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Introduction

“Double-edged tools”: Reading genre from the margins

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The world of genre fiction

In a special issue of *Clues* on global crime fiction, Stewart King goes against the typical scholarly convention of nation-based readings of the genre and proposes a rereading of crime within a world literature framework. Citing the global success of mystery writers like Agatha Christie and the Belgian-born Georges Simenon and, more recently, the craze for “Nordic noir”, he argues that crime fiction is best appreciated within this wider frame (see also Gulddal et al., 2022; Nilsson et al., 2017). In addition to the number of translations and global book sales, a crime novel’s “world literariness” can be attested by the extent of intertextual references to earlier works and how such work is then referenced by crime writers around the globe (King, 2014: 11). In other words, it is not merely how individual works travel beyond borders, but also how particular tropes and conventions of the genre are appropriated in different geographic, cultural, and linguistic contexts and to different ends (Brueck and Orsini, 2022; Christensen, 2024; Macdonald and Macdonald, 2010; Mandhwani, 2019; Smolin, 2022). Romance novels (and their more recent incarnation, “chick lit”) have also had a wide global circulation as the most popular genre in terms of book sales and have spawned a variety of local and regional incarnations (de Bruijn, 2008; Gehrman, 2018; Moudileno, 2008; Parameswaran, 2002; Qadeer and Arafath, 2021; Uparkar, 2014). More recently, science, dystopian, fantasy, and broadly speculative fictions have been particularly fruitful for addressing global issues like climate change, while also presenting opportunities for world-building that draws on local traditions and beliefs (Adejunmobi, 2016; Ezeiyoke, 2025; Gomel and Gurevitch, 2023; Murphy, 2024; Sadaf and Kanwal, 2023).

Established scholars of world literature like Franco Moretti (2000a) and Pascale Cassanova (2005) have tended to ignore popular fiction genres like crime and romance in their models.¹ However, in his essay “World Literature and Popular Literature”, Jan Baetens argues that these two literary spheres are actually not as far apart as we may think when taken in the context of contemporary book culture, with its global marketing and distribution channels, drive towards “intermedial” adaptation (works first released as books that are then transformed into other media products like TV or film), and, I would add, digitized and networked reading practices (2022: 340). The distinction between “popular” and “literary” fiction has always been contentious and shifting,² and the material discussed in this issue covers a wide spectrum, from overtly market-oriented Mills & Boon titles to the work of a writer like Mohsin Hamid, who has had popular success (one of his novels has been adapted into a Hollywood film and a second is in production) yet has been awarded many of the prizes and nominations we have come to associate with literariness.³ This special issue is not interested in adding further fuel to the debate about where we draw the line between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” literary works, but is focused rather on the centrality of genre as a usually conscious reference, if not central preoccupation, in the works discussed.

While genre (in the sense of crime, romance, or sci-fi) was previously only seen as the mainstay of “popular” fiction, the field has also become much more blurry, as unmistakably “literary” writers like Margaret Atwood and Kazuo Ishiguro publish work with distinct generic markers.⁴ Defining “genre” has always been complex and fraught; it has typically been associated with the formulaic and conventional, which has often led to its disparagement. A more useful definition, however, comes from John Frow, who explains genres as “a set of cues guiding our reading of texts” (2014: 4) and a system of “intertextual relations” between texts (26). He emphasizes that genres are not fixed or stable and that “texts do not ‘belong’ to genres but are rather ‘uses’ of them”, asserting that “texts work upon

genres as much as they are shaped by them” (2014: 2, 30). It is this understanding of genre, as reader-oriented, intertextual, and dialogic (between text and genre and between genre and context) that drives the questions explored by the articles contained in this issue. They also variously work with and against the notion of the “popular” as a distinct arena of literary and cultural production.

