postcolonial theatres

Devoting an issue to postcolonial theatres arises from the need to examine the meanings of theatre for women, and their motivations for enacting stories that are informed by colonial histories, nationalist ideologies and postcolonial migrations. Bringing the role of playwrights, directors, actors and even spectators into the fold of such inquiry, the articles in this issue identify theatre and performance from the ex-colonies of India and the Caribbean and from Black Britain, Canada and the US as sites of social and political activism that publicly interrogate the ongoing legacies of colonial histories, which have 'real, foundational value in the lives of the recently emancipated' (Mishra and Hodge, 2005: 376). Even more compelling is their attention to the ways in which such histories intersect with nationalist formations and impact upon the social, political and cultural lives and bodies of women and minorities in colonized regions and diasporic locations. Through rigorous scrutiny and analysis of historical and contemporary contexts and the material circumstances that frame the plays, the articles analyse the configurations of the theatre space and its attendant theatrical elements – songs, props, bodies, music, dance and gestures – as politically encoded signs that point to the vitality of the oral and the performative to the formation of alternative communities, to the projection of what Mishra and Hodge (2005: 378) identify as 'a configuration of experiences and insights, hopes and dreams arising from a hitherto silenced part of the world', and to the forging of challenges to dominant and exclusionary narratives, which, within literary studies, have been primarily attributed to print culture.

Gabriele Griffin presents the ways in which Black and Asian playwrights' negotiation of past histories with race politics in contemporary Britain enables a theatre that demands 'long term visions and strategies for change.' Jacqueline Petropoulos' analysis of Janet Sears' African-Canadian drama enables a rethinking of the uneasy relations between diasporic communities and multiculturalism, mediated as these relations are by colonial histories and memories. Jisha Menon analyses Kirti Jain's play about the 1947 Partition of India, that 'moment of rupture' (Pandey, 2001: 1) in the history of the subcontinent when the shift from British India to independent India simultaneously and violently split the subcontinent into two nations: India and Pakistan. Her discussion of Jain's play addresses the role of theatre in offering 'public accountability' for the private trauma and memories of women who were abducted and raped during the Partition, and whose bodies were appropriated for varying political ends by families, communities and the

nation state. Lata Singh's dialogue with the prominent Indian director and playwright Tripurari Sharma about her play on a courtesan's participation in the 1857 Revolt against the British Raj, and Nida Sajid's review essay on recent scholarship on women and theatre in India provide particular knowledge of the complicated relations between nationalist thought, colonial history and women in India. Georgie Boucher's article highlights how histories of colonization and slavery inform the politics of race and sexuality, and the construction of the African American female, in the works of the controversial and relatively neglected playwright Adrienne Kennedy, during the civil rights era of the 1960s. Discussing the use of Calypso as feminist theatre in the Caribbean, Denise Hughes-Tafen reflects on the ways in which the political and gendered exclusions of nationalism and colonialism inform the plays' content and the theatrical event, affecting their production and consumption. She points out how actresses themselves, far from simply performing well-rehearsed roles, engage in forms of feminist performance that (without shunning national pride) question and interrogate the exclusions of the nation by turning the male-dominated space of the Calypso into a space invested with feminist politics. Royona Mitra considers how nationalist, colonial and postcolonial paradigms in India about women and sexuality inform the historical and contemporary policing of the dancer's body and demonstrates the ways in which Kinatema's experimental focus on physical theatre disrupts and resists such discourses. Such historical and contextual specificity facilitates understanding of where social relations of power are to be located.

colonial histories/postcolonial theatres/ women

The growth, since the 1990s, of scholarly work devoted to historical and contemporary global forms of imperialism, has opened up new levels of inquiry and debate regarding questions of rights, the politics of recognition, redistribution of resources and multiculturalism – questions that are becoming increasingly relevant in a 'global' world – and prompted studies that examine the role and function of theatre in addressing such issues. A significant intervention in this direction, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins' *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* addresses 'the specific ways in which performance has been controversial in resisting the continuing effects of imperialism' (Gilbert, 1996: i) in Australia, Africa, New Zealand, the Caribbean and other colonized regions. Additionally, Brian Crow and Chris Banfield's *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre* (1996), Christopher Balme's *Decolonizing the Stage. Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial drama* (1999), J. Ellen Gainor's *Imperialism and Theatre. Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance* (Gainor, 1995) and Helen Gilbert's *Postcolonial Plays* (2001) are invaluable contributions to this

endeavour. Spanning international contexts and issues, these works have been both supplemented and complemented by more specialized scholarship on local theatre movements in the ex-colonies (of India, Africa and the Caribbean, for example), settler colonies such as Australia and New Zealand and Black theatre organizations in Europe and America. This expanding corpus of critical work is indicative of the importance of postcolonial theatre as a distinct area of study, and reinforces the need for bringing attention to individual plays and performances that demonstrate in Gilbert's words, 'the achievements of some of the most exciting dramatic works performed across the world in recent decades' (Gilbert, 2001: 1). As well, in identifying its thematic and formalistic markers, these studies have pointed out possible future directions.

