

**Notes From the Editor:  
Forty Years of *ARIEL***

**Thinking Through Postcoloniality**  
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Tate Modern, the London gallery on the south shore of the Thames, regularly invites artists to install large sculptures in its expansive entrance hall. In 2008 the Columbian artist Doris Salcedo created *Shibboleth*, a crack in the concrete floor, extending the whole length of the gallery. The name Shibboleth evokes the Biblical story of the Gileadites' victory over the Ephraimites (Judg. 12: 4–7). When the defeated Ephraimites attempt to escape, they are asked to say “Shibboleth,” a word they cannot pronounce.<sup>1</sup> Given away by their accents, some forty-two thousand are massacred. It is a poignant story from the far distant past that haunts our own centuries of mass genocide, casual slaughters and unremitting brutalities.

*Shibboleth* extends throughout the length of the vast entrance hall, beginning as a small crack at the west entrance and widening towards the eastern end. Barely perceptible in the concrete floor at its beginning, the crack opens into a deeper fissure marked with reinforcing wire that becomes visible as the floor breaks open. Viewers react to the installation in diverse ways: a mother and child hold hands, walking the length of the hall on each side of the gap; a woman tentatively puts her foot into a wider section of the crack; a man runs his fingers along a protruding piece of wire. What are the implications of this extraordinary installation? What does a crack across the concrete floor of a major international gallery signify?

On a basic level, the crack is “brokenness,” a gap that points toward a fractured world, split less into nations than into zones of abjection (sprawling urban slums, bleak rural poverty) and zones of luxury (gated communities, opulent urban spaces). Read metaphorically, the fissure reminds viewers of a world divided into belonging and exclusion, into

those who are included and those who are shut out. In a world that is characterized by the movement of large populations—the calculated economic migration of professional classes, the frantic flights of civilians escaping war, the desperate attempts of the poor to find work and new lives—the question of who belongs and who is shut out is indeed an urgent one. Refugees from Afghanistan and elsewhere linger in dreary makeshift camps in northern France, waiting for an opportunity to cross the Channel to England; able-bodied adults from Zimbabwe crawl under fences to reach South Africa, hoping to earn support for their families; countless people travel to the north African coast, willing to risk death at sea in flimsy crafts to reach Spain or Italy; young women from rural communities in central Europe are enticed with promises of employment as waitresses or cleaners only to end up in the international sex trade; Latin Americans try to make a life within the United States in the limbo of illegal immigration. This list could be much, much longer; it only touches on the “border-crossings” of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Within such a context, Salcedo’s *Shibboleth* points to the sinister implications of borders; they are set up to exclude, to drive a wedge between those who can cross and those who cannot. In her conception, the negative space of the fracture represents racism, which divides and separates humanity. As she writes, “the w(hole) in history that I am referring to is the history of racism, which runs parallel to the history of modernity, and is its untold dark side” (65). As the work of many scholars in postcolonial studies has amply underlined, the claims of Enlightenment modernity in Europe for just, equal and free societies were constructed alongside worldwide enterprises of colonization and imperialism. *Shibboleth* foregrounds the crack that still splinters humanity. From this perspective, the installation points to a bleaker reading of borders than the celebration of hybridity, fluidity and *métissage* that has sometimes been associated with “borderlands.” It is a reminder of the pain of exclusion, even the threat of death, that borders signify.

At the same time, the installation also gestures towards different futures, possibilities of other ways of living, not circumscribed by the past. Paul Gilroy puts it this way, “By looking down, we are not only

confronting the foundations of our present, we seem to be digging up the history of our future in a daring act of anticipatory archaeology. This realignment of past and future speaks to the prospect of healing and, in the longer term, to the possibility of encounters with alterity that do not involve fear and anxiety alone” (29). He goes on to suggest that, as divisions in the world grow wider, a principled and productive response must be to embrace “the healing possibility of mourning and reconciliation” (29). Border crossings offer opportunities for new affiliations, for openness to otherness, for different ways of living.

When *ARIEL* published its first issue, some forty years ago, many nations had just gained independence: Ghana (1957); Nigeria (1960); Uganda, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago (1962); Kenya (1963)—to name only a few. The incipient field of Commonwealth literatures was discovering the literatures in English from newly independent nations, as well as the emergent awareness of national literatures within the settler colonies of Australia and Canada. The following decades saw the shift of the field into postcolonial studies, an exploration of the aftermath of colonization across a globe increasingly linked by finance, trade and information technologies, but still divided by wealth and poverty, by security and uncertainty, by familiarity and dislocation. The new contexts put in question even the terminologies through which scholarship signaled its investigations. If “Commonwealth” had neatly described the former British empire, its usefulness was limited by the narrowness of its reference: it could not, for instance, explore the interconnections among African, British, Spanish, French, Dutch, South and East Asian presences in the Caribbean. “First”, “Second” and “Third” Worlds, emerging from the discourses of the Cold War, was equally unsatisfactory. The terms currently favoured, “North” and “South,” seem more adequate, but it is also necessary to bear in mind that parts of the “South” exist in the “North” (sections of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; the living conditions of some indigenous peoples in the United States, Canada and Australia), and that parts of the “South” have produced wealthy economies (Singapore; the coastal Chinese cities of Shanghai, Guangzhou; the new Indian high-tech industries in Mumbai, Delhi and other cities). Robert Young’s “tricontinentalism,” discussed in this issue

and elsewhere, offers an alternative. As always, in this effort to find terminology it is crucial to be attentive to the tensions, contradictions and nuances in concrete situations.

The struggle over terminology gestures towards an awareness of the pressures of the material conditions in which literatures are produced. In their introduction to *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzi, Antoinette Burton and Jed Esty comment on the need for “a reassertion of a certain historical urgency that may have been leached from postcolonial studies during its period of theoretical refinement and institutional consolidation” (5). Articles in this special issue examine urgent issues for contemporary postcolonial studies: the representation of migrant labourers, the spaces of peripheral modernity and questions about alternatives to the European/American models of modernity, African writers and the global representation of slavery, the relationship of China, a country not colonized, to “post” colonialism, and other issues that are nodes of significant contemporary critical interest. All of these articles invite a “thinking through postcoloniality”: thinking through the resources and strategies that postcolonial studies has developed and thinking through the impasses, absences and difficulties that confront contemporary scholarship towards a productive future. *ARIEL* very much appreciates the contributions of the authors and the work of the co-editors Wang Ning and Shaobo Xie in bringing them together, and the help of our assistant Erin Wunker. In the past forty years *ARIEL* has explored a wide range of questions in international English literatures and the theories that emerged from the study of them. As it enters its fifth decade, the journal will continue to offer compelling and vital discussions.

## Notes

- 1 The “Shibboleth” story is revisited in Danticat’s 1998 novel *The Farming of Bones* that tells the story about a nationalist-inspired Dominican uprising against migrant Haitian workers in 1937. The fleeing Haitians are subjected to a similar test. “What is this?” they are asked by Dominicans brandishing bunches of parsley. The Haitians pronounce the name in Creole French, “pèsi,” and therefore give themselves away by the being unable to say the Spanish, “perejil.”

**Works Cited**

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