

**Dominic Davies, Erica Lombard, and Benjamin Mountford, eds. *Fighting Words: Fifteen Books That Shaped the Postcolonial World*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017. Pp. 279. ISBN: 9781906165550.**

*Fighting Words: Fifteen Books That Shaped the Postcolonial World* is the inaugural volume of a series entitled “Race and Resistance across Borders in the Long Twentieth Century,” which itself finds its origins in an interdisciplinary network launched by The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH) in 2013. The book starts with an oddly self-congratulatory note by the series editors (who describe their own advisory board as “a veritable powerhouse in the field” [x] and write that readers are about to discover a “brilliantly edited” [xi] volume), followed by an introduction in which the three editors of the book retrace the genesis of their project and outline its aims. *Fighting Words*, as Davies, Lombard, and Mountford report, grew out of a wish to provide a postcolonial counterpart to Antoinette Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr’s *Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire: Creating an Imperial Commons* (Duke University Press, 2014). Whereas Burton and Hofmeyr’s volume underscored the role played by books in supporting Britain’s colonial venture, Davies et al.’s project focuses on the idea that texts are also “powerful tools for those seeking to critique and resist imperial rule” (4).

The editors of *Fighting Words* are acutely aware that the selection of books that they have operated “necessarily involves an element of arbitrariness” (20). From the onset, Davies et al. make it clear that they have chosen to include in their volume not only “re-evaluations of [...] canonized texts” but also “studies of overlooked resistant writing” (1). This fact may account for the absence of chapters on classical works such as Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), and conversely explain the presence of a section on Annie Besant’s *Wake Up, India* (1913), a collection of lectures that, according to contributor Priyasha Mukhopadhyay, “has been barely visible in historical and literary scholarship” and “has next to no claim to

a transnational reputation” (90). If it remains debatable whether all fifteen books analysed in *Fighting Words* have veritably *shaped* the postcolonial world as the subtitle of the volume suggests, what is crucially not in dispute is that the selected texts, which are examined in chronological order of publication, are each of considerable interest when it comes to exploring the concerns and complexities of postcolonial history and politics. This quality lends legitimacy to the editorial freedom exercised by Davies et al., who define their volume as a “pedagogic project” (18) that aims to give readers the tools to engage in a critical understanding of colonialism and its aftermath. In this ambition, *Fighting Words* undeniably succeeds.

Another daring decision that pays off is the editors’ broad interpretation of what constitutes a “book.” The material examined by the contributors indeed includes not only the expected works published as single bound volumes but also, for example, the initial run of the magazine *Transition* under the editorship of Rajat Neogy (1961–1968), and two autobiographies by Jawaharlal Nehru “here discussed as one ‘book’” (21–22). This inclusive approach to the idea of a “book” makes for a welcome diversity across the volume, an eclecticism that also finds expression in the wide range of analytical approaches adopted by many of the contributors. Beyond textual examination, most of the chapters leave pride of place to discussions of the books’ editing and publication histories, as well as to analyses of the works’ dissemination and reception.

The methodological echoes that reverberate across the volume are supplemented by thematic ones, so that readers are implicitly invited to engage in a fascinating comparative exercise. For instance, anti-capitalism, which inspired many anticolonial movements of resistance, is at the heart of the opening section by Dominic Davies on Marx and Engels’ *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), and it prominently resurfaces in different guises – often in the form of opposition to or collusion with neoliberalism – in several other chapters: Benjamin Mountford’s section on Frank Hardy’s *The Unlucky Australians* (1968) discusses the exploitation of the Indigenous Gurindji people by a multinational company in Australia’s Northern Territory, and the means of resistance deployed by this Aboriginal community to counter their mistreatment; Asha Rogers in her chapter shows how the first editorial of *Transition*, a magazine designed to promote creative and intellectual debates in the emerging postcolonial nation of Tanzania, was “[p]ositioned dangerously close” (190) to an advertisement for Coca-Cola, suggesting an alliance

with another form of imperialism; Erica Lombard, discussing Nelson Mandela's autobiography *A Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), cites the South African activist's complicity with neoliberal interests during his presidency as one of the reasons why the legacy of Mandela's struggle for freedom in South Africa remains more symbolic than material.

Many of the chapters in *Fighting Words* also concentrate on elements of form, and once again there are reverberations across the different sections. For instance, when Lombard describes Mandela's book as a work that largely conforms to the genre of the postcolonial leader's autobiography, she is referring to the characteristics of this type of narrative as outlined by Elleke Boehmer in her chapter on Nehru's *An Autobiography* (1936) and *The Discovery of India* (1946), a section in which Boehmer interestingly argues that the Indian politician uses "patterns of interpellation and self-projection" to "call the new postcolonial nation of 'all India' into being" (121). Generic considerations also feature in Janet Remington's section on Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), which however focuses more prominently on the book's writing and publication histories and on its author's unsuccessful attempt to appeal to the British imperial government to directly intervene in discriminatory South African politics.

