

Exception

Introduction

Cécile Girardin



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/4133>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.4133

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Electronic reference

Cécile Girardin, « Exception », *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 43.1 | 2020, Online since 30 October 2020, connection on 09 November 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/4133> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.4133>

This text was automatically generated on 9 November 2020.



Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Exception

Introduction

Cécile Girardin

- 1 Common wisdom expressed in the phrase “the exception confirms the rule” encapsulates the peculiar status of exception: both an oddity and a foil to a source of authority, both a stand-alone, one-of-a-kind object of awe, and an empty vessel waiting to be ascribed meaning. In the field of political science, the “state of exception,” though inherent to all human organizations, has routinely become synonymous with counterterrorism, which threatens the law and human rights in the name of “the idea that only exceptional measures can deal with enemies on whom state violence should be able to fall without limits” (Mbembe 2016, 49; my translation).¹ In the field of arts, exception, although it does not bear the inflexible stamp of the law, connotes individual achievement in need of official recognition. In some cases, an artistic exception conjures up the unconventional and the eccentric, calling for legitimacy and incorporation into a canon; in others, it stands for genius and gains a particularly positive value in and of itself. Exception can then be viewed as central to the very idea of creation, where the author, if s/he wants to be heard, needs to be singular and out-of-step.
- 2 Trying to grasp the full scope of such an elusive concept has been the focus of the nine authors of the following essays. Exception proves to be a particularly potent concept to make sense of the innovative content and form of postcolonial literature, combined as it is with a thematic obsession with politics, especially the politics of exceptional measures to be seen in wars, insurrections, revolutions, terrorist actions. Postcolonial writing has always been concerned with the outside, the socio-political contexts, and, by excavating what used to be excluded in history books, it has contributed to the making of a historiographical corpus. This awareness is acute throughout this issue, with all authors strongly engaged in a reflexion on the tension between language and its democratic potential in the face of domination, not to say tyranny.
- 3 Proposing to explore the functioning of the notion of exception in postcolonial literature involves paying attention to the political and the poetic formations at work. The essays by David Waterman, Bhawana Jain and Sabine Lauret pay due respect to the

dark, threatening rule of dehumanization introduced by states of exception. A situation central to decolonization wars and the establishment of postcolonial societies, the state of exception turns democracy into a mode of government to be questioned. As Mbembe's argument has it, the colony remains the nocturnal side of democracy, "hiding a primordial and foundational void, the law that has its origins in lawlessness and which institutes itself as law, out of the law" (2016, 42; my translation).² Those essays are followed by five others that explore the many ways in which poetic exception enables the emergence and the construction of self in postcolonial contexts. Alice Michel, Laura Singeot, Elsa Lorphelin, Cédric Courtois and André Dodeman address the creativity of artists who either are considered marginal or view themselves as exceptions, writing against the grain of received literary traditions and genres.

- 4 David Waterman studies *Snuffing Out the Moon* (2017), a novel by Pakistani writer Osama Siddique, which traces four millennia of South Asian history through the prism of movement, migration, expulsion, and exodus. The state of exception, rather than being temporary or exceptional, seems to be a permanent means to consolidate power. Drawing on Agamben and Schmitt, the article shows that emergency measures to which the sovereign resorts contribute to blur the border between what is legal and what is not.
- 5 Similarly, Chris Cleave's novel *The Other Hand* (2008) features refugees as dehumanized through legitimate power and violence, in the "zone of non-being" that is the refugee detention camp set in England. Bhawana Jain focuses her analyses on the African protagonist, triply relegated to the margins as a woman, refugee and teenager. Bordering on the idea of "Homo Sacer," she is at risk in both her homeland and her hostland, but the novel eventually outlines new forms of relationality and reciprocity across the boundaries of race, gender and class.
- 6 A novel that chronicles the action of Bengali nationalist civilians during the 1971 War of Independence that led to the genocide of hundreds of thousands of people, *A Golden Age* (2007) by Thamima Anam invites the reader into the lives of women. The novel filters exceptional political conditions (cancelled elections, religious, ethnic and gendered violence) through the mundane, and retrieves people's memories of a time of collective frenzy. In this story of an exceptional generation coming of age with political exception, Sabine Lauret-Taft chooses to read the protagonist's destiny as an allegory for nation-building and resistance in Bangladesh, as she reclaims her body, her status as mother and woman, and her ability to make herself and other women heard.
- 7 Alice Michel addresses the exceptionality of Mary Fortune (1833–1909) on multiple levels. An adventuress and writer born in Ireland who travelled the world and followed the gold rush in Australia, her unconventional work as a journalist and author of fiction was excluded from literary history before being recently excavated and reassessed. The article addresses "Twenty-Six Years Ago," an autobiographical account of her experience in the goldfields, and of writing in the colonial era in a way that was not consistent with the idea of womanhood that prevailed at the time.
- 8 Laura Singeot explores how Alan Duff (*Once Were Warriors*, 1990) and Mudrooroo (*Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, 1991) craft their narratives as exceptions to Western constructs of ethnicity. By rejecting filiation in a literal sense (in these stories, fathers are eminently crossed out and rejected) in favour of affiliation, as theorized by Edward Said, the novels depict the emergence of a self that is neither Westernized nor assigned to Indigenous stereotyping.

