
Postcolonial Studies in the Twenty-first Century: A Book Review Article of Literature for Our Times & Reading Transcultural Cities

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Alejandra MORENO ÁLVAREZ**Postcolonial Studies in the Twenty-first Century:
A Book Review Article of *Literature for Our Times & Reading Transcultural Cities***

Some scholars suggest that postcolonial studies is being eclipsed by globalization studies and others advocate for interdiscursive approaches so as to go "beyond a certain kind of postcolonial studies" (Lomba, Kaul, Bunzl, Burton, Esty 7). Revathi Krishnaswamy and J.C. Hawley argue that "to be global is first and foremost to be postcolonial and to be postcolonial is always already to be global" (3). In my opinion it is indeed the case that postcolonial studies moved away from regional studies to fields such as social sciences or media studies. Dennis Walder wondered in his 1998 *Post-Colonial Literatures in English* whether there is an "after" postcolonial space and Ato Quayson, when dealing with dimensions of interdisciplinarity in postcolonial studies distinguishes between "synoptic" (conceptually oriented) and "instrumental" (pragmatically applied). According to Quayson, postcolonial studies has been "highly interdisciplinary in the synoptic sense, borrowing freely from a wide range of fields in a desire both to challenge received assumptions as well as to shed light on the configurations of the present and the future" (25). In my view, Bill Ashcroft's, Ranjini Mendis's, Julie McGonegal's, and Arun Mukherjee's 2012 edited volume *Literature for Our Times: Postcolonial Studies of the Twenty-First Century* and Isabel Carrera Suárez's, Emilia Durán Almarza's, and Alica Menéndez Tarrazo's 2011 edited volume *Reading Transcultural Cities* are following Quayson's interdiscursive rather than interdisciplinary approach. Nevertheless, both works still imply "a crossing of traditional disciplinary boundaries" (Huggan 14).

Literature for Our Times is a compilation of articles from the 14th International Triennial Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies held in Vancouver in August 2007. The question contributors to the volume address is as to what postcolonial studies would or ought to be in the twenty-first century. Contributors to the volume attempt to define postcolonial studies and whether the field remains within observable boundaries. Ashcroft, in the introduction to the volume, highlights how the postcolonial is a way of reading and how postcolonial theory provides the language to describe the diversity of cultures and the intersection of its global cultural production (xvi). The volume gives readers a clear sense of the wide range of postcolonial concerns, each section about an already existing area of interest within the field and approaching "emerging" subjects such as affect studies, autobiography, Dalit studies, diaspora studies, gender studies, Indigenous studies, linguistics, migration, Orientalism, transcultural theory, transnationalism, trauma studies, and translation studies. As Ashcroft defines the volume's approach in *Literature for Our Times*, "it is not a Grand Theory of everything but a range of interests and approaches living together in what Amartya Sen might call an argumentative democracy" (xvii). The volume is the perfect example of cohabitation, a "convivial critical democracy" (xvii). The volume contains nine thematic sections structured with a variety of clusters which avoid geographical criteria. Gregory Castle, in *Postcolonial Discourse. An Anthology*, followed, back in 2001, a geographical principle and also a thematic one where articles were rearranged as in an index to facilitate readers' work. Castle chose to organize the studies selected according to region so as to give readers a sense of heterogeneity and historical embeddedness of postcolonial discourses and because "theorizing postcoloniality is ineluctably tied to specific geographical, social, and historical conditions" (xiv). Hence my view that although the contributions in *Literature for Our Times* could have been organized differently, the sections are coherently structured.

If for Ashcroft and his colleagues the consequences of a history of boundary-crossing is the congenital habit among postcolonial scholars questioning existing formulations of the field (xxi), no doubt this is what the contributors to the volume do. In the first chapter, entitled "The Idea of (Postcolonial) Literature: Conceptual and Methodological Issues," Franck Schulze-Engler and Debjani Ganguly begin the cluster by analyzing one of the most current topics nowadays, namely "world literature." The former assesses the place of postcolonial studies in relation to it and posits that scholars of postcolonialism are not able to produce "the most basic consensus about the shape of this metadiscipline" (7) and that thus the "postcolonial" has nowadays become a successor term for both "Commonwealth" and "Third World." Ganguly, on the other hand, considers that "to read the 'world' in literature today is to confront plurality, the prevalence of difference, and a myriad of often unpredictable nodes of connectivity" (33). Lincoln Z. Shlensky and Paul Sharrad approach the field addressed by the previous contributors by analyzing specific works. Shlensky shows how Jamaica Kincaid's literary work has the capacity to enter an ethical engagement with history, specifically through the efficacy of the autobiographical. Sharrad, on the other hand, claims the need for transformation in the field and underlines

that there is a danger, within postcolonial theory, to lack and underachieve by presenting textual-cultural abstractions that seem esoteric or irrelevant (54). Nela Bureu Ramos closes this section by discussing Robert Kroetsch's *The Hornbooks of Rita K.* and how his work, together with the study of other postcolonial writers, should engage in a balance between time and space in postcolonial writing. The five chapters included in this section foreground conceptual and methodological issues.

