

## *Introduction*

*Len Platt and Sara Upstone*

Western culture over the last fifty years has been powerfully shaped by what Elazar Barkan has termed the ‘retreat from scientific racism’ – the radical undermining of once commonplace ideas about the biological foundations of race.<sup>1</sup> The consequences of this dramatic shift have been manifold and diverse, giving rise on the one hand to more fluid notions of racial identity as strategic and malleable, on the other reinforcing the valency of race as a primary marker of identity that is ideologically and discursively inscribed. Notions of post-racialism exist hand in hand with the continued existence of ethnic nationalisms and racial prejudice.

At the same time, the post-1945 period has been one of intense literary experimentation, characterised by postmodern texts which challenge the grand narratives on which conventional racial ideologies rely. This book aims to address a serious gap in scholarship on postmodern aesthetics, namely the consideration of the intricacies of the following conjunction: how the dramatic shift in conceptions of race in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been dealt with and informed by writers at the cutting edge of equally dramatic transformations of literary form in the same period. The chapters in this collection respond to Kobena Mercer’s contention that race functions as a privileged metaphor in both postmodern and poststructuralist discourses.<sup>2</sup> Together they constitute an extended discussion of the ways in which race has been appropriated by Western theoretical interventions and simultaneously becomes a topic of intense scrutiny and significance in the literatures of this period.

To date, attention on racial discourse in this context from the perspective of literary studies has tended to be limited to concern for the relationship between postmodern and postcolonialism with the parameters of debate having remaining much in place since early articulations in the 1980s and ’90s. Kwame Anthony Appiah’s landmark essay ‘Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?’ (1991) distinguished between the ‘postrealism’ of postcolonial writing, and the ‘postrealism’ of

postmodernism of Western writers such as Pynchon, which he located in a different set of motivations, particularly in terms of the political. Yet at the same time, high-profile synergistic readings, such as Linda Hutcheon's use of Salman Rushdie as an exemplar of her theory of historiographic metafiction, illuminated how the postcolonial and postmodern *could* productively coexist.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, even for Appiah, despite the perceived differences, the 'post' in both postmodernism and postcolonialism represented a 'space clearing gesture' which challenged 'legitimizing narratives' of the past.<sup>4</sup>

This collection asks what space might be cleared, by works simultaneously postcolonial and postmodern, for the intervention of new racial imaginaries and the questioning of those grand, legitimising narratives of existing racial discourses. The ethos of this collection is that postrealism is a postmodern trait that might equally be called postcolonial. This is not to negate the different positionings of writers conventionally seen as one or the other, but rather to examine productively to what extent, in fact, such distinctions are useful. How does the geographical and political positioning of experimental writing inform its contribution to racial discourses? Does this offer the distinctions Appiah suggests? Or, perhaps, does it complicate even further such discrete categories?

At the same time, there are writers whose focus on race falls outside of the postcolonial frame entirely, or whose relationship to it is at the very least ambivalent. Although there is an argument to be made for the reading of all American writers, and particularly African-American writers, as postcolonial, nevertheless the neocolonial context of contemporary American culture makes such an understanding highly problematic. There is an emerging Eastern European literature produced in the wake of the Balkan conflicts and the break-up of the USSR which, as Vedrana Velickovich's chapter in this collection illustrates, has focused on issues of racial politics and related concerns with national identity. In the British context, a new generation of diasporic writers are responding to questions of race in ways for which older postcolonial frameworks are only partially relevant. All these developments reflect the acknowledged limitations of postcolonialism as a means of explaining the complex intersectional forces which shape contemporary identities.

At the same time that the place of postmodernism in 'minority' discourses demands attention, there is a pronounced lack of discussion regarding attitudes to race in works by white British and American writers that employ a postmodern aesthetic, despite the fact that seminal accounts of postmodern culture identify marginality as a core preoccupation of

postmodern literature. Little has been written on the racial politics of canonical postmodern writers and how their work potentially functions against, outside, or alongside, postcolonial concerns with race. Such questions ask for consideration, as Toni Morrison has so powerfully suggested, not simply of how postmodern writings represent the racial other, but also of the role of whiteness in the literary imagination.<sup>5</sup> Whilst Morrison has called on literary critics to consider race not solely as a matter of marginal identities, but also as a haunting presence in the dominant traditions of American fiction, neither in the United States nor the United Kingdom has this call been taken up in terms of considering how whiteness manifests itself in the texts of white writers – an issue specifically addressed in this collection in chapters on such figures as Pynchon, DeLillo and David Foster Wallace. Nor has there been any sustained discussion of the absence of race – as subject matter, as characterisation – in the work of white postmodern writers. The diasporic fictions of writers such as Zadie Smith and Diana Evans represent the contemporary metropolis as a space of racial diversity and cultural exchange, but this same metropolis is represented in the writings of J. G. Ballard or Ian McEwan as overwhelmingly Caucasian, with those of other ethnicities consigned to the margins. Such starkly different racial demographics begin to prompt questions about the construction of fictional worlds, and how they might seemingly coexist. With such concerns in mind, this collection recognises the need for a contrapuntal understanding that considers the significance of the absence of race in much of white postmodern writing. In response to this, it offers new readings of postmodern writers rarely – if ever – thought about in racial terms.

