
Cross/Cultures 170 provides readings in Post/Colonial Literatures and Cultures in English; however, the editors of Postcolonial Studies Across the Disciplines explain in their excellent introduction to the book that the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (ASNEL) originates in German-speaking countries. Notwithstanding that the cultural distinction is clearly framed – geopolitics do matter – the domain of postcolonial studies is understood to be a global and interdisciplinary field of inquiry.

The editors of ASNEL Papers 18 suggest that the postcolonial movement manifests ubiquitously within various academic disciplines and institutionalised departments and is often aligned with linguistics, literature and cultural studies – just another framing device in the vast range of critical approaches in literature, history and culture. However, there is an embedded caveat to study in the field. Scholarly engagement is often repressed or marginalised until Master’s specialisation and often endowed with a negative aura within establishments because of its challenging nature. Postcolonial studies are concerned with critical consciousness-raising in complex matters ‘of racism, colonialism, Orientalism and Eurocentrism while simultaneously engaging the mantra of race, nation, gender, class and sexuality’. Inevitably, in exploring the underbelly of colonialism – master/slave relationships, marginalisation, inclusions/exclusions, solidarity and social justice issues – postcolonial scholars are drawn towards deconstruction and revisionist discourses (including the criticism of entrenched Western-style models of knowledge production). And change – especially the transfer of power and privilege that goes with the devolution of master narratives – is often resisted by those authorities with a personal stake in maintaining the status quo. Postcolonial scholars however believe in the possibility of metamorphosis. Attitudes, intentions and life-systems may be moved in response to alterity – something completely strange/familiar in [an]other – and the need for communion. The suggestion here is that they work in a space where altruism and *realpolitik* must be calibrated in practical application and contemporary issues filtered through sensitive, open minds in proximity and dialogue with that irresistible other.

ASNEL Papers 18 is the product of the 22nd Annual conference held in June 2011, a collaborative venture, drawing in the main upon communities surrounding the Atlantic – the Americas, Africa, the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean and Europe – and for those researchers interested in comparative reflection in areas of specialised interest, despite the spacial distances between their homelands or milieu. This publication cogently reflects current nerve endings in academia; for instance, the editors observe that the dominant school in British cultural studies has tended to exclude literature in its preference for popular cultural forms after the sociological turn in the 1970s. The convenors of this conference see their project as providing an alternative which redresses past omission with the stress primarily although not exclusively on literary contexts. Given these drivers, the essays here are arranged according to regional, thematic and methodological considerations. There are four sections following an introduction by Jana Gohrisch and Ellen Grünkemeier which presents a clear, informative and persuasive overview of the whole venture.

---


Book reviews: *Postcolonial Studies Across the Disciplines* edited by Jana Gohrisch and Ellen Grünkemeier.
Christine Runnel.
Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.
‘Interdisciplinary Reflections’ contains six essays and focuses on neighbouring disciplines: history, textiles, art, linguistics, music and cultural studies. I am particularly fascinated by Johannes Ismaiel-Wendt’s analysis of popular music as a paradigm for recent cultural experiences of migration and academic scholarship in the contemporary context. This scholar pays tribute to the prominent cultural theorist and writer Stuart Hall. He calls on Hall’s expertise in popular culture and media studies and references his use of Reggae musical form to explain such terms as ‘diaspora’, ‘cultural identity’ and ‘imagined community’. His purpose is to question ‘how and to what extent popular music and postcolonial theories correspond to utopic understandings of culture’ (90) and to examine – cogently, I suggest – the motivations, reasonings and frameworks that couple postcolonial theory with popular music and praxis.

