Imaginary Europes, phantoms of the past, conceptions of the future?

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INTRODUCTION

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This special issue opens up a critical space to reflect on literary and cinematographic images of Europe, as they come alive within and without the bounds of what we, from a geopolitical and cultural perspective, regard as Europe. While most of us are aware of the European Union’s 28 member states, fewer probably know that its geopolitical reach also comprises overseas territories in parts of Africa, Asia, and the Americas. This geographical spread, which translates into different ethnicities, cultural codes and languages, to some extent explains why there can never be one but only many imaginary Europes. Moreover, the 20th century has witnessed crucial changes which have affected our perceptions of Europe: the devastation and consequent reorganization of nation states during and after the world wars; the collapse of empires; the creation and expansion of the European Union; the end of the Eastern Bloc; the Balkan ethnic conflict and the ensuing nation rebuilding. These events have inaugurated the continuous reshaping of Europe’s population through emigration, immigration and globalization. With every new generation, the imaginary Europes produced within the continent and in its diasporas proliferate. With each newly independent nation and with each shift in the balance of power, traditional constructions of Europe make way for fresh outlooks. As a consequence of European emigrants settling abroad, new memories of the ancestral home are handed down to subsequent generations. And, with each internal or external migrant seeking a European home, new anticipations of what Europe might be emerge. These factors have been explored not only in the art produced in Europe during the changes in the 20th and 21st centuries, but also at a distance, whether by artists witnessing the changing influence and shape of Europe from afar, or by those examining, in retrospect, the journey that Europe has taken to develop the multifaceted dimension it displays today.\textsuperscript{1}

It was during a conversation in 2011, on a park bench in Istanbul, overlooking the Bosphorus, perched on the edge of the continent of Europe, that we considered the lack of attention given to the imaginary Europes produced at a distance from the continent and in its peripheries. What particularly intrigued us was that much of this cultural production happens without first-hand experience of Europe itself, but as a reaction to the cultural, economic, political and religious influences that Europe has had throughout the world. Rather than hold a mirror up to Europe, these imaginary creations present artistic portraits of the continent and its cultures, constructed across differences of power, both political and ideological, as well as ethnic affiliations, cultural currency, linguistic practice and geographical locations. Arjun Appadurai (1996) has relentlessly pointed to the

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importance of the imagination in the construction of a new public sphere; to him imagination is an underestimated cultural practice that in fact makes our being in the world possible in the first place. Through the transmission of stories and images, moving and still, human society has always carved out its sets of values and norms, beliefs and fears. So too, the narration and imagery of Europe, handed down from generation to generation and community to community, uncovers far-reaching discursive powers in its ability to imagine new perspectives and constellations (see Puttnam 1997).

In contemporary international anglophone writing and film, transcultural interactions and Europe’s shifting position in a globalizing world produce European identities that negotiate the past and the present, the local and the global, and the altering relations within Europe as well as between Europe and the rest of the world. In his influential text Provincialising Europe, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) acknowledges that “there were and still are many Europes, real, historical, and fantasized” (xiv). Europe, therefore, is never a static entity and, as Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande (2007) posit, should only be understood “in the sense of an institutionalized process of permanent change” (6). Within this process, they identify two principal conceptualizations of Europe: the “old Europe” of the development of nation state politics, and the “new cosmopolitan Europe” (165) of transnational connections. This special issue, in its examination of the traces of “old Europe” in contemporary literature and film concerning European integration, cold war division and decolonization from Europe, signals a move away from the centre/periphery dichotomy as a critical framework for considering these imaginary Europes. When Homi K. Bhabha (1990) wrote in his introduction to Nation and Narration that “America leads to Africa; the nations of Europe and Asia meet in Australia; the margins of the nation displace the centre; the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis” (6), he opened up new vistas by recognizing a transnational cultural network of diasporas. In the past two decades, Bhabha’s conceptualization of Europe as the nucleus of a web of diasporic threads has been further elaborated into a visualization of Europe as a proliferating, transnational network of multiple, hybrid centres, each negotiating local and global cultural identities and hierarchies.

