

of European history marked by the resurgence of the far-right and populisms. Most European universities enjoy full support by the state so that the necessity to deal with marketing is less visible, but neoliberal structures are changing higher education also here, and their subtle action should be the object of careful critical scrutiny. Moreover, in many European countries, the student population is becoming increasingly diverse, but teachers and professors are overwhelmingly white, creating a situation in which the “other” also occupies a lower position in the school hierarchy, a situation that should be considered with full attention by educational policymakers. Bolton, Smith, and Bebout have provided a valuable contribution to American studies in education, addressing crucial questions with an open and reflective approach that can speak to readers from different backgrounds, both inside and outside the academic community.

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Stephanie Li, *Pan-African American Literature: Signifyin(g) Immigrants in the 21st Century*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018. 186 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8135-9277-0.

Narratives of the twenty-first-century immigration from Africa to the United States form an important yet still relatively understudied body of literature. They raise and negotiate crucial questions concerning black identities in flux and the new ways needed to conceptualize them. Stephanie Li probes into these issues in *Pan-African American Literature: Signifyin(g) Immigrants in the 21st Century* (2018). It opens with references to Toni Morrison’s essay “On the Back of Blacks” (1993) and its insight into the white-black polarization of American society. Acknowledging the merit of Morrison’s argument, according to which assimilation into American culture necessitates the internalization of the inferior position of African Americans in society, Li explicates the experience of nonwhite immigrants, especially of African descent, highlighting the relations between them and African Americans. Further, she speculates on how “complete” the assimilation of nonwhite immigrants can ever be under these conditions.

The main focus of Li’s book “is to describe how recently immigrated African writers confront blackness through the history and experience of African Americans while also signifyin(g) on black letters more broadly”

(12). As implied here, she delineates the discussion to writers who were either born in or otherwise identify with African countries. While this choice excludes large parts of what may be thought of as pan-African American, such as immigrant writers from the Caribbean and Latin America, it is a sound move that renders the scope of the book manageable. Another strategic choice is to concentrate on how the narratives of African immigrant writers relate to the tradition of African American literature and its defining tropes, such as “the talking book, invisibility, and signifyin(g)” (12-13). Li examines the ways in which these narratives engage in dialogue with such iconic African American writers as James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison. As Li contends, this intertextuality “represents a robust effort to reimagine the boundaries of the African American literary canon” (13), and her explication of this becomes a valuable contribution to African American studies.

The book is organized around five analytical chapters that provide readings of selected writers of the new black diaspora. The texts under scrutiny are placed in dialogue with each other, particularly at the beginning of each chapter, which is an effective organizing principle that helps the book become a coherent whole. Chapter 1 focuses on the convergences between African memoirs and the slave narrative, dealing particularly with the dilemmas of war and displacement and the concomitant traumatic memories. Li offers perceptive readings of three narratives, one of which is, somewhat surprisingly, as she acknowledges, a novel written by a white American writer, Dave Eggers. Li makes, however, a valid case for the inclusion of *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (2006), as this text has played an important part in popularizing the narratives of African child soldiers and refugees for American mainstream audiences. It may also be read as a prequel to Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007). Li includes Emmanuel Jal’s *War Child: A Child Soldier’s Story* (2010) to expose the affinities between these texts and the antebellum slave narrative, for example “a redemptive structure that provides readers with the satisfaction of individual triumph often coded through images of the American dream fulfilled” (32). These three narratives also function as antecedents to the texts discussed in subsequent chapters.

The second chapter maintains that Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011) runs parallel with Jal’s *War Child*, as both these texts, in radically different ways, establish “the memory of slavery as part of the pan-African American consciousness” (56). While *War Child* signifies on Frederick Douglass’s semi-

nal antebellum slave narrative to underscore and illuminate Jal's "experience of captivity and bondage, Cole presents slavery and its historical afterlives through the uncanny" (56). Li suggests that in *Open City* the protagonist, Julius, becomes "a figure of postcolonial alterity, [...] black without the history and community tied to American blackness [...], specifically haunted by the specter of African American history" (57).

The next three chapters tackle such crucial African American tropes as invisibility (Dinaw Mengestu's novels), different configurations of blackness and ancestry (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* [2013]), and the inbetweenness constructed at the intersection of multiple identities (Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father* [1995]). Mengestu's novels are contrasted against Adichie's *Americanah* by focusing on the issues of the insider and outsider perspectives as to African American blackness. Whereas Mengestu's immigrant protagonists have an "intimate relationship to blackness and African American identity," Ifemelu, the main character of *Americanah*, occupies the status of a visitor and outsider, detached from the dynamics of blackness in the United States. The struggle to understand one's relationship to blackness also provides a link to Obama's autobiographical narrative, sharing such issues as the absence of the African father and the upbringing by a single mother in the United States. These points of convergence highlight the grappling with racial identity prevalent in both narratives.

Li concludes with an acute and timely discussion of what she perceives as a crisis of blackness, not as a condition produced by the Donald Trump regime, but as a much longer historical continuum. She exemplifies this by the almost uninterrupted series of newsflashes depicting the deaths of unarmed black men in the hands of the police, often targeted without any due cause. The book closes powerfully by assigning special significance to the dead: "Pan-African American literature does not seek the impossible task of resurrecting the dead. The dead are to be mourned and remembered. And through that process they become the foundation of belonging, of home" (168). In this way, the book ends as it begun, closing the circle by reference to Toni Morrison, particularly her essay "Home" (1997) and her novel by the same title (2012), whose perceptions of blackness in America form a framework that this important book both builds on and transcends.