Ismaiel-Wendt postulates that music and music theory have always been critical to inspiring and shaping postcolonial studies, not merely by way of illustration but ‘as an epistemological system’ and the carrier in its own right of a worldview which informs habitual working practices. This is a grand claim. This scholar links pure music theory to an altruistic longing and search for an alternative poetics, one devoid of racist logic, coercion or cultural usurpation. In this intention, Ismaiel-Wendt is reaching for a utopic vision of migration – de-territorialisation without violence. He suggests that track studies correlate with the concept of ‘trek’ studies – movement across the landscape and takes up the notion of [re]mix to clarify how discrete patterns and traces of previous compositions negotiate new contact and adaptively respond to changes in the environment. Ismaiel-Wendt counsels the researcher to let go of history’s imbroglio and the polarised rhetoric of past confrontations and talks of the necessity to respond to present life-experience with an open mind. He suggests that fixed systems which smack of ‘nationalist, racist or heteronormous’ (104) discourses must be resisted. He is persuasive. But however passionate for cultural [ex]change Ismaiel-Wendt explains that this attitude is not always about rebellion and neither does it mean renunciation of cultural heritage. Echoes of the past are permitted, indeed necessary, in the process of recognition and meaning-making – the refrains give context. Nonetheless, track studies are about de-linking, a de-colonial epistemic shift towards alternatives which counter the hierarchical divisions of ‘First World’, ‘Second World’ and ‘Third World’. Music is recognised as but a small part of the whole picture and the methodological discipline of sonic de-linking ‘means disobeying the burdensome obligations of acoustic representation, liability, and belonging’ (102). Strategies and techniques of disruption are introduced for the purpose of turning the audience towards a new focus. They are given the opportunity to listen differently and to hear an alternative poetics. Ismaiel-Wendt also references the postcolonial guru Edward Said in order to naturalise the word ‘contrapuntal’ from music into the domain of postcolonial/cultural studies. Said imports the term – taken from his expertise in classical music – to express the dialogic relationship between independent and autonomous subjects, as they engage in successful communication with one another despite their differences. The connotations are both qualitative and procedural to explain the line and mode of entry of an ‘outsider’ into an already established conversation/convention – elevating the focus on expressive behaviour, relationships and the right to be heard. I suggest that Ismaiel-Wendt is convincing. ‘Track Studies: Popular Music and Postcolonial Analysis’ sustains the argument that track studies raise awareness and that the knowledge produced is not determined by master narratives or political bias.

‘Interdisciplinary Atlantic Studies’ – also six essays – presents particular issues of culture, race, class, family groupings and character in which analyses of literature bears the burden of extended metaphor. Works of imagination are given a privileged position in unravelling and signifying human

narratives – historically situated or fanciful and allegorical. Australia gets entrée in the section called ‘Crossovers: Historiography, Fiction, Criticism’ with an article by Dennis Mischke on ‘othering’ in auto-ethnographical fiction, along with two papers located in the Indian experience of colonial relationships. Matthias Galler writes about the aesthetics of contemporary Indian historiographical fiction and Cecile Sandten starts her work from the observation that ‘otherness’ has always been a central issue in postcolonial criticism; she considers the character of Othello not as a ‘foreigner’ but as an ‘untouchable’.

In academic practice I am beset by canonical issues of alterity and ethics of production in my specialist area, creative writing. I was therefore drawn to Mischke’s essay first. He explores the paradox of ‘self’ and ‘other’ when he draws on Stephen Muecke’s experience as a white anthropologist engaging with Indigenous Australians in his paper, ‘Othering Otherness: Stephen Muecke’s Fictocriticism and the Cosmopolitan Vision’. Fictocriticism is from my own experience considered to be a controversial hybrid strategy for research which challenges the strictures of meaning and knowledge production in Eurocentric academic disciplines. Mischke argues, however, that fictocriticism has a useful place in the struggle to avoid the inherently destructive tendencies of ‘mining the landscape’ and appropriating the other for our own ends. He suggests that a fictocritical approach contributes a cosmopolitan vision because it ‘endeavours to enact a communicative situation in which the alterity of the other is not overwritten but maintained’ (335).

