Below the radar of consciousness: A Conversation about Elleke Boehmer's short story collection *To the Volcano*, with the author

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Elleke Boehmer is a writer and critic, and professor of World literature in English at the University of Oxford. Her books include *Stories of Women* (Manchester, 2005) and *Indian Arrivals* (2015), as well as fiction, including the award-winning *The Shouting in the Dark* (2015).

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Elleke Boehmer and Filippo Menozzi met online as part of the seminar series of the Research Institute for Literature and Cultural History (RILCH), Liverpool John Moores University, to talk about her evocative and fascinating short story collection, To the Volcano (Myriad Editions, 2019)*. The short stories travel across different continents and explore lives in faraway contexts and countries, from Latin America to Europe and southern Africa. A common thread of these stories concerns the significance of the southern hemisphere as a way of decentering the dominant place that the north holds in the global historical and literary imagination. Our conversation looked at some of the interesting themes and questions that the collection raises, including birth and death, age and aging, and the trajectory of a life. The stories in their different ways all ask what it is to be very distant from each other and, yet, to stay in touch.*

Filippo Menozzi (FM): What I find most fascinating about many stories in this collection, for example "South, North", "Evelina" and "Blue Eyes", is the thought-provoking note of *non finito*, as if the stories were not concluded but rather about to continue in an open-ended and unsettled way. Can you tell me more about your choice to use the short story as literary form, and what it allowed or not allowed you to do, compared with novelistic or academic writing?

Elleke Boehmer (EB): I see short stories as snapshots, as opening windows or frames onto an often-provocative moment – moments that

are rarely conclusive, or rounded out, unlike, say, most academic writing. Novels offer a different kind of composition again. The short story form imposes limits or a framework in interesting ways; this is not about compression, but about saying what is essential for the story to work, so that it asks the questions that it wants to ask.

For me, the frame allows a number of episodes to be gathered together and presented to the reader, but none of them need be conclusive. This is why I often use breaks and other kinds of ellipsis, which help to focus or further provoke the question. In the work of one of my models, the New Zealand modernist Katherine Mansfield, intentional omission or subtraction often powerfully directs or advances what is being said. I try to capture something of those redirections and adjustments of focus. We are invited to ask questions about the unseen and the unsaid, which is the level at which so much of human interaction happens, below the radar of consciousness.

To illustrate further, the story "Blue Eyes" tells us about a character who is essentially experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder after fighting on Rhodesian side, in the Zimbabwean war of liberation. That's not a kind of condition that allows a rounded, neat ending. The inconclusiveness of this short story – and others – helps to centre the reader in the situation of the characters, to involve them in their dilemmas.

FM: Your reference to Katherine Mansfield made me think of her 1915 story "The Wind Blows" and the poetic use of ellipses she makes there. Would such an elliptic, subtractive figuration mirror, in some way, the experience of southern writers travelling north? How would the interstitial and the unfinished nature of your stories intimate personal trajectories of hemispheric travel and displacement?

EB: That's a lovely, large question which deserves a long and detailed answer – longer than we have space for, but I'll give it a go nonetheless. "The Wind Blows" is one of the Mansfield stories that I most deeply admire. It works daringly with both longer and shorter breaks; it tries out interruptions, new starts and sudden gaps. At moments it is as if the language itself were being buffeted by the wind. Reading the story, you feel the gusting of the great southerly buster that sweeps through Mansfield's native Wellington. You feel those surges of restlessness that strong, high winds often give people. And then there's that final, famous break and twist at the very end of the story, as that same wind energy seems to blow the two central characters, the sister and the brother, right around, so that their past selves face out to their present selves, waving goodbye from a ship departing for Europe.

That image of the ship and the wild southern wind then leads on neatly to the second part of your question, about how these elliptical, unfinished or even disruptive qualities might mirror something of the experience of southern characters travelling north. I would say that writers from the south like Mansfield – but not only her, we might also think of Janet Frame, or Patrick White, or Olive Schreiner, and many others – clearly communicate something of their outsider or ex-centric perspective in the northern metropolis by using ellipsis. Breaks, gaps, stops and starts allow them to pose questions about being on the edge, or viewing the centre always from the outside, or being always obliged to translate themselves so as to be read, understood, and favourably received. I explore this kind of perspective in the story 'North, South' in *To the Volcano*. The story poses the question of what style or language you use as a southerner to enter into northern space and to speak of northern experience. The character Lee-Ann in the story, who is from South Australia, is overwhelmed with memories of her southern home at the very point that she reaches the Paris of which she has long dreamed. I also use gaps and breaks but to different effect in "Blue Eyes," to suggest something of the unsaid and unsayable of war, its experiences of loss, breakage, and absence.

