This swindle has become something of a self-perpetuating industry:

Old methodologies don't, of course, die; they remain on the shelves of the critical hypermarket along with the newer, more heavily-advertised products, and as each miracle ingredient turns out to be not quite the elixir that was promised, the theoretical laboratory churns out yet another: New Historicism will make your readings sparkle like they've never sparkled before; cultural materialism brings out the colour in your interpretations. The anti-capitalist rhetoric of so much recent theory is ironic, given that the business is such a prime example of the capitalist system at work. (205)

Harwood's study of the poverty of interpretation may be ultimately enriching if, as he tries to do, anger and frustration can be turned into a sceptical disposition. He is looking for a balance between textual analysis, historical acumen, and biographical awareness. Above all, Harwood insists that the academy must engage in a public criticism which “assume[s] an audience of equals, informed, exacting, alert to nuance, for whom reading is an end in itself, rather than a problem in search of a theoretical solution” (207).

The Parisian gentleman who took my money gave me much more than he was able to take away. I was more streetwise for one thing. More importantly, I was able to turn my psychological defilement from hatred and revenge to a more life-sustaining forgiveness; I learned (late in life for so simple a lesson) to be happy for the money left in my pocket. If only a fraction of Harwood's unsettling polemic is correct, one can only hope that the recognition of the emptiness of our pockets may lead to a more sustaining dialogue in the future.

Gabrielle Watling

POST-POST-COLONIALISM?


Anne Brewster's Literary Formations: Post-colonialism, nationalism, globalism is perhaps the most informative work on Postcolonial issues since Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s The Empire Writes Back (1989). But whereas The Empire Writes Back was an introductory “how to” book (David Carter, “Tasteless Subjects”: 1992), Literary Formations applies recent postcolonial thinking to wider theoretical concerns such as gender, nationalism and globalism. In recent years, Postcolonial theory has
been accused of universalising Postcolonial experience, promoting globalised “solutions” to Postcolonial issues and covertly fostering nationalism under the guise of “difference.” Brewster’s self-reflexive analysis of Postcolonialism in the late twentieth-century is therefore timely, and locates new areas for further research.

However, Brewster’s strength—her ability to examine the diversity of what is now regarded as “Postcolonialism”—may also be her weakness. The Empire Writes Back was criticised for its prescriptive celebration of a Postcolonialism which depended on only a handful of authors, and a theory of cultural hybridity. Brewster’s book, on the other hand, recognises that Postcolonialism is now read, and “written,” on a variety of levels. Debates on globalism, literary strategies of resistance, essentialism, hybridity and nationalism are all now recognised as constituting parts of the Postcolonial agenda. In this respect, Literary Formations has released Postcolonialism from the restrictive parameters set up by The Empire Writes Back. However, for a “detailed examination of post-colonial literatures and post-colonial theory” (back cover), Literary Formations is, literally, very thin. Its 123 pages of text are divided into six short chapters which, although they present a number of Postcolonial issues in some detail, read as a series of unconnected essays.

Brewster clearly covers a lot of geographical and theoretical ground in Literary Formations, but the issues dealt with in her chapters are not encouraged to intermingle and comment on each other. The chapters discuss the issues through the work of specific authors. The first two chapters, both titled “Reading Aboriginal Women’s Autobiographical Narratives,” deal with “The Repressive Hypothesis” and “Agency and Audience” respectively. “Nationalism and Globalism” discusses Ania Walwicz’s prose poetry and “Formations of Nationalism” examines the work of two Singaporean writers, novelist, Philip Jeyaretnam, and poet, Arthur Yap. The final chapter, “Neo-Nationalism and Post-coloniality,” focuses on Bharati Mukherjee’s controversial migrant fiction. But despite the title’s suggestion that the text will compare these ideas of identity and location, strategies of resistance and new approaches to Postcolonial subject formation, comparison is restricted to a couple of sentences at the beginning of each new chapter.

However, its odd structure aside, Brewster’s book includes some well articulated analysis on Postcolonialism’s most recent concerns, and of the work of writers who enunciate those concerns. That the book presents a series of largely discrete essays does not diminish the quality of the work within the essays. The two chapters on Aboriginal women’s writing examine a variety of books and analyse the strategies used by Aboriginal women writers in resisting White oppression. Brewster comments on both the effects of White criticism on Aboriginal
women's writing, and on the ways in which this writing commonly resists White (and some Aboriginal) reading models. She also uses Aboriginal women's writing to critique the idea that Postcolonial writing encourages an Australian nationalism. Brewster questions Mudrooroo's famous claim that Aboriginal women's autobiography conforms to the Australian "battler" myth on the grounds that the claim "assume[s] that Aboriginal people are shaped by the same cultural formations as white Australians, share the same history, and have the same mobility within the public sphere" (69). As the book points out, Aboriginal women's narratives often claim their sources from a community which both exists in the writer's lifetime, and is inferred from the tradition of storytelling which has been handed down through generations of Aboriginal speakers. Brewster concludes that Aboriginal women's autobiography therefore contradicts the Australian nationalist myth of individual triumph against the "odds" in favour of co-operative, family-based Aboriginal communities.

But Brewster does not claim anti-colonial resistance for all the writers in her book. Although some migrant and diasporic writers, such as Ania Walwicz and Arthur Yap, work towards the suspension of national consolidation and affiliation, Bharati Mukherjee upholds what Brewster describes as a "neo-nationalism" in her books. Mukherjee's fiction, and especially that fiction written from her adopted country, the United States, positions the migrant subject as the "new pioneer" (and the loyal American subject) in the land of opportunity. Taking Mukherjee's fiction as her example, Brewster cautions against valorising Postcolonial literature as a homogenised medium of political change and resistance to colonial hegemony, and points out that Postcolonial literatures (and some Postcolonial theory) are sometimes complicit with the very powers which construct the colonial subject in the first place. In this way, Brewster exposes as myth the claim that all "Postcolonial" fiction offers politically correct "solutions" to the ongoing effects of colonialism.

According to the cover blurb, Brewster approaches a number of "Postcolonial" sites and writers in order to "[scrutinise] the processes of neo-colonisation, the ways in which indigenous, diasporic and multicultural writing are re-appropriated by the canon, and the impact of postmodernism" on Postcolonial writing. And, although I'm not sure that Brewster's book does all it promises, its individual essays are both timely and intelligent in their reassessment of "Postcolonialism" in the late twentieth century.