

New Genres, New Conversations of the Global South: Art, Chick-Lit and Biography

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“All we want is a new conversation” (Ntone Edjabe and Achal Prabhala 2008, cited in Isabel Hofmeyr, “Against the Global South” 2018, 313).

Russell West-Pavlov introduces and presents a fascinating range of case studies on *The Global South and Literature* in this timely edited volume that is part of the Cambridge Critical Concept Series (2018). What I propose to do in the following forum piece is to look at individual contributions in a relational manner, picking up on certain themes raised by specific chapters, and suggesting further development that build towards what I want to consider as new genres of the Global South. As Fabio Akcelrud Durão reminds us in his piece entitled, “Critical Theory: Made in Brazil”, the “Southern Turn” “should be viewed in this context of opening new horizons at the expense of an image of the whole” (2018, 83). It also marks the beginnings of “neoliberalism with Southern characteristics” following the much cited author Vijay Prashad (2010, cited in Hofmeyr 2018, 307). Here I am very much invested in certain “cultural modes taking shape in the exchanges and connections within the Global South itself (rather than just considering North/South dynamics)” that Isabel Hofmeyr gestures to in her contribution “Against the Global South” (2018, 309). It is a way of seeing the Global South as emerging through “the relation between places” that Pashmina Murthy gestures to in her piece entitled, “Uneasy Returns: The Literary Turn to the South” (2018, 198), and that I want to elaborate on by proposing three such emergent new genres: art, chick lit, and biography. Each is formed in the experiences between various locations of the Global South (and with multiple detours along the way to the North), and is a way to build a new set of conversations, citing Ntone Edjabe and Achal Prabhala above, about (on, and with) the Global South, and that builds on

Russell West-Pavlov's edited volume, and this wonderful literary set of interventions.

First, however, I want to qualify my use of genre. I take the idea of genres of the Global South from Jens Elze's contribution, who proposes the "picaresque" as "increasingly apposite as a trope of the time of the Global South" (2018, 224). While Elze goes on to discuss two such picaresque novels, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007), inserting them into contemporary Global South debates on entrepreneurship and humanitarianism, respectively, I want to focus on the productive possibilities imbedded in the idea of genres of the Global South. I focus my attention on three of them in order to expand the Global South to include several outside the strictly literary canon and which are touched upon but not directly discussed in several of the contributions included in this volume. Similar to Elze, I ask: can we take certain well established global genres (such as the *Bildungsroman* and the picaresque which explore "the relation between individual experience and the conditions of modernity" (2018, 223), to trace emergent forms that come directly out of the Global South, and that are distinct from their northern iterations?

This forum piece is also a form of experimentation, where the act of reading prompts a scholar located in the Global South (such as myself) to learn anew, to relocate one's own writings in different settings, and think expansively. Thus, rather than suggest that these genres are found missing from this critical volume, pointing to a lack thereof, I propose that it prompted for me a new set of conversations on the Global South, and to revisit certain topics that I have been thinking and writing about: art, chick-lit, and biography.

Art

It was reading Russell West-Pavlov's introduction that gave cause to think about Art as a first new genre of the Global South. He starts his piece entitled, "Toward the Global South" with reference to a Colombian artist named Fredy Alzate whose 2014 display (entitled "Lugares en Fuga" [Fleeing places] is of a collection of chipped and dented brick-and-mortar globes, which had a previous life as traffic bollards on the city streets of Medellín. West-Pavlov goes on to write: "Alzate's globe, with its rough-cast craftsmanship and its prior history in the public sphere, is a fitting icon of what has come to be known as the Global South" (2018, 1). Other contributors in this volume also point to Global South art works as illustrative of certain defining characters and characteristics of the Global South. Kerry Bystrom ("The Cold War and the (Global) South Atlantic") discusses South African photographer Jo Ratcliffe, and her "triptych of a crumbling mural painted on a house in Viriambundo, Angola some thirty years ago – depicting Fidel Castro, Agostinho Neto, and Leonid Brezhnev – [as speaking] to the way the utopian visions of the past which animated Tricontinentalism have slowly peeled away; or perhaps never