FM: These stories are oriented towards the southern hemisphere, if not directly set there. Can you tell me more about the idea of the south that inspired the stories? Would the south be a poetics as well as a geographical location?

EB: The geographic south in the stories concerns the far extremities of the planet; it is the counterpoint to the north, those zones where, geopolitically and cartographically, everything that is deemed to be 'important' historically has happened. Think only about the front pages of any newspaper that you might care to mention. Stories from 'the other side of the world' are only ever about extreme events and disasters, otherwise these areas remain more or less invisible. As a case in point, there was the explosion of the volcano in Tonga in January 2022. This was first reported using satellite data as people on the ground were cut off from international communications networks. But by the time the human stories began to come through, three or so days later, the story as event had already disappeared from our screens and front pages.

The geopolitical dominance of the north has led to the curious marginalization in history as well as geography – and in literature – of these hemispheric extremities. Whether the south also then entails or posits a different poetic is a further question again, one that demands attention, given that the south involves seeing differently, from the

other side. Writing and other forms of cultural expression from the south certainly seem to propose that southern poetics exists – a writing that is no longer European, yet not quite African or Australasian, to half-quote J.M. Coetzee; also a writing that sees or imagines the world from the south, where, for example, winter is in June and July. Perhaps, as we were just saying, a prominent use of ellipsis, is part of a southern poetics. The season in which my title story "To the volcano" is located, is indicative in this respect: the story is set in July, and the weather is cold and dry. We are definitely not in the northern hemisphere. But this is not explicitly spelled out, it's implicit. So, a southern poetics may have to do with writing that tries to match and capture environments that were never, till colonization, named using European languages, that were voiced and described in indigenous languages. This concern with naming and the difficulty of naming, and what it is to be indigenous and southern, links many of the southern extremities of the planet, far apart as they are geographically. I try to capture something of these perspectives in *To the Volcano*. In that sense the stories form a series of experiments; they ask what a southern poetics might look like. What are the demands the south makes on perception and perspective?

FM: I wonder if this decentring of hegemonic, northern, narratives from the standpoint of the southern hemisphere might parallel or revise the question about the other geographical polarity – East and West – which has influenced much postcolonial writing and thinking after Edward Said. How would writing from the south rearticulate what Said described as the "imaginative geography" dividing the world between East and West?

EB: The question of Orientalism in relation to the southern poetics of *To the Volcano*, is unavoidable, difficult and interesting. There does undeniably seem to be a similar dichotomy in operation here, north-south rather than east-west. And it does have to do, again, with how the world was colonised, through trade but also economic, political and cultural production, and how it was organised in terms of colonies and then nation-states, always in a centre-periphery relationship to the colonial metropolises. There is something unmistakeably postcolonial and Orientalist also about the north-south dichotomy. But the Orient – seen a secondary entity in relation to the west – is not like the south in that, though othered, the Orient was nonetheless desired. The southern hemisphere was explored and charted by Tasman, Magellan, Wallis, Cook and others precisely because Britain and the Netherlands and Spain wanted to find ways to the alluring East. The south, by contrast, had very little that the capitalist North was interested in, other than whales and seals, and those were fished out in the nineteenth century to the point of near extinction. The south is the outside, the *ne plus*

ultra of the planet, though it's also where many valuable materials to this day lie.

FM: The title of your collection, *To the Volcano,* made me think of the wider ecological question of eruptions and the global interconnectedness of our planet as an ecosystem. For example, the 1883 Krakatoa eruption, which caused major repercussions worldwide, as well as current research on the Gulf stream and its implications for climate change. Would southern writing help to reimagine the global scope of ecological issues? Moreover, some stories seem to point to exchanges between countries of the south. For example, in the title story, the extinct volcano on Ngona Plain is described as a vlei or a billabong (hinting at links between South Africa and Australia qua geography), while the journey in "Blue Eyes" is expanded to include "a line tracing west and south, to Cape Town or even farther—Tristan da Cunha, he imagines, Gough Island, South Georgia, Tierra del Fuego." Can you tell me more about possible connections and translations across the places that compose this book?

