

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature*, edited by Irene Gilsenan Nordin, Julie Hansen and Carmen Zamorano Llena (Rodopi, 2013)**

In a recent issue of the *London Review of Books* (20 February 2014) James Wood reflects upon the burgeoning forms of ‘secular homelessness’ or ‘varieties of not-belonging’ in contemporary world literature. This writing, made possible by the fluid and often voluntary movement of peoples from one country to another, sometimes overlaps with and sometimes diverges from the older and more established categories of émigré, multicultural or postcolonial writing. Wood comments that the international movement of peoples in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has exceeded old paradigms of analysis ‘because emigration itself has become more complex, amorphous and widespread’ (6).

In similar fashion, the editors of the collection *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature* assert the need to find new ways to address this transcultural phenomenon. Throughout the twelve essays, the term ‘transcultural’ is made to wear the cloth of many nations, grafted through many border crossings. The collection arose out of discussions within a research group of academics teaching at Dalarna University and residing in Sweden who themselves come from varied backgrounds (Swedish, Algerian/French, Spanish, German, Russian, Taiwanese and North American). The editors define ‘transculturality’ somewhat broadly as ‘the formation of multifaceted, fluid identities resulting from diverse cultural encounters’ (ix). They aim to reconceptualize various modes of transculturality in literature, exploring texts that emerge within a variety of different western and non-western global locations. Although the endeavour is welcome, the essays here seem hampered by the critics’ choice of authors, texts and critical tools of analysis.

The twelve essays in the collection are presented into four general sections, organized to engage conceptually with issues of migration, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism and translingualism. The first section, ‘A New Kind of Migration’, considers works by three writers who explore migrant processes of uprooting, resettling and assimilating into new societies. These include naturalized American Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*, Russian-American émigré Lara Vapnyar’s *Memoirs of a Muse* and short stories, and British writer Chris Cleave’s *The Other Hand*. In each essay critics adopt familiar approaches, largely indebted to 1990s postcolonial theory, to address their texts. The second section attempts to redefine ‘Cosmopolitanism’ in the light of changes to global politics including: everyday fears brought about by the terrorism of 9/11, climate change, and unpredictable economic forces. Literature addressed includes British migrant writer Monica Ali’s novel *In the Kitchen*, Robert Olin Butler’s Pulitzer prize-winning short story cycle *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, and examples from contemporary German literature. Critics variously invoke the work of Appiah, Levinas, Beck and others to tease out the implications of the death of national literatures, refugee identity, and the global exchange of cultures in specific locations. In the third section, on multiculturalism, essays provide an overview of debates that challenge assimilationist perspectives in Canada with reference to the novels of Michael Ondaatje and Neil Bissoondath, take up black American identity with reference to Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* and Percival Everett’s *Erasure*, and expose the inherent racism within the patriotic myth of American tolerance and unity in John Updike’s *Terrorist*.

The fourth, and perhaps most interesting, section of the collection turns to a consideration of ‘translingual texts’, that is texts written by authors in more than one language, or in a language other than their ‘mother tongue’. A chapter by Stefan Helgesson features two French novels by Algerian

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writer Assia Djebar, and teases out the ways the author reaches beyond bilingual practice to grapple with issues of female identity, Islam and postcolonial experience, linguistically graphing her fractured subjectivity into the text. Another extends translingual considerations to several Francophone writers from the Magreb. In the final essay, J.B. Rollins takes up the multilingual, multimodal stylistics of Taiwanese poet Hsia Yu in her poetry anthology *Pink Noise*, which defies ‘translation’ in its use of fragments of French and English poems, translated into Chinese by a web-based artificial intelligence program and delivered on transparent plastic pages which allow the three ‘languages’ to play off each other. Rollins considers Hsia Yu’s extreme linguistic inventions while also introducing the nuanced perspectives of Lydia Liu and Ruth Speck on ‘translingualism’, coupled with Bakhtin’s model of ‘interference’.

The collection points to significant new directions in literature with an expanded sense of global possibilities, given the movement of peoples and the impact of economic and political forces of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. With few exceptions, however, most of the essays could have been written ten, if not twenty, years ago. One is left wondering if it might have been possible for authors to take fuller advantage of the literature if different texts had been chosen and/or if those texts had been subjected to new paradigms for reading and analysis. O’Neill’s *Netherland* (as a transcultural text by a transcultural author) is a rare exception in this regard, but one not fully realized in the critical approach offered in the anthology. Carmen Llena fashions the text as a ‘post 9/11 American narrative of identity’, modelled on *The Great Gatsby*. Her essay juxtaposes the protagonists Hans van den Broek, a Dutch oil-futures analyst residing in New York with his family just after the 9/11 attack, who narrates the story, and his friend Chuck Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian migrant with south Indian origins, who seeks to refashion himself and redefine America through the game of cricket. But Llena’s critique stalls on Chuck and his search for a new identity not only for himself but also for the United States which, he proposes, might be accomplished if cricket were to become the national sport. The focus on the protagonists’ search for identity and how their two intertwined stories ‘propound a new narrative of American national identity in the post 9/11 context’ (12) limits the capacity to recognize more significant transcultural elements in the novel.

When *Netherland* first appeared in 2008, James Wood reviewed it in *The New Yorker* (26 May 2008). With his antennae attuned to the new elements in both the text and the author’s background and experience, Wood judged it to be ‘an extremely subtle novel’ that juxtaposes the different origins and expectations of the two central characters. His review, acknowledged but not cited in Llena’s essay, teases out the author’s unique transculturality, one that might be seen to influence his interests, curiosities and writing style. It was Wood who first noticed the echoing’s of *Gatsby* in *Netherland*, but he contends that both *The Great Gatsby* and *A House for Mr Biswas* loom large as interlocutors in a powerful text imbricated of myth, desire, history, politics and power. In distinction to Llena, he contends that *Netherland* is a *post-nationalist* novel (emphasis mine) that offers ‘fresh permutations on the national story America tells itself’. In his review, Wood alerts the reader to the novel’s unique transcultural elements as he probes the author’s background and the text, forged out of migratory journeys and embedded within colonial, imperial and postcolonial histories. In doing so, he manages to exceed existing critical paradigms. This was the intention of the editors of *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature*. Would that more authors in this anthology had followed a similar lead.

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