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Elina Valovirta, *Sexual Feelings: Reading Anglophone Caribbean Women’s Writing through Affect* (Cross/Cultures 174, Rodopi, 2014)

The trope of rape is a common one in postcolonial literature, by women in the Caribbean as elsewhere. It serves as a metaphor for the abuse and exploitation of the colonial subject as well as the legacy of sexism and extreme violence against women still present in many postcolonial societies (India is one example that comes to mind).

In this study, the Finnish scholar Elina Valovirta focuses not exclusively on rape, but on sexuality in general (the expectation of virginity for girls, the double standard for adultery, alternative sexualities and so on). Valovirta offers thorough and sensitive readings of the primary Caribbean texts she has selected (*Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, *Sleeping’s Beauty and the Prince Charming* and *Louisiana* by Erna Brodber, *Buxton Spice* by Oonya Kempadoo, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat, *It Begins with Tears* by Opal Palmer Adisa and *Cereus Blooms at Night* by Shani Mootoo).

The book is divided into seven parts. The first consists of a general discussion in which the author explains her choice of texts and describes the theoretical approach she favours, which may perhaps best be described in her own words as ‘an affective phenomenology of reading tak[ing] into account the role of emotions in meaning-production’ (Valovirta, 187).

Barthes, Bakhtin, Cixous, Foucault, Irigaray and Co. are given the requisite nods, but the theoretical foundation supporting Valovirta’s analysis is vaster still, based on works by Sara Ahmed, Sue Campbell, Evelyn O’Callaghan, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, Lynne Pearce and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, to name only a few. Extensive quotation and paraphrasing of these writers unfortunately hampers the fluency of Valovirta’s own text, which is otherwise clear and insightful.

The second section, titled ‘Reading the Ambivalence of Sexuality in Transition’, discusses the work of Brodber and Kempadoo and focuses on the secrecy, isolation and shame often accompanying the change from girlhood to womanhood (for example, sexual awakening, menarche). Valovirta discusses Brodber’s symbol of the *kumbla* – a protective and sheltering physical space or mental state – at great length; it is here that young Nellie of *Jane and Louisa* retreats in her confusion ‘in order to escape what she experiences as the threatening nature of sexuality’ (Valovirta, 52). The shelter offered by the *kumbla* is ambivalent; by ‘dwelling in it for too long, Nellie becomes its victim and her health begins to crumble’ (53). The discussion is genuinely interesting, but authorial explanations occasionally stumble under the weight of their own wordiness: ‘Erna Brodber’s *Jane and Louisa*, with its notoriously difficult and elusive kumbla figure, shows us how the reader becomes positioned by its polysemy into a world of ambivalences where negotiations of new meanings and understandings of sexuality and emotions are negotiated’ (Valovirta, 71).

In *Buxton Spice*, set in Guyana, young Lula and her friends attempt to educate themselves by inspecting a sleeping man’s penis, reading *Man and Woman* in secret and making their first exploratory forays into the world of masturbation. Actual coitus between Judy, a white girl of Portuguese descent, and a black man considered her social inferior leads to scandal within the community, so that the themes of race, class and gender intertwine.

The third section of the study treats ‘Ways of Reading Sexual Shame, Violence and Pain’. Valovirta focuses on three key incidents in which female sexuality is associated with shame, destruction and pain. In the first, Sophie, a young Haitian girl in Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes and Memory*, takes her own virginity with a pestle in order to liberate herself from her mother’s ‘testing’ ritual (insertion of a finger to ascertain that the hymen is still intact). In the second incident, set in
rural Jamaica, Monica, a prostitute in Opal Palmer Adisa’s *It Begins with Tears* who is having an affair with a neighbour’s husband, is subjected to revenge by ‘peppering’ in which hot peppers are inserted into all her bodily orifices by a group of livid women. The third incident is taken from Brodber’s story entitled ‘Sleeping’s Beauty’ and deals with the shame of menstruation. Because Charming cannot come to terms with Sleeping’s menstrual cramps, he leaves her suffering and unable to put body and soul together, simultaneously rendering it impossible for them to realise their original plan to repatriate their people to Africa.

The fourth part of the study, ‘Communities That Heal: Reading Sexual Healing” deals with the same works as above. Women who have been traumatised in some way (by the ritual of ‘testing’ or peppering, for example) must come to terms with their legacy of pain, name their violators and prepare to end the cycle of violence, rebuilding their own lives with the help of caring members of the community.

The fifth part of the study describes the role of those men who support the female characters and help them to overcome sexual trauma in various ways. In contrast to the usual cast of abusive or absentee husbands, these men are healers, caregivers and nurturers. Tyler, the narrator-protagonist of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, stands out most prominently as he is a male-to-female transsexual – a sexual hybrid who breaks down binary oppositions and helps readers to ‘envisage alliances and belongingness across non-normative identities’ (Valovirta, 161).

The sixth section of the study examines the hypersexual and the asexual woman, in the characters of the uninhibitedly lusty former prostitute Monica (from Adisa’s *It Begins With Tears*) and Ella from Brodber’s *Louisiana*. Though the two women may at first glance seem to be located on different ends of the spectrum, both characters pose a challenge to the traditional and/or patriarchal views of what constitutes acceptable female sexuality: just as Monica’s untamed erotic energy can be read as ‘empowering and exemplary’ (Valovirta, 171), Ella’s lack of sexual interest may be considered liberating in a phallocentric society.

The final section contains a short summary and an outlook.

