

Jane Bryce. *The Post-Colonial Condition of African Literature (Annual Selected Papers of the Ala, No. 6).* Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2000. 149 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-86543-771-5.



Eldred Durosimi Jones, Marjorie Jones, eds.. *Exile and African Literature.* Trenton and Asmara: Oxford University Press, 2000. viii + 152 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-86543-822-4.



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Exile and Postcoloniality in African Literatures

The Post-Colonial Condition of African Literature and *Exile and African Literature* are useful collections of essays on two of the central concerns of contemporary African literatures. The former comprises ten articles selected from papers presented at the 1995 African Literature Association conference, and is the fifth such selection, while the latter, the twenty-second issue of *African Literature Today*, comprises nine articles and numerous reviews of new books, most of which were published on the African continent. As with all such selections, there is considerable variety of content and quality, but the books' very existence is testament to the energy and commit-

ment of Africa World Press and Eldred Jones in particular in bringing attention to African literatures and establishing a body of original works and critical opinion.

One of the long-standing problems for academics, particularly in Europe and America where the study of literatures tends to co-exist with the study of national languages and histories, is the question of singularity: is there such a beast as "African Literature," and if so, how are we to consider the role exile plays in its production, and how are we to conceive of its postcolonial condition?

The ALA collection, in particular, highlights this problem as its ten articles cover not just West African (five), South African (two), Central (one),

and East African (one) writers, but also the work of Caribbean authors and the film-maker Euzhan Palcy. As such, the collection indicates a number of postcolonial conditions rather than a single one, and in a number of different literatures and media (including music and film). Readers who are led by the volume's title to expect a more comprehensive and definitive discussion of postcoloniality may be disappointed, therefore.

They are also likely to be disappointed that relatively few of the articles address the volume's stated theme directly, tending instead to give readings (insightful and interesting ones, to be sure) of texts whose presumed postcoloniality makes them fit subjects for inclusion. In this category I would place the articles by Eleni Coundouriotis on Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, and Brinda Mehta's article on *Segou*, as well as Bernth Lindfors's summary of Ayi Kwei Armah's earliest published writings--his schoolboy articles for the Achimotan school magazine in the late fifties.

Certain key issues do emerge, however, including the relationship (if any) between the postcolonial and the postmodern (articles by Anjali Roy, and Koffi Anyinefa), between postcolonial and feminist critique (articles by Carmela Garritano and Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter), and between a locally driven postcolonialism and postcolonialism as the latest "inauthentic" Western import. Of the articles that confront the postcolonial condition most directly, Roger Kurtz's brief piece on three recent Kenyan novelists (David Maillu, Francis Imbuga, and Marjorie Macgoye) opens with a persuasive case that postcolonial critique needs to pay attention as much to geography and spatiality as it does to history and temporality. His reference to the work of Edward Soja makes for me a salutary materialist addition to the theorists of hybridity and liminality who are all too frequently trotted out without due regard to local conditions. Kurtz's article, however, also highlights one of the drawbacks of the current volume (perhaps of *all* such volumes): being a sample of

papers presented at the ALA conference in 1995, much of the work is already out of date. For instance, Kurtz's book, *Urban Obsessions, Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel* (Africa World Press, 1998) has superseded his brief article (see H-AfrLitCine review by Tony Simoes da Silva, October 2000). Similarly Eleni Coundouriotis's article on Ben Okri appears to be a version, condensed to the point of incoherence, of a chapter in her 1999 book *Claiming History: Colonialism, Ethnography, and the Novel* (Columbia University Press).

The second collection under review here suffers from some of the same drawbacks as *The Postcolonial Condition* in that a number of the individual essays offer readings of works by exiled (or otherwise alienated) writers without explicitly tackling the question of exile as a generic issue in African literatures. That said, many of the writers do offer enlightening readings; the opening essays, for instance, by Annie Gagliano and David Kerr, give us complex accounts of the works by Dambudzo Marechera and Bessie Head as "prophetic literature which probed the psychological roots of racism and exploitation, in ways which continue to reverberate profoundly even after the formal apparatus of racism and colonialism has been dismantled" (p. 21).

