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Review Forum

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reviews

BOOKS

Review Forum

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Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India, and the Afrasian Imagination. By Gaurav Desai. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. Pp. 352. ISBN 9780231164542. \$50 (hbk).

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I will account for the importance of Gaurav Desai's *Commerce with the Universe* in broad theoretical terms rather than perform a minute close reading.

'Intersectionality' and 'conjunctural': these are two terms that have become *de rigueur* in contemporary critical and cultural discourse. When a work of scholarship is intersectional and conjunctural, it does much more than actualize a one-to-one representative and representational correspondence with a particular field – say, eighteenth-century literature. It de- and re-territorializes the very site known as

eighteenth-century literature in response to multiple adjacencies, and reidentifies it horizontally and trans-locally with reference to other flows and movements that may not seem intrinsic to the eighteenth century. Easier said than done. All the more reason to celebrate with much pleasure and enthusiasm the publication of Desai's *Commerce with the Universe*. It is a brilliant and nuanced work that heralds 'the oceanic' and 'the hemispheric turn' in literary studies. Desai's work does more than pay lip-service to the crucial concepts of 'relationality' and 'coevalness' by way of a rich, circumstantial and deep reading of the hybrid, contradictory and overlapping relationships between Africa and India. Thanks to Desai's ambitious endeavour, postcolonial studies will be enriched and de-provincialized by what Desai terms the 'Afrasian Imagination.'

For too long, postcolonial studies has been hamstrung by debates over the exemplarity or not of either the Indian or the African postcolonial experience. What has been missing is a 'co-axial' Afro-Indian postcolonial narrative. I, for one, am delighted and grateful that Desai has initiated a long-awaited dialogue between India and Africa. In many ways, Desai's book replicates, in its own discourse and register, the oceanic literary imagination of Amitav Ghosh (about whose work Desai has much to say in this book), which envisions history along multiple scales, insists on the palimpsestic nature of historical traces, and maintains a creative and secular (in Edward Said's sense of the term) focus on the shared and constructed historical ties between different peoples, identities and cultures. 'Imagining with precision' the nature of cartography and the reality of geopolitical location is the motto in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*; and Desai attempts something similar in *Commerce with the Universe*, as he reads into reality the meaning of Indian and African texts in a mode that is diasporic, disseminative and profoundly relational. The conversations that take place within the oceanic space of the book between India and Africa are simultaneously intra- and inter-identitarian for the simple reason that India and Africa are transformed as mutually constitutive by Desai's Afrasian erudition and perspective. As Desai states it eloquently: 'While asking the question of what Africanists might gain from an eastward glance, I am also interested in what scholars of the Indian Ocean gain by placing Africa more centrally in their accounts.'

Even as Desai initiates this new temporality of reciprocal simultaneity between Africanists and Indian Ocean specialists, he is aware of certain pitfalls. 'Thus, while I use Amitav Ghosh's seminal book *In An Antique Land*

as both a historical as well as a theoretical anchor for my project, I also show that his enthusiasms for Indian Ocean cosmopolitanisms risk erasing the histories of sub-Saharan exchanges that were also simultaneously taking place' (7–8). To his credit, Desai does succeed, in his own readings of people, characters, narratives, and situations both historical and fictional, in preventing a well-intentioned but unconsciously superior cosmopolitan oversight of the clamour, the twangs, accents and whispers of other conversations. Even as he seeks reciprocal simultaneity among different texts, his readings do not accord the privilege of plentitude to any one constellation or cluster. The lesson that Desai's speculations point to is that the world is one and many in the same breath in an ongoing temporality, and that there is no need to strive towards a hegemonic fullness of representation. Let the many scenes coexist within the same frame coevally, and yet not consent to being framed entirely by the unitary nature of the frame.

I particularly appreciate the rigour behind Desai's work not to 'singularize' conjuncture. There indeed are many different conjunctures: economic, political, cultural, literary, philosophical, physical and textual. I also congratulate Desai on choosing the term 'commerce', rather than a neutral term such as 'dialogue' or 'conversation' or 'exchange'. Commerce points to a worldliness that is not always dialogic and harmonious and cooperative. Commerce has to do with exploitation and privilege, domination and depredation, with iniquitous exchanges structured in dominance. In other words, Desai's investigations, in their very humanistic orientation, seek to understand the very constitution of humanism as unavoidably political and ideological. Here are a few of Desai's driving questions:

How do concepts such as those of individual freedom and slavery travel across time? How do we make sense of the connections between market forces and human motivation and how are these connections structured by states as different as the Fatimid and the postcolonial? How do religious forms and experiences get hybridized and under what circumstances do they insist on a puritanical origin? What might connect the pirates of Aden in Ghosh’s twelfth-century world with the contemporary Somali pirates that increasingly challenge the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean? (12)

These are questions between anthropology and history, between synchrony and diachrony, between the ‘origin’ and secular constructions, between the notional One and the phenomenal many, between the Home as World and the World as Home. If the postcolonial is indeed *post*, Desai’s work invites scholars to imagine and be accountable to multiple pasts (Antonio Gramsci comes to mind here with his insistence that any understanding of the present has to be preceded by a rigorous inventory of the past, the many pasts) that precede the post-, and hence, be answerable to many *posts*.

A few other conjunctures that Desai is mindful of as he connects the horizon of the macro-political with the movements and procedures of the micro-political: economic liberalism, with the so-called freedom of the market place; the battle between socialism and capitalism and the putative triumph of capitalism with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union; ‘the dubious success of liberalization measures in many postcolonial African states along with the more recent financial meltdowns in Europe and the United States’ (17). Whether he is analysing a text by Amitav Ghosh or Ngugi wa Thiong’o, M. G. Vassanji or V. S.

Naipaul, or is in conversation with a host of critical, theoretical voices and positions, Desai is perennially capturing the big picture in the immediate and immanent frame, the pulsations of ‘other’ temporalities in the present moment, and the fleeting face of the world within the official narrative structures of hegemonic structures such as the nation-state, the ethnocentric family, capitalist individualism, etc.

To sum up, ‘imagination’ is what Desai’s work is all about. To imagine is both to acknowledge limitations of givenness – of boundaries of scholarship, identities, histories, hegemonic double-binds of Culture and System – and at the same time, and on the basis of such a critical acknowledgement, deconstruct and transcend the ‘shadow lines’ of these restrictions, constrictions and proscriptions. Desai’s *Commerce with the Universe* is a rich work of imagination that wears its scholarship in the name of Africa, Asia, Afrasia and indeed of a world in whose irrefragable multiplicity lies its underlying unity.

