

Check your metaphors: Review Essay

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Daria Tunca and Janet Wilson (eds), *Postcolonial Gateways and Walls: Under Construction Cross/Cultures 195*. (Leiden & Boston: Brill/ Rodopi, 2017).

It has been a source of wonder to me how the Netherlands has kept publishing sometimes quite arcane scholarly works when everywhere else has succumbed to market forces and multinational mergers. Despite (science-based) research measurements and other publishers' reluctance to accept collections of conference papers, Rodopi, for some decades now, has managed to put out edited collections of literary studies grouped under the 'Commonwealth' or 'postcolonial' label, the best known being the 'Cross/Cultures' series. Some of its volumes have been influential in shifting critical focus and introducing new writing to the world.

So it is good to see that, while the inevitable merger and 'rationalisation' process has finally hit the Dutch academic publishing scene, the 'Cross/Cultures' series continues in new guise. Now under Brill's management, and in a sharp new paper cover that is print on demand from an e-format, volume 195 selects eighteen papers from the 2011 conference of the European Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies. Authors are based in France, Germany, Holland, Italy, India, Australia, Britain, the US and South Africa. The places and writers they discuss relate to some of those countries but also to Turkey, Canada, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and New Zealand.

The editors preface their selection with comments on how the humanities operate by borrowing concepts from other disciplines and turning them into metaphors to think by. Walls can protect or imprison; gateways can allow escape or lead to destruction. Like some disciplinary labels, metaphors can spark new ideas or be so malleable that they spread into a swamp of 'disincarnated rhetorical acrobatics' (x). Postcolonial readings are presented as ideally 'performing critical inspection' of 'construction sites' building with metaphors such as walls and gateways (xi). New metaphors might be a means of allowing scholars to keep on doing the same old thing: talking amongst themselves about books most people have not read, and attributing to them an agency for social change that makes analysing them seem important and politically radical.

One of the virtues of work carried out under the 'Commonwealth Lit' label is that it has continued to focus on the literary text. Sure, it picks up the jargon of current theory and puts it to sometimes mechanical but usually productive use, and it does talk about social issues and politics, but it stays closer to writers and literature than some other modes of textual scholarship. This creates organisational problems that relate to the conceptual underpinnings of the field: how do you meaningfully hold together a body of writing that is – even and perhaps especially if it is

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only in English – a loose and often disjointed assemblage of organs and limbs? Well, you reach for a metaphor: preferably a concrete image that can then be played around with in all kinds of abstract ways – diversity given the appearance of unity: a strength in weakness, weakness in strength. This accords nicely with the project of postcolonial writing and reading: to expose power structures and undermine them; to find the inbuilt gaps and cracks through which things might escape or by which structures might be eroded, demolished. Walls and gateways.

Perhaps the best example of this is Margaret Daymond's chapter. She looks at letters *as letters*, providing a careful, clear reading of three. These are from women differently exiled because of South Africa's apartheid regime, all talking to other women a long way away about home and their feelings. The right amount of background information is provided, and the particular nature of 'dialogue' between writer and addressee teased out. The author closes with some modest but suggestive comments on how reading such texts carries challenges consistent with postcolonial theories and can usefully inform how we ethically read other writing in a postcolonial context.

The opposite of this kind of work tries too hard; it either presents worthy ideas in 'scholar-speak' so thick the reader feels bombarded with undercooked sticky date pudding, or it parades all the possibly relevant theories of text and culture to the point where they prevent clear thinking about what the texts being discussed do or can do. I agree that postcolonial studies has the potential to turn the neo-imperialism of World Literature as posited by its major proponents into something more radically planetary, but an argument for escaping the walls of Eurocentrism needs to be self-critical about using Goethe and Marx as gateways, and I'm not at all sure that David Damrosch has much in common with Frantz Fanon. Nor will any amount of theory-citing convince me that women disguising themselves as 'crones' are escaping or subverting patriarchal discourse: the crone as witchy wise woman is itself a gender stereotype and whatever freedom its marginal social placement confers happens partly because the crone is part of a conventional gender economy: no longer providing sexual or reproductive benefits, she is devalued. Her position certainly escapes some of the pressures on young women but it is also abject rather than revolutionary. Similarly a theoretical framework pointing at liberatory textual moves should not blind a reader to the fact that Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices* exploits as much as questions 'Orientalist' tropes, both of the 'mystic East' and of the spiritual wisdom of Native Americans.

The other trap for the postcolonial scholar is reading from a theorised position of political correctness that results not just in analysing the discursive strengths and limits of a work, but in sounding judgemental that the work is not as thoroughly radical as its reader. Tim Winton, writing about the largely male and almost exclusively white surfing community in Australian country towns, just cannot be deconstructing all gender roles, race relations, and ethnic differences. It is enough in one novel (*Breath*) that he tease out a few complexities in the sport / lifestyle as intuited by some largely inarticulate young people in an otherwise spiritually bankrupt society. It is certainly worth putting that in social context and pointing out an implied conservative attitude to masculinity that favours community service over hedonism. Noting a consistent interest in absent mother-figures is also a productive critical intervention. That's

enough, perhaps with some brief indication of how or whether Winton's other work pushes beyond the 'walls' of this text.

