

Book Reviews

The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry

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Poetry, because it has lines created by breaks in addition to grammatical sentences, draws attention to form more than other literary genres do. A poem relies on the reader's familiarity with past forms even when it self-consciously creates its own. The reader of *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry* will note the volume is organized into three sections, highlighting and exploiting the tension between the two parts of its subject: postcolonial and poetry. The term *postcolonial* has always done two kinds of work. On the one hand, it brings together literary production from those parts of the world that have the English language as a colonial heritage but are not at the center of literary studies in the United States (India, Africa, the Caribbean, Australia, Canada), and thus it replaces the terms *Commonwealth* or *world literature written in English*. On the other hand, *postcolonial* has a political charge those older terms did not and suggests that what matters about those parts of the world is their historical difference from the traditional canon. The conflation of the regional with the political-historical means that the *Companion* is less about the poems themselves than about literary history and the larger story told about poetry. This is inevitable, and the dual nature of the definition is something faced by the *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* as well. The imprecision of the fit between the geographic and political has always been productive.

The conflation of the geographic with the political-historical means that the only Australian and Canadian poetry considered here is by indigenous or diasporan writers: African Canadian (G. E. Clarke, Brand, Philip) and Asian Canadian (Chinese, Japanese). Michael Ondaatje, born in Sri Lanka, also qualifies. The political definition also means that Black British poets have a chapter of their own, although there is no discussion of Native American, African American, or ethnic American poets. This is a *Companion to Poetry by Racialized Poets in English outside the United States plus Twentieth-Century Irish Poets*. There is no room for South African poetry by whites or indeed by Coloureds or Indians (though there is for Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, the English-born Kenyan poet, and for James K. Baxter, the pakeha poet engaged with Maori language and forms). But the conceptual and even political awkwardness of the category of "postcolonial poetry" is familiar to us all, and as I said, frames are necessary.

The first half of the *Companion* reflects the cartographic impulse of the postcolonial and devotes chapters to each of the regions where English-language poetry

is produced outside the United States. The second half of the volume has more thematic chapters organized in two sections, one addressing large questions of form (modernism, experimentalism, orality) and the other questions of content (gender, globalism), or, if one prefers, one about questions proper to poetry and the other about the world in poetry and poetry in the world. The editor, Jahan Ramazani, has instructed the contributors of regional surveys to consider how well the political connotations of the term *postcolonial* apply in each case. The term has one meaning in Africa, where Oyeniki Okunoye notes that the poetic speaker commonly “assumes the voice of a representative of the group,” and another in India where, as Laetitia Zecchini says, poets “are not concerned with writing back to the West or writing for Bangladesh, India, or Pakistan, only with honing their voice and their modernity.” Justin Quinn’s article on Irish poetry says provocatively that ghosts haunt all kinds of poetry, not just by the colonized and, in order to take into account Eavan Boland and Paul Muldoon, the term *transnational* is a better fit than *postcolonial*. But all terms will have limits, inexactitudes, and elisions, including the term *Irish*. Even as they limit, the terms of literary history make understandings possible.

The Caribbean and its diaspora in Canada and Britain occupy the center of the *Companion* because they best fit the political connotations of the “postcolonial”: the language of the West Indian poets is the most marked as different from standard English and always implies some relation to the spoken language of the folk. In Africa and even more in South Asia, by contrast, to write poetry in English implies an elite relation to literature. Not surprisingly, therefore, at the center of postcolonial poetry are Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott, each discussed in six of the *Companion*’s chapters. The scholar-contributors are quick to deny that the two poets constitute a binary, between orality and literacy, folk and elite, local and global, but the force field that they have created is inescapable. Brathwaite is associated with nation-language, but also Sycorax video style, an idiosyncratic attempt to make typeface and layout as transgressive and original as written creolized English; Walcott is frequently credited with defining the subject matter of the postcolonial. I find more surprising, given their limited output and range, that Louise Bennett and Linton Kwesi Johnson (LKJ), both born in Jamaica, are as prominent as they are: each figures in no less than five chapters. Nathan Suhr-Syrtsma tells how Bennett and LKJ had to overcome resistance to have their work accepted as poetry, but the real story, it seems to me, is how notions of poetry have been redrawn to put squarely in the center words shaped for oral performance. It seems obvious to Suhr-Syrtsma that Bennett and LKJ were always poets even when not recognized as such, but that obviousness is retrospective and depends on the changing definition of *poetry*. Postcolonial poetry needs Bennett and LKJ, who spoke to audiences much larger than written poetry does, audiences that could even be imagined as extensive with the nation, in her case, or a generation, in his. Had they not existed they would have had to be invented. *Poetry*, like *postcolonial*, is a context-dependent and ideologically charged word.

The emphasis on the “postcolonial” steers the attention of the *Companion* to the generation of poets who, like Walcott and Brathwaite, began their careers as their nations achieved independence. They are the ones who defined the field and have had the most direct relation to colonialism. There is no discussion of the new African poets

published by Kwame Dawes and Chris Abani or the new wave of young West Indian poets. But Ramazani seems to have instructed his contributors to avoid long lists, and that is all to the good. Instead, almost all of the contributors focus on a select number of cases to make a limited number of points. This does wonders for readability.

Laurence Breiner usefully redefines Caribbean poetry as poets who have read and cite one another, noting that Walcott invented the West Indian tradition because he was the first to mention another West Indian poet (George Campbell) in a poem. Later St. Lucians, such as Kendel Hippolyte, carry echoes of Walcott. By that definition, there is no such thing as postcolonial poetry, for poets from Africa do not read those from India. Jeet Thayil's recent novel, *The Book of Chocolate Saints*, about the first generation of English-language poets in Bombay, makes clear that Indian poetry is also a tradition in Breiner's sense. Thayil's novel even includes an appearance by Bruce King, the American critic of Indian poetry and Commonwealth literature! The equivalent in this *Companion* is the way most of the contributors acknowledge the central role in the field of Ramazani himself. If postcolonial poetry does exist, Ramazani is the red thread running through it.

The picture of postcolonial poetry in the *Companion* brings to the fore the tie to landscape. In Pacific poetry islands, routes, and a land-sea nexus make us visualize the nature of connections among poets, people, and ideas in a new way. This is clearly of relevance to the Caribbean as well. Not surprisingly, cities (especially Bombay) figure prominently in South Asian poetry and universities in African poetry. I had sensed the relation of postcolonial poetry to modernism, but the *Companion* made me see it more clearly. Robert Stilling has a very suggestive chapter on multicentric modernism, about reconceiving literary history, and Robert Wilson defines Oceania poetry against colorless postmodernism, which is cut off from history and full of irony. Yeats, Pound, and Eliot loom large in this volume. *Modernism* as a term, of course, has the same problems as *postcolonial*, and one might ask why we need to make modernism global, but literary history requires such terms, and as much as they can distort they also reveal.

One could, of course, imagine a different organization, say, one that devoted chapters to diasporas instead of to regions. An organization that devoted chapters to different forms—the elegy, the epic, the speaker's voice, rhyme, ekphrasis, orthography, the poetic line—would tell us more about what is proper to poetry. Stephen Burt's chapter on form in poetry, about how poetic form echoes political form in Singapore or how written poetry in English wrestles to escape all the connotations of Europe built into it, suggests what might be done along these lines. But, as poetry itself teaches us, even if different frames are possible, a frame is necessary. The limits a frame imposes is what make things possible. I learned things from this *Companion* and anyone will.

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