As Bill Ashcroft argues in the opening chapter of *Postmodern Literature and Race*, the postcolonial nevertheless remains a useful point of reference, not least because questions regarding its politics also draw attention to wider issues surrounding the use of postmodernism in the service of liberal or transformative racial discourses. The ambivalent politics of postmodernism hint at both radical and profoundly conservative engagements with race, offering potentially problematic encounters, but also the possibility of a progressive literary politics in which formal experimentation acts in the service of the deconstruction of racial hierarchies. This ambivalence is rooted in the fact that postmodernism is in part an empty signifier – a useful periodisation of a range of post-war and contemporary literatures that have played with formal structures, but with no explicit ideological unpinning. There is no ‘postmodern manifesto’ which might allow the identification of a particular attitude to race as an inherent feature. More

broadly, there is no singular political positioning within which a particular attitude towards race might be a discernable element.

Postmodernism therefore exists most readily in the plural form – ‘postmodernisms’ which cannot be assumed to share perspectives on matters concerning race. This difference is not easily interpreted as a matter of geographical location or temporality, but rather is an integral part of a literary discourse that resists the notion of definition as one of its few defining features. Nevertheless, critical attempts have been made to group postmodern literatures according to political perspectives generally, and more specifically in relation to postcolonialism. Most notable in this regard are Linda Hutcheon’s attempts in various works to define a politically engaged postmodern discourse and the work of Theo D’haen which has attempted to make more intricate distinctions between a kind of postmodernism amenable to postcolonial concerns, and one which eschews the representative politics on which those concerns rely.<sup>6</sup>

What these efforts draw attention to is the possible, if unlikely, reality of a postmodern text engaging radically with a racial political agenda. The seminal texts of postmodernism such as Steven Connor’s *Postmodernist Culture* and Brian McHale’s *Constructing Postmodernism* place destabilisations of identity and authenticity at the centre of postmodern activity, alongside a correlative questioning of grand narratives such as historical progressivism.<sup>7</sup> Inherent in such activity is the plausibility of a challenge to racial prejudice and an undermining of racial ideologies entrenched in public discourses such as science, religion and education.

At the same time, tensions between both anti-racist movements and anti-colonialist nationalism and perceptions of a postmodernism charged with relativism and apparent ethical disregard have led to questions as to the political relevance of postmodern techniques, especially as against realist representations of the world. Postmodern texts may continue to uphold stable racial identities, either through affirmations of biological difference, or through promoting the idea of race as a cultural distinction. Or postmodern literature may contribute to both the erosion of these discourses, and to the kind of ‘post-racial’ society imagined across a spectrum of intellectual domains. Here Paul Gilroy’s evocation of a ‘planetary humanism’ that might reimagine universalism for the twenty-first century joins up with Ulrich Beck’s ‘cosmopolitan vision’, Nussbaum’s ‘species memberships’ and Christian Moraru’s ‘cosmodernism’.<sup>8</sup>

This collection of essays makes an important departure from those studies focused narrowly on the particular racial identities of authors to foreground instead how racial discourse is interwoven into the very fabric

of writing from the late twentieth century to the present. With these concerns in mind, it brings together academics specialising in postmodern, postcolonial and diasporic literatures. It aligns through this approach a group of eminent and emerging scholars united by their interest in how experimental postmodern aesthetics may explicate particular concerns with race in the modern world. In doing so, it offers new accounts of how innovative literary practice has acted to both reinforce and redefine racial thinking in other fields such as science, politics, religion, linguistics and popular culture. Whilst influential sociological theories promise a world in which race ceases to be a cultural preoccupation, these essays position race as central to innovative literary practice and, through this, equally as of continued relevance to identity in the modern world; they draw attention to how postmodern experimentation has been used both to reinforce conservative racial thinking and to speculate on utopian futures.