I was disappointed neither by Mischke’s arguments in favour of open-ended, unbiased and rigorous self-questioning and the necessity for responsive intersubjective dialogue in situ, nor by his advocacy for the acceptance in academia of expressive individualism; nor yet by his celebration of the momentum generated by contact with [an]other which culminates in ‘a successful performative utterance’ (333) on contemporary issues – anything and everything permitted. The dynamic generated – which I joyfully espouse – is one of reactive creativity. However, Mischke concludes that the experience of alterity must be deliberately estranged and framed for rational judgement by what Michael Taussig and Walter Benjamin have described as a mimetic faculty, the capacity to perceive “un-sensual similarities” and to turn the “experience of the foreign” into an “estrangement of experience” itself” (335). One is distanced, out-of-body, out of harm’s way: learning is mediated. Mischke is aware of the dilemma of the all-knowing subject collapsing into the text as the narrative of engagement with the other takes shape. Nonetheless, the author makes it clear that Muecke’s bent is not the desire to be subsumed by another culture but in fact a realisation of the positive values assigned to alterity and the quality of the writer’s relationship with his subject – mutual respect. Mischke suggests the focus is on yearning for alternative non-combative human pairings in which winning and losing are not the operatives and whose creative impulse springs from an intense self-consciousness about the right way to live. His final observation is that ‘if one assumes – as I do – that cosmopolitanism is in fact a utopian and experimental attempt to understand otherness without destroying or appropriating it, then fictocriticism definitely offers postcolonial studies a strategy worth exploring’ (335).

The cover image of ASNEL Papers 18, ‘The Door of No Return: House of Slaves, Gorée Island, Senegal’ (© 2010 Ulrike Schmieder), gives an interesting clue to the origin of postcolonial studies in the recognition of master/slave relationships and the radical (awesome) movements towards self-determination that emerge from historical and geopolitical contexts. The plenary lecture of the 22nd Annual conference, given by Sabine Broeck, was about the denial of subjectivity to slaves and black people and also the denial of ‘voice’ to black scholars and feminists, and more specifically the role of race in the formation of modern Western societies, cultures and in the production of...
knowledge. The editors suggest that Broeck’s call ‘for both the decolonization of our own positions as scholars and the transnational decolonization of literary studies (and other disciplines)’ gave impetus to passionate discussion and a self-conscious critical bent among the academic scholars at the conference in regard to their research frameworks.²

I cannot do justice to all the fine articles and issues raised in this compendium. I can praise the intent and rigorous scholarship brought together through the project. The avowed object of the conference was to forge new horizontal links between researchers and to make progress in the production of knowledge by an underlying vision of inclusivity and diversification. The last section called ‘Postcolonial Studies in Research and Teaching’ brings into focus eight short statements from participants – on pedagogy, methodology and administration. These essays arise from the round table discussions and teachers’ workshops. They explore the pursuit of an applied postcolonial perspective both in research projects and through teaching commitment in universities and schools.

Broeck herself concentrates on the rub of disaffection and deconstruction. She broaches the (de)merits of working outside established frameworks and the (dis)advantages of the lack of embedded cultural knowledge in modern scholarship. She calls for ‘methodological and intellectual re-articulation of our work in the academy’ (355). However, the challenge is not so much in interdisciplinary cooperation over the obvious common denominators but in an urgency to understand deliberate disciplinary policies of ‘willful ignorance’ (Broeck, quoting Charles Mills) and to find ways of circumventing ‘a politico-ethically motivated trace’ (356) within academia that reinforces the modern forms of enslavement inherent in globalised incorporation, institutionalisation and empire-building to the detriment of new researchers in any field. Her discourse is on the side of the ‘outsider’ who struggles to survive adrift from the centre in scholarly isolation. This publication of conference proceedings (contained in ASNEL Papers 18) is therefore welcome; it brings news from abroad, provides grist-for-the-mill and affirmation for independent scholars and collates a rich resource for the postcolonial movement across the disciplines, now and into the future. But I wish I had been there then.

Christine Runnel

² The editors write that Sabine Broeck’s lecture is not included in the ASNEL Papers 18 because her central ideas will be presented in a forthcoming publication, No Slavery for the Subject: Slavery, Modernity and Gender. The editors also acknowledge the value to academia of an alternative way of knowing with the inclusion of creative writers in performative mode: ‘The authors Libor Mikeska and especially Bernadine Evaristo, who read from her verse novel Lara and her satirical novel Blonde Roots, added a note of reflective humour to our undertaking’ (xxiv).