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Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India, and the Afrasian Imagination. By Gaurav Desai. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. PP. 352. ISBN 9780231164542. \$50 (hbk).

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Like most works that seek to transform their fields, Gaurav Desai’s *Commerce with the Universe* can be approached from several directions. It can be read as an alternative

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history of cultural exchanges between Africa and the rest of the world. From this perspective the book provides a powerful exegesis of 'an African imaginative space that looks to the East as opposed to the West' (2) and seeks to reimagine the cartography of knowledge production in the modern world by effectively detouring Europe, or, at least, provincializing it. To think about Africa in the modern world from the East is to complicate the vocabularies by which the continent is imagined and represented. But the book can also be read as a meditation on Indian identities on the periphery, outside the subcontinent and familiar places of migration such as Europe and North America. Indeed, every single chapter in the book is driven by the desire to understand what it means to be an Indian, a privileged minority in East Africa, which has, for almost a century, been caught between the claims of a powerful edifice that goes by the name of India and specific national spaces in East Africa. The book can hence be read as an attempt to understand a subject – the Indian – defined by a collectivized ethnicity rather than language, which is often the case in India. More significantly, this work can be read as an attempt to return postcolonial criticism to a subject that it thought it had left behind but one that continues to inform and haunt it, namely the question of citizenship within the space of the nation. It is not an exaggeration to say that in East Africa, the figure of the Indian marks both the possibilities and limits of citizenship. Even when born and bred in a specific country, the Indian is also assumed to belong somewhere else, is hence vulnerable to the crisis of politics, and is often asked to pledge the unspoken oath of belonging. The Indian in East Africa is the emblem of a hybridity that can be both a curse and a blessing.

The great themes of this book seem to be brought together by the problematic of citizenship, of the Indian who is African and yet is associated with another real or imaginary homeland. As Desai notes throughout the book, the Indians who populate the East African landscape are various. They are Kholja, Dawood Bhora and Ismailis. They are Punjabi Sikhs, Gujarati Hindus and Goan Christians. Yet, facing political pressures from the European settlers and colonial officials on the one hand and African nationalists on the other, Indians would come to repress their hybridity and champion a singular identity – that of the *Mubindi* – the Hindu. This corporate identity is perhaps one of the reasons why the Indian – and India itself – presented conflicting meanings to African writers and intellectuals. For Mugo Gatheru and other nationalist writers, India was a place of dreams, its nationalism standing up as an alternative to Empire; for the early Ngugi was Thiong'o, Indians were surrounded by a certain opacity, living in an invisible world behind a shop front. For most of the nineteenth century, Indians in East Africa seemed caught in a dialectic of identity and difference. In order to be Indian, they had to insist on their difference; and holding on to Indian difference depended on a form of interiorization that made the Indian subjects' relationship to African spaces problematic. It is a mark of the power of this book that it is simultaneously an exploration of Indian identity in East Africa and a meditation on the troubled nature of modes of identification that privilege alterity, even one that gives access to colonial goods.

Out of this cauldron – in order to secure their identity, Indians had to prove their difference – emerge the two questions that motivate Desai's project. The first question concerns the status of African knowledge in

relation to the presence of Indians in colonial East Africa and their structures of desire: ‘What happens to our understanding of Africa – its history, its sense of identity, its entanglement with modernity, and the possibilities of its future – if we read its long history as an encounter not only with the West but also with the East?’ (6). The second question is about the figure of the Indian as a stranger: ‘What are the most productive and meaningful ways in which societies incorporate strangers, outsiders, foreigners?’ (13). What Desai calls the ‘Eastward glance’ is significant because it troubles certain established notions about the nature of African knowledge at the interstices of history, geography and cultural exchange.

In the end, what makes this book invaluable and unprecedented is its meticulous and sophisticated reading of the figure of the Indian as a stranger, neither a colonialist nor a victim of colonialism. Each of the chapters in the book revolves around the question of the Indian as a stranger in Africa, endowed with the gift of being both an insider and outsider. Indians in Africa are outsiders in a double sense. First, they are associated with an elsewhere – India and its cultural and religious edifice. Second, because the Indian enters into relationship with Africa through discourse determined by others (European Orientalism), it is not always clear which image of Africa is most important to Indians. Caught between a powerful colonial image of Africa and their own desire to look at the continent from the East, Indian writers on Africa often end up victims of the belated Orientalism that Desai reads in Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land*. The ethnographic gaze that Ghosh casts on Africa is driven not just by nostalgia and a liberal investment in the notion of the private, but

also its inability to shed off the Orientalist tropes, which constitute its mode of operation.

Desai could have pushed Ghosh even further and probed the nature of Orientalism not simply as the discourse that mediates the relationship between India and Africa, but also as a figure of desire – the desire to know Africa from the East already presupposes a conscious or unconscious attachment to Orientalism. Should we then be surprised that this Orientalism is responsible for the huge international success of Ghosh’s novel? Could the work thrive without a measure of an erotic register? Isn’t Ghosh producing an Africa for western, rather than African or Indian, consumption?

Desai is most original and compelling when he is trying to untangle the problem of Indian identity and difference as it is performed in African public spaces. Here, instead of skirting the role of Orientalism in mediating Indian–African relations (chapter three), Desai notes how the figure of the Indian, the image of the bania as ‘a crafty and shrewd opportunist’ (55) created by leading British Orientalists such as Christopher New and Richard Burton, would establish the ground zero of Indianness in East Africa. But what was the difference between the construction of the figure of the Indian in Orientalism and its reimagination in India and East Africa? This question comes up indirectly in the two chapters of the book (four and five) where the author takes up the subject of Indian ethnicity in the texts of Indian travellers and merchants in East Africa. These two chapters are significant for a number of reasons. For one, by focusing on how Africa was represented through Indian eyes, Desai displaces the logic of unilateralism that seems to plague the study of travel narratives, the assumption

that travellers move from Europe to Africa and affirm what is already assumed to be Africa.

Indian travellers such as Adamji and Darookhanawala don't necessarily escape Africanist discourse, but given their own difference, they cannot necessarily affirm its logic and endorse its figuration of Africa. Similarly, in his exploration of the biographies of three leading Indian tycoons, Mehta, Madhvani and Manji, Desai presents us with a revisionist account of the romance of the Indian merchant who, starting as a struggling businessman in small East African towns, would end up becoming a captain of industry. Local African traders who were their potential competitors may have resented these merchants, but they also provided powerful models for an emergent African bourgeoisie after independence. In exploring the romance of commerce as self-making, Desai is attuned to the tension between the need of the Indian to embrace difference while prescribing to a unique religious or ethnic identity. In fact, it is this tension between the imperative for an Indian *ethnos* and the claim to an African public space that would create a crisis for the Indian subject in decolonization. For if decolonization was predicated on the claim to a secular national identity, where was the Indian born in Kenya, Uganda or Tanzania to be located? Could a national framework outside India constitute anything but a threat to Indianness?