In the context of post-9/11 cultural politics, at a moment in which authors are once again being called to take a more 'public' role in society, there has been a resurgence of attitudes which decry postmodernist approaches for a supposed disconnection from ethical and political concerns. Such criticisms align postmodern writing with a poststructuralist discourse that is represented as obscure, textual and alienating, and in doing so argue that postmodernism no longer resonates with the contemporary imagination, evading fundamental questions. In response to such criticism, postmodernism alongside poststructuralism has been re-evaluated here to emphasise, conversely, the inherent identity politics implicated in its concerns. The present collection offers a timely contribution to this ongoing debate, asking how postmodern interventions into racial discourse might speak to the continued relevance of such aesthetics in the contemporary moment, and illuminating how postmodern experimentation has both historically and in the present moment made a unique contribution to a literary discourse with social and political significance.

Accordingly, the collection rejects any straightforward thesis which would group contributions to the discussion in broad, generalising categories based either on the author's nationality, geopolitical positioning or ethnic origin. Whilst recognising that the situation of texts within categories such as 'African-American', 'diasporic' or 'postcolonial' shapes the nature of their engagement with postmodernity, these very categories have become contentious and suggestive of conservative literary frameworks which imprison texts on the margins of literary study. The structural principals behind this collection engage with such specificities through broader conceptual frameworks where texts, from diverse perspectives and

positionings, engage in shared postmodern strategies and work within common frames of reference pertaining to the postmodern condition.

For these reasons, the book is organised precisely around such shared sites of interaction, so as to foreground the central concern with the dialogue between race and postmodernism, rather than between race and other terms of categorisation. Such an approach facilitates a productive conversation between texts whose engagement with postmodernity is often overlooked by their designation, for example, as 'postcolonial' or 'African-American' or, even more broadly, as a particular national literature. A major purpose of the book will be to outline how these ethnic and geopolitical categories intersect in terms of race with postmodernism, and the limitations of theorising texts narrowly in such terms. Thus chapters arranged within the book's carefully delineated sections speak instead to more complex and original dialogues. While the reader of this book will find much of interest in terms of British, American, postcolonial, Eastern European, American-Jewish, and African-American approaches to race, they will also be prompted and challenged by the book's organisation to consider these texts beyond these conceptual framings, with their postmodern engagement at the foreground.

The book is organised, then, in five parts, each speaking to a specific site of postmodern literary intervention into the question of racial discourse. Part I, 'Postmodern Problematics', opens the book with three chapters that each speak to one of the main contexts of racial discourse pursued in the other chapters in the collection, serving to introduce the themes and tensions addressed in the rest of the book via a range of critical perspectives. In Chapter 1, 'Critical Histories: Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, and Race', Bill Ashcroft writes from his intellectual location as a postcolonial scholar to examine some of the central tensions between postcolonial readings and dominant versions of postmodern theory. This is followed by Madhu Dubey's chapter, 'Race and the Crisis of the Postmodern Social Novel' which approaches this same problematic but from the perspective of American literatures and with a particular emphasis on racilogies embedded in 'authoritative periodising accounts of postmodernism' which have linked a perceived 'crisis in the American social novel to the breakdown of a consensual understanding of American life'. Finally, David James in 'Worlded Localisms: Cosmopolitics Writ Small' discusses how the 'localist' fictions of figures like Jhumpa Lahiri and Zadie Smith operate in terms of broader 'worlded' domains, introducing the idea of diasporic engagements so prevalent in contemporary Europe literatures.

The chapters in Part II, 'Race and Performativity', examine how racial identities are 'performed' in postmodern literature, and the effects of such performance on literature's racial politics. These chapters help ground the sections that follow by examining, in both African-American and post-colonial contexts, how the postmodern can usefully serve minority racial positions, fostering challenges to traditional notions of self and identity. Bran Nicol, exploring the detective fiction of Ishmael Reed and Clarence Major, employs Baudrillard's 'seduction' to argue that the postmodern can be compatible with minority agendas, in this case so that it 'diverts the system of (white) detective fiction from its conventional path'. This is followed by Peter Morey's discussion of the performance of identity in the South Asian novel in English, tracing the complexities of racial subject positioning as it examines the relationship between Hari Kunzru's postmodern meditations on racial science against an earlier generation of migrant writing. Abigail Ward's 'Performing Race in Caryl Phillips's *Dancing in the Dark*' brings these two geopolitical positions together, exploring the contradictions between postcolonial and postmodern identities as they are played out in the work of its Caribbean author. Ward draws particular attention to the resonance of Phillips's text against a contemporary context of the social 'performance' of postcolonial and African-American identities. The section concludes with John Duvall's chapter, 'Appropriate Appropriation? Ishmael Reed's Neo-HooDoo and Flannery O'Connor's Artificial Negroes'. Forming an imperfect circle with the book's opening chapter, Duvall uses the African-American Reed as counterpoint to O'Connor – Southern, Catholic, white – arguing that it is, quite unexpectedly, the white 'modernist' author who offers the more sustained challenge to racial essentialism and white privilege.

