Reviews

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Francoise Ugochukwu

Gender and Identity in the Works of Osonye Tess Onwueme

Iniobong I Uko

Africa World Press, Trenton and Asmara, 2004
306pp ISBN 1 5922 1274 3 $29.95
Aalbc.com/writers/africaworldpress.htm

Reading Osonye Tess Onwueme's works within the context of gender and black literary studies, Iniobong I Uko provides a critical analysis that closely identifies with her subject, facilitating an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the plays and novel scrutinised. The book is divided into seven chapters, and explores the subjects which dominate Onwueme's works — gender relations, female identity and empowerment in Africa and the Diaspora. These are followed by a long interview with the playwright and a detailed chronology of her life so far. Her last play, *What Mama Said* (2003), a follow-up to *Then She Said It*, is, regrettably, only summarily introduced and omitted in the bibliography.

Uko's book briefly reviews the various theories propounded to define and study gender relationships in Nigeria, revealing both the huge difference between Western and African feminism and Onwueme's own abhorrence for labels and classifications. The playwright's denunciation of the gulf separating middle-class urban women from their rural counterparts acknowledges a breakdown in communication as both envisage gender relationships in very different terms.

That Onwueme had the privilege of living though the experiences of several of her characters' lives, including a rural childhood, goes some way to explain why the oral tradition 'naturally inhabits' her world, and also her success in portraying rural women, which is quite different to that which dominates a lot of writing by men on the subject.

The in-depth analysis of the plays combines their relevance to Nigerian society with their author's critical evaluation of relationships, such as her challenging of the status quo and her confrontation with the daily realities of wife and motherhood. This reveals Onwueme's commitment as an artist to the task of chronicling social contexts while at the same time suggesting 'what is useful for the people', covering such domestic issues as parenting, female education and marriage, polygamy, the preference male children along with political ones like women's associations, female muteness, class consciousness and avarice. Her 1986 plays in particular are overt statements on Nigerian society at the time and a condemnation of a system 'that perpetuates class consciousness [and] oppression'. The book suggests her play *Wazobia* as a summation of Onwueme's message and presents it as a metaphor for unity, love and hope for a people – who symbolise Nigeria – while also addressing problems of domination and subservience, particularly the religious, ethnical and linguistic fragmentation of southern Nigeria.

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Onwueme's global concerns are expressed in chapter five, which focuses on African American women and the diaspora. This chapter revisits the 'back-to-Africa' motif, addressing the question of dual personality and double heritage for African Americans, and insists on Onwueme's message that 'Africa and Africans in the Diaspora need to understand themselves before any form of unity can be achieved', an idea Oonwueme explored through the technique of 'blended characterisation' and the twinning of characters from the America and Africa. Onwueme's plays, such as *A Hen too Soon* (1983), *The Desert Encroaches* (1985), *Tbe Broken* (1986) and *Shakara Dance-Hall Queen* (2000) are shown as projecting this vision, exploring the issues of slavery and racism and representing 'an update on the state of racial relationships in the US'.

Chapter seven starts with an overview of African oral literature and places Onwueme's novel within a folktale genre, emphasising the author's storytelling skills and renewing the traditional theme she experimented with some twenty years before. The supremacy of storytelling is highlighted by the subtitle of the novel, *Why the Elephant Has no Butt*: 'stories mother turkey told her children — adapted from the African-igbo original'. The author considers this novel as 'an interesting milestone in the development of Onwueme as a writer' and this explains why she chose to keep it for the last chapter, although it was published two years before the last plays. Uko views the novel as 'an extensive session of counselling', meant to improve the youth's socialisation and skilfully analyses the book to show its relevance in the author's oeuvre which, in sum, Uko considers to be a bold attempt to demystify womanhood while at the same time envision a new type of woman.

Generous quotes from Onwueme's plays allow her skill in bending the English language in conjunction with the structures of her mother tongue to show through. The book unearths her creative skills, in particular 'her bold experimentation with forms and techniques' such as her use of dreams, flashbacks and suspense and her use of humour, sarcasm, ridicule, witty double-entendres and metaphors. Writing with an American audience in mind, the playwright nevertheless uses proverbs and local colour, giving readers a flavour of the Nigerian multilingual situation with her frequent use of slang expressions, street language and the pidgin English she would have learnt at home in the Niger Delta.

Uko also discusses Onwueme's debt, both to the oral tradition already mentioned and to other playwrights like Bertolt Brecht, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Sembene Ousmane and Femi Osofisan, especially their roles in building peoples' theatres, largely didactic in purpose, and their identification with the oppressed and under-represented through flexible use of language, imagery and setting.

The highlight of the book is undoubtedly Uko's face-to-face interviews with Onwueme, supplemented by telephone conversations and e-mails covering the months of June to October 2003. This very complete and lively account sets the book apart, clarifying a lot of issues 'in [Okwueme's] own words' while introducing readers to a vibrant, passionate and surprisingly traditional lady who fights for female education while taking her role as a wife and a mother very seriously.

Considering that 'it is difficult to conceive of an identity for the African woman outside the context of marriage', and at a time when a new vibrant Nigerian market of self publishing emerges, subverting current publishing hurdles, Onwueme considers herself a world writer 'in search of an audience'. Her wish is that western scholars and critics will realise that Africa is moving fast and that behind Achebe and Soyinka, many more writers, several of them female, are waiting to be recognised beyond the African literary scene. Uko's book certainly goes a long way in successfully promoting Onwueme's works.

Bill Schwarz

A Meeting of the Continents: The International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books: Revisited: History, Memories, Organisation, and Programmes 1982–1995

Sarah White, Roxy Harris and Sharmilla Beezmohun, eds

New Beacon Books and George Padmore Institute, London, 2005, hb
560pp ISBN 1 8732 0118 4 £25.00
www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/newbeacon.asp

Older readers of *Wasafiri* will remember the successive International Book Fairs of Radical Black and Third World Books. They were an inspiration for an entire generation in the UK and much further afield. It is impossible to imagine the contemporary intellectual world in Britain without grasping the significance of the Black and Third World Book Fair. The very possibility of thinking in terms of a black aesthetic; the idea that writers from the former colonies possessed the imagination and capacity to 'write back'; the bringing to life of a rich variant of black feminisms; the notion that continents might 'meet' and that they could do so through the articulation of a democratic politics and literature: the Book Fairs did not exactly invent these modes of thought and being – that would be claiming too much – but they gave them form and voice, and did so with a distinctive drive, energy and implacable generosity.

Too often the story of the coming of 'other' literatures to the UK is presented in too abstract a voice. The conventional story begins, as if by an immaculate conception, with Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and continues with the publication of a string of more great writers, publicly accredited by publishers and reviewers. In this version

of things, the species of postcolonial theory which typifies the academy becomes the begetter of all that this transformation represents, as if the theory enabled the practice to happen. It is no disrespect to Rushdie, nor to those who have followed in his footsteps, nor indeed to those (myself included) who teach postcolonialism in the universities, to suggest that this is a lop-sided conception of a more complex, more visceral history: and one in which the Book Fairs played an indispensable role.

In the inauspicious month of April 1982 – the exact moment of the war with Argentina: a terrible time when the instincts of the old empire cut through into the present – three publishers, Bogle-L'Ouverture, New Beacon and Race Today, launched the first of the fairs, opened by the esteemed and by this date venerable figure of C L R James. Twelve further events followed, the enterprise coming to a close in 1995. These later occasions moved out from London to Manchester, Leeds and Glasgow, and in 1987 and 1988 they were linked to the Caribbean People's International Book Fair and the Book Fair Festival.

From the vantage of current political imperatives the Book Fairs were resolutely old school, working to operate outside the commodified world of publishing, universities and state support. The idea of a book *fair* is a common one. But in practice most book fairs can be dull affairs, consumed by the cult of celebrity, with very little sense of popular festivity. Exactly the contrary was true of the Black and Third World Book Fairs. They were popular in every sense of the word, embracing a vision of the world turned upside down or (as Fanon put it) a vision in which the last shall be first, and the first last. Those attending from the UK or overseas could count on no financial support and no swanky hotels: they came under their own steam, and relied on the goodwill of friends and supporters in Britain to care for them when they arrived.

The documents collected together in the current volume represent an archival treasure. The programmes are reproduced here, with a range of adjacent documentation and various retrospective judgements. The volume represents an effervescent cultural and political history of a key moment, or conjuncture, of our recent history. From it can be discerned the connections between the literary imagination and the hard process of politics. For all the excitement of new voices assuming public authority, though, political defeat and tragedy are never far distant. In particular, the destruction of the New Jewel Movement in Grenada and, nearer to home for UK readers, the deaths of the New Cross teenagers darken the pages of what otherwise represents a commemorative volume. Even so, that such a publication can be produced in these times is credit not only to the indefatigable editors, but so too to that stalwart of good thinking, the Rowntree Trust, which underwrote at least some of the costs of publication.

As I well remember, continents did meet in the Book Fairs. From the start they sought to be international and, so far as a shoestring organisation allowed, this they achieved. But their genealogy was more particular. The entire venture represented a peculiarly Caribbean enterprise. Of the sixty or so speakers invited to the opening conference more than half came from the Caribbean, or had a close Caribbean connection. That James should have been accorded the role of presiding maestro of the first Fair in 1982 – appropriating the magic of Prospero while refusing to relinquish the identification with Caliban – was entirely appropriate. The Caribbean genealogy is part of a larger intellectual history of the diaspora in Britain, stretching back to the work of James and George Padmore in London in the 1930s, drawing in the Manchester Pan-African meeting in 1945, embracing the memory of Claudia Jones and her *West Indian Gazette* at the end of the fifties, and taking us to the Caribbean Artists' Movement of the sixties and seventies. The Book Fairs were an extension of this deeper history, inventing new forms while consciously continuing a longer tradition.

