Editorial

Post-colonial Interdisciplinarity

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The concern of this issue on post-colonial interdisciplinarity is with the apparent need for interdisciplinary approaches in post-colonial analyses: analyses that take textuality as their object but which are framed around wider social or political questions of power. By necessity such analyses take the critic into territories that until the end of the 1960s were not considered the property of literary studies. Yet, however necessary this expansion of the critic's focus has been in order to allow literary criticism to comment on the social functions of representation, it has exposed post-colonialism to a range of criticisms, many of which seem to arise from a perceived weakness in its interdisciplinary approach. For instance, as the gaze of the critic has been cast increasingly widely, many conservative commentators have come to lament the loss of the text. This concern has perhaps been less hotly contested in Britain than in the U.S., where the so-called 'Canon Wars' split departments. Nevertheless it seems especially problematic for post-colonial studies because even its fairly modest project of opening up the canon to writers from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Middle East has been predicated on a fundamentally political concern with wider forms of inequality, of which Eurocentric reading practices are only one facet. Post-colonialism is firstly a concern with social divisions based upon the spatial segregation of development and modernity as filtered through the prism of particular national or racial categories. Its interest in textuality is by no means incidental to these concerns since post-colonial critics have persistently sought to demonstrate the degree to which texts are shaped by, and are capable of shaping, the conceptual formation of race or nationality, and articulating particular elaborations of modernity. Far from representing the loss of textuality, post-colonialism can actually be seen to have reinvested textuality

with a social significance that we can equally find in the early work of the Leavises, albeit from a quite different perspective.¹

From a different perspective, post-colonial criticism has been accused of being insufficiently able in using the terminology of the disciplines that it turns to in order to explicate its critique of the discursive nature of modernity. The anxiety about interdisciplinarity from this perspective is that, rather than existing between disciplines, an interdisciplinary method produces a disciplinary competition in which the home discipline attempts to absorb elements of other discourses without reference to their proper object. Put bluntly, this criticism accuses post-colonial critics of not being very good at the interdisciplinarity that they profess to employ and may suspect post-colonial catachresis (to use Spivak's term) of sliding into malapropism. Presumably, it is from here that critics such as Aijaz Ahmad and Ella Shohat have complained of the co-option of post-colonialism by literary studies and the illusion of literary hermeneutics as political action that this creates.² There does seem to be some validity in this concern, even if it is sometimes too boldly stated. Accordingly, interdisciplinarity requires a considerable intellectual effort to do justice to the disciplinary competence of the disciplines involved. Nevertheless, given that a purely formalist criticism seems increasingly anachronistic, some form of interdisciplinary exercise is increasingly central to all literary criticism. As such, it is important that we become practised in the form of intellectual exertion that it involves.

Finally, interdisciplinarity is not solely a question of intellectual method and much of the vogue for interdisciplinary programmes has been driven by the rationalisation of university education since the late 1970s. In *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings explicitly associates interdisciplinarity with the exposure of the university to the force of 'market capitalism' arguing that:

One form of ... market expansion is the development of interdisciplinary programs, which often appear as the point around which radicals and conservatives can make common cause in University reform. This is partly because interdisciplinarity has no inherent political orientation It is also because the increased flexibility they offer is often attractive to administrators as a way of overcoming entrenched practices of demarcation ... in the structure of the universities. The benefits of interdisciplinary openness are numerous ... but they should not blind us to the institutional stakes that they involve.³

Notably, Readings cites Rey Chow's argument concerning the compartmentalisation of scholars working on different aspects of Asian cultures into specific nation-based subject areas; a process that places the study of other cultures within a universalist paradigm that reproduces an earlier, colonial, territorialism.⁴ The implication of this is that post-colonialism is not exempt from the problems which Readings identifies with interdisciplinarity, and his argument implicitly recalls Gayatri Spivak's observations concerning the construction of marginalised positions for tokenised members of the academy who are able to claim identification with disempowered social groups: such activity is plainly one response to post-colonialism's effort to move beyond textuality into the social.⁵

It is clear then that the gesture towards interdisciplinarity is not in itself a radical one, even if it has historically felt like one. Nevertheless, the radical potential for such work remains tantalisingly potent. One context for this current issue of *Critical Survey*, is the recent debate in the U.S. House of Representatives over the International Studies in Higher Education Act of June 2003 (HR 3077). In recommending this Act the House of Representatives sought to tie the funding of education relating to international relations, in particular concerning the Middle East, to the so-called War on Terror through the issue of Homeland Security. The need for a well-trained student body capable of engaging with the Middle East in something approaching its own terms was viewed as a crucial element in the efforts to prevent future terrorist attacks against the United States originating in that region. As part of this debate Congress took evidence from scholars critical of '“post-colonial theory”' which was characterised as 'the ruling intellectual paradigm in academic area studies' and which it was claimed took as its 'core premise' the belief 'that it is immoral for a scholar to put his knowledge of foreign languages and cultures at the service of American power'.⁶ Significantly, this criticism of post-colonial theory traced such work to Edward Said's *Orientalism* and labelled Said as an anti-American extremist. Given the influence of Said's work on literary criticism, such a perspective inevitably draws post-colonial criticism to take an interdisciplinary posture because it coincides with post-colonialism's own diagnosis of textuality as political (a view which owes more than a little to Said himself).