These intriguing questions are taken up in chapter six where Desai presents a memorable account of Indians who gave up the romance with commerce in order to become citizens of a socialist Tanzania. Ironically, Indian identities in East Africa would come to be shaped by very specific national frameworks – thriving as captains of industry in Kenya and

Uganda, where private enterprise was dominant, Indians would be associated with socialism in Tanzania. Given the prominent role of Indians in East Africa, it is perhaps an exaggeration to argue, as have Desai and others, that the problem of the Indian community was how to 'publicly come to terms with its African history' (73).

A larger puzzle, handily dealt with explicitly in this book, is the problem of the Indian as a subject in the private sphere. Simply put, while Indians and Africans could associate in the public sphere, collaborating in politics and sports, for example, there was little interaction in the private sphere. Indian identity in East Africa seemed to demand strict exogamy. If Indians appear mysterious in the works of African writers, it is precisely because they were visible in public but inaccessible in private. It is in this context that Indian creative writing in East Africa becomes significant. As Desai shows in chapters three and seven of his book, it was in the poems, plays and novels of writers of Indian descent that Africans could (imaginatively) access the Indian private sphere. At the same time, however, works of the imagination could be symptomatic of the crisis of Indianness in East Africa, for the critical mass that Desai discusses in chapter three, itself evidence of Indian imaginative engagement with the East African literary scene up until the end of the 1960s, would almost disappear in the last decades of the twentieth century.

The disappearance of the Indian writer from the East African scene, or rather the significant shift from an Indian literature that was rooted in the region to one that was essentially diasporic, is one of the major topics of this book, but the author sometimes seems to treat it as a seamless and inevitable moment without accounting for

the specific histories that enable it. One could, of course, argue that the movement of the Indian writer from nation to diaspora is no different from that of other African writers in the second half of the twentieth century. And yet it is triggered by a different set of factors: Indians expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin would secure comfortable lives in Europe and North America yet hold on to their East African identities as a gesture of nostalgia (this is the lesson of Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala*).

The most prominent Indian writers of the 1960s and 1970s had been born in small towns in East Africa and educated in local African institutions; their cultural history was not different from that of other African writers. By the end of the 1970s, the number of Indian students attending East African institutions had drastically diminished (I remember counting four at the University of Nairobi, an institution founded by Indians, when I was a student there in the late 1970s). The Indian imagination had become expatriated. Novels such as Vassanji's *Gunny Sack* carry both the promises and anxieties of this expatriation. *Commerce with the Universe* is also informed by similar promises and anxieties. The promise is that of a post-national critique in the spaces of diaspora, the possibility that the Indian in Africa, now relocated to Europe or North America, is quintessentially the global citizen. The anxiety is that even in this narrative of globalization, locality persists – the Indian will not go away, nor will East Africa. I think this book is a model of how to read the global in the local and the local in the global.

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Response to R. Radhakrishnan and Simon Gikandi

In an intentionally acerbic piece, 'Who Wants an Afro-Asian Dialogue?', Ashis Nandy remarked at the turn of the century that a conversation between Africa and Asia had become increasingly dangerous not only to the economic and political interests of the West, but also to the very categories of thought through which 'Africa' and 'Asia' had hitherto been imagined. He called for an 'alternative form of conversation which will include components that can perhaps be only called shamanic' (Nandy 2000, 3). *Commerce with the Universe* does not quite deliver on this call for the shamanic, but following Amitav Ghosh, Dipesh Chakrabarty and a host of other like-minded thinkers, it tries to tease out the possibilities of a long historical dialogue between the African continent and South Asia in particular. Drawing attention to the intersectional and conjunctural nature of the analysis, R. Radhakrishnan, almost in answer to Ashis Nandy's question, responds: 'For too long, postcolonial studies has been hamstrung by debates over the exemplarity or not of either the Indian or the African postcolonial experience. What has been missing is a "co-axial" Afro-Indian postcolonial narrative. I, for one, am delighted and grateful that Desai has initiated a long-awaited dialogue between India and Africa.' Indebted as I am to Radhakrishnan's generous reading of the book, to be fair, it should be noted that such conversations have long taken place even if they have not always been heard. That in itself speaks to the politics of knowledge production which is very much at the heart of the concerns of *Commerce with the Universe*.

African engagements with South Asia and South Asian engagements with Africa have been so marginal to the ways in which African as well as South Asian studies have been fashioned in the Euro-American academy that much of that intercourse has been submerged, buried, unheard. Even when scholars such as Robert Gregory and Thomas Metcalf have successfully shown the centrality of British colonial India in the administration of British East Africa, scholars based in the West rarely make use of the immense archival resources on Africa located in the Indian subcontinent. The invaluable work of scholars working in India who have used these archives and produced refreshingly original work rarely gets noticed or circulated in the corridors of academic power. In one of the endnotes in my book (and I do hope readers will read the endnotes!) I refer to Ramakrishna Mukherjee's book, *Uganda: An Historical Accident?*, originally published in 1956 under a different title and republished in 1985 by Africa World Press. This book anticipated in significant ways many of the discussions of the 'invention of ethnicity' and 'tribalism' that later became common parlance in African studies, and yet, if citations are to be a measure, there seems to be little to no historical memory of this book. My point here, to echo the character Kamiti in Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's novel, *Wizard of the Crow*, is that even in the most enlightened circles one often has to be reminded that 'An Indian (in Africa) is not all *dukawallah* and nothing else'. One of the tasks of my book was to showcase the myriad subject positions of Indians in Africa, from Bomma the slave, to Ghosh the anthropologist, to Mehta the tycoon, to Mustafa the politician, to Fateh, the markedly lower-class Kariakoo resident who can't speak English and bonds with fellow Africans through the medium of Kiswahili.