While Frow rightly asserts that *all* texts are shaped by genre (“a universal dimension of textuality” (2)), the institutionalization of literature through publishing houses, points of sale, and the academic structures of university courses and scholarship (as suggested by the titles of the many works cited above) necessitates a grappling with generic categories that represent more or less conscious applications of recognizable narrative structures, tropes, and conventions. This genre institutionalization, like the literary world it is a part of, is “one and unequal” (Moretti, 2000a: 56), and continues to be structured by the wealthy countries of the Global North (see Datta in this issue). This tension — between working within the existing (Eurocentric) genre categories and problematizing them — is a central through-line of this issue. Jade Jenkinson’s article about Indigenous writing addresses this problem directly in her rejection of the category “Gothic” because of its colonial baggage, opting instead for “speculative” as a better representation of the decolonial work undertaken by the texts under discussion.

When considering the institutionalization of literature and its unequal distribution, this necessarily brings us back to capitalism and the role of the market. Genre fiction has always, to a certain extent, been driven by what we now call the “Amazon effect”: *you liked that so we think you’ll also like this*. In 1903, Arthur Conan Doyle was compelled to bring back Sherlock Holmes after he had killed him off due to intense pressure from readers and publishers, who saw profits being left on the table. Today, a novel like Ayisha Malik’s *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2017) is not only marketed as “the Muslim *Bridget Jones*” but actively

courts such comparisons through a playful repurposing of its forebear's narrative form and chick lit tropes. A number of articles in this issue discuss the impact of the market on the production, reception, and circulation of texts (Datta, Jenkinson, and Kriegel), and the role of intermediality (Anjaria, Bessai), establishing genre as both opportunity and constraint for the writers in question. In my conversation with crime and fantasy writer Ausma Zehanat Khan, she points to the difficulty of finding an audience for her books due to the perception that they are “niche” and only speak to Muslim communities, a sentiment that is echoed amongst other genre authors who write from the “margins” (Kean, 2015; Saha and van Lente, 2021).

Beth Driscoll, Lisa Fletcher, and Kim Wilkins have examined this interplay of text, genre, and market in their book *Genre Worlds*, which they define as “a collection of people and practices that operates according to established and emerging patterns of collaborative activity, in order to produce the texts that make popular genres recognizable” (Driscoll et al., 2022: 2), asserting the intersecting social, industrial, and textual facets of such “worlds”. However, as Sreepurna Datta points out in her article in this issue, these “Genre Worlds” are still primarily shaped by the Global North due to the dominance of Euro-American publishers and tech firms that determine our algorithmic interaction with literary works. Even when there is a drive towards diversification beyond white authors and readers, this is more often in the context of multiculturalism within these spaces. The aim of this issue is therefore to expand the lens to consider the dynamics of such work within the local markets of the Global South as well as in marginalized spaces within the more established Anglo-American publishing sphere.

Genre fiction and resistance

This recent turn to genre, as suggested by the number and locations of regional studies cited above, should be of particular interest to scholars engaged with the legacies of empire today.⁵ Yet, despite its enduring attention to how writers from once-colonized contexts “write back”

to the forms and tropes propagated by their erstwhile colonizers, postcolonial literary studies has shown surprisingly little interest in genre fiction, and popular literature in general. In their introduction to *Popular Postcolonialisms*, editors Nadia Atia and Katie Houlden highlight “the way that postcolonial studies, with its roots and politics in the radical challenge to colonial and neocolonial power, has tended to overlook popular forms, often defined as low or middlebrow and commonly viewed as antithetical to resistance” (2018: 2). As Atia and Houlden suggest, this neglect is in part a symptom of the broader devaluation of popular fiction within academic scholarship discussed above. However, the perception that such work is “antithetical to resistance” does have some basis. Genre fiction in particular has been taken to task for propagating racist tropes and conservative ideologies, as “genres actively generate and shape knowledge of the world” and as such “are bound up with the exercise of power”; they are “not mere ‘stylistic’ devices”, but “create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility” (Frow 2014: 2). This brings us to another important feature of genres, that of their “rhetorical function”, which is deeply entangled with their content (Frow, 2014: 10). As Tzvetan Todorov argues in *Genres of Discourse*:

In a given society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalised, and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by that codification. A genre [...] is nothing other than the codification of discursive properties. (1990: 17–18)

