

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Special Feature: Literary Transculturations Letter from the Guest Editor

Welcome to the special 'Literary Transculturations' feature of Transnational Literature!

Fernando Ortiz's coinage of the term transculturation in the 1940s marked an important shift in how the mixing of cultures might be viewed and discussed. Reacting against the theories of hegemony and acculturation, both of which predicate a dominant culture that subsumes other, less powerful cultures, Ortiz's concept of transculturation emphasises less tidy, more unsettled cross-cultural encounters. According to Mark Millington, 'The sense is that what is produced by transculturation or hybridization does not fit within neat binaries, that it straddles, mixes and disrupts.'¹

While not bound to any particular historical period, transculturation is of particular relevance to the types and themes of literature that have emerged in the past twenty years: literature that can no longer be conceived of as simply postcolonial. In a strong move away from the binary, literary transculturations point to enactments of multiple sites of culture, to heterogeneity and heterochronicity.

The articles collected in this issue originated in the inaugural conference of the Nordic Network for Literary Transculturation Studies (NNLTS),² 'Post/Colonial and Transcultural: Contending Modernities, Presaging Globalisation', held in Riga, Latvia in September of 2010. A collaboration between researchers in Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, the NNLTS explores the theoretical and methodological challenges and possibilities that transculturation brings to the study of English literature. At the conference in Riga presenters sought to both interrogate and lay a foundation for an examination of the transcultural as it relates to other terms of force in literary and cultural studies, namely 'colonial', 'postcolonial', 'globalisation' and 'modernity'.

The first two articles, by Anne Holden Rønning and John McLeod, tackle the productiveness of the term 'transculturation' head-on and are useful in providing a set of critical tools and vocabularies for a discussion of the transcultural. In pointing specifically to Australian settler literature, Holden Rønning posits that the traditional Western conventions for reading a cultural history of the present are too narrow. In a similar interrogation of the viability of our current methodologies for interpreting our contemporary globalised world, McLeod recounts his personal experiences with the incommensurability of cultures on a recent trip to Melanesia and concludes that transculturation offers us the option of being listeners of silence.

The subsequent articles in this special feature may be said to focus more strongly on the application of the critical tools and vocabularies offered by

¹ Mark Millington, 'Transculturation: Contrapuntal Notes to Critical Orthodoxy', *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 26.2 (2007) 257.

² The NNLTS is administered from the Institute for Foreign Languages at the University of Bergen, Norway, and funded through 2012 by Nordforsk, an organisation under the Nordic Council of Ministers that promotes Nordic research cooperation. For more information on the network members, upcoming events, and projects, please visit the network's website at: <https://www.uib.no/rg/nnlts>.

transculturation. Joel Kuortti's reading of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* argues that the transcultural provides a more nuanced reading of colonial history, but is never solely confined to the colonial/postcolonial dichotomy, as the 'Islamic' sections of Rushdie's book reveal. Ulla Rahbek's analysis of 'Feast' also points to untenable binaries (East/West, global/local, vampire/human, old/new), revealing the more complex layers of what is only superficially a neo-colonial story.

Anne Sophie Haahr Refskou's application of Peter Brook's transcultural aesthetics demonstrates how a canonical drama that fails to resonate with contemporary audiences might be removed from its historical and national context and given new life.

The article by Jena Habegger-Conti reveals the underlying Enlightenment ideology behind two projects (one colonial, one postcolonial) aimed at publishing an 'original' and authoritative edition of the *Thousand and One Nights*, projects that deny and debase the transcultural history of the story collection.

Erik Falk discusses Zimbabwean (Rhodesian) author Charles Mungoshi's adoption of the European form of literary modernism to simultaneously react against it in his depiction of local social spaces. Falk employs transculturation to frame his discussion of 'modernity' and 'tradition', which contradict and overlap in the works of Mungoshi.

Several of the conference participants focus on transcultural identities in their articles. Kamal Sbirri queries Said's claim that refugees are without a definite identity and 'tellable history' and applies Deleuze and Guattari's theory of deterritorialisation as a more appropriate way to understand the notions of home and belonging in refugee poetry. In an analysis of literature written by Lithuanian emigrants to Canada, Milda Danyte assesses the extent to which the racist rhetoric of the Anglo majority, geared towards constructing a Canadian identity, is reflected in the immigrants' own view of themselves as more animal than human. Also writing on Canadian literature, Rūta Šlapkauskaitė analyses the complex nature of transcultural identity in the novel *Elle*, in which a colonising exhibition to Canada leaves the narrator marooned on an island with Inuit inhabitants, turning the tables on ideas of alterity.

As guest editor for this issue I would first like to thank our>NNLTS co-ordinator, Professor Lene Johannessen (University of Bergen) and Professor Tabish Khair (University of Aarhus) for arranging the conference in Riga. Many thanks are also extended to our contributors for their hard work in revising and in remarkably meeting every deadline, and to our other network members for their insightful comments on papers presented at the conference and during the revision process. My deep gratitude is also given to our peer reviewers from across the globe who so willingly gave their time to provide our authors with immensely helpful advice. In addition, the>NNLTS would like to thank the editorial board of *Transnational Literature* for accepting our proposal to produce a special 'Transculturations' feature. We are delighted to see these articles published so soon after our conference. Finally, I would like to express a special and heartfelt 'thank you' to Gillian Dooley for her support throughout the past year, and for her careful and perceptive work as an editor.

Jena Habegger-Conti