

## Comptes rendus / Book Reviews

**Kai Mikkonen. *Narrative Paths: African Travel in Modern Fiction and Nonfiction*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015. Pp. 324. ISBN: 9870814252024.**

Kai Mikkonen's *Narrative Paths: African Travel in Modern Fiction and Nonfiction* bears a slightly misleading title. The book's exclusive focus is indeed on white Europeans journeying to Africa, while Africans traveling across their own continent are nowhere to be found (those going to Europe or coming back to Africa make a brief cameo appearance in the conclusion to the study). This opening observation might well be considered nitpicking by scholars in comparative literature, the field of research to which Mikkonen belongs, but such an objection would merely testify to the chasm that often separates representatives of the comparative field from those of the postcolonial one: while the former scholars tend to reproach the latter their obsession with empire and its aftermath, the latter regularly reprove the former for their focus on aesthetic matters at the expense of a firm ethical and political engagement. The present review, written from a postcolonial perspective, conforms to this predictable pattern, though it also aims to appraise Mikkonen's contribution within his own field of expertise.

The introduction to *Narrative Paths* outlines the main argument of the book. Focusing on a corpus of generically diverse texts—whether travel writing, journal keeping, or fiction—published by European writers in the late nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, Mikkonen's study sets out to investigate interactions between genres *within* these works so as to gain a fuller picture of the formal “cross-fertilization” promoted by these texts, even as their individual classification as either fiction or nonfiction remains relatively uncontroversial. More specifically, the author of *Narrative Paths* proposes to draw on narrative theory to examine how nonfiction borrows techniques more readily associated with

fiction (such as free indirect discourse or narrativization) and how, by contrast, fictional texts may for example use rhetorical strategies pointing to their referentiality outside the fictional world. It is precisely such an overall “expectation of referentiality,” according to Mikkonen, that distinguishes novels from nonfictional travel narratives, for in the latter the assumption is that “the author bears truthful witness to the real world” (11)—even if, the scholar concedes, the traveller has a “necessarily subjective and limited perspective” (15).

*Narrative Paths*'s interest in subjectivity, it gradually becomes clear, resides in its scrutiny of the “self-reflection, self-analysis, and self-fashioning” (303) that the travellers under examination engage in, rather than in the historical consequences of the dissemination of their biased worldviews on the inhabitants of the continent that they write about. The opening chapter, for example, focuses on scenes of arrival in Africa in works by Blaise Cendrars, André Gide, and Graham Greene, paying particular attention to the writers' mental processes as they portray the spaces around them. Because the focus is clearly on the travellers' subjectivities, dubious comparisons between black people and objects, animals, and plants in the work of Cendrars are hardly commented on (44–48), and the same applies to Gide's descriptions of Africans as “children all alike” and “droves of human cattle” (59). More baffling still, after stating that, “In his *Travels in the Congo* Gide makes explicit the relation between primitive mentality and Africa” (119), the author of *Narrative Paths* goes on to support another analyst's view that “Gide is never racist nor does he despise the indigenous Africans”; Gide's approach, we are told, merely “recalls earlier forms of exoticism” (144n29).

My objection to the above assertion is not just ideological, though obviously Mikkonen's tendency to mitigate or ignore some of the prejudiced comments made by the writers he examines is, in my opinion, a problematic aspect of his work. (The second part of the book is more nuanced in this regard, though the impulse to endorse some of the travellers' colonially tinged comments never entirely disappears.) More crucial from a methodological perspective is the author's choice to leave aside postcolonial theories such as those proposed by Edward Said in *Orientalism* because of the latter's scant attention to generic issues (25) or because, in the more precise context of African studies, the reading of European texts through an “Africanist” lens “has often resulted in monolithic images of the Western mind” (26). These are well-known criticisms

levelled at postcolonial theories, as Mikkonen makes clear. However, in my estimation, the author misses an opportunity here to offer a corrective to these generalizing approaches, something that might have been achieved by preserving some of the basic tenets of postcolonialism while also devoting attention—as the author indeed does—to the subjectivities of the European writers that make up his corpus. For instance, in his discussion of Cendrars's poetry, Mikkonen refers to the Frenchman's disability (he lost an arm during the First World War) to justify the writer's "description of the fullness and optimism of the black body, and the desire to identify with the Africans" (49). No mention is made, however, of the possible paradox involved in the fact that the mutilated body, an abject component in many European cultures, is put in the service of oppressive discourses of power and appropriation. Along similar lines, British writer and war correspondent Evelyn Waugh's depiction of the festivities around Ethiopian Haile Selassie's coronation ceremony as a "preposterous *Alice in Wonderland* fortnight" (154) would have justified more than a few comments situating Lewis Carroll's fictional text as "a kind of model for the absurd juxtapositions . . . that Waugh was trying to capture" (161)—for, surely, the comparison with *Alice* says at least as much about Waugh's inability to apprehend foreign cultures as it does about the Ethiopian emperor's access to the throne. Here, the limitations of Mikkonen's analysis are methodological rather than strictly political, for he too regards some of the views defended by Waugh (who supported Mussolini's intervention in Ethiopia) as "racist" (181).

