LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Michael Perfect (2014) *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism: Diversity and the Millennial London Novel*. **Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 221 pp., £95.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781137307118.**

In the wake of Brexit, a backlash against multiculturalism has been touted as a key factor in the wave of political unrest breaking over the Western world. This backlash, critics contend, has increased the scapegoating of immigrants and refugees as a tactic of fearmongering designed to advance political causes. Literary production has responded with independent presses like Manchester's Comma Press, Sheffield's And Other Stories, Leeds' Peepal Tree Press, and Liverpool's Dead Ink joining forces to amplify culturally-diverse voices while challenging the capital's dominance as the central publishing hub of Britain. Multicultural texts such as Nikesh Shukla's 2016 essay collection *The Good Immigrant* received wide critical attention, and Comma Press's resolution to only translate work from nations on President Trump's "travel ban" underscore the insurgent nature of cultural production more broadly. Furthermore, intersectional analysis has paved the way for more nuanced considerations of social categories with multiculturalism parsed along lines of class, gender, and space. Michael Perfect's 2014 book *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism: Diversity and the Millennial London Novel* addresses several of these intersectional concerns by interrogating links between ethnicity, identity, and cultural history. Perfect's book surveys an array of contemporary multicultural texts to question the way such texts are read based on categorical or biographical assumptions. The book provides generous overviews of fiction that focus on multicultural identity within London, but its proclivity for sweeping surveys somewhat undermines its rigor.

Opening with the assertion that London 'has never been monocultural,' Perfect immediately complicates this position by adding that multiculturalism, in the way that we understand the term today, has not been the norm either (4). In making this claim, he seeks to highlight the plasticity of the term itself while freeing discussions of diversity from prevailing conceptions and timelines. Despite this, the book's analysis is centered on fairly standard conceptions of multiculturalism, specifically 'literature about migrants to London from former British colonies and their British-born children' (6). Adding that publishers have been eager to capitalize on such narratives, Perfect declares that recent years have revealed declining sales due to cultural pushback against multiculturalism as the consequence of political shifts. This, he notes, was compounded by skepticism toward "political multiculturalism" — a programmatic attempt by the Blair government to foster cultural diversity (7). Perfect also revisits debates of authorial authenticity, dismissing biographical legitimacy on the grounds that policing the borders of what constitutes multicultural writing would inevitably result in 'essentialism, reductionism, and literary ghettoization' (10). The objective of the book, he posits, is to 'stimulate debate over what texts about multicultural London

demand to be discussed, compared, analyzed and taught, and why' (25-6). What the book delivers is a wide survey of contemporary texts that explore representations of multicultural identity in London, focusing specifically on how texts have been read by critics in a manner that does them a disservice.

The book covers an expansive selection of authors whose fiction is generally read as representative of British multiculturalism, offering detailed overviews of their work in addition to weighing both their critical and commercial success. It suggests that, up until this point, such authors have been either misread or misunderstood in some manner. For example, Perfect begins by stressing the challenge critics have faced in anchoring the work of Hanif Kuerishi to a multicultural canon. He posits that Kuerishi's oeuvre should instead be approached in relation to its departure from multicultural motifs, arguing that the work itself performs an aesthetic migration. His interpretation of Andrea Levy's work centers upon Edward Said's notion of contrapuntal reading, insisting that Levy deploys a contrapuntal writing technique through 'a direct engagement with historicity' characterized by colonial erasure (73). Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* is said to adopt a similar aesthetics of disavowal as Kuerishi and Levy's work in that scattered (as opposed to constant) depictions of racism cast prejudice as an apathetic 'cultural anachronism' through formal 'familiarization' (88). As with *White Teeth*, Perfect argues that Monica Ali's novels have been 'prominently (mis)read' (199), noting that *Brick Lane*'s ironic use of stereotypes connotes integration rather than antagonism, rendering the text as a 'multicultural *Bildungsroman*' (116). Readings of Gautam Malkani's *Lodestones* (2006), Chris Cleave's *The Other Hand* (2008), Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009), and Stephen Kelman's *Pigeon English* (2011) seek to recuperate the texts from their lukewarm reception, with notable emphasis placed on Cleave and Chikwava's exploration of immigration in terms of asylum-seeking and the moral imperatives associated with crisis scenarios. Perfect's reading of contemporary multicultural texts is rich in scope and coverage, providing context and approaches that add depth to notions of London as a multicultural arena.