To say this is not to question the integrity of the commitment to the internationalism of the organisers — this cannot be doubted. But it highlights a specific history of the diasporic Caribbean in Britain — a story whose full panorama we have yet to get in focus. Yet it is not only the Caribbean, or the diasporic Caribbean. Within this formation, Trinidad and Tobago can claim a privileged position. And (becoming ever more local) within *this* formation, the figure of John La Rose stands out as an inspiration through whom much of this happened.

La Rose was the founder of New Beacon Books and of its publishing arm. He was director of the Book Fair. He was a co-founder of the Caribbean Artists' Movement. He involved himself in a myriad of popular-political campaigns in the nearly fifty years of his stay in the UK. His ties to the Oil Workers of Trinidad remained close throughout. He was, in sum, a central presence in the making of contemporary black Britain.

There are now many stories which tell us of the evolution of the Caribbean migration to Britain, which describe survival and teeth-gritting accommodation. There are different strands to this, as migrants made their own choices. La Rose's position, we can see in retrospect, was clear throughout: *his* strategy was based on the commitment to the autonomy of a popular migrant politics. His was not a politics built upon achieving access to the social institutions of British life. Access seemed to have bored him, and carried too many dangers. Rather than building a life seeking entry to what Britain offered La Rose – with good grace, intelligence and much humour – determined to create new spheres of activity, close to the lived migrant experience, which themselves would flourish and, in time, require native Britons to heed, to understand and ultimately to learn from.

The Radical Black and Third World Book Fairs represented one such venture. Much that we now understand simply as literature or culture was first incubated there. Through the impetus of the Caribbean migrant experience

Britain was opened up to a new world. In La Rose the tradition of James, Padmore and Claudia Jones continued into a new age. Through listening to these Trinidadians Britons, and others, could imagine themselves anew.

Susanne Mühleisen

Linton Kwesi Johnson Live in Paris with the Dennis Bovell Dub Band

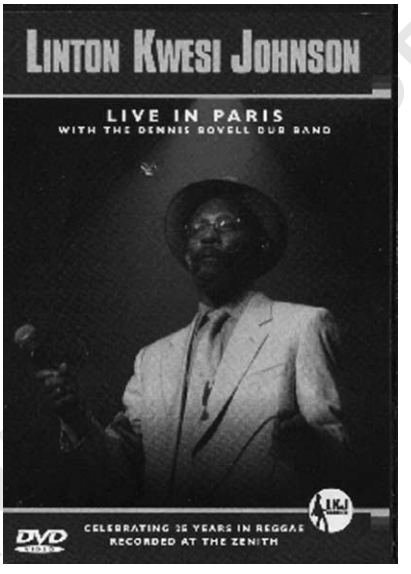
LKJ Records, London, 2005, CD

LKJ CD 022, LKJ DVD 001
www.lkjrecords.com

When in 1978, the black British poet, music journalist and political activist Linton Kwesi Johnson released his first album *Dread Beat and Blood*, his audience was not aware, as Christian Habekost recounts in *Verbal Riddim*, that 'this was dub poetry captured on a record for the first time'. It was clear from the very beginning, however, that this was something new — new in style and music, as well as in the content of the lyrics. Spoken words on reggae beat ('toasting') had already been popular in the DJ scene in Jamaica throughout the 1970s, but Linton Kwesi Johnson's debut work revealed an entirely new poetic and political quality and had its own distinctive British flavour. Johnson's powerful spoken poetry over reggae sounds has since become almost synonymous with Dub Poetry, a term and style for which he is widely regarded as the founding figure.

The DVD – *Linton Kwesi Johnson live in Paris with the Dennis Bovell Dub Band*, recorded at a concert at the Zenith, Paris, in 2003 – marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the release of *Dread Beat and Blood*, and hence the silver jubilee of this unique relationship between poetry and music. In the first three performances – 'Di Eagle An Di Bear', 'Want Fi Goh Rave' and 'Sonny's Lettah' – the artist presents a taste of his works from different albums like *Mekkin Histri* and *Dread Beat and Blood* across the last twenty-five years. The next section is clearly dedicated to early works with a strong agenda of political activism.

In an atmosphere of constant talk about the 'fight against terrorism', Johnson reminds his audience that the so-called ethnic minorities of Europe have known this fight for decades — the fight against the terrorism of racism. Thus, 'Fite Dem Back', 'Reggae Fi Peach', 'Reggae Fi Radni' and the a-capella version of 'Di Great Insohreckshan' take us back to earlier struggles and events in black British history, to the 1979 murder of the anti-Nazi activist Blair Peach, to the fate of Walter Rodney, the Guyanese academic and political activist who was assassinated in 1980, as well to the Brixton riots in 1981. Songs like 'Liesense Fi Kill' about Black deaths in police custody and the 'conspiracy of silence' about these matters make clear, however, that this struggle is far from won.



So, is 'Inglan' still the bitch she was in 1980? This old-time favourite is conspicuously absent, as are some of Johnson's more personal lyrics, such as 'Lorraine' or 'Reggae Fi Dada'. The last poem/song, however, performed after a few more classics like 'Mekkin Histri', 'Tings An Times' and 'More Time' is 'Reggae Fi Bernard', dedicated to Johnson's nephew who died in tragic circumstances in 1995. Here, it becomes perhaps most clear how the political and the personal merge in Johnson's lyrics, adding a very tender tone to the stance of political dedication.

In the packed concert atmosphere at the Zenith, Johnson presents himself in the manner which has become his trademark: in impeccable suit, tie and hat, he performs his powerful lyrics with his usual reduced movements, compelling even the excited concert audience to pay attention not only to sound and vision, but also to the content of his works. The Dennis Bovell Dub Band has become more than just the musical background support to his lyrics but is an essential part of the show and make this DVD a feast to the ears, as well as to the eyes and the mind. The sixty-minute concert recording is accompanied by a twenty-minute interview and a photo gallery. In the interview, Johnson talks about his childhood in Jamaica in the 1950s and early 1960s and the various influences on his music. 'I didn't discover music, I was born with music! From the time I heard my heart beating, I knew I had music', so he claims. But also his poetry has its roots in his early years in the Caribbean, with influences like the 'poetry of the Bible', as he told Burt Caesar in an interview, read at his grandmother's home and a later, perhaps more conscious, stimulus by the works of Caribbean poets like Edward Kamau Brathwaite. Linton Kwesi Johnson also talks about his experience of racism in Britain, after joining his mother in London at the age of eleven and his subsequent political work which began at the age of fifteen or sixteen. His further revelations about his early work in the music industry and a consequential dinner with Richard Branson in 1977, as well as an a-capella recital of 'Reggae Fi Bernard' make this interview an additional asset to the concert performance on this DVD.

Linton Kwesi Johnson may well be called a living legend, being, after all, only the second living person to have been included in the Penguin Modern Classics series. His influence on the music scene is as powerful as his influence on the use of patois – or nation language, as he prefers to call

it – and his way of presenting his words not only orally but also on the page has become a model for many other writers and poets. His work is also living proof of the success of black British culture in transforming British society in the past decades.

Leila Kamali

Brown Eyes: A Selection of Creative Expressions by Black and Mixed-Race Women

Nicole Moore, ed.

Matador, Leicester, 2005, pb
268pp ISBN 1 9052 3714 6 £9.99
www.troubadour.co.uk/matador

According to the editor Nicole Moore, 'The aim [of *Brown Eyes*] was to discover new and diverse talent, ensure representation and act as a medium for black and mixed-race women [in Britain] to speak out and reach a much wider audience.' This anthology, which appears to have been compiled, in part, from writers' workshops, consists of poems and essays, as well as interviews in which contributors elucidate their approaches to their work. Moore's editorial strategy thus establishes a promising counterpoint, from which dialogue might emerge, not only between writers, but also from the shifts in pace and inflection which emerge between diverse forms.

There are indeed moments of inspiration to be enjoyed here, particularly in the sensitive illumination of historical memory in a poem such as Maggie Harris's 'Origins':

> Yes, track me the scent of my
> skin on a coast of Paramaribo
> where a trade wind blowing its
> precious cargo
> doesn't know that one day
> they'll build rockets
> from behind those trees and
> aim for the moon

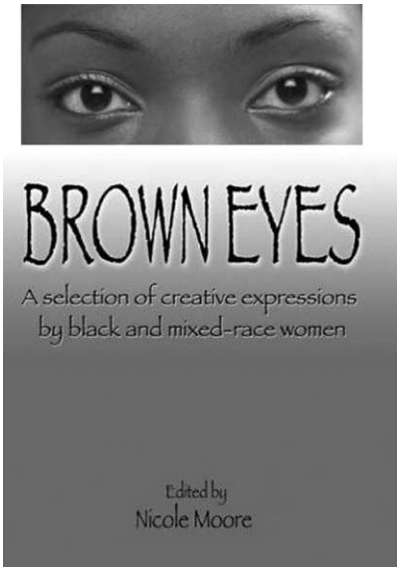
The memory of slavery resounds powerfully in some pieces, nowhere more so than in Louise Hercules' poem, 'The Quay', as she evokes 'the gaze of those so ready to slay your hand from mine', or as Kimberly Trusty imagines a 'slave ship/turned upside down/on the banks of the Ohio River'. The movement, both historical and current, of lives lived across diverse terrains, is vividly felt in a poem such as 'Home' by Tolu Melissa Carew:

> When I put my arms around my
> lover
> And I kiss his face
> I am home . . .
> Not home in London but in
> Lagos . . .
> I am in Victoria Island, Biaduo.
> I am 10.

