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Navigating borderlands: reading *The Pearl Frontier*

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this issue and demonstrates how the field of postcolonial life narratives can 'speak for the socially dead' – from eighteenth century slaves to twenty-first century asylum seekers – through the transactions of testimony (p 201).

Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions offers crucial and nuanced insights into the fields of autobiographical and postcolonial studies at their intersections. Whitlock's book is incredibly timely and valuable in that it provides both a historicised and grounded understanding of the genealogies of colonial modernity, its conditions and legacies, as well as a set of critical tools that foster nuanced and tangible discussions and considerations of the social and political transformative capacity of testimonial cultures. The urgency of Whitlock's call to turn the focus of postcolonial critics to the current subaltern, to asylum seekers, is embodied both in her method and critical vocabulary. *Postcolonial Life Narratives* far exceeds the scope of literary critique in both the fields of life writing and postcolonialism, making this book an essential read to anyone working on human rights and forced migration issues and campaigns across the globe.

Notes

1. Whitlock, Gillian, *Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography*, London: Cassel, 2000; and Whitlock, Gillian, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, London: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
2. Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York and London: Routledge, 1992.
3. Whitlock, Gillian, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, London: University of Chicago Press, 2007, p 3.
4. Schaffer, Kay and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004; and Whitlock, Gillian, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, London: University of Chicago Press, 2007, p 13.
5. Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Confessions* (1789), translator Angela Scholar, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
6. It should be noted that while Whitlock published work on *The History of Mary Prince* and *Roughing It in the Bush* already in *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography,* the two chapters dedicated to these narratives in the first part of *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions*, offer a new, relational reading of the texts.

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Navigating borderlands: reading *The Pearl Frontier*

Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labor and Indigenous Encounters in Australia's Northern Trading Network, by Julia Martinez and Adrian Vickers, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2015, 240 pp., US$50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-4002-0

The distinct sense of place in Australia's Top End is imprinted with cultural diversity shaped by histories and geographies of intercultural encounter. *The Pearl Frontier* explores labour

histories and trading networks of Northern Australia, including the pearling ports of Broome, Darwin and Thursday Island. Using archival narratives as a departure point, the book penetrates the intercultural meshwork of Asian-Aboriginal places that continues to flourish despite histories of racial exclusion harboured in collective memories. Martinez and Vickers reframe discursive labour practices, relationships and connections that 'shaped a whole shared region across international borders' (p. 2), articulating how the pearling industry expanded beyond the national imaginary in an era of 'White only' immigration. Through an analysis of commodified labour, the book demonstrates how the industry breaks with conventions of a time when perceived racial superiority and segregation created a hierarchical workforce specialised by tasks and stratified by wages. Importantly, Martinez and Vickers communicate how the racialisation of labour and colonial regulations against the employment of non-whites were eluded but also paradoxically strengthened the imperial colonial project.

The image of Abdoel Gafoer, an Alorese pearl diver indentured in Kupang, West Timor features on the front cover and throughout the book. Working as a crew member on a pearling lugger, Gafoer's relationship with an Indigenous woman in Broome was not recognised by either the Australian or Indonesian government. Unconventionally however, Gafoer and his family gained official permission to stay in Australia, whilst others were deported back to Indonesia at the end of their contracts. Gafoer, who first arrived in Australia in 1921 during the White Australia Policy, remained nameless by White pearling masters and was addressed by the derogatory label 'coolie'. Becoming an initiated Yawuru man, Gafoer's struggle is emblematic of the relationships that formed the pearling frontier and the families that remain as a result of it. This transnational historiography of the pearling industry is shaped by such accounts gleaned from archival records. These narratives foray into a rich cross-disciplinary area of history and anthropology, making this work a more-than-descriptive account of the national, cultural and racial imaginaries that the pearling industry inadvertently fostered.

This book addresses a maritime border neglected in post-colonial literature and demonstrates how the pearling zone became integral to the formation of relations between Australia and Indonesia. So far, little documentation exists of workers in the pearling industry, compounding issues of recognition for Asian workers and their families. Most of the existing narratives also say very little about intercultural encounters on this frontier; there is little recognition of their enduring legacy in Northern Australia. The book problematises the geographic imaginary of the nation-state and the categories of citizenship it creates which inadequately account for the complex and varied ways people moved and worked across the pearling zone. Prior to British colonial contact, gender and race shaped patterns of mobility through the South East Asian archipelago and Australia. The West's shaping of Australian history, through promoting Whiteness as a national identity, however, is unsettled by these accounts of natural migration flows in the region prior to European contact. These rich accounts dovetail into the complexity of European and Asian interactions in the pearling zone, a region imagined by colonisers as a frontier space.

