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Perspectives from the Radical Other



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Introduction: Perspectives from the Radical Other

Joan Anim-Addo, Giovanna Covi and Lisa Marchi

In this special issue of *Synthesis, Perspectives from the Radical Other*, we draw centrally on material collected through the AHRC-funded international research network, “Behind the looking-glass: ‘Other’-cultures-within translating cultures” <<http://www.gold.ac.uk/caribbean/behind-the-looking-glass/>> which aimed at addressing questions and issues of the Other as cultural translator. The metaphor of the mirror signifies, here, the staging of contact and the mutual reflection between discourses, practices and identities attached to cultures that are connected through the long history of colonial imperialism. This staging implies a different power dynamic between those holding the mirror to a self that is constructed on a certain idea of otherness that can be used either as a negative, or as a supplement, and in many cases as both. Rooted in the material politics and knowledge discourses that construct this Other as a racialized and gendered human being, the staging of Self and Other that the mirror necessarily implies is embedded in the legacy of biopolitical violence that has been fully materialized in the history of the slave plantation and its related racist discourses. A significant product of this has been the *radical* Other: racialized, gendered, epistemologically defined as inferior and naturally depraved, yet capable of resilience and resistance and also equipped with creativity and imagination. This Other, often non-white, non-male, non-Christian and non-western, becomes the spectre who haunts the centralizing figure of “Man” in the Enlightenment paradigm, as thinkers such as Sylvia Wynter remind us. Precariously situated between now and then, here and there, it is precisely this troubled, “dark,” yet also colourful and lively Other that we celebrate in our collection. Like an acrobatic figure performing spectacular balancing acts, this radical Other travels precariously between continents, mapping out alternative geographies and inaugurating new affective trajectories.

By focusing on such a spectral, liminal, resistant figure, our intellectual effort has engaged a politics of translation that develops within existing affiliations between cultures in Britain, as well as in the larger western world. This has led us to a key encountering of and engagement with the haunting of this radical constituency that is both subjected to othering and the subject of resistant opposition; a subject who persistently transforms subjection into agency. *Imoinda: Or She Who Will Lose Her Name* is the text that we consider particularly appropriate to interrogate this tension, as it carefully retraces the protagonist’s trajectory from violence to emancipation. In particular we have been led to appreciate, directly or by comparison, how deeply the survival and development of Imoinda, and of the radical Other

she embodies, is related to the history of the slave trade, the slave plantation and the black Diaspora. Within the dominant impetus towards the forgetting of this painful and silenced history lies an abiding tension that can turn into either conflict and the vicious repetition of violence or its creative overcoming. Such tension, we believe, can be elaborated through acts of translation that engage the existence and development of affiliations between cultures and the consequent development of a diasporic, creole and hybrid present. Equally related are our considerations about the long history of *Imoinda* as a contemporary text and a musical performance, with its resistance and resilience emblematic of the acrobatic figure representing the radical Other. Precisely in order to investigate the cultural and political potentiality of this kind of creolization in British culture today, the research network has necessarily addressed the politics and practices of excluding or relegating to oblivion certain constituencies, their collectivities, traditions and discourses. Such politics and set of practices are detrimental to literary development, as each essay in *Perspectives from the Radical Other* demonstrates, and they deeply affect intercultural and multicultural relations in the present.

It may well be that the central term, *Other*, upon which this issue is focused is considered to carry problematic overtones. This is because, as Mina Karavanta forcefully underscores in her paper, it has only too effectively in the past signified binary thinking “between civilized and savage, metropolitan and peripheral, strong and weak cultures.” Yet, despite its dichotomous history as Self and Other, or perhaps because of it, in the conceptual embrace that this Special Issue represents, we have sought specifically to re-signify the figure of the Other. We have pursued this goal in large measure by “critically engag[ing] the discomfort zone of Édouard Glissant’s ‘shared knowledge’ (8) and histories.” Importantly, we have aimed in the process to transcend “epistemological, cultural and discursive divisions that disseminate and reinvent the earlier and hitherto influential binary thought. In effect, we hope to have achieved the “radical reconceptualising and transformation” which Suzanne Scafe invokes in her paper.

