

## Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

Ap. 13 (2020)

Just art. Documentary Poetics and Justice



### Giving Presence to the Present

Mina Karavanta

doi: [10.12681/syn.27568](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.27568)

Copyright © 2021, Mina Karavanta



Άδεια χρήσης [Creative Commons Αναφορά 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

## **Giving Presence to the Present**

Mina Karavanta

The Editors' Choices Section publishes articles whose theoretical scope and inquiry open the horizon of literary and cultural studies in the present by focusing on a number of current theoretical, political and cultural debates that decolonise the field of the humanities. Against the backdrop of a world that is becoming radically transformed by the economic and climate catastrophes that are brought about by the rampant policies of the neoliberal order, theoretical inquiry as a democratic practice has the crucial task of drawing from the space of the literary, which offers shelter to a radical imaginary that remains open to alterity, in order to reinvent the realm of the political. In this particular time that we struggle to recognize as 'our' present, an unevenly shared present, theoretical inquiry has intersected different fields in the humanities—literature, philosophy, history, cultural studies, media studies, translation, and the social sciences—to mention a few of the fields we have so far hosted in the journal. A growing number of decolonial discourses emerging from and developing across the places that were identified as the dark continents are currently reformulating the question of human and citizenship rights, the right to soil and movement, and the right to political and social participation and representation, independently of one's citizenship status, country of origin, religion and ethnic identity. Such discourses try to dismantle the colonial and neo-colonial aesthetics and conceptual framework that continue to hierarchise being and categorise it into higher and lower species by thus legitimising the foundational antinomies between the developed and the underdeveloped cultures, the secular and the non-secular religions, the civilised and the rogue nations, and the Euro-American North and the Global South.

With the inauguration of this section, the Editors wish to draw the attention of scholars, intellectuals, and artists writing from and thinking across the time-places that have been considered to be the periphery of the world and whose work foregrounds the poetics and politics of texts that deconstruct the narrow view of the world as the space of borders and divisions. This section focuses on essays that project the world as a site of connections and alliances without foregoing or putting under erasure the existing and ongoing oppositions, conflicts and politics of dissent that make up the world. It contributes to the ongoing effort to promote the essay as a thinking genre, whose “mode of presencing, of being present, of voicing presence” (David Scott, “The Last Conjuncture” ix), not only represents but critically refashions the present; and whose throbbing vein is the formulation of questions that are not limited to a small number of experts but are rather open to a wider community of scholars, intellectuals, younger students and artists. At a time when the field of literary and cultural studies appears to be further marginalised in the university and in the public sphere, the essay as a genre that has developed across different literary traditions and languages and is the most condensed form that best foregrounds the aesthetic and political potentiality of the literary, can reinvigorate the practice of theoretical and cultural analysis and refashion it as a political tool by stressing its relevance and timeliness in the present.

In the current issue, the Editor’s Choices Section is hosting two thinking essays that are written in this spirit and manner of giving presence to the present: R. Radhakrishnan’s “Notes Towards and Exilic Co-Existence” and Elena Tzelepis’s “Art’s Political Criticality: At the Thresholds of Difference and Eventuality”. Radhakrishnan raises the timely question of co-existence at a time of new migrations and dispossessions that are often met with xenophobia, closed borders, and, in general, neo-nationalist and neo-racist politics and policies. Radhakrishnan frames the question of co-existence as a political and ontological task by dismantling the hierarchy that places existence, its ontological presuppositions and political markers, as prior to co-existence. Instead he argues that in the age of exile, dispossession and migration, co-existence is a political given that, drawing from the experiences of deracination, homelessness and dispossession, can invent forms of belonging and alliance that are not accountable to the politics of autochtony, filiation and blood. Stretching the limits of Edward Said’s critique of humanism in the name of humanism and Martin Heidegger’s deconstruction of the blindness of humanistic inquiry to the exilic condition of existence, which always presupposes and is thus radicalised by co-existence,

Radhakrishnan ventures out into the limits of critique to ask the question of the political. What kind of home in and of the world can be imagined and reconstructed so that co-existence can be administered as “normative policy”, Radhakrishnan asks. How can co-existence be achieved “normatively, governmentally” and. “in whose name” if the task is not just to think phenomenologically but to turn that thinking into a politics of “relationality” that works “against the ossification of community” and “in the name of the Open, and not in the name of any enclosure that promises to accommodate the Open”? Performing the limits of critique in the form of an essay that pursues this question does not immediately produce the normative policy for a co-existence that transgresses the limits of ethnocentric bias, nationalistic attachments and neo-racisms; it does however reinforce the reciprocity between the growing demand for a politics of co-existence that challenges the provincialism of home and can be developed in a world of contradictions and oppositions and the democratizing potentiality of a theoretical analysis that deconstructs the order of politics to attend to the realm of the political as the realm that is opened by alterity and its demands on the present.

Elena Tzelepis’s essay also performs critique at the limits by examining the political capacity of the poetic action to bring into presence “different shapes,” in other words, different forms of alterity that have yet to be acknowledged, that question “the intelligibility of presence.” Her essay explores “the mimetic element of art’s criticality” through an intertextual reading of Plato’s *Republic* and Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* and examines “art’s critical performativity in its mutual affective entanglement of the literary and the philosophical, as a means of contesting predicaments of power and reconfiguring (instead of representing) the world.” Art’s mimetic capability is not necessarily self-referent, Tzelepis argues in her “dialogical meditation” on Plato and Nietzsche, but rather involves the critical praxis of reshaping and, thus, rethinking the presuppositions, axioms, and truth claims that structure intelligibility and can thus dis-orient and limit the interpretation of the world. The double role of art as both critique and criticality, which is directed at an exterior object while destabilising its own assumptions, “allow us to reclaim and re-embody the never-ending task of imagining the present and the future.” Maybe not to accept the conditions of the present as it is but to change it so that the future is made possible *otherwise*. How can art’s “political criticality” contribute to the re-democratization of the *polis* against the financial exigencies and political restrictions of the neoliberal order? How does art enable us to stay with the theoretical and political trouble of engendering non-hegemonic ways of being

in the world at a time when the world further complicates and involves all worlds and becomes the world of All, what Édouard Glissant calls “le Tout-Monde”?

Rigorously engaging their questions, Radhakrishnan and Tzelepis invite us to meditate on the present not only because we need to better understand what the present is but also, and most crucially, because it is timely urgent to envision the ways by which we can transform it.

### Works Cited

- Glissant, Édouard. Glissant, Édouard. *Traité du Tout-Monde*. Gallimard, 1997.
- Scott, David. “The Last Conjecture.” *Small Axe*, 18:2 (2014): vii-x