It is this attention to differences – historical, ideological, religious and gendered, among others – that Radhakrishnan picks up on when he refers to the 'clamour, the twangs, accents and whispers' that can be heard throughout the book. But as Simon Gikandi notes, there is also, in the East African context, a compulsion to a 'corporate identity' as a *Muhindi* – someone of Indian origin. One of the aims of the book was to stage this tension between the very individual personal identities of various actors, whether fictional or real, and the ways in which they negotiated these personal identities in the larger frame of what it meant to be and moreover to be *read as* Indian in the African context. Indeed, one of the original titles of the book's coda was 'The Indian as Enigma' since, as Gikandi rightly points out, the Indian has been an enigmatic figure in much of the modern history of East Africa. Not quite the colonizer or the colonized, neither fully an insider but not, after several generations of habitation in East Africa, a total outsider, the Indian has continued to be figured as a stranger.

Gikandi's reading of *Commerce with the Universe* as being about the question of citizenship within the space of the nation is of course apt, and one might extend the argument not only to the crisis of Asian citizenship in the East African context but also to the context of postcolonial Britain, where increasing immigration from former colonies would lead to the xenophobic sentiments of Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968. Thus the 'possibilities and limits of citizenship' which Gikandi refers to were felt at this time in very immediate terms by East African Asians, caught on the one hand between an uncertain citizenship in their African contexts and, on the other, with an equally precarious reception in Britain. The Amin expulsions of 1972 forced Britain to

recalibrate, and the settlement schemes not only in Britain but also elsewhere (such as Canada) permanently marked metropolitan engagements with Asian African immigrants. Nonetheless, Gikandi is probably right that I do not spend as much time and space addressing what he refers to as the expatriation of the Indian imagination from East Africa. The 1972 expulsion plays such a large role in collective memory that it seems odd indeed that the book does not dwell on it extensively. And yet it is precisely because it is such a defining moment in East African Asian history, a moment that is often exclusively discussed in racial or ethnic terms, that I chose to highlight other aspects of the East African Asian experience. It was only after several readings of Vassanji’s *The Gunny Sack* that I realized that the main character Salim leaves Dar es Salaam *not* as an ethnic exile but as a political one. This, I think, is a very telling choice on Vassanji’s part because it allows him to ask us to de-ethnicize politics even as politics insists on ethnicizing subjects.

Gikandi also invites me to push further the insights that *Commerce with the Universe* has to offer on the nature of cross-cultural desire and its Orientalist provenance. While the immediate context of this discussion is my reading of Ghosh among the Egyptians, what Gikandi notes about the private lives of Asians and the insistence on endogamy, as well as his note about India as a ‘place of dreams’ for early African nationalists, speak both to the very nature of desire for cross-cultural encounters and to the policing of such desires. In suggesting that the ‘desire to know Africa from the East already presupposes a conscious or unconscious attachment to Orientalism’, Gikandi provokes a series of questions with which *Commerce* is centrally concerned. What connects the worldview of the twelfth-century Indian slave Bomma with

the twentieth-century Oxford-trained anthropologist Amitav Ghosh? What do the twelfth-century Tunisian Jew Ben Yiju and the twentieth-century Ugandan exile Jay share in common when they both discourage their daughters from entering into an exogamous marriage? If all these subjects are marked by an ‘Orientalist’ imaginary, are they Orientalist in identical ways?

Regardless of where we each stand on some of the important questions and pointers in the two reviews, R. Radhakrishnan and Simon Gikandi have done more than justice to my modest offering. For this, and for their continued work in African, South Asian and postcolonial studies in general, I remain truly grateful.

Reference

Nandy, Ashis. 2000. ‘Who Wants an Afro-Asian Dialogue?’ *Identity, Culture and Politics* 1 (1): 1–3.

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Reviews

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Postcolonial Film: History, Empire, Resistance. Edited by Rebecca Weaver-Hightower and Peter Hulme. London: Routledge, 2014. PP. 316. ISBN 9780415716147. £80 (hbk).
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In their afterword to *Postcolonial Film: History, Empire, Resistance*, Robert Stam and Ella Shohat celebrate its range, ambition, and inclusivity, writing that the volume ‘fulfils its promise of offering fresh perspectives on the

postcolonial' (282). This is a bold claim, but they are right to make it, as this collection of essays is indeed a valuable and rich contribution to postcolonial scholarship. Engaging with existing scholarly conversations about the position of film with regard to postcolonial debates, the text collects twelve essays with a remarkable interdisciplinary range. Each essay focuses on one particular film, analysing it and relating it to a range of contexts; this structure allows the volume to flex the idea of the postcolonial in generative ways while remaining lucid and narrow enough to stay coherent in its terms of reference. As intended, the book provides heartening evidence that the postcolonial retains great analytical, intellectual and political purchase.

This book demonstrates the strengths of the edited volume as a format. Its scope is inclusive, as it features new essays on acknowledged postcolonial classics such as Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, in adjacency with arthouse films such as Guy Maddin's *My Winnipeg* (which has not previously been subjected to scrutiny from a postcolonial perspective), popular science fiction such as Niell Blomkamp's *District 9*, and with marginal cinemas such as the Dalit Budhan Theatre's documentary about some of the poorest labourers in the world, *The Lost Water*. The volume surveys this heterogeneous range of filmmakers, genres and styles, while remaining methodologically and thematically robust; it has an international scope, engaging with familiar postcolonial coordinates such as France, Algeria and Australia, and contexts that have less frequently been considered in a postcolonial light, such as Canada and Taiwan, while retaining clarity of purpose and depth of thought.

This heterogeneity is never simply disparate, as the rigour and intelligence of the

writing – and its close focus on the postcolonial – is consistent across all of the chapters. Each essay features detailed, sustained and sensitive engagement with a wide range of scholarship. The writers pay perceptive textual attention to the films with which they engage, but they also relate these films to the many broader contexts in which they are situated, be they cultural, imperial, historical or, importantly, material. Indeed, one of the major intellectual pleasures of this volume is the way that attention to the political, economic and material contexts of filmic production is integrated with theoretical and textual exegesis. Many of the essays mobilize literate and thorough surveys of relevant materials and intertextual relations; both Yu-Wen Fu's essay on Te-Sheng Wei's *Cape No. 7* and co-editor Rebecca Weaver-Hightower's essay on Blomkamp's *District 9*, for instance, feature analysis of the scholarly, popular and online receptions of the films they discuss. This adds another welcome level of depth to the reader's understanding of the films as material artefacts whose afterlives, distributions and circulations are often as interesting as the texts themselves. Nicholas Harrison likewise brings life to *The Battle of Algiers*, a much-discussed text that could be seen as analytically exhausted, in this way: discussing the hostile 2003 reevaluation of the film in *Cahiers du Cinema*, Harrison reveals much about the ambivalent afterlife of this perennially resuscitated movie in its post-9/11 context.

