

EDITORIAL

THE WORD IN THE WORLD - TRANSNATIONALISM AND AFRICAN/AFRICAN DIASPORIC WOMEN'S WRITING

Cheryl Sterling, Guest Editor
The City College, City University of New York

Contact:

Cheryl Sterling, The City College, City University of New York
csterling@ccny.cuny.edu

To cite this editorial:

[Cheryl Sterling. "Editorial: The Word in the World – Transnationalism and African/African Diasporic Women's Writing." *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*, Winter 2017, vol. 18, pp. 1-13]

In this focus on African and African diasporic women's literature, the subtitle of transitions, transformations and transnationalism must be foregrounded and, even more subtly revised, for in the transnational we find issues of transitions and transformations. Transnationalism is an open signifier; it can denote diversity or sameness, contested sites or terrains, or their conjunctions, interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary studies and intellectual movements, and the international movements of peoples, ideas and things. In many ways, the term transnationalism functions like a cognate of the terms diaspora, internationalism, and globalization, or even an amalgam of all three. Transnationalism has also been correlated with modernity and postmodernism. It walks hand in hand with technology, the movement of global capitalism, neoliberalism, issues of environmental justice, and international policies of nation states. Like most theoretical constructs, its range and topoi shifts based on the field of inquiry of the writer or academic, not to mention the political stakes, which each and every individual intellectual must navigate at any given moment.

In thinking about this volume, questions that come to light are: how does transnationalism redefine aspects of feminist engagement, cultural forms, political causes, (hetero)patriarchal discourses and issues of sexuality and sexual difference? Conceptually, theoretically, and pragmatically, what is the potentiality and trajectory of the literary voices and creativity of African and African Diasporic women writers and artists in their trans- portation, transformation, incorporation, and dissemination as subjects within this movement, who authorize its formative constructs, indexical lens, and its range of permutations? Following the logic of such inquiries, transnationalism trajectory alongside postmodernity constitutes an important underlying rubric of the engagement with the articles in this edition. The two terms—transnational and postmodern, whether intersecting or clashing, depending on genre, area or era, acknowledge and emphasize a generative multiperspectivism to any given set of relations. As such, it behooves us to understand the multiple ranges of engagement that its discourse, creativity, and activism trigger.

Different theorists in different arenas of thought opine on transnationalism's differences. Leela Fernandes (2013) focuses on the genealogy of transnational feminism, and points out that that transnationalism allows for non-static racialized identity. It decenters Eurocentric worldviews and concepts of the nation and its sphere of domination (p. 182). Transnationalism within this definitional context is more about disidentification and remaking positionality. However, she also points to its temporal and spatial signification as it is about the new and the now as a more contemporary moment of globalization (p. 191). Nawal El-Saadawi (2000) provocatively calls transnationalism, "globalization from below," in how it allows for mobilization by peoples struggling against globalizations top down, economic and political agendas, to "work and to fight and to struggle for justice, freedom..." (Meridians, 2000, pp. 14-15). More concretely, Amrita Basu (2000) highlights the imbrication of transnationalism and technology in pointing out that such activism across borders cannot exist without

these new forms of technological linkages (Meridians, 2000, p. 13). Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick, and J.T. Way (2008) conversely historicize transnationalism and link it “to genealogies of anti-imperial and decolonizing thought, ranging from anticolonial Marxism to subaltern studies to Third World feminism and feminisms of color” (p. 628).