The reasons why the author chose to structure her book as she did are clear, but what is equally obvious is that the structure is not without its flaws. As she discusses many of the novels more than once, examining different but related aspects, Valovirta ends up repeating herself frequently, at times word for word (see 76 and 164), and citing the very same passages from the texts that she has already quoted elsewhere in her analysis (see 96 and 127). Had she chosen to include a wider range of texts, the problem of redundancy might have been avoided. Even brief, parenthetical references to other primary works might have lent the study additional breadth (for example, a reference to Grace Nichols’ poem *Sugar Cane* when the use of sugar cane as a sexual symbol in *Jane and Louisa* is discussed on page 111; a note on the sexual trauma experienced by the young heroine in Joan Riley’s *The Unbelonging*, or an allusion to Jamaica Kincaid’s *Girl* with its instructions on how ‘nice’ girls are expected to behave or to Dionne Brand’s contrasting depictions of homosexual and heterosexual relations in her novel *In Another Place, Not Here* (to name just a few possibilities).

Occasionally, completely unnecessary questions are raised and answered, as when the author comments that ‘narratorial exclusion does not rule out readerly participation. Thus, the inability to see oneself as black when reading Brodber does not amount to an inability to feel, much less an inability to feel responsively in a generous manner’ (139).

On a more positive note, the author does make occasional references to black American literature as well as to Australian literature, references which serve to expand the readers’ horizons, as good criticism should.
Valovirta’s stated goal is to ‘clarify the complexity, polysemy and fluidity of feelings in the text-reader relationship’ (38). This goal is achieved, and despite some lingering scepticism regarding the usefulness of the theoretical approach chosen, the author may be commended for having made a unique and interesting contribution to the study of Anglophone Caribbean women’s writing.

Tamara Braunstein
Diaspora studies, though a comparatively new discipline, has gained tremendous impetus in the recent years both in public discourse as well as in academia. There has been a proliferation of scholarly assessments and critical inquiry on the South Asian as well as Indian diaspora studies in recent years. Situated within the corpus of the ever-growing academic inquiries like Vijay Mishra’s *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2007), Susan Koshy and R. Radhakrishnan’s *Transnational South Asians: The Making of a Neo-Diaspora* (2008), Rajesh Rai and Peter Reeves’s *The South Asian Diaspora: Transnational Networks and Changing Identities* (2009), Om Prakash Dwivedi’s *Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (2011) or Rita Christian and Judith Misrahi-Barak’s *India and the Diasporic Imagination* (2011), Om Prakash Dwivedi’s edited collection of essays on the contemporary representations of the Indian diaspora makes a significant contribution to the growing critical discourse on diaspora.

Wide-ranging in scope and scholarly in outlook, *Tracing the New Indian Diaspora* offers an important and timely exploration into the complex and dynamic nature of the Indian diaspora. It tries to re-examine established notions of identity, home, location and/or belonging and search for newer paradigms for the concepts of hybridisation, dislocation and/or alienation and their myriad representations within the global Indian diaspora. The book is graced by a scholarly introduction by Om Prakash Dwivedi that sets out to introduce the new Indian diaspora and gives a critical overview of the evolving notions of the diaspora so as to contextualise the complex global nature of Indian diaspora. It foregrounds the evolving changes in contemporary times and contexts and gives a clear indication of the themes the essays follow. The book consists of two sections. The first section, ‘Tracing the Indian Diaspora,’ is made up of nine essays. The opening essay by Pierre Gottschlich discusses the socio-economic and political aspects of the Indian communities in Mauritius, Fiji, Singapore, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, the UK and New Zealand, and as such provides a broad overview of the cultural and geopolitical diversity of the Indian diaspora, its history and developments, specific circumstances and periods of settlement.

This transnational trajectory of the Indian diaspora is further traced in the next few essays. Brij Maharaj’s essay examines the condition of the Indian community as an ethnic minority in post-apartheid South Africa and observes how the community’s rigid conservativism of cultural identity might be a factor in exacerbating racist tensions and consequently giving rise to feelings of marginalisation and disillusionment. Amarjit Kaur’s essay, however, tries to reconnect contemporary Indian migration to Malaysia with the late-nineteenth century Indian migrations to the Malaya. In his essay, Louis Harrington analyses how the Indian community in Ireland, through their multifarious interactions with the Irish community, recreates not only a new ‘homeland’ but also a new cross-cultural identity. Anjali Sahay examines the Indian diaspora settled in the USA and the potential economic and political roles the NRI community can play in the development of their ‘homeland’ India. The complex nature of experiences pertaining to the ethnic minorities in Indian diaspora is brought out succinctly in Meena Dhanda’s essay that spotlights the identity and rights of the Dalit community in Britain. Wardlow Friesen’s essay takes the queue from the experiences of the Indian diaspora in New Zealand to theorise on the representation of diaspora in media and its significance in the construction of diasporic identity. Sunil Bhatia’s essay grapples with the experiences and autobiographical representations of the Indian community in suburban USA post-9/11, while Brij V. Lal’s essay-cum-travelogue uses personal memory as a tool to reconnect with his lost ‘home’.

