

## “Minor” genres in postcolonial literatures: New webs of meaning

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It is now widely acknowledged that the field of postcolonial studies has been by and large averse to exploring aesthetic matters (see Boehmer 2010; Hiddleston 2011; Hitchcock 2003), save for discussions foregrounding postmodern literary features in postcolonial texts – what Eli Park Sorensen (2010) has famously dismissed as the “modernist ethos” of postcolonial scholarship. While this lack of engagement with aesthetic matters might have much to do with postcolonial studies’ subordination of form to political/historical questions, it also manifests itself through a generalized neglect of generic issues. Specifically, much work in postcolonial literary studies has systematically promoted a single body of cultural products only, namely the novel. Problematically constructing this genre as a “dominant” one in postcolonial literatures, this critical trend hardly does justice to the multiplicity of the field. Moreover, it misrepresents certain literary traditions within which the novel occupies a less central position (see Herbillon in this issue about the centrality of the short story in the Australian literary tradition). Also, postcolonial scholarship’s overemphasis on the novel-as-national-narrative (see Chaudhuri 2008; Pravinchandra 2013) has contributed to marginalizing literary traditions and works by writers who delink their novels from issues of modernity and nation formation (see, for instance, Sarah Brouillette’s 2007 discussion of the reasons behind the neglect of Zulfikar Ghose’s work by postcolonial critics). With regard to a Malaysian context, Philip Holden (2010) remarks that the overabundance of postcolonial scholarship devoted to the novel genre obscures the fact that, in “late colonial and post-independence periods”, the short story is “often a more common means of literary expression” (442). In the Caribbean, the earlier critical consensus that the novel developed in conjunction with nationalist movements and that it has been a dominant genre in the region has been problematized by critics such as Alison Donnell (2006) and Evelyn O’Callaghan (2004), who, by broadening the terrain of analysis to pre-1940s Caribbean writings, have highlighted the generic diversity of that corpus – and, what is more, have emphasized the “global” dimension of the early Caribbean novel (see Dalleo 2016).

Equally importantly, the critical disregard for generic issues contributes to the containment of postcolonial criticism within a set of prescribed paradigms and even re-inscribes exclusions. A case in point is Dalit literatures. As Laetitia Zecchini (2015) remarks, because Dalit literatures “have initially privileged the genres of poetry, autobiography, and short story” – in addition to being “overwhelmingly written in so-called

vernacular languages” (60) – they have been generally overlooked by what Graham Huggan (2014) calls, in a different context, the “postcolonial mainstream” (131). In his indictment of postcolonial scholarship’s failure to consider what we might call, in this novel-oriented context, another “minor genre”, namely poetry, Jahan Ramazani (2001), in *The Hybrid Muse* – one of the rare book-length studies of postcolonial poetry in English – suggests that “the mimetic presuppositions” that postcolonialism generally holds regarding literature prevents its engagement with genres that might disrupt, or complicate, these same presuppositions (4). For Ramazani, poetry is bound to play second fiddle in a postcolonial context because the formal features of the genre rule out the possibility that poems might solely be used as political and historical documents: “since poetry mediates experience through a language of exceptional figural and formal density, it is a less transparent medium by which to recuperate the history, politics, and sociology of postcolonial societies” (4). As Ramazani sees it, the marginalization of poetry by postcolonial criticism has little to do with the quality of postcolonial poetry itself; rather, it concerns an inability to attend to more formal matters that might sit uneasily with, or perhaps just bypass, the coordinates of postcolonialism’s reading grid. In a different context but related line of thought, Amit Chaudhuri (2008) suggests, too, that partly because of its downright inattentiveness to, or plain oversimplification of, formal matters, postcolonial criticism appears to lose itself in the ever-reverberating echoes of its own (uncritical) voice. Chaudhuri specifically critiques postcolonial studies for their unflinching engagement, in the wake of the canonization of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), with a surprisingly “old-fashioned and mimetic” interpretative aesthetic when it comes to readings of Indian novels in English: “Indian life is plural, garrulous, rambling, lacking a fixed center, and the Indian novel must be the same” (2008, 115). For Chaudhuri, the fact that both “Indianness” and the postcolonial Indian novel in English have been constructed, after Rushdie, as necessarily standing *against* the conventional English novel and its realist conventions, involves the risk that delicacy and nuance might be thought of as rightfully belonging to the rational, bourgeois west alone – “surely an old colonialist prejudice” (116), Chaudhuri rails.