were what they seemed to be at the time” (2018, 79). Another example is by contributor Nadja Gernalzick who, in her piece entitled “Sugar and the Global South: Substance of New Solidarities”, mentions in passing African American artist Kara Walker’s 2014 sculpture made of sugar named “A Subtlety; or, The Marvelous Sugar Baby”, calling it a “social-interventionist art work which addresses the sugar economy and industry in the US and its legacy of slavery, racism, and abuse” (2018, 116). Contributor Dilip Menon makes art and art fairs the focus of his piece entitled “Thinking about the Global South: Affinity and Knowledge” by referencing four Southern artists (Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar, Hong Kong artist Kwan Sheung Chi, Albanian artist Adrian Paci, and Brazilian artist Rivane Neuenschwander) who each presented at the Kochi Biennale in India in either 2012 or 2014. I would argue that his contribution, more than any of the other chapters listed above, is the beginnings of a new conversation on the genre of Art in the Global South. Yet, here I would push Menon to say more, to use these four artists to develop an argument about the production and consumption of Global South artwork (as material and medium) in and about the Global South.

Thus, in calling for a new genre of Art of the Global South, I want to move beyond art’s use value as illustration as it is employed by these authors to ask, rephrasing Pashmina Murthy in her contribution, “Uneasy Returns: The Literary Turn to the South”: “what is the work of the Global South [artwork replaces text] here?” (2018, 199). I would also like to suggest that art potentially stands in for what is not easily articulated or translatable in text, and therefore can be used to say something that evokes a Southern viscerality; it works as an affective register of the Global South in some sense. It can potentially gesture to what AbdouMaliq Simone suggests in his contribution, “Inoperable Relations and Urban Change in the Global South”. He writes: “across the lower- and working-class districts of southern latitudes, inhabitants craft a particular aesthetics of the built environment that conveys a sense of the inoperable – rendering what takes place not easily discernible according to a specific function, agenda, or identity” (2018, 123). I want to take what Simone says about aesthetics and the built environment and apply it to artistic production, and as the grounds (both form and content) for an emergent genre of Art of the Global South.

Chick-Lit

It was Pashmina Murthy’s focus on contemporary literature and her brief discussion of Chimamanda Ngoize Adichie’s novel *Americanah* in her contribution entitled “Uneasy Returns: The Literary Turn to the South” that prompted me to think about chick-lit as a second new genre of the Global South. It made me ask the question, what if we read *Americanah* through the lens of Global South chick-lit as opposed to African diaspora fiction-writing? Would it make us better understand the main characters of Ifemelu and her first love

Obinze, and their becoming (as individuals), through their multiple relations of place (Nigeria, the US, and the UK). Reading her contribution also returned me to my recent involvement in co-editing a special issue for the journal *Feminist Theory* (2019) on the topic of African Chick Lit. While conceiving this project, I was imbedded in thinking about chick lit from Africa in a strict sense. In our jointly authored introduction, Ronit Frenkel and I wrote: “Can we learn something new about chick-lit more generally by locating ourselves on the African continent and in relation to its multiple diasporic locations, thus re-imagining its production and consumption from here?” (2019, 123). We found inspiration less in Helen Fielding’s popular *Bridget Jones’s Diary* – which firmly put chick-lit on the map of Northern literary genre studies –, but rather in Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* whose title we used as a play on words for our own, “Chick-Lit in a Time of African Cosmopolitanism”. It was lateral thinking, putting South Africa and Colombia into conversation that suited us better to reposition African chick-lit.

In other words, I want to propose chick-lit (alongside Art) as a second potential new genre of the Global South that has gone under-examined. I do so having realized how much the relation of *places* (emphasis on the plural of *place*, following Murthy once again) within the Global South matters for shaping a certain kind of Chick Lit heroine who goes against type. That is, instead of a main character who strictly lives in the North and only goes on vacation in the Global South and of course gets herself into trouble there – as Bridget Jones does in Helen Fielding’s second volume during a beach holiday to Thailand where she gets caught up with a male drug smuggling scam artist – this Global South heroine lives, vacations, and moves within and across various Southern landscapes without necessarily desiring the North. I would thus reframe my earlier work by both locating African chick-lit within a wider swath of Global South Chick lit and recasting African diasporic writers such Chimamanda Adichie as chick-lit writers of the Global South. As Frenkel and I state at the end of our introduction, “we want to leave open the possibility [...] that current and aspiring African writers are confidently directing and experimenting with new genres of their own” (2019, 131). I would hope the same for future chick-lit writers (and their fictional characters) located across the Global South.

