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American Studies: Margins, Middles and Metropoles

Loes Nas and Lesley Marx

Introduction

This special edition of the *Journal of Literary Studies* springs from a growing interest in American Studies in South Africa. In the past few years three American Studies conferences were held, first in 1994 at the University of Durban-Westville, then in 1996 at the University of the Western Cape where the Cape American Studies Association was launched, and in 1998 at the University of Cape Town. American Studies as such does not (yet) exist in South Africa; however, this does not mean to say that parts of American literature, culture or history are not being taught.

Generally speaking canonical American literature used to form part of the curriculum of the English departments in South Africa, but in the 1980s many institutions provided for more South African literature. The core curriculum remained British literature which seemed sacrosanct and could not be replaced, so American literature had to make way. Meanwhile a lot of water has gone under the bridge, and many English departments now teach a mixed bag of British, Southern African, African, American, Carribean, European and Latin-American literature in translation to which in the 1990s courses in literary theory, cultural and media studies were added.

When Rosemary Crockett, then cultural attaché to the United States Embassy, arrived in South Africa, she was immediately struck by the pervasiveness of popular American culture. She observed in her address at the launch of the Cape American Studies Association on 4 July 1996:

> Young South Africans and President Mandela wear baseball caps proclaiming the New York Yankees and the Chicago Bulls. Sweatshirts boast the names of U.S. colleges and universities never attended. The American flag is displayed on tee shirts, trousers, kombis, jackets, coffee mugs, just about any object known to man. Scarves in the colours and design of the American flag dangle from more rearview mirrors in South Africa than in America.
>
> (Crockett quoted in Marx, Nas & Dunwell 1997: 1)

The SABC, M-Net and e-tv broadcast many American soap operas, talk shows, detective series and feature films, and American plays and musicals are performed in theatres. The majority of films shown on the circuit are American. Llandudno and Camps Bay, Paitra Russell argues in "The Idea of Africa and the Business of Blackness: South Africa's Transatlantic Connections" in this special issue, remind her of Beverly Hills; the Tyger Valley Mall near Cape Town with its over-the-top Mississippi Detour, where a river with two-seater boats runs through the restaurant, strikes her as typical middle-America. In the jazz clubs we hear American jazz; in the townships in the Cape metropolitan area gangsters unite in Westside-Story-like gangs known as The Hard Livings and their rivals The Americans. On the Cape Flats, south of Cape Town, large housing projects have come to resemble the Wild West: in the first half of 1998 alone over two hundred people were gunned down in gangster-related shoot-outs, bomb- and drive-by attacks. Tupac Shakur features on giant wallpaintings in desolate housing estates, not unlike Dr T.J. Eckleburg's eyes in *The Great Gatsby*'s Valley of Ashes. "Yet despite all these manifestations of popular American culture", Crockett argues, "the United States is basically an unknown entity in South Africa" (quoted in Marx et. al 1997: 1).

Is this necessarily an undesirable thing? Is it important that people know about the United States, know about its basic philosophy and history, and about its culture? The present time as we would all agree, is characterised by multicultural debates, in which ethnic and national identities are posited as opposites to each other, and South Africa is no exception. If we look at the recent history of the United States, we see that in the past ethnic and national identities struggled to find common ground. Now ethnic minorities can claim political and cultural space on the basis of their belief in "America as a nation protective of individual rights for all regardless of ethnic origins or race" (Bodnar 1996: 716). In the changing fabric and demographics of American society minorities have become an integral part. This shift is also reflected in the academy's response with its focus in the 1990s on cultural and ethnic minorities. It does help us to understand the role identity and cultural heritage, whether national or ethnic, play in the construction of the narrative of identity. The narrative of assimilation has thus definitely been replaced by that of resistance, a terrain where "individual and group identities are forged and cultures meet, clash and transform one another" (Rosenfelt 1996: 53).

The question this special edition of the *Journal of Literary Studies* addresses is: what role does American culture play in the construction of these narratives? And secondly, how can we as academics reconceptualise these changing constructions of identity? How can we integrate these narratives of human diversity, or of multiculturalism, if you will, into American Studies curriculum

material?

One way of doing this is to take a comparative, cultural approach to contemporary America, by looking at the nature of culture and society. How do cultural meaning systems and social locations influence human perception, thought and behaviour, and how is this complex cultural and social composition of the contemporary United States represented in literary, or more broadly, cultural, texts? How do the various cultural, ethnic and minority groups and meaning systems get constructed? What narratives are constructed?