I must insert a contention in how within feminist theorizing of difference, as African and Diasporic women, we have allowed ourselves to become part of the lumpen proletariat in accepting denunciatory categories like “the other,” or reductive collectivistic distances by terminologies like Third World feminism, feminisms of color, Global South feminisms, or women of color. Arguably each of these usages has allowed for critique and inclusion with discourses about feminism and women around the world, but it has done so by generating a minoritizing distance, which must be interrogated. Mignonette Chiu, one of the voices in the reproduced discussion titled, “Transnational Feminisms Roundtable,” re-scribes those categories of colored and third world, which she acknowledges, point to attempts at equivalences with Western feminism. Instead, she enumerates the manifold possibilities in which to deploy transnationalism as a political framework in that it exemplifies “a way of seeing that potentially offers a feminist escape from overdetermined colonial and colonizing, liberal and neoliberal, Western paradigms, narratives, processes, methodologies, practices, and applications” (Blackwell et. al., 2015, p. 6). Such reconditioning, as I see it, build on the feminist paradigms of seminal texts like *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (1981) by Filomina Chioma Steady, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994) by Carole Boyce Davies, and *Moving Beyond Boundaries*, volumes 1 and 2 (1995), by Carole Boyce Davies and Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie. More recently, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1991) concept of intersectionality, in referring to the analytic imbrication of categories such as gender, race, class, and the law has become prominent in transnational dialogues. However, in many ways, this intersectional paradigm is

a reworking of Patricia Hill Collins's (1990) concept of interlocking systems of oppression. What I'm saying here is that the transnational framework is not new, at least for African and Diasporic women. Pioneers like the scholars above, long included the colonial, neo-colonial, western feminism, local patriarchies, globalism, and self in the list of interrogatory categories to analyze African and African Diasporic women subjectivity and positionality.

These essays, I hope, extend such multiperspectivism, in their acknowledgement of shifting positionalities and subjectivities, wherein issues of race, gender, class, culture, religion, language, and sexuality are constitutive elements that allow for comparatives in the experience of sameness and difference (see Villaverde, 2010, p. 178). Hence, when transnationalism conjoins or is substituted for diaspora, internationalism or globalism, and linked to African and African Diasporic women's literature and creativity, it allows for the questioning of the psychosocial foundation of Phyllis Wheatley's "celebration" of her emancipation from darkness. It allows for an interrogation of the oral corpus of songs, poetry, and stories generated by women like the famed Iyá Nassó, Francisca da Silva, in Brazil. Francisca, an enslaved woman, who originated from Oyo in Nigeria, is credited with founding the first Yoruba-based *candomblé terreiro* in Salvador da Bahia in the early 1800s, and who later returned to Whydah (Nigeria) as a free woman (Sterling 2012, pp. 29-30). It allows scholars to take former slave and evangelist, Amanda Smith from the back-burners of history and privilege her autobiography as a treatise on life in the United States, England, Ireland, Scotland, India and Liberia, all places she sojourned, in the late 1800s. It revisits famed pioneers like Josephine Baker, in not just the iconoclastic representations of her creativity in Paris, but her dedication to the French resistance from her new base in Morocco, and her unending support of the civil rights movement in the United States. African Diasporic writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, Nancy Morejón, and Maryse Condé, just to name a few, are more cogently linked to the Pan-African ethos and activism they narrated and embodied. And that there is a new African

Diaspora, one not defined by transatlantic slavery, but by migration and movement from and around the continent of Africa to the urban hubs of Europe and the U.S. and back, that spark and chronicle this present moment of transnational creativity, with writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, NoViolet Bulawayo, Taiye Selassie, and Imbolo Mbue should not be taken for granted.

With the new wave of African and African Diasporic women writers, the transnational sphere now consists of voices that were at the margins of gender and race hierarchies, that highlight the individual writer within the complexities of relations in and out of national, cultural, religious, gender, and ideological bonds. Transnationalism's use as a paradigm of engagement is open to elaboration in that it has profound effects on local and global cultures, the movement of peoples, the relations of power and domination, and intra-gender and inter-gender relations. However, by no means have the authors of the essays in this edition limited themselves to these parameters. Each author opens questions and dialogues that do indeed touch on different issues within a transnational context such as the rethinking and rearticulation of feminist politics, the function of (hetero)patriarchy within the articulation of self-hood and sexuality, the question of nation and nationhood in the struggles of the postcolony; cultural exposition in the local and transnational contexts; migrant subjectivity and experientiality, and female writers and artists as agents of change and producers of knowledge. As such, collectively, the essays dynamically and iconoclastically metamorphose into something new and different. What I have argued is the complex landscape of transnationalism today, which keeps present the diffused exigence of post-modernism, of our diasporic consciousness, and of emergent articulations and groupings. Transitions, transformations and transnationalism confers an unlimited vista of inquiry, thought and action as seen in this array of literature by African and African Diasporic women writers.

