

identifies as a weakness of theatre studies—their over reliance on textual and thematic rather than spatial and material aspects—though this weakness can be expected as a result of the scarcity of surviving information on the spatial characteristics of performances. Nevertheless, in working out the ways in which the theatre, as a predominantly spatial art form, simultaneously comments on and participates in some of the most pressing debates of the period, this book will be especially useful to those interested in the position of the theatre in early modern social reality.

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Rocío G. Davis and Rosalía Baena, eds. *Tricks with a Glass: Writing Ethnicity in Canada*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. Pp. xxiv, 301. US\$23 pb.

*Tricks with a Glass* consists of an Introduction, fourteen essays, and two interviews that attempt to investigate what Rocío Davis calls “the diverse ways in which Canadian writers have negotiated identity and space in terms of the realities of ethnicity” (xiii). The essays analyze literary texts by writers such as Michael Ondaatje, Neil Bissoondath, Rohinton Mistry, Nino Ricci, Antonine Maillet, Janice Kulyck Keefer (who also contributes an memoir/essay to the volume), Rudy Wiebe, SKY Lee, Joy Kogawa, Lee Maracle, and Rachna Mara; the two interviews, which function as a coda to the volume, provide a sympathetic and resonant dialogue between Rocío Davis and Wayson Choy and a somewhat flat exchange between Rosalía Baena and Linda Hutcheon. The collection ranges widely and eclectically over contemporary Canadian writing almost exclusively in English: white ethnic writers, writers of colour, First Nations writers, and francophone Acadian writer Maillet (the only writer in French discussed in the volume)—all fall within the bounds of this volume’s investigation of “ethnicity in Canada.” Despite being published in Europe, the collection follows the prevailing biases of English literary studies in Canada by proceeding as if Québec does not exist.

In such an eclectic collection, one might reasonably expect the Introduction to make sense of the topics addressed and the possible theoretical or conceptual issues under investigation. Davis asserts in the Introduction that “The conceptualization of ethnicity is currently undergoing a radical change based upon the increasingly complex politics of representation,” but she sidesteps a further theorization of this “radical change” through an appeal to plurality: what Davis calls “The multifarious ways in which ethnicity is registered

and articulated in literature,” which, she argues, “make it virtually impossible to offer a single working definition of the term” (xiv). So while Davis acknowledges that “theorizing on ethnicity is a valuable critical enterprise,” she asserts that “this collection will centre instead on the actual inscription of ethnicity in concrete texts; together, these essays, it is hoped, match at least the central pattern of Canada’s mosaic” (xiv). My central quarrel with the collection’s Introduction is not with its side-stepping of “theorizing” ethnicity as such, although I would have hoped for a more thorough engagement with the theoretical debates that have animated critics in Canadian literary studies throughout the 1990s. My quarrel is rather with the Introduction’s apparently unselfconscious recirculation of Canadian multicultural ideology (such as the clichéd image of the mosaic) and the conceptual fuzziness of the critical terms it puts forward. These two problems come together near the end of the Introduction, where Davis writes: “The appreciation of ethnic culture and the recognition of variety only serve to enhance the richness of Canadian literary life. The images created by the diverse ‘tricks with a glass’ performed by writers are the shaping stones in the multicultural mosaic” (xxiii–xxiv). The specific terms of “appreciation” and “recognition” and enhanced “richness” all call out for closer critical scrutiny than the Introduction provides, while the assertion that “images” are “shaping stones in the multicultural mosaic” remains thoroughly unclear to me as a description of the work performed by the essays and interviews that follow.

Readers should note that the Introduction and the majority of the essays in *Tricks with a Glass* do not cite any works published after 1994, a limitation that seriously compromises the ability of a collection published in 2000 to contribute to and extend contemporary scholarly debates. Important scholarship published before 1994 also remains unacknowledged: Kathleen Firth’s analysis of Neil Bissoondath’s novel *A Casual Brutality* (1988), for example, makes no mention of incisive critiques of Bissoondath’s work by M. Nourbese Philip and Dionne Brand (see Philip; and Brand), critiques that have circulated widely and would have productively cut across the essay’s banal conclusion that Bissoondath’s novel suggests that “all human beings live ‘lives cut hopelessly adrift’” and “that all of us are wayfarers, very far from home” (69). Eva Darias Beutell’s more theoretically sophisticated analysis of the “centrality of the historiographical” (191) in Joy Kogawa’s novel *Obasan* (1981; incorrectly listed as 1983) and SKY Lee’s novel *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990) likewise proceeds without acknowledging the fact that such concerns have been discussed time and again over the past twenty years in the scholarly record surrounding *Obasan* (for an influential uncited example, see Goellnicht). Typos abound: Trent University Canadian Studies scholar James Struthers is re-

ferred to as “James Struther” (16); *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) is cited as being published in 1993 (33); and Sister Vision Press is referred to as “Sisters of Colour Vision” (252). My purpose in making these points is not to scold critics for omissions and errors but rather to underline the uneven and sometimes inadequate manner in which these essays participate in contemporary scholarly debates over ethnicity in Canadian literary studies.

Taken as a whole, *Tricks with a Glass* provides a few instances of fairly dense theoretical writing (particularly in the essays by Beautell) and many straight-ahead close readings of contemporary Canadian literary texts in English. In reading these essays one after another, I found myself missing a more sustained meditation on the question of *how critics might analyze and discuss texts considered to be “ethnic”*—not how critics might trace thematic tropes within these “ethnic” texts (an approach well represented in this volume) but rather how critics might engage with and attempt to realign the act of criticism itself. In this sense, Davis’s appeal (which I quoted above) to “the actual inscription of ethnicity in concrete texts” (xiv) seems to forestall the necessary and genuinely difficult project of reworking the disciplinary codes that govern the ways we might write literary criticism dealing with questions of ethnicity, an ongoing project being undertaken in Canada by critics such as Roy Miki, Fred Wah, and Smaro Kamboureli, amongst others (see Miki; Wah; and Kamboureli). *Tricks with a Glass* records how certain scholars have approached the topic of “writing ethnicity in Canada” in the 1990s but it stops short of showing us possible ways to rethink and push forward future *critical* discussions of “cultural difference” in Canada.

### Works Cited

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