

## Introduction

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## Introduction

Columbus from his after  
deck watched heights he hoped for,  
rocks he dreamed. rise solid from my simple water.

Parrots screamed. Soon he would touch  
our land. his charted mind's desire  
The blue sky blessed the morning with its fire.  
Kamau Brathwaite, "Colombe"

I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder  
That you would neither cajole nor ignore.  
Conquest is a lie. I grow older  
Conceding your half-independant shore  
Within whose borders now my legacy  
Culminates inexorably.

And I am still imperially  
Male, leaving you with the pain,  
The rending process in the colony  
Seamus Heaney, "Act of Union"

Through the creation of a bounded space, territory, as Stuart Elden points out, "is already a violent act of exclusion and inclusion; maintaining it as such requires constant vigilance and the mobilization of threat, and challenging it necessarily entails a transgression" (Elden xxx). This organisation and maintaining of territorial limits as an enterprise fraught with violence is clearly apparent in the postcolonial world, the boundaries of which, ever since European imperial expansion began and right through to decolonisation and the present era, have been drawn and redrawn with little or no consideration for the cultural, linguistic, and historical affinities among the inhabitants of those places. This issue of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* seeks to reflect on the ways in which contemporary postcolonial literatures in English engage with and represent territorial conflict and transgression. The genesis of this project was a one-day conference held at the Université de Lille 3 in late December 2014. Some of the articles in this volume are by participants at that conference who have developed their papers in the light of the discussions held, and the insight shared by keynote speakers Christiane Fioupou and David Lloyd. Other articles are by early career and confirmed scholars whose research resonates with the interplay between territory and conflict. The literature of several different countries is explored here and this wide geographical span reflects the fertility of exploring many contemporary postcolonial literatures through the lens of post-conflict studies.

An obvious point of departure are the violent legacies stemming from various instances of partition. As Joe Cleary points out in his important book on the literatures of Ireland, Israel and Palestine, "[t]he tendency to bypass the topic [of partition] in [post-colonial] studies is curious since partition has played an important role in the annals of British decolonisation especially, and because it raises serious theoretical questions



about the nature of postcolonial state formation, state division and nation-building” (15). Rejecting Benedict Anderson’s influential analysis of the processes by which the nation is imagined, Cleary suggests that it is “[o]nly if we take account of the complex articulation of nationalist struggles with those of other social movements, and of the ways in which the latter were often inflected in terms of class, religious or regional loyalties, [that] can we begin to understand why in some situations – such as Ireland, India and Palestine – the territorial borders of the colonial state did not become those of the nation-state” (18). Several of the articles in this issue tackle the legacy (and ongoing consequences) of partition in Indian, Palestinian and Irish writing, while the ways in which emerging ecological and diasporic concerns intersect with more familiar Marxist and gender studies discourses are investigated in others. The articles investigate the varied aesthetics developed by postcolonial writers in order to engage and negotiate with and, in some cases, contest borders and boundaries imposed by a foreign power with little regard for the consequences.

In the two epigraphs with which this introduction opens, taken from poems by Kamau Brathwaite and Seamus Heaney respectively, the land is personified and becomes the speaker of each poem. In “Colombe,” the poetic voice is that of land on the cusp of colonisation (and violation, hence the biting ironic pun in the title) as it watches Columbus greedily observing the voluptuous island “he hoped for.” The moment carries a strong erotic charge in the references to “touch” and “desire,” and the polysemous “fire” already contains the threat of gunshot, even as it alludes once again to desire. The poetic voice of Heaney’s poem on the other hand is that of the coloniser and here too the poet uses a pun in order to stress the sexual nature of conquest: “conquest is a lie” suggests that it is untrue, but it also perhaps indicates sexual congress, especially since the rest of “Act of Union” couches the 1800 union of Great Britain and Ireland in the rhetoric of sexual assault and a resulting unwanted pregnancy in the shape of what would later become Northern Ireland. Both of these poems might be considered as relatively early postcolonial texts, in which the colonised land is often problematically troped as a woman. However, my decision to include excerpts from poems as epigraphs is motivated on the one hand by the fact that the genre of poetry does not loom large in the articles which make up this issue and, on the other, by a necessity to highlight the ways in which the critical analyses contained here depart from these early tropes of territory. The texts under scrutiny in this volume are more contemporary than the poems cited, and (arguably) more innovative in their engagement with territories and their imposed limits and, in our increasingly globalised world, do not restrict themselves to the familiar paradigms of centre and periphery, or personified (and feminised) land. On the contrary, in their interrogations of borders and boundaries, particularly in the context of conflict which has its roots both in colonisation and in decolonisation, the novels, short stories, poems, and life narratives analysed here focus on unearthing other untold stories, rendering visible and audible precarious and bare life (Butler; Agamben), both human and non-human, in intra-national and international contexts.

The first three articles deal with contemporary Indian fiction in English. Angelo Monaco discusses Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland*, Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*, and Anita Rau Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, and the representations in these novels of geographical divisions and geopolitical reconfigurations within and beyond India. He reads these novels as moving away from early social realism, and the historio-

graphic metafiction so associated with Salman Rushdie, and as mingling realist modes with symbolic elements. In these transnational novels, he argues, imagined communities are disturbed and instead become “sites of contestation.” Sreyoshi Sakar analyses Rushdie’s 2005 novel, *Shalimar the Clown*, and considers the process of “worlding” in this postmodern novel. For Sakar, while this novel allows Rushdie to rethink in an interesting way the Kashmir story and interrogate post-9/11 discourses which conflate immigration, terrorism, and Islam, the novel nevertheless subordinates insidious forms of structural, gendered, and environmental violations to sensationalist forms of violence and tends to fetishise Kashmir as a “site of romance and adventure for a South Asian and global” readership. In this reading, Rushdie ultimately forgoes and “elides the many ongoing, complex, stories of Kashmir – stories of conflict and suffering, but also people’s struggles to survive, to rebuild, to heal homes and communities.”

