

Culture Bound and Unbound: Concurrent Voices and Claims in Postcolonial Places

By Diana Brydon, Peter Forsgren and Gunlög Fur

One of the central concerns of the postcolonial effort has been to recover the voice and agency of the subaltern in an effort to find alternative articulations to monolithic imperial representations. Universalizing perspectives obscure their origins and threaten to silence alternatives, regardless of their validity or influence. How then, do we account for intersections, contentions, imbalances, and bridge-building as part of the manner in which human beings narrate and engage with their world?

This volume of *Culture Unbound* showcases contemporary postcolonial scholarship collected under the auspices of *Concurrences in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies*, a University Research Center at Linnaeus University in southern Sweden. The center gathers senior as well as postdoctoral scholars and graduate students from different fields interested in how colonialism and imperialism affected encounters in various contact zones across the globe. The *Concurrences* research looks for ways to expand the understanding of conflicting and simultaneous claims regarding culture and history. Influenced by the postcolonial concern with recovering the voice and agency of the subaltern, the principal purpose is to investigate various cultural archives – formal and informal, traditional and digital, fiction and documentary text – in order to map multiple and concurring claims of reality, experience and meaning in time and place.

We recognize that this is a challenging project for which there are few successful models or guidelines and propose that any viable response requires cross-disciplinary fertilization and widespread collaborative efforts. We therefore find it essential to employ and further develop theories and methods that legitimize, problematize and communicate multimodal and multivocal forms of concurrences without trivializing the contested power relations that influence who is heard, where and in what way.

The present collection of articles roams across territories, centuries, and disciplines, demonstrating the many varied settings to which colonialism bequeathed its legacy. They all struggle to make room for diverse and many-faceted processes, which cannot adequately be described in binary terms or easily delineated categories. As a result, they present different innovative methodological approaches to the study of cultural encounters inflected by colonialism and imperialism. They demonstrate, each in their own way, the bounded nature of Western interpretations of these encounters and of colonial systems of interaction. In doing so they

contribute to this journal by suggesting that colonial legacies constrict culture in specific ways, causing, as it were, a culture bound. That boundedness, however, can also be unbound, in part, through a recognition of those discrepant and concurrent modes of reading that characterize postcolonial approaches.

Historian Linda Andersson Burnett employs the concept of “ecology of knowledge” to interpret a patron-client system that demonstrates the formation and function of information gathering in late eighteenth century Britain. Focusing on the example of George Low, a Presbyterian Minister on the Orkney Islands in the North Atlantic, Andersson Burnett tells a story of a man with an abiding interest in natural history and environment. The network into which Low enters stretched far beyond his immediate context, revealing an ancillary system connecting scholars and explorers from England to Linnaeus and his system of categorizing the world, to European fascination with the “unknown” northern regions, as well as to British overseas colonies. It demonstrates concurring circles of knowledge that interlace and jostle one another in the assembling of information to feed the ferocious appetite for information concerning the natural world at the end of the 18th century, during the period commonly associated with the birth of a modern and secular form of knowing the world. Andersson Burnett chooses to analyze these connections as an eco-system of knowledge transfers. This serves at least two purposes. On the one hand it moves the focus from “great” individuals (explorers, naturalists, scientists) to systems of circulation and dependence, transcending both class and geography; on the other hand it demonstrates the many ways in which global and imperial power intersected with local hierarchies and systems of knowledge. While not forgetting structures of inequality, the essay on Low’s gathering of Orkney information suggests a novel approach to interpretation and visualization of the many different forms of knowledge production.

Visual art scholar Melanie Klein discusses education as a contact zone in her study of art education for Black students in South Africa during the era of Bantu education around the middle of the twentieth century. Her search for an “antireductionist” perspective leads her to pay specific attention to “punctual evidence” forming patterns of temporary stability. Art education for Black students, primarily in conjunction with teachers training, was expected to advance civilization and modernity, at the same time as it emphasized and encouraged specific formulations of African authenticity and ethnicity. Black leaders and artists, however, did not always adopt or agree with these definitions. Through examples of the Black South African sculptor Job Patja Kekana and the white educator John Grossert, she demonstrates that artistic expressions and art education in apartheid South Africa had multiple and sometimes dubious origins and at times unexpected or contradictory consequences. Her methodology exposes “an alternative art historical narrative” with aesthetic concepts that are not fixed but instead point out struggles regarding artistic and intellectual self-definition.