In reviewing the work in this issue it is helpful to note the two types of post-colonial interdisciplinarity which Ato Quayson has distinguished

in his work on the subject: instrumental interdisciplinarity, which combines disciplines for primarily pragmatic purposes, and synoptic interdisciplinarity, which borrows freely from numerous disciplines but which resists integration by shifting ‘rapidly between the universalized and particularized perspectives in such a way that these are not amenable to easy appropriation by any single disciplinary perspective’.⁷ For Quayson, following Theodor Adorno, this resistance to the anchoring of disciplinary knowledge is a necessary part of post-colonialism’s attempt to refashion the structures ‘of domination and subversion’ that are central to its ethical function: Quayson concludes that post-colonialism ‘is always entangled with ethical questions’ as a result of its focus on the negative impact of colonial structures ‘past and present’.⁸ David Huddart cites Homi Bhabha to similar effect on the nature of interdisciplinarity in his contribution to this issue. His essay revisits the questions set out above, by way of Derrida, in order to consider the degree to which interdisciplinary approaches allow for a repetition of ideas without duplicating the structures of authority which these ideas support. This potential is central to the type of synoptic interdisciplinarity that Quayson outlines and Huddart seeks to situate the efficacy of these ‘translations’ as revolutionary models that emerge in contexts that are different from their originary moment.

Anastasia Valassopoulos’s essay also characterises this synoptic interdisciplinarity. She describes interdisciplinarity as a collection of fragments that cohere as a form of critique rather than as a containable object – a kind of puzzle or mosaic of reference points that contribute to a single but multivalent whole. Importantly, and in common with other contributors, Valassopoulos sees this as defining post-colonialism’s analytic method. Her reading of Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love* as an interdisciplinary text sees the novel’s hovering over the border of a range of fictional genres and critical idioms as a necessary part of its conscious critique of existing knowledge: a critique that operates by the substitution of generic instability for fixed positions. If Valassopoulos reads Soueif’s novel as consciously and transparently interdisciplinary, Sujala Singh’s reading of Amitav Ghosh’s *Circle of Reason* (1986) identifies a more oblique use of interdisciplinarity, but one that equally disrupts the discourses of modernity inherent in narratives of scientific development. She argues that *Circle of Reason* contains an ambivalent, even contradictory, representation of science as both transcendental

humanism and a mechanism for facilitating colonial expansion through the pathologisation the colonial subject.

The essays by Thomas Tracy and Liam Connell adopt slightly different approaches to the question of interdisciplinarity. Superficially, both these essays employ a more instrumental approach to the topic. Tracy's essay rereads Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and the dominant post-colonial critiques of that novel through the disciplinary focus of biblical studies. In doing so, he indicates how the ubiquitous biblical allusions in Brontë's text cohere as a critique of imperialism founded upon the biblical condemnation of Rome. His essay demonstrates the necessity of an interdisciplinarity that is conversant with the codes of other disciplines in order to avoid misreading these codes in pursuit of our own analysis. Connell's essay attempts to identify globalisation as a theme in contemporary narratives in an attempt to suggest that the terms through which globalisation is framed in social-science accounts of the process tend to overstate its phenomenological basis. It seeks to expand upon approaches to literary globalisation that concentrate primarily on the structures of textual reproduction and distribution and argues for an understanding of globalisation as principally a narrative, or discursive, effect that reshapes internationalism around supposedly universal notions of modernity. In slightly different ways, both these essays illustrate that the division between instrumental and synoptic models of interdisciplinarity may overstate the differences between them, since the use of ideas from other disciplines for instrumental purposes seems necessarily to involve some refashioning or disruption of their original sense (an idea recently suggested by Graham Huggan⁹).

As a collection these essays contribute to an ongoing debate within post-colonial studies about the uses of interdisciplinarity. To the degree that they approach this question from differing perspectives they illustrate something of the diverse practices that the term post-colonial interdisciplinarity represents. In different ways too, they indicate the care needed in attending to the specificity of knowledge from other disciplines, but also the value and efficacy of purposeful revision of these terms in line with priorities of post-colonialism's wider critique of modernity.

Notes

1. F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment* (London: 1933), Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932).
2. Aijaz Ahmad, 'The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality', *Race & Class* 36.3 (1995), Ella Shohat, 'Notes on the Postcolonial,' *Social Text* 31/32 (1992).
3. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 39.
4. *Ibid.* 201–2.
5. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value,' in *Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia (London: Arnold, 1997).
6. Stanley Kurtz, *Testimony of Dr. Stanley Kurtz*, 2003, House of Representatives, Available: <http://edworkforce.house.gov/hearings/108th/sed/titlevi61903/kurtz.htm>, 24 May 2004.
7. Ato Quayson, 'Instrumental and Synoptic Dimensions of Interdisciplinarity in Postcolonial Studies,' *Essays and Studies* 52 ns (1999): 75, 82.
8. *Ibid.*, 91.
9. Graham Huggan, 'Postcolonial Studies and the Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity,' *Postcolonial Studies* 5.3 (2002): 264.