

Afro-European Studies in Perspective

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Beezmohun, Sharmilla, ed. *Continental Shifts, Shifts in Perception: Black Cultures and Identities in Europe*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016. 190 pages. ISBN 9781443888240. Hb. £41.99.

In recent years, the field of Afro-European studies has emerged as a significant and innovative area of scholarly and critical inquiry, drawing on academic research with equal force in the humanities and social sciences, social and political interventions, and overlapping and often-shifting networks of individuals, institutions, and discourses. Based on the increasingly critical need to open up the study of African identity, writ large, in evolving European spaces, Afro-European studies crosses geographical and historical boundaries which have become more and more challenged through the experiences of migration, dislocation, and diaspora. Multidisciplinary and multilingual, the AfroEurope@ns Research Group thus functions as “a network of networks . . . open[ing] up spaces of exchange, interaction, and interconnection between peoples (black and white, men and women, academics and cultural/political activists) from the five continents” (vii), focusing not simply on keywords, such as “dislocation, displacement, discrimination; exile; racism; identity (crisis); [and] diaspora,” but equally on “coalition; strategy; survival; transgression; belonging; community; struggle; intersubjectivity, intersection, interdependence” (viii). It is, therefore, no great surprise that *Continental Shifts, Shifts in Perception: Black Cultures and Identities in Europe*, a collection of selected proceedings from the research group’s fourth biennial International Conference, held in October 2013, in London, should follow this ethos.

Across the eleven collected essays which comprise its contents appears a wide and impressive variety of scholarly approaches, socio-political contexts, and intellectual engagements with material which ranges from the literary through the sociological to the personal-reflective. Despite the diversity of papers presented in the collection, the volume as a whole nonetheless comes together as a single entity, due, largely, to a careful editorial process, with its many different and, sometimes, divergent pieces coalescing into a whole, which is greater than the sum of its parts. Concluding with two brief afterwords, which respond both to the conference and the collection, *Continental Shifts, Shifts in Perception* offers a welcome synthesis of the personal and political, analytic and reflective, scholarly and practical, which aptly demonstrates the interconnectedness of all of these approaches. The most effective essays in the collection are those which draw together personal

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reflections with analytic inquiry. Opening the volume, for instance, is Johny Pitts's "The 7:30 Train to Frankfurt: An Afropean Aesthetic." In this piece, Pitts, the son of a white British mother and African-American father, draws connections between his experience growing up on a housing estate in Sheffield, the heart of England's industrial north, with a broader Afro-European inhabitation—and celebration—of the "fringes of society . . . [w]here the battle of transition was being fought and where the margins were edging their way into the pages of national narratives" (6). Weaving together the experiences of African and African diaspora communities in France, Portugal, Sweden, and more, Pitts evokes a form of optimistic creativity at the heart of the black experience in Europe, one which exceeds the confines of "the fashionable elite" (6), and allows dynamism to grow out of stagnation. This sense of defiance borne from the margins is echoed in the volume's two afterwords, where Gabriel Gbadamosi and Nat Illumine invoke the solidarities that mark the experience of minority peoples in Europe, gesturing towards the larger humanity which percolates beneath the stereotypes often accompanying these populations and moving beyond their limits.

Given this concern on the interconnections that emerge across groups of individuals—and individuals themselves—as well as the slippery terrain of cultural affiliation and transformation, it is understandable that so many essays in this volume might focus on literature as their locus of inquiry. Ágnes Györke's "London in Buchi Emecheta's Fiction" examines the production of space in Emecheta's early London novels, *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen*, locating in these texts a sort of productive instability which transpires through the "nomadic connections" (21) permeating protagonist Adah's experiences, first as a new migrant in London living with an abusive spouse, and then as a single mother struggling in the unforgiving city. This flexible consciousness is held in contrast to the more literally complex, but more spatially absolute vision of the city in Emecheta's subsequent work which, Györke argues, falls into a utopian idealism. Later in the volume, Joana Passos's "Exile, Displacement, and the Literature of 'Returned Settlers' by Portuguese Women Writers" takes a similar perspective on the multiplicity and mutability of spatial interconnections through a focus on the writing of white Africans born into Portuguese settler families, foregrounding the emerging generational distinctions. The complex relationship between displacement, regeneration, migration, and home is, again, invoked in Anne Heith's contribution to the volume, "Displacement and Regeneration: Minorities, Migration, and Postcolonial Literature," which examines the emergence of a new body of Afro-Swedish writers, particularly Johannes Anyuru and Sami Said. Both writers, as Heith demonstrates, take part in a new body of writing from

