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# FOREWORD

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## PERIPHERIES

*“despite all our desperate, eternal attempts to separate, contain and mend, categories always leak.”*

Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*.<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to speak or act from the periphery? To what extent is the periphery a site of marginalisation or the arena for creative destruction? Is the periphery a space in which, as Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests, rigid and ‘eternal’ categories submit to leakage? Or is the very notion of a periphery itself a leaky category, constantly defying our attempts to definitively locate it? Such questions pursue with determined insistence the articles contained within the tenth volume of *Moveable Type*. Traversing through topics such as decolonisation, identity, the poetics of affect, the politics of borders and the recuperation of side-lined canons—the following interventions bring into focus the sheer polyvalence of what the idea of a periphery means for us today.

The word ‘periphery’ literally means ‘to carry’, ‘about’ or ‘around.’ It is this hidden verb that helpfully conjures to mind the experience of peripheral vision: from the corner of one’s eye, a flash appears—a spark so intriguing that it *carries the perceiver away* from what they were doing or the place to which they were going. In this sense, the agency of the periphery lies in its capacity to pick us up and spirit us off: it is not a static point which occupies the edge of a frame—rather, it is the very motor of our on-going self-dislocation; it is that which takes us away from our centre. This notion of the periphery as an active concept underpins this volume’s first article, ‘Siting Language.’ A record of visual artist Dana Ariel’s journeys across the contested border zones between Palestine and Israel, the piece reflects upon her own family history within the region, and the ways in which such history reverberates across the region’s fraught contemporary *topos*. Working her way through the homophonous deferrals of ‘site’ into ‘cite’ and ‘sight,’ Ariel probes what it means to document the periphery through visual, aural and written media,

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<sup>1</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana UP, 1989, p.94.

and the ways in which peripheral zones as spaces of confrontation themselves complicate notions of representation, testimony and personal identity.

Of course, ‘periphery’ is a quintessentially relational concept. A periphery cannot be defined outside of its relationship to a centre, and for a great deal of contemporary writers, the negotiation of centre/periphery relations is of vital importance amid shifting national and international fault lines. Chelsea Haith’s contribution on ‘Language and Decolonial Justice in Koleka Putuma’s *Collective Amnesia*’ situates itself squarely in the middle of these negotiations, writing within the context of South Africa’s Rhodes Must Fall movement. Starting from Barbara Boswell’s conception of the ‘restorative ethic’ of South African black women’s poetry, Haith argues for a periphery that intervenes upon and radically reformulates an erstwhile centre, rather than said centre spreading out and appropriating peripheral voices. Combining detailed literary criticism with an ethnographical approach to the publication history of Koleka Putuma’s ground-breaking debut poetry collection, Haith offers an optimistic (albeit necessarily qualified) account of the prospects for the on-going decolonisation movement.

If the overriding theme of Haith’s article is a belief in language’s capacity to mediate the interventions of the periphery upon the centre, this theme is taken up with equal vigour in Joseph Hankinson’s account of the Ghanaian poet B. Kojo Laing’s poem ‘No needle in the sky.’ Situating his argument within exciting new currents of World Systems Theory, Hankinson argues that Laing’s poetry attempts to linguistically overcome the combined and uneven development of a global system defined by neo-colonialism and repressive international policy. Through his meticulous account of the intertextuality between Laing and Gerard Manley Hopkins, Hankinson offers fresh insights into the ways in which linguistic feedback loops between colonising centre and colonised periphery work to dismantle hegemonic power relations.

Often, the optical connotation of the term periphery can bring to mind something that is *unseen*—or, at the very least, something which can only be viewed partially. At the edges of one’s gaze, the world slips out of focus, and operates in this sense as a potential site for buried trauma. In Hana Teraie-Wood’s path-breaking essay on Jez Butterworth’s recent play *The Ferryman*, this question of buried trauma is explored in detail. Chiming with all three of the contributions that precede it, here the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is not and can never be a mere line drawn upon a map. Such a peripheral zone is saturated by memory, injustice and open wounds: in the play, the border county of Armagh bleeds ghosts, and Teraie-Wood perceptively takes us

through Butterworth's theatrical re-enactment of history-as-trauma, emphasizing throughout the need to confront buried histories that are all too often pushed out of view.

In multiple senses, history is overflowing with half-heard echoes and momentary flashes of insight. Methodologically speaking, it can be very difficult for the literary historian to look directly at the ways in which a historical subject laughs or cries. Our discipline is, after all, anchored to the written record—what to do then with affective and emotional expressions that definitionally operate on the outskirts of language? How to respond when confronted with a mouth that does not speak, rather one that moans, laughs, splutters and cries? The final two articles in this volume are grouped loosely around questions such as these. First, Daniel Norman takes us through the polemical speeches of eighteenth-century orator John Thelwall, and the way in which he harnesses humour as a mode of critique. In this essay, Norman bridges the commonly acknowledged gap between laughter and speech by suggesting that humour lays the foundation for moral judgement. A laugh can register an imbalance or a discord latent within the political climate—and it is from this moment of discord that Norman traces the ways in which Thelwall extends and stretches the presuppositions of politically contextualised jokes, using laughter as an entry-point to 'enlighten the marginalised.'

Such a linear model may seem at odds with our final contributor, Harvey Wiltshire, whose essay on John Donne's treatment of tears and acts of weeping gives a more unsettled account of the relationship between language and emotion. Tracing the conflicted and often contradictory ways in which the metaphysical poet judges the act of weeping throughout his sermons and poetry, Wiltshire warns us away from interpretations that seek to pin down Donne's theological and aesthetic positions one way or another. The gap between 'talking tears' and 'false spectacles' (tears that at once communicate something to us yet frustrate our capacity to see clearly) is precisely the point: Donne sees the act of weeping as that which actualises a crisis in representation, wherein paradox and contradiction point to a form of expression that inevitably leaks out of the categories we use to describe it.

Finally, it would be wise to acknowledge the pluralist spirit of this volume's theme. As we have noticed in this summative introduction, the protean connotations of the term underline the fact that there is more than one way to locate a periphery. Perhaps this collection will appeal most to those who seek to make connections between variously distributed subjects—subjects that do not speak to each other through the mediation of some privileged centre, but rather those that communicate by brushing up against each other in the on going process of being 'carried away'. It is to this end that this volume

makes room for Dawn M Gaietto's artistic intervention, while also housing a broad array of reviews, ranging in theme from postcolonial poetry to contemporary popular cinema; the medical humanities and domestic life in Early Modern England to experimental geography and queer fictions. Unexpected connections and surprising echoes abound, and it is in the spirit of interdisciplinarity and dialogue that this issue combines so many distinct voices.

The following is thus a timely intervention into our contemporary moment. Ongoing geopolitical uncertainty has predictable and resolute consequences for those occupying border-zones and other spaces of contestation. The tendency of borders to erase and to marginalise calls for an attendant politics of decolonisation. From the peripheries of the academy, such a politics is already sending tremors, although it is arguably much too early to predict whether these will end up crumbling any edifices. Nonetheless, borders built on top of buried trauma and historical injustice are looking far less stable than they did in the past. Where crisis emerges, so too does opportunity, and the voices contained within this volume look towards the peripheries as the locus from which a much-needed political agency might emerge.