Directly linked to the generic features of the books under study and to their political objectives are the epistemological strategies underlying their authors' formal choices. For example, Johanna Richter's contribution on Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias's *Men of Maize* (1949) largely attributes the "resistant potential" (157) of the novel to the author's decision to blend Mayan literary and philosophical traditions with European avant-garde strategies. Cheikh Anta Diop's *Nations nègres et cultures* (1954), discussed by Ruth Bush, can also be regarded as an attempt to restore the dignity of colonized peoples, but one which adopts a radically different approach in that it aims to "provid[e] a scientific basis for affirming the humanity of black Africans" (174). Diop's book famously retraces the origins of Ancient Egyptian civilization to sub-Saharan Africa and, in its insistence on the sophistication of African cultures, this work bears notable similarities to Joseph B. Danquah's *The Akan Doctrine of God* (1944), examined by Rouven Kunstmann in the volume. In this section, Kunstmann focuses on the reactions to the Ghanaian politician and intellectual's claim that the Akan people of Ghana held a monotheistic belief that formed the basis of a shared cultural ethnicity, which was itself "rooted in a common origin in either the distant Kingdom of Ghana or Ancient Egypt" (143).

Interestingly, Kunstmann recounts that Danquah's hypothesis about the ancient state of Ghana was then "borrowed" (143) by his political rivals, among whom Kwame Nkrumah, to defend the idea of a unified Ghanaian national identity. That *Fighting Words* includes a chapter on Danquah's book rather than on Nkrumah's better known autobiography provides an interesting illustration of how Davies et al.'s project particularly values the work of those perceived to be precursors in their fields. Indeed, references to the prophetic value of authors and their books abound in the volume. For instance, Imaobong Umoren identifies African American educator Anna Julia Cooper as a "visionary" (54) who, in *A Voice from the South* (1892), provided a thought-provoking examination of the "complex intersectional identities" (50) of black women in the US. In a similar vein, Reiland Rabaka uses the word "prophetic" (75) to describe the concepts of the Veil and the color-line that Cooper's male compatriot W.E.B. Du Bois developed (along with the idea of double-consciousness) to investigate the condition of African Americans in his well-known *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Frantz Fanon's vision in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) too is praised for its "foresight" (203) by John Narayan, who argues that the Martinican thinker "anticipated our neo-imperial present long before it fully materialized" (203).

Next to these postcolonial "prophets" of sorts, *Fighting Words* also devotes space to more ambiguous figures and works. For example, white British Emily Hobhouse's *The Brunt of the War and Where It Fell* (1902), which is examined by Christina Twomey, is an ostensibly laudable text that vehemently criticizes the British government for the inhumane treatment of Boer women and children in concentration camps during the South African War (1899–1902). However, as Twomey asserts, Hobhouse in her lifetime showed far less regard for the hardships endured by black South Africans in the same situation: she "always maintained that it was not her responsibility to investigate conditions in the black camps" (60) and made only "piecemeal efforts" (68) against racial discrimination in South Africa. Similarly ambiguous is British activist Annie Besant who, despite championing anti-imperial resistance in *Wake Up, India: A Plea for Social Reform* (1913), ultimately advocated "only limited freedom [for India] under British rule, rather than outright independence" (96), as Priyasha Mukhopadhyay suggests. A different kind of equivocalness surrounds Australian Sally Morgan's best-selling memoir *My Place* (1987), examined by Michael R. Griffiths. The book recounts a young woman's discovery of her Aboriginal identity in a way that, Griffiths

explains, potentially leads the white Australian reader to over-identify with the Indigenous protagonist, thus possibly encouraging a dubious form of cultural appropriation.

The paragraphs above retrace but one possible interpretative trajectory through *Fighting Words*, a volume that additionally sustains readers' engagement thanks to the relatively short format of its contributions. The book also largely fulfils its objective of providing chapters written in a "pithy and accessible style" (18), with the possible exception of one section whose clarity is marred by unnecessarily convoluted syntax. Importantly, the volume achieves the rare feat of both providing ample material for reflection *and* leaving its readers wanting to know more about the books examined within its pages. In this sense, *Fighting Words* is a most stimulating read; it should be of considerable interest to a large number of students and researchers in postcolonial studies.

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