Less exciting is the frequent appearance throughout this volume of bland mythologisations of African matriarchs, and equally, of matriarchal Africas. Contributors wax lyrical on this well-worn theme, from a simple glorification of black femininity, such as Lynda Wireko's 'Woman black woman,/I see God's beauty within you', to an abstraction of the figure of the black mother with a generalised African motherland in Amanda Epé's 'The Diaspora':

> She stands central and
> large . . .
> Her dispersed seed across the
> oceans
> Evolved into a beautiful life

The exaltation of the matriarch forms only part of the very large dose of essentialising racial 'pride' which this volume delivers, conveyed with a plentiful array of clichés and rhymes such as 'The black race is Ace/We all go through hard times./But nothing can take away our gifted minds.'



Nicole Moore, in her Introduction, writes that '*Brown Eyes* is meant to celebrate, reflect upon and embrace our diverse female identities and the common-thread that unites us living the UK experience.' The terms 'black' and 'mixed-race' are used in the context of this collection to refer to 'women from African and African-Caribbean backgrounds'; and diversity and commonality, which Moore so rightly identifies as values which should be held in balance in such an anthology as this, are indeed broadly represented. Yet the volume is divided into sections with titles such as 'Cinnamon: What's it like being us?', 'Chocolate: Who do you think we are?', and 'Beige: When will our skin colour be just a colour?' Isn't there something deeply questionable about representing identity through food analogies, let alone about grading skin tone as if it were a selection of paint swatches? There is a distinct sense that Moore guides the focus of the volume into something of a cul-de-sac based upon her own rather fixed understanding of cultural identity, and this can elicit a certain (perhaps unintentionally) bemused candour such as is shown by Daniella Blechler: 'I don't go out and look for books that are by mixed-race women. I look for books that appeal to me.'

In her own poem, which begins with the line 'Colour, hue, I just love you', Moore surmises that:

> it's more than just a colour
> That creates fear amongst
> ignorance
> It's the unknown face
> Of difference

Moore's concluding comment to her own essay, elsewhere in the volume, reads: 'It isn't problematic that mixed-race people are bi-racial or of dual-heritage; it is that there is so much silence, ignorance and racism.' The reader is forced to ask whether simply naming a problem in this way really does the work that 'creative expression' surely can, of reconciling marginalised subjects with a society which seeks to exclude or devalue them.

At times, this volume provides useful responses to the challenge which seems to be set in its very title. Portia Msimang demonstrates awareness of the differential which often exists between the terms 'black' and 'mixed-race' as they function in everyday use:

> Here and now, we are in a position to abandon the scientifically discredited, morally repugnant philosophies, which have elsewhere demonstrably decreased the vulnerability of those who are willing to embrace their status as 'mulatto', 'coloured', or 'mixed-race' . . . When I look in the mirror, a black woman reflects back at me. In those eyes, there is a slight weariness from 30 years of arguing to be allowed to be black . . . The reflection I see in windows . . . walks with head held high because inside it, I carry my heritage, the unshakeable belief in world citizenship, with great care.

Dorothy Cornibert du Boulay, similarly, recognises the power of an identification which transcends uncomfortable racial hierarchies, when she asserts, 'I realised that black was global'. Signifiers, like poetry itself, can transcend distances and divisions in order to assert a place for marginalised identities within a continuum of human diversity, and it is clearly in this way that the use of any particular identification, whether 'black' or 'mixed-race', is most liberating and productive. Sheree Mack puts it nicely: 'I'm a "mixness". There is no box to tick for that.' Emma Louise Felicia Hopkins's poem, 'All I Can Want is What There Is', can similarly be seen as a clever response to this volume's overarching focus on skin tone:

> All colours treat lives like
> shades
> Like safe bait
> Tight in their skin, possessive
> in pace
> All features fester
> And colour is my self-defence

Brown Eyes fulfils its promise of offering exposure to some talented writers, but if Moore proceeds with her professed plan to produce two further such volumes, she would be well advised to enforce slightly more stringent 'quality control' over contributions, as well as undertaking a careful consideration of what it means to truly represent diversity.

Nuzhat Abbas

Inventory

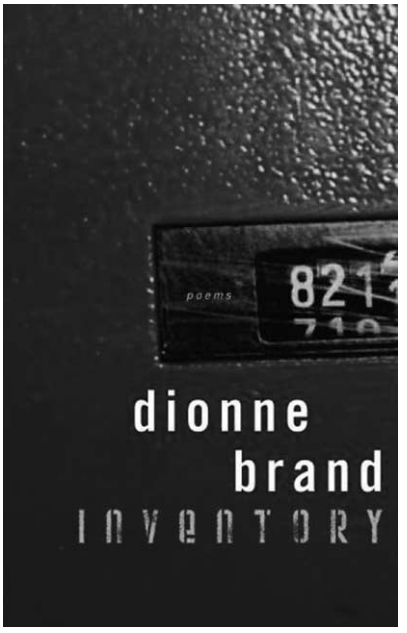
Dionne Brand

McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 2006, pb
100pp ISBN 0 7710 1662 X $17.99
www.mcclelland.com/poetry

> yet, this figure, eight hundred
> every month
> for the last year, and one
> hundred
> and twenty in a brutal four
> days,
> things, things add up

Dionne Brand once told me in an interview: 'you find yourself in a world of forgetting. And your project – well, mine at any rate – is remembering'. Over the years since the publication of her first book of poems *Fore Day Morning* in 1978, Brand has honed her craft of remembering with uncanny precision and a strict refusal of any false comfort or romantic nostalgia. Remembrance, in Brand's poetry and in her prose, remains the difficult, ongoing, attentive and deeply loving work of writing an alternative historiography of the world. The texts she produces are sutured with ambivalences, gaps, and silences but remain deeply disruptive of any official story. In gathering up valuable fragments of memory and obscured histories, they continue to point, however sadly, to the possibilities of a different future.

Like Neruda and Walcott, whose echoes sound frequently in her work, Dionne Brand is among those rare poets capable of transmuting charged political realities into profound and unnerving lyrical intelligence. In *No Language is Neutral*, written in the aftermath of the US invasion of Grenada (which destroyed the revolution she had gone to support) Brand declared: 'I have come to know/ something simple. Each sentence realized or/dreamed jumps like a pulse with history and takes a /side'. Language freighted thus with history either retrieved or silenced, is experienced as burden, especially to those born black — who must carry the history of their bodies as they struggle for freedom within the Diaspora. Tracing (im)possible longings for origin and place in her multi-genre book *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand wrote: 'Black experience in any modern city or town in the Americas is a haunting . . . How do I know this? Only by self-observation, only by looking. Only by feeling. Only by being a part, sitting in the room with history.'



Being a part, sitting in the room with history, becomes quite literally, the task of the poet in *Inventory,* Dionne Brand's ninth and most recent book of poetry. A long poem divided into seven sections, *Inventory* offers a searing account of the brutal first years of this new century. The spectre of history lies on all things in this book, layering each event with reverberations and echoes. Though such haunting is not only the burden of black survivors of slavery, carrying that history in one's skin gives the poet a particular and intimate sense of the deep relationship between colonialism and capitalism. It also gives her the foreknowledge with which to recognise the signs of the new century with its unremitting brutality, growing militarisation, forced labour, and endless rapacity.

> all the railwayseverywhere, and
> the forests we destroyed,
> as far as the Amazona's
> forehead, the Congo's gut,
> the trees we peeled of rough
> butter,
> full knowing, there is
> something wrong
> with this

After such histories, innocent beginnings or originary returns are impossible. When your stories have already been told by someone else, how is it that you can begin to imagine something different? The poet gives caution to any romantic hope otherwise, reminding us: 'we arrived spectacular, tendering/our own bodies into dreamery,/as meat, as mask, as burden'. The West's history of seductive but dangerous narratives flickers in *Inventory* like a cinema screen from a distant past, dazzling viewers into believing another land to be more real than their own

> the way to Wyoming, the
> sunset in Cheyenne,
> the surreptitious cook fires, the
> uneasy
> sleep of cowboys, the cactus,
> the tumbleweed,
> the blankets,
> the homicides of Indians,
> lit, dimmed, lit, dimmed

Brand is alert to the meagre powers of language compared to the overwhelming influence of cinematic representation, and also that repeated via the nightly news broadcasts on television. But language is that she has to use. In the same interview, she spoke about her devotion to poetry because 'you may have to think about it. It is not televisual, it is not so apparent'. In *Inventory*, Brand's words work against the image in a Benjaminian sense, as captions to their violent seductions. She offers a warning, futile and all too late, to her younger self and to those who so happily consumed such stories — 'this was their manifesto,/but we took it like fun//their love stories never contained us,/their war epics left us bloody'. The poem carefully draws historiographic lines from the excitement of cinema in spaces rendered peripheral by capital to 'the homicides of Indians' to the poet herself, grown older, sitting by the window of a television in Toronto, watchfully counting the dead in Iraq, this time writing words to counter the stories told on screen –

> never mind that, here is the
> latest watchful hour
> twenty-seven in Hillah, three in
> fighting in
> Amariya, two by roadside
> bombing, Adhaim,
> five by mortars in Afar, in
> firefight in Samarra

Here is history observed and re-written as fast as the poet can while she listens carefully to that which is not being said and tries to imagine what is not shown. Note how she lists the names of cities, how the names themselves become beautiful, memorable, remaining on the tongue even as the cities and their inhabitants are being destroyed. All cities, both those ruined and those still living, the named and unnamed dead, bits of films, fragments of songs – te recuerdo Amanda, Redemption Song, Ooh Baby Baby – fragments of poems, overheard conversations, pieces from radio and television, all are collected and re-arranged — inventoried, but not without comment.

