

Postcolonial Poetics

Elleke Boehmer

Postcolonial Poetics

21st-Century Critical Readings

palgrave
macmillan

Elleke Boehmer
University of Oxford
Oxford, UK

ISBN 978-3-319-90340-8 ISBN 978-3-319-90341-5 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90341-5>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018940670

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2018

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors, and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: The etching on the front cover is titled “Compound Housing” (2014) by South African artist Mongezi Ncaphayi. It is reproduced with permission from the artist, photograph courtesy of Guns & Rain (www.gunsandrain.com).

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer International Publishing AG part of Springer Nature.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

For Lisa Hill

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like many other books, *Postcolonial Poetics* could not have come into being without the encouragement and support of family, friends, and colleagues. These acknowledgements are an inadequate expression of my gratitude.

First, as ever, to my family, both nuclear and extended, huge thanks: to Steven Matthews and to Thomas and Sam Matthews Boehmer, for amazing creative and moral support, for your insights into surfaces and depths, and for your unfailing good humour. And to my dear Netherlands cousins, especially Annemie Boehmer, Marius Otto, and Josée and Jan-Willem Boehmer, for your interest in the various things I do ‘met Engels’, for asking hard questions, and for never ceasing to keep me grounded in my marshy other country across the North Sea.

To my dear friend Lisa Hill, in whose beautiful living space in Adelaide, Australia many of the chapters here were reshaped and edited, unbounded thanks. Without your genius, wit, wisdom, and wonderful friendship, my life across these past 30+ years would have been so much less fun. You are in all of my books, not least this one, right up front as dedicatee.

I am grateful to the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice at the University of Adelaide, in particular Jennifer Rutherford and Brian Castro, and the Department of History and the Australian Dictionary of Biography team at ANU, Canberra, for hosting me as Visiting Professorial Fellow in 2015–18, and 2017–18, respectively. Special thanks also to Amanda Nettelbeck at the University of Adelaide and Melanie Nolan at ANU.

The intertwined ideas of attentive reading and postcolonial involvement that inform this book are indebted to conversations with my friend

Terence Cave over the past many years. Our ongoing exchanges on reception, communication, and the *how* of literary thinking, including as part of the Balzan-funded project ‘Literature as an Object of Knowledge’, presented me as a postcolonial critic with a particular challenge. As our discussions frequently had recourse to the classics of European literature (as the literary writing best known to most), my often troubled question was whether there was a kind of reading that postcolonial texts in particular solicited—a reading that could be seen as both border-crossing and yet culturally specific. This book represents an attempt in eight parts to address that question. Each chapter, even when reflecting back on earlier work, returns to it. Whether I have adequately resolved the poetical concerns that our discussion raised, readers will have to decide. I for my part have been grateful for the challenge, as it allowed me to reappraise from different interesting angles the contribution of postcolonial writing to how we understand the world.

Related to this, I should like to thank my fellow contributors to the book *Reading Beyond the Code* (OUP, 2018), edited by Terence Cave and Deirdre Wilson: Kathryn Banks, Guillemette Bolens, Neil Kenny, Raphael Lyne, Kirsti Sellevold, Wes Williams, and of course Terence Cave and Deirdre Wilson themselves. The book grew out of spin-off discussions from the Balzan project that were held in Geneva and Oxford, 2013–16, and focussed closely on how we might read inferentially or ‘with relevance’.

Warm thanks to my colleagues at Oxford and elsewhere for various kinds of help, support, and inspiration across the past few years: Ros Ballaster, the late David Bradshaw, Carrol Clarkson, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, Stefano Evangelista, Daniel Grimley, Jane Hiddleston, Michelle Kelly, Karin Leeder, Laura Marcus, Peter McDonald, Ankhi Mukherjee, Katie Murphy, Seamus Perry, Lloyd Pratt, Matthew Reynolds, Graham Riach, Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, Helen Small, and Chris Wickham at the University of Oxford; Derek Attridge and David Attwell at the University of York; Alison Donnell, then at the University of Reading, now at UEA; Pablo Mukherjee at Warwick University; Susheila Nasta and Alex Tickell at the Open University; Kate Wallis at the University of Exeter; Paul Sheehan at Macquarie University, Sydney; and Lynda Ng at Western Sydney University. I want to add that it is a joy to inhabit the postcolonial world alongside my dear co-conspirator and friend Ankhi Mukherjee. I am especially grateful to Alex Tickell for the collaboration on our *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* article, cited below, which helped to shape my thinking in chapter 7.