Still, this is not to say that postcolonial studies’ attachment to Sorensen’s “modernist ethos” necessarily needs to be counterbalanced (and thus somewhat redeemed) by a programmatic engagement with realism. After all, as Kumkum Sangari ([1987] 2000) has famously noted, postmodern aesthetic features signify *differently* in first-world and “third-world” contexts, in which they tend to assert *not* scepticism about meaning but “another *level* of factuality” (903; emphasis in original). As she phrases it, “the postmodern preoccupation with the crisis of meaning is not everyone’s crisis [ ... ] there are different modes of de-essentialization which are socially and politically grounded and mediated by separate perspectives, goals, and strategies for change in other countries” (918). Certainly, Sangari’s call for carefully contextualizing postmodernist literary features concurs with Ato Quayson’s (2003) argument that the literary-aesthetic and social-historic domains are in fact “related to each other because they mutually mirror systemic heterogeneities that manifest themselves as constellated and reconstellating thresholds” (xxxi). That said, the understanding that genres and forms can partake in “modes of de-essentialization” also requires that we take on board their provisional character. So Peter Hitchcock (2003) is right in noting that genres should be

apprehended as “genres-in-the-making” only, which implies that, in a postcolonial context, minor and dominant genres alike “are internally dialogized by the concrete realities of their production” (318). Ironically, as Hitchcock reminds us, while we have yet to seriously engage with the ways in which postcolonial literature has rewritten genres, its “genre-bending” tendency was emphasized long ago, in the foundational text of postcolonial studies, *The Empire Writes Back*. Back in 1989, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin remarked that

[t]he interaction of English writing with the older traditions of orature or literature in post-colonial societies [... has] radically questioned easy assumptions about the characteristics of the genres we usually employ as structuring and categorizing definitives (novel, lyric, epic, play, etc.). [...] The perspective of cross-cultural literatures has given explicit confirmation to the perception that genres cannot be described by essential characteristics, but by an interweaving of features, a ‘family resemblance’ which denies the possibility of either essentialism or limitation. (181-182)

Our goal in this special issue is not merely to tune down postcolonial scholarship’s overemphasis on the novel genre. Equally importantly, we wish to suggest that shifting the terrain of analysis to so-called “minor genres” offers exciting critical opportunities for discussing their interactions in both vertical and lateral fashions. After all, the generic dialogues that our contributors examine equally work along the lines of minor to minor interactions – as in Rebecca Romdhani’s article on Kei Miller’s hybridization of the essay genre with his blogs and Facebook posts – and minor-to-major interactions – as in Robert Antoni’s article on how his use of the vernacular and digital resources in *As Flies to Whatless Boys* (2013) pushes the boundaries of the novel format. Also, we feel that some postcolonial writers have been over-hastily pigeonholed as “novelists”, even if the complexity of their *œuvre* would need to be reconsidered in terms of their engagement with genres other than the novel (see, in this respect, Marc Delrez’s article on Janet Frame’s letter writing and Bénédicte Ledent’s article on Caryl Phillips’s radio plays).

It is perhaps clear by now that our use of the phrase “minor genre” has nothing to do with a value statement. In what follows, the term “minor” only refers to the ways in which cultural products that fall outside the novel format are minoritized by postcolonial scholarship. We realize that the term “minor” is relational and that the lack of visibility of certain genres is context-specific; as suggested above, in this issue, Marie Herbillon reminds us, for instance, that the short story is certainly not a minor genre in an Australian context. Also, when turning to the “minor” genre of poetry, Kathie Birat and Kris Steyaert each suggest that the category of the minor might be homogenizing in that it contains a multitude of other dialogues between major and minor forms. While Steyaert complicates our understanding of poetry as a minor genre by looking at the ways in which the Dutch Indonesian poet Gertrudes Johannes Resink falls back on, and yet subverts, major poetic genres such as the sonnet, Birat argues that by turning to *ottava rima* in *Bloodlines*, Fred D’Aguiar uses a “minor form within the minor genre of poetry”.

