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Reviews

Fighting Words: Fifteen Books that Shaped the Postcolonial World. Edited by Dominic Davies, Erica Lombard and Benjamin Mountford. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017. 279 p. ISBN: 978-1-906165-55-0. €69.95.

Reviewed by Claire GALLIEN

Fighting Words constitutes the inaugural volume of the series “Race and Resistance Across Borders in the Long Twentieth Century” published by Peter Lang. The series borrows its name from one of the flagship networks of The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH) and pursues, in print format, the objectives of the network in studying, from a transdisciplinary perspective, “anti-racist, anti-colonial, transnational or internationalist movements in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, and the United States” (ix). Just as the activists, writers, artists, intellectuals, and politicians under study in the volume forged their works of resistance in intercultural and internationalist milieus, the series editors, editorial advisory board, and contributors of this inaugural volume come from African, American, Asian, European, Oceanian backgrounds and seek to develop a form of scholarship which is also by nature internationalist, transcultural, and cross-disciplinary.

The volume sets itself the task of analysing the power of books, understood as both cultural forms and material objects, to resist imperial global orders in their circulation and translation across times, cultures, and regions. The editors recognise the role of books in supporting the construction and disposition of Empires and position themselves in the continuation of a long line of critical and historiographical studies, including Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), quoted somewhat belatedly in the introduction, Antoinette Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr’s *Ten Books that Shaped the British Empire* (2014), Rimi B. Chatterjee’s *Empires of the Mind* (2006), and Harish Trivedi’s “The ‘Book’ in India” in *Books without Borders* (2008). Yet they turn their attention and give critical precedence to the “resistant books” (1) that have initiated and pursued, from within the structures of Empire, destabilising moves, changes, and revolutions.

In doing so, they pitch *Fighting Words* at the intersection between the material, historical, and sociological history of books, global studies, and postcolonial literary criticism. The contributors focus on the “viral” (7, 13) migration of ideas, “literary replications” (11) and reorientations, through the circulation of books and the multiplicity of their locations in time and space. They also showcase questions related to forms and genres, which, at least in part, account for differentiated, uneven, and chronologically disjunctive patterns of reception. A woman’s diary does not sell in the same way as an essay such as Marx and Engel’s *Communist Manifesto*; a book may go unnoticed by its contemporaries and be picked up only generations later and for a purpose unpredicted by its author. This attention to the specifics of forms and contexts of production, circulation, and reception allows for a fine-grained analysis of what books have done and can do “to change the world” (1).

Fighting Words is less a volume of contributions than a reading list. It consists of fifteen chapters, each dedicated to a specific book selected for its long-lasting impact on anti-colonial, anti-racist, decolonial and resistance movements. As such, the volume constitutes a fighting corpus that interrogates power relationships in the construction of literary history. It does not purport to be final and the editors recognize the necessarily limited and arbitrary nature of the list. Yet it remains open-ended, with a recognition that additions on other cultural forms of resistance, such as drama and films, would be welcome.

The volume brings together popular resistance books by writers such as Engels and Marx, Du Bois, Nehru, Fanon, and Mandela with less well-known or quasi unknown texts in the West, such as Cooper's *A Voice from the South* (1892), Danqah's *The Akan Doctrine of God* (1944), Asturias's *Men of Maize* (1949) and Neogy's journal *Transitions* (1961-1968). It is particularly strong in the chapters dedicated to books which have failed to attract the attention of postcolonial critics so far. The more famous publications by Du Bois, Fanon, Mandela and others do not appear to be analysed under new critical light except that they offer important discussions about recuperations and transformations of these "classics" across time and space. Formal coherence is given to the whole by applying a pattern which is flexible but which ensures that each chapter has a section on the context of publication of the books, as well as their circulation and resonance in the postcolonial present.

In revisiting and expanding the corpus of resistance, editors emphasise the pedagogical aspect of the *Fighting Word* project and its aim to transform the curriculum. It places academia in the wake of social and political movements such as Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall and therefore reasserts a ground-up approach as well as a need to define theory in praxis, as Burton and Hofmeyr intimate in their afterword entitled "Plotting a Postcolonial Course in Fifteen Chapters".

However, I would be cautious concerning the transformative function of this inaugural volume and its preconception concerning the power of books to "crystallize the ideological tensions and power dynamics at play in a given geo-historical moment" (8). Editors acknowledge that other cultural forms influenced anticolonial resistance but still give the printed word pride of place. For instance, books could be read in conversation with other cultural forms of resistance, such as the *chapatis* used during the 1857 Indian Uprising to circulate secret information, or the amulets containing passages from the Qur'an and the long white robes worn by the Muslim slaves of Bahia (Brazil) for the first time in public to signal the beginning of the revolt in 1835. What is perhaps needed is the support of a decolonial push to include more indigenous fighting words which were not necessarily, and actually most often not at all, caught in print. Finally, the chronology chosen for the volume, which mirrors that of the series, may also appear problematic in the sense that fighting words predate by far decolonisation and internationalist movements. It may sound banal to say that a volume cannot address everything, but the acknowledgement of such tensions could have been given more space in the introduction for instance.

Despite these objections, which are related more to what the collection does not do than to what it actually achieves, the volume remains an excellent source of inspiration for the classroom and for a form of academic research that builds on praxis and aims for social change.