



## Review Essay: Gaps, Gutters, and Devolution in Postcolonial Britain

*Anglophone Verse Novels as Gutter Texts: Postcolonial Literature and the Politics of Gaps* by Dirk Wiemann, London: Bloomsbury, 2023, 240pp, h/bk £81, p/bk £26.09, e-book £64.80

*Rewriting the North: Contemporary British Fiction and the Cultural Politics of Devolution*, by Chloe Ashbridge, New York: Routledge, 2023, 190pp, h/bk £100, e-book £31.99

Emma Parker, University of Bristol, UK, [emma.parker@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:emma.parker@bristol.ac.uk)

---



In his 1997 verse poem *Sinking* the South African writer Michael Cawood Green retells the true story of the Oosthuizens, a Transvaal mining family who, in 1964, were buried alive by a sinkhole which consumed their house and several nearby properties. A network of man-made, underground tunnels had caused the ground to swallow all five Oosthuizens, along with their unnamed Black domestic worker, while other nearby residents scrambled to safety. As Dirk Wiemann notes at the beginning of *Anglophone Verse Novels as Gutter Texts* (2023), Green's linear, laconic verse focusses on interruptions; a boasting housewife realises that 'her strawberries had disappeared – her neighbour too' (1997: 18) when the sinkhole tears apart the earth and rips into the poem's narrative. Another white homeowner flings open his backdoor only to find 'nothing before/Him' as 'a wind moaned through/his threads of dreams' (1997: 18). As the extractivist logic of apartheid is laid bare, white supremacy emerges as a teetering edifice built on rotten foundations; the ground beneath the poem's surface has been plundered to the point of literal collapse, revealing a honeycomb of empty, unstable hollows. Wiemann is drawn to Green's preoccupation with

[...] holes  
 Eaten out by water,  
 And now filled with water  
 Form in it too a secret system of caves and conduits (6–7)

In the chapters which follow, *Anglophone Verse Novels as Gutter Texts* traces the possibilities of gaps and empty spaces, uncovering caves which become conduits, and pursuing new opportunities for reading and interpretation. At the heart of Wiemann's study is a concern with texts which offer 'a form of community ... of planetary creatures' by challenging 'national and other political framings' (2023: 56). The unnamed domestic worker remains, however, on the edges of the poem, creating 'a gaping silence, a lacuna at it's centre' (53).

These readings of *Sinking*, now a relatively obscure text of the post-apartheid-era, begin a timely argument on the verse novel as 'a prolific though largely overlooked literary form, especially in postcolonial, diasporic, and minoritarian anglophone writing' (18). In a study roughly divided into thirds, the book's opening, lengthy introduction leads to two key sections which offer thoughtful close readings of poetry by Derek Walcott, Albert Wendt, Anne Carson, Kae Tempest, Bernadine Evaristo, Patience Agbabi, and M. NourbeSe Philip. These discussions extend Katharine Burkitt's (2012) previous contention that the verse novel is a literary misfit: 'an oddity, a speed bump that disturbs the dominant novelisation of the global' (Wiemann 2023: 34). Verse

novels, with their renewed emphasis on gaps and incompleteness, usher in a view of the world as ‘process rather than fact’ (35). Connecting these readings is the concept of the gutter, a seminal term in comics studies which describes the blank spaces between drawn panels on the page. The gutter is an integral feature of graphic narratives which often operates as an invitation, beckoning the reader to co-create meaning by linking separate frames. While Wiemann cites Scott McLeod’s descriptions of the gutter in his 1993 study *Understanding Comics*, McLeod’s definition is reliant upon the concept of closure, which occurs as readers fill in the gaps, creating the ‘phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole’ (63). Wiemann, by contrast, turns to the gutter to pursue an aesthetics of the incomplete, a ‘marking of form as never fully realised and hence infinitely emergent’ (41). Here the gutter marks a certain kind of a meeting place, a location that is both ‘a gap and a bridge’ (41). This potentially marks an exciting development in postcolonial literary studies, where the vocabulary of comics studies might be extended to discuss experimental *textual* forms. More recent studies, such as Kate Polak’s *Ethics in the Gutter* (2017), can and should be used to extend this idea, and Wiemann’s arguments – which largely avoid contemporary studies of graphic narrative – would be strengthened even further by engaging with the work of comics scholars. After all, Hilary Chute has demonstrated that the gutter is ‘a space that refuses to resolve the interplay [...] of absence and presence’ (Chute 2016: 35), emphasising that comics ‘require an active and complicated literacy’ (2016: 36) which is still overlooked by more traditional forms of literary criticism.

