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Caitlin E. Stobie, *Abortion Ecologies in Southern African Fiction: Transforming Reproductive Agency* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 214 pp.

Recent critical turns in Medical Humanities, for instance, as reflected in Anne Whitehead and Angela Woods' introduction to the *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities* (2016) and Alan Bleahey's introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Medical Humanities* (2022), reinvigorate the seam of transformational intent which informs nuanced interrelations between healthcare and human experience. Bleahey, particularly, speaks of how literary discourse can be leveraged to make medical education 'democratic' and offer resistance strategies to dominant biomedical and medico-social narratives. Within the context of these burgeoning convergences, Caitlin E. Stobie's *Abortion Ecologies in Southern African Fiction: Transforming Reproductive Agency* offers a deft reading into the hitherto underexplored intersections between reproductive science and the politics around it.

Centered primarily on literary writings from Southern Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana, the author's arguments are routed à la the works of Wilma Stockenström, Zoë Wicomb, Yvonne Vera and Bessie Head. The spatio-temporal axes of Stobie's selection are of particular significance in understanding her overall argument: *Abortion Ecologies* chooses works that were either written or published within a milieu fraught with complex pursuits of liberation, decolonisation and anti-apartheid resistance (~1970s to early 2000s). Thus, her work draws extensively on historical processes that have impacted the sociolegal perception of abortion and initiates a discourse about the complexities of 'reproduction' in a heterosexist political paradigm. Additionally, Stobie juxtaposes her reading of works by indigenous African authors with those of white settlers to explore complex interstices between reproductive agency and colonial biopolitics in Southern Africa. Her postcolonial-ecocritical lens explores ways in which colonial regimes sought to control and regulate bodies (vegetal and human), reproductive processes and kinship ties through imperial policies and moral frameworks. Through such readings, Stobie integrates new materialist thought with recent approaches to subjective human experiences within medical humanities.

The structure of Stobie's narrative reveals the fractal-like, self-similar pattern in thematic interests. Bookended by an Introduction and Conclusion, the broad sections of textual analyses are titled 'Animals,' 'Plants,' 'Minerals,' and 'Humans'

revealing Stobie's inclusive posthumanist stance that encompasses in/organic matter. These titular signifiers become critical lenses through which the intricate network of life-forms, materiality and ethics is explored. The study assesses the diachronous processes that have influenced discursive thought *apropos* female reproductive agency. Stobie usefully forges an incisive connection between linguistic terminology and accessibility to 'safe' and 'legal' medical services with regard to pregnancy-terminations for women across the world. Her study explicates how metaphors have been playing a prominent role in building (and deconstructing) implicit coda around reproductive topics, especially abortion. Historically, direct references to terminations of pregnancy have been suppressed in euphemisms due to formidable notoriety surrounding the issue. Stobie addresses this linguistic 'concealment' by deconstructing intersubstance in the structural and thematic schema of the selected works.

For instance, Stobie's exploration of Stockenström's *Expedition to the Baobab Tree* as a non-conforming *plaasroman* highlights the slave trade's legacy of gestational violence and the impact of unequal power relations vis à vis race which lead to misogynistic legalities pertaining to reproductive agency. Of particular depth is her study of interspecies ecological analogies through which Stockenström thematizes wildlife within the vortices of racial divide. As reproduction becomes a tool of political appropriation in the apartheid clime, Stobie shows how 'abortion' assumes new meaning by transforming into a "desire not to perpetuate a system of inheritance that does not care for the work of female progenitors" (62). Stobie dissects Stockenström's deployment of animalistic noises and their juxtaposition with scatological and inanimate imagery to posit a posthumanist interconnectedness of all matter. The analysis of Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* joins the existing corpora on the author's work in deciphering identity-formation within the conflict of 'home' and 'exile.' But then, it adds more, and at times, deviates from the beaten critical path. For instance, Stobie devotes much time to analyze how the text's formation in itself is an extended abortive metaphor which is "autopoietic in its scope" (86). She examines the imagery used to emphasize the interconnected corporeality of vegetal life and the female body. Stobie builds interlinkages between the evolving subjectivity of Wicomb's protagonist and the formative schemata of the text itself through the paradigm of autopoiesis and explores the paradigm of non-reproductive parenthood through the protagonist Frieda's character, usefully unsettling the pervasive 'repronormative/antinatalist' and 'pro-choice/anti-abortion' binaries. Then, through Vera's critically acclaimed novel *Butterfly Burning*, Stobie sharpens the existing critique on the abortion scene in the story and re-reads the trope of tragedy through the episode of the protagonist Phephelaphi's self-immolation. In the context of postcolonial studies, Stobie's study of reproductive 'anxieties' in erstwhile colonies provides a useful methodological impetus for applying such analysis in regions with similar (colonial) histories especially when read *apropos* the notion of 'resistance.' Stobie's narrative is interested in unmuting the transactions between various in/organic matter: "human, animal, vegetal, elemental and textual" (111) while re-

reading the more pressing tragedies enfolded within Vera's novel. This is done through a trenchant stylistic deconstruction of the said and unsaid: metaphor, metonymy, silences and slippages. For example, Stobie reads Head's works along several interlooped indices: the biological imagery of "growth and separation" are deployed to see how the "sexist, racist and speciesist discourse [...] in southern Africa" (149) is disrupted. The focus is on the non-essentialist models of creativity and gestation (or the negation of it) that constitute a vital part of Head's thematic preoccupation. Through works such as *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswanan stories, When Rain Clouds Gather, Tales of Tenderness and Power, Maru and A Question of Power*, Stobie traces the ambivalences, connections as well as discords between pre-colonial tribal beliefs, colonial appropriation of reproductive laws and post-colonial ambiguities in politics and perceptions related to matters of abortion, miscarriages and gestation in general.

One of Stobie's most prominent contributions to Medical Humanities is her delineation of how literary texts can also become useful scaffolds in questioning current laws on reproductive decisions. *Abortion Ecologies* melds the 'literary aesthetic' and ground social realities with a pronounced transformational intent. Stobie also subverts the teleological model of perceiving nonhuman agency and the call for closer attention to its impact on human actions and events. The narrative's insights into the phenomenon of 'embodiment' are also thought-provoking especially when the deliberation is connected to (post) colonial predicaments of historically marginalized autochthonous peoples. Such frameworks can help to look at reproductive issues as fluid markers of empowerment and affirmation.

Stobie's work initiates several important dialogues along related-but-distinct axes of reproductive issues. The dynamics of gestation have been fascinatingly connected to the process of aesthetic/literary creation thereby forging new networks of analysis in the area. The vision of the work, albeit grounded in historical continuity, is futuristic and course-corrective, driven by a desire to elicit pragmatic responses to questions which affect epistemes around "life," its affirmation and negation. *Abortion Ecologies* will be a useful resource particularly for scholars foraying into the fields of (new) materialism(s), ecocriticism and ecofeminism, multispecies ethnography, postcolonial studies, posthumanist affect studies, (post)colonial African literatures, and legal studies in reproductive discourse.

## Works Cited

- Whitehead, Anne and Angela Woods. "Introduction." *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities*. Edinburgh University Press, 2016.
- Bleakey, Alan. "Introduction." *Routledge Handbook of Medical Humanities*. Routledge, 2022.