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Neil ten Kortenaar. *Postcolonial Literature and the Impact of Literacy, Reading and Writing in African and Caribbean Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011. 232 p. ISBN (hb): 9781107008670. £58

- 1 The irony of the insistence by some African writers on reclaiming their oral traditions through writing has been exposed often enough, for instance when J. M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello lambasts the pose of one such writer who has actually not written a line in a while and whose oral feats are restricted to lectures for low-brow audiences on a holiday cruise. The opposition between African and European traditions, between the written and the oral word, stands out more sharply because of the origins and races of the characters involved, and of the author himself, a white South African. Neil ten Kortenaar is acutely aware of the tensions inherent in the topic of his book which, over the course of five chapters, a long and dense introduction and a shorter conclusion, spans novels from Nigeria, with works by Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, the Caribbean, focussing on V. S. Naipaul and Erna Brodber, back to the southern tip of Africa with an analysis of Dambudzo Marechera's *House of Hunger*. It also includes references to other writers from the same countries or neighbouring areas, whether they write in English (Doris Lessing, Eskia Mphahlele), French (Boubacar Boris Diop, Amadou Hampaté Bâ), or Spanish (Gabriel García Márquez). The "postcolonial" approach announced by the title thus finds itself amply justified by the actual scope of Kortenaar's study both geographically and in the manner in which he analyses the

complex interactions between literacy and orality, a key issue in many postcolonial novels. Kortenaar also avoids too theoretical an angle by grounding his arguments in a deep understanding of essential works where these interactions, because of the forms colonialism took in those areas and the breaks it introduced in the transmission of cultural forms and traditions, lie at the core of the novelists' concerns. The geographical diversity thus allows for comparisons between various "literacy-orality systems" (17) while the chronology of the periods represented in the novels traces at the same time "the history of the spread of writing on paper and its changing significance" and "tell[s] a literary history of Africa and the West Indies" (9) which reads like "a narrative of early excitement, later compromise, and final ambivalence" (10). While general trends thus appear, a close reading of each novel and constant comparisons between each chapter in the study and other works by the same or other authors mean that Kortenaar avoids sweeping generalisations or duplicating a Manichean opposition between modernity and tradition, or literacy and orality, in order rather to underline their constant interaction as experienced by most figures of readers or writers in the novels studied.

- 2 The fairly complex but clear introduction sets the aims of the study which draws from a wealth of resources by literary critics, historians, anthropologists, philosophers or scholars in communication studies. The author skilfully manages to work these sources into a textual analysis of each novel, while some recurring figures (the window and the page, the closed room, or the tin trunk) help the reader further draw links between the novels across time or regions, in what makes for a powerful, gripping read. One does feel a minor disequilibrium in the work with the first chapters on Achebe and Soyinka being slightly longer and more annotated, while the others are about ten pages shorter and with fewer notes, apart from the one on Brodber which, although shorter, includes more notes. The reason for this might be that the chapter on Achebe, by far the one that weaves more closely the greatest number of varied references, and that on Brodber, are adapted from previously presented and published papers. Perhaps also because of the specific stature of Achebe, all the more perceptible at the time of reading Kortenaar's study and writing this review, the chapter stands out as the most convincing of all, but this does not detract from the quality or interest of those that follow.
- 3 On a similar note, one might find the conclusion frustratingly short (only 6 pages), as it ends on a brief comparison of two novels by Diop and Danticat. One cannot help but feel that the first part of the conclusion could have been developed a little longer and that some elements brought to the fore by the last two novels studied would deserve greater consideration, such as the choice of language, already mentioned for instance in the chapter on Achebe and the codification of Igbo, or the time at which they are set. It is, however, probably one of the merits rather than a defect of Kortenaar's valuable study that readers should want to pursue its threads of thought further in light of their own favourite novels.

AUTHORS

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Mathilde ROGEZ teaches translation, literature and South African studies at the University of Toulouse-Le Mirail. She has written a number of articles and book chapters on contemporary African writers like J. M. Coetzee, Zakes Mda, Damon Galgut, Ivan Vladislavic, and Yvonne Vera. Her current research interests include the representation of landscape and cityscape through fiction and photography, and the question of Africa, blackness and identity in contemporary South African fiction.