One such direction is to strive towards a greater understanding and recognition of women's contribution to the development and use of theatre for political purposes, an area that is marked by relative neglect. Balme's *Decolonizing the Stage* (1999) which focuses on the 'syncretic' aspects of plays from post-colonial societies (Maori, Aboriginal, Native American, South African and Indian) analyses primarily the work of male playwrights and dramatists. Similarly, Crow and Banfield's 'major dramatists' from colonized cultures and the subordinated cultures within Europe and America include Wole Soyinka and Athol Fugard from Africa, Derek Walcott from the West Indies, August Wilson and Jack Davis from Australia and Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad from India. Useful though their works are in pointing out the decolonizing strategies encoded in the fusion of the 'performance idiom' of traditional theatres with western dramatic practices (Balme, 1999) and in highlighting the subversive potential of theatre from colonized and subordinate regions and cultures (Crow and Banfield, 1996), the short shrift accorded to women intensifies the need for expanding the parameters of postcolonial theatre to include gender issues as a central node of critical interpretation in discussions about the public visibility given to private stories. As the articles reveal, gender issues in these stories propose new ways of thinking about the ways in which playwrights, directors and actors question the fixity and singularity of nationalist ideologies and colonialist paradigms through emphasis on elements and forms that function as multi-faceted signs. While the body is one such sign, the fluid and hybrid aesthetics of the plays, which are not simply celebrated but carefully located within imbalanced histories of power-relations during colonization and slavery, and of reactionary formulations of nationalism in the wake of decolonization, question their implications for women's positions within local, national and international circuits of power. Thus if, as Boucher argues, Adrienne Kennedy's plays present fragmentary and fluid visions, it is to get away from notions of essentialism emphasized by the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s, which she recognizes as impossible because of long histories of colonization and slavery. In the case of Black and Asian women's theatre in Britain, the production of a 'dynamic and interdependent model of the relation

between redistribution and recognition' as Griffin points out, ultimately articulates a feminism that demands the recognition of rights and redistribution of resources as the primary concern of these women. For Janet Sears, referencing the 'many cross-cultural and transnational sites that shape constructions of African Canadian identity' complicates, as Petropolous demonstrates, static notions of cultural origins suggested by Canadian multiculturalism.

Bringing together articles under the rubric of 'postcolonial theatres' is thus to identify in specific historical and contextual terms, aspects that shape women's theatre practices in differentiated contexts of power. The interventions made by the plays and performances addressed in these articles negotiate the local and the global in ways that emphasize the interconnectedness of national and international politics and transatlantic histories of slavery to the local in order to avoid reproducing social, racial, identitarian and geopolitical categories into separate, stable and watertight compartments: west/non-west, north/south, or others. Instead, the articles enable a mapping of the ideological, historical and theatrical intersections, alignments, overlaps and multiple crossovers as highlighted by these performances. In this context, they also carefully chart the roles of institutional networks, funding policies and performance venues that shape, govern and assist the production and dissemination of plays.

The diversity of performance traditions and practices (manifested in the deployment of naturalism, realism, melodrama and fragmentation within formal dramatic structures, for example) also highlights the plurality of such practices. For this reason, this issue is titled 'postcolonial theatres'. Such diversity offers another productive entry into the debates on what constitutes 'postcolonial' drama and theatre. While it reveals how women have invented new languages by transforming what Audre Lorde (whose varied influences and inspirations are referenced by both Petropolous' and Boucher's articles) termed the 'master's tools' (Lorde, 1984), it additionally yields more wide-ranging critical knowledge about what performance and theatre have come to mean for women in postcolonial contexts. Taken together, the articles provide information that urges towards new cross-disciplinary inquiries about contemporary and historical forms of postcolonial feminist theatre practice and inform us of the ways in which such practices fit into/inform/and critically interrupt colonial, patriarchal and national formations and histories.

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