These reservations aside, Mikkonen's study deserves to be praised for a number of reasons. First, it deals with a sizable corpus, which encompasses more than a dozen texts across two languages, English and French, which the author navigates with equal ease, sometimes offering personal translations when no official versions exist. From a more markedly qualitative perspective too, *Narrative Paths* offers many valuable insights, especially in the chapters where it most clearly exploits the possibilities offered by narrative theory. Among the most successful sections in the book is the analysis of Graham Greene's *Journey without Maps*, in which Mikkonen explores the connection between causality and temporality in fictional and nonfictional narratives, concluding that Greene's travelogue, interspersed as it is with seemingly digressive memories and reflections, owes much of its complex structure to that of a modern novel. Equally engaging is the section on Pierre Loti's *Le Roman d'un spahi*,

in which Mikkonen starts from an isolated passage in the narrative that asserts the factuality of a fictional incident to go on to discuss the interaction between fiction and nonfiction in the French writer's work. A similar cross-generic enquiry is conducted about Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which the protagonist Marlow's discovery of an old (non-fictional) navigation book provides Conrad with the opportunity to hint at different styles and modes of narration within his fiction.

Perhaps the most compelling chapter in *Narrative Paths* is the one focusing on Georges Simenon's fictional and nonfictional texts about Africa. Here Mikkonen successfully demonstrates how the writer uses free indirect discourse with a variety of effects in his novels, ranging from the exposure of his characters' limited knowledge to the portrayal of the mental disintegration of one of his protagonists. In this chapter, the scholar equally convincingly shows how Simenon supposedly rejects exoticism but simultaneously falls prey to it, most notably by retaining the idea, in his fiction and nonfiction alike, that Africa is synonymous with "a forgotten archaic past" (190).

The other chapters in the book offer interesting observations too, either by opting for perceptive thematic groupings or by adopting stimulating methodological approaches. Thus, one of the early sections puts together descriptions of African forests in the works of Joseph Conrad, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Graham Greene, and shows how the three writers present these landscapes as spaces that break down the barriers between rationality and madness. The part of the book devoted to Waugh, despite the reservations mentioned above, manages to illuminate some of the links between his fiction and his travel writing, especially in a passage dealing with focalization. A chapter on Michel Leiris's *L'Afrique fantôme* elucidates an intriguing list of Africa-related images included in the ethnographer's travel journal, ranging from references to European operas to bloody events in French colonial history; and the final section discusses Karen Blixen's use of storytelling to relate her experience in colonial Kenya in her memoir *Out of Africa*.

The final two chapters, as many others in the study, establish a fruitful dialogue between the structural, formal, and thematic aspects of the works under examination. Ultimately, it is in this territory—the probing of the poetics of genre through case studies—that Mikkonen's book is at its best, and it is on these grounds that *Narrative Paths: African Travel in Modern Fiction and Nonfiction* may prove to be an

inspiring read for scholars interested in travel writing, fiction, and all the generic spaces in-between.

DARIA TUNCA  
dtunca@uliege.be  
*Université de Liège (Belgium)*



**Anke Bartels, Lars Eckstein, Nicole Waller, and Dirk Wiemann, eds. *Postcolonial Justice*. Leiden and Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi, 2017. Pp. 376. ISBN: 9789004335035.**

*Postcolonial Justice* is a substantial collection of essays originating from an ASNEL (now known as GAPS, Gesellschaft für Anglophone Postkoloniale Studien)—GASt (Gesellschaft für Australienstudien) joint conference held in Potsdam and Berlin in 2014 (a second volume, *Postcolonial Justice: Reassessing the Fair Go*, was co-edited by Anja Schwarz and Gigi Adair). The opening discussion, which describes how the handling of human remains in Berlin's imperial collections reflects a continuing disregard of indigenous knowledge resulting in modern forms of epistemic violence, serves to illustrate the importance of foregrounding questions of justice in present-day postcolonial studies. The concept of postcolonial justice should not be universal, but rather should promote utopian ideals "bound to local frames of speaking from which they project the world" (xi). This new idea of justice, which is not limited to legal aspects but extends to knowledge at large, should move "beyond eurocentric confines" (xii) and address past injustices as well as the "neo-colonial injustice" (xiv) presently prevailing both in the global South and in Western countries through a so-called "boomerang effect" (xvi) of colonial practice that takes the form, for instance, of austerity policies. Therefore, the "global economy of dispossession" (xiv) and the universality of capitalist exploitation make the quest for postcolonial justice a crucially important issue for citizens around the world.

The seventeen essays that make up the volume are presented in five thematic sections. The first one, entitled "Decolonizing Regimes of Knowledge," investigates the link between knowledge and power and underlines the need to de-Westernize the frame of reference that brought about the idea of universal justice. In the first article, David Turnbull argues that for the rule of law to appear rational and objective, it requires