EB: Yes, this question flows in interesting ways from the last one. Perhaps I was intentionally trying to create something of a southern blur across the stories, where spaces that are in fact wide apart are shown to share commonalities – of perception, of light effect, of oceanic awareness, and so on. Many of the stories explore the condition of farness, which is a condition shared by all the southern lands where the stories are set. "North South," "To the Volcano," "The Mood that I'm in," in particular, focus on this. Our awareness of distance is something that relates to all our senses – it's about light and remoteness and quiet and dryness. I link these sensations to a condition I call *southing*, a desire or an inclination to tend south. There is far more ocean in the southern hemisphere and far fewer people live there (only about 11% of the world's population), so the word *southing* also conjures for me associations of thin blue light-infused air and charging ocean currents. Of wind pressure and cold. D.H. Lawrence when in Australia talked about the "unspeakable beauty" of the light over the sea in Sydney Harbour. Katherine Mansfield admired its silver sheen on the waves in Wellington harbour. That's the kind of light these stories are trying to bring to mind, and by bringing it to mind, they try to trace lines of connection across the south.

FM: I am fascinated by your use of "south" as a verbal, gerund form, as if *southing* were more akin to a process of becoming and metamorphosis rather than a fixed state of being or location. Many characters in your stories, especially one of the central characters in "To the Volcano," seem to go through such processes of becoming, worldling, and transformation. Would *southing* be an inner experience

too, a transformation of the sense of self, as well as being a social structure of feeling?

EB: Southing is definitely not static, as I see it, but it may involve more displacement than transformation. This loops back to the earlier bit about ellipsis, how ellipsis helps to communicate an experience of strangeness and displacement. A feeling about coming from elsewhere, somewhere very far away. So, yes, southing isn't only a structure of feeling, but also something in motion, something out of kilter – seeing where we live or stand always to some extent from the outside, as well as from within.

FM: A theme recurring through the stories seems to be the question of how to narrate something difficult if not impossible to represent. Thus, for example, "To the Volcano" concludes with a communication officer unable to do justice to an extraordinary experience, while "Blue Eyes" deals with unspeakable trauma and guilt. Could you tell me more about this aspect of the stories, and is working through traumatic experiences an important theme in *To the Volcano*?

EB: Yes, this probably is a key theme, and it relates back to what we were saying at the beginning about the inconclusiveness and codedness that the short story form allows us to explore. By contrast, the novel is a very 'talky' genre, it wants description, depth, activity, explanation. We already touched on "Blue Eyes," but "The Biographer and the Wife" at the end of the collection, too, is concerned with an experience of trying to move on from, and circling back to, experiences that don't let go. And then in "Evelina," a story about a young woman leaving or trying to leave her native Argentina for the first time to join her boyfriend in New York, she comes up against a kind of blockage, she can't get beyond the point of departure. She keeps visiting the airport to test herself: will she be able to leave when it comes down to it? Short stories work well for exploring this kind of circularity.

FM: Expanding on "Blue Eyes," I am intrigued by many aspects of the story, especially the focus on the visual and scopic element. In an intense passage, a character named "Iris" (evoking for me the part of the eye around the pupil) describes a bottomless depth in the eyes of the troubled protagonist. Can you tell me more about this moment of the story, the significance of his "blue eyes" and why are they described as a blank space?

EB: That's interesting about the ocular connotation of Iris, since I was probably thinking as much of the flower, and its deep blueness or purpleness, whereby Iris the character becomes a counterpart to "Blue-eyes John."

About the blank space of blue eyes, I was thinking quite literally about early photography, including colonial photography, in black and white. Blue eyes in those pictures show up as faded or washed out, almost blank. Think about the photos of the young Curzon or Kitchener. There seemed to me an interesting metaphor that I could build on about the unseeing-ness of the colonial man in, say, Africa or India. He didn't see what was before him, he often didn't have the conceptual tools for that kind of seeing, whereas local people did of course see the coloniser. He had come in from outside, there he stood, the mzungu, the foreigner, shooting things, people, animals, interfering, disrupting, imposing. John in the story can't see at all of course; he doesn't know what he wants, he doesn't understand the impact of the war on him, he can't even really articulate what his trouble is.

