



PROJECT MUSE®

Postcolonial Audiences: Readers, Viewers, and Reception ed.
by Bethan Benwell, James Procter, and Gemma Robinson
(review)

Rebecca M. Gordon

Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History, Volume 5, 2013, pp.
78-81 (Review)

Published by Penn State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/513292>

and the rhetoric used to describe them, as well as this rhetoric's relationship to the power of publishers, editors, reviewers, educators, readers, and marketers. It is a small step from here to a consideration of other relevant sources of cultural power. Regardless of gender, what readers choose or need to read is no doubt influenced by the marketing of personal image, lifestyle, and products that are rooted in planned obsolescence that often focus on what an individual lacks.

There is also a lesson in Badia's chapter on Morgan. Sometimes the rhetoric of the extreme used to draw attention to a movement will become the hook the media use to limit our understanding of the movement. More important overall, Badia leaves us with a sense that both male and female scholars and critics invested in patriarchal culture continue to perform a close reading of women readers in ways that mirror nineteenth-century critical assumptions and worry about those women readers, which should worry all of us. It appears that high art does have low readers, and as a result, low readers have high (anxiety) readers.

Rhonda Pettit, University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College

Bethan Benwell, James Procter, and Gemma Robinson, eds. *Postcolonial Audiences: Readers, Viewers, and Reception*. New York: Routledge, 2012. 264 pages. \$128.00 (cloth).

In *Postcolonial Audiences*, Bethan Benwell, James Procter, and Gemma Robinson address a neglected—and contentious—area of scholarship. As the editors point out in the book's introduction, while recent scholarship has made large claims for reading as an ethical act, as a means of establishing collective consciousness, as identification with difference, and as a mode of resistance, postcolonial literary studies has tended to prefer *readings* to readers. In doing so, argues Grant Huggan in his preface, the field ignores modes of audience reception and consumption that have created the politics and pleasures of meaning making during and after empire. Using the term *postcolonial audience* to think “in the broadest possible way about the different theoretical and empirical consequences of reception, from ideal to real readers” (1), the editors here collect a group of essays whose authors approach this challenge with gusto.

reception

The volume is organized into five sections, with chapters grouped according to the kinds of readers and methodologies involved rather than specific texts, individuals, or geographical locations. The first section, “Real Readers/Actual Audiences,” offers three empirical studies that locate the reading, reception, and consumption of postcolonial texts as activities embedded in practices of everyday life, thus disrupting the “ideal” and “implied” readers of established postcolonial literary studies. Michelle Keown opens the section with an analysis of international audiences for *bro'Town*, an animated series from New Zealand. Challenging commonly assumed differences between “lay” and “professional” readers, Keown claims that the knowledge possessed by local online fans of the program (“lay” readers) affords them insights into the show’s racial politics that are missed by overseas viewers and professional critics, whose reception is informed by global marketing strategies rather than the program’s “Pacific” specificity. Shakuntala Banaji uses audience research carried out in India with teenage film viewers to evaluate responses to changing representations of class in Bollywood films since the deregulation of the Indian economy. Banaji’s strongest point emerges at the end of her essay, where she notes that the distinct break between films of the new neoliberal India and their forebears “marks a sense in which capital . . . rather than labour (the people)” are constructed as India’s strength in the global arena (67). Placed between these two chapters, the editors’ contribution presents the most compelling offering in the section. An ambitious study of transnational urban reading groups in far-flung parts of the postcolonial world (Africa, India, Canada, the Caribbean, the UK), the writers pay attention to the ways in which readers both invoke and resist place, authenticity, and belonging as significant terms in their discussions of diasporic fiction. The study showcases the difficulties of naming any group of readers a “postcolonial audience” when readers can speak back to and reject that rubric.

In the second section, “Readers and Publishers,” contributors investigate relationships between publishers and readers in Africa and Britain to evaluate some of the industrial pressures placed on the reception and distribution of texts. Elizabeth le Roux traces the international market for South African scholarly publications and finds, rather bleakly, that the market was larger during apartheid than now. Considering a very different audience, Clair Squires demonstrates that the industrial structures that have supported the critical and commercial successes of many postcolonial literary writers have been less successful at producing mass market books that appeal to Black Minority Ethnic (BME) readers in the UK. Squires’s study indicates that the BME audience has not been as well served as the audience for literary fiction, despite government policies that promote reading and new publishing ventures. Gail Low’s fascinating article shows how publishers’ readers can shed light on the processes of manuscript selection, gatekeeping practices, and canon

formation, thus helping us understand the interface between aesthetics and commerce. Low focuses on William Plomer, a reader for Jonathan Cape known for discovering Ian Fleming and the young Derek Walcott. Low is especially adept at tracing how Plomer's tastes and self-conscious relationship to empire (he was himself raised in South Africa and England) influenced his decisions at Jonathan Cape, contributing to the publisher's uniquely international nature.