Literary genres are political constructs that represent as well as impose a particular view of the world, and in the case of fictions aimed at the mass market, that view is generally the dominant one. However, if genre works to give readers a particular “horizon of expectations” when approaching a given text, then these expectations can be harnessed in order to resist the norms and structures they traditionally support. And yet, as Frow reminds us, “Even when a text disrupts all the expectations we may have of it, these expectations nevertheless form the ways in which we can read it and the ways in which we can change our minds (that is, develop new expectations)” (2014: 30). It is this dynamic interplay between a genre and its

disruption, and the forms of social and political resistance this interplay enacts, that this issue is concerned with.

Science fiction is a genre that has been extensively analysed in relation to its propagation of colonial structures and tropes (Kerslake, 2007; Langer, 2012; Rieder, 2008). It is closely related to the colonial adventure story, translating its violent frontiers and racialized binaries of self and other, citizen and alien, human and less-than-human, centre and periphery, onto fanciful worlds, whether under the sea or on other planets. Patricia Kerslake reads sci-fi texts as “literary experiments” in “the practice of power and empire” that allow humanity to test its (neo)imperial hypotheses “in lieu of a field test” (2007: 30). It is not a coincidence, as Rieder suggests, that the most intense period of European imperial expansion in the late nineteenth century coincides with the most important period in the development of the genre, and in the countries most involved in colonial enterprises (2008: 2–3).

Given what Langer describes as the “twin myths” of “the Stranger” and “the Strange Land” that are central to both colonialism and science fiction (2012: 3), it would seem an unusual genre for writers from once-colonized countries, or indeed writers of colour anywhere, to want to take up. And yet, it is precisely the interplay of these tropes that provides ripe material for transformation and resistance in which “their very power, their situation at the centre of the colonial imagination as simultaneous desire and nightmare, is turned back on itself” (Langer, 2012: 4). This is frequently accomplished through the mobilization of local cultures and cosmologies which sit in tension with sci-fi’s typical investment in Western science and rationality. For example, sci-fi author Nnedi Okorafor mobilizes the concept of “Africanfuturism” (which she distinguishes from the more US-centric Afrofuturism) to emphasize the role of “African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view” in her writing, which relocates Africa from the margins to the centre of knowledge and technology production (2019: n.p.). Similarly, in my discussion with author

Ausma Zehanat Khan, she explains how the related genre of fantasy allows her the flexibility of world-building within an Islamic cultural milieu, which is enhanced through frequent wordplay between Arabic and English. As a result, the works of her Khorasan Archives quartet speak on two levels — they can be enjoyed by all, but those with insider knowledge of Muslim heritage are able to gain a second level of insight into the narratives.

We see similar assertions of Indigenous epistemologies in the articles by John Bessai and Jade Jenkinson, which explore texts and multi-media projects that disrupt linear time and narrative closure. Both authors employ the broad term “speculative” to describe the texts in question, as do Jane Poyner and Gerald David Naughton in their studies of South African and Palestinian fiction, respectively. As a more capacious term than science fiction, and one which breaks from the baggage of western science, “speculation” connotes a looking forward, a projection into the future. The concept of “futures” is central to the arguments of Jenkinson, Poyner, and Naughton. In a similar manner to Africanfuturism, “indigenous futurisms”, as Grace Dillon (2012) argues, puts forward a vision of the future that emerges from Indigenous imaginaries and knowledge systems, as an alternative to settler projects of scientific progress that place those communities under threat. The assertion of Indigenous futures also challenges settler colonial discourse that locates Indigenous peoples and cultures in a bygone past, staking a claim for presence and continuity. Such “counterfuturism” as a form of resistance against erasure — both literal and discursive — is also central to Naughton’s exploration of Palestinian futures in the *Palestine +100* anthology. Although here, as in Poyner’s exploration of texts that imagine the African “city yet to come”, the projection of positive futures is consistently undermined by the trauma of the past and the seeming hopelessness of the present. Both articles chart this tension within texts that engender resistance in the very act of conceiving the future, even as they simultaneously acknowledge that such a future may be unachievable. Poyner’s reading is

nevertheless more optimistic, suggesting that glimpsing the horrors extrapolated from present circumstances may serve as a warning to prevent them from coming to pass.

