

„Wid mi riddim, wid mi rime’: Cultural Flows in Caribbean and South Asian Diasporic Poetry and Performance“

Thursday, 12 April 2012

0. INTRODUCTION

15.00 Welcome

ANNE BRÜSKE & CAROLINE LUSIN

15.10 Keynote “Lyrics and the Politics of Transculturality”

LARS ECKSTEIN (POTSDAM)

16.10 COFFEE

I. HERITAGE AND CULTURAL MEMORY

16.30 Sea Passages: Cultural Flows in Caribbean Poetry

BIRGIT NEUMANN (PASSAU)/ JAN RUPP (HEIDELBERG)

In Caribbean poetry it is time and again the sea, as the site of the Middle Passage and as a marker of distinct island experience, which gives shape to an inherently contradictory poetics of location, place and displacement. Notwithstanding a colonial discourse that was preoccupied with the tropical landscape, contemporary Caribbean writing continues to be characterized by an interest in nature. The sea pervades many Caribbean poems, both as a historical contact zone and as an imaginative principle. Our paper examines diverse poetic engagements with the sea, focusing on strategies which transform it into a powerful site of exchange and transculturation. We are particularly interested in the way ‘sea passages’ affect poetic forms and language, accommodating a variety of cultural flows. Do hurricanes, which inevitably haunt representations of the sea, really “not howl in pentameters”, to take up Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s famous statement? What poetic forms are better suited to portray the experience of the sea, and a memory of the Middle Passage? In what ways does the sea translate itself onto the page, and to what extent are the ‘geopoetics’ of writers like Grace Nichols and M. NourbeSe Philip inflected in terms of gender? It is along these and other questions that the analysis of poetic representations of the sea provides an opportunity to consider effects of transcultural exchange not only on themes and motifs, but also on poetic diction, rhyme, and genre.

17.10 Forms of Exile: Self-Analysis and Self-Positioning in Derek Walcott, Anthony MacNeill, and Fred D'Aguiar

TIMO MÜLLER (AUGSBURG)

Caribbean poets have long grappled with the cultural and political implications of Western poetic forms. While some poets have rejected such forms outright, many others have adapted them to their own cultural or individual situations. Exile is a situation most Caribbean writers have experienced in one way or another, and they have often sought to capture its intercultural dynamics by juxtaposing formal and linguistic elements from various cultural backgrounds. In such poems form can fulfill two distinct functions: as a medium through which the poet analyzes his experience of exile, and as a 'position-taking' (Pierre Bourdieu) through which the poet claims a precarious but insightful vantage point in between cultures, languages, and artistic credos. I propose to examine this double function in representative poems by Derek Walcott, Anthony MacNeill, and Fred D'Aguiar. Walcott's "Tales of the Islands" (1962) turns the generic implications of the sonnet sequence to various uses in a complex discussion of home and exile. MacNeill's "Saint Ras" (1972) mirrors the alienation of the exiled Caribbean in its strangely ambiguous, labyrinthine semiosis. D'Aguiar's "Letter From Mama Dot" (1985) adopts conventions of the European psychological-realist tradition but rejects them as unsatisfactory alternatives to the many-faceted imaginative world of Caribbean folk wisdom. Moving beyond mere mimicry or parody, all three writers work on a poetics of exile that incorporates both the inexorability of their in-between position and the degree to which their exile is formed—and can be re-formed—by language and the imagination.

