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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the contributions to a special issue on “Postcolonial Print Cultures”.

Keywords

Book history, cultural materialism, literary studies, postcolonial, print culture

In his 2001 book, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, Graham Huggan argues that scholars of postcolonial literature would better understand their object of study if they considered the material forces that support and structure the production of books and other printed objects sold as postcolonial. They should, he suggests, study the institutions and practices that exist to support the circulation, evaluation, and valorization of postcolonial print commodities and reading experiences. Over the last decade scholarship sharing Huggan’s point-of-view — that the nature of the postcolonial text is illuminated by study of cultural markets and the economic and political forces that those markets mediate — has proliferated, to the extent that it is now possible to identify a substantive materialist turn within postcolonial literary studies. As Robert Fraser notes in *Book History through Postcolonial Eyes*, textual self-expression “travels by a variety of means, both paper-bound and electronic, to a spectrum of audiences in a multitude of overlapping languages and across a jostling plethora of genres and non-genres” (2008: 188). The manner in which these texts reach audiences involves complex negotiations of political, commercial, and cultural boundaries and sensibilities. This special issue offers significant and original work that addresses five key themes: postcolonial literary fields; postcolonial systems; postcolonial contexts; postcolonial archives; and postcolonial critiques.

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Postcolonial literary fields

One motivation for the study of postcolonial print culture is a sense that the internal dynamics of the postcolonial literary text are never quite separable from the ostensibly external world of commodity production and market relations. Andrew van der Vlies's essay, which considers several instantiations of Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), foregrounds the concern about commodification and authority evident in the novel's own proleptic imagining of its future versions. Van der Vlies's research suggests that, for Wicomb, the ethical quandaries that perennially attend the act of depicting the lives of others are heightened by the structure of the postcolonial literary economy. Wicomb herself perceives the challenges of bearing witness to other lives through the prism of ownership: the problem is not just who has a right to speak for others, but who has a right to profit from the circulation of particular incarnations of their stories. Ruvani Ranasinha's focus is, similarly, the way in which a particular author has navigated his relation to the marketplace through specific literary strategies. She shows that Romesh Gunesequera, one of Sri Lanka's most celebrated novelists, has been appreciated by his international readership for reasons that trouble scholars of Sri Lankan culture and politics. These scholars argue that the global circulation and legitimation of his work has served to naturalize a dominant vision of Sri Lanka as a place of unnatural beauty beset by centuries of atavistic and irrational violence. This discourse serves and furthers a conventional definition of the literary as that which avoids direct engagement with the political – a definition that in turn serves Gunesequera as he wins prizes and influence within the literary field because his work is read as suitably apolitical.

Postcolonial systems

A significant concern of several of the pieces published here is writers' efforts to fit their aesthetic and political interests both to the demands of commerce and to the pressures imposed by systems of evaluation that are at once distant and compelling. Nathan Suhr-Sytsma considers, for example, the early work of Nigerian writers educated in the 1950s at University College, Ibadan. He argues that, through their writing, these students articulated a complex relationship to the colonial university, which tended to present a London-based metropolitan modernism as the set of literary techniques to which those who aspired to literary greatness must adhere. Suhr-Sytsma contends that, while attuning themselves to the dominant modes of literary expression — which were, after all, removed from them socially and geographically — these writers refashioned modernism to create their own unique idioms. Meanwhile, Nicole Devarenne's essay discusses how Afrikaans authors who write in English or translate their work into English engage the linguistic and political forces behind their own works' production. These writers at once acknowledge Afrikaans's complicity with apartheid, and express a perhaps countervailing wish to defend the language against the threat of the neo-colonial dominance of English. Their own complex attempts to have Afrikaans "infiltrate" their English-language works are then in turn resisted by publishers who — as the texts themselves at times anticipate — privilege reaching a broad audience over helping a writer to fulfil her literary-political goals.