British colonialism in the Southeast Asian pearling zone, was largely founded on a determination to control the economic utility of the region and to quell piracy that pre-figured many White accounts of the region. A process of boundary making based upon colonial economic interests foregrounded the creation of pearling towns in tropical Australia. Recruitment remained a constant imperative for the industry, and the industrial towns such as Broome and Darwin experienced growth in Southeast Asian populations. Employment within the industry was racially diverse, a reality that disrupted colonial theories of racial separation. Unpacking the mobility of eastern Indonesians, the authors explore why so many Indonesians chose to travel to Australia and contextualise the Alorese culture of Southeast Asia in terms of its wider regional emplacement. Through stories of Gafoer's Muslim background they show

just how diverse and interconnected the ethnic makeup of the region was. Highlighting the cosmopolitan history of the archipelago, the authors state '[t]he mixed descent and multisided political origins of the current social orders in the various islands have created ways by which "outside" and "inside" have combined and interacted' (p. 49). It is evident that Alorese culture of the region incorporated 'foreign' cultures; such an embrace of difference would explain a willingness to migrate and return to work in the Australian pearling industry despite abhorrent conditions.

Pearling masters, or 'pearl kings', played significant roles in affecting changes in working conditions and labour organisation in the pearling industry between 1901 and 1940. Workers were controlled in different ways ranging 'from familial patronage to ruthless exploitation' (p. 76). Since the market for pearl shell was volatile in the early years, pearling ports around the region went through boom and bust cycles, leading to periods of fluctuating migration. With indeterminate labour sources from Southeast Asia, pearl kings engaged in a number of criminal Aboriginal recruitment strategies including blackbirding. Diversity in the spatiality of settler-colonial logics is pronounced, particularly in the Torres Strait where the indenture of Indigenous Australians was practised prominently—effectively enslaving survivors after decades of genocide. In the context of the White Australia policy, the latter half of the book demonstrates the role of the North Australian Workers' Union in agitating for better wages, but in ways that also reproduced the racial segregation of Asian workers. This discussion leads into a chapter on racial segregation on the pearling frontier. It shows how Asian-Aboriginal relations persisted despite officially sanctioned segregation in towns such as Broome and Darwin—the demographic composition of these places today are evidence of these familial hybridities.

As a direct legacy of the economic decline post-Second World War, this polyethnic diversity shrunk in northern towns and cities. The period after the war was an era of retrenched colonisation in the region and the redressing of political borders in a time of new international relations. Indonesia gained independence during this period in which indentured labour was phased out in the industry. Australia claimed to be the global leader in labour reform, however, continued to import indentured Asian labour into the 1970s. The decrease in migration across the frontier due to colonial reform, 'left a blank space on the map that stands out as an anomaly in an otherwise interconnected region' (p. 147). One key point that threads through the entire prose, highlights how the political cartographies of Australia disavowed the intercultural complexity of this region, whitewashing its Asian orientation. The concluding chapter discusses the period of policy transition from White Australia to the removal of the dictation test and race-based immigration. Many of the indentured Asian labourers who remained in Australia struggled to gain recognition for their contribution in nation-building and often faced the prospect of being removed from the communities they shaped if they did not assimilate or pass the citizenship test. Whilst these measures were subsequently removed, the contemporary politics of identity recognition has inevitably been shaped by this extended period of racial and ethnic discrimination.

Beginning in the contemporary setting of Broome, the narratives demonstrate a historical reverence with little description or critique of the current context. As a polyethnic town with many celebratory annual events in the cultural calendar, the lack of current ethnography is perhaps worth a mention. Conflict, evidenced by race riots in the early twentieth century, is historicised but there is a lack of acknowledgement of the swelling political landscape epitomised by growing activism in 2010 around James Price Point. However, the book's main contribution reiterates the complex settler-colonial and economic forces that shaped migration across the frontier and forced migrant workers to reimagine notions of belonging.

This book demonstrates that the northern shores of Australia embraced hybrid and cosmopolitan identities. This was possible because for over a century, pearl shell had been the driving catalytic force of encounter across the frontier, forging not only economic and political interactions but lasting cultural pluralities. At a time when more people are on the move than ever before but regressive immigration policies and border control centre the regional political divide, this book makes a critical intervention. The book provides evidence of maritime mobilities that have unsettled settler-colonial logics. Crucially, it not only unsettles but reshapes mobility narratives through unpacking the production of meaningful and sustained relations between cultures and nations. Borderlands constructed in the White colonial imaginary and supported in the present day idea of the nation-state, can be muddied and reimagined through attention to polyethnic assemblages that shape intercultural identities across the 'frontier'.

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