

Book Reviews

Edited by Heather Allen

DAVIS, CAROLINE and DAVID JOHNSON, eds., *The Book in Africa: Critical Debates*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. ISBN 978-1-137-40161-8. Pp: xii + 280. Hardback \$95.

This ambitious volume introduces a range of debates about the book in Africa through an impressive set of case studies. The aim is to address the marginalization of Africa within book history and to challenge Eurocentric histories of the relationship between “Africa” and the “Book”. If this seems rather grand, the detailed case studies ensure that it never becomes abstract. In each of the eleven chapters, a specialist offers an in-depth analysis of a specific literary field, from Alessandro Gori’s discussion of Islamic printing in Ethiopia (chapter three) to Joyce B. Ashuntantang’s account of the digital dissemination of creative writing in Cameroon (chapter eleven). The geographical, historical and cultural range is admirable, and the book offers a rich resource for further research.

The book is in three parts, structured around three broad critical debates. Part One, “From Script to Print”, examines “the complex transitions between oral, manuscript and print cultures, challenging what constitutes a ‘book’ and a ‘reader’” (6) through case studies from the Cape Colony, Morocco, Ethiopia, and Mali. It is not quite fair to say, as the editors do, that the question of what constitutes a “book” and a “reader” has been “neglected” in book history and postcolonial studies (6). Nevertheless, it is true that we must rethink these concepts if we are to seriously attend to the complex history of oral, manuscript, and print cultures in Africa. The essays themselves certainly require us to do this, from Archie L. Dick’s examination of the role of readers in copying and circulating pamphlets, hymnbooks and handmade booklets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in South Africa, to Fawzi Abdulrazak’s account of printing in Morocco, beginning in 1865 when Morocco’s first book was printed and ending in 1912 when the country lost its independence to France.

Parts Two and Three address neglected territory in book history and postcolonial studies. Part Two examines print cultures and the book in relation to African politics and economics, considering the function of the book in profiteering, constituting political communities, and “mediating relationships between economic and cultural capital” (6). The essays are excellent again, including two contributions from the editors: Caroline Davis’s much-needed account of the Longmans book empire in Africa and its historical legacy; and David Johnson’s lucid account of South African print culture from the decade between the South African War (1899–1902) to the moment of Union (1910). Like Dick, Johnson suggests that his findings pose a challenge to Benedict Anderson’s widely-cited “print-capitalism” thesis, according to which nations are communities imagined principally through the medium of the printed word. Johnson closes with the important and unanswered question: “how are the histories of the millions of Africans without access to published texts to be registered?” (121). This question is of broader significance to scholars of book history across the globe and of different periods. In the specific context of South Africa, Johnson reminds us that in 1910 this “excluded constituency amounted to about eighty per cent of the population” and warns that debates in African book histories run the risk of forgetting such constituencies, along with their histories, cultures, and political agency (121). This also speaks to the urgent questions raised by Davis: who is included or excluded from publishing processes; whose voices are publicized or silenced; what remains in archives and what is discarded or forgotten?

Part Three, “The Making of African Literature”, extends these questions, taking a closer look at twentieth-century literary institutions in order to investigate the relationship between African literature and “its multiple book-historical, print-cultural and online/ebook contexts” (6). Literary institutions are scrutinized again, with a particular focus on the literary prize and the publisher. Familiar institutions like Heinemann and the Caine Prize for African Writing come under fresh scrutiny.

Essay after essay in this book raises the difficult question of the relation between politics and literary production. Jack Hogan and Giacomo Macola write of Lozi history and ethnic politics in Zambia; Gori examines the political role of print culture in strengthening Islamic identity and consciousness in Ethiopia; Nourdin Bejjit discusses the links between the “ideological transitions” in James Ngugi’s fiction in the 1960s and his relationship with Heinemann Educational Books. Ruth Bush and Claire Ducournau analyze the Grand prix littéraire de l’Afrique noire (Grand literary prize of Black Africa), arguing that the awarding organization, the

Association des écrivains de langue française (Association of Writers in French; ADELFF), has sought to move beyond its Parisian base, but the political weight of its financial backing confirms that its “goals and strategies have been bound up with the politics of French cultural hegemony” (217–218). Shamil Jeppie offers a fascinating account of book history in Timbuktu from the early twentieth century to the present, finding that difficult political conditions did not stop the reading, writing, copying and collecting of books, but in some cases actually opened up opportunities to become more engaged in these activities. Elizabeth le Roux takes a critical look at the politics of academic publishing through an examination of South Africa’s oldest university press, Witwatersrand University Press (WUP). Le Roux questions its frequent association with oppositional or anti-apartheid publishing, arguing that WUP’s publications suggest that the press was “far more acquiescent towards apartheid policies” (176), partly because it operated within the constraints of a publicly funded institution of higher education, and partly because it did not resist the government’s censorship regime (192).

There are no simple conclusions to be drawn: the issues are broad and complex, and a book this size can only hope to offer insights. Nevertheless, this is an important volume because it directs our attention to difficult questions, including that of the relationship between socio-historical contexts and literary production. The book will be valuable to the fields of book history and postcolonial studies, not only because it demonstrates the need for new critical approaches to the book in Africa but also for the challenges it poses to the broader discipline of book history.

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REZEK, JOSEPH. *London and the Making of Provincial Literature: Aesthetics and the Transatlantic Book Trade, 1800–1850*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-8122-4734-3. Pp. vii + 286. Hardcover \$59.95.

Joseph Rezek’s *London and the Making of Provincial Literature* identifies London as the shared center of influence for a transatlantic Anglophone book trade during the first decades of the nineteenth century. In particular, he traces the exchange of strategies among certain white fiction writers—Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson, Walter Scott, Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper—who collectively exhibit what Rezek calls an