This materialist focus in turn demands a refreshing relation to film theory. Several of the essays refer to the ways that film as a material practice can be engaged in concrete political projects associated with progressive postcolonial politics. Vuslat Demirkopan's essay on Fatih Akin's *The Edge of Heaven*, for instance, discusses the film as an anti-essentialist engagement with issues related to

Europe’s contemporary experience of multiculturalism, and Henry Schwarz’s essay on Budhan Theatre’s fourth-world documentary *The Lost Water* describes the way that the development of a ‘straight life structured around cultural production’ (268) has fashioned ways of meaningfully improving the lives of disenfranchised and exploited communities; film is here used as a means of amplifying important subaltern voices (in these cases immigrant and Dalit) and of intervening in political debates and projects with definite (sometimes activist) effects. Indeed, this is the strength of the historicist, politically engaged and material emphases of this volume – the collection sidesteps, and in places explicitly refutes, the temptation to extemporize in the vague and speculative fashion of much psychoanalytic film theory, preferring a definite focus on the varied and multiple material roles that film practice and exegesis can perform.

The collection surveys many coordinates familiar to postcolonial scholars. Marginal, revolutionary and resistance cinemas are well represented here. However, at many points the text also provides a trenchant postcolonial critique of Hollywood, analysing not just some of its productions but also its hegemonic relationship to global cinemas. Jerod Ra’Del Hollyfield’s essay, for instance, is dedicated not only to a rigorous close reading of Peter Weir’s *The Last Wave* but also to a nuanced account of the colonial dynamics of the economic and cultural relations of Australian film production to Hollywood. Stephen Spence, in his essay on Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s *The Puppetmaster*, discusses western critique of Taiwanese filmic production by drawing an analogy between Hollywood’s dominant relation to other global cinemas and European systems of colonial knowledge and chauvinism that were and are brought to bear on

other global populations. This is trenchant and persuasive critique.

In summary, then, this volume represents a rich repository of insights and analysis into postcolonial film. The introduction and afterword that bracket the corpus of essays consciously situate this text as an intervention in longer-term debates about the meaning, politics and trajectory of postcolonial endeavours in a time of neocolonialism, infra-nationalisms and globalization, and the collection does indeed have much to say to all of these concerns. Incorporating discussion of a great diversity of perspectives and developing the postcolonial vocabulary of film studies, this book is an important and timely collection that can provide foundations for much discussion, argument and postcolonial critique to come.

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Queer Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing. By Donna McCormack. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. PP. 228. ISBN 9781441111005. £74 (hbk).
Out in Africa: Same-Sex Desire in Sub-Saharan Literatures and Cultures. By Chantal Zabus. Woodbridge: James Currey, 2014, 2013. PP. 298. ISBN 9781847010827. £44.98 (hbk).
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These recent publications are timely additions to a growing body of postcolonial queer scholarship that includes both area-specific and transnational analyses. Donna McCormack and Chantal Zabus’s comparative perspective is a welcome move, since the accessibility of LGBTIQI ideas in traditional

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print and electronic formats has led to a shared sense of concerns in many postcolonial locations. Among these is the legacy of outmoded colonial statutes which not only criminalize homosexuality but also lead to other forms of social ostracism that are hard, if not impossible, to change with transformative legislation. Emphasizing the lesbian and bisexual body more than the gay male body (as has sometimes been the case in postcolonial queer analyses), the authors present distinctly queer forms of sexual embodiment in literature. With such an emphasis, these works join the tradition of recent publications such as Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (2010), Evan Maina Mwangi's *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality* (2009) and Cheryl Stobie's *Somewhere in the Double Rainbow: Representations of Bisexuality in Post-Apartheid Novels* (2007).

Although there are significant differences in the methodology and structure of McCormack and Zabus's studies, I would first like to examine their shared set of concerns. Both critics engage with a substantial body of scholarship in their introductions as they lay out their critical premises. Some significant overlaps include a dialogue with prominent works in gender studies and queer theory by Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner. Ideas of racialized non-normative desire as well as the ethics of its representation are now commonplace in postcolonial queer studies, but the critical and theoretical acumen displayed by McCormack and Zabus in interrogating some of these premises makes for interesting reading. Additionally, these authors move beyond the constraints and limitations of literary criticism by gesturing towards an interdisciplinarity that characterizes the best kind of postcolonial analysis. McCormack engages

with trauma studies to outline her views on witnessing and Zabus turns to anthropology to prove that there has been ample documentation of African same-sex desire, which makes inadmissible the oft-repeated claim that homosexuality was a colonial import to Africa. Only after establishing a theoretical, multidisciplinary context do these critics turn to the novel as a favoured genre for their postcolonial que(e)ries.

The introductions to these books provide valuable overviews of gender studies and its decade-and-a-half interactions with postcolonial studies. Providing useful definitions of the field, the authors seek to locate postcolonial texts within and outside Euro-American literary, critical and theoretical traditions. For instance, McCormack writes 'queer postcolonial texts both mimic the trope of the coming out story (even while characters may discover their queer sexualities and genders) and portray the violence of implementing a supposed plan of modernization through a white, heteronormative colonial regime' (8). Advocating a cautious use of the term 'queer' to African texts, Zabus mentions she has 'in places resisted the queering impulse, for the subject's desire in some African novels is not to be "queer" in the sense of manifesting multiple identities lying within subjectivity without choosing one over the other' (12). In keeping with their careful attention to language and terminology, it is not surprising that the authors argue for a linguistic revaluation. While Zabus's focus is on African language words used to describe same-sex practices and subjectivities towards a queer indigeneity, McCormack presents a genealogy of 'performativity' deployed in gender and postcolonial studies, most notably by Judith Butler and Homi Bhabha.

McCormack's attention to 'witnessing' as an 'event that reinstates the possibility of address, the very intersubjective relationality that makes ontology possible' (21) leads her to explore its various forms in novels by Trinidadian Canadian writer Shani Mootoo, the Moroccan French Tahar Ben Jelloun, and the Canadian playwright, novelist and journalist Ann-Marie MacDonald. The rather eclectic collection of fiction analysed illustrates the critic's argument about the importance of bodily witnessing as a response to sexual trauma that places the responsibility of understanding on the reader/listener rather than the victim. A unique feature of the detailed readings is a careful attention to disability in relation to queerness. As the author indicates in the conclusion: 'Although disability is not visible in the title of this book, it is ... integral to my analysis of the selected novels. To this extent, disability is interwoven into the terms queer and postcolonial' (186). Exploring multiple aspects of alterity in late twentieth-century fiction enables the critic to 'decolonize normativity' by employing as eclectic a critical vocabulary as her collection of texts, which connects to cutting-edge work on exploring connotations of the 'human' amid times of violent disparities (Butler 2006, 2009; Slaughter 2007). Such a critique of the implicit violence of able-bodied heterosexuality in postcolonial fiction, carefully decoded by McCormack, makes *Queer Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing* a unique contribution to postcolonial criticism.

