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Place and Placelessness in Postcolonial Short Fiction: Introduction

Claire Omhové and Pascale Tollance

The unprecedented development of the short story in the literatures that emerged in the former colonies of the British Empire has by now become a well-researched literary fact. Postcolonial critics have teased out the relationships between a genre long regarded as a minor one (at least before its Modernist canonization) and the marginal positions of writers who came to the short story as a creative terrain to experiment with spatial compression and the startling insights it affords, from Joyce's "scrupulous meanness" to Gordimer's "flash of fireflies." In postcolonial literatures – using the plural is the least one can do to call attention to the multiple realities the field comprises – the short story seemed a genre well suited to the expression of minor voices. The perspectives of the disenfranchised (all the more so when they were women, children or marginal individuals) came to embody different forms of subjugation in spaces striated by the political and geographical lines inherited from the colonial past. In the context of the colonial appropriation of indigenous places, the short story has also been claimed as a privileged site for questioning the erasure of toponyms, nomadic routes, sacred grounds and the sense of place that pre-colonial forms of spatiality sustained. An interest in the archaeology of place is thus recurrent in postcolonial short fiction, where it meets with an interest in the successive forms of displacement and replacement that put a strain on the articulation between space and place in postcolonial contexts.

Against the encroaching development of "non-places" (as described, famously, by Marc Augé), the short story can be regarded as a site of resistance with its particular ability to inscribe places, but also a space in-between where language relates place through the specialization of a common, international language. English as a world language can then become reinvented as place-specific through subtle forms of localisation that enable recognition and territorialisation. But the desire to reclaim place may also actively involve placelessness rather than reject it. Placelessness is then not to be

conceived as the negation of place, but as a disruptive force that challenges the fiction of stability and property, “a shuffling of pretences to the proper” – “*un piétinement à travers les semblants du propre*” in the words of Michel de Certeau (1984, Chapter VII, *Walking in the City*; 1990, 156). This “making it strange” of place posits place as the product of constantly shifting relations and exposes the fiction according to which place could be disengaged from its inscription in a signifying process. Placelessness thus reinstates the possibility of a becoming of place, place as event, not least through the mapping of a place of enunciation.

Short fiction, with its limited length, does not only steer clear of the totalizing temptation of narrative, but often builds itself around an event, something that takes place and yet cannot necessarily be traced, circumscribed or fixed. Compression and formal tightness also challenge realistic protocols and question the illusion of verisimilitude that fiction may yield. This opens cracks, fissures in the referential process, or interstices between well-bounded territories where meaning is allowed to circulate. Whether we connect this with *difference* and dissemination (Jacques Derrida, Homi Bhabha) or with indifference (Jacques Rancière), placelessness is at the heart of a process of reconfiguration or reinvention that is made all the easier by the plasticity of short fiction and a “lack” of definition that turns it into a privileged field of experimentation. As it asserts the need to revisit places, the postcolonial short story can be seen as claiming the inevitability of place (place as “inevitable,” as “*incontournable*” in the words of Edouard Glissant) whilst preventing it from becoming a territory – a fine example of what Glissant calls “open islands”; “*îles ouvertes*” (1996, 44).

What happens to these aspects when set in relation to the transformations postcolonial studies are now undergoing as a field of investigation disrupted by dynamics that conjugate the global and the local, challenging national and regional borders as well as the identity formations they buttress? A historical tendency in postcolonial studies has been to give pride of place to critiques of approaches judged to be dominated by Western thought and, instead, to emphasize the reach of the social transformations literature reflects and inspires. The present collection found its inception in our need, as readers and critics, for a complementary course of interpretation, one that gives full consideration to the aesthetic dimension of the entanglement of place and placelessness in the genre under consideration.

Avoiding a geographical grouping was also deliberate on our part to preserve the broad comparatist approach that has been a hallmark of postcolonial studies from their inception to the present day, even as the field increasingly shifts in response to the circulation of diasporic, transnational and transcultural currents in parallel to the renaissance of indigenous forms of art among which storytelling and story writing play vital roles. Out of these diverse approaches, three overarching concerns emerge: the first one is related to “the placeless place before the mind’s appropriation” (McKay 2001, 21) to which writers return, sometimes to counter the effects of historical displacements, and more generally to push back the limits of identifiable locations so as to assert the world-making power of storytelling. In their attempt to retrieve what maps erase or fail to inscribe, stories often end up building a space for secret places – mental or physical – which become both impossible to negate and impossible to locate. Another line of investigation owes much to Doreen Massey’s conception of place as “thrown together,” a constellation of relations and trajectories (2005, 151) that make it

possible to address the fragmented histories of movement and flight found in so many of the stories discussed in this issue. Placelessness then becomes key in challenging the temptation to lock things into place and instrumental in shifting the focus from place that “is” to place that “takes place.” Finally, a third trend ponders the effects of the political oppression and cultural dispossession undergone by the aboriginal populations of settler colonies like Canada and Australia. In both countries, a new generation of indigenous writers is presently thinking anew the ties between story and territory, and the communities that come into being when broken ties can be restored.

Despite their markedly different perspectives, these approaches sometimes come together or overlap. The search for a virgin, original place that was lost at some point in a personal or collective history can be deemed to betray a fantasy that sometimes needs to be given up along the road. At the same time most stories underline that although they may be irretrievable, some places are real enough: loss, suffering and trauma have left a mark somewhere or point to a traceless trace which the stories try to accommodate. What becomes most important then is to preserve this placeless place, to leave room for the unsayable or for what remains unsaid even as one speaks – something for which the short story continues to be a particularly apt form. The art of the fragment also happens to be an ideal tool to track down the events – major upheavals or minor fractures – that suddenly turn the familiar into the strange, upset landmarks and reshape landscapes. The maps we draw are shown to be provisional, the places we inhabit defined by what takes or does not “take” place and placelessness becomes a name for the impossibility of thinking place independently from time. Rather than marking a spot that can never be (fully) retrieved, placelessness may thus foster a dynamic movement in search of these places that never take on a permanent form and that are always in front of us as much as behind us. Remembering Deleuze and Guattari’s insistence that the main question raised by the short story is “what happened / took place,” the very elusiveness of the short story becomes an ideal means of foregrounding placelessness not as the result of loss but as a defining characteristic of the event. The obliqueness of the short story, an art often considered to be closer to poetry than to prose, involves in its turn a displacement which cannot be reduced to a replacement (of one word / one mode by another), but an open-ended process. This includes the fable or the allegory, a mode to which the short story has often proved very partial and which some consider inevitable in postcolonial fiction: against the notion that this poetic mode helps secure the meaning of the text, some writers can be seen to use the “*allon*” of the allegory to set in motion what cannot entirely be placed or made to stand still.

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