How can we better understand migration in terms of aesthetic practice or, for that matter, aesthetics as a category of the migratory? This volume of interdisciplinary essays offers a diversity of topics from the fields of literature, film, photography, art history, environmental studies, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, gender studies, cultural theory and analysis, all generated and focused around the knotted terms of “migration,” “migratory” and “aesthetics.” In times of heady globalisation, there is a need to critique conflations and confusions between critical terms and scholarly practices. People forcibly exiled or relocating themselves and their cultures bring aesthetic traditions into host cultures which, in turn, can both reject and appropriate these traditions. The conjoining of “migratory” and “aesthetics” is not intended to suggest a free-floating aesthetics that somehow transcends national borders. Aesthetic practices, like migrants themselves, are clearly subject to multiple cultural, political and economic constraints. And yet aesthetic practices often gain their force precisely through their contestation of constraint and the assertion of a certain freedom of movement. Aesthetic freedom is linked to human agency, to the power to create the (multi-) cultural habitats in which we live. But what role does aesthetics play in a world in which goods, labour and capital are seemingly becoming ever more moveable and movement itself becomes a sign not only of individual agency but also of powerlessness, where there is no choice but to move? How does aesthetic production reflect and contest the unequal power relations that underpin the myriad movements occasioned by globalisation?

Between the politics of migration and aesthetic production there is always a complex transaction of cultural signs and identities. This collection of essays reflects these two-way movements between cultural identity and subjects-in-aesthetic-process – not all of who are themselves migrants. “Migratory aesthetics” suggests the various
processes of becoming that are triggered by the movement of people and peoples: experiences of transition as well as the transition of experience itself into new modalities, new art work, new ways of being. But the essays collected here also draw attention to those who are caught, even frozen, in transition, between lives and countries, unable to lay claim to citizenship; not so much subjects-in-process as subjects-on-hold, subjects-in-stasis whose freedom to move is violently circumscribed. Such, for instance, is the concern of Ihab Salouf’s essay on the displacement of Palestinians and on those who lose their lives in the attempt to move between states.

This volume focuses the lens on the constantly shifting boundaries between postcolonial studies and the marketplace of cultural production, the postcolonial field and its “contents” in terms of genre. Some essays find the scholar bringing cultural theories to bear on specific artworks; other contributors find artists making syncretic theoretical reflections on both their own work and that of others. While Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire (2000) and Multitude (2004) have been the subject of much criticism, there can be no doubt that their work is symptomatic of a shift in postcolonial studies towards the new and not so new forms of imperialism that underpin contemporary forms of globalisation. It is thus no accident that a number of essays focus on geopolitical power relations and the crisis of environmental survival. Aesthetic production, whether it results in identifiable artworks or simply modifications in our lived experience of culture, is central to the development of what Paul Gilroy has termed “planetary consciousness” (After Empire 2004). For readers who may question what place art has in a world of geopolitical and environmental concerns, Essays in Migratory Aesthetics makes the crucial connection between aesthetics, politics and human survival.

Our title also signals that the relation between migration and aesthetics is not simply one of representation, in which the latter is simply a mode of representing the former. Beyond the question of how the multiple modern experiences of migration are represented in various art forms is the question of the impact of migration on artistic production and the category of the aesthetic. The formulation migratory aesthetics draws attention to the ways in which aesthetic practice might be constituted by and through acts of migration. Contra the conservatism inherent in the project of establishing discrete national artistic traditions, this volume takes as one of its key points of departure the possibility that aesthetics is, by its very nature, migratory. As Durrant argues later in this collection, even at the historical moment of decolonisation, where cultural nationalism appears at its most radical, works such as Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart (1958) come into being in the passage between cultures, in the negotiation not simply between modernity and tradition but between rival modernities, rival modes of understanding the interconnected yet disjunctive world in which we live.

To speak of aesthetics as migratory is to spatialise a field that is all too often seen in terms of chronology. Many of the essays in this volume explore the ways in