Historian Hans Hägerdal analyses an early example of Swedish travel fiction, the novella *Swensken på Timor* (The Swede on Timor) from 1815, “translated” by the Swedish author Christina Cronhjelm from a purported English account. It is a tale of a Swedish sailor who after a shipwreck is adopted by an indigenous group on Timor, marrying a local woman and converting to Islam. Since there has been a tendency to reproduce ideas of *cultural otherness* in European travel writing, Hägerdal examines in what ways this novella relates to the European discourse of the tropical or Asian other. Hägerdal shows that some historical facts can be traced in the novella, but more than anything else the text is dominated by literary tropes of romantic exoticism, which explains its remarkably positive portrayal of the indigenous society and to some extent even Islam. At the end of the article Hägerdal underlines that the non-white protagonists of the novella are not merely exotic objects, but on the contrary stand out as subjects whose words and attitudes convey European ideas of natural life and love, and that the important thing with *Swensken på Timor* is that it gives a vision of a society at the margins of Asia which did not conform to the discourse of race and evolution that was taking shape in Europe around the time it was written.

Historian of ideas Mikela Lundahl examines some of the conflicting and competing historical facts and narratives connected to the UNESCO World Heritage site of Stone Town in Zanzibar, Tanzania, using the concept of *friction* as a way to analyze how various actors narrate “the same” event(s) in different ways, and interpret the other actors’ accounts as fantasies or fabrications. Lundahl compares the World Heritage narrative of global values and of (material) cultural fusion and harmonization with local narrations of loss and marginalization. The article raises questions about who has the power over historiography as well as questions concerning what the effects of heritagization are, especially if it silences other narratives that are concurrent and locally more important. Lundahl’s article participates in the theoretical discussion of the concept of *cosmopolitanism*, contributing to discussions elaborated by scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Robbie Shilliam who have redefined cosmopolitanism in different ways in order to give the concept a less Eurocentric definition, and a definition more related to global migration.

Literary scholar Piia Posti employs the concept of concurrence to address the simultaneous and sometimes conflicted allegiances of contemporary travel writing as exemplified in two texts by Swedish writer Sven Lindqvist, *Exterminate all the Brutes* and *Terra Nullius*. Through close reading of his work, she illuminates the challenges of writing postcolonial critique through the conventions of a genre long steeped in colonialism and argues further that globalization, anxiety about the genre of travel writing and the tension between fiction and non-fiction in such work may best be understood as interconnected discursive fields. Whereas most Western travel writing is conventionally complicit with colonialist habits of mind, Lindqvist sets out to critique colonialism. Yet despite these good intentions, the

achievements of these texts are mixed at best. Posti argues that what is interesting about Lindqvist's travelogues is that a tension emerges between the claims to authority of his postcolonial critique (based on his historical reading and analysis) and his role as travel writer (where he bases his claims on his experiences of travel). In these texts, she notes, "the privileged positions of the postcolonial critic and the contemporary travel writer concur" in ways that problematize his critique. She situates these travel narratives as in some ways concurrent with the postcolonial critique of literary theorists writing at the end of the twentieth century, using the decolonial theory of Ramon Grosfoguel to suggest a possible route forward beyond the impasse at which postcolonial thinking now finds itself. In particular, she finds inspiration in Grosfoguel's invocation of the Zapatista mantra, "walking while asking questions," with its potential for rethinking the concurrent relations among local, global, and universal in ways that can do justice to ways of knowing that were previously eclipsed by narrowly conceived conceptions of a Eurocentrically-based universal. Her sustained engagement with Lindqvist's work demonstrates the productivity of the concurrences model for understanding Swedish investments in understanding postcolonial critique and complicities beyond their current articulations.

The concluding essay also extends postcolonial critique into new geopolitical domains. In this essay, literary scholar Fedja Borcak addresses a particular form of writing back against imperial othering, which he terms "subversive infantilisation." In his view, this term describes strategies adopted in contemporary Bosnian literature depicting experiences of the 1990s war. Subversive infantilisation challenges paternalist Western discourses on Bosnia and Herzegovina, by "re-rigging" them, often by filtering them through the perspective of the naïve child narrator, to open up a space of undecidability for the reader. Citing Maria Todorova's coinage of the term *balkanism* (theorized on the model of Edward Said's *Orientalism*), Borcak explains that Western discourse on the Balkans has been to a large extent unchanged for roughly 200 years. Western discourse on the war and media depictions of it continued in this *balkanist* vein. Given this situation, Bosnian writers repeat this infantilizing discourse that casts Bosnia and Herzegovina as a child state, inhabiting and using it (through subversive child narrators) to "dissolve it from within."

Taken together, these essays illustrate the versatility and resilience of the concept of concurrences for enabling new readings of cultural production within and beyond the binding structures of discursive, geopolitical, and historical power structures.

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