This special issue originates in a broader reflection on generic issues that was initiated by Katharine Burkitt and that has been led conjointly, over the past few years, by members of the English Department and members of CEREP (Centre d'Enseignement et de Recherche en Études Postcoloniales: [www.cerep.ulg.ac.be](http://www.cerep.ulg.ac.be)) at the University of Liège, Belgium. This reflection has been energized by various seminars and talks as well as a host of fruitful interactions between scholars based in the department and scholars from abroad, and this special issue gathers the most exciting exchanges that took place in this cross-pollinating context. The contributions engage with the work of writers hailing from all over the globe, and touches upon the intersection of generic issues with postcolonial realities pertaining to regions such as South Africa, Nigeria, New Zealand, Indonesia, Australia, the UK and the Caribbean. The minor genres that our contributors work on include crime fiction (Geoffrey Davis), letter writing (Marc Delrez), radio plays (Bénédicte Ledent), poetry (Kris Steyaert), a novel in verse (Kathie Birat) and short stories (Daria Tunca and Marie Herbillon), as well as blogs and essays (Rebecca Romdhani). In the opening article of the volume, Geoffrey Davis complicates the assumption that crime fiction was merely escapist during the apartheid era and traces the many recent developments of the genre in the New South Africa. In his analysis of Janet Frame's correspondence, Marc Delrez contends that her letters cannot be reduced to a minor adjunct to her literary oeuvre. Specifically, Delrez highlights the "proleptic" quality of Frame's letters to her friend, the American painter Bill Brown, by showing how her correspondence fictionalizes her own life while announcing the "ekphrastic mode" of her later novels. Similarly shifting the terrain of analysis to understudied productions by postcolonial "novelists", Bénédicte Ledent analyses the formal and communicative specificities of Caryl Phillips's radio plays. The suggestion that "generic rebelliousness" is often met with critical neglect is emphasized in Kris Steyaert's reappraisal of G.J. Resink's poetry, which shows how Resink moved from the sonnet, through the eastern quatrain, to the quintain in order to better express his interstitial position as a Dutch postcolonial writer and an Indonesian national. Considering *ottava rima* as a minor form within poetry – itself a minor genre within postcolonial literatures – Kathie Birat examines how, together with his emphasis on voice, Fred D'Aguiar in *Bloodlines* uses a seemingly outdated form to complicate the relation between inside and outside in encounters pertaining to the aftermath of slavery. Moving from Caribbean to Nigerian contexts, received notions of African authenticity are deconstructed in Daria Tunca's article on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story "Jumping Monkey Hill", which is seen to participate in a brand of postcolonial metafiction that is "fiercely political". The question as to how generic boundaries are pushed to breaking point is also very much at stake in Marie Herbillon's reading of Murray Bail's short story "Camouflage", which revisits the Australian tradition of "hard-luck stories" and borrows the stylistic codes of realism to better problematize the relationship between place and literature. The last two contributions return us to a Caribbean context, and link up the notions of genre to those of digital experiments. Looking at Jamaican author Kei Miller's blog posts and Facebook notes, Rebecca Romdhani shows how Miller's online work further dramatizes and mirrors some of the themes that he addresses in his essays, including that of existing hierarchies of realities between the Caribbean, the US and the UK. It is no accident that the last article of this special issue focuses on a book pertaining to the novel genre. By ending up with Robert Antoni's discussion of his use of the

vernacular and digital resources in *As Flies to Whatless Boys* (2013), we would like to suggest that "major" genres might yield new webs of meaning when digital media are mobilized with a view to creating new forms of hybridity and multiplicity and to pushing genre boundaries.

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