Subaltern studies has here played a significant part in altering perspectives on Europe by challenging Europe’s alleged ownership and transmission of “universalist” Enlightenment principles (civilization, nationalism, human rights, scientific progress, etc.) and its simultaneous, hypocritical refusal to grant equal rights and citizenship to others. The task at hand, according to Chakrabarty, is to “provincialize Europe” by exploring how European thinking, “which is now everybody’s heritage and which affects us all – may be renewed from and for the margins” (2000, 16). Such a productive re-imagining of European thought targets not only the imperialistic propagation of Europe’s philosophies at the height of Empire, but also their ongoing reproduction in neocolonial form, whether by Europe or its neocolonial allies (such as the United States) across the world. These approaches are addressed in this issue by Maggie Ann Bowers with regard to works by the Canadian Sri Lankan Michael Ondaatje and the British Pakistani Kamila Shamsie, who happen to explore critically the same key events and figures in European history from an Asian perspective. In The English Patient (1992) and Burnt Shadows (2009) Ondaatje and Shamsie expose the racist assumptions underlying the American decision to bomb the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II. In The English Patient and A God in Every Stone (2014) they problematize the use of an imperialist discourse of modern historicism through references to the work of the ancient Greek historian Herodotus.
If Bowers explores Ondaatje and Shamsie’s anti-imperialist critique of Europe, James Mackay examines the surprisingly positive images of Europe adopted in contemporary postmodern Native American writing. He shows how Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) writer Gerald Vizenor counterbalances a familiar mode of anti-imperialist protest with an unusual and subtle alignment of French and Native American aesthetic traditions in two recent novels. In *Father Meme* (2008), intertextual references to Albert Camus’s existentialist novel *The Fall* reinforce Vizenor’s indictment of church abuses on the White Earth Reservation, Minnesota; in *Shrouds of White Earth* (2010), he configures French and Native American modernist art on the same global “cosmoprimitivist” continuum, in defiance of the high art status awarded to the former and the folk art label given to the latter. However, the creative mode of survival Vizenor posits for Native American culture walks a tightrope between essentialism and universalism, as Mackay shows in his analysis of a visit to the collections of indigenous art at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, which is described at the end of *White Shrouds*.

Critics whose work has informed this issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* have also focused on the internal ideological clashes that have affected the “European project” in the 20th and 21st centuries. In his discussion of the inextricable ties between the “history of Europe” and “the history of communism”, French philosopher Étienne Balibar (2004), for example, explains how “Soviet communism claimed, no less than the ‘West,’ to be the representative of the European idea, the bearer of its heritage and future” and in this regard speaks of

the Europe of contradictory illusions [that has been] maintained since 1920, and most particularly since 1945, by the very way that each of the two ‘blocs’ laid exclusive claim to the idea of Europe in its confrontation with each other. (89)

It is this “infernal logic” that Balibar considers to be one of Europe’s central driving forces, turning “Europe at once [into] an obsession and a phantom, still in need of blood and nourishment, which we do not know whether to exorcize or bring to life” (89). Recent developments in the Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula have sadly confirmed the philosopher’s evaluation of the tensions that permeate Europe’s geo-cultural space. A quarter of a century after the fall of the Iron Curtain and a decade after the publication of Balibar’s *We, the People of Europe: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, this phantom has powerfully resurfaced with as yet unforeseeable consequences for the future of Europe (see Cheauré 2010). The weight of imagination in imminent Europeanization processes is also momentous. As Ib Bondebjerg (2008) posits, “our Imaginary Europe is [ … ] a strong and sometimes forgotten cultural dimension in the European integration project and a dimension with important social, political and democratic implications for the construction of a European public sphere” (215).

In her discussion of cinematographic images of Europe that emerged at the beginning of the third millennium, when the Great War and the havoc it wreaked in Europe have been succeeded by many other crises, Sissy Helff shows how a nostalgia for Europe’s past takes precedence over an affirmation of the increasingly unified stance it has been adopting in recent decades. A thoroughly cosmopolitan Europe, in which Continental Europe and Britain figure as truly unified, still lies beyond the imaginative reach of contemporary American and British cinema, as is illustrated by the British-European encounters presented in Pawel Pawlikowski’s *Last Resort* (2000) and Steven Spielberg’s *War Horse* (2011). Both films, Helff argues, portray the continent of Europe as a hostile place divorced from and even spurned by Britain, a nation which ultimately falls back on an essentially nostalgic, insular identity. Whether these films
choose to focus on recent problems surrounding asylum seekers or revisit the horrors of the Great War, they fall short of imagining a broader and more comprehensive view of Europe. Europeanization is, at best, restricted to fleeting moments; it certainly is not projected, let alone realized, within the films’ narratives.

