

**Review of Lawrence Phillips's *The Swarming Streets: Twentieth-Century
Literary Representations of London* and John McLeod's *Postcolonial
London: Rewriting the Metropolis***

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The Swarming Streets: Twentieth-Century Literary Representations of London

Edited by LAWRENCE PHILLIPS, 2004, Amsterdam/New York, Rodopi 227 pp., 9 042 0166 3, hb €47.00

Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis

By JOHN MCLEOD, 2004, London/New York, Routledge 224 pp., 0 415 34460 3, pb £19.99

'When a man is tired of London he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford', Dr Johnson famously wrote in 1777. More than two centuries on, Johnson's comment on London's ability to excite seems to be more relevant than ever in view of the number of literary texts being produced centring on the quasi-legendary city. *The Swarming Streets* and *Postcolonial London* are examples of this trend, two volumes which can be viewed as complementary and which should find a place in the library of anyone interested in London as a cultural and political metropolis that has shaped, directly or indirectly, the destinies of so many individuals and has in turn been shaped by them. *The Swarming Streets* brings together essays by fourteen different scholars on how various writers represented London in their writing, from Virginia Woolf in the first decades of the twentieth century to Andrea Levy in the 1990s (i.e. at a time when her London novel *Small Island* [2004] had not yet been published). The editor of the volume is Lawrence Phillips, one of the organizers since 2002 of a yearly Literary London Conference and the editor of an online review entitled *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London* (www.literarylondon.org). In his introduction he observes, erroneously in my view, the dearth of literary criticism on twentieth-century London, and traces the developments that have taken place in London writing from the 'sense of possession' (p. 3) of the Victorians to the more impressionistic and subjective view of the Modernists. The evolution of a 'modern urban consciousness' (p. 3) in

the twentieth century is then illustrated by the papers that follow. All of them are informative and interesting, even if a few do not live up to their promising beginnings and leave the reader hungry for more. This is the case, for example, of a piece by Rob Burton, 'Cheerleading and Charting the Cosmopolis: London as Linear Narrative and Contested Space', which briefly discusses various novels among which Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Edward Rutherfurd's *London*, and also of an original article by Samantha Skinner on 'Iain Sinclair as Rag-picker.'

This being said, there is a real cohesion to the collection, as testified by some cross references, for example to Virginia Woolf or to Elizabeth Bowen, as if the authors examined here were a chain of voices, enacting what Storm Jameson, perceptively discussed by Chiara Briganti in her essay, called in the 1930s 'the multicoloured fabric of London' (quoted p. 64). In spite of dealing with different topics and different genres (not only traditional fiction but also, among others, children literature and film criticism), the essays repeatedly view London as a place that welcomes marginalized groups and therefore allows them to build up an alternative vision of the place, a remapping that often involves wandering through the city. This is especially true of women, as shown in essays on Virginia Woolf and/or Dorothy Richardson by Nadine Attewell, Francesca Frigerio and Vicki Tromanhauser. But it applies to children and anarchists as well. Witness Jenny Bavidge's essay on the novels of E. Nesbit and Philip Tew's on B.S. Johnson. Another common feature seems to be the importance of history, in particular of the two World Wars, in the representation of London, although this theme is more specifically tackled in a well-documented piece by Sara Wasson on 'Wartime London's Sensory Landscapes' and in a solid analysis of Graham Swift's *Shuttlecock* by Ingrid Gunby.

Only three essays in the collection edited by Phillips deal with postcolonial writers, who have nonetheless played a major role in the development of twentieth-century representations of the metropolis. John McLeod's *Postcolonial London* pays full tribute to these authors from the so-called margins of the former Empire and explores the ways in which they have rewritten London over half a century. His book, which is well-argued and written in a style that is both clear and accurate, albeit occasionally repetitious, is organized in five chapters, each of which centres on a motif and how it is tackled by two or three writers belonging to the same decade. This astute structure makes for a consistent whole and gives the reader a clear idea of how the creative imagination has contributed to making London a different place. After an introduction, in which McLeod gives a thorough explanation of the meaning of 'postcolonial London', a phrase which for him foregrounds 'the subaltern agency' (p. 15) but steers clear of idealization, he proceeds both chronologically and thematically by giving sensitive close readings of a selection of key texts by postcolonial writers, half of

whom are of Caribbean descent. The 1950s are represented by Sam Selvon and Colin MacInnes, whose utopianism is informed by popular culture; the 1960s by V.S. Naipaul, Doris Lessing, and Janet Frame, three writers who convey the disillusion of the newcomer to London; the 1970s by Buchi Emecheta, Joan Riley and Grace Nichols, who illustrate the response of the Black female immigrant to the metropolis; the 1980s by Linton Kwesi Johnson, Hanif Kureishi and Salman Rushdie, particularly the writing in which they focus on riotous protest; finally the 1990s are illustrated by David Dabydeen, Fred D'Aguiar and Bernardine Evaristo with their muted celebration of transcultural London. This thought-provoking volume closes with a measured examination of the transformative potential of post-colonial London writing and with a helpful bibliography.

There are few overlappings between *The Swarming Streets* and *Postcolonial London* in terms of authors or works discussed, with the possible exception of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* which is only briefly analysed in the two books but comes out as the quintessential London novel of the 21st century. The theoretical approaches – varied in *The Swarming Streets*, because of its format, and resolutely post-colonial in *Postcolonial London* – also differ, even if both books contain common references to Michel de Certeau whose criticism seems to have become a must in any analysis of the city. Still, the two books converge on a number of important points, undoubtedly due to their common subject matter. As their roughly chronological organisation seems to suggest, both insist on seeing London as a city marked by change, not just in terms of gender but also of class and race. They also display an awareness that London is often unavoidably linked with intricate issues of nationalism and identity, particularly in writing by so-called outsiders. This question needs to be addressed with caution for, as McLeod points out, London remains a 'conflicted location' (p. 6) and in spite of the 'utopian slant' (p. 15) London may trigger in some writers, it is a city with a complex fate that also involves minor and major tragedies.