Postcolonial poetics?

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If colonial “reactivations” do not occur at the levels at which they once appeared, on the planes of social relations in which they were once activated, how do we identify their morphings and morphologies? (Stoler 2016, 31)

Curiously enough, postcolonial studies reduces the action of subalterns to a ritual of afflication in the service of a morbid cult of redemptive suffering [...] ultimately reinforcing colonial and postcolonial domination. (Bayart 2013, 79–80)

What does it mean to speak of a distinctly “postcolonial poetics” in this globally connected 21st century of ours? Even if it is still true that access to the Web is unevenly distributed across the globe, it is equally true today that aspiring writers based on different continents can discover and explore an unprecedented and overwhelming range of poetic archives and traditions. For example: a Tanzanian poet may develop a passion for the tanka, a traditional Japanese poetic genre, and appropriate it for his or her own purposes; a South Korean novelist may stumble upon the term “trauma novel” while surfing on the Web and, after reading Primo Levi, W.G. Sebald, Binjamin Wilkomirski, Sindiwe Magona and Toni Morrison, borrow some of their poetic devices to re-imagine a family saga set during the Korean war. In Vienna, the city from which I write, the Japanese manga series Black Butler – set in Victorian London – has become one of the favourite sources for “cosplay” meetings. Twitter fiction and flash fiction, two “fast reading” genres which are very much the product of the new millennium, are currently thriving in South Africa as much as in Europe and the US. This would suggest that, as Jahan Ramazani reminds us, if disparate poetic forms and genres have long circulated across national borders over the centuries, “modernity-fueled globalization has accelerated and intensified this process” (2009, 13). In the early phase of decolonization – in the late 1940s, early 1950s – this scenario, with this sort of intensity and fastness, would have been unthinkable. In what ways are such transcultural layerings and mutual fertilizations shaping our writing styles, literary tastes and reading practices? How do they complicate the notion of a “postcolonial poetics”? As cultural critics, we have hardly started to grasp these new phenomena but, clearly, the transcultural transport enabled by our digital era has made it increasingly harder – if not impossible – to see any cultural work as a direct product of the national and the local.

Elleke Boehmer’s Postcolonial Poetics (2018) is a courageous book, willing to take risks within academic discourse. The book appears at a peculiar time within the humanities, as “postcolonial studies” – or at least a certain version of it – has been under severe attack recently, and as issues such as exploitation, structural inequality, migratory flows and racial discrimination have become worldwide phenomena, growing both in scope and in complexity. It does not come as a surprise, then, that other publications have appeared under the rubric of poetics or aesthetics over the last decade: Jahan Ramazani’s (2009) A Transnational
Poetics, Stephen Clingman’s (2009) *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary*, Akin Adesokan’s (2011) *Postcolonial Artists and Global Aesthetics*. All these books, as their titles suggest, see current developments in poetics and aesthetics as being deeply intertwined with transnationalism and globalization. The question, then, emerges almost naturally: how are Ramazani’s and Clingman’s “transnational poetics” related to Boehmer’s “postcolonial poetics” or Adesokan’s “global aesthetics”? What kind of mapping or re-mapping do these different reading approaches suggest? After reviewing Elleke Boehmer’s book, I offer a contextualized reflection on some of the issues and arguments this book raises, also taking into account the new inflections “poetics” and “aesthetics” have been given over the last decade.

The research question at the core of Boehmer’s *Postcolonial Poetics* is whether there are specifically postcolonial “verbal energies” (3), formal designs or structures, which require a different and specifically postcolonial involvement on the reader’s part. As far as genre is concerned, her examples range from protest poetry and life writing to fiction; she discusses the work of writers of various cultures and countries – Indian and African as well as contemporary diasporic Black British and Asian British writers.

In the first two chapters Boehmer outlines her theoretical and conceptual prism. Taking her cue from scholars in reader-oriented and cognitive as well as linguistic studies such as Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (1986) and Terence Cave’s *Thinking with Literature* (2016), her concern is with how reading can be combined with questions of political awareness, action and resistance in the 21st century. Central to Boehmer’s book is the idea that texts can be compared to musical scores and the reader to a performer. Instead of approaching texts only thematically or strictly symptomatically, she argues that inherent in each text are formalistic structures and protocols that guide and shape our reading; we do not either savour formal aspects or think about political and pressing issues or themes; it is a text’s poetic properties that convey urgent agendas. “Literary structures”, she argues, “are our thought” (2; emphasis in the original). Boehmer thus makes the point that postcolonial texts do not merely mirror or reflect certain social or political issues, as critics have tended to argue over the last decades. Instead, they contain specific poetic structures and protocols that through the act of reading – “inferential patterns” (5) and “flow[s] of implication” (8), as she calls them – can be mobilized creatively in the reader’s imagination; as a result of the reading process, the “reader-performer” may be solicited to contemplate new thoughts, develop new perspectives about the world and, ideally, feel compelled to engage in diverse forms of political action.