I should like to thank my wonderful research students who have in the course of time happily also become friends and collaborators, in this case in particular Dominic Davies, Erica Lombard, and Edward Dodson, for their intellectual and scholarly engagement on so many levels. With Dom Davies first on the Leverhulme-funded ‘Planned Violence’ project (2014–16), and then the British Council (US)-funded ‘Divided Cities’ project (2016–17), based in TORCH, I was able to investigate in the form of workshops, wide-ranging discussions, and co-writing how literary texts combatively speak back to urban spaces. Some of the core ideas set out in the final chapter of this book are indebted to the exploratory conversations on three continents Dom and I have shared over the past seven years, for which many thanks.

I am deeply grateful to the outstanding Erica Lombard who helped to show me that there was a book in these assembled observations. Then in 2016, when the OUP-John Fell-funded ‘Postcolonial Text, World Form’ project was set up, Erica happily became its formidably competent Postdoctoral Research Fellow, and the inspired maker of the ‘Writers Make Worlds’ website. Throughout, it was always great to work with her, and always possible to rely on her unique mix of good sense *and* an excellent sense of humour, no matter how recalcitrant the situation. Erica and Ed Dodson were the initial readers of the MS of *Postcolonial Poetics* and fitted this work around important deadlines of their own. I should like to thank them very much for their insights, diligence, and patience.

I want warmly to thank Priyasha Mukhopadhyay, Asha Rogers, and Rouven Kunstmann, as well as Dominic, Erica, and Benjamin Mountford, for our collaboration on the Global History of the Book (1780 to the Present) workshop in 2014 and on the conference publications *Global Histories of Books* and *Fighting Worlds*, books that were crafted in some sense concurrently with *Postcolonial Poetics*.

To Louisa Layne, many thanks for persuading me by encouragement and example that my initial interest in postcolonial aesthetics, as expressed in the 2010 essay of that name, were worth developing into something longer. Thanks also to Khadeeja Khalid and Kelly Tse for help with reference checking and proofing.

Huge thanks to Mongezi Ncaphayi for kind permission to include an image from his artwork ‘Compound Housing’ for the book cover. I am grateful also to Julie Taylor of ‘Guns and Rain’ for facilitating the link with Mongezi.

I am grateful to the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH) where I spent two enjoyable years as Director (2015–17), and then a further year-and-a-half as PI on the Andrew W. Mellon-funded ‘Humanities and Identities’ programme. It was during this period that I wrote and completed several sections of this book. My thanks are to the Leverhulme Trust, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the British Council (US), and the OUP-John Fell Fund for the funding that supported several different research networks and programmes that in turn helped foster some of the ideas informing this book, in particular ‘Race and Resistance across Borders in the Long Twentieth Century’ and ‘Divided Cities’. Apart from the already-mentioned ‘Planned Violence’, all of these projects were located within TORCH, as was ‘Postcolonial Text, World Form’. My thanks to Victoria McGuinness at TORCH for her spirit, enthusiasm, and bottomless cups of tea and biscuit jar. I am grateful to Andrew Fairweather-Tall for good guidance. I should also like to acknowledge the support and friendship of the Oxford Centre for Life Writing at Wolfson College, in particular our President and the Centre’s Director Hermione Lee, and the Postdoctoral Research Fellows Rachel Hewitt and Kate Kennedy-Alum.

I began revising the essays that form the core of this book, including chapter 3, ‘Revisiting Resistance literature’, during the winter that I heard the sad news of Barbara Harlow’s death. Barbara, the author of the well-known 1980s primer text *Resistance Literature*, was to me as a young scholar the model of a radical thinker and researcher-activist. In the period when we were both carrying out research on fin-de-siècle Empire she also became a friend. I continued to write and rework both chapter 3 and the rest of the book with Barbara’s critical example and generosity of spirit very much in my mind.

In the two and a half decades since the publication of my first book of postcolonial criticism, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, I have moved many times into other fields, some closely related, some less so, exploring colonial and imperial history, and biography and life-writing, always with great profit and enjoyment. Throughout, however, my continuing interests in postcolonial writing always kept pulling me back to the still-open questions of perception and reception that that first critical book had raised. Not least, these included the question of whether we can speak of a postcolonial poetics that interacts with and engages a postcolonial politics. It has been a pleasure to return to these concerns in *Postcolonial Poetics*—and also to write a book with precisely that alliterative and assonantal title.

