Bernth Lindfors and Geoffrey V. Davis (eds), *African Literatures and Beyond: A Florilegium* (Rodopi, 2013)

In the preface to the volume *Contemporary African Cultural Productions* (2012), Pinkie Mekgwe and Adebayo Olukoshi note that, ‘all over Africa, an explosion in cultural productions of various genres is in evidence’. Commenting on the flourishing cultural life on the continent, both scholars assume that the scholarly community, at least, not African social scientists, did not seriously engage with African cultural productions. One would hardly disagree with Mekgwe and Olukoshi on the contention that the politics of research even in most African universities does not feature local cultural productions and their modes of inscription in global cultural negotiations as prominent objects of scholarly investigation. Nevertheless, a wholesale dismissal of the growing scholarship on African culture is commonplace and reproduces the problem one sets out to address. Largely, the visibility that African cultural productions are gaining nowadays pertains to the work of scholars, cultural and political activists who have been instrumental in creating awareness about African cultural presence in the last decades.

For nearly half a century James Gibbs has been at the forefront of scholarship into Anglophone African literature. You hardly write a piece on Wole Soyinka without mentioning his name, either to align with or interrogate his claims. His colleagues gathered 25 essays and creative writings, ‘to celebrate both the man and his works’; the *Festschrift* edited by Bernth Lindfors and Geoffrey V. Davis and published in the Cross/Cultures series of Rodopi is a commendable book. If many commemorative volumes are designed to revisit the works of a scholar in order to shed new light on the salient features of their works, it appears that the editors of *African Literature and Beyond: A Florilegium* have decided to avoid rendering cheap praise to James Gibbs’s brilliant works. It strikes the reader that only few references to James Gibbs occur throughout the essays.

The structure of the book illustrates the diversity of Gibbs’s research interests. The first cluster of essays focuses on West Africa; two contributions in this section critically engage with Wole Soyinka’s oeuvre. Mpalive-Hangson Msiska examines the notion of power and the idea of the hegemonic in Wole Soyinka’s works. Msiska criticizes narratives which locate the rereading of dominant Marxist ideas of power exclusively in the realm of progressive Western movements such as cultural studies. He contends that, ‘Soyinka’s analysis of power in his creative work has attended to that zone beyond formal theoretical categorization of power’ (5). The essay thus ventures a reading of Soyinka that conflates critical and poetic texts and questions the political and ethical implications of their theoretical elaborations. Msiska convincingly shows that theorizing about African literature did not begin with the emergence of postcolonial theory in the 1980s.

Further contributions to the first section of the volume include Sola Adeyemi’s article on the narratives of the postcolony in Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, Awo Mana Asiedu’s essay on the enduring relevance of the earliest Ghanaian play, *The Blinkards*, one hundred years after its first production, and Eustace Palmer’s exciting review of five plays by Sierra Leonean dramatists. Gareth Griffiths’s insightful study on *The Rev. Joseph Jackson Fuller: A Native Evangelist and Black Identity in the Cameroons* substantiates the results of recent research into the use of black evangelists in Africa: ‘In the process it has become clear that the story of the successful missionizing of black Africa is the story of its indigenous evangelists’ (69). Griffiths traces the desperate struggle of native

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Book reviews: *African Literatures and Beyond: A Florilegium* by Bernth Lindfors and Geoffrey V. Davis.

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Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.

Baptist Christians to remain under the authority of the Baptist Mission Society of London after Germany took control over Cameroon in the mid-1880s and the Basel Evangelical Missionary Society was now to take over the Baptist congregations and schools. Alluding to the question of native agency, Griffiths finds out that ‘both groups seem willing to treat the people of the Cameroons as items in a set of transactions rather than as people with their own views, emotions, and commitment to their Baptist faith and their preferred form of worship’ (85). Griffiths’s contribution is illuminating, though further investigations should explore the position of other missionary groups represented in this part of the continent on the eve of the Berlin Conference. While the editors’ choice to organize the essays around geographical regions is appealing, their understanding of regional boundaries becomes embarrassing when they place Griffiths’s study among the contributions focussing on West Africa.

The second section of the book groups three essays relating to Eastern and Central Africa. Jane Plastow and Geoffrey V. Davis give accounts of field experiences in Eritrea and in Zimbabwe, two countries in which artists face the disastrous consequences of political bankruptcy. In their audit of the Zimbabwean cultural sector, Davis and his colleagues of the ‘culture cluster’ within Commonwealth Organisations Committee acknowledge that ‘there is a sense that things are at last beginning to improve’ (133). Plastow’s report on the contrary takes an apocalyptic twist in the end: ‘I ceased writing about live theatre in Eritrea some years ago because it was no longer anything but a vehicle of state propaganda. The tender shoot of local-language radio drama now seems to have been cut off in the same way’ (101). Pia Thielmann examines memories of the Arab slavery in Jonathan Sajiwandani’s Road to Emancipation: From Slavery to Happiness. His contribution resonates with Chris Dunton’s study of four poems on the sinking of the troopship Mendi, which falls into the next section of the book focussing on South Africa. Raoul J. Granqvist’s reading of Carl Linnaeus’s fieldwork as translation is impressive. His definition of translation as ‘a term for appropriation and conquest’ (149) is highly convenient for the discussion of foundational texts of ethnology, anthropology, linguistics and humanism.

Another section of the book contains contributions dealing with other parts of the world. The pioneering role of the University of Bayreuth in promoting African studies in Germany is acknowledged by three contributions from scholars linked to that institution. In an interview with Anne Adams, Theodor Wondja Michael brings the legacy of German colonial rule to the fore. Their conversation is inspiring. Eckhard Breitinger, one of Germany’s best specialists of Anglophone African literature, died in August 2013 before the publication of the book. His essay examines romantic and revolutionary visions of Caribbean history as documented by German explorers, scientists and storytellers over six centuries.

The section presenting creative writings is as diverse as the book itself. Poetry, fiction and drama are represented; the content of the book thus becomes as colourful as the kente cloth chosen for the book cover. The last contribution to the book reveals an unknown dimension of Gibbs’s immeasurable talents. Innes’s short text and the accompanying pictures document the 2011 staging, in Goldsmiths College’s Pinter Centre, of a script written by James Gibbs. The photographs showing James Gibbs on the scene as well as the creative writings in this book constitute the best illustration of its title. James Currey and Lynn Taylor make a similar assessment: ‘James Gibbs, in his steady work for both African Theatre and African Literature Today, has […] made a singular contribution to the serious evaluation of work from Africa, both published and performed’ (338).

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