Chapter 3 starts with an essay focusing on resistance. According to Boehmer, two paradigms have become predominant in connection with this idea: the first dates back to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) and tends to locate resistance in the text, in language itself – in the manifold hybrid and vernacular appropriations of western languages, forms and genres through which writers and poets have been writing “back” to the empire. A second paradigm is directly related to anti-colonial national liberation struggles and locates resistance in writing as a form of direct activism in the service of political action. Barbara Harlow’s *Resistance Literature* (1986) and Neil Lazarus’s revisionist and materialist *Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011) would be foundational examples for this. Boehmer takes issue with both paradigms, making the point that, whereas the former has tended to de-contextualize and thus de-radicalize “real” resistant effects, the latter has tended to put poetic techniques and reader-oriented approaches at the service of “programmatic” (40) political agendas. Boehmer tries to find a middle ground between these two positions in order to approach the theme of resistance from a readerly and poetic perspective. Boehmer asks
whether there are poetic textual devices which are not spectacularly but “obliquely resistant” (40); that is, resistant in a more elusive way. Juxtaposition, for Boehmer, functions as an “inferential”, “subtle” and “underspecified” (40) poetic conduit, which provides a “score for reading for resistance” or “for reading otherwise” (43; emphasis in the original). As an example, Boehmer provides one poem from Warsan Shire’s collection *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011) and a case study of Nelson Mandela as a resistant reader.

Chapter 4 takes up the deliberate and difficult theme of terror. Boehmer is interested in its different modes and manifestations. She understands terror as an event that can appear under contradictory guises; it can be “archetypal yet contemporary, slow yet sudden [...] both a manifestation of the modern imperial state, yet can take anti-imperial, ante-modern forms” (70). Her definition of the term is rather broad, maybe too broad; whereas her introductory discussion addresses one-off necropolitical terrorist attacks, in her interpretative analysis she actually looks at imaginative renditions of experiences of migration and of slavery, more precisely, of the 1781 *Zong* slave-ship massacre. Boehmer does not explore in detail any of the terror narratives that come out of Europe or the US, but she does mention, for example, DeLillo’s fiction. Boehmer suggests that, in contrast to western representations, a specifically postcolonial poetics of terror entails “drawn-out incremental reiteration” (77), repetitive techniques, paratactic syntax, a tension between rupture and continuity and, significantly, a more expansive emphasis on resilience. She makes the point that postcolonial representations of terror tend to “actively override the discontinuous with the consecutive” (66) and bring the reader always beyond terror, by strangely combining what is unbearably shocking and paralysing on a sensorial and semantic level with questions of renewal and recovery. The chapter includes readings of poems by Sharon Wire, M. Nourbe SePhilip’s *Zong!* (2008) and texts by Ben Okri as well as novels such as Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) and Yvonne Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* (2002).

South African trauma literature is the focus of chapter 5. Boehmer addresses the boom in trauma narratives that was sparked off by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) proceedings in the second half of the 1990s, coupled with what Didier Fassin has called the “empire of trauma” of the last decades. Boehmer refers to a wide range of texts that were published between 2000 and 2014 – from creative non-fiction essays to novels, all of which are marked by what she calls a “repetitive poetics”, a particular symptomatic and compulsive form of writing “violent” and “trauma-ridden” text (88). She mentions novelists such as Damon Galgut, Sello Duiker and Achmat Dangor as well as Imran Coovadia and Sifiso Mzobe, but also more recent essayistic exercises or autobiographical pieces contained in Liz McGregor and Sarah Nuttall’s *At Risk: Writing On and Over the Edge of South Africa* (2007) and *Load Shedding* (2009). According to Boehmer, it is not an exaggeration to compare the South African literary output in this time span to a “traumatized subject” (95), struggling to transform and integrate a range of systematic disorders – both narrative and “real” – into the national imaginary. Boehmer detects common poetic features in her corpus of texts such as “semantic and structural incoherence, hiatus, abrupt halts, and suspended action” (95), as well as endings which take the form of an “arrested fall” (96) signalling a sense of being frozen in time and a blockage of future-oriented trajectories. She calls the arrest of time which these texts convey “the persistent poetics of time being” or “frozen penultimate” (109). In terms of theory, she refers us to Ato Quayson’s notion of “symbolization compulsion”, which she paraphrases as a “metaphoric insistence not supported by character or plot” which “can be related to an unutterable traumatic occurrence” (95). What is less appropriate to her discussion of South African literature as a melancholic and compulsive practice is her reference to Dominick LaCapra’s essay “Trauma, Absence, Loss” (1999). Thinking about the political and cultural impact which theorizations of trauma can have in the world, LaCapra is one of these
rare trauma scholars who has rightly alerted us to the danger of theorizing historical losses (such as the Holocaust) as metaphysical absences or as “negative deities” of sorts. For LaCapra, working through trauma is not a process without “resolution or redemption” (91) à la Cathy Caruth, as Boehmer writes. Instead it is a dialectical process with multiple potentials. But for LaCapra it is crucial how we frame historical or personal losses and how, in turn, we theorize them. Boehmer problematically aligns LaCapra with Quayson without taking up or discussing the difference he so carefully draws between “loss” and “absence”, something that, retrospectively, would have helped her to compare South African with other trauma novels or other representations of historical loss such as the Holocaust. After all, trauma novels were not invented by South Africans. Since her book promises to show how a postcolonial trauma novel involves the reader differently and specifically as a postcolonial genre, this chapter would have profited from such a comparative undertaking.