The above articles are followed by a brief second chapter entitled "After Said: Imperial Scholarship, Race, and Ethnicity." Daniel Sanjiv Roberts advocates closer attention to the roots of postcolonialism in the achievement of colonialism, while Satish C. Aikant draws the complex human consequences of historical events and cautions against overly general theories of imperial history. The chapter that follows is devoted to "Translations and Transformations" as approaches the role of translation in postcolonial studies. Translation is viewed as important in postcolonial studies since it has always been the site of a power-struggle. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o suggests in "A Multi-Centred Globe: Translation as the Language of the Languages" that translation is a key mode of negotiating the universal and the particular, advocates moving away from nation-centric conceptions of culture, and incorporating the idea of translation to a better understanding in the global community. Ngũgĩ's article is followed by John Hawley and Mumia Osaaji who explore Ngũgĩ's work and the role of translation. Elena Basile explores in "Scars of Language in Translation: The 'Itchy' Poetics of Jam Ismail" how the "itchiness" of the scars of language can be the site of cultural healing through process of translation. Most remarkable in this chapter is the closing article by Robert Young who argues that "however wide the spread of the language, to write or read in English is not the same all over the world" since "rhixomatic contact occurs, transforming the languages in the process" (169).

Diaspora, migration, transnationalism, and transculturalism are themes in the volume's fourth chapter. Sissy Helff proposes transculturality as a way into global (i.e., world) literatures and claims that an alliance of postcolonial criticism and transcultural studies is needed. What follows is John Clement Ball's study on the ocean as a space which may represent the fluid mutability of the (im)migrant and diasporic identity "and it is that relational identity that makes this sea-hating and sea-fearing man a creature of the ship, even as he and his story plant themselves firmly on the national shore that the latest critical waves keep threatening to wash away" (218). Anjali Roy explores the inroads made by bhangra music into Punjabi culture followed by Dorothy Lane's examination on the connection between India as a land of pilgrimage for both Indian and Western travelers. Kavita Ivy Nandan presents a personal account of the human consequences of racism against the indentured Indian laborers transported to Fiji. The "Fijiindinas" distressing story has barely entered the historical, national or literary imagination of Fiji. Nandan underlines how, in this context, writing becomes a healing power since "although I realize that the diasporic life assumes the quality of brokenness, writing has been a way to make meaning out of the rupture of the past" (274).

Gender, an important matter in postcolonial Studies, is also included in the volume. Cheryl Stobie, by analyzing Chimanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* analyses of African feminism and Marilyn Adler Papanis discusses the place of gender in the relationship between trauma and testimony. Feroza Jussawala revisits the debate between postcolonial feminists about the right to choose the veil as a statement of Muslim identity. For Jussawala, wearing the veil has become a statement of resistance to homogenizing Western influences (291) and emphasizes how Muslim women have written both pro and against this issue, "but they wanted to be, and continue to be, the one who wish to speak their own mind on this issue, rather than having it legislated either by Western notions or by feminisms" (293). A sixth chapter, entitled "Indigenous Literatures, Literatures of the Land: An Ethos for These Times," owes its title to the first article of this block, by Jeannete Armstrong who shows how the stories of the Sylix Native American relationship with land can provide an ethos for contemporary questions of sustainability. Sam McKegney and Michaela Moura-Koçoglu explore the pressure on Indigenous males to adhere to masculine stereotypes. Chelva Kanaganayakam and Stephen Ney close the chapter by introducing areas little explored in postcolonial studies such as Philippine literature. Kanaganayakam underlines how this literature shares much in common with other postcolonial literatures. Ney, on the other hand, follows Kanaganayakam statement but also takes the discussion to a connection between Christianity and "the postcolonization of Christianity" (406).

The last three chapters of the volume deal with specific subjects such as "Dalit Literature and its Criticism," "The City," and "Terrorism, Trauma, Loss." Despite its brevity, especially in the cluster about the city, contributors speak to each other, whatever section they are placed in. K.A. Geetha, P. Sivakami, and K. Stayanarayana explore matters of caste, gender, representation, political and organizational growth of Dalit identity and literature. *Literature for Our Times* gives, with the inclusion of this chapter, voice to a theme that occupies a currently microcosmic space in postcolonial literature.

The same happens to the city, which has been absent in postcolonial theory until the last decades. "The City" cluster contains an article by Pamela McCallum who explores the contemporary multicultural city within contemporary Britain by analyzing Zadie Smith's texts. Vandana Saxena and Angelie Multani present studies of the English public school based on J.K. Rowling's novels. I did miss a better link within the articles of this particular section and also a wider variety of articles since as *Reading Transcultural Cities* shows there is much to say by and about the city. "Terrorism, Trauma, Loss" gathers the works of Fred Ribkoff, who deals with colonial trauma and mourning in the aftermath of the Air India bombing in the 1980s, Susan Spearey compares two stories of social and political transition in Rwanda and South Africa and Susan Pervez examines Hannif Kureishi's works and warns that "we have been failing to hear Kureishi's message for at least two decades, and this very failure has left us shocked in the wake of the 2005 London Bombs" (562). Pilar Somacarrera urges us to take into account the democratic socialist content of Margaret Atwood's writing so as to understand her career and work. Through a careful study of Atwood's work, Somacarrera demonstrates how Atwood has a political discourse all through her career. From the volume's introduction to Henry Giroux's afterword, the collection revisits many of the most significant issues which have inspired postcolonial studies. It accomplishes what Giroux underlines in the afterword "If higher education is to reclaim itself a site of critical thinking ... educators and students will have to redefine the knowledge, skills, research, and intellectual practices currently favored in the university" (611). To sum up, *Literature for Our Times* proves that we are not facing diminishing interest in postcolonial studies since "few research fields can be as contested, not least by their own practitioners, as Postcolonial Studies, which continues to share every inclination to choose itself as the principal object of its own debate" (Huggan 1).