The first essay by Rahul Gairola engages the novels, *Abeng* by Michelle Cliff and *Cereus Blooms at Night* by Shanti Mootoo. Focusing on the “duppy” or malevolent spirit as Gairola terms it, he analyzes the ghosts figure as a commentator on sexual pathology in regards to queerness in postcolonial Caribbean societies. I begin with this article because it addresses the framework, tone, and intent, of the open signification represented by conceptualizations of the transnational. Whereas the duppy trope allows for transgressive passages beyond liminality, interrogations of the normative, transformability of characters, and convergence of elements, it sets the tone of how this volume considers the complexity of this critical category. The duppy in Gairola’s analysis is seen as a migratory figure, between the spiritual and the sexual worlds, but ultimately as a diasporic figure at the edge of these two realms. Focusing on the characters Clare in *Abeng* and Mala in *Cereus*, Gairola looks at Caribbean lesbianism through the conceptual lens of M. Jaqui Alexander, as “erotic autonomy as a form of decolonization politics.” Queerphobia in the Caribbean, he suggests, resurrects spectres of dissent, apparent in the migrant duppy trope, but is also apparent due to the continual exploitation of the region.

Edward Said in his now famous essay, “Traveling Theory” (1983), asks a seemingly apparent question, what do theories do when they travel? Said’s question addresses transnational interactions, but also the translocal, in the way that global flows affect the local. Richard Oko Ajah and Letitia Egege address the translocal through the arena of fashion and aesthetics. In the essay, “Deconstructing the Ivorian Vestimentary Traditions: New Fashion, Contemporary Beauty and New Identity in Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie’s *Aya de Yopougon*,” the authors explore the relatively new literary form of the graphic novel, to problematize contemporary African aesthetic paradigms. Ajah and Egege use an eclectic framework of semiotic, postmodern and postcolonial theories to discuss body politics in the deliberate fashion choices, hairstyles, and cosmetics made by young women to highlight their femininity and sensuality. In some ways this article validates Judith

Butler's (1990) claim that gender is a social construct, but not in the way that she articulates it. For Butler, gender and sex, bodily identity, do not necessarily correlate, as identity is not a set category but an actively constructed performance with the body as a staging ground. Such aesthetic choices, Ajah and Egege argue, establishes both subjectivity and group identity, in becoming a form of everyday resistance to elitist dominant cultures and cultural nationalism. The body as Susan Bordo (2004) suggests becomes a text of culture, and in this analysis a new culture influenced by the transnational flow of fashion styles makes a peripheral space, like Yopougon (the outskirts of Abidjan), a center of female agency and resistance.

Just as Ajah's and Egege's essay allows for the interrogation of a new literary form that asserts a postmodern aesthetic, Amanda Renée Rico analyzes visual and written narratives of dystopian, apocalyptic futures that are part of the science fiction/Afrofuturist genre. In the third article in this edition, "Gendered Ecologies and Black Feminist Futures in Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi*, and Wangechi Mutu's *The End of Eating Everything*, and Ibi Zoboi's "The Farming of Gods," Rico addresses the signification of a gendered imperative and further complicates the view of the black female body by engaging with texts which have ecological imagery. She questions and retools the Afrofuturist paradigm to cover past, present and future, and analyzes concepts of ecofeminism, to draw on its more particularistic vision of ecowomanism as a theoretical construct for/by African and Diasporic women. The black female body, Rico poses, becomes both a metaphor for ecological abuse and a conduit for the earth's redemption. Through the works examined, black female embodiment takes on almost "sheroic" signification, against its historical-material and symbolic negation, to assert a future alterity that hinges on African and Diasporic women's agency.