The second section, ‘Literary Representations of the Indian Diaspora’, has six essays that examine the complex appropriations and negotiations at play in the literary and/or cultural texts of the Indian diasporic community. The section begins with the eco-critical analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *One Amazing Thing* by Chitra Sankaran, followed by Lisa Lau’s essay that makes a comparative study of two distinctly different novels – Kavery Nambisan’s *The Scent of Pepper* and Sarita Mandanna’s *Tiger Hills*, both set in Coorg and depicting the distinctive flavour of the locale, customs and community of the region. Their differences of location – one a home author and the other a diasporic one – give rise to a differential perspective, as Lau so astutely notes, in the projection and contextualisation of their setting. Maria Ridda’s essay focuses on Vikram Chandra’s *Love and Longing in Bombay* and links it to the contemporary Hindi cinema and its representations of the diasporic themes. For Ridda, Bollywood cinema not only showcases India as part of a global culture but also serves as a mode of connection to the homeland as well as a repertoire of ideal Indian values for the diasporic Indian community to emulate, providing, as it were, ‘a visual and “emotional” archive to connect with’ (232). Judith Misrahi-Barak draws on *The Swinging Bridge*, a novel by Ramabai Espinet, a ‘double-bound’ diasporic writer born to Indian parents in Trinidad but now settled in Canada, to theorise on an alternate and creative perspective to account for the experiences of ‘double-bound’ diasporic communities and individuals. Uma Jayaraman’s essay examines Rohinton Mistry’s novel *Family Matters* to foreground how a gendered diasporic identity can challenge and disrupt the normative codes of identity formation and generate complex, non-normative and hybridised identities thus ‘negotiating possible meanings of what it means to be Indian in the newly generated spaces of the global arena’ (253). This notion of hybridised identities reconstructed by women in Indian diaspora is continued in Pranav Jani’s essay that serves as a fit conclusion to the volume because it brings together the much-debated issues of identity, gender, family and nation in diaspora. Through a detailed examination of Indian-American texts such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel *The Mistress of Spices*, Nisha Ganatara’s film *Chutney Popcorn*, Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story ‘Mrs. Sen’ in *The Interpreter of Maladies* and Mira Nair’s film *The Namesake* based on Jhumpa Lahiri’s eponymous novel, Jani spotlights the negotiations of ‘various boundaries dividing “East” and “West” and even questioning their validity’ (272).

Overall, this collection offers a range of significant, thought-provoking and scholarly contributions that provide insightful interpretation and analysis of the complex phenomenon of the Indian diaspora in contemporary times. By employing different theoretical approaches and analytical frameworks, the essays expand both specialist and lay readers’ understanding of the diversity of the Indian diaspora and the complex nature of literary and cultural texts of Indian diasporic communities. One of the major strengths of this volume lies in its concurrent grappling with the ever-evolving social and political contexts, as well as with the literary and cultural texts that articulate the diasporic imagination. Alongside an exploration of the historical and socio-political evolution of the complex identities, there is an examination of the literature and cultural texts of the Indian diaspora in which these diasporic identities are produced or contested in diverse ways temporally as well as spatially. This technique lays bare the multifaceted nature of Indian diaspora – the complex positionalities and the subtle negotiations at work in the politics of the Indian diaspora today. This insightful foregrounding of the multidimensionality of Indian diaspora is vital in understanding the lived realities of Indian diasporic communities.

**Sutapa Chaudhuri**
Syncretic Arenas is one of the few Festschriften combining the structure of the liber amicorum with a substantial take on a specific area of investigation. It is a compelling anthology in honor of the Nigerian-born playwright, poet and scholar Esiaba Irobi (1960-2010) and, at the same time, it actively contributes to the ongoing researches on postcolonial African drama as a transnational and transcultural phenomenon. Irobi’s work, in fact, provides an interesting case study for those who advocate the necessity of a ‘transcultural turn’ in literary and cultural studies. As aptly reminded by the editor Isidore Diala in the introduction to the volume, Irobi ‘liked to describe himself as a Biafran who led all his life “in exile in Nigeria, the UK and the USA”’ (xix), but he also managed to transform this multiple exclusion into a multifaceted creative production. Differently from his renowned predecessors Soyinka and Pepper Clark, however, Irobi has been quite neglected in the field of Postcolonial Studies until the publication of this volume, which also stands as a major contribution on the author.

The first section of the book is entirely devoted to Esiaba Irobi, whose memory is celebrated in different ways, ranging from individual memories to a series of poems dedicated to him by fellow writers such as Biodun Jeyifo, Benedictus Nwachukwu, Obiwu and Olu Oguibe. Nwachukwu’s Half a Century Death, in particular, manages to effectively convey the core of Irobi’s life and works, as it might be appreciated in these two stanzas:

Your performance strategy thrilled those
   in the house of words who profess truth;
the Soyinkan model, the Shakesperean compass.
   Cultural appropriation to the core. Half a century plague.

Creative, one, like pollination, east and west.
   You presented us with words
of gold, frankincense and myrrh
   moments later you departed from the forest of words. (54)

Cultural appropriation and cross-pollination are, indeed, fundamental elements of Irobi’s creative process, as he took advantage both of his ‘holistic education’ (104) – which he recalls in his long interview with Leon Osu (103-132) – and the propensity to cultural syncretism of his most renowned predecessors, Wole Soyinka and John Pepper Clark, and his fellow writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whom Irobi repeatedly praises within the same interview.

Regarding Soyinka, in particular, the whole book follows the path opened by Isidore Diala’s previous works on Irobi’s drama, underlining, thus, the latter’s tight relationship with Soyinka’s oeuvre. On one hand, in fact, Irobi’s play quoted by Nwachukwu, Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh (1989), seems to be ‘a parody of the many conferences of the 1960s and 1970s in which African writers and scholars attempted to identify and define the prime virtues of neo-African literature’ (70), including Soyinka in the list. On the other hand, as Isidore Diala points out in this volume, “[t]he trajectory of Irobi’s career was to tend more and more to Wole Soyinka’s, only with a more explicit interest in politics’ (72). Less marked, yet still effective, is the influence on Irobi’s writing of another
Nigerian dramatist of the precedent generation, John Pepper Clark, as noticed in his essay by Henry Obi Ajumeze (91-102).

As for the political dimension of Irobi’s legacy, which differentiated his oeuvre from Soyinka’s works, it was not limited to the ‘performance strategy’, quoting Nwachukwu, that he deployed as a playwright or as a Shakespearean actor; it could be also retraced in Irobi academic writing. Suffice it to say that at the time of his premature death, Irobi had been appointed Visiting Fellow at the International Research Center at the Freie Universität of Berlin with a research project on ‘the politics and aesthetics of international performance in the age of globalization’ (16).

