e-ISSN 2499-5975

Il Tolomeo
Vol. 23 – Dicembre | December | Décembre 2021

Editorial Notes: Postcolonial Genre Fiction

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Genre fiction is a capacious category that encompasses science fiction, crime and detective fiction, Gothic and Horror, romance fiction and erotica, and fantasy literature. It is usually understood in opposition to a literary 'mainstream' from which genre fiction distinguishes itself by its reliance on formal conventions, tropes and themes that are specific to each genre, and by the way it caters to specific groups of readers through specialized publishing networks. In terms of critical appraisal, it has traditionally been looked down upon for its supposed lack of quality, innovation, and depth. According to this line of reasoning, it appeals to masses of readers with poor critical literacy (justifying the alternative nomenclature of 'popular fiction'), and/or to a number of niche audiences. Such a dichotomic division between genre fiction and 'the mainstream' is, of course, problematic, framing the former as a minor literary product, inescapably formulaic, stylistically simplistic, and psychologically superficial.

Despite these traditional prejudices, genre fiction is steadily acquiring greater dignity, a process certainly helped by the fact that its authors have obtained critical and commercial recognition with *different* audiences – becoming, in fact, 'mainstream' – and thus challenging the idea that genre fiction is – depending on how you define it – directed exclusively to a specific readership, systematically low-quality, or necessarily simplistic and formulaic. It is also worth noting that genre fiction tropes may find their way into works that cannot be defined as belonging to genre fiction itself – further blurring the boundaries between mainstream and genre literature.

What does it mean, then, to address *postcolonial* genre fiction – the focus of this monographic section of *Il Tolomeo*? What do we gain by

adopting a specifically postcolonial perspective on the study of genre fiction? Considering that the exact meaning of 'postcolonial' has always been debated, there is no simple answer to this question. The seven articles included here have opted for several different (but compatible) approaches to tackling the question of how the category of the postcolonial may merge with a discussion on genre fiction:

1. the first approach is to explore the genre fiction produced within postcolonial countries (e.g. the history of crime fiction in South Africa). This approach brings to the foreground the notion that, rather than talking of *one* history of genre fiction, it is more correct to talk of several (variously interconnected) histories. It also leads to interesting research trajectories, such as the way in which a peripheral/colonial literary environment influences the formal aspects of genre fiction, or the relationship between these postcolonial genre fiction traditions and Western/European/American ones.
2. The second approach, to an extent overlapping with the first one, is to look at genre fiction written by colonial subjects and/or people of colour – not necessarily in (post)colonial countries (e.g. speculative fiction by black writers in Canada or the US). This leads us to investigate when and how writers from marginalised communities and/or minorities produce radically different forms of genre fiction in comparison with their white counterparts.
3. The third approach – based on an understanding of the postcolonial as an inherently political stance – involves seeing postcolonial genre fiction as texts that either deploy or subvert specific genre fiction conventions or tropes to perform an anti-colonial, de-colonial, anti-racist function (either within works that can properly classified as genre fiction or within hybrid works, which simply incorporate *some* aspects or devices of genre fiction). This implies critically investigating the extent those tropes/devices can be connected to colonial/anti-colonial epistemologies.
4. The fourth approach involves a rewriting of Western genre fiction, consistently with the traditional postcolonial move of rewriting the literary canon. The fact that the canon of genre fiction may overlap, at times, with the 'mainstream' literary canon (e.g. in the case of *Mansfield Park* or *Frankenstein*) inherently reminds us that the barriers between genre fiction and 'the mainstream' are sometimes rather volatile.

Together, these various, interconnected approaches show how looking at genre fiction through a postcolonial perspective – as well as looking at postcolonial literary history in the mirror of genre fiction – opens up compelling areas of research and discussion.

The monographic section opens with Marta Fossati's article on the black South African writer H.I.E. Dhlomo and the crime fiction he produced in the first decade of apartheid. After an overview of crime fiction in the South African context, Fossati compares some of Dhlomo's short stories with those of Arthur Maimane, published a few years later in the popular magazine *Drum*. Fossati claims that, while Dhlomo's and Maimane's stories are formally different, they both re-work and adapt the tropes of European and North American crime fiction to the South African context, and, in doing so, reassert a claim to knowledge denied to Black South Africans under apartheid. In addition, Fossati argues that Dhlomo could be seen as a precursor of *Drum* writers like Maimane, establishing important continuities between two generations of South African writers.

Lorenzo Mari's article focuses on the genre of the family novel – a popular one in postcolonial and world literature – to argue against the separation between 'high-brow' and 'low-brow literature', on which the distinction between genre and mainstream literature largely lies. After examining the various ways in which this genre has historically been framed – variously relying on the work of Frederic James, Graham Huggan and John McLeod – and discussing its place in the global literary market, Mari focuses on *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz and *Lara* by Bernardine Evaristo, which he takes as turning points in the tradition of the postcolonial family novel, opening the path for new developments, such as the increasing hybridization of the family novel with the genres of popular fiction.

Miriam Sbih's article addresses the potential of the concept of 'speculative fiction' as an umbrella term for various modes of genre fiction (such as fantasy, Horror, or historical fiction) that, engaging in a 'what if?' scenario, construct new or unheard visions of the world. This is a stance that, as Sbih argues, complements a postcolonial critical agenda, allowing writers to think of alternative scenarios to those emerging from the reality of colonial history. Her case study is the collection *Dominoes at the Crossroads* by the African Canadian writer Kaie Kellough, which attempts to re-imagine the story of the black diaspora in Montreal.

Alessia Polatti discusses three novels by British-Caribbean writer Caryl Phillips and their intertextual connections: *A State of Independence*, a rewriting of *Mansfield Park*; *The Lost Child*, a rewriting of *Wuthering Heights*; and *A View of the Empire at Sunset*, a narrative of the early life of Jean Rhys – the great rewriter of *Jane Eyre*. Polatti uses these three novels to articulate how Phillips's rewrites the canonical nineteenth-century romance genre. She argues that Phillips manages to combine the romance genre and postcolonial fiction, placing twentieth-century migration, at the heart of the three narratives, within the historical frame of canonical romances, and ultimately resettling the romance genre through the postcolonial concept of 'home'.

e-ISSN 2499-5975

Teresa Colliva's article contributes to the debate on Afrofuturism, particularly on speculative fiction written by black women, by addressing the work of the Nigerian American writer Nnedi Okorafor. Taking as her point of departure Okorafor's rejection of the label Afrofuturism in favour of her self-coined category of Africanfuturism, Colliva shows how the writer insists on the importance of narratives rooted in the African continent, thus abandoning the Western models and canons of science fiction. Most importantly, by analysing Okorafor's novels *Who Fears Death?*, *Lagoon* and *Binti*, as well as her interviews and blog posts, Colliva argues that Okorafor uses speculative fiction to conceive an alternative modernity for Africa.

Valerie Tosi examines Peter Carey's novel *My Life as a Fake*, taking this novel as an example of postcolonial Gothic, a category that she contextualises by investigating its intertextual connections with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and its similarities with Stephen King's *The Dark Half* and "The Importance of Being Bachman". Carey's novel, she argues, turns the cultural history of Australia into a Gothic narrative that dismantles cultural stereotypes and challenges hierarchies between metropolitan centres and colonial peripheries.

The article by Mohammed Lamine Rhimi focuses on the novels of Edouard Glissant. Specifically, Lamine Rhimi proposes to see the hybridisation of literary genres that characterises Glissant's prose as a narrative example of his Poetics of Relation and uses the expression *maronnage rhétorique* to define the Antillean author's rejection of any imperialistic categorisation.