Laura Doyle. *Inter-imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance*. Duke University Press, 2020. 392 pp. $29.95.

Reminiscent, in its breadth and ambition, of such recent works as Lisa Lowe’s *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015) or Susan Stanford Friedman’s *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (2015), Laura Doyle’s long-anticipated *Inter-imperiality* proposes a programmatically expansive reconsideration of the relationship between empire and modernity as historical contexts for the study of literature. Despite being the product of many years of research, its vision of clashing and ever-unstable imperial formations—and the often-unexpected forms of resistance they provoke—remains, alas, timely.

Doyle moves her objects of study along three distinct (but, she argues, necessarily related) methodological axes: the political-philosophical; the long-term historical; and the feminist-intersectional. The first emphasizes the relationality rather than the sovereignty of political entities. Appealing to the value of genuinely dialectical thinking, Doyle is critical of what she sees as reductively economistic or realpolitik understandings of empires, which are often “driven, perhaps more profoundly, by a wish to manage and ‘conquer’ the volatile terrain of existential relationality itself” (4). Empires are not the self-managing subjects of history, any more than people are, but are internally divided by both their conquests and their own pasts as “prior systems and states endur[e] in sublated forms that chafe against the very transformations they’ve provoked” (251). Accordingly, Doyle’s *longue durée* approach insists on thinking about empire “before, during, and since the height of European hegemony” (15). Following on the pioneering work of such scholars as Kathleen Davis and Lila Abu-Lughod, she critiques the identification of Europe, empire, and modernity, arguing that “large-scale state projects and regimented labor practices that are often deemed European and ‘modern’ actually have a much longer history” (51). Even critiques of European
empire tend to give Europe too much credit, so to speak, “veil[ing] the fact
of Europe’s late entry into systematically networked worlds” and so implicitly
maintaining a medieval/modern binary that “ramifies into corollary divisions
between the contrasting epistemes of hierarchy and democracy, sacred and
secular, or static and dynamic culture” (36). The feminist-intersectional
aspects of Doyle’s analyses show how attention to race and gender reveal
more complex understandings of labor, for example, and therefore of the
economic stories told about empire.

Doyle emphasizes that these inter-imperial relations are still with
us not only in overt geopolitical rivalries, but in our inherited disciplines
and conditions of knowledge. Her study thus revisits, from oblique angles,
debates long central to post- and decolonial studies, with the “inter-” of her
longue-durée inter-imperiality emphasizing less before and after and more the
spectrum of possible relations: competition and borrowing, accommodation
and resistance. Much of this methodological framing builds on the work of
historians and theorists, so it is the readings of literary texts that develop the
implications of this complex framing in original ways. In part, then, Doyle
intervenes in debates about world literature, situating herself in proximity
to Pheng Cheah in her efforts “to rectify the problems of depoliticization in
the expanding subfield of world literature” (21). Like Cheah, she approaches
the topic of “world literature” in terms of “the historical, existential, and
political conditions under which literature exerts its worlding force” more
than as a problem of prizes, canons, or literary history (25). More specifi-
cally she asks, “How do works of literature, however local, arise from and
co-constitute the inter-imperially shaped field of relations?” (24; emphasis
added). Doyle thus views “inter-imperial positionality as both a condition
of aesthetic production and an object of literary representations,” pursuing
an approach to world literature that is “neither comparative, circulatory, nor
merely connective, but strongly dialectical” (25, 28).

The main text of the book is only about two hundred and fifty pages, but
packs in seven chapters in addition to a substantial “Theoretical Introduction”
and a short conclusion. Briefly identifying just the topics of these chapters
will give some sense of the scale and pace of the book. Following the opening
chapter on “Dialectics in the Longue Durée”—which provides historio-
graphic depth and context to the theoretical introduction—the subsequent
chapters move chronologically from the Middle Ages to the present, each
dealing with different inter-imperial regions.