Irobi’s criticism was also directed at the Nigerian political establishment, which never granted him any acknowledgment while he was living in Nigeria, and at the transnational academic world, which he suffered a great disappointment from, especially during his stay in the UK. In the latter regard, as Olu Oguibe recalls (9-10), Irobi bitterly criticised the UK academic environment immediately after leaving it, in a poem which was explicitly titled ‘An African Poet in England Curses His English Head of Department’, to be later collected in his cycle of poems, Rejection Slips (2004). Irobi’s political views, however, appear to be also slightly controversial, as he was ‘wary of Marxism’ (98), but his Christian faith, which he explicitly acknowledges in Osu’s interview (113), drew him nonetheless to the endorsement of a strong, albeit generic, egalitarianism. His criticism of globalizing tendencies in politics and culture, on the other hand, was never completed because of his early passing at the time of his academic stay in Berlin.

In conclusion, if there is a weakness in the whole organisation of the anthology, it might be in the reproduction of this contradictory entanglement of political and cultural issues in the second section of the book, where the transnational and transcultural focus on postcolonial African theatre (covering Nigerian as well as Egyptian, Kenyan, Ugandan, South African playwrights and theatre institutions) lacks full cohesion, producing different perspectives on the political commitment of dramatists. While this might be interpreted as a direct consequence of the vagueness of the transcultural approach, as it is rooted in a growing but unstable discipline such as African Cultural Studies, it also calls for future works sharpening the critical gaze both on Esiaba Irobi’s legacy and the critical potential of a transcultural and transnational approach to postcolonial African drama and theatre.

Lorenzo Mari

Rebecca Mead, *The Road to Middlemarch* (Text, 2014)

It’s only a question of time before the term ‘bibliomemoir’ finds a place in the dictionary. It will sit somewhere between biblioklept (‘a book thief’) and bibliophagist (‘a devourer of books’). The definition has already been proposed: ‘bibliomemoir, a memoir about the books one has read’, with ‘bibliomemoirist’ coined to define the author.\(^1\)

In the last few months, I have read several bibliomemoirs. They seem to be a particularly popular sub-genre with New York writers, perhaps because their city is so well-endowed with publishing houses, libraries, bookshops and literary magazines. Joanne Rakoff wrote *My Salinger Year* (Random House, 2014); Phyllis Rose described her year of reading in a New York library in *The Shelf: From LEQ to LES* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2014). And now Rebecca Mead, one of the staff writers for *The New Yorker*, lays claim to the title of bibliomemoirist with her intelligent and entertaining book, *The Road to Middlemarch: My Life with George Eliot*.

Mead approaches this canonical nineteenth-century novel from the perspective of a passionate and responsive twenty-first-century reader. She is trained in the language of literary scholarship – she majored in English – but her working life has been spent outside academia, as a writer and a journalist. It is this fresh, educated perspective that makes her book such a pleasure to read. If you like reading Victorian fiction, particularly if you admire George Eliot’s work, you will probably enjoy Rebecca Mead’s bibliomemoir very much indeed.

Text Publishing promotes *The Road to Middlemarch* as ‘a sensitive work of deep reading and biography, for every reader of literature who cares about why we read books and how they read us’. This encompasses the disparate strands that Mead weaves into her text. There are sections of close reading and criticism of *Middlemarch*, combined with lengthy passages on George Eliot’s life and times. These are blended with the memoir of bibliomemoir, personal elements of Mead’s experience – from the time she first read *Middlemarch* ‘when I was seventeen years old and still living in the seaside town where I spent my childhood’ (1) through to the phases of her adult life (career, marriage and motherhood). Throughout the book, there is the passionate invocation of the power of reading:

> Reading is sometimes thought of as a form of escapism, and it’s a common turn of phrase to speak of getting lost in a book. But a book can also be where one finds oneself; and when a reader is grasped and held by a book, reading does not feel like an escape from life so much as it feels like an urgent, crucial dimension of life itself. There are books that seem to comprehend us just as much as we understand them, or even more. There are books that grow with the reader as the reader grows, like a graft to a tree. (16)

If this passage resonates strongly with you, then you are likely to enjoy this bibliomemoir whether you have read George Eliot’s work or not.

I have read *Middlemarch* – years ago, lying on the university lawns under the plane trees, sitting in crowded lecture theatres with a hundred or so other students. It is still taught at the University of Adelaide, as it is in many other colleges and universities, in courses on nineteenth-century literature and society. Virginia Woolf admired it; the critic F R Leavis famously declared it to be part of England’s literary *Great Tradition*.\(^2\) One way of appreciating the value of *Middlemarch* is to read the criticism – Leavis, or Barbara Hardy, or any of the other reputable scholars who have

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published monographs, book chapters and journal articles on Eliot. Another approach is to ransack library shelves for biographies of Eliot’s life and writing, coming away with the work of authors such as Gordon Haight and Jenny Uglow. Reading a bibliomemoir like Rebecca Mead’s is another way again.

The Road to Middlemarch is a remarkably accessible book based on literary criticism and biography. It is not academic, but it is scholarly enough to be insightful as well as entertaining. There isn’t an index for pinpointing specific facts and interpretations, but there is a section of bibliographical notes that could lead an enthusiastic reader to further studies, and to other novels by George Eliot.