18.00 DINNER BUFFET

FRINGE EVENTS I

19.30 Round-Table Discussion on the Topic "Concepts of Cultural Contact: Literature and Transculturality"

VITTORIA BORSÒ (DÜSSELDORF), OTTMAR ETTÉ (POTSDAM), DOROTHEA FISCHER-HORNUNG (HEIDELBERG), FRANK SCHULZE-ENGLER (FRANKFURT AM MAIN)

(Location: Heidelberg Center for American Studies, Hauptstraße 120)

Friday, 13 April 2012**9.30 Keynote “Dub Poetry: From the Local Arena to the Global Stage”**

WERNER ZIPS (WIEN)

10.30 COFFEE**II. MUSICAL FORMS, POETRY AND PERFORMANCE****10.50 Poet and the Roots: Redefining Identity in the Caribbean Diaspora**

DAVID BOUSQUET (STRASBOURG)

The pioneering work of Linton Kwesi Johnson and Oku Onuora in the late 1970s led to the emergence and development of a poetic genre known as dub poetry, later taken up by poets like Mutabaruka, Mikey Smith or Jean Binta Breeze. Marked by a strong afrocentric trend, this form of cultural expression challenges conventional, eurocentric definitions of poetry. The poets are often musicians and performers and liken themselves to the reggae and dub DJs; they place their work in the traditions of Caribbean popular music both practically and theoretically, while claiming a form of literary and poetic recognition. They privilege the oral performance of poetry over the publication of written texts, even if they do publish poetry collections. They embrace Creole languages as a valid medium for poetic expression and tend to reject Standard English and the literary legacy associated with it, favouring the investigation of Caribbean oral traditions as a resource for poetic creation. Dub poetry thus illustrates the often conflicting flows which constitute the culture of the Caribbean diaspora, and more particularly an ambiguous approach to the literary tradition in what Carolyn Cooper describes as “vagrant texts that both restructure the canon and challenge the very notion of canonicity”. The poetic and/or musical performance can be seen as a privileged time and space where cultural and political identities are constantly being redefined, in a fashion which is quite typical of diasporic cultures whose origins are literally a displacement, as Paul Gilroy or Edouard Glissant have convincingly shown. Through a study of both forms and contents, I will try to argue that the performative poetics at work in dub poetry enacts, in the time and space of performance, a rhizomic, creolised identity which challenges essentialist definitions of this concept and anticipates a new, global politics of identity.

11.30 From Jamaica to Mecca: Transculturation in the Music and Poetry of Poetic Pilgrimage

ANA SOBRAL (KONSTANZ)

My paper deals with the effects of globalization on the self-perception and self-presentation of diasporic artists in Britain, using the example of Poetic Pilgrimage – a female rap and spoken-word duo from London. A noteworthy

aspect about these two women of Jamaican origin is their conversion to Islam in 2005. In their lyrics and music, Poetic Pilgrimage firmly establish their religious faith as a form of emancipation from racism and sexism, while also assuming an activist stance against Islamic fundamentalism. They place themselves ostensibly between cultures, highlighting the creative and communicative potential of popular music and poetry in a transcultural context. To illustrate Poetic Pilgrimage's unique transcultural position, the paper begins by discussing the song "Land Far Away", which samples a famous track by the 'canonical' Rastafarian roots reggae band The Abyssinians. Here Poetic Pilgrimage merge their Jamaican heritage with the Islamic faith – thus revealing a link between these cultures. Secondly, the spoken-word poem "Aborted Daughters" is analyzed as an example of the artists' employment of the Caribbean collective memory of oppression in order to counter the mistreatment of women in fundamentalist Islamic societies.

12.10 LUNCH

13.10 Tato's –ao: Guillén, Langston, and the Afro-Spanish Poetics of Tato Laviera

JUAN FLORES (NEW YORK CITY)

13.50 Performing a Digital Caribeño/a Diaspora: El Puerto Rican Embassy and Levente no. Yolayorkdominicanyork

TOMÁS URAYOÁN NOEL (ALBANY, NEW YORK)

This paper explores the relationship between the global circulation of media and the global circulation of diaspora in two hybrid digital projects: poet/performer Pedro Pietri and visual artist Adál Maldonado's web installation *El Puerto Rican Embassy* (1994) and writer/performer Josefina Báez's YouTube performance videos from her book *Levente no. Yolayorkdominicanyork* (2011). Engaging with scholarship in such fields as diaspora studies (Paul Gilroy, Juan Flores), new media studies (Timothy Murray, Steve Dixon), and performance studies (Peggy Phelan, Nick Salvato), I read Pietri and Maldonado's and Báez's multimedia projects as attempts to rethink the Caribbean Latino/a diasporic self in and against the tensions and contradictions of globalized, digital cultures, and I suggest how diasporic artists engaged in what Dixon calls "digital performance" can help us rethink the terms of being and belonging in an increasingly techno-mediated environment.