Nandana Dutta focuses on Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* and in her article, she develops an analysis of what she terms “subaltern geoaesthetics” in this novel. She reads the depiction of the inhabitants of the tide country of the Sundurbans, their perception of animals, and the waters as a formal structuring principle of the novel. Covering the many different borders with which this novel engages (human and animal, land and water, outsider and inhabitant, and so on), Dutta investigates the ways in which conflict is subverted through the depictions of the tides erasing divisions. Sabine Lauret-Taft’s article on Romesh Gunsekera’s *Heaven’s Edge* discusses the representation of the land as a space in which beauty and terror collide. The island in this novel is, significantly, never named, but clear analogies can be drawn with contemporary Sri Lanka and its long drawn-out conflict. Lauret-Taft investigates the dystopian portrayal of a lush natural habitat which is affected by severe atrocities, analysing both the distortion and restoration of reality for the diasporic protagonist and the recourse to myth as a means of transcending violence. In the final analysis, however, she shows that Gunsekera places the emphasis on the impossibility of harmony, and on the necessity of embracing one’s violent origins, a point underscored by the presence of syncretic allusions to various myths (from various traditions) and to death and rebirth.

With Claire Gallien’s article, we move from Asia to the Middle East, specifically Gaza, and to a discussion of the ways in which Gazan writers not only expose the violence and suffering experienced by the population living there, but also sketch out the contours of a counter-geography which undermines colonial territorial boundaries. Gallien analyses the recurrence of borders as lines of tension and fracture in Palestinian literature and the function of the border as both a “shared reality and a shared literary trope.” She evokes the moral and discursive imperative for Gazan writers to represent their experience in order to produce a counter-narrative to Israeli and Western media representations, and discusses the elision of another border, that between reportage and fiction, in some Gazan literature. She also explores Gazan writers’ rejection of the discourse of borderless and hybrid states present in some quarters in postcolonial studies, and investigates the ways in which contemporary literature presents existing borders as artificial creations and those reconfigured in fictional and imaginative ways as much more viable.

The focus of the articles which follow brings us to Ireland, another country with a violently contested border. However, Anne Duflos and Virginie Girel-Pietka focus less on analysing the representation of space than on the politics at stake when (re)imagi-

ning the state after a period of conflict. Duflos discusses David Park's *The Truth Commissioner* in which a fictional Truth and Reconciliation Commission, similar to the one which took place in South Africa, dredges up a dark past with serious consequences. Her concern, however, is more specifically with gender politics, particularly the representation of masculinity, and what this might reveal about the post-conflict space. In the transitional phase from conflict to (ostensibly) post-conflict society, the relationship between violence and masculinity appears to have evolved, yet Duflos shows how Park's novel ultimately offers a more negative counter-narrative to what she sees as an ambient optimistic dominant discourse. Girel-Pietka discusses Denis Johnston's 1956 pageant of the adventures of Cuchulainn which was written and performed as part of a festival to celebrate Irish culture which coincided with the fortieth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising. She argues, however, that Johnston's work, far from reinforcing the mythological and patriotic symbol of Cuchulainn, uses it as a tool to foster a link between Irish national culture and post-Second World War Europe, shedding light on the human predicament, as opposed to "outdated Irish cultural interests."

Another geographical shift brings us to Zimbabwe and an article on contemporary Zimbabwean fictional and non-fictional prison writing. It explores the particularities of prison spaces as sites of women's oppression and the extent to which the prison experience can be reconfigured as a site of resistance in a nation-state such as Zimbabwe. It also argues that, in portraying both the carceral space and the wider nation-state as gendered, the two texts demonstrate how women are rendered as "invisible" as possible. The porousness of the boundaries between fiction and life-writing are also explored in this article, with close attention to both kinds of texts as aesthetic constructions. Bhawana Jain's article, while not strictly speaking focusing on a post-conflict territory *per se*, does shed new light on Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* which she reads through the prism of theory related to the spatial turn. She analyses the transformation of London urbanscape in Smith's text, attending in particular to distinctions between micro-spaces, places and non-spaces, and concludes that Smith's novel, in its deconstruction of binary discourse, gestures towards a London in which categories such as diaspora, race, religion or origins no longer have currency.

This collection ends with the second part of Pascale Guibert's article on Édouard Glissant's poetics of the compounding of places. This is particularly fitting as although Glissant's presence is at best fleeting in the other articles, due to the fact that they deal with the specificities of borders and territorial limits in literature, his *Poétique de la Relation* is nevertheless relevant to the questions raised in this issue as it indicates a potential way of thinking beyond borders. Guibert follows on from the first part of her article, published in the previous issue of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* (38.2 Spring 2016), to discuss the genealogy of the concept of the "common-place," the significance of the hyphenated form, the ways in which place shapes the very writing of the common-place, and the various avenues of meaning bound up in the hyphen which links the two component parts of the neologism. As such, it provides a very stimulating conclusion to this collection of articles on literature and post-conflict territories.

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