Chapter 6 is concerned with Chinua Achebe’s influence. Boehmer calls Achebe’s poetics “generative” (123) and claims it was very much shaped by “energies at once verbal and mythic drawn from African oral literature and from a mix of African and European languages” (120). Boehmer ascribes Achebe a special position within the African literary canon since he made Africa imaginable both in a political and literary way, “providing a new imaginative catalogue at once ethnographic and historical fiction” (123) and opening up a new field of literary and imaginative possibilities. In this chapter, she looks in particular at two figures that shaped other African writers – the device of the ogbanje (Igbo for returning baby) or abiku in Yoruba and the cursed twins. There is no doubt that Achebe had a major influence on contemporary African writers, yet it is strange to extrapolate from his oeuvre those two figures which, in Achebe’s fiction, were not exactly ornamental but certainly not central or specific to his poetics either. Boehmer looks at African writers like Ben Okri, Diane Evans, Helen Oyeyemi and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and concludes that whereas in Achebe the ogbanje child was under threat and the twins not permitted to live, in the work of more recent writers “the cursed or doomed child achieves some familial filiation as well as the connections of affiliation, such as with friends and compatriots” (137).

In her seventh chapter Boehmer contextualizes postcolonial literature against the recent rise of “World Literature Studies” and “World-System Literatures”. Because of its theoretical import, it would have been useful to see this chapter earlier in the book. Boehmer ascribes to postcolonial writing a contradictory and threshold position. If, on the one hand, postcolonial writing can be seen as transnational and global because of the “planetary reach of the European empires”, on the other hand, postcolonial literary writings “struggle against the cross-border, trans-planetary arrangements of the globalized world” (146). Similarly to global and world literature, postcolonial writing addresses questions of circulation and exchange, forms of shuttling between the local and the universal, but it always does so from a migratory, peripheral, southern and subaltern perspective. Having provided an impressive overview of recent studies within the fields of “world” and “world-systems literature”, Boehmer concludes that the former tends to abstract questions of literariness and poetic form, thereby decontextualizing notions of literary canons and cultural values from geopolitical, historical and often violent contexts. “Otherness” together with “radical knowledge from below” and “radical energies” are, in contrast, what characterize postcolonial writings (164–165). As an example she offers a reading of Nadifa Mohamed’s Black Mamba Boy (2010).

Boehmer concludes her study by exploring what she calls “contestatory” poetics, yet also the transformative potential of postcolonial writing. Probing the poetic effects of poems by South African poet Mongane Wally Serote, Koleka Putuma and selected short stories from the New Internationalist One World anthologies (2009, 2016), Boehmer argues that these are texts that involve the reader in paradoxical ways: in non-consecutive reading, “immediate, one-off, and stochastic”, “kinesic” and “embodied” ways, seeking identification, while at the same
time, resisting it all (177). Boehmer concludes by suggesting that postcolonial poetics is based on a set of paradoxes:

It seeks identification yet also resists it; it speaks to universal themes but invokes local readerships; it bridges cultural gaps yet also compromises those bridges; it grabs attention then shoves it away. Throughout, a postcolonial poetics asserts an interest in day-to-day ordinariness that may be shared across cultural worlds and continents (189).