Lists, repetitions and inventories have long been features of Brand's writing. It is how she has reified the material world in her texts. In her 1997 long poem, *Land to Light On*, she wrote, somewhat ironically: 'inventory is useless but just to say/not so fast, not so clever boy, circumnavigating// parentheses may be easy, but not the world'. In *Inventory*, the form of the poem is announced in its title and signals a defiant refusal to let go of the particulars that speak the world. The title demands a summing-up, an accounting of the buried histories of genocide, colonialism and slavery lying behind the supposed newness of current global wars. Listing, counting and cataloguing — these are all also forms of colonial knowledge acquisition, long used to separate and differentiate. However, in this poem, as in her other work, Brand reworks the form to allow complex juxtapositions that yield new meanings. Even as borders are drawn, and lists collated, the lines between things frequently pull into themselves making it both difficult to separate and to discount the complicities, the threads that interweave to produce an integral fabric, pulling the living into the dead, and *us* into *them*.

Inventory records an ongoing ambivalence and tension between the productive solidarities of differentiated identities but also the historical impossibility of such neat divisions. Though the poem begins with the stark statement – 'We believed in nothing' – and records the unwilling seduction and destruction of this collectivity – 'we poor, we weak, we dying' – it also points out the complicities impossible to avoid by a subjugated people, already made 'spectacular', who unwittingly give way to the all powerful 'book of signs/the last magical bird feather'. Brand's despair at the now lost optimism of the anti-colonial struggles, the dreams of revolution and black resistance, is palpable in these pages. But she remains persistently clear-eyed and unsentimental, wanting us, her readers, to figure out how these battles were lost, to note what strategies were used, and to understand their terrifying consequences: 'so hard now to separate what was them/from what we are/how imprisoned we are in their ghosts'.

However, Brand is quick to juxtapose the bleakness of such conclusions with a beautifully rendered personal history of revolutionary longing. She reminds us of the powerful possibilities inherent in what was once dreamed, the abyssal beauty of what once gave hope: 'to have seen Che/ Guevara as an old man on television', to know if 'Angela's unbreakable voice has made jails extinct', 'to die in this compassion'. The true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love, said Che. Elsewhere, Dionne Brand has spoken of the significance these words have had for her. Despite the horrors she chronicles in *Inventory*, there is a tremendous tenderness in these poems, a fierce protective impulse over what is being destroyed, and a deep faithfulness. The text reads, at moments, like a love letter to someone unknown but strangely familiar, waiting there amid the ruins.

> all I can offer you now though
> is my brooding hand,
> my sodden eyelashes and the
> like,
> these humble and particular
> things I know,
> my eyes pinned to your face
> understand, I will keep you
> alive like this,
> . . . .
> know that I am your spy here,
> your terrorist,
> find me

The unending bombardments of the past years, the incessant destruction of people and of places has left many of us bereft of feeling, unable to keep our hearts open to the dead. But the poet understands this — 'If they're numb over there, and all around her, she'll gather the nerve endings/spilled on the streets, she'll count them like rice grains/ she'll keep them for when they're needed'. The last sequence of the book begins to offer some respite from the destruction. In a gorgeous life-affirming list, Brand summons up the beauty of ordinary life — from the colour yellow and coastlines, safety pins, dancehalls, 'the whole of music' to 'the way a woman stands' and 'some lovers of course'. But even during this brief pause, the dead continue to gather and return to demand the poet's attention. Reading *Inventory*, we are forced to remember what is happening alongside the recording poet as she declares that her task is 'to revise and revise this list/hourly'. Although the grief is often unbearable.

In writing *Inventory*, Dionne Brand has drawn upon the ancient role of the poet as holder of public memory and dreamer of the dead, reworking the trope for use in our present-day landscape of mass graves and evaporated bodies. 'At least someone should stay awake, she thinks/Someone should dream them along the abysmal roads.' This is a difficult, brave and deeply necessary book, arriving at a time when obscenities are forgotten as the dead are rendered as nothing more than collateral damage, or the business of war. Our task here as readers would be to insist, along with Brand, on poetry's essential purpose to renew thought via language, to halt the deadening of our tongues and the hardening of our hearts.

> some words can make you
> weep,
> when they're uttered, the light
> rap of their
> destinations, their thud as if on
> peace, as if on cloth,
> on air, they break all places
> intended and known
> soft travellers

Drew Shaw

Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East

Brian Whitaker

SAQI, London, 2006, pb
264pp ISBN 0 8635 6819 X £14.99
www.saqibooks.com

The Middle East is rarely out of the news, yet little is known about gay and lesbian life there. Public discussions are woefully unaware of the human face of homosexuality and *Unspeakable Love* seeks to redress the ignorance. As the Middle East editor for the *Guardian*, Brian Whitaker, travelled widely in the region before writing this book, well-researched, with an extensive bibliography and useful index, it paints a poignant portrait of Middle Eastern gay and lesbian life, analyses media, literature and film depictions, engages in discourse analysis, and challenges persecutions in the name of Islam.

IslamOnline describes homosexuality as 'the most heinous' sin in Islam. The supervisor of its scholarly committee, the Egyptian-born academic, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, says, in a fatwa, 'This perverted act is a reversal of the natural order, a corruption of male sexuality, and a crime against the rights of females.' Such statements, understandably, offend gay rights campaigners.

However, Whitaker is critical of campaigners who oversimplify the problem and attribute it to an immutable religion and culture. 'Treating Islam, rather than social attitudes, as the main obstacle minimises hope for reform', he

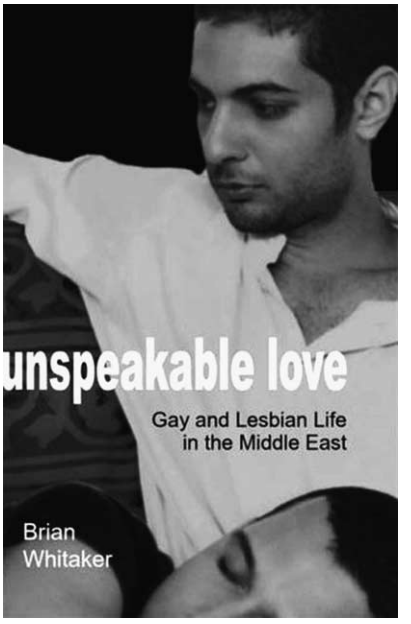
states. Instead, he chooses to pay attention to the sameness, rather than otherness of Arab-Islamic culture. Homosexuality, Whitaker points out, is seen overwhelmingly in the Arab-Muslim world, as it once was in the West (and still is in parts), as a choice. This 'removes any need for tolerance or compassion towards people who are homosexual'.

Throughout the Middle East, Whitaker shows, homosexuals are considered as either mad or bad. Parental ignorance, a lack of public discussion, and hysterical newspaper reports do little to help the situation. From Beirut to Cairo, Damascus to Palestine, to 'come out' is to disgrace not only oneself but one's entire family.

Ali, from a traditional Shi'a family in Lebanon is beaten with a chair, imprisoned in a house, locked in a car boot, and threatened with death for disgracing his family. Al-Hussein, son of a wealthy Jordanian family, forced to marry, but caught kissing his male lover, is thrown down the stairs by his brother, hospitalised, then hunted down and shot in the hospital, again by his brother. Not surprisingly, most gay men remain in the closet. To disclose their sexual orientation often means being sent for psychiatric treatment.

Lesbians have an easier time, Whitaker suggests, because they are not subjected to the same sort of scrutiny. According to Laila, from Egypt, the main requirement of girls is that they do not lose their virginity or get pregnant before marriage. Thus a 'daughter's preference for women at least reassures the family that she won't bring shame on them by getting into trouble with men'. Also, women living together as 'flatmates' do not arouse much curiosity.

Attitudes are similar, Whitaker suggests, throughout the Middle East — yet circumstances differ from state to state. Egypt began a crackdown on gay life in 2001 with a police raid on the Queen Boat, a floating gay nightclub on the Nile. Dozens of gay men were arrested, gay websites were infiltrated by government agents, and the Egyptian police began a cruel campaign of not only raiding gay parties, but also setting them up — only to entrap unsuspecting victims.



In Saudi Arabia, where homosexuality is punishable by death, Whitaker nevertheless reports an abundance of private gay parties in Riyadh, late night cruising in cars, and three gay cafés. The shopping malls in Jeddah, meanwhile, are apparently a magnet for gay cruising.

In Iran, which carries the death penalty, there have been public hangings. On the other hand, transsexuality is surprisingly tolerated and gender reassignment operations are commonplace.

Similarly there are appalling stories of entrapment in Palestine, where same-sex acts are illegal and gay men frequently flee to neighbouring Israel.

In the meantime, the official media, even in Beirut (the most liberal of Arab capitals, where gay life flourishes), is relentless in its condemnation of homosexuality, but the picture, Whitaker shows, is more nuanced in Arab literature and on cinema screens. From Egypt to Tunisia, there is an ongoing attempt in the creative world to depict diverse sexual realities.