Felix Mutunga Ndaka article, may well retool Said's inquiry as the question that seemingly undergirds the work is, what happens

to individuals culturally, socially, and politically when they travel? In “Rupturing the Genre: Un-Writing Silence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*” Ndaka examines how female voices transform narrative strictures, and more specifically, the codes of racial and patriarchal discourse, and the confines of migrant subjectivity. Ndaka proposes that Adichie deploys a highly hybridized novel form to trouble epistemic/discursive control and closure, and interrogate the surveillance of migrant, and racial and gendered relations in the ways the characters negotiate their seeming marginality and powerlessness. The fourth article in this edition, it performs an analysis of space and place, and focuses on the hair salon as an intimate, but politicized narrative space and how female aesthetics and hair, like Ajah and Egege, is a signifier for shifting subjectivities. Then, Ndaka traces the arch of the main character’s, Ifemelu’s blog, as a freeing space that transcends the imposed silences of (inter) race relations and dialogues. The novel, Ndaka shows, ultimately allows for the multiplicity of subjectivity in more globally dialogic contexts.

As issues of transnational feminism are just as much grounded in the local struggles for change as in the global networks of communion with other like-minded subjects desiring or working for change, transnational feminist scholars in a collective statement against war point out how in the conjoined purview and actions of patriarchy, nationalism, violence and warfare, women’s perspectives are degraded or excluded, while women suffer more from the effects of war (Bacchetta, et al., 2002, p. 304). Janice Spleth article explores how the role of women in warfare has evolved, and in effect has transformed her place in the war story. The article, “Exploring the Gendered Nature of National Violence: The Intersection of Patriarchy and Civil Conflict in Tanella Boni’s *Matins de couvre-feu* (Mornings Under Curfew),” gives voice to the gendered nature of violence by focusing on the fictional narrator’s perspective on war. Spelt employs feminist theories and the concept of ecofeminism, in particular, to explore such gendered perspectivism. Boni, she shows, is writing in concert within a new

trajectory of women novelists that break this masculinist, patriarchal hold as the authors and interpreters of the effects of warfare and as the harbingers of peace.

Maylei Blackwell also suggests that the transnational signals “unaligned geographies of difference” (2015, p. 7), but in attempting in this edition to give space and valence to the heterogeneity and multiperspectivism of African and Diasporic women’s voices, these articles, I hope, rather highlight how these differences align. The last two essays in this issue focus on lesser known voices in the Caribbean, who perform different types of genealogical and ideological constructions to reposition the liminal black female subject in national narratives of identity. Stephanie Gomez Menzies article, “On Memory and Resistance: Motherhood, Community and Dispossession in Zora Moreno’s *Coquí corihundo vira el mundo*” (1981) analyzes narratives that deconstruct Puerto Ricanness. Examining song lyrics and the play, *Coquí corihundo vira el mundo*, Menzies addresses how traumatic memory becomes encoded through the stories of an Afro-Puerto Rican woman’s resistance of power. The play in fictionalizing a true story of black female agency, Menzies suggests, dismantles the accepted narrative of identity represented in the patriarchal myth of the *gran familia puertorriqueña*, which leaves Afro-Puerto Ricans out of the national dialogue. Menzies specifically engages with theories on the translocal, but also indirectly takes on a key issue in transnational discourse - that the nation is a contested site and always has to be in question - in suggesting that such stories reshape community ethos and write Afro-Puerto Ricans (women) into the national narrative.

Writing into and reshaping the canon of Curaçaoan-Dutch Caribbean women’s literature is exactly what Florencia Cornet accomplishes in her article, “Dutch Caribbean Women’s Literary Thought: Activism through Linguistic and Cosmopolitan Multiplicity.” Cornet historicizes the works of 20th and 21st century Curaçaoan women writers, to provide an indexical framework from which to examine their creative and actual, cultural and political

agency and activism. She reads novelists and poets such as Nydia Ecury, Sonia Garmers, Diana Lebac; and the more contemporary works by Myra Römer, Loeki Morales, Aliefka Bijlsma, and Mishenu Osepa-Cicilia, within, as she terms it, “the empowering physical and psychological possibilities that come with cross-national travel, immigration, cosmopolitanism, and linguistic multiplicity.” This work is so apt for the last article, as it seeks to accomplish for Curaçaoan-Dutch Caribbean women’s literature the same as the underlying context for this edition: to add to the canon of African / Diasporic women’s creativity, to generate critical engagement and interlocutions on the expansive possibilities in placing and viewing such works in a transnational context, and to offer interpretations of such works that scribes their relationality.