Reading McCormack's interpretations I often felt that they would have benefitted from a little contextualization of the works discussed. Collectively, this body of fiction portrays sexual violations and exploitation in dystopian settings and dysfunctional families, belying any liberatory potential inherent in

'queer' in the title *Queering the Postcolonial*. Individually, these are significant works from different literary traditions published in the 1980s and 1990s. Some, like Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, have been read as diasporic and lesbian fiction, but others like Jelloun's Francophone *L'Enfant de Sable* (published in English as *The Sand Child*) and MacDonald's *Fall on your Knees* are somewhat outside the 'canon' of postcolonial literature. There is much to be said for an exploration of sexuality in non-mainstream postcolonial literature, which thematically connects to a critical exploration of sexual alterity. However, besides this obvious connection, the rationale for drawing on these particular texts from various national literary traditions is somewhat unclear, a minor but noticeable flaw in an otherwise important work.

In contrast to McCormack's focus on late twentieth-century literature, Zabus directs readers to a wide array of sub-Saharan African literature representing same-sex desire from the 1960s into the first decade of the twenty-first century. As a prelude to these discussions, Zabus mentions nineteenth-century European colonial narratives which brought African sexualities into the realm of the popular imagination. Among these were Henry Morgan Stanley's *My Kalulu, Prince, King and Slave: A Story of Central Africa* (1873) and *Le Roman D'Un Spahi* by the French novelist Pierre Loti (1881). These comparative perspectives set the stage for Zabus's analysis of sexuality in African fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, including works by Cameroonian Mbella Sonne Dipoko, Nigerian Wole Soyinka, Ghanaian Ayi Kwei-Armah and Malian Yambo Ouologuem. A wide survey, such as the one presented here, risks emphasizing certain linguistic and/or national literary traditions over the other.

However, such a bias is circumvented by Zabus's scrupulously comparative, transnational, multilingual approach.

The transnational focus of *Out in Africa* also avoids the neat and somewhat artificial distinction between local and diasporic literature favoured in some postcolonial circles. In this Zabus follows, even without obviously stating, the authors of a classic work of African literary criticism who 'attempted to represent as fully as possible ... women writers, and ... all regions of Africa and of the diaspora – but always with an eye to excellence, not to geographical, sexual or ethnic balance' (Chinweizu et al. 1983, 5). Thus, in a chapter entitled 'The Stuff of Desire: Boarding School Girls, Plain Lesbians, and Teenage Dykes', Zabus discusses the Kenyan writer Rebeka Njau's 'gothic' novel about sexual awareness and emergence, *Ripples in the Pool* (1975), and British Nigerian Helen Oyeyemi's gothic lesbian narrative *White is for Witching* (2009) and concludes: 'Like Njau, who points to alternative sexualities and institutions outside of patriarchy such as female husbandry, Oyeyemi shows that not only patriarchy but also gynocracy ... conceals ... fragmented sexuality. As in Rebeka Njau's fiction, the Gothic mode here serves to dramatize female same-sex desire' (158). Such a juxtaposition of Africa-based and diasporic authors is also present in Zabus's examination of South African women's fiction by Bessie Head, Sheila Kohler and Shamim Sarif, where she extends the notion of diaspora by positing 'the characters are also doubly diasporic on account of their queerness, which is to heterosexuality what the diasporic state is to the notion of "home"' (213). Zabus's application of a queer diasporic framework to read these texts is in keeping with Asian, US, British and African American scholarship in the area (Patton and Sanchez-

Eppler 2000; Cruz-Malave and Manalansan 2002; Gopinath 2005; Manalansan 2003).

Juxtaposing popular and high literature and bringing in filmic and dramatic representations of same-sex desire, Zabus is driven by an encyclopedic impulse which sometimes makes her work a little unwieldy. A case in point is the chapter entitled 'Male and Female Mythologies', which exemplifies a myth criticism approach. Identifying male African authors' evocation of Egyptian myths around Osiris and Horus and female writers' use of 'a dominant ancestor guiding a person's sexual preference' (217), Zabus struggles to fit her analysis of fiction and autobiographical literature into this paradigm, leading to the somewhat forced conclusion that the 'male and female mythologies outlined in this chapter mark a shift from the novel to the autobiography and often from Greek and Egyptian or West African myths to indigenous ancestor-worship and spiritual possession' (249). Despite this, the chapter offers some excellent insights about the propagation of false myths such as unsubstantiated accounts of the legendary ruler Shaka Zulu's promotion of homosexuality in the South African lesbian sangoma Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's 2008 autobiography *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me*. As this instance illustrates, Zabus does not adopt a celebratory account of representations of same-sex histories and relationships in Africa; rather, her position is one of critical engagement.

McCormack and Zabus's monographs conclude with specific directions for future research extending, even transcending, postcolonial queer studies in its current manifestation. This 'trans' or beyond consists of post-human subjectivities created by organ transplants as mentioned by McCormack, and African transgender/transsexual identities as an area of future exploration for Zabus. Other

possible areas of exploration could be comprehensive accounts of same-sex desire and queer identities in postcolonial drama and poetry. Throughout their works, both authors have successfully dispelled popular but outdated and erroneous assumptions about Euro-American influences on queer lives and representations in Africa and other postcolonial locations.

Such correctives are particularly important now since active homophobia is being advocated in many African countries at the behest of proponents of Christianity, more specifically the Anglican Church. Nigeria passed the Same-Sex Marriage Act in January 2014 and Uganda's proposed anti-gay legislation was finalized into the Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Act in February 2014. The former mandates fourteen years of imprisonment for homosexual activities, and the latter mandates life imprisonment for those found guilty of same-sex relations within and outside the country. In the various African and Caribbean contexts discussed by McCormack and Zabus, South Africa alone stands as an exemplar of legislative change, but even here constitutional non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or the Equality Clause mandated in 1996 has not led to unqualified social equality or cultural acceptance.