Gay Muslims are an oxymoron, we learn, to Islamic scholars such as Joseph Massad of Columbia University, who views the concepts of homosexuality (and heterosexuality) as Western imports. Whitaker accepts, with Jeffrey Weeks, that in Muslim countries 'there is no concept of "the homosexual" except where it has been imported from the West'. However, he disagrees with Massad that the promotion of gay rights by a so-called 'Gay International' is an imperialist-style 'missionary' project. Declaring 'Arab culture cannot be treated as a fossil', Whitaker says 'the issue . . . is not whether concepts such as "gay" and "sexual orientation" are foreign imports but whether they serve a useful purpose'. To 'families – puzzled, troubled and uniformed by their own society – they offer a sensible alternative to regarding sons and daughters as sinful or mad'.

The question of sin is inescapable, it seems, and to ascertain the actual position of Islam on homosexuality, Whitaker devotes much of the book to an overview of Islamic history, the Qur'an, sharia law, various *hadith*, and what can and cannot be attributed to the Prophet Mohammed. Here, he gets a little bogged down in minutia but importantly establishes 'some evidence the Prophet was aware of sexual diversity (if not by name) and was not noticeably troubled by it'.

Although Whitaker gives an invaluable account of gay and lesbian life in the Middle East, he nevertheless succumbs to an element of homogenisation in his commentary, and this, if anything, is the book's main weak point. His view of the Middle East is extrapolated mostly from experiences in Egypt and Lebanon and tilted more towards gay than lesbian life. There are a number of generalisations, which will no doubt be challenged in years to come when Middle Eastern gays and lesbians begin to present their own stories from their own specific localities. Until then, *Unspeakable Love* speaks eloquently for those who have no voice and assists a process of empowerment. *Unspeakable Love* is a bold intervention, an astute engagement with key thinkers.

Denise deCaires Narain

Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation

Elleke Boehmer

Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 2005, hb
239pp ISBN 0 7190 6878 9
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

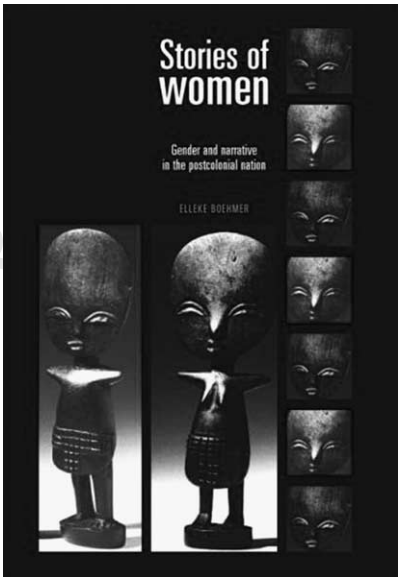
This collection of essays offers discussions of an impressively wide range of literary texts from diverse postcolonial contexts and in relation to an engaging gamut of postcolonial concerns and theoretical approaches. The intersecting vectors of nation and gender tie the essays loosely together and make this a welcome addition to the growing body of work which consolidates the importance of gender in postcolonial studies. It also challenges the current antipathy to 'the nation' within postcolonial studies, arguing that it may yet provide an accommodating space for women and for women's access to modernity.

Stories of Women argues from the outset that nation inevitably bears the imprint of gender:

> As in the cross-section of a tree trunk that is nowhere unmarked by its grain-by that pattern expressing its history-so, too, is nation informed throughout by its gendered history, by the normative masculinities and femininities that have shaped its growth over time.

Each of the essays then traces the 'markings' of gender in a selection of literary texts, largely (though not exclusively) by South Asian and African writers, male and female. Chapter one, 'Theorising the engendered nation', makes the now familiar argument that in many male-authored texts, 'woman' functions as metaphor while 'man' functions as agent in the struggle for nationhood. Whether it is in the celebration of Mother Africa or Mother India, Boehmer argues that images of women are deployed as crucial symbols of *both* the ideal *and* failed/diseased (post-independence) nation. Familial relationships are also important, structuring the representation of nation, either by implication in the earnest stories of questing 'sons of the (African) soil' in texts by Laye and Abrahams or, more ironically, in the elaborate use made of family trees and national genealogies by Rushdie. In what she calls, following Freud, the *family drama*, Boehmer suggests that the family is both a constitutive of, and privileged paradigm for, the nation. In the one chapter which does not focus on postcolonial *novels*, 'The hero's story: the male leader's autobiography and the syntax of postcolonial nationalism', Boehmer argues persuasively that postcolonial male leaders narrate their stories in ways which naturalise this familial paradigm of the nation, and of their roles as sons within it. The comparative reading of Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) and Nehru's *An Autobiography* (1936) is sharp and the astute connections made with a range of autobiographical texts and theories of autobiography makes this a meaty essay.

Chapters two and three focus on two prominent 'fathers' of African Literature, Achebe and Ngugi who both attempt to inscribe women as powerful forces in their texts but fail because these figures are so overloaded with (good) symbolic value that they become 'bionic' superwomen, and unbelievable. Boehmer recognises the effort involved for both writers but concludes that the old 'gender markings' creep in to compromise their good intentions. By contrast, Flora Nwapa, whose novel *Efuru* (1966) was the first to be published by an Anglophone African woman, offers a take on the nation which, because it is embedded in the daily rituals of a specific community *within* the nation and inscribes this polyvocal reality in the *form* of the novel itself, refuses male-authored grand narratives of the nation. It is hard to disagree with this, but the very inevitability of this argument perhaps raises questions about an approach which hinges on women's writing coming *after* male-authored texts and then functioning as a *corrective* account. In a literal sense, many African women's texts have *come after* those of their male counterparts; as Boehmer points out, Flora Nwapa has been referred to as one of 'the sons of Achebe'. But, as feminist critics, we are also now writing *after* the various critical interventions that have so thoroughly destabilised taken-for-granted categories, including 'woman'. This makes the business of tracking gendered representations in texts in tandem with the author's own sexed identity an altogether trickier affair.



Chapter six, 'Daughters of the house: the adolescent girl and the nation' shifts away from interrogating male-authored texts to offer comparative readings of women's texts published between 1883 and 2002 from diverse postcolonial locations. Instead of a (rather dreary) catalogue of where/how male writers get the representation of woman wrong, this chapter looks at three women's texts in the context of Schreiner's novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) and offers a dynamic discussion of the way that daughters, of the (patriarchal) family *and* nation, negotiate a place for themselves. The choice of texts is unexpected: Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*

(1940), Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982) and Carol Shields' *Unless* (2002) but Boehmer really makes the comparison work, offering, subtle and nuanced arguments about the ways each 'daughter' authors a sense of 'self', however compromised. None of the (re)solutions suggested in the texts is completely convincing but harnessing them together, she argues, does present possibilities for women's agency within family *and* nation. This commitment to a comparative, relational approach is persuasive and is extended in most of the remaining chapters to good effect.

Chapter seven explores the way the traumatised colonial body is embodied or avoided in novels by Head, Coetzee, Farah, Okri and Cliff while Chapter eight discusses the very different attitudes to metaphorising the nation in novels by Okri, Hove and Marachera. Gender slips out of focus a little in the latter chapter and the assertion with which it opens that 'anti-colonial nationalism in Africa, as in other colonised regions, was distinguished by *literal* belief structures: a strong, teleological faith in the actual existence of the nation as 'people' perhaps takes anti-colonial elites too much at their word. The marginalisation of 'First Nation' peoples in definitions of the postcolonial nation was too categorical for it to be read as innocent of racially stratifying arguments from the outset.

The last four essays focus exclusively on texts by women consolidating the value of comparative readings in a 'transnational frame'. Chapters eleven and twelve anchor the arguments more firmly in relation to gender and nation; in the former Boehmer argues that Yvonne Vera and Arundhati Roy share a similar concern with the *local* spaces which women occupy, offering in their texts 'more heterogeneous constructions of community' which ultimately suggest more complex and accommodating definitions of nation. Cross-cultural comparative readings can thus ironically end up consolidating the specificity of the local; a persuasive point. In Chapter twelve, Boehmer argues that the 'small stories' of rebellion, domestic duties, pleasures and desires explored in Manju Kapur's novels about (middle class) Indian women refuse the definition of nation as normatively male, suggesting instead that 'the (re-) gendered nation might be reclaimed as a structure of feeling, if not of passion, for women'.

Stories of Women offers *excellent* discussions of a wonderfully eclectic range of literary texts in pleasingly unexpected combinations. The collection as a whole both enacts and endorses the productive possibilities of the collaborative, the comparative, the speculative and the relational: all of which are a welcome relief from the grandstanding combativeness of some postcolonial debate. If at times assertions of the ongoing viability of 'the nation' appear to be an act of faith in the absence of any other clearly definable alternative, this may perhaps be reasonably viewed as a predicament of our postcolonial moment?

I'll end with a couple of quibbles: the first concerns the 'neo-orientalist' reception of Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Using a similar line of argument to Graham Huggan in *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), Boehmer suggests that the ecstatic reception of Roy's novel frequently referenced Roy's 'Indianness', her exotic 'intensely feminine, ineffably photogenic, elfin beauty' and the fashionably hybrid exuberance of her writing style. To avoid such neo-orientalising processes, Boehmer suggests that postcolonial critics attend to the material realities and specific contexts informing such expressions of hybridity and refuse to privilege only those texts which enact hybridity. Although Boehmer mentions kathakali dance, it strikes me that the discussion requires (as did Huggan's) a full discussion of the considerable amount of coverage given to the reception of Roy's text *in India* for this argument to begin to persuade. If arguments about 'the postcolonial exotic' remain tied exclusively to *metropolitan* consumption, don't we risk a pervasive cynicism which denies the possibility of ethical readings of any 'hybrid' postcolonial text?