Conclusion

We are in the world of Trumpism, of bombastic, white male, hypermasculine, warmongering, of Brexit, xenophobic ideations, and economic and international withdrawal, which Gairola so ably notes at the beginning of his article. However, we are also in the world of massive push back from parochializing discourses that limit our collective horizons; African and Diasporic women have always been at the forefront of such push back. This dichotomization may very well reflect our understandings that power is not simply a top down phenomenon, but as suggested by Villaverde (2010) a course of influence, of push and pull, against and towards each other. In collectively recognizing that a center of self and positionality cannot hold, but also that the “other,” as self cannot exist, that different struggles no longer have to be homogenized and packaged for western consumption, and even if western conceptualization continues in its limited modalities, ours does not and cannot. We must also recognize that transnationalism as theory and praxis cannot stand alone and must have a modifier. Be it African and Diasporic women as in this body of work, or feminism, or postmodernism, or another category, such modifiers

must be chosen by the subject. This allows for the empowering variance and multiplicity that this framework brings.

In acknowledging our differences and similarities, and the openness of the subject and her society to such interactivity, to alternate shared relations, to understandings of the struggles of others, to finding commonality and solidarity in different communal modes, and to organizing across disciplinary and geographical borders, such openness effects the transformation from below. The works explored in this edition are from the diffused perspectivism that comprises the transnational world in which these creators and their works travel. The scholars explore an iconoclastic range of work by writers and artists who centralize their momentum in the struggles against power in its many manifestations. As subjects of their own discourse and gatherers of their agency, in fact and fiction, the artists and their characters analyzed in this volume, point the way forward for how multiperspectivism leads to avenues of selective mutuality and influence to generate transformative creative work, scholarship, and practices.

References:

- Bacchetta, P., Camp. T., Grewal, I., Kaplan, C., Moallem, M., & Terry, J. (2002). Transnational feminist practices against war. *Meridians*, 2(2), 302-308. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40338534>
- Blackwell, M., Briggs, L., & Chiu, M. (2015). Transnational feminisms roundtable. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 36(3), 1-24. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250fronjwomestud.36.3.01>
- Bordo, S. (2004). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, western culture, and the body*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Briggs, L., McCormick, G., & Way, J.T. (2008). Transnationalism: A category of analysis. *American Quarterly*, 60(3), 625-648. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068518>
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.
- Davies, C. B. (1994). *Black woman, writing and identity: Migrations of the subject*. New York: Routledge.
- Davies, C. B. and Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie. (1995). *Moving the boundaries: International dimensions of black women's writing* (Vol. 1). New York: New York University Press.
- Davies, C. B. and Ogundipe-Leslie, O. (Eds.). (1995). *Moving the boundaries: Black women's diasporas* (Vol. 2). New York: New York University Press.
- Fernandes, Leela. (2013). *Transnational feminism in the united states: Knowledge, ethics, power*. New York: NYU Press. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfr45>
- Hill Collins, P. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York/London: Routledge.

- Meridians (Ed.). (2000). Counterpoints: Ama Ata Aidoo, Edna Acosta-Belén, Amrita Basu, Maryse Condé, Nell Painter, and Nawal El Saadawi speak on feminism, race, and transnationalism. *Meridians*, 1(1), 1-28. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40338426>
- Said, E. (1983). Traveling Theory. In *The word, the text and the critic* (pp. 226-47). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Smith, Amanda. (1988). *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. (Original work published 1893)
- Steady, F. C. (Ed). (1981). *The black woman cross-culturally*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman
- Sterling, C. (2012). *African roots, Brazilian rites: Cultural and national identity in Brazil*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Villaverde, L. (2010). Feminist consciousness, transnationalism, and the interruption of borders. *Counterpoints*, (355), 175-187. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42980579>