



## Commonwealth of letters: British literary culture and the emergence of postcolonial aesthetics

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criticism, something that, despite occasionally vague and abstruse language, Mukherjee's book does with brilliance, bringing in the postcolonial perspective.

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**Commonwealth of letters: British literary culture and the emergence of postcolonial aesthetics**, by Peter J. Kalliney, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, 316 pp., £41.99 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 1999 7797 0

*Commonwealth of Letters* represents a burgeoning interest in mid-20th-century British culture, which, as Kalliney acknowledges, “has proved awkward for literary historians” because it falls “between the cracks of modernist studies, postcolonial theory and even postmodernism” (117). Challenging the view that “the metropolitan cultural establishment and anticolonial literature” existed in a state of “outright hostility” (118), the work offers an enlightening insight into the entanglements and collaborations between a British cultural elite associated with modernism and an emerging corpus of formerly colonized writers regarded largely as the forerunners of postcolonial literature. It is an approach to the period that complements J. Dillon Brown's recent book *Migrant Modernism* (2013): the 1950s, both Kalliney and Dillon Brown maintain, cannot be characterized as a blank space between colonial and postcolonial literatures, or modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. Instead, the decade must be regarded as a pivotal moment when modernism was adapted and expanded upon in response to the processes of decolonization and mass immigration from the former colonies.

Where *Migrant Modernism* offers a predominantly aesthetic approach, with edifying close readings of key Caribbean texts, *Commonwealth of Letters* concentrates more on book history and what Kalliney calls the “concrete forms of exchange and reciprocation” (118) between established British literary figures and institutions, on the one hand, and late colonial writers and intellectuals on the other. The study begins with a discussion of Nancy Cunard's 1934 anthology *Negro*, which included contributions from Ezra Pound, Langston Hughes, Samuel Beckett and W.E.B. Du Bois. Drawing on extensive archival work, Kalliney maps the myriad networks of “inter-colonial contact” (4) that followed *Negro*, from Kamau Brathwaite's reinterpretation of “Leavisite theories of cultural traditions” (95) through to the recruitment of West Indian writers by the BBC, the relationship between Amos Tutuola and Faber & Faber and “the emergence of postcolonial literature as a distinct sector of the literary market” (180), in part due to the success of the Heinemann African Writers Series.

The central thread that runs through the impressive scope of the book is Kalliney's reading of late colonial writers as adopting the modernist idea of “aesthetic autonomy”: the notion that “a work of art should transcend economic calculations, political partisanship, or racial tensions” (5–6). This is not to disregard the importance of literature in challenging the inherent inequities of colonialism, but rather to address the influence of modernism on writers who sought to resist the

segregation of works of art along racial lines. Kalliney deals with this relationship between modernist and postcolonial literatures deftly, offering a new perspective on an era of literary history that is all too often characterized by antagonism between Anglo-American modernism and postcolonial politics. The interactions that *Commonwealth of Letters* reveals are not peripheral to existing narratives of 20th-century literature but disconcert those narratives, forcing us to think otherwise about the categories that order 20th century cultural production.

### Reference

Brown, J. Dillon. 2013. *Migrant Modernism: Postwar London and the West Indian Novel*. London: University of Virginia Press.

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**Postcolonial translocations: cultural representation and critical spatial thinking**, edited by Marga Munkelt, Markus Schmitz, Mark Stein and Silke Stroh, *Cross/Cultures* 156: ASNEL Papers 17, Amsterdam/New York, Editions Rodopi, 2013, 414 pp., €108 (hardback), ISBN 978 9 0420 3631 4

**The contemporary novel and the city: reconceiving national and narrative form**, by Stuti Khanna, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 240 pp., £55 (hardback), ISBN 978 1 1373 3624 8

According to the editors of *Postcolonial Translocations*, their essay collection “argues the case for establishing space more firmly and explicitly as an analytic paradigm in postcolonial studies” (xx). But thinking about space was always central to the colonial project. A cognitive map of the world in which territory was imagined as *terra nullis* – empty space awaiting occupation by Europeans or underused space waiting to be made productive – was indispensable. This logic of strangeness, in which the geographical and cultural differences of a territory from the metropole marked it as ripe for colonization, was supplemented by the logic of sameness in the settler imaginary. As Edward Said observed in *Culture and Imperialism*, wherever Europeans went “their conscious aim was to transform territories into images of what they had left behind” (1993, 271). Recalling Said reminds us that postcolonial literary studies has from its inception been engaged with the complex, tangled relationship between imaginative literature, colonial and anti-colonial discourses, and competing ways of mapping the world. In short, the “analytic paradigm” of space has not been in noticeably short supply, and so the editors of this volume needed a sharper sense of the distinctive contribution they wished to make to the field.

This collection is an example of some of the parts being greater than the whole. Perhaps this is inevitable with a collection of 21 essays that grew out of conference proceedings (the 2009 annual conference of the Association for the Study of New