I wonder too about the argument made in Chapter ten about the taboo on same-sex relationships in Africa and in African literature and that 'sexuality remains the dark secret of the Third World nation'. This perhaps overstates the case and ignores the many novels in which sexuality is central to the narrative (and to ideas of nation); Armah's hypermasculine protagonists and the violent homophobia of *Two Thousand Seasons* would be one example from the 1960s but, more recently, to take just one postcolonial context, same-sex relationships have featured more prominently in several South African texts (including Shamim Sarif's *The World Unseen*, Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*, Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* and Coetzee's *Disgrace*). Boehmer offers a queer reading of close relationships between women in Vera and Dangarembga as indicative of 'yearning and desire' even where there is no explicit sexual relationship. The embrace of queerness may provide a 'restorative aesthetics' and a move towards 'an epistemology of African queerness' to counter the 'overcompensatory mechanism of a defensive African masculinity'. While I agree with the gist of the argument and with the expansiveness of this gesture, it strikes me that explicitly naming it 'queer' in combative relationship to a 'defensive African masculinity' may be provocative but not productive and risks re-inscribing the 'dominant' position being challenged in the first place. I don't have an alternative to offer to Boehmer's ' postcolonial aesthetics of queerness' but the arguments she presents in *Stories of Women* offer detailed literary mappings of the intersections of 'gender' and 'nation' which will undoubtedly influence the contours of postcolonial feminism — and help generate a more nuanced vocabulary.

Kanika Batra

Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India

Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, eds

Yoda Press, New Delhi, 2005, pb
ISBN 8 1902 2722 X INR 295
www.yodapress.com

People Tree, my favourite haunt in Connaught Place, New Delhi, keeps a selection of very special literature in a small bookstore at the back of the shop. This is the place where I first discovered a collection of books documenting the lives and struggles of sexual minorities in India. It is easy to miss the shelf containing these books and indeed the bookstore unless one knows where to look for it, as much as it is easy to miss the presence of gay, lesbian, and bisexual men and women amongst the multiple social spaces inhabited by most Indians. Except that these lives are no longer invisible. They are here, many of them are out and some, though not all, proudly announce that they are queer. Assisting in this endeavour is Yoda Press, a progressive publishing house whose recent title includes a collection of essays edited by Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan entitled *Because I Have a Voice,* documenting the rise of queer politics in India.

Besides several activist publications on gay and lesbian rights in India, Ashwini Sukthankar and Hoshang Merchant's anthologies of lesbian and gay writing, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's anthology on same-sex love, and Vanita's edited collection on queer readings of Indian culture and society are some of the precursors of *Because I Have a Voice*. Narrain and Bhan's introduction to the volume testifies that the sexuality awareness work of the 1980s, which reached its apogee in the late 1990s, following the controversy surrounding the screening of Deepa Mehta's 'lesbian' film *Fire* in Indian cinemas, has now come to be theorised as a fully-fledged political movement. Including theoretical accounts, activist reports, and life narratives of people living on the boundaries of acceptable and transgressive modes of expressing gender and sexual identity, the essays in this volume mark the emergence of 'a more public queer articulation'. In the opinion of many contributors to the volume 'queerness' does not imply merely an alternative sexual preference (gay or lesbian) or a crossover to a non-biologically assigned gender identity but rather an interrogation of the patriarchal and heterosexist premises governing Indian social spaces (Bhan and Narrain, Narrain and Chandran, Muraleedharan).

One of the signs of the increasing sophistication of queer politics in India is that the movement is able to critique itself by building on the work done over the past few years. Discussing legal, medical, and cinematic discourses, the first section of the anthology attempts to provide a conceptual approach to sexuality as a form of politics. Akshay Khanna's essay in this section takes issue with the two most common ways of addressing the politics of sexuality: as a human rights issue and as a response to violence. Pointing to the pitfalls of both approaches Khanna indicates how the postcolonial state becomes an arbiter of a sexual politics since the 'human rights regime is located in the relationship between the body and the state' and 'for the working of power to be recognised and addressed, it must be manifested as violence, or it should be capable of being understood in terms of "discrimination"'.

These insights are relevant both to a queer as well as a feminist politics, addressed by many activist reports included in the volume. Among others Chayanika Shah, Gomathi N B, Bina Fernandez, and Deepa V N bring the issue of the highs and lows of a collaborative feminist and queer activism to the forefront in the second section of the volume entitled 'Stories of Struggle'. While Indian feminists have been reluctant to ally with groups focusing on sexuality rights, sexuality framed through a focus on violence against women has always been on the agenda of the feminist framework. As Deepa points out in her meticulously documented report of the origins, activities, and future of the organisation Sahayatrika (literally, fellow traveller), such a focus in the prevailing feminist practice 'leaves unaddressed perhaps more challenging and disruptive notions of sexual and personal as well as socio-economic autonomy'. The challenge is to 'move beyond presenting a lesbian existence as a site of violence and conceive of a lesbian (or feminist) politics that is based on the right to desire'. The women's movement is the natural ally of the queer movement in this respect, since, according to Chayanika, 'women's movements were the first to articulate concern over the control over sexuality and the societal constructions of gender and are hence the closest link and support for the nascent "queer" movements in the country'. Bina and Gomathi's research on violence faced by lesbian women in India situates itself in a feminist standpoint epistemology marked by an assertion of their identities as bisexual and lesbian activists. Locating several sites of institutional violence, among them the family and the medical establishment, the implications of this research help theorise violence in a nuanced manner by not only documenting the possible causes of the high incidence of lesbian suicides in India but also accounting for the violence implicit in disallowing sex reassignment surgery to those who desire it.

Sex reassignment surgery to adopt a transsexual identity is a vexed and contentious issue in queer communities. Even while pointing to the violence implicit in the denial of rights to transsexuals Fernandez and Gomathi label lesbians' desire for such surgery as indicative of 'some degree of self-denial and violence towards their bodies'. Indeed the one article on the rights of transsexuals included in the volume expresses unease with the idea: Ashwini Sukthankar admits that her initial opinion was that such surgery 'reified the rigid definitions of gender – what it means to be a man or a woman – that

feminists had always sought to question'. By including two accounts – the first by Satya, a female to male transsexual, and the second by Famila, a hijra – in the essay Sukthankar makes an important intervention in the conjunctures and disjunctures between the two identities. Members of a community indigenous to South Asia, hijras are men who willingly embrace a female identity following voluntary (though sometimes enforced) castration. They earn their living as performers on auspicious occasions such as weddings or the birth of children in families. The historical, class-specific, and linguistic differences between hijras and transsexuals helps in accounting for the different forms of queer existence indigenous to South Asian, particularly Indian, contexts.

These identities also counter the charge of Westernisation faced by the queer movement in India and other non-Western locations. The class specific dimensions of this charge are evinced in Alok Gupta's account titled 'Englishpur ki Kothi' ('The Kothi from Englishland') where another identity specific to Indian context, kothi (feminised men in same sex relationships, often as passive partners) is applied to the author but his English education and class position are seen as setting him off from other kothis. The central problematic here is the lack of applicability of Western identity categories to many forms of alternative relationships found in India — between women, men or transsexuals.

This volume provides nuanced information on queer lives in India. It is also a veritable archive of queer activist support networks: Humsafar, Humrahi and Humnawaz from New Delhi, Sahayatrika from Kerala, Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action (LABIA) from Bombay, Counsel Club and Parivartak from Calcutta, Amitie from Chandanagar, Good as You (GAY) from Bangalore, among others. For young people embarking on the search for their sexual identities, this archive of organisational work and life narratives is as important as is the reiteration of the importance of queer visibility in university campuses. Representation in its broadest sense is clearly intended by the editors since there are accounts of Christian, Muslim and Hindu sexual identities based in India and as well as queer communities in the Indian diaspora. Meticulously edited, for the most part free from typographical errors, this book does its share in providing visibility to queer lives and the queer political movement in India where the relative merits of such visibility continue to be debated within the movement.

Sabine Broeck

Hotbeds: Black–White Love in Novels from the United States, Africa and the Caribbean

Pia Thielmann

Kachere Series, Zomba, 2004, pb 395pp ISBN 9 9908 7623 1 www.sndp.org.mw/kachereseries

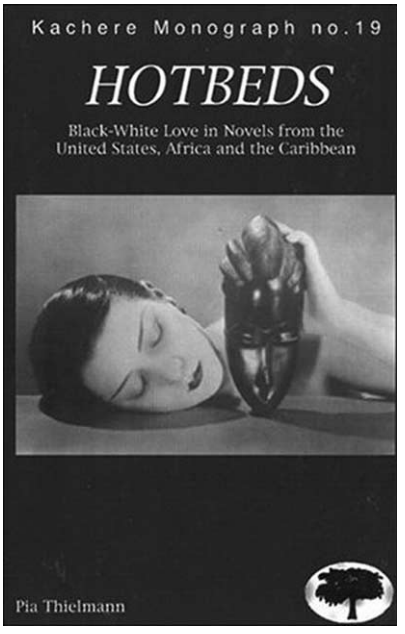
In her allusively titled monograph, full of seedy connotations, Thielmann attempts to give the reader a rather comprehensive overview of twentieth-century novels which treat the theme of bi-racial sexual and/or love relationships from various perspectives: those written by black men, black women, white men, and white women respectively. As she writes in her introduction, this book has been autobiographically occasioned by the author's personal involvement in interracial sexual and family transgressions, and her rationale for developing arguments in the text which purposely reflect her own experience is given as follows: 'transgressions of gender and race, geographic and religious boundaries and the rewards and repercussions of such outrageous acts are "not merely personal". They are highly political, in real life, and in fiction.' Consequently, Thielmann pursues a political, as well as a literary-critical aim with her investigation, not only to demonstrate the main themes, such as the fictionalisation of interracial love, but also to trace and expose the explicit and implicit political connotations, and implications of the works. To put it in her own words:

> It can be expected that interracial love relationships in these regions experience different destinies given their respective histories and demographics — The United States being perceived as white, Africa being mainly Black, and the Caribbean relatively mixed but predominantly Black. The answers to the questions of who was and is in a power position, who was the slaver and who the enslaved, who was the colonizer and who the colonized. And how were/are identities shaped in these contexts, and under these different circumstances are also expected to leave their marks on the literary representations of interracial love by Black and white authors from the three regions.