Biography

In this next section, I want to propose biography as a third new emergent genre of the Global South, alongside Art and Chick-Lit. Here my discussion is prompted by reading Pramod K Nayar’s contribution entitled “South of the Graphics: Gandhi, Mandela, and Telling Lives”. His piece points to the importance of such under-theorized literary subgenres as the graphic novel for inclusion in the Global South literary canon. It is less his focus on the graphic novel that interests me, but rather his idea of “telling lives” that I focus on here, even as his focus is on Gandhi and Mandela, two perhaps over-subscribed

Global South (Indian and South African, respectively) historical figures. I also take my cue from a line from AbdouMaliq Simone who provocatively suggests in his contribution: “if a viable, useful remnant of the South persists, it might be as a locus to think about how to detach from the question about who counts and does not count. It is about how to operate in the interstices of the world” (2018, 125). Here I argue that biography (or “telling lives”) operates precisely in the interstices, which is exactly why it has such potential as a genre for thinking about the relationality of places in the Global South. I also read Nayar and Simone in conjunction with my own recent involvement as co- editor of a special issue of *Radical History Review* on “The Global South: Histories, Politics, Maps” (May 2018, issue 131) alongside Christopher Lee, Marissa Moorman, and Sandhya Shukla. Specifically, we focused on mapping lesser-known biographies of the Global South, suggesting a departure from “grand narratives of the Global South, as defined by occasions like Bandung, as well as “great men” whether Jawarhalal Nehru, Fidel Castro, or Frantz Fanon” (2018, 3). Instead we write: “We believe that the Global South and its possibilities might be better grasped through an emphasis on the texture of interpersonal exchanges and categories of analysis that might be seen, prima facie, as peripheral, but in practice retain value and meaning for local and regional communities, rather than global ones” (2018, 3).

Our special issue includes a biographical contribution by Sean Jacobs. Entitled “‘Get Used to Me’ Muhammad Ali and the Paradoxes of Third World Solidarity,” Jacob recasts American boxer and internationalist Muhammad Ali as a Global South figure who is formed through his many relations of place (US, Ghana, Nigeria, Egypt, Lebanon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Africa). In our summary to his piece, we write: “Moving into the field of biography, Muhammad Ali’s recent death offers Sean Jacobs an opportunity to revisit the politically complicated subject onto whom so much has been projected. Jacobs argues for seeing Ali’s many and shifting perspectives on US imperialism and Third World struggles as part of a necessary discussion on the vexed relationship between race and nationality. But he reminds us that contradictions, too, illuminate a particular historical moment and a life lived like many others: desirous, aspirational, and deeply aware. Unlike so much that has been written and said about Ali, Jacobs declines hero worship in favour of a fuller, though still appreciative, appraisal of the man” (2018, 7). Biography succeeds for Jacobs in that he is not wary of reading the failure of Ali’s internationalist politics into mapping unlikely histories of the Global South. Our *Radical History Review* discussion and Sean Jacob’s contribution both go back precisely to Simone’s point about it mattering less who counts for what, but rather a focus on the life lived in the interstices which in turn, suggests the potential of biography as a third new emergent genre of the Global South.

Conclusion

Following Russell West-Pavlov in his Introduction to this wonderful and wide-ranging edited collection, I also “entertain the hope that the concept of the Global South may reframe old questions in such a way as to produce new knowledge, that it may open up new vectors of enquiring exploration that do not merely reveal terrains previously ignored, but generate novel ways of inhabiting them” (2018, 19). I hope that my proposed genres of art, chick lit, and biography can be seen as generative categories, ones that emerge in the relation between places, and that will potentially prompt future readers and writers to think laterally about the Global South as deserving of a new set of conversations.

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