

Book Reviews

Attewell, Nadine. *Better Britons: Reproduction, National Identity, and the Aftermath of Empire*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2014. Pp xi, 324. CDN\$65.

Nadine Attewell's book *Better Britons: Reproduction, National Identity, and the Aftermath of Empire* is interesting, impressively researched, and timely. In the face of rising Islamophobia, immigrant panic, and fears of "demographic winter," Attewell tracks how "reproductive acts have signified at particular moments of the twentieth century" (144) in order to trace the ways in which individuals and cultures envision themselves and pursue specific visions of desirable demographic continuity. The book is divided into two sections of equal length, "Beginnings" and "Endings," the first dealing with various imperial fantasies of origin, birth, re-birth, and permanence, and the second dealing with rupture, foreclosure, death, and defeat. The uneasy intersection between the vainglorious notion of an Empire upon which the sun will never set and a nagging sense that the taint is always within us (that decline is inevitable) is clear enough in postcolonial studies, but Attewell does a nice job of demonstrating how human bodies intersect with the body politic. In Attewell's view, "reproductive behaviours bear upon not only gender and sexual identities . . . but civic, national and racial ones as well" (4). Within the rhetoric of Empire, "national fortunes [are] taken to depend upon the reproductive behaviours of citizen-subjects" (5). The opening chapters focus on links between eugenicist visions of optimizing "suitable . . . strains of blood" (11) and "keeping out bad blood" (12) as central to totalizing utopian projects. In such a context, abortion registers not simply as an ethical issue to do with the sanctity of life but as a political one with serious demographic implications. Attewell pays particular attention to the motif of the island in utopian (and by extension imperial) projects. "The desire for utopia," she writes, is simultaneously a "desire for the enclave, self-sufficiency, containment and totality" (39). As such, islands offer the tempting prospect of a contained, self-replicating civilization: free of taint and abounding in biological and social order. This, Attewell suggests, is true to different degrees of Imperial Britain, colonial Australia, New Zealand, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *Brave New World*, *The Tempest*, *Prelude to Christopher* (by Eleanor Dark), and several other real and fictional utopian projects.

If the list above looks fine to you, you'll probably like this book. For me, it's problematic. Attewell sees her project in terms of an effort to disrupt the "smooth narratives of settlement, repatriation, and homemaking" (214) that inform and undergird imperial and post-imperial sensibilities, but the book suffers from its own desire to "smooth out" differences and marshal disparate signals into an ill-fitting overall design. A third of the way through the book, for example, Attewell attempts to yoke together "photographs, newspaper articles, fiction, reports, and government memoranda" (71) into a single discussion that cannot possibly account for the various contexts and iterations it invokes. As such, the diversity of Attewell's research material ultimately serves a centralizing, unifying function. She approaches several very different texts and ideas in terms of a fundamental sameness, and the heterogeneity she champions at the level of academic and political critique is contradicted by her own argumentative practice.

This desire to "smooth out" differences that present problems for her design is most apparent in the section Attewell devotes to the policies of Cecil Cook, appointed protector of Australia's Aboriginal Peoples in the Northern Territory in 1927. Cook proposed "breeding out the colour" in the Northern Territory, a process by which "half breed" women would be married to (or, more to the point, "mated" with) white settlers in an effort to address the conundrum of settler legitimacy, namely what Terry Goldie calls the "impossible necessity of becoming indigenous" (qtd. in Attewell 15). That is, faced with aboriginal territorial precedence, the settlers could "whiten" aboriginal bloodlines and consequently dilute aboriginal claims to territorial priority. This is imperialism enacted at the level of blood, territorializing the bloodlines of indigenous peoples *en route* to a more persuasive claim to their literal territory. Cook's effort to link "miscegenation to the project of white supremacy" (Attewell 69) is startling to those of us who are "unused . . . to the claim that whiteness may be produced through miscegenation" (86). "Breeding out the colour" reads the intermingling of bloodlines not so much as "taint" but as a Darwinian contest that the settler will surely win.

The idea is compelling, but the problem is that Cook's policy had virtually no effect and was always regarded as heretical and tangential to a national rhetoric, which, while still racist, was never impactfully racist in this particular way. Attewell does not contest that Cook's legacy was materially "negligible," yet she claims that "we misrecognize the signs of [his] policy's failure and success" when we attend only to its "substantive effects" (70); in fact, she suggests, "it is arguable that the scheme's failure makes it more, not less, worthy of scrutiny" (23). I do not see how this can be so. Attewell sees Cook's policy as symptomatic of "the overreach that is characteristic of projects of

reproductive reform" (23) and correctly claims that the logics of "absorption and assimilation" are linked (71). "Breeding out the colour" is a biological rejoinder to the engineered assimilation through residential schools, forcible relocation, etc., but quantitative assessments matter in cases such as these. When we think about "mass shootings," for example, we are explicitly dealing with matters of scale. Attewell argues that "removal and 'breeding out the colour' cannot be quarantined from each other" (71), that both are "eliminationist in rhetoric and intent" (69). Yes, but rhetoric and intent are distinct from historical purchase; unlike "breeding out the colour," removal had large-scale, concrete, historical impacts. We would not talk about it the way we do if, like "breeding out the colour," it only occurred a dozen times in a century. I have a hard time reading Cook's largely rejected policy as a "key component of . . . Australian modernity" (71). For me, the most glaring "overreach" in the chapter involves Attewell's inflated argumentative claims.

The book concludes with an interesting investigation into various invasion narratives, from Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech to the "undead" bodies of zombies in recent British film. Attewell cites Paul Gilroy to argue that terrifying, invasive "others" encode "the unacknowledged pain of [Empire's] loss and the unsettling shame of its bloody management" (qtd. in Attewell 199). For Attewell, British zombie movies "disclose a utopian influence" (186) in which the "island adventure narrative [is reversed] along apocalyptic lines" (177). The zombie, as a grotesque replication of the human body (created and transmitted through unnatural means), encodes the anxiety that contamination is inevitable and that the utopic island can never be impregnable or sufficiently self-contained. The specifically British aspect of the films Attewell studies is often overstated, but her reading of Alex Garland and Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* is compelling, linking discourses of contagion and continuity in several convincing ways.

Better Britons has several good moments and traffics in arguments of tremendous contemporary importance. It remains a frustrating book, however, because it fails to be what it often seems to want to become: an enlighteningly eccentric journey through an eclectic collection of materials. I think *Better Britons* wants to be a collection of articles or a special issue of a journal. Attewell wants it to be a book, and her desire to position disparate discourses and texts inside her own overarching framework ends up compromising some compelling sub-arguments, which resist rather than confirm her overall design. Like the Empire Attewell critiques, her book cannot withstand the divergent pressures that work against her presupposed, and ultimately illusory, imaginary unity.

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