Coupling *Other* with *radical* may also invoke barely dormant fears easily rekindled at this time. Yet, our concern with affiliation is a priority and cultural affiliations imply a void between one culture and the other, a void filled with the haunting presence of those whose histories, languages and traditions have been silenced. Importantly for our task, this is a void that speaks through texts that address rather than forget these absences and the histories of these radical Others represented as “signifying minorities” (Anim-Addo, 2009: 124). The texts analyzed in this issue attest to the politics of radicalizing those who remain Others because of their ethnic, religious, language and cultural differences. Most of the authors examine texts whose aesthetics are the result of a creolizing practice that hybridizes genres and whose narrative content draws on the affiliations of cultures and their histories since they were forced into contact and connection within colonization and imperialism. How does this history translate in the present that these contemporary texts address? And how can these texts promote a certain practice of translation that remains open, or even welcomes, the hauntings of the past as warnings in the present? How do we remember and reinvent an

intercultural present and a politics of affiliation without forgetting the rift between affiliation and dispossession, relation and marginalization, dominant self and radicalized other?

Several of the essays share at least in part the choice to focus their textual analysis on Anim-Addo's *Imoinda, or She Who Will Lose Her Name*. This renders it evident that the authors' investigation has been devoted to a creolization of discourses and genres, a gendered rereading of the history of Atlantic slavery and an articulation of memory that empowers present agency. Moreover, that *Imoinda* was performed in London (see interview in this issue) as this collection was being prepared made the readings all the more topical and immediate.

At the core of our research, the keyword *translation* has been placed alongside a concern to engage and complicate Caribbean creolization as a poetics and practice that is also of transnational significance when examined and reconfigured as a new paradigm of intercultural representation. Indeed numerous essays engage definitions of creolization as a travelling concept. These ideas engage with glocal discourses, the tension between tightly defended, narrow, and weakly-conceived understandings of the local and the global, as well as the longstanding ties that bind local to global citizens. Within this debate, the figure of the radical Other looms. Since the AHRC research devoted particular attention to the shaping of New Britishness, some of the essays in this collection analyze the extent to which notions of creolization may also mean the capacity to understand Britishness as an ongoing and open cultural process, allowing for more democratic and inclusive practices.

Contributors to this issue consider how we might develop insights from liminal positionalities to enable a rethinking not only of Britishness, but also of globalization and global Englishes, from the perspective of narratives by "signifying minorities," that is, from perspectives that include that of the diaspora. Do these "minor discourses," histories and cultures (Deleuze and Guattari) set new paradigms for cultural production practices and the articulation of new affiliations on a local as well as global scale? Can they open a path to discovering the "other cultures within" not only the "dominant" but also perhaps "minor" cultures? These questions are significant to the current debate concerning the crises of national identity which projects "a world of 'us' and 'them,'" particularly within which, "new" black immigrants (post-1953) are "other" (Phillips 23) together with other unrecognized constituencies, rendering this project urgent.

Focusing on the relation between the "cultures within" and taking on the challenge to articulate intercultural discourse, these essays have accepted the risk of exploring and articulating how a variety of diverse texts and art objects, together with collaborative practices of teaching and doing research may mediate cultural and social (ex)change. The contributors' concern with the radical within the Other lies also within the "artistic othering"—expounded by Mackey, and foregrounded in Scafe's paper—that is revealed through close examination of the poetics in each discourse.

The collection opens with [Joan Anim-Addo's](#) article that proposes to consider the classroom and the literary text as crucial though differentiated spaces of translation. Central in her essay is Doreen Massey's elaboration of space as a "complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and cooperation" (81). Interlinking the

complexity of Massey's "web" with an intention by the radical Other to translate, Anim-Addo explores the ways in which selected Caribbean diasporic texts by women writers employ translation to interpellate a non-Caribbean reader, challenge canonical traditions, and place black women protagonists as central characters. The contemporary textual *presence* of the black woman in these texts is put in dialogue with her absence in a historical and violently muted past.

