

Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature

Nathan Suhr-Sytsma

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Nathan Suhr-Sytsma's recent *Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature* presents an engaging new rendering of postcolonial literary history by centering poetry as the pivotal form of the postcolonial milieu. For the past two decades, literary scholars have highlighted the complex social networks and economic conditions that fostered a postcolonial literary marketplace in the late twentieth century. Sarah Brouillette, for instance, has demonstrated that "authors' careers are key paratexts for reception and reproduction" for writers from postcolonial nations (3), reflecting renewed popular interest in biographical readings of literary history. Similarly, Madhu Krishnan compels us to understand the history of the African literary canon as "a history predicated on the fight over positions, positioning, and position-taking" (3). Yet these conversations, for all their focus on the relationship between literary form and cultural capital, have largely neglected poetry and drama. Suhr-Sytsma, in contrast, extends Jahan Ramazani's contention that poetry's associations with cultural authority heightened its importance in the postcolonial moment to argue for its centrality to the literary marketplace. Through a material history of postcolonial poetry's affective connections, he demonstrates that poetry's brevity, together with its allusive nature, facilitated broad reprintings that connects writers across emergent national spaces.

Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature uses new evidence based on original interviews and archival research alongside careful formal analysis of individual poems to challenge common conceptions of literary production in the postcolonial period as either heavily nationalized or implicitly transnational. Suhr-Sytsma proposes an "interactive approach" to the reading of literary production (17), one which foregrounds the lateral interactions among writers, editors, publishers, and readers. Through this interactive approach, the book achieves a coeval reading of Irish, Nigerian, and Caribbean poetry, which emphasizes the role of collaboration in literary production and effectively returns Irish literature to the postcolonial fold.

The book's four primary chapters track poetic developments in England, Ireland, Nigeria, and the Caribbean. The first and second chapters establish London as an educational, administrative, and

publishing center that dominated international literary circulations well into the post-independence years. Suhr-Sytsma addresses Pascale Casanova's argument that "dominated areas within Europe" (85) understood themselves within "hierarchies and relations of dependency" (83), but argues that the centering of London in postcolonial literary production was an effect less of the gradual "literary emancipation" that leads writers towards cosmopolises and more the result of the active centering of London publishing houses and cultural activities through the 1980s. The book's second half then explores an alternative narrative by positioning two provincial hubs—Ibadan and Belfast—as themselves literary cosmopolises, inflected by, yet apart from, London literary culture. Four "interchapters" highlight the personal connections that connect these spaces.

The opening chapter maps the relationships between the Ibadan, Belfast, and Leeds literary schools as "contemporaneous participants in a wider late-imperial milieu" (31), emphasizing the material and personal connections that operated across Nigeria and Northern Ireland. It follows individual writers, including Martin Banham and Chinua Achebe, as they work and write across the three cities. These early collaborations, in turn, become central to the later moments of crisis that subsequent chapters outline. For instance, in the next "interchapter," Suhr-Sytsma considers the relationship between Mbari, a Nigerian literary space and publisher, and the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), whose funding brought much scrutiny to Mbari. Suhr-Sytsma traces Mbari's international publication networks to posit that the Mbari writers, in presenting an African experience in implicit dialogue with University College education, established literary networks beyond the purview of CCF funding or control.

In the second chapter, Suhr-Sytsma contends that London-based literary conferences, festivals, and anthologies solidified the emergent category of Commonwealth literature, which prized an imagined authenticity. These festivals and anthologies negotiated and extended a legacy of imperial efforts that positioned the postcolonial aesthetic as always implicitly political. Even those publications that sought "to separate the literary from the political map" did so "only in a very particular sense" (115). Nonetheless, the history Suhr-Sytsma presents offers a nuanced view of writers' own strategic decisions within this milieu. The following interchapter, on Derek Walcott's relationship to the *London Magazine*, demonstrates that Walcott "negotiate[ed] his relation to the literary prestige and transnational public represented by publication in London through the *London Magazine*" (113). Publication in this putatively apolitical magazine enabled the poet to negotiate his position as a preeminent writer: it "allowed Walcott to gain entry into the London literary world and become more than a journalist without disaffiliating from the Caribbean" (119).

The *London Magazine*, like the cosmopolitan city in which it was published, supported and made visible transnational networks of affiliation which remained oriented to the global South.

This individual focus crystallizes in the third chapter, which examines the career of Nigerian poet and activist Christopher Okigbo. Okigbo has often been celebrated for his adaptation of oral styles and modernist aesthetics. In highlighting the print circulation of Okigbo's work, though, Suhr-Sytsma argues that it was this very turn to print —“papers, books, a typewriter [...] conditions of production and circulation for twentieth-century African literature”—that defined and demanded a modernist hybridity that allowed Okigbo to address varied audiences simultaneously. The print paths that Okigbo's work takes—from its publication in *Transition*, to its posthumous appearance in *Black Orpheus*, and subsequent publication as a single volume—provide glimpses of its many audiences, and into the institutional forces that shape literary valuation.

The closing chapter plots Seamus Heaney's transformation from provincial poet of the Northern Irish troubles to canonical Irish poet of the late twentieth century. The chapter positions Heaney alongside contemporaries Derek Mahon and Michael Longley to demonstrate the role of print journals in their early careers. Suhr-Sytsma evaluates the relationship between occasional and canonical poetry by reading Heaney's first poems as they were published in *New Statemen* and *Listener*—as literally part of the news—and later in *North*, demonstrating that the contextual shift reconstrued the work from occasional verse to modernist rumination. The final interchapter departs from this materialist focus to dwell on Wendy Belcher's theorization of literary “possession” of European writers by African writers. Suhr-Sytsma contends that Seamus Heaney's and Geoffrey Hill's embrace of Nigerian forms and images in their later works reflect not an appropriative move but a spiritual possession that shapes their writing beyond their direct intentions.

Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature offers a compelling new account of the rise of the postcolonial as a literary and political category across continents, emphasizing literary production as itself the outcome of particular material and market conditions. Its material lens justifies its ambitiously comparative project, returning Northern Irish literature to the fold of postcolonial literature along personal, thematic, and material dimensions. Somewhat unusually, this book is an eminently readable one. Despite the depth of its sociological and historical contextualization, and the wealth of cultural scenes and networks it describes, the monograph does not meander. Instead, it is a rare instance of a deeply contextualized comparative study, illuminating the cross-cultural currents that shaped postcolonial literary culture both within and outside of European metropolises.

Works Cited

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