Part III of the book, 'Nations and Belonging', examines intersections with race in one of the most deconstructed grand narratives of the postmodern literary project – the relations between race and nation in postmodern literature – through the varied contexts of Scotland, England, the United States and the former Yugoslavia. In "*How SCOTTISH I am*": Alasdair Gray, Race, and Neo-nationalism', Len Platt examines the intersection between race and nationality, arguing that familiar raciologies continue to shape Gray's celebrated version of the postmodern, 'albeit in strategically inverted forms'. In Gray's fictions, traditional antipathies between the Scots and the English appear to flourish in the context of new nationalisms. Linking up with the previous section, these chapters emphasise how the racial 'other' in the contemporary period takes on forms that are both new and also resurrections of historical prejudices,

with multiple and shifting registers of difference. Vedrana Velickovic argues that post-Yugoslav writing challenges not only the racism implicit in the Balkan conflicts, but also the boundaries of Euro-American postmodernisms, to present a specifically national postmodernism. This is followed by David Witzling's piece, which draws attention to the tensions between Jewish distinctiveness and the 'postmodern as a mode of mainstream Euro-American cultural authority', implicitly connoting a 'whiteness' to which Jewish authors respond both directly and indirectly. The section concludes with David Punter's essay on the writings of Will Self. From his unique perspective as both postcolonial and postmodern scholar, Punter explores the racial inflections of Self's fiction to provide a stark example of how race functions as an underlying preoccupation in concerns with questions of belonging in writing of contemporary white postmodern authors.

These chapters in Part III, on race and the nation, increasingly implicate postmodern literature in a project that undermines the nation as a racially homogenous space. Nation in these terms is one particular metanarrative which a focus on race may interrogate. Part IV of the book addresses this more broadly by considering how questions of gender, whiteness and Englishness might be problematised by thinking through race in postmodern terms. Opening this section, Tim Engles considers how DeLillo's fiction can be seen as an attempt to dismantle 'ambitious, ambivalent, and fantasised white individualism' that is centred in particular on a male subject position. This is followed by Nick Bentley's essay, which examines the complex interplay of race and discourses of Englishness in three seminal British postmodern novelists – Salman Rushdie, J. G. Ballard and Julian Barnes – situating these writers within a tradition of post-war writing that has drawn on postmodern techniques to critique dominant sociopolitical racial discourses. Finally, the section concludes with Samuel Cohen's discussion of Wallace, who he argues needs to be read as heir to an earlier generation of white postmodern writers, attempting to speak about race as part of a broader commitment to ending postmodern cynicism in favour of a reworked 'humanism'.

Cohen's essay serves as a bridge to the book's final section, 'Post-Racial Futures?' which critically considers whether postmodern fiction might play a role in gesturing towards a displacement of racial categories in favour of precisely the kind of revised humanism Cohen identifies. At the centre of this final group of chapters is the awareness that alongside the need for representation is the possibility of a post-representational discourse. This begins with an essay by Philip Tew, whose discussion of

Zadie Smith reveals how postmodernism may be, for some contemporary writers, a position to be eschewed rather than embraced precisely because it constrains thinking within a discourse of identity politics. In 'Racial Neoliberalism and Whiteness in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*', Sue J. Kim argues that despite the limits of post-racialism as a critical discourse, Pynchon's work might be seen as gesturing towards the possibility of such a society in its rethinking of ideas surrounding whiteness. The section concludes with Sara Upstone's essay "Some Kind of Black": Black British Historiographic Metafiction and the Postmodern Politics of Race', examining how recent reworking of the slave narrative might attempt to optimistically address questions of racial division pertinent to twenty-first-century culture.

*Postmodern Literature and Race* is concerned with how postmodern literature engages with racial discourse in the broadest terms: as political statement, as metaphor, as postcolonial intervention and as cultural formation. The volume provides a much needed contribution to the study of postmodern literature. It deepens understanding of the complex relationship between postmodern experimentation and postcolonial and diasporic writings, and offers through its broad range of geographical concerns a deeper appreciation of the role of literary innovation in contributing to a complex matrix of racial discourses in twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultures.

### Notes

- 1 See Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- 2 See Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- 3 See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).
- 4 See Kenneth Kwame Appiah, 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonialism?' *Critical Inquiry* 17/2 (Winter 1991), 336–57.
- 5 See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- 6 See Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989); Theo D'haen, "'History", (Counter-)Postmodernism, and Postcolonialism', *European Journal of English Studies* 1/2 (1997), 205–16.
- 7 Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (1989; Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1993)

- 8 See Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imaging Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, Harvard University Press, 2000); Ulrich Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006); M. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006); Christian Moraru, *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).