The postcolonial has moved lately from being a historical marker to a more global term and the role of cartography in postcolonial writing in general consists "in the implementation of a series of creative revisions which register the transition from a colonial framework within which the writer is compelled to recreate and reflect upon the restrictions of colonial space to a postcolonial one within which he or she acquires the freedom to engage in a series of 'territorial disputes' that implicitly or explicitly acknowledge the relativity of modes of spatial (and, by extension, cultural) perception" (Huggan 30). *Reading Transcultural Cities* is an example of the engagement in the ongoing processes of cultural decolonization. The cartographic connection included in this volume provides an interdiscursive link that joins the contestatory theories of poststructuralism and postcolonialism in the pursuit of social and cultural change. *Reading Transcultural Cities* is a volume of research carried out at the University of Oviedo on literary representations of the global/gendered city. The articles gathered in the volume bring together theoretical and critical reflections on contemporary urban texts from cities as diverse as London, Vancouver, Dublin, and La Havana. The work follows Manuel Castells's definition of the global city, a fluid and ever-changing work. Most of the articles focus on European and North American geographies, but are all connected to neo/colonial routes, often diasporic. That is why there is a persistence of the physical/migrant human body such as in Luz Mar González Aria's "In Dublin's Fair City: Cited Embodiments in Paula Meehan's Urban Landscapes." González Aria examines, using Elizabeth Grosz's concept of bodies-cities and posits that "the embodied dimension of the city and the citified character of its dwellers conceptualize both humans and spaces as (inter)active agents of cultural production" (124). The volume includes ten articles and a life-story of Caballero Roca, "A Woman's Journey of Transgression from Santiago to Havana," which aims to reflect the racial background that persists in Cuba and which constitutes a "decisive factor, together with gender, when defining who has really profited from the fruits of the Cuban revolutionary process" (246). This life story is preceded by Luisa Campuzano's article in which she explores a broader Latino framework and postnational condition. The study is an example of how it is not only the "conventional partners in the British colonial relationship who are joined together in migrant writing in English" (Boehmer 228), but the ex-colonies of Spain such as Cuba, too.

Rashmi Varma opens the volume, preceded by Isabel Carrera Suarez's introduction, with "'Zone of Occult Instability': Theorising the Postcolonial City" where she reviews the historical creation of the postcolonial urban from the old colonized cities to current postcolonial urban subjectivities. For Varma, the postcolonial city "is constituted by the tensions and contradictions between the global, national and the local concepts and practices of urban space; it can therefore be conceptualized as a conjunctural space" (28). Aritha Van Herk analyses the possibilities and limitations of the voyeur, particularly women, "the public and the private is thus no longer distinct, and that continual exploration of the luminal space that the window dramatises is key to the transcultural city" (47) since in the fenestration of the city, the women that we glimpse become texts of transculturalization (56). Gabriele Griffin, by focusing on South Asian communities in the United Kingdom, concludes that their urban reality is a

non-place owing to the structural circumstances of their gendered and radicalized lives. Katherine O'Donnell, Luz Mar González Arias, and Carla Rodríguez González discuss how cities are subjects in processes where alternative cartographies literature provides are needed to inscribe new spaces for subjects in motion. Elizabeth Russell, Alicia Menéndez Tarrazo, and Esther Álvarez López take readers to Mumbai, Vancouver, Puerto Rico, and New York by analyzing literary texts which try to deconstruct the city and with it its inhabitants, permanent residents, or those on transit.

Although chapters refer to specific g/local locations, *Reading Transcultural Cities* offers a conceptual basis for a new interdiscursive framework required now that nations and cultures are seen as demarcated entities. Again, we are presented with articles which seem to dialogue with each other as they are so knitted together in the thoughtful research. To my mind, however, some areas are underrepresented as is the case with *Literatures for Our Own Times*, but it is clear that both volumes provide many opportunities to redefine the toolboxes of postcolonial studies. These volumes work as "texts in transit." They do not claim to have reached a final destination, but offer, instead, a mapping of the many possible roots to be accounted for and routes to be taken. They offer readers a fluid and complex model of what might be called "roots rerouted" or "tidalectics," a term coined by Kamau Brathwaite, which implies a movement of the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic, rhizomatic motion which breaks with the linear and Eurocentric theory and practice to replace it with a global and interdiscursive one (Brathwaite qtd. in DeLoughrey 2).

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