The second chapter then initiates the book’s overall emphasis on lit-
erature, exploring the circulation and translation of One Thousand and One
Nights through a variety of inter-imperial contexts, including, ultimately,
early modern Western Europe. The following chapter rethinks orientalism not as something developed a few centuries ago by Western Europeans with overseas ambitions, but as a field of knowledge with a longer and more geographically expansive history in successive Eurasian empires, with a particular emphasis on Russia. Chapter four develops a dialectical reading of “the association between the Oriental and the Gothic modes” identified by Muhsin Jassam Ali, for example, to read an “anticipatory post/colonial orientation” in Gothic literature, most especially in Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) (136, 133). Despite its overt orientalism and anti-Irish caricatures, *Melmoth* “exposes both the structural logic of the inter-imperial order and the gendered betrayals of existential relationality inherent to this order,” and its “entangled narrative form also gestures toward alternative world relations” (139).

The final three chapters focus on literary texts from each half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first, respectively. For the modernist era, Doyle foregrounds the ambivalences of technological and mediatic infrastructures at the apex of European imperialism, which “fostered transhemispheric anticolonialist solidarity” even as they strived for near-global hegemony: “inter-imperially generated technologies made the effort to control time more possible, more dangerous, and more contested” (159, 158). Keeping in mind the *longue durée*, the chapter also tracks the ways in which modernism involved not simply breaks with the past, but “the geopolitical unfolding and refolding of ancient and modern poetics” (159). Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of this World*—so central to the postwar emergence of “magical realism”—features prominently in the following chapter. Doyle’s reading focuses, on the one hand, on the specifically Cuban contexts of Carpentier’s political consciousness—“a revolutionary one attuned to the archipelagic, inter-imperial, and . . . intersectional coordinates”—and, on the other, on the novel’s often disturbing but also complex sexual politics, which she reads as obliquely queer (208). The final chapter turns to contemporary literature, with special attention to Patricia Powell’s *The Pagoda* (1998), whose story of a Chinese woman passing as a man in order to work in Jamaica overtly matizes the relationships between gender, race, labor, and globalization—but seen through Doyle’s critical lens also raises questions about the historically deep origins of “neo”-colonialism.

Even this breathless summary only scratches the surface; it is difficult to imagine any reader who will not find in this challenging but compelling and urgent study both unfamiliar literary texts and new ideas. Some readers may find that the term “empire” refers to too heterogeneous a body of political formations—especially given the historical freight of the English-language
word—but this is a price worth paying for the conceptual possibilities opened up by such a radical rethinking of the relationship between empire and modernity.

Christopher Bush
Northwestern University

Christopher Bush is an associate professor of French and Comparative Literary Studies at Northwestern University.

At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War. By Monica Popescu. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. x + 258 pp. $26.95.

African literary history has been enriched by recent scholarship revisiting accounts of the field's development and relationship to conceptual categories such as modernism and realism. Simon Gikandi's 2012 essay, “Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History,” which reevaluates the appropriation of romance and realism by early African writers, is a case in point. The tendency to consider the 1950s as marking the beginning of an African literary tradition also has come under scrutiny by scholars offering a different story of African letters, with a much earlier origin. The result is a more complex, nuanced narrative of African literary history that remains open to contestation and revision. Monica Popescu's new book, At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War, is a significant addition to this growing corpus of revisionist scholarship on African literary history with reverberations that extend beyond the continent and its literature.

No matter how one periodizes African literature, Western colonialism often appears as the overdetermining factor. Popescu acknowledges the constitutive impact of Western colonialism while illuminating what is glossed over by the dominant script: namely, the role of the Cold War in shaping African letters and the ways in which African writers and their literature contributed to Cold War discourses. As she puts it, At Penpoint proposes “a look at African cultural production as simultaneously a gauge of, material trace of, and contributor to the formation of Cold War narratives, both taking from and giving form to this global discourse” (4). Popescu's persuasive argument for a Cold War analytic in understanding African literature between the 1960s and 1980s hinges on examining the institutional development of African writing through publishing support, funding for