Most of the above is derived from the final section of the collection, which is perhaps an example of how the conference metaphor gets stretched to accommodate as much as it can. Gender is the wall or gateway here, and the section opens with comparison of Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. Europe is the wall and gateway for Africans fleeing violence and poverty, both books showing up the diversity of experience and the realities behind theories and images of migration and 'the refugee'. Contemporary migration is an echo of the Middle Passage, but with major differences, and the experiences of men and women diverge markedly. Both books break up narrative sequencing to reflect lives in which no continuity can be expected between one day and the next. The chapter concludes that 'The only glimmer of hope to break through in Phillips's dark narrative is its potential effect on the reader' (265), while Unigwe's oppressed women band together to provide a more positive ending. We might wonder whether that has the reverse effect on the reader of allowing escape from social concern.

The first section relates to the originating conference venue: Istanbul. Atatürk's modernisation of his nation symbolised in laws against old forms of dress provides a basis for looking at Fanon's writing on the veil and contemporary oppositions to the various modes of female muslim attire summed up as the 'burqa'. The essay shows how every attempt to construct a legislative 'wall' results in unpredictable 'gateways' until specifically targeted discriminations turn into a general suspicion of human identity: 'the mask is the inescapable condition of identity' (19) and we all become targets of surveillance.

Comparison of Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* and the work of Salman Rushdie (particularly *The Satanic Verses*) shows clear similarities between depictions of diasporic experience (doubles, hybridity, the dangerous power of literature, gendering the city as female and its conquest as a masculine takeover) and suggests the viability of using postcolonial theory to read Turkish literature. Rushdie is seen as ultimately pessimistic, while Shafak is more optimistic about Istanbul's capacity to hold past and present together.

In 'The Bosphorus Syndrome' we get a panoramic history of 'the puzzling interface' between West and East and Orientalist dualities of 'millennial splendour and gothic twilight' (41). European artists, travellers and writers are cited as backing up a 'sentimentally submissive' quality in contemporary Turkish authors expressed by Orhan Pamuk as 'hüzün': 'a kind of profound cultural sensitivity verging on schizophrenia and steeped in melancholy meditation' (46).

For some reason, Amitav Ghosh is the most cited author in this collection, and 'Geography Fabulous' takes a late essay by Conrad as a basis for assessing Ghosh's denial of 'writing back' to someone who otherwise seems to have clearly been an influence. The essay argues that Ghosh imbibed Conrad's investing of geography with romance, and attributes his favouring of Melville over Conrad to his being interviewed while living in the US and thinking about the Gulf War and oil in relation to Britain's earlier exploitation of the opium trade.

‘The concomitant spaces of territory and writing’ begins with Africa-inspired plays performed in Toronto and ranges across Derek Walcott, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Amit Chaudhuri, Europe’s modernists, Synge, Tagore, Beckett and Janet Frame. All this to argue that the English language was widely adopted not so much as a colonial imposition as a ‘gateway’ offering expressive flexibility and a lever for freeing up the rigid literary codes of vernacular writing. (Nirad Chaudhuri argued this years ago for Bengali, and, like this chapter neglected to mention that the hybrid flexibility of English was also posited by imperialists as part of the assimilative ‘genius’ of their rule.)

Section Two (‘Under Construction: Nations and Cultures’) begins with ‘Towards an Australian Philosophy’, an attempt to show Murray Bail’s *The Pages* as reworking the Enlightenment project to establish linearity, realism and rationalism as more worthwhile than postcolonial critiques would suggest. I have to confess that I gave up on *The Pages* and this reading does not incline me to try again, though it gives close attention to the text and uses Heidegger as support for the narrative’s presentation of philosophy not as a linear progression towards truth, but as ‘a complex fragmented pattern of thoughts’ that can be read in any order and might ‘re-map bonds between Australian space and thought.’ (98).

A livelier chapter considers the idea of nation in relation to Africa and its diaspora. ‘Image-i-nation’ opposes Renan’s concept of cultural and racial unity to a more complex national belonging that may be multilingual, multi-ethnic, poly-religious. It tracks the history of Benin / Dahomey to reject the idea that hybrid constructions of identity did not just begin at the other end of the Middle Passage, but were already under construction in West Africa. Later Black intellectuals tended to romanticise a unified national heritage somewhere in Africa, while all around them the idea of nation was being reinterpreted (Brathwaite’s ‘nation language’ and the redefinition of nation in Brazil into ethnic communities). Transformations within Vodun and debates around the use of colonial language or creoles (with differences between the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean) are considered within an argument for regional creation of entirely new concepts of ‘nation’.