In conclusion, both critics remain aware of the limitations of literature and literary criticism. While Zabus's call is 'to plead for an indigenization of discursive sex and, in particular, same-sex sex in Sub-Saharan Africa' (283), McCormack acknowledges that although 'stories create a space for survival', realistically speaking 'the embodied nature of the stories and the sociopolitical dimension of the storytellers' tales suggest that stories alone will not stop or prevent violence' (188). Though stories and storytellers cannot stop violence, they can make people aware of the

pleasure, joy and companionship in same-sex relationships at the same time as they document the destructive impact of social opprobrium and vicious legislation on LGBTQI lives. Chimamanda Adichie, Bernadine Evaristo Helon Habila and Jackie Kay' recently issued a fierce public response condemning the Nigerian homophobic legislation as undemocratic and un-African. With McCormack and Zabus, I share the hope that such responses, combined with literary representations of LGBTQI lives, may perhaps lead to change.

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Cinema and Development in West Africa. By James E. Genova. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. Pp. 222. ISBN 9780253010087. \$25 (pbk); ISBN 9780253010025. \$70 (hbk).

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 James E. Genova's monograph *Cinema and Development in West Africa* provides a fresh look at the cinema as a site of ideological and material contestation in French West Africa, from the late colonial period into the first two decades after independence. As Genova's choice of the term 'cinema industrial complex' suggests, his study not only concerns the representational content of early African cinema but places equal emphasis on its 'materialist structure', referring to the necessary equipment, postproduction facilities, distribution networks and bureaucratic sources of funding. It is within this industrial complex that Genova traces the creative output of the pioneering cohort of French West African cinéastes, whom he regards as what Gramsci termed 'organic intellectuals' (6). His aim is a redemptive one, as Genova argues that by ignoring the material conditions faced by these early cinéastes, previous scholarship has unfairly criticized them for creating limiting 'traps' for current African filmmakers (73).

The structure of the monograph is chronological. The first two chapters examine

France's late colonial 'film politics' that aimed carefully to represent the colonies as beneficiaries of the imperial 'civilizing mission' and censored any material deemed incendiary. Chapters three and four trace the emergence and development by individual filmmakers and the journal *Presence africaine* of 'an African anticolonial film politics' (18). This counter-politics informed early postcolonial films, which served as a corrective to colonial depictions of Africa and Africans. Genova explores how no one form of cultural production existed in a vacuum, but rather the energies of intellectuals, poets and filmmakers intersected in productive ways. In the case of cinema, many directors adapted African novels to the screen so that they could reach an audience beyond the literate elite. While early West African cinema adopted a similar aesthetic of the colonial docu-fiction, their embrace of local vernaculars and critical depictions of colonialism clearly distinguished them from the previous filmic tradition. In focusing on Ousmane Sembène, Med Hondo, Djibril Diop Mambety and Souleymane Cissé, Genova also provides a sense of the diversity of the early cinéastes, in terms of their background, training and approach to the genre. Finally, chapter five moves beyond the content and style of individual films to the struggle of filmmakers to shift the locus of control of postproduction facilities, distribution networks and funding from the old colonial metropole to the new postcolonial states.

This final chapter is the most engaging and innovative of the book, as it draws attention to how financial structures of neocolonialism constrained not only postcolonial economies but also postcolonial cultural production. Genova also makes a strong case that postcolonial West African cinema can only be understood as globally situated. West African

cinéastes waged the struggle with help from multiple directions, from training and funds from the Soviet Union to intellectual debate and exchange with members of the Third Cinema movement in Latin America. In the end, while Genova admires the efforts of ‘filmmakers to seize control of the materialist dimension of the cinema industrial complex’, he finds that these efforts are ultimately unsuccessful (129–130).

Genova synthesizes a sizeable amount of information from secondary literature as well as the colonial archives in France and the Senegalese National Archive. However, untapped are the voices of the African audiences that garnered acute attention of colonial states and African cinéastes alike. Despite that fact that Genova critiques Henry Slavin (2001) for making the pessimistic assumption that colonial cinema in France ‘could only be singularly interpreted and that the audiences came to the space of the theatre with a monolithic interpretive framework’, Genova follows a similar tack in regard to African audiences (48). Genova describes African colonial audiences as ‘bombarded with foreign images’ imbued with ‘colonialist tropes of African primitiveness and exoticism’ (161). While this representational discourse existed, it does not explain why ‘millions of moviegoers annually’ patronized the cinema in West Africa by the 1960s. (162). As scholars have revealed elsewhere across the continent, Africans viewed the cinema as a place of fun and excitement. Moreover, far from passive audiences, Africans actively adapted foreign cinematic tropes and stock characters to local debates and practices, whether forming Cowboy Clubs inspired by westerns or debating moral questions of etiquette and sexuality displayed in Bollywood dramas (Larkin 1997, 1998; Fair 2010; Gondola 2009; Brennan 2006; Burns 2002; Ambler 2001). By

focusing exclusively on African elites who conceived ‘the false and distorting images that emanated from Hollywood’ as antithetical to nationalism, Genova risks denying the ability of West Africans innovatively to use the content of foreign films in their daily discourse and cultural production (149). An engaged use of historical newspapers and the conducting of interviews could have opened up space to explore questions of reception.

Another result of Genova’s focus on elite cinéastes is that he accepts their claim that their vision of ‘African modernity ... was progressive, developed, just, and egalitarian’ as well as representative and in service of the general populace (164). Yet some evidence presented by Genova suggests it is possible that the version of ‘modern Africa’ constructed by the intellectual elite conflicted with other imagined African modernities. To give just one example, Genova describes a film by Cissé that criticized Qur’anic schooling as an attack ‘on the archaic and regressive role of religion in Malian society’ (145). While both colonial and postcolonial states condemned Qur’anic schooling, the continued presence of this institution throughout contemporary Francophone West Africa suggests that the cinéaste’s vision of ‘modernity’ was by no means the only significant option.

Genova’s choice not to include an exploration of audiences additionally underpins his dismissal of the recent video boom in sub-Saharan Africa. Television and videos may be relegated to ‘the private sphere of the home’ and thus be ‘inherently atomizing’ in parts of the world (163). Yet this does not apply to sub-Saharan Africa, where people consume video and television in restaurants, informal screening venues, or living rooms crowded with neighbours and friends (Saul and Austen 2010). Moreover, Genova’s claim that ‘the capacity for Africans to both produce and

consume their own images is perhaps lower now than it was during the early postcolonial period' (163) may be true for celluloid film, but ignores the explosive productivity of Nollywood, which as Tanzania's Bongowood proves, is a reproducible model. Unequal 'access to financial resources' may limit cultural development, but it does not preclude it (9).

