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Stefan Helgesson. *Transnationalism in Southern African Literature. Modernists, Realists, and the Inequality of Print Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2009. xii, 164 p. ISBN (pb): 978-0-415-80879-8 £23.99; eBook: 9780203431511

- 1 Within the broad perspective of the cultural, economic and political impact of late colonialism, Stefan Helgesson examines the effects which the migratory potential of print medium had on the lusophone and anglophone countries of Southern Africa where orality was the dominant mode of social and cultural interaction. Against the background of contradictions and sectorial interests generated by colonialism, the author posits that it is within this transnational arena created by the dissemination and mobility of printed texts and the accompanying reticulation of what he calls “discourse networks” (11) that the question of aesthetic creation in connection with political liberation is worked out. The main issue at the core of this book is that of self-empowerment through literature in the colonial context of Angola, Mozambique and South Africa between 1945 and 1975. Helgesson’s study is underpinned by the Benjaminian conception of modernity whose major tenet is to link the differences existing between the arts to their technological conditions of possibility or to their specific medium or support.¹ The author posits an analogy between the drive to African self-empowerment and the access to printed medium and to world literature.

- 2 The book is divided into five chapters, each constituting a short essay, in which the author analyses how the colonial order was contested in the various forms of writing – journalism, essay writing, poetry, realistic fiction – which African writers had gradually mastered. The five chapters are thematically divided into two groups: the first group of three chapters consists in a trajectory which moves from a broad discussion of issues dealing with world literature and print culture (chapter 1) to close readings of two Southern African journals – *Itinerário* in Lourenço Marques (Maputo) and *Drum* in Johannesburg (chapter 2), and to the contributions of three prominent critics – Lewis Nkosi, Mario Pinto de Andrade, Eugénio Lisboa (chapter 3). The second group of two chapters examines how the materiality of the print medium is used in the genres of lyrical poetry by Rui Knopfli and Wopko Jensma (chapter 4) and realistic narrative prose (chapter 5). His study combines aspects of the sociology and history of print, elements of reception theory enriched by close readings of texts, narrative analysis and postcolonial criticism. His historical approach allows him to grasp the evolution of themes and forms in relation to the political context.
- 3 Helgesson's in-depth analysis combines three methodological approaches: social, linguistic and literary. First he analyzes how Southern African writers have managed to position themselves as the shapers of an African transgressive national consciousness within world literature through the material quality of the print medium. This transnational border crossing was facilitated by cosmopolitanism and by the physical migrancy of the printed word through "discursive networks." He points out that colonial literature needs to be seen in terms of its dependency "on a historically specific confluence of colonialism, capitalism, notions of public sphere, and aesthetic values engendered by dominant literary fields" (18). His sociological approach, mostly framed by the heuristic models of Pierre Bourdieu and Pascale Casanova, discusses how African writers managed to negotiate the tension between foreign and local influences and the subtle shiftings between the print medium and orality to create African literary fields. He describes how the transnational circulation of print and other media generated "tensions between 'serious' and 'popular' or 'national' and 'colonial literature'" (76) within local literary fields. This logically leads him to address the much debated questions of cultural autonomy and authenticity. Helgesson also makes an interesting comparison between lusophone and anglophone African writers underlining the difficulties and contradictions they all faced to be recognized as belonging to the world of literature. He analyzes in particular how writers and critics negotiated the gap that separated their world from foreign cultural and literary configurations by either vindicating the legitimacy of African literature predicated on locally grounded knowledge or emphasizing the necessity of taking into account the continuity of a global cultural paradigm (i.e. established literary genres) – what Helgesson calls "reiteration" – whose parameters could be ultimately disrupted and redefined. One of the main contradictions he addresses is the challenge they faced to elaborate a literary idiom which could be addressed to both an external and a local audience.
- 4 The second major issue is the use of languages. Helgesson closely examines the role of language in the construction of colonial knowledge, the formation of subject-positions, and the difficulty writers had in grappling with a European language to express personal and social truths. He claims that African literatures have appropriated europhone languages, encouraged literacy and used various printed materials in order

to acquire a modernity that was deemed essential to confront the colonial order on its own ground. Thus the access to and mastery of the printed text, the search for new forms of expression were instrumental in acquiring a discursive authority.

- 5 Helgesson's book is also largely devoted to a literary approach of his material, dealing with a fairly wide range of texts and genres: journalistic articles, essays, letters, poems, autobiographies, novels. His close readings offer insightful illustrations of his theoretical analysis. The gist of this exercise, with critical notions borrowed from poststructuralism and postcolonial criticism, is to show how colonial writing relates to its material condition of possibility, and how this affects writing and interpretation. He insists in particular on the role and meaning of the print medium on realistic fiction in a colonial context. Helgesson interestingly claims that the print medium is "always positioned as both an external, material object and an internalized phenomenon" (104) and, as a result, it occupies an ambivalent status as it was used as an instrument of cultural and political emancipation on the one hand and an instrument of colonial and global domination on the other. In a colonial context, and in that of apartheid South Africa in particular, the perception of print as an instrument of racialized power obtained. Helgesson concludes that, despite its positive role in the development of African literature, "print remains subject to the tyranny of place and history" (120). The way out of this quandary is, according to him, located in realistic fiction presented as "counterdiscursive texts" (103) which tend to undermine classical paradigms of representation.
- 6 Helgesson's book offers a perceptive, closely argued and richly documented study of how the introduction of the print medium and culture interfered with the existing forms of literary expression in Southern Africa and was appropriated by colonial writers as an access to modern agency and identity in their struggle against colonialism. By comparing his views with those of prominent literary critics or specialists of media studies he asserts his own critical stance in a convincing way. His book thus provides a nuanced and innovative approach to an often neglected aspect of literary history, and its critical apparatus (appendix of selected articles in *Itinerario*, notes, bibliography and index) makes it an invaluable research tool.

NOTES

1. Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique* (Paris : La fabrique éditions, 2000) 46.

AUTHORS

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Richard SAMIN is Emeritus Professor at the University of Nancy 2 where he lectured from 1988 to 2009 after teaching in several African countries for sixteen years. His field of research includes South African literature, postcolonial studies and literary theory. His articles and conference papers on South African authors and on colonial and postcolonial topics have been published in several academic journals in France and abroad.