Postcolonial contexts

Several articles focus on the way textual activity is conditioned by and responds to its literary, political, and social contexts. Gemma Robinson details the histories of two series of works produced at different points in twentieth-century Guyana, N.E. Cameron's 1931 anthology, *Guianese Poetry, Covering the Hundred Years' Period, 1831-1931*, and the early 1950s issues of *Thunder*, the journal of the socialist anticolonial People's Progressive Party. Robinson accounts for their attempts to establish discursive communities of writers, readers, and audiences, while the manner of textual creation and consumption she uncovers offers unusual evidence of the strategies by which Guyana's more dynamic literary figures sought to transform it from a cultural hub within the British Empire to a centre of anticolonial politics and poetics. Gail Low's piece on the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival is a rich case study of festivals as instigators of particular types of textual material — festival programmes, committee documents, official documents — analysis of which clearly demonstrates the importance of social and political conditions to the material determination of festival programming in general, and contemporary attitudes to postcolonial literature in specific. Among events hosted were festivals of Commonwealth Poetry, which saw robust criticism by key Anglophone Caribbean writers, Derek Walcott and Martin Carter, who objected to the anti-immigration laws then in force. Low makes a convincing argument for how the language and metaphors used in official documentation associated with Festival events — metaphors of distance and proximity, centre and periphery — encapsulated and fostered a shift in attitudes towards Britain's colonial legacy, toward disavowal of any admission of the ongoing salience of colonial history.

Postcolonial archives

Publishers' archives are important source material for several of the articles. Caroline Davis draws our attention to the complex debates and processes surrounding the creation, production, and dissemination of Athol Fugard's trilogy *Statements: Three Plays*, published by Oxford University Press in 1974. The trilogy of anti-apartheid plays included *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act* and two plays co-authored with John Kani and Winston Ntshona, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island*. Davis offers important new information drawn from archives to chart the progress of Fugard's early plays through the maze of publishing in the UK for South African markets. She demonstrates the manner in which form, content, and reception could be shaped by a publisher's imprimatur and by the placement of a piece within a prestigious literary publishing series aimed at particular audiences. Particularly relevant is her cross-disciplinary focus on the implications of political decisions on the marketing and reception of the plays. Alistair McCleery draws upon the Penguin publishing archives for his exploration of the trading structures within which UK publishers operated from the late 1940s through to the 1970s in rapidly decolonizing states. McCleery's apposite focus is a case study of Penguin Books as a model of broader transformations that British trade publishers underwent as they moved from colonial to postcolonial and then global contexts, and from independent status to incorporation under multinational umbrellas. One victim of this

history was the Traditional Market Agreement (TMA), which between 1947 and 1975 guaranteed British dominance over American incursions into former colonial states. McCleery's article is one of the first to chart in any detail the effects of the TMA on a publisher's activities.

Postcolonial critiques

A final two contributions use local analysis to offer meta-commentaries on how the field of materialist study of postcolonial literature has been developing. Ana Margarida Dias Martins' research on Lusophone women writers leads her to critique the lack of attention to gender in two movements within postcolonial theory. The first is the materialist turn initiated by Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic*, as a foundational work on the industry of postcolonial literary production. The second is the challenge that Lusophone theories of postcolonialism, especially sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos' article on Portuguese "inter-identity", "Between Prospero and Caliban" (2002), present to conventional centre-periphery models of postcolonial power. Martins draws upon each of these important developments in her work, but faults a lack of attention to the ways in which gender and sexuality necessarily inform how value is attached to marginality within cultural markets. For his part, Suman Gupta explores in great detail a relatively recent turn in the last decade of English translations produced from literary texts in Indian languages for the Indian market. In this case, the English translations are not of mainstream literary works, but of mass market, pulp, or dime fiction from Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Bengali, and other indigenous languages. Pulp fictions have usually been not only outside the circuit of the English reading public in India (who are sometimes barely aware of them, and generally scornful if they are), but outside the academic canons of literatures in Indian languages. Their appearance in English translations, as Gupta demonstrates, raises interesting questions about cultural value, intercultural transactions, and mainstream Western ideas about what constitutes postcolonial literature, given that postcolonial literary analyses often privilege the more "literary" texts over equally valuable genre works of this type. Gupta offers salient material on why such texts are being translated and why they sell well, on the implications of the displacement of these texts from their home regions and habitual readerships into English and, ultimately, on the relation between such popular but critically understudied texts and more culturally acknowledged Indian commercial fiction in English.

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