One question that Thielmann's study raises – by including in her commentary novels addressing interracial rape, and other forms of brutally and abusively exploitative relationships – but does not thoroughly address, is the validity of the term 'transgression' as a guiding concept in and by itself. Given that sexual and emotional relationships across colour lines have taken so many different forms and shapes, and given her observation that literary representations have variously engaged both the violent and the tender facets of those entanglements, the notion of transgression seems to be too narrow a concept.

The many novels Thielmann has chosen to discuss at greater length – covering vastly different historical and cultural ground – range from Ousmane Semene's *O Pays, mon beau peuple!* (1957) to Andre Brink's *Cape of Storms:*

The First Life of Adamastor (1993); from Shand Allfrey's *The Orchid House* (1953) to Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1997) and from Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) to *The Chaneysville Incident* (David Bradley, 1981).



Within the available space of the standard dissertation format Thielmann cannot – even for her 'featured' authors – spend more then a couple of pages on one novel, or one author. Cursorily, however, she takes us through many texts too numerous to list here (which are also listed in her impressive, twenty-page bibliography; all primary titles are mixed in with her secondary sources, so it is impossible to tell at first sight which narrative material she is dealing with altogether). This already points to what is at the same time the main strength and the main weakness of this book: its enormous wealth of primary material.

Thielmann's study is highly recommendable for every reader – politically, or aesthetically interested – who doubts prevalent literary histories of either mainstream white origins, or of black studies' ilk (male or female authored) and their overall stubborn silence on the controversial topic of interracial mixing. For those readers who want to learn more about the actual richness of novelistic treatment of interracial relationships in all their many lustful, violent, funny, ironical, tragic, melodramatic and other representations the study provides a welcome entry into the material, summarising plots and main themes of dozens of well and lesser well-known primary texts. As an aside it should be noted that in this regard, it comes all the more as a surprise and a pity that she ignores Werner Sollors' magisterial *Neither Black, nor White, Yet Both* from 1997 which, in its treatment of miscegenation also deals with an array of textualisations of interracial relationships.

Thielmann's study makes quite obvious that despite political pronunciations of race purity and political correctness from all corners, the 'hotbed' has occupied fine novelistic minds in all quarters, and we come away from her book with first glimpses at the variety of content and forms that have been tried on this subject. First glimpses — and more curiosity, to read the novels, first, and then to move on to more in-depth studies of particular representations, narrative strategies, motifs, and styles. One problematic result of Thielmann's rather indiscriminate content-orientation is that the author discusses texts of different genres (for example, modern and postmodern novels and Harlequin style romances) without making any distinction in her judgement of their aesthetic and/or political potential. Thus, what the present monograph does not yet provide us with is more sophisticated textual analysis that would reach farther than the thematic, and more or less rather rough summaries of its chosen texts. It remains to be hoped that other scholars, biographically invested or not, will follow Thielmann's lead and produce such studies of older, and of more contemporary 'hotbeds' of/in representations.

Annie Paul

Art of the Caribbean: Selection of Postcards and Text

Anne Walmsley

The Goodwill Art Service Ltd, Oxford, 2003, folder, £23.50
www.goodwillart.com

This selection of artwork from the Caribbean, reproduced on postcards along with an accompanying text, is an innovative and enterprising project. Designed to be used in school classrooms it is a valuable gift to the children of the Caribbean diaspora from one of its most enduring expatriate cultural historians and educators, Anne Walmsley. *Art of the Caribbean* would seem to be the latter-day counterpart in visual art to *The Sun's Eye*, an anthology of West Indian writing for young readers published by Walmsley in 1968. Walmsley, who taught English for three years in a rural secondary school in Jamaica in the early 1960s is also well known for documenting the life and times of CAM, the Caribbean Artists' Movement, which started in London in the sixties and included many of the Anglophone Caribbean's most prominent writers, poets and artists in its membership.

Oddly enough, considering that it is quite normal to think about 'West Indian' literature, visual art in the Caribbean has resisted identification as a regional entity; instead it remains balkanised with each tiny island jealously constructing its own 'national' art history. Thus you are confronted with Jamaican art, Barbadian art, Trinidadian art or Haitian and Cuban art, the latter two being the giants among the art worlds of the region. Walmsley's *Art of the Caribbean* therefore administers a much needed palliative to the situation although sadly the common ground it assumes is felt and honoured more in the diaspora than in

the competitive home territories which have steadfastly defied integration thus far.

The section titled 'Caribbean Art History' with which the text opens fluidly spins a carefully compiled set of facts spanning eight centuries into a regional narrative supporting the idea that art, as expressed in the petroglyphs, pictographs, basketry and pottery of the Tainos who once inhabited the area, was indigenous to the territory. All the same there are no visible landmarks with which to illuminate this native art terrain in the centuries preceding the arrival of the Spanish in 1492 who brought with them European traditions of art, mainly enlisted however, for religious purposes. Walmsley then provides individual histories for colonial Cuba and Saint Domingue which include brief references to twentieth-century art historical events and personages in these countries.

Some fascinating sidelights are thrown up in the process such as the fact that the earliest traces of Caribbean Creole culture first appeared in Cuba, 'notably the fusion of Catholic and African religions in *santera* (sic), its all-pervasive religious practice'. In Haiti we are told, the painting tradition was in full swing by the mid-nineteenth century with thirty Haitian artists 'at work' whose 'portrait subjects . . . were blacks and mulattos who formed the country's new elite'. Walmsley attributes this to Henri Christophe, first black king of northern Haiti who commissioned Englishman Richard Evans to paint his portrait and to establish an academy of painting, drawing and art instruction in schools. Likewise in Port-au-Prince, Walmsley suggests, the ruler of southern Haiti, Alexandre Pétion, hired French artists to do much the same. This is particularly interesting because the story we hear more often is that Haiti's prodigious art production is due to the intervention of 'visiting American' Dewitt Peters who set up the Centre d'Art in 1944, more than a hundred years later.

As Walmsley states up-front her project has a special focus on the Anglophone Caribbean. The Dutch Antilles therefore are summarily dealt with before the author proceeds to the substantive part of her thesis: the British West Indies or the English-speaking Caribbean. Walmsley euphemistically describes how the British had been trading in the West Indies from the mid-sixteenth century as 'privately sponsored buccaneers, who raided Spanish ships'. Gradually winning territories from the Spanish and the Dutch the British, 'who were the first to establish sugar-cane plantations, import Africans and practice slavery on a large scale', dominated the Caribbean by the late eighteenth century.

The practice of slavery introduced the cultural traditions of slaves to the region and Walmsley discusses the African contribution to art, evident in the tradition of domestic pottery to be found in Jamaica and in festival traditions such as Jonkonnu and Carnival. Indian labourers who were brought to the region after Emancipation 'to ensure continued productivity on the sugar estates' made their contribution to art in the Caribbean as well but according to Walmsley there was no evidence of European painting and sculpture being made in the region before the late eighteenth century despite the occasional visiting European artist. In contrast to Cuba and Haiti which enjoyed relatively long periods of 'heavily colonial, artistic activity' Western forms of art were virtually without precedent in places such as Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Guyana.

This sets the stage for the grand entrance of Edna Manley who arrives in Jamaica from England in 1922 supposedly bringing modern art with her. Although her first solo show in Kingston only takes place in 1938 the National Gallery of Jamaica's version of Jamaican art history dates the beginning of its so-called art movement to the year of her arrival in the island when she was only twenty-two and had barely begun practicing as an artist. In fact, as in Barbados and Trinidad, significant activity in Jamaican visual art only manifested itself in the late 1930s and early 1940s, a time of burgeoning nationalism and simmering social and political unrest in the region.

One of the most curious features of Jamaica's National Gallery is the official distinction it makes between what it calls 'mainstream' artists and the subaltern 'intuitives', an uneasy typology that Walmsley rightly fingers as divisive. The distinction is made between mainstream artists who are the products of formal training in art and self-taught artists without any such training who are commonly referred to as 'primitives', 'naïves' or 'outsiders' in mainstream art history. While a big deal is made of the fact that the National Gallery disdains such terms preferring instead the less derogatory sounding label 'intuitive' nothing much is changed as the operational logic behind the labels ultimately remains the same. What does it mean that a region that is itself outside the mainstream insists on recreating a mainstream for itself? Trinidadian artist Eddie Bowen for instance once asked if all Caribbean artists were not in essence 'outsider' artists in relation to the Euro-American canon. Needless to say the Jamaican curatoriat does not perturb itself with such questions pointing out that the creation of such a category actually enabled visibility and acceptance for the untrained or spontaneous artist. Ironically many of Jamaica's best-known artists, as Walmsley points out, fall into the 'intuitive' or self-taught category and she thinks are 'evidence of a continuous indigenous art tradition'. John Dunkley, claimed to be Jamaica's 'foremost' artist, famously spurned art instruction at classes held by Edna Manley and others in the late 1930s.