14.30 COFFEE

14.50 Jamaican Dancehall Artist Vybz Kartel: 'Pretty like a Colouring Book'

PATRICK HELBER (HEIDELBERG)

"Vybz Kartel", Adidja Palmer is one of the most controversial entertainers in the Jamaican music genre Dancehall. In my presentation I would like to demonstrate on the basis of this provocative artist the ability of Dancehall

music to cross and transgress geographical, physical and canonical borders. The paper demonstrates first how Kartel rewrites colonial geographies on his own body through his tattoos. Second it elaborates how the adaptation or re-definition of historical or political names provides an opportunity to redefine and re-create colonial knowledge. The third part of the paper shows, how modern media technology creates the possibility, to cross/transgress borders or visa restrictions and to unite the diaspora with the homeland. Jamaican Dancehall scholar Carolyn Cooper characterizes in her work *Sound Clash* the variety of social clashes Dancehall Music provokes. My presentation expands her assumption and shifts from the clash to the overlapping aspects. I will use Homi Bhabha's theories of cultural hybridization and mimicry to explain the Dancehall deejays function in a post-colonial and transnational counter-discourse. Further Paul Gilroy's concept of the *Black Atlantic* and Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytic work *Black Skin, White Masks* shall be included in the dealing with Kartel's provocative violations and performances of multiple border-crossing. At the end of the presentation I give a short outline of the reaction Kartel's provocative "chatting back" provokes in Jamaica.

15.30 British Bhangra: Pasts, Presents and Futures?

RAJINDER DUDRAH (MANCHESTER)

British Bhangra is a genre of popular music that fuses Punjabi beats, music and lyrics, UK pop, RnB, reggae and other world sounds. Its history in Britain dates back to the immediate post-war period when migrants from the Punjab, resettled their lives and homes in the UK. In the post-2000s the music can now be heard across the soundscapes of multicultural cities around the globe, to mainstream fashion and advertising, and even in the songs and music of Bollywood films. British Bhangra's centres of music industry are increasingly located in Birmingham and London, from where its musical products are distributed and performed internationally. Yet, this recent visibility is also marked by a history of cultural racism, community politics and a music and cultural industry that has struggled to stake its place in British popular culture. This paper will chart the story of British Bhangra music and its industry, and will look towards its futures especially as it is connected to other important places of cultural production around the world.

FRINGE EVENTS II

18.00 Poetry Reading by Daljit Nagra

(Location: English Department, Kettengasse 12, Room 108)

20.00 Conference Dinner

Saturday, 14 April 2012

9.30 Keynote “Poetry, the Dialogic, and the Postcolonial Diaspora”

JAHAN RAMAZANI (VIRGINIA)

10.30 COFFEE

III. GENRE AND FORM

10.50 ‘in a two-directional (at least) field’ (Ron Silliman): An exploration of Debbie Tucker Green’s Dramatic Poetics

DEIRDRE OSBORNE (LONDON)