FM: The theme of the border seems to appear in many stories, either as a physical place dividing and connecting countries (the Limpopo in "Blue Eyes," the natural border right between Zimbabwe and South Africa, or the airport in "Evelina"), or even as a sort of liminal space, such as the volcano in "To the Volcano." Are borders important in your writing? Might the south be a border in certain ways?

EB: Yes, this is hugely important, I'm deeply preoccupied with borders. I have another short story, not in this collection, about phones telling us when we cross borders, like when we cross 'invisible' borders in Europe. As in some of the stories, I'm fascinated and disturbed by what happens at the border, at the checkpoint, who is allowed through and who is stopped. Who has authority at that point? What is at stake when we cross the border? What is demanded of us? Who demands it? Another story in *To the Volcano*, "Synthetic Orange," is in a coded way about migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean into Europe, and the terrible losses imposed by the border. The privilege of being able safely to cross borders and having the right papers to do so, is one denied to many. Invisible, apparently fluid borders are sometimes as or more violently policed, 'off-shore', than concrete, physical ones.

FM: Related to that, some of the stories seem to be questioning our perception of what is (and is not) real. For example, "To the Volcano," "Evelina," and "South, North" seem to suggest that real places can have a sort of dream-like aura, a *genius loci* that could appear even in the most unlikely places such as airports. Was that the effect you might have been trying to create, by using magical realism, or, more broadly, by trying to reimagine realism?

EB: I'm not sure of the label magic realism; southern realism works better, perhaps? By which I mean, there are strange things that happen in one or two stories, that ask questions of the nature of reality and our perspective on it. Here we might remember that the south spins counter-clockwise to the north. But perhaps I will partially sidestep the question and rather go back to what we were saying right at the beginning about involving the reader in the story-telling, in the moment of the story-making, which is a technique I'm interested in. Even in the stories that are told in the past tense, I try to hold the reader in the moment of the unfolding of the story in line with the moment that the characters are inhabiting. Perhaps that's why, at certain times, we don't cross the border. We are waiting to cross, we are considering the crossing, we are held in that moment. John is held before the border in "Blue Eyes." Evelina sets out to cross over and depart, but does she? This is a kind of writing in the moment. I try to unspool the moment even as the characters are seeing and experiencing it. Once again, the ellipses, the displacement, and the impressionism we were talking about earlier, come into play here, to give a sense of the characters' responses unfolding in real time.

FM: As a last question, could you talk in closing about some of the writers and literary traditions that inspired you when writing these stories? There seem to be explicit references to Joyce in "Evelina" and to Orwell in "Blue Eyes," but also many other indirect or uncertain resonances: for example, would Jorge Luis Borges also be an influence in "Evelina," and are willows in "To the Volcano" a hint at "The Willow Song" in *Othello*? Has Nadine Gordimer's short fiction also inspired you? Interestingly, these influences cut across north and south.

EB: That's always a very big question, because to name influences is to claim a writer somehow, whereas of course, they haven't actually endorsed your project. I've already said something about Mansfield and what I've learned from her – so much. From how she switches point of view across her ellipses, to how she says so much through mere glimpses. I admire that concentration. Her craft on one level is so simple and so lucid to the extent that she was sometimes written off as childlike and childish. But her technique is second to none. I go back for a refresher to Mansfield every year, and read my way through the collected stories. As for Orwell, he is more the character John's model (in "Blue Eyes") than mine, though I admire his writing, its precision. With "Evelina", the idea was to respond to Joyce's *Dubliners* story "Eveline" that has always intrigued me, speaking again of breaks and ellipses. The break at the end of that story poses important questions about belonging. I wanted to write a southern, Buenos Aires Eveline or Evelina who, as it were, looks back at Joyce's character across the Atlantic and across the twentieth century She teeters on the brink of a

similar predicament. So, yes, that draws out another north-south axis in the collection. Spinning the globe in the imagination, that's something I was very interested to do with these stories. In this way I wanted to craft something that might begin to approach a southern poetics, even though using English, a northern language, but one creolised in southern space.

FM: Thank you so much for your thoughtful answers. It was great to hear more about the creative processes that inform your fiction and the wider political and social issues these might reveal. It looks like your southern poetics will continue to prove illuminating and thought-provoking as a prism to understand our very turbulent century.

EB: Thank you. Southern poetics to me represents a work in progress, in my creative as in my critical writing, so the encouragement is wonderful to have.