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# DIASPORAS

A special convention issue of the  
**Postcolonial Studies Association** newsletter  
• Winter 2015-16

# #16

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# editors' introduction

**WELCOME** to the **Winter** issue of the biannual newsletter of the Postcolonial Studies Association. This issue offers a report of, and reflection on, the first ever Postcolonial Studies Association Convention, which took place at the University of Leicester across three days, 7-9 September 2015. The Convention was organised around the special topic of “Diasporas”, a subject that has been of central interest to the field of postcolonial studies since its inception, but that has also engendered significant cultural, social and political pertinence in recent years as populations are becoming increasingly mobile, whether displaced by the ramifications of climate change or fleeing conflicts in countries such as Syria. The result of this increase in global movements and diasporas raises new and pressing questions for postcolonial studies, many of which were confronted and discussed by the numerous rich and exciting panels, papers and keynote lectures that were presented at the convention. In this issue, we have a range of contributions that document only a small but fruitful section of what was an astonishingly wide-ranging and in-depth convention. Chair of the organising committee and Leverhulme Fellow at the University of Leicester, **Alberto Fernández Carbajal**, offers a brief introduction that tells how the convention’s theme was decided, remarks upon the incredible response to the initial call for papers, and offers thanks, which is shared by the entire PSA committee, to all the organisers and colleagues who made it such a spectacular event. In addition to this, we include **an interview with keynote speaker John McLeod**, conducted by PSA Newsletter Editors Lucinda Newns and Dom Davies, in which he discusses his new book, which was also the focus of his lecture, *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption*, published by Bloomsbury in 2015. **David Firth** offers a report on a panel put together and presented by him and his colleagues, Edmund Chapman and Sarah Newport, on ‘Definitions of Diaspora’, and **Ellen O’Donoghue Oddy** presents a summary of her paper, ‘Rooted Nowhere: The Significance of Reproduction in Zadie Smith’s *NW*’.

As well as these convention-specific pieces, we also have reviews from **Deirdre Osbourne**, who offers her take on McLeod’s *Life Lines*, from

**Niroshini Sundaesan**, who reports on the second volume of a new trilogy entitled *Diasporas, Cultures of Mobilities*, edited by Sarah Barbour, David Howard, Thomas Lacroix and Judith Misrahi-Barak, and from **Sumaya Kassim**, who looks at Robbie Aitken and Eve Rosenhaft’s new study, *Black Germany: The Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community, 1884-1960*. The issue concludes with **Carola Briese**’s report on a conference entitled *AfroEuropeans V: Black Cultures and Identities in Europe*, which took place at the University of Münster in German, 16-19 September. Between these reviews and the reports on the PSA Convention, we hope that this issue offers an overview of some of the exciting direction that the field of postcolonial studies, particularly in relation to the ever more pressing theme of diaspora, is taking.

The PSA Newsletter Editors would like to take the opportunity, once again, to thank all those who contributed to this issue, but also to all those involved in the organisation of the PSA Convention 2015—and especially Alberto Fernández Carbajal—for all the hard work that went into creating such a special, and what will surely be a landmark, event. We close the issue with a call for contributions to Issue #17 of the PSA Newsletter, which will be out in the summer of 2016 and that will take the topic of ‘Cities’ as its special focus. More details can be found in the abstract included there.

**Lucinda Newns** (Design) and **Dominic Davies** (Editorial) are the editors of the Postcolonial Studies Association biannual newsletter. Lucinda is a lecturer in Comparative Literature at Queen Mary University of London. Her research focuses on the intersection between gender and other structural hierarchies, especially race and religion, in contemporary diasporic fiction. • Dominic completed his PhD at the University of Oxford in March 2015 under the supervision of Professor Elleke Boehmer. He is now a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Oxford researching the way urban infrastructures in post/colonial cities are represented by graphic novels and comics.

## PSA Convention 2015: An Introduction Alberto Fernández Carbajal

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Around the summer of 2014, as I was preparing to start my new Leverhulme research project, *Queer Diasporas: Islam, Homosexuality and the Micropolitics of Dissent*, at the University of Leicester, I started considering the possibility of organising a symposium or a small conference around the concept of ‘queer diasporas’ that would inform my project and enrich my knowledge of the field. In the autumn of that same year, the PSA Executive Committee discussed changing the format of previous PSA conferences by organising a centrally-held PSA convention with a special topic that would welcome any perspectives on postcolonial studies, as a means of getting most of our membership together for a convivial dialogue about postcolonialism across the disciplines.