What there is in Rebecca Mead’s work, in abundance, is the lived experience of a genuinely passionate and educated reader. The memoir glows with her love of Middlemarch and her appreciation of the generous humanity and thoughtful morality that it teaches. I’ll leave the last words of the review to Mead, with the hope that you will read this bibliomemoir, and share it with anyone who has not yet had the pleasure of reading Middlemarch:

Cloaked in my quasi-objective spirit of enquiry was another set of questions, these ones more personal, and pressing, and secret. What would happen if I stopped to consider how Middlemarch has shaped my understanding of my own life? Why did the novel still feel so urgent, after all these years? And what could it give me now, as I paused here in the middle of things, and surveyed where I had come from, and thought about where I was, and wondered where I might go next? (10)

Jennifer Osborn

‘Some writers do set out to be experimental for a variety of reasons’ (193), and Julie Armstrong’s *Experimental Fiction* is one such experiment in writing with a very clear and straightforward reason. Meant for creative writers who want to experiment with writing and for readers of such experimental works, Armstrong leads by example, so far as the writing style is concerned. The book, divided into four sections (plus introduction and conclusion), does not have the traditional division into chapters, and begins with a detailed and unusual contents section. An important and interesting aspect of the book is the activity box that follows each description of new writing. Through these activity/experiment boxes, the book attempts to engage with readers, some of whom are also supposed to be aspiring writers and who would want to learn from the past experiments and consequent developments in literature.

*Experimental Fiction* introduces the readers and the writers alike to the idea of how experiment began in literature, became prevalent and is almost inevitable in the current scenario. It builds up on the processes by which this experimentation has been sustained and strengthened from the twentieth century into the twenty-first century. Armstrong traces the philosophical, psychological and technological changes that led writers to depart from the realism of nineteenth century and to try to find and, if necessary, invent new ways of express themselves. Armstrong touches upon various historical, social, cultural and political conditions to explore the new ways of and new form of writing that emerged in the twentieth century. The four sections of the book successively deal with Modern(ism), the Beats, Postmodernism and the contemporary era in writing. Armstrong juxtaposes their similarities and differences, using examples from representative authors and their texts. Linearity of time and hence linearity of narration is the first casualty in this quest to experiment and form anew. Space is the next. Armstrong discusses in some detail the blurring the boundaries of time and space and their ultimate apparent dissolution in stream of consciousness technique in the writings of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and so on. She also discusses reality (psychological rather than physical), (lack of) meaning, (un)truth, multiplicity of meanings and truths, and so on, to portray ‘contradiction, angst, rootlessness, disorientation, urban dislocation and, yet, optimism, making the world new’ (15). Making new is the clarion call of experimental writers, and the book seems designed to invite readers to be actively involved while reading and responding to such literature. In this context, fragmentation and fluidity of form reflect the fragmentation and fluidity of thought, perception, experiences, identities, and human character. Form, content, language, syntax, and technique – all expose the complexity and chaos of the modern and postmodern, and the contemporary world.

Armstrong succinctly brings out how Beats responded to heightened awareness of altered perceptions about ideas regarding racial and gender (in)equality through interactions with people on the margins, drugs, experimenting with sexual practices, and turning to spiritual transcendence and music. Williams uses narratives by Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and others to illustrate what the Beats were influenced by and how they wrote.

According to Armstrong, postmodern has an inherent sense of playfulness, experimenting with a representation of identity that is in flux, and it ‘seeks to challenge beliefs and to stimulate new ways of thinking, new ways of seeing and new ways of being in the world’ (111, 112). The women’s movement, gay writing, identity and subversion are some of the key elements of this writing, which serve to uncover the commercialisation that is the driving force of the postmodern world. Metafiction
emerges from this flux that postmodern writing has become. Explanations from the fictional narratives of authors like Brett Easton Ellis, Douglas Coupland, Jeanette Winterson, Don DeLillo, Kurt Vonnegut, Salman Rushdie and so on, help chart the era from postmodernism through postcolonialism to the new era.

The section on the new era makes for the most enthralling read. This last section is perhaps the most important one in the quest to know and understand experimental fiction, but its appears rushed. It explores the melting and yet ever presenting boundaries of ‘art, reality, social networking, celebrity, advertising, marketing and publicity’ (175) that are reflected in the fiction of this new era. Armstrong could have emphasised and discussed this section more. Although historical reasons are important to understand the current experimentation in writing, the focus on such writing would have more fully served the purpose of the book, of introducing the readers and writers to experimental fiction.

Another major drawback of this experiment in writing that is Armstrong’s book is that many times it reads like class notes, albeit polished class notes. There is some repetition while discussing historical changes in writing styles, form and techniques, which for the readers reinforces the impression of reading modified and refined notes that were perhaps meant for a class. It introduces the readers to contemporary experiments in literature, an area which could have been explored and explained further instead of the greater focus that is given to historical experiments with writing, with making new. This making new in the twenty-first century would have made for a far interesting read.

The book concludes with an optimistic section 'A New Era is Dawning’, which hails the birth of a new reader along with a reaffirmation of the death of the author. Armstrong closes by saying that experimental ‘writing should make readers think, question, challenge assumptions, unsettle, re-define, grow and not stay stuck in the past … with no surprises, no shocks, no new adventures’ (195, 196). A gripping book made more fascinating because of its own writing style as well as its introduction to various new ways/styles/forms of writing/creating towards the end of the book (anti-novel, extreme metafiction, electronic fiction, etc), Experimental Fiction is a welcome addition to the library of both creative writers and readers, who themselves want to experiment with different writing styles as well as read and respond to these new writing styles. That said, it could have itself surprised and shocked more.