While Perfect's scope is wide-ranging, he consistently positions his chosen subject within a focused contextual moment in order to build productive connections. For example, by claiming that Kuerishi's work is characterized by aesthetic abandonment, he links the text to multicultural dynamism and migration based on both textual form as well as narrative content. Furthermore, by suggesting that Kuerishi's work breaches genre boundaries of multicultural fiction, the book's rejection of authorial authenticity is justified, challenging the dominant critical positioning of Kuerishi as an "ethnic" author. And it is the same rejection of biographical authenticity that allows Perfect to recuperate Cleave and Kelman — white authors writing about multicultural London — as significant figures within a multicultural canon without concerns of cultural tourism. Although questions over authenticity are hardly new in literary studies, Perfect mobilizes his position effectively to challenge the way such texts are hastily dismissed or maligned in relation to expectations placed on genre.

Perfect's book also offers insight into the nature of the city itself — specifically the way that regions are coded and understood through patterns of immigration. For example, the book highlights Levy's contrasting of specific continental histories against the mixed backdrop of London, arguing that such narrative details provide the foundation against which cultural identities can be

cast in stark relief. Similarly, in his reading of *White Teeth*, Perfect notes the way Smith represents the domestic space as a stage upon which certain cultural identities can be affirmed or contested. The capital itself is omnipresent throughout, but Perfect treats the city more as a contact zone — a backdrop against which various cultural histories interact and multicultural identities are negotiated. The book's early chapters act as stepping stones for the final two chapters which regard London less as a cultural melting pot and more as a space of refuge, using the texts under analysis as a way to consider the moral implications of urban design. In this sense, Perfect's readings connect the discourse of traditional multicultural considerations of identity and ethnicity to the kind of contemporary debates over migration that circulate today as a consequence of political shifts. While Perfect's work focuses primarily on identity within the space, the permissive nature of the space is implicit within such discussions.

Having said that, the book is not particularly space-centric, and readers accustomed to magnifying understated representations of space in fiction may find themselves forced to perform a similar task with Perfect's work. London is cast as somewhat incidental throughout the texts surveyed, and the book's focus is geared significantly more toward the idiosyncrasy of identity than the way such identities are shaped by the city itself. Furthermore, while Perfect's coverage is generous, it is somewhat uneven in that early chapters focus on bodies of work whereas later chapters examine single texts. Both approaches are productive in their own manner, but the difference between them is jarring in that the first half of the book reads more like a thematic bibliography. This stems from Perfect's insistence that a text's impact is largely characterized by its sales figures or its inclusion on academic syllabi — an odd criteria repeated throughout the book with regularity based on data acquired from Nielsen BookScan UK. On the one hand, the use of such data provides a unique insight into the way multicultural fiction is marketed; on the other, the book marshals it in a way that leads to dubious conclusions such as the claim that commercial success 'suggests that the market for fictions of multicultural London is now less concerned with authorial "authenticity" than it once was' (201). Ultimately these are minor protests, but they do undermine the book's stronger points in addition to positioning it as more of a survey of multicultural writing than a sustained or developed argument.

As increases in sales can stem from a multitude of variables, a rejection of authenticity seems, at best, like a convenient correlation. However, such claims serve the book's most unswerving argument — that a reliance on authenticity places restrictions on a text's function. In this sense, the criticism that Perfect levies at past readings of contemporary multicultural texts — that they have sought to construct the text as an outpouring of multicultural autobiography — is well-stated and somewhat helpful. The book's chapters are structured along comparable lines in that they begin with context and sales data, survey critical responses, and then provide subsequent rationale as to why such critical responses are limited. Yet the interpretations that Perfect offers vacillate between compelling and shaky, appearing at times as though the proposed readings have been shoehorned to fit the book's overall agenda. For example, the first three chapters are structured upon interpretations of what the authors leave out: for Kuerishi, the negation of sustained multicultural thematics; for Levy, the negation of historicity; for Smith, the negation of consistent representations of racism. Such interpretations are potentially fruitful, but they hinge too

heavily on what is not present in the text as opposed to what is. In this regard, the second half of the book in which readings are more grounded is more successful.

Overall, Perfect's readings are informative, and the biographical summaries he provides throughout serve as a thoughtful way to recuperate texts of mixed acclaim and appreciate them in a new way. While London serves as an expedient boundary by which to round up the texts surveyed, the city itself plays a minimal role in Perfect's analysis with the book focused more on identity formation as the result of integration. While the book might have benefitted from expanded geographical coverage to consider multicultural fiction that steps outside of the capital, the rationale to ground it within a space that signifies so profoundly makes sense. Perfect's book provides both a helpful survey of recent multicultural fiction, while challenging critics to think about the limits of interpretation and expectation of genre. However, for an analysis of the role of the city in terms of the way multicultural aesthetics are carved out, readers might look elsewhere as the book treats London as more of a stage than a character.

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