Finally, while his sources make clear that the French government as well as African nationalists and cinéastes all viewed the cinema as an important economic asset, at times Genova takes their ideological statements at face value, even when the scant empirical evidence he presents contradicts them. While the 70 million CFAs earned by the two main French distribution monopolies (COMACICO and SECMA) in 1969 from all the former French colonies combined was not a negligible sum, it remains unclear if cinema truly had the potential to be an 'integral arm of economic development' post-independence (153, 162).

Despite these shortcomings, *Cinema and Development in West Africa* achieves the important task of reminding readers that the economic structures of neocolonialism possessed deep tendrils that broadly impacted postcolonial life and politics. Moreover, it clarifies what the political stakes of African cinema were for colonists, nationalists and intellectuals. The descriptions of the hopes, aspirations and political agendas of the pioneering cohort of French West African cinéastes cogently presented by Genova will be of interest to specialists, with prose appropriate for advanced undergraduate classrooms.

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 1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh. By Srinath Raghavan. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. PP. 368. ISBN 9780674728646. \$29.95 (hbk).

In February 2013 an estimated one hundred thousand protesters descended upon the Shahbag neighbourhood of Dhaka, Bangladesh, demanding capital punishment for Abdul Qader Mollah, who was accused by the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh of egregious war crimes during the 1971 war for Bangladeshi independence. The

protests highlighted a still-fierce conflict between the Awami League – who first ignited the movement for Bangladeshi liberation from Pakistan in the 1970s – and the Jamaat-e Islami Party, which, at the time, stood for a united Pakistan and now constitutes the largest Islamist party in the nation. The violent protests eventually precipitated the execution of Abdul Qader Mollah at the end of the year. Though certainly inspired by large-scale protest movements across the globe in 2011 and 2012, such as those in Tunisia, Egypt and Turkey, the Bangladeshi protests were not fuelled by the desire to overthrow a corrupt sitting government, but instead exact justice for a set of social and political crimes committed in its nascence. Bangladesh's continuous turmoil as a new nation is predicated on the complex political circumstances of its birth. This historical moment is now being rehashed and reconsidered in many different fora, from massive protests on the street, to controversial studies such as Sharmila Bose's *Dead Reckoning* (2011), which questions the genocidal scale of the Pakistan army's crimes in East Pakistan, to literary treatments such as Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2008) and Zia Haider Rahman's recent *In Light of What We Know* (2014). Srinath Raghavan enters this ongoing retelling, reconsidering and reopening of wounds with his astonishing text, *1971*. Much like the Shahbag protests of 2013, Raghavan portrays the liberation war of 1971 as at once fiercely local in its demands but also inextricably connected to larger global movements and redistributions of power.

Raghavan argues the formation of the Bangladeshi nation is not a geographically confined skirmish but a worldwide event that indexes vast societal movements across the globe. He portrays the liberation of

Bangladesh as symptomatic of much larger shifts in the political realities of the late twentieth century. His scope is immense, giving much textual space to the world powers of the Cold War who, between themselves, negotiated diplomacy surrounding East and West Pakistan. In 1971 the formation of Bangladesh is not simply an impassioned independence movement by a people united in language, culture and faith, but rather the outcome of a complex and nuanced game of international diplomatic chess. Against the grain of common thought that the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan was a foregone conclusion, Raghavan argues 'the creation of Bangladesh was the product of a conjuncture and contingency, choice and chance' (8).

In this vast world-scale 'global history' of the formation of Bangladesh, the role of the Bengali East Pakistanis in the independence movement becomes minor as the conflict grows in scale and political gravity. When India, under the regime of Indira Gandhi, enters the picture, the conflict in Pakistan is transformed into something much larger than a clash between two hostile wings of a fairly new nation. Raghavan makes the case that the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 was a moment that crystallized the political relationships between India, China, the United States and the Soviets, while the British and French remained largely uninvolved. As a result, the new South Asian nation of Bangladesh is one step beyond the condition of postcoloniality (Britain and France's neutrality should indicate as much), and a foray into a world beyond the tethers of imperialism. Raghavan's work demonstrates with great detail and force that Bangladeshi independence was a military theatre of the Cold War, offering an opportunity for the powers of the new world order to flex their diplomatic muscles. It becomes clear in

Raghavan's account that the formation of Bangladesh was a linchpin in the global alliances that would determine the course of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Raghavan's training as a military historian is on full display in the text's breathless pace, racing from the streets of Dhaka to the chambers of Yahya Khan, Indira Gandhi and Richard Nixon, and volleying into numerous global conversations in the Soviet Union, China, the UK and France. All the while, *1971* plumbs an impressive number of archives, some only recently made public, tracking the infinitely mutating form that the Bangladesh question took over myriad telegrams, phone calls and UN summits, and finally on the borderlands between India and East Pakistan in December 1971. The fine detail of subtle shifts in diplomatic logic, presented with great expertise by Raghavan, can be overwhelming to a reader unversed in military strategy, but this only adds weight to a work whose diligence and gravity is undeniable. He thoughtfully and rigorously illuminates the motivations behind each world power's decision to become involved in (or abstain from) the conflict.

For Raghavan, the way anyone aligned themselves in the spring of 1971 – from heads of state, to protesting students, to international rock stars such as George Harrison – was symptomatic of much broader political and social allegiances. The choices, it seemed, were between the free-market capitalism of the first world, the socialism of the second world, and the dictatorial leanings of the newly formed third world. He finds India's involvement, a catalyst for the war to take the definitive shape it did, to be largely bound up in its concerns

about the growing population of East Pakistani refugees flooding the radicalizing areas of West Bengal. 'The refugees, New Delhi feared, would come as touch paper to [the] tinderbox of the growing political momentum of the Maoist Naxalites of West Bengal' (77). India, unable to garner support from its traditional allies for the Bangladeshi cause, turned to Israel to supply weapons to fight on behalf of a majority Muslim population. In another development, the United States, lagging in its decisions with concern to how it would affect its relationship with China, finally turned to Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iran to supply weapons to Pakistan – a development that somehow made burgeoning Bangladesh seem outside the purview of the Muslim world (246). The global alliances formed during this conflict are puzzling to say the least, and revelatory of the seismic shifts of world power during the Cold War.

1971 is a fascinating text that broadens the formation of the Bangladeshi nation to encompass the world at large. That said, it seems, as the chapters progress, that the East Pakistanis are the least important players in this moment of Cold War nation-formation. Raghavan's text has the tendency to be about everything but the experience of the Bangladeshi people themselves, and indeed these are the stakes of writing a 'global history'. Nonetheless, this is an indispensable contribution to the ongoing and pressing conversation that reassesses the very ambivalent historical moment of Bangladesh's inception.

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