

***Embracing the Other: Addressing Xenophobia in the New Literatures in English* (ASNEL Papers 11), ed. Dunja M. Mohr (Rodopi, 2008)**

ASNEL stands for the Association for the Study of New Literatures in English, the leading academic association for Anglophone postcolonial and transcultural literary and cultural studies in German speaking countries. Papers 11, *Embracing the Other: Addressing Xenophobia in the New Literatures in English* is in the series Cross/Cultures and takes its title from the fourteenth ASNEL conference in 2002.

These days it is not plausible to locate culture or literature exclusively in the context of nations or ethnicity. Edwin Thumboo says that the English-speaking world is multi rather than monolingual: 'The metropolitan centre cannot hold' because the canon is now 'loaded with our texts' (12). Now we have 'the family of World Englishes' (12). Because our task is to relate to each other we must ask: *What am I?/ What are you?* Only in understanding difference is knowledge produced. Thumboo writes: 'we should be our neighbour's keepers but only after we have learned what is precious to him or her' (36).

Mala Pandurang opens her essay on Indian emigration, *How Brave Is Our New World?*, with the observation that the responses of academicians 'are inevitably bound up with location, are paradigm laden, and are far from neutral' (63). At the conference the self-reflexive call was 'for more pluralistic paradigms while investigating narratives of marginalized and minority groups' (63). *Embracing the Other* is a political statement – active intent – of twenty-two essays from the margins and a definitive introduction. How sensitive are we, as a cluster, to minorities? Each paper delves into the nuances of embrace and the significance of contact.

The editor, Dunja M. Mohr, speaks about the embrace as 'an act of power potentially perpetuating the system of binary logic, of us/them, Self/Other, inclusion/exclusion' (x). The Other is all that is not Self, all that is strange. Xenophobia is 'fear of strangers'. Xenophilia is fascination with strangers. Mohr's chosen text plumbs the depths of a Self/Other dual in the disturbing short story 'Draupadi' (1978) by Bengali author Mahasveta Devi, taken from an English translation by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1981), about the capture and breaking of a woman renegade. Cruel wisdom: there is no counter to drastic abuse except a refusal to conceal or erase the marks of engagement – stand naked and let the body speak. Mohr writes about the difficulties of translating the cultural nuances into English.

Every essay is composed of contextualising theory and exemplary fiction. Reading is easy. The sensitive arrangement of texts is an obvious instructional journey. We must be moved from the Self-centre to include the Other. How?

Examine the cover art from a paper collage by Gordon Collier. Apt title: 'Choose One: An Embrace of Riches.' Six surreal groupings – arms and torsos, in a variety of colours and embrace – provide a visual invitation to compare and contrast the physical and emotional tension in each coupling. Cool tones evoke a subtext of a space between worlds, of shadowlands/shadowtexts, of things visible but as yet unnamed. We are led into the maze.

Susan N. Kigali lays bare alienation and longing to belong – no other mediator but her poetic voice:

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*I wish to be different and free
To laugh, be counted and see
What wealth diverse feathers bring
To be looped together as one wing. (3)*

She speaks her memories of the feverish struggle for freedom, the painful dislocation, the numbing fragmentation, the emptiness of loss:

*I have no claim to land
Geographically fixed
In
blood and delirium.*

‘Stories Retold’ brings with it the realisation that a life lived in a violent struggle to merely survive has no meaning except as a story retold. She calls out:

*And my sister,
Our life will stop meaning
What it has meant to us
Who have fought for sanity
Who have combed for roots
To charm hunger (7)*

Embracing the Other is organised into sections: Poetry; Theory, Writing History, and Textuality; Migrant and Border Narratives; Transitional States; Negotiating Identity and Alterity; Diaspora and Orientalism.

Judith Dell Panny explores xenophobia in terms of intertextuality and New Zealand/Maori historiography. Russell West-Pavlov speaks about xenophobia as internalized inferiority and the role of the education system to critically intervene. He says: ‘the practice of reading is deeply implicated in the transmission and “reproduction” of cultural values and social relations’ (52). And he talks about the need for Caribbean-British fiction to contribute to anti-racist elements.

Vera Alexander challenges Homi Bhabha’s spin on migrant culture as an agent of innovation, translation and mediation. Her protagonist is caught – piggy-in-the-middle – between cultures, reaping no advantage from migration either way. Danilo Victorino Manarpaac’s Filipino men find pain and disillusionment in emigration to the US. However, Dipli Saikia shows us the vitality of a border culture in the Burghers of Sri Lanka. English is their first language and their culture a mix of colonial inheritances which sets them apart from Tamil-Sinhalese domination; Carl Muller’s von Bloss lids-off family saga celebrates with humour and subverts with irony. Then the analysis shifts from social realism to magical realism and the fantastic mode as Virginia Richter’s paper examines the contested term ‘human’ in binary combination with the privileged border figure of ‘ape’.

The ‘negative embrace’ of the Other – issues of race and racism – is explored in gloomy visions of Contemporary Canadian and South African Fiction. But Natividad Martínez Marín reads the work of Nadine Gordimer, to show how the old

dichotomy is reformulated so that hard-line attitudes are moderated for a more progressive, inclusive model of Black/White relations.

Mary E. Modupe Kolawole deals with gender issues in Nigerian Women's short stories; women must speak back to both Western culture and men with a resistance strategy that creates a strong and positive alterity. Jörg Heinke explores two characters that resist *being (em)braced*: Peter Carey's Jack Maggs; David Malouf's Johnno. The discourse is about inclusion and exclusion and what marks the renegades as Other, and the control of deviance through the body.

Sandhya Patel addresses the 'Difficulty of Being: Reading and Speaking in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Xenophobia is explored through linguaracisms. The recalcitrant Other within is the coloniser's language. But at the other pole, Laurenz Volkmann celebrates Caribbean performance poetry in Great Britain and the way creole and dub becomes esteemed popular culture. Double consciousness negotiates local issues while at the same time taking part in larger national and societal conversations. The struggle is for equality in an interstitial space.

And so it goes on, neat segues.

David S. La Breche's contribution is from an Australian perspective: the myths and stereotypes that arise out of historical circumstances; the Orientalist attitudes of Australians to Asia and Asians; the rewriting of this relationship.

Sissy Helff's theme is sexual emancipation in Queer West Indian Diasporic Fiction, the claim that exoticism operates through the poles of familiarity and strangeness and becomes 'a control mechanism of transcultural translation' (281). *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1990) ultimately opens a 'Third Space', the Alms House, and moves outside the colonial/postcolonial mediating process in the search for new relationships.

The final section focuses on Canadian and South African Theatre. Ginny Ratsoy explains Canadian docudrama through a study of persecuted minority cultures. Henning Schäfer considers collaborative process and the politics of authenticity in the arsenal of the First Nations struggle for self-determination. And he asks: 'what does critical responsibility towards minorities mean?' (308). His answer is respect. Haïke Frank explains Waldenfels' Theory of Other and postulates an embrace that could overcome hatred.

ASNEL Papers 12, *Transcultural English Studies: Theories, Fictions, Realities* – also published in 2008 – focuses on the challenges that now move centre stage because of the concept of transculturalism. Next year's 21st conference aims to explore contested communities – actual and imagined – in postcolonial contexts. *Embracing the Other* reaches the Antipodes after seven years in the post but is no less valuable to a scholar in the field, for all that.

Christine Runnel