Chapter two’s exploration of gaps in postcolonial poetry from the Pacific, Caribbean, and Canada focusses on representations of geological instability and particularly the trope of the volcano, a feature which shows the planet ‘as an unfinished site of constant making and unmaking’ (57). This chapter positions much-discussed texts like *Omeros* alongside Albert Wendt’s *The Adventures of Vela* (2009) – with its descriptions of the ‘remembered cord that stretches across the abyss’ – and W. S. Merwin’s *The Folding Cliffs* (1998). Such unexpected combinations will be especially valuable to researchers and students interested in the links between Pacific and Caribbean poetry; indeed these have connections already explored in the comparative scholarship of Elizabeth DeLoughrey whose tidalectic readings in *Routes and Roots* (2010) are also a conspicuously absent reference. Yet while *Anglophone Verse Novels as Gutter Texts* makes a commendable effort to position writers like Carson and Walcott side by side, these readings occasionally rely on blunt assertions of racial and cultural difference; Walcott ‘speaks from the position of and on behalf of the descendants of the enslaved’ while Carson must contend with whiter forms of ‘stifling traditionalism’ (77). Both may be partially true, but repeated recourses to unyielding biographical

coordinates cannot account for the overlaps and distinctions between their poetry. Moreover, Walcott's fierce arguments against 'a literature of recrimination and despair' in 'The Muse of History' (1974) suggests his firm refusal to speak 'on behalf of' anyone, let alone those who he perhaps controversially criticised for entertaining 'a rage for identity' (11). Yet the attentive and focussed close readings in the first half of *Anglophone Verse Novels as Gutter Texts* are not primarily grounded in biographical interpretations. These discussions instead look towards more expansive horizons by discussing poetic imaginaries of gaps and gutters that figure 'a malleable, unfinished, open world' (89).

The book's third chapter presents an original – and much-needed – study of how the verse novel has developed in both postcolonial Britain and beyond, scrutinising the island nation's colonial, transnational histories. Here Wiemann moves from Kae Tempest's polyvocal combinations of the planetary and the local in *Let Them Eat Chaos* (2016), Black life in Roman Londinium via Bernadine Evaristo, Patience Agbabi's retelling of *The Canterbury Tales*, and M. NourbeSe Philip's exploration of Britain's imperial archives. The final, close reading of Philip's challenging epic *Zong!* (2008) is especially productive, as a text which unpicks 'the celebratory myth of [national] heroic self-transformation' (192) championed in Britain's 2007 public commemorations for the abolition of the slave trade. While *Zong!* is 'not a verse novel proper but a cycle of experimental poems' (180) its interest in narrative 'emphasise[s] the non-negotiability of the gap' (190). The study's third chapter also demonstrates how such extended poems exist in a vexed relationship to the post-Brexit 'return of the condition-of-England novel' (134) exemplified by Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018) or Sam Byer's *Perfidious Albion* (2018). In brief gestures towards the blank verse of Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) or Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), there is an implied argument that contemporary Brex-lit is looking to move beyond, or at least reimagine, the traditional novel form. The third and final section of Wiemann's study offers a range of engaging readings, spanning from chicklit as imperial romance, to performed verse as a collaborative form of world-making. This engaging study of post-imperial British literature stands almost as an independent study within a wider monograph.

*Anglophone Verse Novels as Gutter Texts* makes a compelling argument that verse novels merit far more critical attention than they have previously been afforded. As a thought-provoking account of an overlooked sub-genre, it breaks new ground by scrutinising narrative poetry's relation to violent political realities, from apartheid to the continuing legacies of the transatlantic slave trade. That said, the monograph's recursive returns to Oscar Wilde's aphorism, "we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars", does not provide the methodological underpinning of the

textual gutter that these readings deserve. Instead, this aphorism sends us on repeated diversions which in the first dozen pages of the introduction include: Wilde's play, the cultural climate of the Weimar republic, Nicholas Mirzoeff's influential readings of the two *Blue Marble* photographs, the rearticulation of German nouns, recent theories of *entrelacement*, Renaissance painting and its distinctions from European Medieval art, and the politics of form according to Levine, Eyers, Ranciere, and Kornbluh. Far more important are Wiemann's three defining features of verse novels as gutter texts which subsequently appear in a brief subsection (they combine separation and connection, occupy a peripheral status in a literary system which prizes novels, and represent a prolific area of postcolonial writing). There is more to be said about these identifying features, as well as the linkages between the book's second and third chapters. The latter might plot the connections between the initial discussions of planetary verse novels to the subsequent focus on poems addressing the legacies of empire and enslavement in Britain. Perhaps these structural issues are the result of a versatile, wide-ranging study which illuminates future areas for research and debate. In either case this marks a distinct contribution to the study of contemporary and postcolonial literatures, particularly for those looking to stray from the well-trodden path of the contemporary global novel.