- 9 Pondering on the apparent exceptionality of the short story in Anita Desai's oeuvre, Elsa Lorphelin shows how three stories from her collection *Diamond Dust* (2000) widely borrow from other genres (tragedy, fairy tale and fantasy) in order to deconstruct them and appropriate them for her own purposes, thereby opening up new interpretative horizons for the short story, a genre generally known as unstable. The article explores the narrative techniques that enable the author to trivialize the tragedy, subvert the fairytale and make Otherness a central and unifying concept, thus making the so-called Western genres universal.
- 10 In a similar play on Western literary codes, Cédric Courtois argues that the Nigerian war novel *Burma Boy* (2007), by Biyi Bandele, adopts the genre of the Bildungsroman to deconstruct it in a most effective way. Picturing the Burma campaign during the Second World War when Nigerian soldiers were sent as cannon fodder, the narrative rewrites history from the point of view of the marginalized, exceptional child soldier from the colonies gone mad. This narrative approach undercuts the idea of writing from a unique, unified, stable point of view.
- 11 Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* (1959), which focuses on a dislocated community in need of social and spiritual reconstruction in the interior of British Columbia, is exceptional because it resists formal categories. André Dodeman demonstrates how Watson's modern experimentation with language (the highly condensed syntax and the prevalence of prose poetry, in particular) makes the text stand out from the realist tradition of the first half of the twentieth century. Watson produced a text obsessed with the inability to communicate, without ever lamenting on or even pointing at the particulars of ethnic origins. Thus she manages to draw universal meaning from a marginal community and finally suggests the possibility of new beginnings and cultural transformation.
- 12 Looking at postcolonial writing through the prism of exception, one is struck by the democratic potential of writing: in the very act of writing the exception, whether it is political or intimate, lies the ability for the subaltern to lose his/her status of subaltern, as Gayatri Spivak would have it. Every subject of modernity depicted in the works under scrutiny seems to embark on such a liberating journey once the act of speaking out is made possible. Speaking, or writing for that matter, enables one to be wrested out of one's own singularity, and to become the third person that is the characteristic feature of fiction. As the arrangement of the essays suggests, the shift from exception to its adjectival development, the exceptional, marks the *raison d'être* of fiction, the source of its particular value: "Literature is this existence that does not let itself be distinguished from what it demonstrates, and must, therefore, continually repeat this demonstration. It must constantly produce something exceptional, and it can only do it with common material" (Rancièrè 2004,191; my translation).³

BIBLIOGRAPHY

MBEMBE, Achille. 2016. *Politiques de l'inimitié*. Paris: La Découverte.

RANCIÈRE, Jacques. 2004. *Aux bords du politique*. 1998. Paris: Gallimard.

NOTES

1. "l'idée selon laquelle seules des mesures exceptionnelles peuvent venir à bout d'ennemis sur lesquels devrait pouvoir s'abattre sans retenue la violence de l'Etat."
 2. "Cette face nocturne cache un vide primordial et fondateur, la loi qui trouve son origine dans le non-droit et qui s'institue en tant que loi hors la loi."
 3. "[L]a littérature est l'existence qui ne se laisse pas distinguer de sa démonstration et doit, par conséquent, répéter continuellement cette démonstration. Elle doit constamment faire de l'exceptionnel et elle ne peut le faire qu'avec du banal."
-

AUTHOR

CÉCILE GIRARDIN

Université Sorbonne Paris Nord

Cécile Girardin is a Senior Lecturer at the Université Sorbonne Paris Nord. She has published numerous articles on South Asian fiction and non-fiction (Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Hamid Mohsin, V.S. Naipaul, among others) and edited *Continuité, classicisme, conservatisme dans les littératures postcoloniales* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013).