Suman Sigroha

To do justice to *The Road to Middlemarch* one needs to consider it alongside the novel itself, because the novel is firmly entrenched within the book, together with Mead’s own response to the work of George Eliot and the life of Eliot herself. *Middlemarch* by George Eliot has been described as the best novel in English. This is a strong claim, and one with which I could not agree, but there is certainly a stronger case to be made for *Middlemarch* being judged the best Victorian novel. I first read it many years ago as an undergraduate at Melbourne University. I reread it years later when studying Victorian Literature as part of a Masters at Flinders University. It was not set as a text in this course because the lecturer deemed that students would not take the time to read such a long book, and I suspect that this is correct. This reluctance to undertake a demanding novel is to be deplored, as students were denied the opportunity to study a fine work. Rebecca Mead, on the other hand, has no reservations as to the length of *Middlemarch* and has read this novel at least once every five years, beginning at the age of seventeen. It made an immediate impact then: ‘I loved *Middlemarch* and I loved being the kind of person who loved it. It gratified my aspirations to maturity and learnedness’ (6). Over the many years since, Mead’s appreciation of *Middlemarch* has not waned, but it has developed and changed.

And as I continue to read and think and reflect I also realize that she [Eliot] has given me something else: a profound experience with a book, over time, that amounts to one of the frictions of my life. I have grown up with George Eliot. I think *Middlemarch* has disciplined my character. (266)

Has Mead succeeded in bringing readers into the same sense of involvement with the work of George Eliot and particularly *Middlemarch* as she has experienced? I can only speak for one reader, and I was inspired to return to the novel and read it for the third time. Mead has certainly provided not only insights into *Middlemarch* itself, but into the life and social period when Eliot was writing, as well as reflections on some of her other novels and essays. The book is part literary criticism, part literary biography, part memoir, all of which combine to make a very satisfying text. Apart from her undoubted enthusiasm for Eliot, Mead has embarked on very extensive research. Drawing on her experience as a journalist, she set out to ‘look at something familiar from an unfamiliar angle.’ She asked herself: ‘What if I tried to discern the ways in which George Eliot’s life shaped her fiction and how her fiction shaped her?’ (9) *Middlemarch* was originally published in serial form, which would have implications concerning its length and narrative structure. The story is complex in its exploration of relationships, the wider influences of the morality and political happenings of the day. Eliot has no qualms about stepping into the novel to speak directly to her readers; a device which Mead agrees can be awkward and off-putting, although more accepted at the time than it would be today. In fact Mead defends this authorial intervention by pointing out that

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Book reviews: *The Road to Middlemarch: My Life with George Eliot* by Rebecca Mead. Emily Sutherland.

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Eliot … insists that the reader look at the characters in the book from her own elevated viewpoint. We are granted a wider perspective, and a greater insight, than is available to their neighbours down in the world of Middlemarch. (55)

In searching for the link between Eliot’s life and her portrayal of characters and relationships, Mead read letters that Eliot had written throughout her life, traced her movements about England, and noted her disappointments in love and eventual happy life with George Henry Lewes, a partnership that met with disapproval because they were unable to marry, but which brought her great intellectual and emotional enrichment. Mead examined reports by Eliot’s contemporaries, critics and friends. It is evidence of her thorough approach that she spent some days in the library in Edinburgh, reading the correspondence between Eliot and Robert Main, a Scotsman who had excessive devotion to both the novels of George, Eliot and their author, to the extent that he published a book entitled Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings, in Prose and Verse, Selected from the Works of George Eliot: Mead could not ‘think of surer way to be put off the work of George Eliot than trying to read [this book]’ (231). This thorough research allows Mead to outline the events in Eliot’s life that might have shaped her fiction. The Road to Middlemarch is thus an informed and intelligent appraisal of a novel with continues to attract readers. By interspersing her analysis of the novel with her own observations and experiences, and descriptions of the landscape, that Eliot had referenced, Mead has imbued the book with her own passion and appreciation of Middlemarch. She presents a portrait of a woman who was respected by writers, philosophers and thinkers for her intelligence and wisdom, yet who was a woman who doubted her own abilities as a writer, and who accepted that being a plain woman was not an asset.

To have such a passion is one thing, but to then lead others to a renewed appreciation, or to a discovery of a novel is another. On revisiting Middlemarch after reading Mead’s book I found that I looked at in a more incisive way. The main characters are neither totally flawed not flawless, but fascinating in their complexity and contradictions. The description of the landscape and the country people is worthy of Hardy; the eccentric characters remind one of those found in the novels of Dickens, the twists in the plot again reflect both Hardy and Dickens. The authorial intrusions and explanations can be tolerated especially as the writing is so fine. The dialogue is reminiscent of Jane Austen at times. There is an excellence that compares favourably with those other writers. All this I came to realise in rereading Middlemarch, having followed The Road to Middlemarch with Rebecca Mead. It is a road that she encourages others to follow, as would I.

Emily Sutherland


Silke Stroh opens her book with a succinct description of her project: ‘This book is intended as a contribution to current debates about the benefits and drawbacks of extending the field of Postcolonial Studies beyond its traditional core subject of Europe’s former colonies and their diasporas, to also include margins, minorities, and emerging nations within (white) Europe itself’ (11). As her opening sentence acknowledges, there is some contentiousness about such a project. Neither Scotland in general nor the Highlands in particular has ever been a colony in the same way as the overseas colonies of the British empire (or other European empires). For the last 300 years Scotland has been part of Great Britain and for hundreds of years the Gaelic-speaking Highlands have been, politically speaking, partly of Scotland. Stroh is quick to acknowledge this fundamental difference from overseas colonies: ‘a key issue is the ambivalence of Scotland’s cultural and political status, as both an intra-British marginalised Other and an integral part of the British mainstream and Britain’s sense of self’ (12). Nevertheless, there are ways in which Scotland can be seen to have been colonised by England and the Highlands by both England and the Lowlands, which leads the book, as Stroh points out, into questions of ‘how the double marginality of the Gaidhealtachd, both within Scotland and within Britain, relates to the marginality of Scotland as a whole as a result of English hegemony’ (12). However, Stroh’s argument does not rest on whether Scotland or the Highlands can be identified as ‘true’ colonies. Rather, her contention is that if Scottish Gaelic literature displays some of the patterns of discourse which postcolonial critics have identified in other literatures, then postcolonial theory can be a helpful tool in understanding it. She also suggests her study can supplement postcolonial theory which, she argues, tends to assume that the patterns it sees are all modern whereas some of them were already present in classical discourse (16). Accordingly, she begins her study well before the age of colonialism with ‘Classical colonial discourses on Scotland and the Celtic world’ (43), before moving on to medieval Scottish Gaelic texts, via some discussion of medieval Lowland texts which portray the Highlands and Highlanders.

