

Review

Bethan Benwell, James Procter and Gemma Robinson (eds.), *Postcolonial Audiences: Readers, Viewers and Reception*, New York: Routledge, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-415-88871-4. 264 pp.

As suggested by the title, the essay collection *Postcolonial Audiences: Readers, Viewers and Reception* explores, questions and rethinks the role of audience in the construction of the postcolonial. Unlike the vast proportion of academic work from the field of postcolonial studies, the compendium of sixteen succinct essays seldom features references to the canonical postcolonial authorities, such as Said, Bhabha or Spivak. Rather than recycling the established postcolonial theoretical paradigms, the essays are based upon original empirical studies with a clear aim—to change the focus of postcolonial studies from mere textual analysis to interdisciplinary studies of “the material conditions of production and consumption” (p. xiii).

The texts hence distance themselves from the notion of ideal, mock, model and implied readership and empower the postcolonial audience by locating it in the midst of interrelated cultural processes of production, representation, consumption, regulation and identity. Largely corresponding to the renowned concept of ‘the circuit of culture’ (du Gay et al, 1997), the paramount message of the book highlights the idea that studying postcolonial cultural texts should necessarily adopt the holistic approach comprising all the above-mentioned perspectives. Such multifaceted account of postcolonial texts dictates highly interdisciplinary research. Whilst remaining grounded in the legacy of cultural studies, the book flirts with various social science disciplines and their corresponding methods— from participant observation to focus groups and cyber-ethnography.

The book consists of sixteen chapters. Referring to individual case studies, they are organised in five thematic sections and preceded by an insightful theoretical introduction. The introductory section paves a cognitive path for the readership without prior knowledge of the subject; it maps and outlines the general framework of audience studies and follows a systematic trajectory towards defining the theoretical field of postcolonial audiences.

The first cluster of essays entitled *Real Readers/Actual Audiences* explores how the reception of texts is determined by location and everyday social experiences. While Michelle Keown’s contribution explores lay local and international responses to New Zealand ‘postcolonial’ comedy cartoon *bro’Town* in the cyber sphere, Shakuntala Banaji presents

intriguing findings of an ethnographic study among adolescent Indian viewers. By interviewing the respondents in pairs, she emphasises differences and similarities in decoding gender, sexuality, class and caste representations in Hindi films and compares how they translate to youngsters' everyday lives. The strongest chapter in this section—and perhaps in the entire book—is the piece on the role of location—and the lack of it—in the reception of diasporic fiction written by the editors of the book. Based upon the study conducted in several reading groups at multiple geographical locations, the chapter with a suggestive title *That may be where I come from but that's not how I read* questions “the ways in which readers both invoke and resist the significance of place, authenticity and belonging” (p. 12).

The subsequent section *Readers and Publishers* theorises the two-fold relationships between readerships and the publishing industries. While acknowledging the role of publishing institutions in the process of shaping audiences, the section simultaneously recognises the reverse effect of book consumers determining the industry. The contribution by Elizabeth le Roux confirms the difficulties of South African academic literature to reach audiences outside national borders despite the assumed internationalisation of the global book market. Although she deconstructs the putative one-way transversal from North to South, her research reaffirms that “the dominant relationship is still one of a centre/periphery binary rather than of a transnational network” (p. 83). Gail Low approaches the issue of publishing from a fresh dimension—by analysing archived reports for Jonathan Cape composed by publisher's salaried reader William Plomer. While she looks at one mediator's influence on shaping postcolonial literature, Claire Squires' contribution widens the scope by examining the interrelations between the British publishing industry—taking into account the book trade and its demographics—and multicultural consumers, in particular Black Minority Ethnic readerships.

The third trio of essays is bound together by the mutual aim of locating the readership inside representation. Florian Stadler's paper focuses on the Rushdie's narrators' viewing practice and interpretations of Hindi films. He observes how films become deployed as “important interpretative instruments with which Rushdie articulates and interrogates in his novels ‘a version of the world’ for his local, global and diasporic audiences” (p. 126). Lucienne Loh's chapter keeps the readers' focus on the sub-continent by investigating the representations of readers in Mishra's travel narrative *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana*. Echoing the theoretical accounts of Huggan and Brouillette, Lucy Evans analyses Robert Antoni's *My Grandmother's Erotic Folktales* and explores the dynamics between (metropolitan) consumers and (local) consumed audiences in generating new forms of socialities in the Caribbean ‘Paradise’.

The succeeding part is devoted exclusively to the burning topic of nationalism. A triad of essays derives from postcolonial heuristics of Benedict Anderson's (1991) prominent notion of nations being imagined into communities through arbitrary national(istic) narratives that are formulated and transmitted by various ideological mechanisms – including literary production. Srila Nayak and Katie Halsey scrutinise nationalistic discourses

in the context of nineteenth century Indian readership. Nayak's chapter on female and male readings of social and gender reform makes a particularly welcome move towards the question of gendered audience that remains largely neglected in other chapters. *Reading after Terror* by Neelam Srivastava serves an excellent example on contemporary symptomatic reading practices informed by stereotypic presumptions. When examining a 2007 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* written by a Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid, Srivastava accentuates the prevalent readers' response by placing "their emphasis on a reading mediated by religious and national ideological perspectives. This is despite the fact that at no point in his narrative does [the main character] Changez mention religion" (p. 179).

How should we read, is the question resonating in the concluding part of the book entitled *Reading and Postcolonial Ethics*. Daniel Alington's chapter investigates the symbolic production of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and explores how the public perception of the controversial text is principal for understanding the work and its place in the social world. Through a theoretical lens posed by Derrida, David Farrier's chapter examines how reading Herman Melville's *Bartleby* in relation to legal and poetical discourses of asylum seekers pose a question of accountable postcolonial response to asylum narratives. Katherine Hallemeier scrutinises shame and sympathy as ethnical mechanisms deployed as a productive response to colonial legacies, while Derek Attridge closes the book by inquiring about the act of responsible reading when encountering a culturally distant text. Applying the example of the novel *The Yacoubian Building*, he concludes that "[t]he distance is part of what makes the work valuable, and a responsible reading is one that will take full account of it rather than one that undertakes the impossible task of abolishing it" (p. 243).

Although *Postcolonial Audiences* might not bring forth any revolutionary theoretical contribution in the field of postcolonial and reception studies, this eclectic and highly engaging collection definitely presents a lucid academic journey through nationalistic, ethical, gendered, geographical, diasporic, political and individual reading practices. The book thus efficiently communicates the awareness of postcolonial audiences and their profoundly diverse reading experiences and as such opens up an essential research area of postcolonial cultural inquiry.

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References

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- Du Gay, Paul, et al, *Doing cultural studies: the story of the Sony Walkman*, Milton Keynes: Open University, 1997.