"Readers in Representation," section three, presents three widely varied discussions of reception inside representation. Florian Stadler examines how concerns with reception and audience are articulated in Salman Rushdie's fiction through his film-watching heroes. Lucienne Loh investigates the double-consciousness at play in the relationship between the narrator and the readers this narrator encounters in Pankaj Mishra's 1995 nonfiction travel narrative, *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana*. Finally, Lucy Evans considers the consumption of cultural products from the Caribbean through an analysis of Robert Antoni's *My Grandmother's Erotic Tales*, highlighting the book's representations of international calypso audiences and local folktale listeners. Despite the rich material, this section is weaker than the others, primarily because by focusing on the representation of readers, listeners, and spectators within writers' works, these scholars must necessarily give short shrift to the specificities of how other media discuss representation and audience (especially popular film and music). Of the three, Loh's article is the most compelling. As Loh persuasively shows, Mishra's legible desire to be part of India's diasporic intellectual elite leads him unwittingly to elevate himself above the less fortunate Indians he represents in this work, contributing to colonial hierarchies Mishra has stated he wishes to oppose.

Two concepts central to postcolonial literary studies are the ways reading creates the nation and the ethics of reading that postcolonial literature demands. The volume's two final sections engage these questions. Modes of reader performance connect the essays in the fourth section, "Reading and Nationalism." Srila Nayak analyzes reader contributions to *The Indian Social Reformer* in the late nineteenth century to demonstrate how readers identified themselves discursively as liberal reformers, noting how what counted as "reform" was pointedly gendered. Neelam Srivastava's strongly argued essay disrupts the privileged mode of symptomatic reading in postcolonial literary studies, providing a "surface reading" of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) to rethink Fredric Jameson's notion of third-world literature as national allegory. Katie Halsey reinterrogates Thomas Macaulay's notorious 1835 statement that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (qtd. 185) to show a central conflict between Macaulay's own (carefully reconstructed) reading practices and the way he conceptualized the effects of reading on Britain's Indian subjects.

Though Macaulay valorized the European humanist tradition, his reading habits were engaged, oppositional, and critical, and, when applied as a policy to imperial education in India, planted an effective future instrument of resistance.

The final section, “Reading and Postcolonial Ethics,” concerns itself with questions that underwrite the entire collection. “Reception” in the postcolonial context can refer both to questions of hermeneutics (how should we read?) and hospitality (how should we respond to—or play host to—what we read?). Daniel Allington counters textual analysis with speech act theory and ethnomethodologies of reception to demonstrate how readers’ responses and feelings can produce events with force in the world. For example, acts of reception can create a symbolic object—in Allington’s analysis, Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*—whose effects in culture differ vastly from the work as a linguistic structure. In a densely argued essay, David Farrier proposes that asylum seekers echo the subaltern of postcolonial literary studies—figures that hover at the margins of society but who are silenced within popular and academic discourse. In asylum-seeker narratives, a paperless person without a country—a legally illegible entity—must “narrate [himself] into a place of safety” (211). The demands such narratives make on their readers are thus imbricated in the question of an ethical postcolonial reading practice, for the reader must decide how to engage with representations of worldly structures of power. Through nuanced readings of J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, Katherine Hallemeier counters recent scholarship that articulates an ethics of reading as centered either on shame or on sympathy, attending instead to how shame and sympathy can be mutually constitutive. Indeed, a reading response of shame, when it challenges self-complacent sympathy, can elicit new sympathies that disrupt a reader’s ready-made subjectivities. In the final essay, Derek Attridge turns to Alaa al-Aswany’s international best seller *The Yacoubian Building*, comparing Western and Arabic reception of the novel to discern how the “singularity” of the text—its inventiveness and experiential value—manifests itself for some of its audiences. In this way Attridge reminds us that as readers we are always operating in a realm of cultural distance, and he suggests that an ethical reading practice values and recognizes that distance, especially in cases of reading works in translation.

This volume truly thinks “in the broadest possible way” about the different theoretical and empirical consequences of reception for postcolonial audiences; as in any volume that tries to do so much, some contributions are more successful than other. Nonetheless, for sheer richness of method, this volume is a stimulating read whose contributors will undoubtedly provoke their audiences in turn.

Rebecca M. Gordon, Independent Scholar