Chloe Ashbridge's *Rewriting the North* (2023) is an impressive, wide-ranging investigation of how contemporary British literature which engages with 'the North' might elucidate 'democratic alternatives to the centralised British state' (2). Like Wiemann, Ashbridge also acknowledges the resurgence of the English state-of-the-nation novel, concluding that writers like Coe and Byers view Brexit 'as symptomatic of a working-class, insular British nationalism [...] characterised by a protectionist hostility to inward migration' (89). But *Rewriting the North* takes direct aim at two-dimensional accounts of Northern England as representative of such insular regionalism. In many ways it traces the cultural consequences of Danny Dorling's and Sally Tomlinson's findings that, while a mythologised, homogenous 'north' was regularly blamed for the outcome of the 2016 referendum, southern English counties including Cornwall, Essex, and Hampshire accrued some of the highest percentages of votes to 'Leave' (Dorling and Tomlinson 2019). It was pervasive cultural narratives, and not political realities, which allowed the Leave vote to be 'readily attributed to the post-imperial nostalgia of an English working class, broadly located somewhere in 'the North' (Ashbridge 2023: 90). Building on previous arguments regarding the collapse of modern Britain developed by Perry Anderson (1992), Tom Nairn (1977), and more recently Alex Niven (2019), Ashbridge insists that a devolved and 'reprovincialised' understanding of English literature is long overdue. As regional inequalities have

been sharply underscored by recent constitutional instability in Britain, it is indeed incumbent on literary scholars and cultural critics to dispel pervasive myths of ‘a geographically imprecise North [...] a post-industrial monolith marked by working-class dispossession and alienation’ (10). By directly addressing these tired narratives, this well-conceived book asks us to consider what literary responses to devolution might tell us about *the future* of England after Britain. If Wiemann’s study lingers in the gutter, Ashbridge demands that we mind the gaps in reductive accounts of a north-south divide and think seriously about how literary texts can address ‘the cultural politics of devolution’ (156).

Ashbridge is principally concerned with contemporary novels which have been overlooked by literary scholars by considering, in four key chapters, the urban, rural, deindustrial, and ‘neo-primitive’ north. While the first two focus on political and social ‘stress fractures’ between 2001 and 2018, the second considers literary engagements with northern England after the watershed of the 2016 Brexit vote. Chapter one builds on previous scholarship addressing multicultural Englishness in Northern Black and Asian writing (by John McLeod, James Procter, Joe Jackson, and others), developing a ‘devolutionary approach’ to reading the Sheffield novels of Sunjeev Sahota. These are positioned in dialogue with Caryl Phillips’s representations of multicultural, Northern communities. Sarah Hall’s novels then offer an important literary counterpoint to these urban discussions, as chapter two marshals a view of post-imperial rural literature from England’s North West as a troubled reworking of pastoral writing.

The most striking readings of form and genre emerge in the book’s second half, where Ashbridge explores how British writers like Adam Thorpe in *Missing Fay* (2017) and Anthony Cartwright in *The Cut* (2017) rework the parameters of crime fiction in the aftermath of Brexit. These lead to a reading of Fiona Mozley’s *Elmet* (2017) and Sarah Moss’s *Ghost Wall* (2018) as what Ashbridge terms ‘neo-primitivist’ novels, with both depicting modern families who return to pre-capitalist lifestyles. Rather than seeing post-2016 northern England through the lens of nationalist nostalgia, Ashbridge’s two final chapters use Svetlana Boym’s influential distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgias. This result is a reading of genre-bending texts that search ‘for democratic alternatives to the present’ (94). The idea of neo-primitivism is starkly original, emphasising the correlations between *Elmet*’s depiction of a Yorkshire family’s hunter-gather existence and *Ghost Wall*’s reenactments of Iron Age rituals in 1990s Northumbria. Building on Boym, Ashbridge contends that these narratives reach towards but cannot wholly realise new forms of ‘localised democratic relations, social collectivity and ecological awareness’ (125). Ashbridge’s readings are especially attentive to the political geographies which overlay these texts, arguing that neither



allows a romanticised return to the land but instead searches, inconclusively, for ‘more conscious politics of place’ (136). In the end *Rewriting the North* is clear sighted enough to perceive the limits of its own devolutionary analyses, acknowledging that these can only offer tentative alternatives ‘to the unequal global present’ (136).