American Studies is part of "Area Studies" in the United States. Knowledge of other world areas helps us to interact more effectively with each other, but also to refine our understanding of ourselves and others as individuals and as societies. Cultures are not finite, fixed entities, but changing and mutable. Africa and the Americas have been in contact for centuries and Africa has had its effect on the United States. Our third section therefore focuses on the interaction between Africa and the Americas.

We have divided the contributions to this special issue into three different sections; the first deals with forms of popular and material American culture, the second with twentieth-century American fiction, while the third section has a comparative focus.

First Section: Popular Culture

Eve Bertelsen discusses *Pulp Fiction* as an example of metacinema, whereby the radically opposed genres of crime film and TV comedy are parodically counterpointed. In this way cinematic Hollywood conventions of viewer identification and closure are undermined, allowing the film to operate as a metatext that comments on filmic narrative strategies. Simultaneously, Bertelsen argues, the consumerist ideology of the nineteen nineties plays an important part in structuring the narrative games played in the film, as it consumes earlier films supplying identity and motivation to its characters while simultaneously doing the same for the viewers of the film. As Bertelsen claims, *Pulp Fiction* offers many films for the price of one, and every sign comes overloaded, and the diegesis plays fast and loose with narrational norms.

David Schalkwyk argues that the New Globe Theatre in London and Euro Disney in Paris show similarities in their conception. If it is held that Disneyfication represents kitsch consumerism and inauthentic imitation, the Globe theatre, allegedly representing authenticity, conforms to the standards of Disneyfied hyperreality existing between academic research and being a tourist resort. Nevertheless, watching a Shakespeare play in a reconstructed Globe is

characterised as a postmodern authentic experience in the sense that the authenticity does not lie in the object but rather in the experience of the object, and in this way the Globe does succeed in becoming a living museum. In Disneyland every effort seems to have been made to confuse the Magic Kingdom with "the real thing" out there. In spite of Disneyland Paris being the ultimate experience in consumerism, the author argues that the element of pleasure should not be forgotten in this context. And in a sense Disneyland seems more authentic in its imitation of its phenomenological self than the New Globe theatre in its imitation of the real, privileging the "serious" above the "fictional".

Jessica Tiffin looks at how nostalgia accounts for the appearance of *Star Wars* in a contemporary South African comic strip, *Madam and Eve*, arguing that in spite of a revamp of both the film and the comic in the mid-nineteen nineties, the actual content has essentially stayed the same. Both the "New South Africa" and the Rebel triumph over the Empire in *Star Wars* represent a mythology that resonates across different cultural experiences. Yet, Tiffin argues, the message of both is bleak: self-preservation is favoured over moral justice. On the other hand, however, we should be comforted by the idea that popular films like *Star Wars* and comic strips like *Madam and Eve* are at least capable of contributing to the symbols and mythologies through which we understand the world.

Nicholas Gevers discusses subversive tendencies in the science fiction texts of Michael Swanwick, who undermines and radically transforms the erudite, pre-Tolkienian fantasy novel as propagated by Dunsany and Eddison and the traditional fantasy novel embodied by Tolkien, bringing these into confrontation with the political traumas and the alienated youth culture of the 1980s. Using postmodern techniques, Swanwick's stories, Gevers argues, present us with a self-conscious form of science fiction in an attempt to map and simultaneously critique the many different varieties of science fiction and fantasy novels.

Gabeba Baderoon explores the details of *Twin Peaks*, in a wide-ranging and densely argued discussion of the ways in which this ground-breaking television series created a rich intertextual, multilayered narrative that plays with tensions between generic conventions and subversions, between clarity or normality and mystery or enigma and which asks questions of gendered conventions of the genres of detective fiction and soap opera. Central to the series is also the destabilising of authorship and authority (especially as this is vested in both Lynch and the detective figure).

Second Section: Fiction

Michael Beatty rereads F. Scott Fitzgerald's canonical *The Great Gatsby* in the light of his reservations about the author's suppression of Gatsby's criminality. He argues that Gatsby in his pursuit of a Platonic conception of himself resorts to crime, which seems to be endorsed by Nick Carraway, arguably the centre of moral consciousness in the novel. Since Carraway's belief in Gatsby's essential incorruptibility is undermined by the latter's connection to racketeer Wolfshiem, Gatsby's romantic credibility is rendered problematic. Fitzgerald's conception of Gatsby is described as a failed sentimental attempt to give credence to the ideals of the American Dream.

