

terization, logical discourse, seem to him distractions." My text has a semicolon after "theme" and what she gives as "distractions" reads "abstractions unsuitable to a man of his generation."

"Violence in Yeats's Later Politics and Poetry," by Joseph Chadwick, is a cogently presented investigation into one of the most vexed areas in Yeatsian studies. His starting point is a statement by Walter Benjamin: "[Mankind's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic." Chadwick applies this claim to Yeats's later poetry. The line he follows is challenging, certainly, but it underestimates, it seems to me, two things. One is the measure of horror Yeats himself felt at the prospect of imminent times, a horror he had felt many years before when watching Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in 1896 and saw "After us the Savage God." Second, Yeats was a dramatic writer, not a statesman or a prophet and, irrespective of his own hopes or fears, he describes what he envisages with a dramatic intensity which may look like relish or approval but may mean no such thing. Nonetheless, this is a very worthwhile contribution to a central debate.

R. B. Kershner's "Yeats/Bakhtin/Orality/Dyslexia" is not entirely convincing but it brings together some fascinating material and ideas, some helpful and some not. The connection he suggests between Bakhtin and Yeats is reasonable enough but is it needed? Throughout the essay there are modish ambitions which detract from what could be a more satisfying discussion, given the obvious intelligence and eye for good examples. Kershner is extremely interesting on Yeats's manner of writing and reading and on the delivery of his verse but he pushes the evidence too far at times. For example, he describes Yeats's style of delivery as "artificial, slow and cadenced" and attributes this style to his dyslexic condition. Perhaps, but Yeats was not alone in reading in this way. Again, towards the end of the essay Kershner has some excellent comments on Yeats's syntax but he cannot leave the matter there; details on syntax are shanghaied to fit a bigger (and weaker) theory.

Notwithstanding these three good essays and various assorted items of interest in other essays, I cannot see this as a strong or representative collection of recent essays on Yeats.

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Carole Boyce Davies. *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Pp. 240. \$55.00, \$16.95 pb.

This book offers an invaluable introduction to anyone interested in an overview of the writers, critics, and issues involved in reading black women's writing. I begin with a strong assertion of approval for this book not simply out of sisterly solidarity but rather as a way of making

space to move beyond the celebratory to ask more critical questions of this text. The strength of this book is its comprehensive coverage of the diverse critical and theoretical contexts in which black women's writing has been located and discussed. But this comprehensiveness is also the book's weakness; the attempt to account for all black women's writing—African-American, African, African-Caribbean, and African-Caribbean-British—under one critical umbrella requires so many migrations between theoretical positions that the logic for discussing these women as a group becomes altogether too unwieldy.

Boyce Davies begins from the premise that black women—globally—have much in common in terms of the basic material circumstances of their lives, arguing that their liability to race, class, and gender oppression gives them a special purchase on marginality and on the migrations necessitated by such marginality. She argues that “if we take any feminist issue and run it up the scale to its most radical possibility, its most clarifying illustration will be the experience of Black women” (29). This recognition of black women as *the most wretched of the earth* is a familiar one, but in a bold move Boyce Davies insists on *re-describing* this condition so that it functions to *enable* rather than to constantly *disable* black women writers. Black women's multiple marginal locations then allows them an archetypally postmodern fluidity:

My contention is that postmodernist positions or feminist positions are always already articulated by Black women because we experience, ahead of the general population, many of the multiple struggles that subsequently become popularly expressed. . . . Black feminist criticisms, then, perhaps more than many of the other feminisms, can be a praxis where the theoretical positions and the criticism interact with the lived experience. (55)

Black women writers are often treated as if there is no gap between their lives and the texts they create, so invoking postmodernism is a useful antidote to the prevailing tendency to essentialize black women and their writing. However, in insisting on too tight a fit between black women's experiences of oppression and postmodernist positions, Boyce Davies runs the risk of reading black women's literary production as somehow “innately” postmodern, rather than foregrounding her own role—and critical agenda—in *constructing* these women as archetypally postmodern. Her formulation still leaves questions unresolved about the relationship between experience and representation and about the degree to which the kind of postmodern playfulness possible in textual production is matched by a similar degree of playfulness in the sociopolitical context of the “real” world.

