Yves Clavaron & Jean-Marc Moura (eds.)


Jeroen Dewulf, Olf Praamstra & Michiel van Kempen (eds.)


These two books form part of a new trend to include seas and oceans in the landscapes of human history from which these bodies used to be excluded—at least in the recent past. The consideration of this “maritime perspective” opens new possibilities for making and shaping global connections.

Nevertheless, the editors of *Les empires de l’Atlantique* explain in their introductory pieces that they wish to limit themselves to a space connecting three continents—the Atlantic space, in which a literature of migration emerged reflecting complex solidarities that far surpassed national identities. Yves Clavaron connects the Francophone to the Lusophone, Hispanophone, and Dutch-speaking areas as a response to the overwhelming Anglophone presence in studies about the slave trade and the Black Atlantic. He even considers the possibility of composing an Atlantic literary history, whereas Jean-Marc Moura presents the novel *Le ventre de l’Atlantique* (2003), the bestseller by Fatou Diome translated into English as *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2006), to make a paradigmatic case for the formulation of some emblematic topoi in this literary history: the open boat, the triangle, the abyss, and the contemporary football mania.

The book is divided into four parts: “Empires and Transatlantic Histories,” “Empires and Transatlantic Influences,” “The Caribbean Atlantic,” and “Imaginary Empires.” The seventeen contributors are based in universities in Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, and Portugal. The idea of empires, therefore, constitutes the red line for these Atlantic considerations, but they are viewed in different ways. Whereas France, for instance, is still a center for the French-speaking world, the Lusophone regions seem to be less focused on one specific center, and to spread across different continents.

This Lusophone dimension is the most innovative part of the book. Marie-Isabelle Vieira discusses the representations of captains and generals in relationship to the navigators exploring the coasts of the southern continents since the fifteenth century on the one hand and, on the other, the captains and generals who, on April 25, 1974, brought about the peaceful coup d’état in Portugal.
that ended a decades-long dictatorship and an even longer Atlantic empire. Vieira argues that silence reigned over the colonial wars fought in Angola, Guinee-Bissau, and Mozambique since 1961 and mentions that the only French journalist present in Lisbon in April 1974, Dominique de Roux, wrote a novel about his experiences with Portuguese history, *Le cinquième Empire* (1977), which became quite well known. Barbara Dos Santos gives examples of the influence of Brazilian modernism in the literatures of Angola and Mozambique in the 1950s, emphasizing the subsequent influence of the literature of northeast Brazil in the texts of these African writers. And Jean Claude Laborie reconstructs the perception of the Brazilian empire in three novels by the important author Joaquim Machado de Assis around 1900. In Micéala Symington’s contribution on Irish literature and its relationship with the English empire, linguistic problems seem to be as important as those more commonly discussed in Caribbean literatures. The contributions on the Argentinian writer Juan José Saer and Spanish-American vanguard movements also show interesting points. These contributions alternate with essays on changes in the French-speaking “empire,” in which C.L.R. James, Marie Chauvet, Patrick Chamoiseau, and other important authors and historical characters are addressed.

In contrast to Clavaron and Moura’s book, *Shifting the Compass* does not stick solely to literary scholars but also includes essays by fiction writers and historians. In the introduction, Jeroen Dewulf explains that the “Dutch Oceanus” is the adequate background for studying Dutch literature, because it was over these water masses that the Dutch language was transported, establishing global connections since early modern times. Therefore, the historical contributions cover four centuries. Manjusha Kuruppath explores the reasons for which the national Dutch poet Joost van den Vondel wrote a dramatic theater piece, *Zungchin* (1667), about the fall of the Ming dynasty in China. Barry Stiefel pays tribute to Jewish Sephardic writings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Lodewijk Wagenaar turns to Dutch administrative reports on the cinnamon peelers in Ceylon in the eighteenth century. Nicole Saffeld Maskiel analyzes elite slave networks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in South Africa and Curâçao. Rudolf Mrázek discusses episodes in the first half of the twentieth century in Dutch colonial Indonesia. The other essays dedicated to literature demonstrate that Dutch influence extended to northeast Brazil in the seventeenth century and that Suriname knew a lively literary debate in the eighteenth century.

The first and last essays of *Shifting the Compass* consist of family autobiographies and personal testimonies by authors who reside in the Netherlands. Adriaan van Dis explains his search for belonging, growing up between “repatriates” from Indonesia in the 1960s, until his time as a professor of Dutch liter-
nature at the Sorbonne in Paris, “the biggest African city outside Africa” (p. 36), during which he included works by migrant writers in the reading lists for his students. And Giselle Ecury tries to put together the fragments of her family spread among different countries and subject to diverse political constellations, from Aruba in 1893 until the present. The rest of the fifteen contributions discuss literary works, of which Olf Praamstra’s “A World of Her Own,” about Marie Dermoût’s novel *The Ten Thousand Things*, is particularly well written. This piece appears to be one of the few essays that is critical of Dutch colonialism, due to Praamstra’s consequent application of Mary Louise Pratt’s concepts of “contact zones,” “her garden,” and “anti-conquest” as the strategy “of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony” (p. 57).

The main question is, of course, which new insights we gain from these two volumes. In the first place, we have seen that their point of departure is quite different. *Les empires de l’Atlantique* aims to problematize and make permeable the concept of “empire” by discussing different language constellations, whereas *Shifting the Compass* subscribes uniquely to the “Dutch Oceanus,” and focuses on the Netherlands throughout. One of the contributors, Ena Arends, remarks that the establishment of contact between South African and Caribbean writers was an initiative promoted by the Netherlands, and the last sentence of the book, written by Giselle Ecury, might be taken as support for this claim: “Besides, the Netherlands has done well, especially for me” (p. 281).

Secondly, most of the contributors to both these books seem to be relatively new in the field, a fact that might explain why they barely refer to the works mentioned in the editors’ introductions. This gives some of the essays a “déjà-vu” feeling. The theoretical essays of both volumes offer a puzzling contrast. In “L’autorité des empires de l’Atlantique à travers de quelques emblems” (pp. 27–39), Jean-Marc Mouradel delivers a fascinating analysis of Fatou Diome’s novel, which relates the slave trade from the past with the contemporary global football broadcasts on television. Michiel van Kempen’s “Complexities of Non-Western Canonization” does not address the analysis of literary texts. Instead, he presents fourteen factors for judging non-Western canonization: language; social position of the author; publishers; prizes; media; criticism; collected works; anthologies; literary history; education; translation; internet; national content/national pride; accessibility. This essay on success strategies only enlists external factors, for which literature as such seems to be less relevant. The title of his essay is also rather pretentious. The Dutch Caribbean is presented as paradigmatic for non-Western canonization, without further explanation of what “non-Western” means otherwise than not belonging to the Netherlands.
These remarks should not obscure the fact that both books offer interesting readings and ideas. The most promising contributions are those presenting new writers and themes. This concerns especially the African writers in France, such as the talented Fatou Diome from Senegal, Tierno Monénembo from Guinee, or Tahar ben Jelloun from Morocco. The “Afrikaans” writer Karel Schoeman in Cape Town enters this fluid global territory with historical novels. And certainly, the complex experiences of Adriaan van Dis make the reader enthusiastic to learn more about his work.

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