The concept of exile proves to be elastic, capable of covering political expulsion from the nation, region or language of one's birth, to economically enforced migration, to an inner kind of exile from one's self and surroundings more or less synonymous with psychological alienation and social anomie. Lekan Oyegoke, for instance, rather than discussing Okot p'Bitek and exile in terms of his sojourns in the English and Welsh university towns of Bristol, Aberystwyth, and Oxford, propounds that we apply the term exile to Okot's poetry in English and consider the poetry as doubly exiled--linguistically from Acoli, and textually from its oral sources (p. 41). Oyegoke suggests that this double exile results in the "insipid" nature of

Okot's poetry in English. That claim echoes Okot's own self-deprecating judgment of his translations, but for my own part it seems to me that both poet and critic underestimate the originality and sheer energy of the poetry (especially in *Song of Lawino*). Equally disappointing and offbeam is Ezenwa-Ohaeto's reduction of Dennis Brutus's poetry in *Salutes and Censures* to the category of "rational," a judgment that seems to me seriously to undervalue the passion and subtlety of Brutus's work. Reading Ezenwa-Ohaeto's Brutus, one would think the man nothing more than a sloganeer.

It is similarly disappointing that in an otherwise convincing article arguing that we should read Bessie Head as a committed political writer going "beyond protest" (as Kerr also argues), Sophia O. Ogwude recounts the familiar fabrication that Bessie Head's father was a stable hand in her wealthy white mother's family household.[1] Gillian Eilersen's 1995 biography ought to have scotched that piece of speculation, as it ought to have complicated Head's *choice* of rural Botswana as a place of exile. As elsewhere in this collection it struck me that the obvious material constraints on exiles, limiting freedom of choice, deserved greater attention. Given the influence of Marxism on much postcolonial criticism and Lacanian and deconstructionist theory on much postmodern criticism, it is perhaps surprising that most of the critics represented here fall back on liberal humanist assumptions of individual freedom of choice and a stable self.

All misgivings aside, one of the most admirable features of this volume and its precursors in the *African Literature Today* series (edited so diligently by Eldred Jones over the last thirty years or so), is its promotion of African literature on the continent, and of writers who have not found their way into some readily assimilable academic niche of postcolonial or world literature in English. In addition to the essays on figures relatively well-known outside Africa (e.g., Head,

Marechera, Brutus, Emecheta), this volume also includes essays on Okot (on whom *way* too little is currently available), John Munonye, and Catherine Acholonu, while the review section includes thorough and thoughtful reviews of books published across the continent from Djibouti via Dar es Salaam to Johannesburg. Many of the books are co-published by Heinemann or James Currey, and/or are distributed by the African Books Collective based in Oxford. James Gibbs's review of recent Ghanaian fiction is essentially an informative essay commenting on the vicissitudes of West African publishing. In the light of those comments, Eldred Jones and Africa World Press are both to be commended for continuing to battle against the commercial odds in keeping African-based publishing going. On the other hand, Gibbs also comments on the sloppiness of the earliest publications put out by Legon's Sub-Saharan Publishers; such sloppiness is not, alas, limited to them: *The Post-Colonial Condition* in particular is marred by numerous typographical errors (does "circumsizing" a man refer to measuring his waist? Does "Michael Sprinkler" pour cold water on carping critics?). Such details may not be of grave significance, but in order to fully establish the status of African literatures we all—writers, publishers, reviewers, academics—have a vested interest in accuracy and rigor.

[1]. This reading of Head appears to be gaining currency. See also the excellent chapter on Head in Anthony O'Brien's recent book *Against Normalization: Writing Radical Democracy in South Africa* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

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