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eds., *Cultural Transformations: Perspectives on
Translocation in a Global Age*

Imre Szeman

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Chris Prentice, Vijay Devadas, and Henry Johnson, eds. *Cultural Transformations: Perspectives on Translocation in a Global Age*. Amsterdam: Rodopi (Cross Cultures 125), 2010. xxxv + 348 p. ISBN (hb): 9789042030039. € 76 / US\$ 103

- 1 Despite the critical pressures to which the self-certainties of the nation-state have been subjected, it remains an undeniably powerful force in the world. On a financially interdependent planet, the nation is still the primary horizon of economic activity. The nation remains the space in which sovereignty is located and politics enacted, even if it is now recognized by most as a limit to global (and indeed, local) social justice and our collective environmental futures. And culturally, too, the nation has made its way into the 21st century as an important site and mechanism of being and belonging. As critics have reminded us repeatedly, the nation is a fiction rather than a fact – a complex narrative that works ceaselessly to intertwine belief, feeling, identity, history and geography. But it is a fiction that several centuries of political practice, habit, and the accrued weight of social and physical infrastructure has hardened into a fact frustratingly difficult to dislodge from our sense of the nature of things, however much critical thought might want to do so.
- 2 *Cultural Transformations* brings together twelve sharply-argued essays on a wide range of topics. What links these pieces together is a shared commitment to investigating the idea of translocation. Translocation joins a host of related concepts that originated

primarily in postcolonial studies, but which are now widely used in the contemporary humanities and social sciences, including diaspora, hybridity, border-crossing, globalization (or glocalization), and translation (understood as a social-cultural process as well as a linguistic one). As something like an umbrella term for these concepts, translocation insists forcefully that culture has no fixed point of origin or existence; as the editors write, “the very possibility of engaging culture as a productive terrain is conceivable only from a perspective of culture-in-translation” (xvii).

- 3 The book offers interesting examples of just such critical engagements with culture, with a focus on theory and literature, music, and forms of visual cultural experience (everything from Chris Prentice’s investigation of her experiences in the Polynesian Cultural Centre to Simon Ryan’s exploration of post-Fordist work and play in video-game culture). In addition to the specific topic each essay engages – for example, Diana Brydon’s reflections on the differing critical and social implications of the terms “earth,” “world” and “planet,” and Dan Bendrups’ mapping of the borders crisscrossed by songwriter Mito Manumatoma – all the contributors are intent on critically interrogating and rendering unworkable nationally-specific or otherwise fixed ideas of culture. The limit they identify is as much empirical as philosophical: actually-existing culture has always already been translocal, and to suggest otherwise is not only theoretically incorrect, but constitutes a misreading of the life and work of culture.
- 4 The challenge these essays collectively make to the force and implications of culture read (whether in the policies of nation-states or the work of other critics) as fixed and essential is an important one; it is also hardly a new mode of critique, constituting something like received knowledge on the part of those now engaged in contemporary literary and cultural studies. Liminality, ambivalence, ambiguity, indeterminacy, unmapability, porousness: these are the characteristics that criticism envisions as denoting success in its task of challenging the powers that be, all of which are assumed to operate within definite and essential categories that identify (for instance) the criteria for national belonging and exclusion. One of the things that I came away with from this fine collection is that it is perhaps time to take even bigger critical risks than that of challenging the essentialisms of identity and belonging that persist even today. Critical reminders of and challenges to the fiction of the nation on the terrain of cultural texts and practices seem to have had little impact on the lived necessity of national identity. Might we not turn our attention instead to an analysis of those insistent demands of everyday life that make some narratives (such as that of the nation) feel necessary and unavoidable, and other, better, more just and equitable ones, less so? An encounter with the essays in this collection is a good place to begin just such a project of re-imagining the practice of contemporary postcolonial studies.

AUTHORS

IMRE SZEMAN

Imre SZEMAN is Canada Research Chair in Cultural Studies and Professor of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. His most recent books are *Global-Local Consumption* (co-ed., 2010), *Cultural Theory: An Anthology* (co-ed., 2010) and *After Globalization* (with Eric Cazdyn, 2011). Current projects include an introductory text on cultural theory and a book on the cultural politics of global oil.