Border-crossings and experiences of travel by Europeans and foreigners alike have generated yet other imaginary Europes. Migrant artists, whether from outside Europe or European residents with roots in other spaces, have deterritorialized Europe’s national literatures and arts and invigorated its artistic and broader cultural traditions. The critical re-examination of Europe and its histories and ideologies from the perspective of these border-crossers, migrants and travellers has led to the uncovering of silent and invisible connections, both within and beyond Europe, that problematize traditional national narratives (Nyman 2011; Nyman, Häyrynen, and Turunen 2012). Europe here emerges as a contested, hybrid space, whose inhabitants are representatives of transcultural identities and narratives and whose regions could each be or is considered as a “center’ in its own right” (Nyman, Häyrynen, and Turunen 2012, 200). In this regard, Jopi Nyman detects that, when read together, the travel accounts of Finland produced since the fall of the Iron Curtain by three British authors (Roger Scruton, Michael Palin and Michael Booth) testify to the fact that the discourse on European peripheries is changing. In these reports, stereotypical denunciations of the Nordic other increasingly make way for considerations that recognize the cultural diversity of Europe’s most northerly margins, as well as their similarities with Britain.

Christine Berberich’s contribution to this issue examines the way in which Englishness is differently constructed in two travelogues published seven decades apart, the earlier one proposing an isolationist vision of England, the later one a postcolonial postcolonial response to it. She shows how Joe Bennett, a travel writer born in Britain but based in New Zealand since the 1980s, provides a critical, postcolonial distance to the mythological England conjured up by H.V. Morton in his In Search of England (1927), a narrative detailing his travels across England in the decade following the Great War. In Mustn’t Grumble: In Search of England and the English, Bennett retraces Morton’s steps and exposes how the latter’s descriptions of a rural, traditional England were, even at the time, less grounded in reality than produced in Morton’s profoundly nostalgic mind’s eye; they certainly do not match the England Bennett experiences in 2006. The multifaceted imaginings of Europe discussed in this issue also challenge the oversimplified versions of Europe that have been handed down either as a legacy of European colonialism or to later generations following European emigration across the world. Margriet van der Waal’s article on post-apartheid Afrikaans fiction examines how Europe is perceived by expatriate white South Africans in Moltrein (2004) by Dan Roodt, Sabbatsreis (2007) by Annelie Botes and 30 Nagte in Amsterdam (2008) by Etienne van Heerden. While the privileged Afrikaners presented in these three novels reach different conclusions and degrees of insight, Van der Waal shows that their critical perceptions of their racist European environments also serve as an occasion to reflect on the postcolonial subjectivity of Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa.

Janine Hauthal reveals an even bleaker picture of contemporary, multicultural Europe painted by black British writer Caryl Phillips and Greek-Australian novelist Christos Tsiolkas – a bleakness that can be surmised from the titles of their respective texts, The European Tribe (1987) and Dead Europe (2005). Although Phillips and Tsiolkas share a profound pessimism about the persistence of racism in contemporary Europe, Hauthal demonstrates that their conceptions of the continent differ. While Phillips’s counter-travelogue emphasizes the enduring opposition between Europe’s
ruling “tribes” and its shunned minorities, Tsiolkas’s dark ghost story depicts a Europe that may be more profoundly multicultural, but whose anti-Semitic horrors, decades after World War II, continue to haunt second-generation emigrants in locations that are geographically antipodal to Europe.

While each historical period knows its own catalytic and iconographic moments, it is, paradoxically, the perpetual re-imagining of Europe and its history that appears to be its only constant. The multiple and proliferating versions of Europe discussed in this issue result from the ever-mobile populations travelling in and out of the region and the imaginary responses to the world they carry with them. With its special interest in previously overlooked imaginings of Europe from more distant and more peripheral standpoints, this special issue only confirms the need for the continuing re-examination of the role of the cultural imagination in (re)conceptualizing, the past, present and future of Europe.

Note
1. The discussion of these ideas provided the focus for a symposium in 2012 called “Imaginary Europes”, organized by the editors of this issue at the University of Portsmouth (UK), with support from the Goethe University of Frankfurt (Germany) and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium). The keynote speaker, Jopi Nyman (University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu), joined the group to expand the work into a larger, international project exploring these manifold manifestations of imaginary Europes in literature and visual art from different parts of the globe. This issue contains contributions by some of the original speakers from the symposium as well as by scholars working within the contours of the project that has developed from the foundational symposium.

References