Claire Keyes argues that Leslie Marmon Silko's impulse in *Ceremony* is both feminist and tribal, rooting her aesthetics in the oral tradition of the Keres/Laguna tribe of New Mexico. Because story-telling has restorative powers and is central to the survival and wellbeing of the tribe, Silko's thematic concerns centre on the connection between memory and story-telling. In this way story becomes a vehicle for maintaining tribal traditions and informing tribal identity. According to Keyes women, being able to think the universe into being, are at the root of the Keres/Pueblo story-telling tradition and central to the creation of community.

Loes Nas suggests that Barth's entire later work, having developed an on-going critique of different forms of mimesis, is governed by the principle of narrativist mimesis, in which narrative has become the condition for living. Barth's fictional enterprise centres on the genesis, viability and survival of fiction which was deemed to be exhausted in the nineteen sixties and seventies. Barth's programme for the replenishment of literature, she argues, is a return with a difference to "the springs of narrative", informed by canonical works of world literature and contemporary literary-aesthetic theory.

Jeffrey Folks's contribution focuses on how Toni Morrison's novel, *Jazz*, which deals with the contestation for cultural authority between recent African-American immigrants to the North and established middle-class residents of the North, is concerned with the reclaiming of language by African-Americans as a first step towards cultural assertion. Narrative voice empowers the narrator of the novel to take control over language which leads to a deeper understanding of both the past and the present. Morrison, Folks argues, has succeeded in creatively refashioning American colonial language into a new form of African-American cultural expression.

Deirdre Byrne's article on desire, utterance and identity in the fiction of Samuel Delany who is an African-American, gay, yet married writer, is informed by Julia Kristeva's writings on language and power. Insisting that

gender identities in *Stars in my Pocket like Grains of Sand* are constructed in and through language and are intricately bound up with power, she shows that Delany reverses conventional notions of acceptable sexual expression and challenges the very idea of centrality and marginality in his work.

Third Section: Comparative

Paitra Russell explores some of the ideological assumptions at work behind African-Americans' imaged and imagined presence in postapartheid South Africa. She argues that there has been a long history of interaction between African-Americans and South Africans. Recently, however, a shift has taken place in the African-American perception of South Africa. South Africa is no longer considered as a site for political activism, but rather a site through which economic salvation can be achieved for African-American corporate bodies.

Miki Flockemann compares three novels of development, set in South Africa, Canada and the Caribbean, and offers a fresh perspective on fictions of childhood by discussing these texts in terms of "diasporic double consciousness". This negatively defined doubleness, she argues, becomes a strategy of empowerment in the development of subjecthood located physically and metaphorically between developing and developed countries. Fictions of childhood produced in societies in transition can provide fertile ground for analysing attempts to reclaim suppressed identities.

Derek Maus compares Thomas Pynchon's *V.* and J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* focusing on the paternalistic model of colonisation in both novels. In an attempt to identify the source of violence inherent in processes of colonisation, this model links the desire to control and dominate sexuality and death-love. Informed by Georges Bataille's writings on eroticism and Keith Booker's on domination, Maus argues that both Pynchon and Coetzee expose the paternalistic mythography of the colonial paradigm in an attempt to palliate the rising tide of violence in contemporary society.

William Spurlin re-examines African-American writer James Baldwin's critical reception in the nineteen sixties in the light of contemporary theories on queer identity. Insisting on its own historical and material specificity, queer theory tends towards essentialist impulses, and has, as Spurlin argues, neglected to look at the political implications of forms of oppression for queers of colour. His article also investigates the possible social and political intersections with queer identity politics and cultural practices in South Africa.

Peter Merrington traces the origin of the period phenomenon of pageants, suggesting some connections between British imperialist ideology and American

civil ceremonial in the early-twentieth century. Attempting to draw conclusions about the role of public or national identity formation and the construction of "public history" within modern civil society, he resituates the performance of pageantry and rewrites these grand narratives of history and national identity under the incentive of postcolonial pressures.

The variety of contributions to this special issue is an indication of the richness of this field of study. Especially as universities move towards programmatic curriculum planning, we hope that the material offered by this edition of the journal will encourage teachers to consider the value of American Studies in millennial South Africa.

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