This theoretical dilemma is a genuinely difficult one which feminists in particular continue to grapple with, but it strikes me that the very notion of a global category named “Black Women's Writing” is at odds with a postmodern position, and as a result *Black Women, Writing, and Identity* is marked by a tension between celebrating playfulness and a righteousness about the need to read black women's texts from a

morally rather than aesthetically driven perspective. The other related anxiety which marks this text surfaces in the discussion of "theory." Boyce Davies argues that no one theory can adequately account for black women's writing. Adapting a phrase of Zora Neale Hurston's, she suggests that the critic should go a "piece of the way" with as many theories as the texts invite. This kind of easy playfulness is belied by the anxious, almost encyclopedic, listing of theoretical models throughout (Chapters 1 and 4 generate 109 and 114 footnotes respectively, for example). The result of such a profusion of theoretical grids is mixed; clearly Boyce Davies knows her stuff well and an impressive range of feminist, African-American, postcolonial, and postmodern perspectives is covered. Yet, because none of these perspectives is treated in much detail or with much precision, this approach neither allows a fine-tuning of any theory nor does it really convincingly open up any of the black women's texts to which it is applied to. Indeed, there is a sense that black women's writing is muffled by the weight of theory in many of the chapters. While this raises interesting questions about the continuing "race for theory" (Boyce Davies identifies positively with Barbara Christian's qualms concerning theory), I would stress here that however anxious Boyce Davies is about "theory," her critical gymnastics and theoretical "migrations" result in a mapping out of the terrain surrounding black women's writing. This is an understanding that is perhaps necessary to enable other critics to be both more selective and particular in *their* discussions of black women's writing and to shift away from the current tendency (exemplified in this book too) to treat black women writers always as a *group* phenomenon. Boyce Davies herself, in several of the chapters, demonstrates a detailed and wide-ranging knowledge of specific black women writers. And in particular, there are fine discussions of the work of Aidoo, Morrison, Lorde, Kincaid, Marshall, Collins, and others, embedded in the dense web of critical issues which make up the bulk of the text.

There are interesting points of intersection in Boyce Davies's use of the black migrant woman in *Black women, Writing and Identity* and Paul Gilroy's of the black sailor figure in *The Black Atlantic* as archetypal postmodern subjects. Where Gilroy locates his "black Atlantic" figure centrally and *constitutively* with regard to the enlightenment and to modernity and postmodernity, Boyce Davies is unable to do the same in part precisely because of women/black women's marginal position in *His/Story*. But it is also the result of her decision to focus solely on the *literary*. A more interesting range of answers might have been generated had a broader definition of cultural production been mobilized to allow diverse genres of writing and culture to be considered. Clearly there are important gendered differences in the production of, say popular black musical forms, which Gilroy makes the focus of his study. It is not my intention to berate Boyce Davies for not covering the same terrain as Gilroy; neither is his a model which would allow

a Boyce Davies to simply “add woman and stir.” But the different emphases of these two texts raise interesting questions about the critical agendas attendant upon black male cultural production and its female counterpart, about the degree of authority evident in the critical voice of the former and the continuing sense of anxiety that marks the latter.

DENISE DECAIRES NARAIN



Susan Bennett. *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past*. London: Routledge, 1996. Pp. viii, 199. \$23.95, \$16.95 pb.

Arguing that the past has become a powerful commodity in the cultural market place, Susan Bennett maps the performance and reception economies of a range of twentieth-century theatrical and cinematic productions, rewritings or appropriations of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, particularly Shakespeare. *Performing Nostalgia* recognizes, first, the extent to which the “authentic” text frequently exercises a traditional and colonial influence “that its performance might not often resist” (155). Bennett’s detailed study of multiple productions of *King Lear* suggests a “tenacious web of nostalgia and tradition” (40) in the productions themselves as well as in the voices of theatre reviewers and directors. Attempts to go beyond the play’s “original” discursive formations are contained by reference to the text’s prior “authenticity”; in this way dominant cultural capital continues to be reinvested and recirculated. At first glance, the appeal of other “Jacobean” texts—viewed from the 1960s onwards as markers of political dissatisfaction and an emergent sexual revolution—speaks to a desire for a past “which subverts History at the same time as confirming its progressive trajectory” (83). But Bennett explores ways in which various productions of works, including *Bussy d’Ambois*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and David Lynch’s film *Wild at Heart*, offer a merely aesthetic denotation of moral decay, excess and violence, mask class, gender, “race,” and sexuality, and provide little or no analysis. Such productions point to a less than perfect past, but one which can help legitimate a defective present, providing what Stalleybrass and White describe as “exotic costumes which [the bourgeoisie] assumes in order to play out the disorder of its own identity” (117-18).

At the same time, *Performing Nostalgia* offers an impressive record of multiple ways in which a postcolonial/postmodernist age enacts the past in order to de-regulate it, to escape its containing effects, to achieve a dissidence that may respect and explore difference. It does so, however, in the midst of a contradiction—which in the course of her work Bennett’s own study unravels—between her claims regarding the notion of a “global” nostalgia for particularly the Shakespeare