The work of Black British writer Debbie Tucker Green makes porous conventional formal, generic and contextual boundaries by placing traditions of spoken-word poetry in the heart of theatre. Unfazed by the *impasse* of language, Tucker Green’s linguistic arsenal creates a unique idiolect where words themselves attack and counter-attack the bounds of syntax. At the same time, (if not paradoxically), they are rendered lyrically, to enable a threading together of meaning through the continuity of the performing voices, as all are bearers of one holistic, inter-connected, fluid text and yet, one written frequently in stand-alone, stanzaic clusters. Unsurprisingly, she faces critical opprobrium for their very poeticity - ‘Words alone do not make drama: what one craves is a marriage between action and language’ and ‘feels more like an acted poem than a fleshed-out play’ (Michael Billington 2003). Calling to mind Lorine Niedecker’s condensery poetics, Tucker Green crafts a condensery dramatic-poetics, a trans-generic signature which rattles the cage doors of the place of poetry in Black British cultural expression. Imprinted is it is, with the legacies of Caribbean migratory and arriviste sensibilities, her play, *trade* (2008) offers a new dimension to the socio-cultural flow of the region where European women are travelling (in ever-increasing numbers), to former colonies to buy men for sex. In its counter-stance to performance expectations, Tucker Green asserts her theatrical reality as female and black-centred, specifying that all parts (male, female, black, white) be played trans-actionally by three black actresses. While consolidating opportunities for black performers, the constant visual presence of black women implies that Black British women are drawn into the consequences of economic imperialism, the behaviours, attitudes and lifestyle born of Euro-centric indigenism. As Tucker Green acknowledges her cross-generic influences: Louise Bennett, Jill Scott, Caryl Churchill, Ntozake Shange, the paper argues that multi-inheritance, social and artistic, creates a distinctly creative standpoint which requires a new critical lexicon for engaging with it.

11.30 Derek Walcott's Poetic Drama: A Form of Creolization and Creolization of Forms

MARIJA BERGAM (BARI)

Derek Walcott belongs to the category of the “tap natch” poets invoked at the beginning of Linton Kwesi Johnson’s poem: this is true both inasmuch as he engages – in a modernist fashion – with the European literary canon, and in terms of his own status as the *monstre sacré* of Caribbean literature. Yet, focusing on Walcott’s poetry to the detriment of his lifelong interest in theatre blinds us to the fact that his most daring experiments in the creolisation of forms, genres and cultures have been carried out precisely in his theatrical production. This paper examines *The Joker of Seville* (1974) and *Odyssey: a Stage Version* (1993), two plays which re-appropriate the most significant archetypal figures of European literature: Don Juan Tenorio and Odysseus, respectively. The terms that guide the discussion of these works are translation and creolisation. The first play is an interlingual translation of a seventeenth-century play attributed to Tirso de Molina; the *Odyssey* is best considered an intersemiotic translation of Homer’s epic. Both are creolised so that they become essentially Caribbean cultural products: this process will be analysed from the point of view of language, of literary genre, and finally, by considering the dual vision produced at the level of plot and dialogue through Walcott’s treatment of geographical and cultural references. The discussion of the two plays is then briefly placed against Walcott’s poetry from the same period by asking how they compare in their representations of creolisation.

12.10 LUNCH

IV. GENDER AND THE BODY

13.00 Embodying Desire and Sexuality across Borders: Diasporic Indian Women’s Poetry in English

AMRITA MEHTA (NEW DELHI)

Embodiment is an important area in women’s writing and has been debated by theorists of different cultures. What happens when the embodied female self from one culture is transplanted into another culture that differs in notions surrounding women’s embodiment? The poetic imagination, when situated at the cusp of cultures, wrests with and modifies received and circulating notions of women’s embodiment within the cultures that impact it. Diasporic Indian women poets’ altered perceptions, cultural realignments and backward glances at the native disciplinary codes, as encapsulated by the creative imagination, assume complex dimensions beyond a simplistic contestation and subsequent hybridity of cultural mores.

Diasporic Indian women poets problematise the body as a cultural construct in their oeuvre. They aestheticise the cultural realities they have moved physically away from but which impinge emotionally and psychologically. Embodiment

emerges as a living context of their poetry wherein the diasporic location talks back to the native culture and transmutes it. The native culture however exerts an inexorable pull in a location that is not native as the poets strive to construct altered body images and gender roles in the enlarged physical and intellectual spaces they inhabit. The attempt is to create new mythographies (away from cultural ideals) both for the self and for the readers of both their native and adopted cultures through force of their imagination.

