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Scottish Studies after Cultural Studies

Caroline McCracken-Flesher: a Response

In 1919, responding to G. Gregory Smith's assertion of a distinct Scottish literature, T. S. Eliot quipped: 'Was there a Scottish Literature?'¹ Rising—or sinking—to the challenge the next two generations of authors and scholars spilled much ink to demonstrate that there had been in the past and continued to be in their moment. Alternately, courtesy of Calvinism, Britishness, inferiorism, etc., there was not or hadn't been for a while, but should be (from a nationalist and aesthetic point of view)—or should not be (also from an aesthetic and nationalist perspective). Scottish literature was contested as either distinct or not and therefore, in each case, great.²

Today we stand once more on the cusp of theoretical and political change: away from the Cultural Studies that allowed the concerns behind such a debate to arise and Scottish culture to become visible as a field of study; away from the complex subaltern politics of a Scotland at once -colonial and post- that drove a self-conscious struggle with and foregrounding of identity.³

Now that Cultural Studies has saturated every consideration of identity with particularity and thus left no mode of distinguishing the objects of its intervention, and Scotland stands on the brink of nationhood, we find ourselves wondering whether there can be a Scottish Studies after Cultural Studies or, even more strangely, whether there can be a Scottish Studies after the recuperation of an independent Scotland. Lacking the political tension that has both threatened and produced its difference, and the theoretical mode that allowed the expression and assertion of that difference, will there be a 'Scotland'?

So what does it mean to achieve the nation in the post-national moment? What does it mean

to become visible through Cultural Studies but in the moment of that theory's transcendence and thus disappearance?

Our panelists worked to describe the extent of the problem, but also the challenges and the possibilities that ensue. As Matt Wickman points out, at times Cultural Studies has seemed not to mature but to become clichéd as it has moved to the center of critical discourse. Consequently, a literature that emerges through Cultural Studies may be no longer itself. And certainly, anyone who has taught Scottish Literature and learned from undergraduates schooled in popular romances that 'Scots are oppressed' can only agree. But if Scottish Studies, having arisen within Cultural Studies, may not exist beyond that field, Wickman hints that for the same reason it may, by its vagaries, reform or at the very least inform Cultural Studies.

For Carla Sassi, if history has required the Cultural Studies construction of Scottishness, modernity does indeed require a Scottish reconstruction of Cultural Studies. Anxious about unduly pessimistic or optimistic positions that might merely defend the territory asserted through Cultural Studies, or abandon that territory altogether in pursuit of a new universalism, Sassi propounds a thoughtful local and global sensibility that privileges, in Susan Stanford Friedman's term, 'a montage of differences'.⁴

Juliet Shields, too, imagines that the shift away from Cultural Studies but toward nationhood raises the risk of insularity but the possibility of a matured and evolved—perhaps even devolved—discipline. Perhaps Scottishness is not solely for the Scots; perhaps, as for Wickman and Sassi, Scottish Studies is best articulated in and may inform and be informed by broader contexts. For Wickman, the turn may be historical; for Sassi, toward colonial contexts; for Shields, outside its established relationships, Scottish Literature may at last show its relevance as other than purely Scottish.

So can there be a culture distinctly Scottish outside the theory that privileges identity as difference? Is there a Scottish Studies after Cultural Studies and the transcendence of the nation? And should there be?

Scottish Studies after Cultural Studies, I suggest, might look to the past or anticipate a future. Our panelists have each invoked a broader field of reference within or beyond Scotland that may reanimate Scottish Studies either in the context of or despite Cultural

Studies. Scottish Literature itself supplies models for such an alternate future. Could Scottish Studies go 'back to Dunbar' in earnest, to a moment of unselfconscious nationhood—a Scotland so sure of itself that it could produce the 'Lament for the Makars', with its confident equation of international poets in a system that presumed none to be hegemonic and all to be significant?⁵ Might tomorrow's Scotland, with its complex positioning and penchant for self-critique, produce new satires of today's many estates, relevant across more than the countries of the British Isles?⁶

Yet it is important to remember that today's Scotland stands not just within a theory in decline by virtue of its very success, but also a within new world. Contemporary scholarship has to address a field of production that extends beyond, quite differently, and at a massively accelerated pace from those we have known. This field has the potential to redirect studies both Cultural and Scottish. Matt Wickman has pondered power from below, as opposed to power from above. Today, power from below can be power from anywhere and everywhere. Scotland is only one site of Scottish identity, and one locus for Scottish Studies, in a world of identities no longer confined in place, defined by language, or determined by the politics of Britishness. Self-constructed, modular and multiple identities, Denis Constant-Martin suggests, are the norm—and that was before the options for identification and a concomitant fragmentation were exacerbated by the internet.⁷ Perhaps a Scotland aiming for independence even as nationhood is trumped by the rise at once of super states and of particularized individuality, a Scotland revealing its damage and its lack in the moment of its apotheosis, both expresses and yields to this present moment.

But in the chaos that is the Web, is there anything recognizable or coherent enough to be Scottish? A brief review of Scottishness online indicates a massive, changing and complicating field for analysis. Nations, Benedict Anderson has told us, are shockingly new.⁸ Online, everything is new all the time. Still the enthusiastic assemblage of Scottishnesses from the fragments scattered across the internet poses questions not about the nation's transience, but about the extraordinary persistence of Scottishness as an idea. This, perhaps, is the problem and the opportunity that post-British Scottish Studies has always posed to theory in general, and that will arise only the more insistently as Scottishness is diffused but

not diminished across the intensities of tomorrow's Convergence Culture.⁹

Given the particularities of today's Cultural Studies, we might ask: how is it possible for a localized culture to have global persistence? What rough theory, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Edinburgh to be born?

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Notes

- 1 G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (London: MacMillan, 1919); T. S. Eliot, *Athenaeum* 4657 (August 1, 1919): pp. 680–81.
- 2 For example C. M. Grieve [Hugh MacDiarmid], *Albyn* (New York: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1927); Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turbull, *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989); Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996).
- 3 See Scott Lash, 'Power after Hegemony: Cultural Studies in Mutation?' in *Theory, Culture & Society* 24.55 (2007): pp. 55–78.
- 4 Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Planetary: Musing Modernist Studies', *Modernism/Modernity* 17.3 (September 2010): pp. 471–99; see p. 493.
- 5 Grieve, *Albyn*, 4, references William Dunbar's 'Lament for the Makars' (c. 1505).
- 6 David Lyndsay, *Ane Pleasant Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, perf. 1554.
- 7 Denis Constant-Martin, 'The Choices of Identity', *Social Identities* 1.1 (1995): 5–20.
- 8 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 5.
- 9 See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).



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