The journal articles and essays in collections on which the chapters below are based have all been thoroughly redrafted, revised, and in some cases reworked from scratch to address my own sharpening focus on questions of poetics. It has been my intention to draw an explicit arc of interest in reading and reception through all eight chapters. I wish now to express my sincere thanks to the editors and publishers of the following:

- ‘A Postcolonial Aesthetic: Repeating upon the Present’, in *Re-routing the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, edited by Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru, and Sarah Lawson Welsh. London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 170–81.
- ‘Revisiting Resistance: Postcolonial Practice and the Antecedents of Theory’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Graham Huggan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 307–23.
- ‘Postcolonial Terrorist: The Case of Nelson Mandela’, *Parallax* 37 (2005): 46–55.
- ‘Postcolonial Writing and Terror’, *Wasafiri* 22.2 (June 2007): 1–4.
- ‘Postcolonial Writing and Terror’, in *Terror and the Postcolonial*, edited by Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 141–50.
- ‘Permanent Risk: When Crisis Defines a Nation’s Writing’, in *Trauma, Memory and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel*, edited by Michela Borzaga and Ewald Mengel. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012, pp. 29–46.
- ‘Achebe and His Influence in Some Contemporary African Writing’. *Interventions* 11.2 (2009): 141–53.
- ‘Chinua Achebe, a Father of Modern African Literature’, *PMLA* 129.2 (March 2014): 237–9.
- ‘The World and the Postcolonial’, *European Review* 22.2 (2014): 299–308.
- Co-written with Alex Tickell, ‘The 1990s: An Increasingly Postcolonial Decade’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 50.3 (2015): 315–52.
- Co-written with Dominic Davies, ‘Literature, Planning and Infrastructure: Investigating the Southern City through Postcolonial Texts’, *JPW* 51.4 (2015): 395–409.

I am grateful to audiences at, and the organizers of, the conferences and seminars at which early versions of these essays were presented, for their

feedback and interest. The events clustered below follow the order of the corresponding chapters, beginning with chapter 1, the introduction.

The English Association of Southern Africa (EASA) triennial conference, CPUT, Cape Town, 6–8 September 2017; 27th FILLM Conference, Delhi, 15–17 March 2017; and ‘The Future of Literary Studies’ conference, Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, Oslo, 14–15 June 2016, for versions of chapter 1.

‘Re-routing the Postcolonial’ Conference, University of Northampton, 3–5 July 2007, for an early version of chapter 2.

‘What’s Culture Got to do with It?’ African literature and culture conference, Nordiska Afrika Institutet, University of Uppsala, Sweden, 16 June 2009; ‘Writing Resistance’ CRASSH and English Faculty Conference, University of Cambridge, 3–4 July 2009; ‘The Good of Criticism’ Conference, Department of English, University of Reading, 19–20 March 2010, for early versions of chapter 3.

‘Commitment and Complicity’ ASCA Conference, University of Amsterdam, 27–29 March 2006; Terror and the Postcolonial British Academy workshop, University of Southampton, 30 June 2006, for the second section of chapter 4.

‘Trauma and Memory’ Conference, University of Vienna, 9–11 April 2010, for parts of chapter 5.

‘*Things Fall Apart* at Fifty’ Conference, University of Toronto, 17 September 2008, for an early version of chapter 6.

‘The World and the Postcolonial’, ‘World Literature’ panel, MLA Convention, Boston, 4–6 January 2013, for parts of chapter 7.

‘The Languages of Literature’: Derek Attridge@70 Conference, University of York, 24 May, for an early version of the first part of chapter 8.

CONTENTS

1	Postcolonial Poetics—A Score for Reading	1
2	Questions of Postcolonial Poetics	19
3	Revisiting Resistance Literature—Writing in Juxtaposition	39
4	Postcolonial Writing, Terror, and Continuity: Okri, D’Aguiar, NourbeSe Philip, Shire	63
5	Repetitive Poetics—When Crisis Defines a Nation’s Writing. Contemporary South African Novels	87
6	Poetics and Persistence: Chinua Achebe’s Shaping Influence	119
7	Concepts of Exchange—Poetics in Postcolonial, World, and World-Systems Literatures	145

8 The Transformative Force of the Postcolonial Line: Protest Poetry and the Global Short Story	173
Works Cited	193
Index	215