Stroh’s methodology is to examine Scottish Gaelic poetry from its beginnings to the present day through detailed analysis of individual poems (with English translations of all quotations) in the light of postcolonial theory and practice. Employing this strategy with confidence and skill, Stroh demonstrates at numerous points the usefulness of postcolonial theory and criticism in understanding Scottish Gaelic poetry. A few examples will illustrate the insights that this approach offers.

Naturally enough, parallels between Scottish Gaelic literature and what are traditionally identified as postcolonial literatures are easier to draw in the period when the Highlands can arguably been said to have been ‘colonised’ by England and the Lowlands after the failure of the 1745 rebellion and the tightening of central control over the Highland periphery. Nevertheless, there are interesting postcolonial readings of earlier literature. For example, Strohe notes that medieval Gaelic poetry prefers a pan-Gaelic view to a national (Scottish) view and suggests this could be simply the result of literary convention but could equally be a response to the growing marginalisation of Gaelic-speakers within the Scottish nation, a situation with colonial parallels (58). Similarly, she compares the literature dealing with Highlanders’ involvement in the crusades to later literature of Gaels involved in British imperial wars, though in the crusade literature there is more sense of complicity in the imperial adventure whereas the ‘later discourses also include an increasing number of cases where transperipheral solidarity is discernible’ (67).

As we move into the arguably ‘colonised’ period of Highland history, parallels with overseas colonies come thick and fast. For example, in analysing a poem by Maighstir Seathan, Strohe notes...
that it shares ‘many concerns (and pitfalls) of anti- or post-colonial “writing back” literature’ in that ‘Maighstir Seathan asserts that the margin’s culture also deserves respect, but the indigenous self-esteem of fellow fringe-dwellers is not enough: there is a strong need for approval from outsiders, i.e. metropolitan colonisers’ (140). A different example is provided in Stroh’s discussion of Jacobite waulking songs which ‘encode Prince Charlie as a girl’. Pointing out that ‘[t]raditional colonial discourse analysis has often identified the discursive feminisation of the colonised as a strategy of oppression and denigration’, she suggests that ‘[w]here Gaelic poets feminise their own ethnic group or their leaders … this might be expected to reflect a colonised sensibility’ but that ‘in some Gaelic poems (self-) feminisation … can be a tactical move … that allows the text to be played down as “harmless” if it comes to the attention of hostile authorities’ (122–3). Later she notes that images of ‘a feminised, sexualised, and raped country’ parallel ‘colonial and anticolonial discourses all over the globe’ (204).

One of the key subjects of Scottish Gaelic poetry has been the Clearances which depopulated the Highlands in the eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries. Again Stroh argues that while poems which lament the depopulation of the Highlands could be criticised as backward-looking and blinkered by nostalgia, they can also be viewed in postcolonial terms as writing back to Anglophone descriptions of the beauty of the Highland landscape in which it is valued precisely because it is empty of people (207). As responses to the Clearances became increasingly radical and agitation for land rights developed into the crofting movement, Gaelic poetry played an important political role. Here too there are postcolonial parallels: ‘Many of these late-nineteenth-century poems [concerned in particular with the crofting movement] can be considered to resemble overseas anticolonial literature, for instance in their strongly politicised character, their readiness to criticise both alien and native comprador elites … and the instrumentalisation of pre-colonial indigenous history as a means to inspire confidence and establish ideological reference points for forward-looking practical resistance movements’ (231).

An underlying theme of the book is the extent to which the Gaelic-speaking Highlanders can be seen either an alien group within Scotland or the most culturally marked symbolic figures of Scottish nationality. As her analysis shows, this varies over time but there are points at which the latter view prevails, for example when Highlanders came to viewed as the ideal soldiers of empire so that ‘Highlanders could now be rehabilitated, evolving from a despicable Other to either a praiseworthy Other or (again) a national Same – not only of a pan-Scottish nation, but even of an imperial pan-British one’ (157). This is at a time when Scots could see themselves as an integral (though different) part of Britain, but as the movement for devolution or even independence has grown in strength in more recent years, ‘the Gaels are again transformed from Scotland’s internally colonised Other to a pan-national Same in an anticolonial anti-Union (or anti-English) alliance’ (258).

Stroh concludes with the hope that her book ‘has helped to demonstrate that a considerable number of discourse patterns which are commonly associated with overseas colonial and postcolonial frameworks can also be identified in negotiations of Celticity, Gaelicness and Scottish national identity – and that Gaelic poetry plays a significant part in these negotiations’ (329). When readers reach this point they are likely to feel this thorough and comprehensive study has achieved its goal.

Graham Tulloch

Valerie Baisnee, *Through the long corridor of distance: Space and Self in Contemporary New Zealand Women’s Autobiographies* (Rodopi, 2014)

Women’s autobiography theorist Valerie Baisnee’s new book, *Through the long corridor of distance: Space and Self in Contemporary New Zealand Women’s Autobiographies*, examines, in a new light, concepts of place and space in autobiographies written by New Zealand women writers including Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Janet Frame, Laurie Edmond, Fiona Kidman, Barbara Anderson and Ruth Park. These autobiographies range in publication from the early 1970s to the twenty-first century, which reflects the emergence of a renewed interest in autobiographical theory and the changes in self-awareness for New Zealand women that occurred during this time.