As a sensitive literary study of place, Englishness, and the legacies of empire, *Rewriting the North* speaks to other recent cultural studies of England’s localities as entangled with the global histories of imperialism. It contributes to a growing conversation extended by Vron Ware’s explorations of rural Hampshire in *Return of a Native* (2022), Dom Davies’s discussions of Stoke-on-Trent and uneven development in *The Broken Promise of Infrastructure* (2023), and Alex Niven’s return to Alton Towers as ‘the English Disneyworld’ and the site of national myth in *New Model Island* (2019: 24). Ashbridge too is drawn to sites such as the Midlands market town of Dudley, as described in Cartwright’s novel *The Cut*:

[people were] tired of being told you were no good, tired of being told to stop complaining, tired of being told what to eat, what to throw away, what to do and what not to do, what was right and wrong when you were always in the wrong. Tired of supermarket jobs and warehouse jobs and guarding shopping centres. (2017: 101)

Ashbridge is right to emphasise how political inertia underlines this powerful ‘revolt against the injustices of centralised power in Britain’ (114). Yet there is more to be said about the textual slippages in passages like the one above, in this case between a community who are *tired* of serving multinational conglomerates in neo-liberal ‘non-places’ (the warehouse, the car park) while feeling inextricably *tied* to their locality. *The Cut* suggests that Dudley requires opportunities to remake the town’s sense of place, rather than repeatedly ‘being told’ the same, disciplinary refrain. By delving deep into these literary protests against uneven development, *Rewriting the North* is a strident account of cultural production and inequality in Britain. It offers a clear example as to how political analysis, and a carefully theorised sense of place, can reinvigorate the study of contemporary English literature.

If there’s a criticism to be made of this much-needed intervention, it is that the book’s sweeping scope can result in the dismissal of texts and genres which it perceives as inhospitable to its devolutionary methods. For example, autobiographical accounts of Manchester’s celebrated rave scene – which often coalesce around the legendary dance floor of the Hacienda – are dismissed on the basis of one journalist’s admission that these are ‘a hallucination as much as history’ (Morley 2013: 555). *Rewriting the North* concludes that such (undoubtedly baggy) accounts are therefore ‘complicit in

[the] mythologisation' of the North' (14). Given that substance-fuelled hallucinatory revelations underpinned the forms of collective liberation propounded by the 1990s English rave scene, this reads as a harsh, potentially too hasty dismissal. A similar condemnation of recent fiction by Jessica Andrews, Eliza Clark, and Anna Glendenning is delivered on the grounds that these replicate the 'working class escape narrative' (12) from Northern England, rather than reflecting the continuing, rapacious demands of a culture industry centred largely in London. Despite Andrews's debut novel *Saltwater* (2019) being described in more generous terms during the monograph's conclusion, this latter point risks overlooking an emergent generation of female novelists who maintain strong artistic and familial connections to the North. Whether because of or despite these forceful claims, *Rewriting the North* sustains an impressive overarching structure to seriously consider literature's relationship with the future of English devolution. It remains sadly urgent to counter the false 'binary opposition between an uneducated working-class North and a socially progressive liberal Southern elite' (109) which pervades English political, cultural, and social life.

Like Wiemann's latter focus on the gaps and gutters within verse novels depicting Britain, Ashbridge's compelling arguments for deprovincializing our understanding of English literature make a generous and distinct contribution to contemporary literary studies. In our co-edited essay collection *British Culture After Empire*, Josh Doble, Liam J. Liburd and I borrow a phrase from Daljit Nagra to insist that narratives of local sites across these islands 'might allow us to move beyond the "myth kitty" of hoarded national stories' (2023: 14). In their distinct ways, Wiemann and Ashbridge extend this vital work, exploring both regions and texts that remain curiously marginalised in current literary studies. Their commitment to to the latter – literary form – is a shared focal point for both. These commendable monographs will undoubtedly pave the way for future, expansive studies of contemporary literary landscapes.

---



## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

---

## References

- Anderson, Perry. 1992. *English Questions*. London: Verso.
- Burkitt, Katherine. 2012. *Literary Form as Postcolonial Critique*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Cartwright, Anthony. 2017. *The Cut*. London: Peirene Press.
- Cawood Green, Michael. 1997. *Sinking: A Verse Novel*. London: Penguin.
- Chute, Hilary. 2016. *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Davies, Dominic. 2023. *The Broken Promise of Infrastructure*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. 2010. *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Doble, Josh, Liam J. Liburd and Emma Parker. 2023. *British Culture After Empire: Race, Decolonisation and Migration Since 1945*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Dorling, Danny and Sally Tomlinson. 2019. *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire*. London: Biteback Publishing.
- Morley, Paul. 2013. *The North (and almost everything in it)*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Nairn, Tom. 1977. *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism*. London: Atlantic Highlands.
- Niven, Alex. 2019. *New Model Island: How to Build a Radical Culture Beyond the Idea of England*. London: Repeater.
- Walcott, Derek. 1998. 'The Muse of History'. In: *What the Twilight Says*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 36–64.
- Ware, Vron. 2022. *Return of a Native*. London: Repeater.
- Wendt, Albert. 2009. *The Adventures of Vela*. Wellington: Huia Publishing.

