

EDITORIAL

Laura Chrisman

Somewhere in our past
we believed in the future

that a better world
would discover foundation
under our feet, and we
would be forever singing,
in its kitchen.

Bricks pile up in a field.
Whether they will be enough
no one knows. How
they fit together
is anybody's guess.

Men with darkening skins
scribbled on by weather
wait for their instructions.

From time to time
limousines miraculously appear:
there is always a somebody
in a suit willing to smile
and shake their hands

who lays the first stone.

Then the camera lights
and racing engines
turn around, shrink back
from where they came.

Those left behind
stare at their own hands
afterwards, puzzled
at precisely what
has been transacted, why
they are still being offered
bonds

squint
between gnarled fingers
pace out the hopeful distances:
- there will be a flower bowl.
- my bed is going here.

As for now the door knobs
have no doors.

Their windows peer out
at no sky.

1. Kelwyn Sole,
'Housing Targets',
Love That Is Night,
Durban, Gecko
Poetry, 1998, pp44-
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Kelwyn Sole, 'Housing Targets'.¹

The children of empire are swollen butterflies
Locked in this electric hive of steel and ice;
Clogged, clotted and black, in late August
Their nude arms and legs are their weapons,
Flashed like Nubian armor against white arrogance.
Under the cocaine glaze of her pimp she shrills,
"Hey mister, wanna go out, hey mister,
Wanna go out," this bright-eyed throaty girl
Whose hot sunflower head, beautiful as Georgia,
Is tricked into a wild parody of whoring.
Fuelled on the blood of the weak,
Wanton as Babylon, perverse as Rome,
The doom of Manhattan crumbles like shit
Into the twin rivers that lave its flanks.

2. Robert Chrisman,
'Children of Empire',
Children of Empire,
Sausalito, Black
Scholar Press, 1981,
p51. Reprinted by
kind permission of
Robert Chrisman.

Robert Chrisman, 'Children of Empire'.²

There are good reasons to open this special issue with poetry. The poems - one about the contemporary United States, one about the new South Africa - neatly capture several concerns of the special issue as a whole. Kelwyn Sole's 'Housing Targets' highlights the confusion of decolonising nations in transition to a future more neo-colonial than post-colonial. In this issue Salah Hassan and Sole explore, respectively, the recent decolonisation of Palestine and South Africa. Elliott Colla explores the problematic relationship between subaltern populations and the nationalist elites that represent them in Egypt. Robert Chrisman's poem 'Children of Empire' portrays an imperial USA whose home black population, subjugated and

resistant, exposes both its power and vulnerability. 'The Rendez-Vous of Conquest' explores both white hegemonic and black counterhegemonic practices.³ White racism, British and US, is tackled in the contributions by Ben Carrington and Wendy Chun. While Chrisman's poem focuses on the national arena, James Campbell and Peniel Joseph explore the transnational dynamics of black liberation struggles, and Madhu Dubey examines the micro-politics of contemporary black American intellectuals.

'The rendez-vous of conquest' brings post-colonial and nationalist studies into dialogue with black diaspora and empire studies. Recent anti-globalisation and reparations movements are creating transnational alliances based on an understanding of the global interpenetration of capitalism, colonialism and racism. This special issue attempts to bring academic practice more in line with these current social movements, refusing to respect the disciplinary boundaries practised and preached by departments of history, sociology, politics, comparative literature and English; refusing also the US exceptionalism that all too frequently isolates analysis of the US from analysis of the rest of the world. It is not only political activists that conventional academics may have been lagging behind; it is also cultural producers. As Sole points out in his article, South African poets are tackling socio-economic injustice in ways that few of that country's academics are. Ironically, perhaps, the culturalism that many of its academics take refuge in is being resisted by cultural practitioners themselves. This, then, is another reason for beginning with poetry.

This collection calls for more complex views of anti-colonial nationalism and national identity than are found in the romanticised approach of Benedict Anderson's 'Imagined Communities' or the equally popular, blanket anti-nationalism of mainstream post-colonial and diaspora cultural studies. Colla, for example, draws our attention to the operations of the state and material objects in producing national culture, qualifying and complicating Anderson's focus on print culture as nationalism's conduit. Joseph and Campbell suggest the historically variable relations between black nationalism and internationalism, revealing how these emancipatory political projects can work in complex symbiosis. They thus provide alternative models to Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic' which presents black nationalism and black 'worldliness' as categorically opposed impulses. Hassan and Sole show how contemporary decolonisation and globalised capitalism can be mutually supportive, and look at the role the metropolitan academy plays in masking this relationship. Dubey shows how difficult it can be to 'transcend' nationalist logic, uncovering how many contemporary post-nationalist intellectuals continue to base their arguments and legitimacy on the very nationalist categories they claim to oppose. These conceptual extrapolations should not obscure the materialist premises of the contributors. Their concern is with identifying and analysing the geo-historical particulars of their chosen subject. Thus Hassan differentiates 1960s PLO nationalism from its post-Oslo version, while Colla identifies

3. The phrase 'rendez-vous of conquest' comes from Aime Cesaire's 1956 *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land (Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal)*, translated by Mireille Rosello with Annie Pritchard, introduced by Mireille Rosello, Newcastle Upon Tyne, Bloodaxe Books, 1995. The passage in full reads:

'and there is room for all at the rendez-vous of conquest and now we know that the sun revolves around our land shining over the plot chosen by our will alone and that every star falls from sky to earth at our limitless command' (p127).

differences between statist- and culturalist versions of Egyptian nationalism.

If Benedict Anderson's culturalism is effectively rebutted here, so too is his attempt to absolve nationalism from the taint of racism. The articles by Carrington and Chun show just how integral racist classifications were and are to the formation of national identity in the US and the UK. Chun exposes the way US national mythology continues to operate in the internet. Like Chun, Carrington features contemporary media in his analysis of hegemonic nations; he traces the way British colonial mythologies of black masculinity continue to inform media representation of black male athletes. Both Carrington and Chun explore and critique market 'solutions' to racial injustice. Carrington considers the notion of racial empowerment through mass media commodification of black people, while Chun discusses the promise of racial freedom through the consumption of technology. The market inflections of racial identity may have intensified with globalisation, but they are not new. Campbell's article underscores the importance of commerce in nineteenth-century ideologies of black liberation, while Colla's discusses the material and ideological role of tourism within nineteenth-century Egyptian nationalism. If the economic components of anti-racist and nationalist struggles need further critical attention, so too does the role of racial subjugation in the analysis of economics.

Several of the contributors discuss the problematic behaviour of nationalist leaders in first and third world countries. Dubey and Sole point to the ways that, in contemporary US and South Africa, anti-racist struggles have led to the emergence of a small black bourgeoisie that uses the language of black nationalism as a smokescreen for class privilege. Joseph's account of the creative fusion of socialism and nationalism in black American alliance with Cuba provides, perhaps, an alternative resource, the hint of the progressive possibilities still available for future social movements.