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The question that drives Boehmer’s book – that is, whether there are distinctly postcolonial features which may involve readers in a particular way – is a compelling and ambitious one; the combination of cognitive and linguistic approaches with questions of political engagement or activism is both intriguing and original. A few problems become manifest, however, in Boehmer’s account. The first revolves around the tendency to use “postcolonial” as a blanket term. Boehmer does not only take its meaning for granted; she also tends to use it in an undifferentiated manner, as a totalizing condition of global proportions. The British Somali poet Warsan Shire (Kenyan by birth), for example, was brought to England by her parents when she was only one year old. Boehmer aligns her writing with that of Mongane Wally Serote, Ben Okri or Nadifa Mohamed. Shire makes for an interesting case when compared with other diasporic postcolonial writers. Caryl Phillips ostensibly shares a similar fate as he was brought to England from St Kitts in the West Indies when he was 12 weeks old. Yet the industrial Leeds in which Phillips grew up in the 1960s and 1970s is a very different place from the contemporary and multicultural London in which Shire arrived in 1989. Such an approach occludes not only the heterogeneous trajectories of these writers’ biographies and countries; it also homogenizes generational differences, despite what can only be very divergent experiences of migration. Used in this manner, the term “postcolonial” tends to simplify and de-contextualize the complex relation that can only exist between the colonial “past” and the “postcolonial” present. As Laura Ann Stoler (2016) argues in her most recent book, Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times, we should stop looking at current sociopolitical landscapes as direct “leftovers” or “traces” (5) of colonial times. Applied in this facile way, the concept occludes instead of eliciting knowledge. Although Boehmer acknowledges the contested nature of the term as well as the recent controversies and critiques which have developed around the field of postcolonial studies, she neither takes an explicit position on these debates, nor thinks that the field may be in need of renewal – both as far as its idiom as well as its methodologies are concerned.

The second problem concerns Boehmer’s choice of themes. According to Boehmer, trauma is a “primary instantiation of postcolonial experience” (88); except for the “generative poetics” of Achebe, most of her chapters revolve around violent events, be it slavery, migration, terror or the trauma of apartheid. Although she takes care to point to questions of resistance, renewal and transformation as well, Boehmer risks depicting postcolonial realities mainly in terms of alienation, oppression and affliction. This “cult of redemptive suffering”, as Jean-François Bayart (2013) rather provocatively but rightly calls it in the epigraph at the beginning of this piece, reinforces colonial bindings and regularly fails to acknowledge the manifold and complex ways in which postcolonial societies have not only reacted or rebelled against colonialist practices, but also creatively – to a degree even autonomously – appropriated them from a social, economic, political and cultural point of view.

The third issue concerns the complexity of the current moment and the series of challenges the new millennium has brought with itself. Indeed, many of the themes Boehmer discusses in her book are no longer only distinct predicaments of postcolonial regions or of what we used to call the empire’s “peripheries” or “margins”. Boehmer argues, for example, that “postcolonial writing is predominantly associated with migrant spaces” (69). Yet the predatory nature of current finance capitalism – its deregulated flows and disparate accumulations of capital as well as the dislocations
of industrial production it causes on a regular basis – is making hundreds of thousands of people at best precarious, at worst superfluous, setting them on the move, also within European and Eastern European countries. The stream of Ukrainian migrant workers (estimated at 1.2 million) is a case in point. This is not to suggest that we should put different migratory flows on the same plane; the question is, rather, how can we refine and renew our critical language in order to capture such correspondences or differentiations?