After acknowledging and outlining the historically accepted ways of reading autobiography through the lenses of genre, truth versus fiction and subjectivity, Baisnee explores, more specifically, the role of ‘place’ and ‘space’ in the development and representation of identity. Questions surrounding the literal and metaphorical birth of the author take precedence over the post-modern death of the author paradigm (23), where in a post-post-modern world, the life of the author is less about what is real and what is fiction and more about the ‘body and its environment’.1

Baisnee refutes the hegemonic identification of earlier theorists regarding the difference between ‘place’ and ‘time’ which sees ‘time and its connotations of history and progress as masculine, and place with its connotations of nostalgia and inertia as feminine’ (xiv), and suggests instead that ‘the relationship between space and mobility needs to be reassessed’ (xv). Using post-colonial, geographical, and autobiographical feminist theories, Baisnee further delineates the difference she sees between the ideas of ‘place’ (both public and private) as it pertains to gender and autobiography and its fixed positions, and ‘space’, which is characterised by movement (xxi) and where ‘these marginal, in-between spaces are sites of resistance’ (xiii).

Her book is broken up into five chapters that nicely reflect these questions surrounding ‘place’ and ‘space’ as they pertain to women’s autobiography and New Zealand women’s autobiography in particular: ‘Thresholds’, ‘Homes’, ‘Displaced Bodies/Disembodied Texts’, ‘Landscapes’ and ‘Itineraries’. These chapter titles also connote the autobiographical tropes of the journey, of travelling, and of boundaries, both in the physical and metaphysical sense, which is one of the underlying themes of this work.

In the first chapter ‘Thresholds’, Baisnee applies Gerard Genette’s definition of the marginal space of paratext as ‘liminal devices and conventions, both within and outside the book that form part of the complex mediation between book, author, publisher and reader’ (21) to suggest that it is within the paratext of autobiography where ‘the game of multiple identity-positions and the limits of the genre are explored’ (2). The idea of the liminal and the marginal, of the inside and the outside, and the spaces between the two, is another important theme that permeates Baisnee’s work as it pertains to subjectivity and place. Four of the books she discusses in this chapter appropriate the ‘journey’ trope into their titles – including Janet Frame’s *To the Is-Land* – as a means of highlighting the subjective relation between time and space for these women autobiographers. Baisnee also analyses epigraphs, forwards and openings to ‘decode the transgressions and deterritorialisations [that] take place [which is] what the paratext allows the reader to do’ (23).

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This idea of thresholds connects to the next chapter, ‘Homes’, which explores the connotations of home through a feminist and post-colonial reading and how these New Zealand women autobiographers subvert the hegemonic notion of home as a place of specifically female ‘nurture, security and stability’ (26) by suggesting that ‘home can be both lived and imagined’ (54), and also that ‘home has a different meaning for those who have been colonised’ (27). Baisnee goes on to explore the various representations, by these women writers, of this space called home, whether it be living without one, or compromising one’s freedom to have one, and, in particular, the notion of home and how it pertains to the creative life where all these women ‘had to redefine home in order to fulfill their artistic urges’ (54). She refers to Gillian Rose’s definition of homes as ‘paradoxical spaces … spaces that would be mutually exclusive if chartered on a two-dimensional map – centre and margin, inside and outside, are occupied simultaneously’ (54).

In ‘Displaced Bodies, Disembodied Texts’, Basinee, once again, connects the preceding chapter of the idea of home to the ‘most private of homes – our bodies’ (57). She further equates the accepted autobiographical text of a truthful rendering of a life to a body that historically, for females, had to be in control, both of its functions and its secretions, and explores the various outcomes rendered by these women autobiographers when they question these paradigms and the boundaries of places/spaces within them as it pertains to the body and their body of work (61).

The fourth chapter, entitled ‘Landscapes’, acknowledges there are subjective terrains to traverse, and links these subjective terrains or landscapes to a more political idea of nationhood as a ‘place’ and ‘space’ of autobiographical experience and representation, especially as this relates to New Zealand as a distant colony with an end of the world topography where ‘geography and nature have played a key role in forging the country’s self-image’ (77). The autobiographies that Baisnee focuses on in this chapter illustrate, once again, the overriding theme of her book, which is one of margins and thresholds as spaces for female expression and, so, with landscapes. Despite their different approaches, her autobiographers, ‘rather than viewing landscape from without … are involved in and contained by it … in their accounts, their bodies, selves and landscapes are interdependent, not separate … external images of the world can also become images of the mind’ (95).

In the last chapter, ‘Itineraries’, Baisnee explores the autobiographical Bildungsroman of these writers to further extrapolate on the idea of the marginal as a means for women’s self-representation where ‘the traditional portrait of the artist implies the contemplation of fixed images from a distance. Conversely as itineraries, these writers’ careers reveal themselves as tortuous journeys’ (131). These tortuous journeys include not only subjective experiences of marriage and freedom (or lack of it), but also literary liaisons and jealousies, tall poppies and influence anxieties, and a cultural cringe that befell many English colonies at that time. Baisnee highlights these less than romantic notions of personal insecurities because ‘relating a writer’s identity to its social space … helps debunk myths surrounding the writer and her career’ (128).

In the conclusion, Baisnee ties all of her ‘paratextic’ examples from the preceding chapters into a discussion surrounding autobiography and these women writers’ appropriation and subversion of the historical genre, both as a conscious act and unconscious revelation, where a myriad of boundaries of ‘place’ and ‘space’ are becoming increasingly more fluid.

Amanda Williams