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Introduction: The Genres of Postcolonialism

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Introduction

The Genres of Postcolonialism

Brent Hayes Edwards

This issue gathers recent work in postcolonial criticism and theory. The perspectives represented and contexts considered (South Africa, Canada, the United States, India, Pakistan) are the result of an especial—and still all-too-uncommon—effort to attend to scholarship produced in the global South, rather than simply entrenching further the association of postcolonial studies with a relatively narrow coterie of metropolitan migrants. At the same time, in bringing together work engaged with subaltern studies historiography in India (particularly the contributions of Sanjay Seth and Rosinka Chaudhuri) and work explicitly concerned with U.S. imperialism and contemporary globalization (particularly the contributions of Pius Adesanmi and Mark Driscoll), the issue poses once more a question raised by the last *Social Text* special issue on this topic—published in 1992, in the wake of the first Gulf War—around the theorization of the postcolonial itself.¹ Vigorously questioned in that setting in now-classic essays by Ella Shohat and Anne McClintock, the term *postcolonial* may have proven itself to be most useful precisely when it is placed under severe pressure, angled to highlight the necessarily uneasy relationship between colonial past and neocolonial present, history writing and current critique, cultural studies and political economy, as a task or problematic rather than a method or map.² In 1992 Shohat noted what she termed the "puzzling" absence of the term *postcolonial* in the rhetoric of the academic opposition to the Gulf War (in contrast to commonly invoked terms such as *imperialism* and even *neocolonialism*). She wondered in response whether something about the rubric of the postcolonial "does not lend itself to a geopolitical critique"; in the open-ended present of the "war on terror," the relative invisibility of explicitly postcolonial analysis must beg the same question.³

Instead of rehearsing those definitional debates or simply offering overviews of the essays that follow, I will comment briefly on an issue that has long haunted methodological concerns in postcolonial studies: the politics of interdisciplinarity. The following essays raise this issue in disparate arenas and different ways (whether Sarah Nuttall's recourse to ethnography and feminist critique; Rosinka Chaudhuri's conjoining of poetics, translation studies, and historiography; Kamran Asdar Ali's attending to reader-response criticism as well as the sociology of religion; or Mark [End Page 1] Driscoll's "isomorphic" linking of global economics and the representational politics of U.S. supermarket tabloids). Chaudhuri's illuminating critique of the uses of Rabindranath Tagore in the scholarship of Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty provides an entrée to this concern, as she asks in particular about the uses and misuses of the literary in postcolonial criticism. Stuart Hall has suggested that part of the reason for the failure of postcolonial work to deal with the economic may be that it has been "most fully developed by literary scholars, who have been reluctant to make the break across disciplinary (even postdisciplinary) boundaries required to advance the argument."⁴ If so, one might note that in the past decade there has been something of a counterdevelopment, in which a great deal of postcolonial criticism, written under the influence of the Birmingham school of cultural studies, has tended to consider literary readings, especially of forms outside mass market publishing and journalism, at best unseeingly and at worst irrelevant.⁵

It is particularly crucial in this regard to raise the question of genre, which Chaudhuri introduces but does not pursue. Challenging Chakrabarty's claim of an "intimate" historical link between fiction and Bengali political modernity, Chaudhuri reminds us on the contrary that poetry was the more influential genre in the literature of Bengali nationalism during the second half of the nineteenth century. She notes that the novel and the nation "have been symbiotically linked together in a profusion of postcolonial works," an understatement at best; even a haphazard review of the main works of scholarship shows that in the realm of representation, postcolonialism has almost exclusively been considered through the novel.

Jahan Ramazani's groundbreaking *The Hybrid Muse* (2001) is the first—and...

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