Book Review

*Grounds of Engagement: Apartheid-era African American and South African Writing*. Stéphane Robolin. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015; 237pp., ISBN 978-0-252-03947-8 (cloth: alk. paper); 978-0-252-09758-4 (e-book) *The New Black Studies Series*

This study – by Stéphane Robolin (Associate Professor of English, Rutgers University) – explores relationships between African American and black South African writers (Peter Abrahams, Richard Rive and Bessie Head fit Robolin’s category “black”). The period covers the years of apartheid and, in the US, the years of civil-rights struggle from 1948 to the late 1980s.

It is a period that, while characterised by racial tensions, witnessed what Robolin describes as “transnational solidarities” – the phrase summarising the crux of the argument. By transnational Robolin means engagements, transactions, circulations, migrations (Nat Nakasa in the US on an exit permit, for example) and practices (Rive’s literature curriculum for American students) that “exceed the boundaries of nation states”. Transnationalism is distinguished from “internationalism”, the latter – Robolin avers – more likely to retain the sovereignty of the nation-state as a key component of wider cultural processes.

Relationships between black South African and black American writers, we are told with repetitive insistence, did not occur naturally or even symmetrically, but were “produced”, “enacted”, in the difficulties of struggle, but struggle that had race as the recurrent factor. In short, material realities, not essential commonalities, provoke what Robolin, in parodying Reaganite constructive engagement with the apartheid regime, terms grounds of emancipatory engagement.

Theoretically, we hover over the by now familiar terrain (geographical place and space being tropes of constraint and resistance in the study) of postcolonialism or cultural Marxism, according to which the dominant (white) order – absent here – is “deconstructed” and replaced by reconstructed, purposeful black voices. Such simplified dichotomies, fortunately, are not permitted to prevail. Robolin offers illuminating case studies of Langston Hughes, Peter Abrahams and Richard Rive (in complicated interactions of influence; of Keorapetse Kgositsile and Gwendolyn Brooks; of Audre Lorde and Ellen Kuzwayo; of Michelle Cliff, Gloria Joseph and Bessie Head, to list several among other engagements.

What is particularly engaging from a ‘South’ perspective is that the study modifies the usual ‘imitation’ model of the South being led by the North, whether it be “*Drum*” writers of the 1950s imitating Harlem dudes or B-movie gangsters or, today, black South African youngsters imitating black American rappers. Instead, Robolin, especially in his final chapter, gives specific examples of the influence that black South African writing, or writers, had on African American outputs.

The study – clearly articulated – is well worth its investment.

Note

1. Only in anti-apartheid Black Consciousness terminology of the 1970s (in South Africa) were all who were not white (i.e. Africans, Coloureds and Indians) designated as “black”. As in apartheid racial classification so in post-apartheid racial classification (the latter retained, we are told, for purposes of redress), Abrahams, Rive and Head were/would be designated “Coloured” (mixed-race).

Classification is not merely an exercise in semantics, but has educational, cultural and economic consequences. Africans (called “Bantu”) under apartheid experienced a greater degree of legislative constraint than Coloured or Indian South Africans. Today Africans can hope for greater job/promotion
opportunities (redress) than whites, Coloureds or Indians, particularly in government-related organisations. Despite this, the African-majority remains the most economically disadvantaged so-called group.

Such distinctions – unfortunate as they are – would have diverted Robolin’s study from its main purpose, which is not the _reductions_ of home, but the _transnational_ “geographies” of travel and/or exile.

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