This paper will attempt to read the poetry of four diasporic Indian women poets-Sujata Bhatt, Imtiaz Dharker, Suniti Namjoshi and Meena Alexander-to examine the different ways in which desire and sexuality is encoded in the poetry of diasporic Indian women from diverse backgrounds. In the poetic transactions of women's embodiment across and between cultures, emerge nuanced representations of desire and sexuality, through which the poets are not merely assimilating to their host cultures but they are also reshaping them through their own.

13.40 Negotiating Spaces of Belonging: Gender and Cultural Identity in South Asian Diasporic Women's Poetry

SONJA LEHMANN (GÖTTINGEN)

This paper will focus on poetry by three South Asian diasporic women writers, Sujata Bhatt, Imtiaz Dharker and Moniza Alvi, whose writings contain the experience of being located in several countries and cultures. While each poet offers a unique perspective, they are all likewise concerned with the effect of gender on the formation of cultural identities. However, notions of gender are shown to be strongly influenced by their intersection with other categories, for example class. Through images of gendered bodies, depictions of gendered spaces and reflections on gender roles the poets paint a complex picture of the diasporic experience while at the same time reflecting on their own position in this diasporic space. As a result the idea of cultural identity is questioned and reformulated and new forms of belonging are negotiated.

14.20 COFFEE

V. TRADITION AND INNOVATION

14.40 'Feminist Fables': Theorizing Subversive Mythology in the Poetry of Suniti Namjoshi

DEBASHREE DATTARAY (KOLKATA)

In the post-Independence era in India, the woman poet continues her quest for identity in the context of an evolving concept of the 'modern woman' caught between the changing ethos of the 'local' within the Indian subcontinent and the demands of a globalized world. Deviating from traditional roles of women

in Indian society, the poet enters into the realm of an indigenous female consciousness and speaks from different regions, generations, sexualities, classes and communities.

The paper would focus on the poetry by feminist poet, Suniti Namjoshi (1941-). Educated in India and Canada, she has held academic positions in both countries. Namjoshi currently lives in Devon. Her poetry is part of a genealogy of poets who “take up the hard questions” and “push their ideas and their language and their minds.” Her oeuvre reflects the woman as a part of a ‘collective’ where the community is prioritized over the individual. This paper would explore Namjoshi’s fabulative mode which is extremely effective in focusing attention on the questionable workings of patriarchy and the inherent tensions of existence for the South Asian woman in the diaspora. Namjoshi explores the female condition by inventing a subversive mythology. Myths are appropriated, translated and rehistoricized by her as a resistance to definitiveness, with an emphasis on a fluidity of existence, a ‘Third Space’. It is the Third Space that “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity;”¹ In Namjoshi’s poetry, the ‘third space’ unravels a space for dialogue which identifies and exposes the mechanisms of control and repression. The significance of her works is further revealed through the conscious reworking of ancient myths, legends, fairy tales from the East and the West.

15.20 Between Tradition and Innovation: Redistricting the Literary Imagination

SILVIO A. TORRES-SAILLANT (SYRACUSE, NEW YORK)

I would like to propose a presentation that focuses on the Caribbean and South Asian impulse to write poetry that connects geographies of knowledge, that crosses oceans, and interlaces histories within the vast space that the colonial transaction and diasporic dispersions have configured over the last centuries. I will be drawing references from an array of authors that includes Brathwaite, David Dabydeen, Aida Cartagena Portalatin, Damas, Trefossa, R. Dobru, Yerba Sekou, Gibi Basilio, Julia Alvarez, Mahadai Das, and the like. The presentation contends that these bodies of writing have redistricted the locus of the literary imagination in profound ways.

16.00 FINAL DISCUSSION

¹ Bhabha, Homi K. (*The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994), 37.