The subgenre of dystopian fiction is also oriented towards the future and is the subject of Hannah Murray's contribution. She reads Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man* in the context of the increasing circulation of white supremacist dystopian narratives — most notably the Great Replacement Theory — which imagine that white populations in western countries will soon be outnumbered and oppressed by non-white groups. The apocalyptic framing of such narratives raises the question of whose world, exactly, is coming to an end. We may ask similar questions about apocalyptic narratives of a climate-changed future, which a number of contributors also engage with (Bessai, Medugno, Jenkinson). For peoples who have already experienced their world come to an end with the arrival of European conquerors, what alternative visions could and should be imagined (Whyte, 2017)? Each of the texts discussed play on what Rieder refers to as the “double-edged effect” of the exoticism that has been a mainstay of sci-fi and speculative fiction: it can be used “as a means of gratifying familiar appetites”, but equally, as a “fundamental challenge” to one's sense of what is “proper” or “natural” (2008: 4).

While not as explicitly tied to the colonial enterprise as science fiction, the crime genre's association with policing also entwines it with colonial forms of power and domination. In *Crime and Empire*, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee reads the foundational texts of British detective fiction in the context of the country's endeavours to maintain colonial rule abroad, tracing “the lines of continuity between the representation of the criminal and the colony” (2003: vi). Crime fiction has also been associated with managing urban “degeneration”, and in this capacity helped to justify the over-policing of communities of colour and others deemed threatening to the social order of the status quo (Knight, 2011; McLaughlin, 2000; Reddy, 2003). As Heather Worthington summarizes, “Crime is the

deviant action of the marginalised individual that defines the normative centre of society”, and crime fiction by extension has been a central mechanism for encoding such distinctions discursively (2011: x). However, this then opens up the question of how these lines might be drawn differently if voices from within such policed communities are represented more centrally in the genre. As Mukherjee attests:

even as crime [writing] has served as an important ideological tool [of the powerful], it is also the site from where challenges to authority have been, and continue to be mounted. [...] [N]arratives of crime, punishment, and justice are double-edged tools that both empower and question authority. (2003: vii)

This notion of the crime genre as a “double-edged tool” is central to the discussion of Ausma Zehanat Khan’s series of police procedurals. Her work, especially her most recent Inaya Rahman series, turns the eye of western secular law against itself, to investigate its abuses at home and abroad. In a post-9/11 era in which America (along with its allies like Britain and Canada) styled itself as the “world police” and coupled this with intensive surveillance of Muslim communities at home, crime fiction like Khan’s points to alternative sources of justice that may prove more fully committed to the stated egalitarian goals of western legal systems. Colette Guldemann addresses similar questions in her article on black crime writing set in apartheid South Africa. She reads Gomolemo Mokae’s depiction of a resistant black detective in the context of anti-apartheid Black Consciousness discourse, citing his uncomfortable position within the white supremacist police force as a disruption to the subgenre of the police procedural and its role in maintaining the ideological apparatus of the apartheid state.

On the “cosy mystery” end of the crime spectrum is Harini Nagendra’s Bangalore Detectives Club series, set in 1920s Bangalore. Though the series draws inspiration from Golden Age British detective writers like Agatha Christie, Vaibhav Parel reads in this series a subversion of a number of the key conventions of the genre, especially its move from the detective as singular genius to a diverse and female-centric collective of investigators — the

eponymous “Bangalore Detectives Club”. The series, he argues, is also a means of enacting social critique through its depiction of mixing between high- and low-caste characters, female liberation, and the agency of subaltern figures like servants and prostitutes. This move highlights the fact that even seemingly “conventional” and entertaining popular fiction can play a role in radical social change. Keya Anjaria also picks up on the progressive possibilities of crime fiction in her reading of the female serial killer across recent thrillers from Nigeria, Japan, Turkey, and Britain. In a comparative approach reminiscent of King’s (2014) world literary reading of crime fiction cited at the start of this introduction, Anjaria traces the increasing popularity of this figure across these very different cultural and linguistic contexts, noting its use for analogous — though distinct — critiques of patriarchal structures in the societies concerned. She also sets this figure against the typical depiction of “women who kill”, suggesting a move beyond limiting frameworks of the “femme fatale” and the “victim-avenger”, offering possibilities for new forms of female agency, however troubling these may be.