Brief art histories of Barbados, Guyana and Trinidad follow that of Jamaica, documenting key moments, personages, events and institutions in each country. The racial dynamics of art discourse in the region is hinted at by Walmsley's noting that art in Barbados was 'widely regarded as something done

by expatriates'. Jamaica too has had more than its fair share of expatriate artists, curators and educators involved in the production of visual art. This, coupled with the fact that visual art tends to be, in any society, a rarefied activity almost exclusively controlled by its elites means that despite the best intentions of those involved there is an unhealthy disconnect between the art scene in Jamaica and the average citizen. The easy assimilation of expatriates into Caribbean art worlds contrasts strongly with the West Indian literary canon which far from admitting expatriates, even balks at the inclusion of white West Indian writers, who are viewed as being culturally incapable of authentically representing populations that are largely black or non-white.

Walmsley ends her text by briefly examining Caribbean-born artists in Britain; her poignant inclusion of Denzil Forrester's 'The Burial of Winston Rose' deftly brings in the diaspora and the spiritual alienation suffered by Caribbean immigrants. The classroom activities included at the back as well as the notes on each individual postcard provide a rich amalgam of art-related learning which would provide children with a strong sense of the visual art of the region. The text is illustrated with line drawings and black and white reproductions while the postcards reproduce the artworks in full colour. Though designed mainly for children in the Caribbean diaspora, particularly in Britain, *Art in the Caribbean* would also greatly enhance visual art curricula in the Anglophone Caribbean, promoting a regional sense among local children currently locked into rigid national narratives. For that matter this art package published by the Goodwill Art Service could serve as an engaging introduction to Caribbean art for many an adult interested in exploring such subjects. It is true that Walmsley's approach to art is more traditional than contemporary with new media such as video and installation left out in the cold. Except for this and a very small number of typos and errors (the date for *This Land of Mine* by Barbadian artist Annalee Davis, born in 1963, is given as 1966 when she would have been three years old), this innovative pack of materials is a pedagogical tool of great value.

Andrew Lesk

Swimming in the Monsoon Sea

Shyam Selvadurai

Tundra Books, Toronto, 2005, hb
274pp ISBN 0 8877 6735 4 $24.99 Cdn
www.tundrabooks.com

Story-Wallah: Short Fiction from South Asian Writers

Syham Selvadurai, ed.

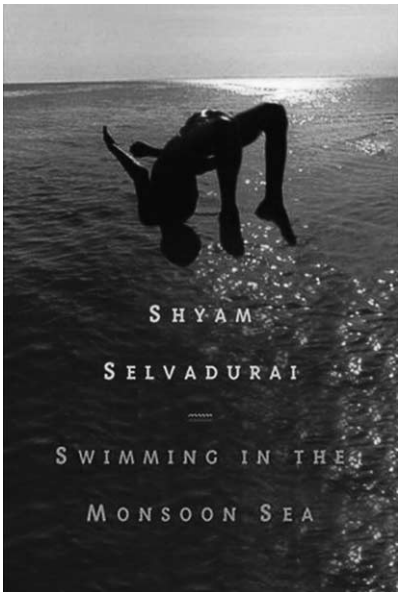
Houghton Mifflin, New York, 2005, pb
438pp ISBN 0 6185 7680 0 $14.00 US
www.marinerbooks.com

In his new novel, ostensibly for young adults, Shyam Selvadurai mines territory familiar to those who have read his 1994 effort, *Funny Boy*. *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, like its predecessor, concerns a young boy's growing realisation of his nascent homosexuality. *Funny Boy*, though, engages the panorama of Sri Lanka's social strife and search for national identity as a parallel backdrop to the protagonist's search for personal identity; the new work, on the other hand, uses a much smaller palate to examine how a sexual coming-of-age is difficult in a country not known for a liberal attitude toward identities queer.

Amrith de Alwis is a fourteen-year-old orphan, living with his well-to-do relatives in Colombo, in 1980. A sensitive youth, Amrith is a relative loner with no male friends, and an adolescent's penchant for holding onto a peevish anger. His Aunty Bundle blames herself for the death of Amrith's mother, and though we later learn that her guilt is misplaced, Amrith nevertheless uses it as a bargaining chip in maintaining his hard-done-by stance.

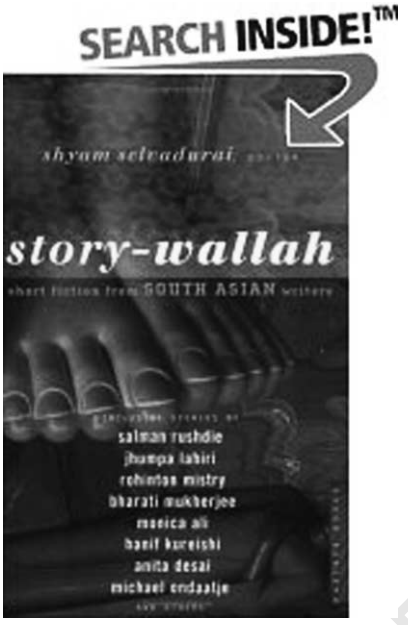
The novel opens with Amrith's attempt to make a silent mynah bird speak, and it is the bird's unwillingness to accommodate itself to another's wishes that is meant to parallel Amrith's reluctance to disclose his feelings to those who might help him, notably his aunt. Similarly, the turbulence of the monsoon sea, appearing occasionally, is a pathetic fallacy signaling Amrith's own disordered uncertainties and lack of self-knowledge.

The attentive reader, though, will easily intuit what Amrith cannot: his increasingly obvious homosexuality. Rather stereotypically, Amrith is a star of his school's drama society and relishes playing the female roles in his school's various productions of Shakespeare. He has won an award for his portrayal of Juliet and is now eager to play Desdemona. His drama teacher, Madam Algama, 'had a way of looking at him, as if she saw right into his soul and understood something about him that he did not understand about himself. And what she saw made her more kind to him, more gentle'. He finds great contentment in the aesthetic luster of his Aunt Wilhelmina's silver, which he polishes. And he has befriended his Aunty Bundle's friend, the very gay Lucien Lindamulagé, who we find, in a chapter appropriately named 'The Holidays Drag On', 'always applied white powder to his face'. With Lucien, 'Amrith felt that he could simply be himself'. Amith's ignorance is almost all a bit much, and one wants to shake him into awareness long before he comes to terms with his homosexuality.



It is not until about a third of the way into the novel that Amrith's long-lost Canadian cousin, Niresh, is introduced. Two years older than Amrith, Niresh is a gregarious, curious spark, given to hyperbole and prevarication. He makes his younger cousin feel wanted, and in turn, Amrith unknowingly begins to fall in love with him. Amrith sees his cousin naked and becomes aroused, and lashes out at his female cousins when they attempt to manipulate Niresh's time. Amrith, so caught up in his increasingly tumultuous world, eventually loses his focus – and the part of Desdemona – and violently gives in to his jealousy. But the truth will out: Niresh reveals how his life in Canada is quite miserable, and after Niresh returns to Canada, the besotted Amrith realises that he, like Lucien, is gay. Amrith keenly feels his isolation but is not without hope.

Swimming in the Monsoon Sea is not a novel for adults and it's easy to see why: Amrith's self-absorption and petulance are uncritically depicted qualities that any teenager might readily identify with; all others will readily lose patience with a youth as coddled and spoiled as Amrith. Yet Selvadurai's gentle unveiling of Amrith's identity accurately illustrates the slow process of coming to knowledge that any teenager, gay or otherwise, engages. Amrith's homosexuality is presented as an incontrovertible fact; he is not an object of pity, nor is his gayness shown as unwelcome — it simply is.



In his academic introduction to his collection of South Asian writing, Selvadurai puts aside the subject of gay subjectivity to discuss the trope so familiar to South Asians: the diaspora. *Story-Wallah*'s brilliant introduction argues for diasporic writing as cultural production, especially as such creativity flows from 'the space between, that marvelous open space represented by the hyphen, in which the two parts of [an author's] identity jostle and rub up against each other like tectonic plates'. Selvarduria provides a potted history of how (postcolonial) nations struggle to assert a collective identity that nevertheless cannot be inclusive of people who are different, in whatever fashion, from the national norm. Selvadurai then ties the question of national citizenry to diasporic identity, particularly as the latter complicates any attempts at resolving the former. He writes that

> the idea of diaspora acknowledges the act, the trauma, of migration and the fact that one cannot but be transformed in the new land. The emphasis must shift to a sense of cultural identity that is eclectic and diverse, a sense of cultural identity that is transforming itself, making itself new over and over again.

This 'continuous work in progress' not only acknowledges similarities but, importantly, differences.

In his discussion of the various writers included in the anthology – Ondaatje, Vassanji, Desai, Mukherjee, Rushdie, Krueishi, and Monica Ali among them – Selvadurai is careful to point out the problems inherent in simple explanations of the complexity that is the South Asian diaspora. Not all of the components that might fall under the potentially homogenising label that is 'diaspora' are in any way harmonious.

In the instance of Canada, for example, the disputes between Canadians who are of Indo-Caribbean background and more recent immigrants from Asia give rise, in Shani Mootoo's 'Out on Main Street', to an examination of cross-cultural experiences that often entail the maintenance of a culture's point of origin.

So too does the anthology draw attention to new writing in which, in many ways, maintains a dialogue between South Asia and the new country – using South Asia as a geographical starting point – and an appreciation of modern advances in mobility in stories such as Sandip Roy's 'Auld Lang Syne'.

The anthology itself invariably juxtaposes stories which have arisen from and deal with different locales and cultures: the volume is, as Selvardurai points out, similar to a South Asian bazaar, a milieu rich in choice in which South Asia comes to resemble a map of the world.