‘Refugees and Three Short Stories from Sri Lanka’ points out the many kinds of dispossession in the history of civil conflict of that island. It notes, too, that no South Asian country has signed refugee conventions so that resettlement devolves to local states and lacks consistency. Neil Fernandopulle’s ‘Dear Vichy’, Jean Arasanayagam’s ‘The Journey’ and S. Panneerselvam’s ‘My Motherland’ show the difficulties of internal and overseas displaced peoples, and unsettled and unsettling exclusions of nationalist politics.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Sea of Poppies* is contrasted with Barlen Pyamootoo’s *Bénarès*, the former a positive view of poor and persecuted Indians anticipating a better future in Mauritius, and the latter, written in Mauritius about some modern-day villagers taking a couple of women from the capital back home, portraying a bleak existentialism: ‘If Ghosh’s protagonists cannot foresee their future, Pyamootoo’s are even less capable of retrieving their past’ (145). Ghosh’s journeys are spatial, whereas Pyamootoo’s characters try to recall things that will give their home significance. The juxtaposition of a local and an internationally famous book is productive

and allows comment on the expectations of postcolonial / global readers. (Pyamootoo's book suggests further comparison with Subramani's stories from Fiji.)

'Postcolonial Literature in the Time of World Literature' has been mentioned already. Its 'wide-angle' discussion narrows briefly around Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration*, Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* and Shrilal Shukla's *Raag Darbari*.

Section Three looks at borders. '*Die Mauer* is no joke!' compares depictions of the Berlin Wall by New Zealand writers Cilla McQueen and Kapka Kassabova. McQueen was in Berlin in 1988 to learn German, and published poems as *Berlin Diary* in 1990. A friend of Maori Poet Hone Tuwhare, who had also written about time in Germany, McQueen reads The Wall partly as a metaphor for the bicultural society of her homeland, its solidity containing hints of its immanent collapse. Kassabova migrated to New Zealand from Bulgaria after biculturalism had morphed into something more complex. Her visit to Berlin resulted in *Geography for the Lost* (2007) and *Street Without a Name* (2008), and relates to her memories of the Cold War from the Eastern Bloc perspective in which the Wall was both prison and comfort, its loss an excision of her past. The chapter relies on close reading of poems and some recourse to ideas from urban planning.

South African Ivan Vladislavic writes about walls around property, but (in line with Sarah Nuttall's discerning a new 'ethic of hospitality' in South African writing) he envisages some walls not as exclusionary protectors of isolated privilege, but as creative constructions witnessing to the past and to collective desires. The chapter is structured by Heidegger's binary *Mitsein* and *Dasein* and includes comparison with some work by Gordimer and comment on supposedly 'Ndebele' artwork on Johannesburg walls.

Carol Shields' novel *Larry's Party* is read against Northrop Frye's depiction of Canadian nature as an obstacle occasioning a 'garrison mentality'. 'Enclosed: Nature' riffs on Shields' central motif of the maze, it being a wall but also a gateway, nature but also culture. With reference to ecocritical ideas, the chapter tracks old texts that read the maze as life's journey (noting Shield's penchant for a 'life writing' narrative mode), and examines the novel, showing some of Larry's strengths and limitations as a user of and blurrer of boundaries. Garden writing is also often journal-like and records a journey towards some ideal. Shields can be read against the pioneering 'garden' writing of Susannah Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill and the art of Emily Carr, and creativity ultimately comes up against the world beyond language that may express itself through nature. The maze / garden as 'processed wilderness' (234) leads to 'the discovery that human nature is part of the uncontrollable Otherness' (236), not a separate entity walled off by prairies and mountains.

'An Ethics of Mourning' returns us to Amitav Ghosh and *The Shadow Lines*. Noting the protagonist narrator's quest to remember properly, the chapter argues that 'the novel maintains a tension between the refusal to forget, on the one hand, and imaginative, fictional productions of loss, on the other' (241). Objective maps are contrasted to subjective memory in which desire informs 'truth' and the narrator clings to the past as present in traumatised melancholy. Photographs serve as 'a prosthetic mnemonic tool' reinforcing fixation in selective recall.

Repeated rehearsal of the past by the narrator ends in an act of imagination that ‘functions as a trace’ and ‘a creative product that fills the void of his loss’ (250).

One thing that stands out in this book is the absence of any papers on indigenous writing. Here we can perhaps see the exclusionary nature of the governing metaphors: walls and gateways have little relevance to nomadic cultures, for example, though protest writing about being confined to residential schools and prisons and white homes could have been examined. Possibly such work was seen as well documented already, though Kim Scott’s actual deconstruction of walls in *Benang* seems like a topic too apt to have been neglected.

Postcolonial studies is itself a structure and one which many scholars have declared uncomfortably restricting. As globalisation and cross-disciplinary studies have gained momentum, the old nation-centred, discipline-based work has spread out into micro- and transnational studies and into indigenous, gender, cultural and animal studies, and started to inform work in anthropology, visual arts, archaeology, geography and so on. As the editors of this volume properly signal in their subtitle, the project has always been a process: power shifts ground and form, so speaking truth to it must also change: the postcolonial is a site forever under construction. Claims of its disappearance are either wishful thinking or overly pessimistic, depending on your politics.

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