Even if Boehmer succeeds in showing what a postcolonial poetics might consist of in contrast to world literature and world-systems literature, it remains unclear how it relates to recent formulations of transnational and global poetics/aesthetics. Indeed, it could be argued that transnational literary studies emerged precisely out of the need to expand and complicate our current categories of literary analyses as well as to allow the colonial and postcolonial to speak to each other in more ambiguous and intricate ways. “We live in an even more complex setting now”, Stephen Clingman (2009, 4) writes; for decades, he argues, our prevailing categories have been the modern and the postmodern, the colonial and the postcolonial; in our 21st century, however, the complexity reached is such that we need to be able to account for a “different kind of syntax, a different kind of navigation, a different kind of mapping” (2009, 32). Whereas the term “postcolonial” allows us to mention Achebe and Zadie Smith together in one breath, we “cannot allow a Sebald to speak to a Rushdie”, Clingman complains (31–32). In his superb and profound study The Grammar of Identity, Clingman (2009) detects a range of formal patterns and deep complex poetic matrices around the notion of the boundary in writers as different as Joseph Conrad, Charlotte Brontë, Jean Rhys, J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Anne Michaels, W.G. Sebald and Caryl Phillips. In the fiction of all of these writers, boundaries function as gears on the fictional spindle, giving way to imaginative spatial tapestries and a wide array of identities on the move. In the chapter entitled “Route, Constellation, Faultline”, Clingman analyses Caryl Phillips’s poetics. The refreshing image emerges of a writer who is only contingently and not by essence “postcolonial”. Never interested in questions of “black identity”, Phillips has invested much of his intellectual energies into finding diagonal but mutual resonances with other traumatic histories (slavery, the Jewish diaspora, the Palestinian dislocation). Believing in the power to appropriate and choose his literary ancestors across wide geographic and cultural distances, Phillips “creates new constellations” (Clingman 2009, 78), which consciously try to transcend traditional postcolonial binary oppositions such as colonizer–colonized, centre–margin, west–east. Phillips steeps his narratives in different histories in order to map points of affinity, convergences and correspondences as well as breaks; what matters, however, is the effort through writing to share painful thresholds and negotiations of identity, routing and rerouting as part of an entangled history that belongs to us all. In Phillips’s work, Clingman argues, “identity itself has become a route – punctuated, transitional, altering, in the way that our identity as a species out of Africa has undertaken such a set of transitions” (2009, 92; emphasis in the original).

From a more formal perspective, what is also troubling about Boehmer’s account is her reference to and acceptance of “creolized, mishmash, polyvocal” modes with “zigzagging” effects for the reader as “conventionally postcolonial” (69) devices. As Ramazani (2009) has shown in his book A Transnational Poetics, these are not distinctly postcolonial poetic features but products of transnational layering, sedimentations and mutual borrowings across a spectrum of positions and creative agendas. According to Ramazani, hybridity, juxtaposition and creolization were not postcolonial inventions but “the engines of modern and contemporary poetic development” (2009, 3). The first example which comes to mind is Ezra Pound’s inscriptions of Chinese signs in his Cantos or T.S. Eliot’s borrowings from Indian thought and epic. Again, Ramazani’s aim is not to dissolve the polarities or poetic distinctions between Europe and postcolonial cultural production. Clearly, the creolization of Derek Walcott should in no way be put on the same level as Ezra Pound’s hybrid poetics. His aim, rather, is to diversify and to show a spectrum of poetic
reconfigurations as a result of transcultural fertilizations, making it very difficult to talk of a distinctly “western” or “postcolonial poetics”.

Finally, Elleke Boehmer’s Postcolonial Poetics would have profited from engaging with Akin Adesokan’s (2011) notion of “global aesthetics”. Adding a materialist inflection to the debate, Adesokan shows convincingly that genres and textual forms are, if not determined, then certainly severely complicated by material and institutional apparatuses. In Nigeria, his country of birth, for example, the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s led to changes in the quality and quantity of fiction and movie production. In the chapter on the South African trauma novel, for example, Boehmer mentions temporal freezing as a typical postcolonial poetic feature but the novels she refers to – some of which are products of university creative writing programmes – share a range of similar temporal narratological devices with western prize-winning trauma novels such as the fragmented fictional arrangements we find in Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987) or Anne Michaels’ Fugitive Pieces (1996). If, as Boehmer rightly suggests, trauma novels proliferated in South Africa in connection with the TRC proceedings, but also as a result of the transatlantic memory boom of the 1990s, can we really formulate a distinct postcolonial poetics without taking into account the formal influence played by European or American trauma novels?

Between the lines of Boehmer’s book, the reader all too often perceives a strange anxiety to mark an academic territory under attack by way of preserving and resorting to an originary – maybe, to a certain extent, predictable – lexicon. In the first epigraph at the beginning of this essay, Ann Laura Stoler (2016) suggests that colonial “re-activations” or “recursions” (3), as she calls them, still exist but they are neither mimetic vestiges nor direct prolongations of colonial pasts. They do not necessarily have to manifest themselves at the levels on which they used to. Our current challenge consists in identifying, reading and naming these new morphings. Obviously, the change of frame Stoler pleads for also requires, unavoidably, a change in our terminologies as well as different conceptual and methodological procedures. If we compare the field of postcolonial poetics to a tree or a copse of trees, it seems to me, in this complex new millennium, we need to keep the trunks but learn how to discriminate between old and new branches, old and new carvings, old and new grafts. Naturally, we need conceptual pruning, trimming and cutting. We need multiple readers. Multiple lenses. Multiple disciplines – even those we may perceive as “rival”. Most of the fruits do not have a proper name yet. A particularly challenging harvest season still lies ahead.

References


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