Issues of gender and women’s agency are central to the third broad genre category covered in this issue, namely romance. While it has been the most academically dismissed of all the genres discussed, largely due to its association with a feminized escapism and formulaic market-orientation (McCracken, 1998: 75), its impact cannot be ignored given that it remains the most consumed genre globally (Kamblé et al., 2020: 20; *WordsRated*, 2025). There are also notable vernacular iterations of the genre, such as Onitsha market literature in West Africa (de Bruijn, 2008) and Urdu popular romances, interwoven with Islamic leitmotifs (Farooqui, 2023). The biggest imprint of romance novels, Harlequin Mills & Boon, publishes more than 110 romance titles a month, in over 30 countries and 150 languages, attesting to the genre’s global reach (Kamblé et al., 2020: 20). However, as Sreepurna Datta demonstrates in her article on this topic, the world of romance is an uneven and unequal one,

and this is further exacerbated by the dominance of online retailers like Amazon whose algorithms are structured by terms and categories derived from white majority contexts that make little sense when used in markets like India.

While romance is typically associated with the private sphere and thus often seen as antithetical to the concerns of politics, it has played an important role in codifying gender relations, which are inherently political. Influential precursors to the genre, like domestic fiction by Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, helped reinforce European norms of heterosexual love and separate gendered spheres into colonized societies via imperial education systems, especially those for women (Newns, 2018). Like with the other genres discussed, this makes it ripe for transformation and renegotiation. As Emily Davis asserts, “the instability of the romance [genre] makes it an especially malleable tool for representing fluid political, sexual, and racial identities and coalitions in an era of flexible global capitalism” (2013: 2).

Y-Lynn Ong and Sophie Kriegel’s articles both address this “instability” of romance and its potential for social and political critique. They both analyse works of chick lit, an outcrop of the romance genre that emerged in the 1990s, from Singapore and South Africa, respectively. While generally seen as more progressive than traditional category romance due to its emphasis on female empowerment and agency beyond the simple love-plot, it is nevertheless steeped in the individualism and commodity culture of neoliberal capitalism (Ferriss and Young, 2006; Smith, 2008). Ong explores how these chick lit conventions are taken up in Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan’s *Sarong Party Girls*. While, she argues, Tan’s novel formulates a parodic response to the exotic stereotype of the eponymous “Sarong Party Girl”, the work engages in its own kind of self-exoticism in order to make it legible and desirable to a global market, through which the wealth and glamour of Singapore become representative of contemporary Asia. By contrast, Kriegel’s article discusses how Zukiswa Wanner’s chick

lit novels repurpose the genre's tropes for a local South African audience, facilitating a targeted critique of its social norms around race, class, and gender. However, at the same time, she argues, the genre's imported conventions of middle-class milieu and individualized mobility limit the works' ability to highlight the systemic nature of the issues it raises. In both articles, the genre is shown to be one of ambivalence, with both possibilities and limitations for decolonial and gendered resistance.

Genre: New routes of comparison

While these examples demonstrate some of the potential drawbacks of popular genres, “highbrow” postcolonial literature is also not immune from the pressures and enticements of the market (Brouillette, 2007; Huggan, 2001). It, too, has been beholden to the “Big Five” Anglo-American publishers, as well as international prizes like the Booker, in which certain kinds of texts (largely Anglophone and by writers who already have metropolitan connections) move across borders and gain “global” audiences, while others do not. In the wake of critiques of postcolonial literary studies' over-reliance on a limited number of (generally elite) authors whose works have been endorsed by Anglo-American reviewing and prizing apparatuses (Lazarus, 2011), expanding the lens to fiction that is closer to what ordinary people are reading offers a refreshing alternative to such approaches. In doing so, it opens up the domain of resistance to include the personal and everyday within specific local contexts, adding complexity to the larger geopolitical concerns that are normally foregrounded within postcolonial reading practices.