Sweden, which challenges its image as a homogenous state, “writing against the reproduction of hegemonic discourses” in favor of an “exploration of in-between spaces” (67) of self-expression and self-discovery. Rounding out the literary critical contributions to the volume, Marion Kraft’s “Building Cross-Cultural Bridges: Audre Lorde’s Liasons with Black Germany” and Juan Miguel Zarandona’s “South African Indian Ahmed Essop in Spanish Translation: ‘Dos hermanas’ (2010), a Story of Many Linguistic and Cultural Barriers,” examine what happens when texts and their writers travel, and new dimensions of identity and affiliation are so produced.

Beyond literature, popular culture figures largely in the collection, with a number of essays devoted to film and football. Leonardo De Franceschi, in “Omar Sy: Towards a Black Stardom,” examines the rise of the titular actor within French and international cinema. Viewing cinema as a “strategic archive in the system of power/knowledge currently dominating power relations in contemporary global ‘Entertainment Society’” (97), the essay uses Sy’s career and rise to international stardom through films such as *Intouchables* as an exemplary case study of the need for a negotiation between film studio strategies, the continued import of the star system, and the politics of representation as impacts on transnational black actors and audiences. While De Franceschi’s essay ultimately suggests a hopeful, if not entirely unproblematic, future for black stars in the world of cinema, Donald M. Morales’s “American ‘Migritude’: The Flight of Black British Artists to the United States” suggests a more pessimistic outlook. For Morales, the slow shift towards more equitable representation of black actors in cinema, television, and theatre in the United Kingdom must be tempered by the continued need for the black artist to flee to America to find a foothold for success, emotional and affective connections to Britain notwithstanding. Football, like cinema and television, is another site of negotiation, both positive and less so. Alfred Markey, in “Boks Amach and Plastic Paddies: Solidarities and Sport Between Africa and Ireland,” focuses on the shifting landscape of racialization in Irish sport, positioning the figure of the “Plastic Paddy,” in particular that of African descent, as a site of deterritorialization and liberation, with links to the longer history of Irish decolonization. “African Footballing Fantasies: The (Dangerous) Call of Europe in Francisco Zamora’s *The Kaduna Alligator*,” by contrast, uses Zamora’s novel as a means of exploring the wider phenomenon of football trafficking, predominantly of underprivileged African youth to Europe, and its links to the larger global asymmetries which sport continues to reproduce. The issues of asymmetrical forms of privilege and power are also taken up in Carlos Rabasso, Francisco Javier Rabasso, and Marian Bagayoko’s contribution to the volume, “Paris—

New York—The West Indies: A Comparative Study of Discrimination among African Ethnic Groups in the Diaspora,” which uses the example of Afro-Puerto Ricans and American society as a means of leveraging a critical account of the many shortcomings of France’s policy of secular republicanism. In particular, they focus on the ways in which France’s ostensibly race-blind ethos serves to disempower its multicultural and multiethnic communities, with little official space to maneuver.

The essays in *Continental Shifts, Shifts in Perception* are mostly brief in length, and this leads to the sense, across the volume, that each individual piece is merely gesturing towards a far larger and more complex intellectual and cultural context with which it cannot fully engage. Equally, there are some inconsistencies in the quality of individual contributions, which becomes especially apparent across disciplinary boundaries. There is, moreover, a danger in volumes of this nature that the notion of “African identity” becomes conflated with “blackness” as a racialized concept, leading perhaps to a false sense of homogenization of the African continent and erasure of other African identities. For this reason, the inclusion of essays which examine white and Asian African identities is a welcome redress. The volume’s greatest strength, however, lies in the connections which develop across, between, and beyond its individual essays, a true testament to the innovative grounds on which the AfroEurope@ans Research Group takes hold, making this an important contribution to European, African, and African diaspora studies more broadly.

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