Drawing from recent conceptualizations of translation as an open, fragmentary, and unpredictable process (Simon, 2006; Bassnett, 1998), [Lisa Marchi](#) employs creolization as a theoretical paradigm of transnational significance to explore the ways in which Other cultures translate cultures, by paying particular attention to the breaks, tensions, and relations that these translations both reveal and produce. By engaging creolization as a transnational poetics and practice and a theoretical tool to read and critically interrogate the creolized texts produced by Arab and African-Caribbean diasporic artists within the British and US nations, Marchi further explores the productive cultural dynamics but also the points of rupture that traverse an increasingly interconnected, heterogeneous, and "uneven" (Radhakrishnan, 2003) world.

[Viv Golding and Maria Helena Lima](#) reflect, together with a group of international students, on the affective and political power of texts and contexts. Central to their critical thinking and radical feminist teaching pedagogy is Anim-Addo's *Imoinda*, a text whose form, setting, and narrative structure render productive moments of relation, in which individuals and their historical experiences—rooted in colonial oppression—establish connection to each other *through difference* rather than commonality. The article discusses how the study of Anim-Addo's libretto situated at a frontier site between the university and the museum can enhance understandings of the text and the context from which the work was created and contribute to the performance of a creolized feminist pedagogy. The collaborative teaching practice prompted by *Imoinda* is, as Golding and Lima demonstrate, without being naïve to hierarchies of power and control, essentially responsible and dialogical; it privileges careful listening and speaking amongst all participants—teachers and students alike—and strives to raise diverse voices through the embodied learning that multisensory activities with museum objects can promote.

[Mina Karavanta](#) presents creolization as the urgency to develop new concepts and disseminate "contrapuntal" and "affiliated" histories (Said) in order not only to narrate the Caribbean diaspora but also the social, political, and historical development of a wider British culture. In *Imoinda*, Karavanta sees the emergence of both a site of translation, where discrepant histories are translated, written anew, and rethought, and of affiliation between different aesthetics, genres and traditions. *Imoinda*, Karavanta argues, represents a new poetics of the human whose history is now narrated by the formerly dispossessed and expropriated Other, who tirelessly attempts to imagine and practice new modes of relation outside the rigid binarism, Self/Other.

The topic of resistance is also a central theme in [Suzanne Scafe's](#) article. Taking three Caribbean texts as her point of departure, Scafe presents a version of Caribbean history that resists colonial discourse and that effects a process of healing and recovery from the epistemic

violence of colonial historiography and the continued imposition of its cultural norms. Crucial to her argument is Nathaniel Mackey's definition of "artistic othering," as a radical and resistant artistic practice that refuses a too easy re-appropriation of otherness. Scafe analyses authors who insist, rather, on the possibility of radically reconceptualizing and transforming the Other from within the Caribbean context and in relation with the world outside of it.

The possibility of radically reconceptualising and transforming the Other in more positive terms is further addressed by [Laura Fish](#) in her contribution to this collection. Engaging with and complicating Woolf's view of women as looking-glasses that "reflect[...] the figure of man at twice its size" (34), Fish illustrates how black women have historically functioned and still function as looking-glasses in a *dual* way: as blacks and as radical Others. She suggests that the misshapen image of black women created by white people and also black men provides them with a distorted, denigrating image of themselves, which they promptly resist and challenge by forging alternative, more positive self-images. The autobiographical voice in her essay underscores how deeply the transformation and reconceptualization that the research network called upon has been engaged by all authors included in this *Synthesis* special issue, *Perspectives from the Radical Other*.

Finally, [Giovanna Covi's](#) article considers literary texts by women writers, including *Imoinda*, that trouble mainstream definitions of family and love to figure shared knowledges through intercultural performances. Covi's paper insists on the primary importance of critique to confront questions of power and offers figurations of the global that, by incorporating intimacy, affects, and by troubling kinship, map material and discursive reality in a manner that is widely inclusive, through affiliation rather than filiation. Jamaica Kincaid's *See Now Then* provides the wording of her argument, since, while these figurations never forget the *then* of colonialism, they bring forward a *now* of globalization that is populated by subjectivities—radical Others—capable of subverting and transgressing the establishment, without erasing their own vulnerability.

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