This special issue is therefore about bringing together a genre studies approach with critical frameworks stemming from world literature and postcolonial studies to read fiction from a range of non-western, Global South, and minoritized contexts. Each of the articles reads their textual examples with and against the tropes and conventions of their respective genres, considering the possibilities of resistance — whether related to gender and sexuality,

class and caste, race and ethnicity, or wider geo-political structures of power — through the re-interpretation of these generic codes. This also frequently includes problematizing Eurocentric genre categories and taxonomies themselves, reconstituting new formulations, and projecting alternative literary futures. Attention to this work is especially important given the dominance of Anglo-American publishing houses in genre fiction, and the continued shortage of diverse voices in the popular genres within those spaces (Saha and van Lente, 2021). However, there is a broader aim for this issue than one of increased representation (vital though this is), which is that placing such geographically diverse works in conversation around specific genres opens up new possibilities for cross-regional comparison and connection between the local and the global.

The proposed articles have been chosen to represent a wide range of genres and geographic contexts and to encourage comparison across regions. Marco Medugno's article in particular traces new routes for South-South comparison through its reading of the science fiction anthology *Ecoceanic: Southern Flows*. The anthology form has been an important one for genre formation (see, for example, Baratz-Logsted, 2006), expansion, and diversification, as seen in Grace Dillon's (2012) and Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan's (2004) influential science fiction anthologies (as well as Comma Press's *+100* anthology series already mentioned), and more commercial titles like the *Hachette Book of Indian Detective Fiction* (Saint, 2024). *Ecoceanic* mobilizes the fluid and in-between space of the southern oceans as a framework for bringing together speculative stories from the coastal regions of Africa, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, Australia, and Latin America. This anthology, as Medugno argues, is decolonial in both its structural composition and its content, facilitating multilingual and non-hierarchical connections between contributions, with genre as a through-line. It is hoped that this issue will similarly generate new lines of reading and enquiry by placing works of related genres from different regions and cultural

contexts side by side, as well as following the movement of genres through global marketplaces and into different mediums.

Genre fiction can circulate far beyond its primary intended audiences and sometimes command unexpected responses from different reading communities. Simultaneously, generic forms are being reworked and repurposed using local material. Both of these processes have been further accelerated by the dominance of digital technologies and sharing platforms.

From Mills & Boon romance in India to South African crime novels and speculative fiction by Indigenous North American writers, this issue is about broadening the lens and presenting recent research across different regions and genres in order to encourage new pathways of literary analysis and a revaluation of genre literatures globally.

Notes

¹ Moretti does address crime fiction in a separate essay (2000b), though it does not feature in his model of world literature.

² The cleavage between the two can broadly be traced back to the British Victorian period, during which widespread literacy, cheaper printing technologies, and mass rail travel worked together to encourage a growing body of so-called “pulp” fiction that was entertaining and easily accessible to the masses. Critics like Q. D. and F. R. Leavis bemoaned the prevalence of such “lowbrow” writing (Leavis, 1932/2000) and aimed to establish a “great tradition” of work that could be set apart as true literature (Leavis, 1948/2008). For a work that challenges such value distinctions, see McCracken (1998).

³ *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *Exit West* (2017) were both shortlisted for the Booker and won other notable literary prizes.

⁴ Many of Atwood’s novels lean towards the sci-fi or speculative (*The Handmaid’s Tale*, the MaddAddam trilogy), as does Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*. His novel *When We Were Orphans* uses the framework of detective fiction.

⁵ This growing interest is also indicated by the recent establishment of the Routledge Studies in Global Genre Fiction book series, which at the time of writing has published eight titles since 2020.

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