The rest of the PSA Committee and I felt that the PSA and my project should join forces to organise a convention around the special topic of diasporas, which we believed would be beneficial both for our members and for my research. Opening up the convention’s central theme from ‘queer diasporas’ to ‘diasporas’ instantly broadened the event’s remit. As we quickly established when putting together our initial call for papers, movement—of people, capital, or culture—has always been central to postcolonial studies, whether this movement is the catalyst of colonial expansion, the slave trade, indentured labour, or, indeed, the migration of the colonised or formerly colonised to the old imperial metropolis. We wanted the concept to be embraced but also probed by convention delegates: how does it intersect with related concepts, such as ‘cosmopolitanism’, ‘transnationalism’, or ‘globalisation’? How does ‘diaspora’ challenge or endorse economic

privilege? In what ways can it help resist mainstream ideologies? It seemed from the start that the concept of diaspora was well established and familiar enough within postcolonial studies, but we wanted to learn about the latest developments in the study of migration, and to gauge why diaspora studies continues to hold an important place in

“We wanted the concept to be embraced but also probed by convention delegates.”

contemporary critical discourses. In addition, it was clear to us that we did not want to narrow down the convention’s presentations to the special topic, and that we wanted to welcome innovative work on any area of postcolonial studies, so that the programme was representative of the heterogeneous work undertaken by our members. In the meantime, our long-standing ally, the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, offered its financial support to organise a celebratory event for its 10th anniversary, which eventually took the form of a special introduction to the journal by its chief editor, Janet Wilson, and the announcement of the PSA/JPW Postgraduate Essay Competition

“...movement—of people, capital, or culture—has always been central to postcolonial studies...”



by Sarah Lawson Welsh, followed by the main event: Paul Gilroy's keynote lecture, 'Europe Otherwise: Mare Nostrum and the Banality of Good', followed by a drinks reception in the hall of College Court.

Having no experience of organising a large, central convention for the PSA, our expectations were largely exceeded when we received over 200 abstract submissions from all parts of the world as a response to our first CFP. This was both encouraging and terribly humbling, and as a small organising committee, we found it extremely difficult to choose a selection of papers that could be comfortably accommodated given our limited time and resources. It has been to our great satisfaction that our keynotes, John McLeod (University of Leeds), Paul Gilroy (King's College London) and Gayatri Gopinath (New York University) were our first choices in every single case, and that their work, focusing on transcultural adoption, the current refugee crisis in Europe, and the aesthetics of queer diasporas, represents so well the wide range of work on diasporas undertaken by world-leading scholars. Each plenary address contributed a distinct and

unique angle to our dialogue about migration, proving that the study of diasporas is still of the utmost relevance to our contemporary world.

The following pages present a brief insight into the content of the keynotes and of the multiple and very illuminating panels that we put together for the PSA Convention. Personally, it was thrilling to witness an event that we orchestrated with so much dedication finally come to life. Our delegates' papers were engaging, committed and eye-opening, and the event provided exactly what we had been hoping to establish: a convivial way of learning about the latest developments in the study of postcolonialism and migration. I would like to thank all presenters and panel chairs for their work, and my fellow organisers and colleagues for making the convention such an exciting adventure. I hope to see you all again in 2017!

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**Alberto Fernández Carbajal** is a Leverhulme Fellow in the School of English at the University of Leicester. He is also the Postgraduate and Early Career Representative for the PSA.



# A Conversation with Keynote Speaker John McLeod

## Dominic Davies and Lucinda Newns

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*John McLeod has been an important figure in the field of postcolonial studies, and gave the first keynote lecture at the PSA Convention this year. His first book, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2000), introduced many of the key concepts in the field and considered their application to literature, whilst his second, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (2004), explored how London has been re-imagined by a variety of post-war writers. He also edited the *Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (2007) and co-edited *The Revision of Englishness* (2004), which considered the ways in which Englishness has been imaginatively reconsidered by different kinds of writers and film-makers.*

*His new book, *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption* (2015), which has recently been published by Bloomsbury, is the first critical study to explore narratives of transcultural adoption from contemporary Britain, Ireland and America, drawing on fictions, films and memoirs made by those within the adoption “triad” or concerned with the pain and possibilities of transcultural adoption. His keynote lecture, “Against Biocentrism: Adopting, Writing, Diaspora”, delivered on the first day of the PSA Convention 2015, introduced some of the key concepts of the book and explored how they related to the convention’s special topic of “diasporas”. He took time after lunch on the second day of the convention to talk to the PSA Newsletter editors, Lucinda Newns and Dominic Davies. Here he reflects a little more on these*

*ideas and introduces some of the key concepts that underpin his new book, as well as offering his thoughts on the field of postcolonial studies and the role of academic scholarship and creative writing more generally.*

**Dominic Davies (DD):** Hi John, thanks for talking to us today. We wanted to begin by asking how you’ve enjoyed the PSA Convention this year so far. Have there been any highlights? And what have you learned?

“I’ve always been struck during the years that I’ve been involved in the field [of post-colonial studies] by just how convivial, principled and decent people are.”

John McLeod (JM): Well we’re only half way through of course, but I’ve enjoyed it immensely. One of the things I like about working in postcolonial studies in general is the academic community that constitutes the field. I said at the beginning of my keynote yesterday how daunting it is to face all these fantastic people, but I’ve always been struck during the years that I’ve been involved in the field by just how convivial, principled and decent people are. We have good debates, people don’t walk out or fall out, and even though, in presenting our ideas, we are all also presenting ourselves to a certain extent, it’s not egocentric. I love the way there is great symbiosis between more established academics and early career researchers, and as ever there are a lot of graduate students around at the moment who are taken seriously and whose work is welcomed. For me the conference is a really exciting moment to see what’s new and what the next generation is going to be working on. So I’ve had a great time—it’s also a good way to see old friends again and to have some fun! I think half of the enjoyment of conferences is what’s done in the coffee breaks and at dinner and in the evenings,

