Nadia Butt, Alexander Scherr, Ansgar Nünning (eds.)

The Anglophone Novel in the Twenty-First Century

Cultural Contexts – Literary Developments – Model Interpretations

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A companion volume to *The British Novel in the Twenty-First Century* (2018) and *The American Novel in the 21st Century* (2019), the present handbook of *The Anglophone Novel in the Twenty-First Century* aims to establish a decidedly transnational and global perspective on the contemporary Anglophone novel. In addition to offering frameworks for theorising Anglophone literature (postcolonial studies, world literary studies, new sociological approaches, and more), the handbook surveys (trans)cultural contexts of Anglophone fiction, literary responses to global concerns, and new novelistic forms as well as transformations of established genres.

As the editors of a handbook that places the contemporary Anglophone novel in the context of salient global concerns, we cannot help recalling that the contours of this project began to take shape in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. The reality of this event reaffirmed our intuition that a broader account of the 21st-century novel must address the global interconnections that inform our cultural situation today, demanding us to consider literature beyond the framework of the nation state. Although it is the third and final part of a trilogy of handbooks, the present volume is not a handbook of the 'rest' of the Anglophone literary world but an attempt to develop new ways of reading novels that encourage a transcultural and planetary mindset.

Considering how the global pandemic and other serious crises have impacted the collaborative work on this handbook, we are all the more grateful to several people who have helped to bring the project to fruition. First of all, our sincere thanks go to all our authors for contributing significant work on different aspects of the contemporary Anglophone novel that, taken together, add up to a multifaceted account of the novel's many forms and functions. Moreover, we are indebted to Maureen Schwarz, Lucia Toman, and Marvel Yassa for assisting the editorial process. Last but not least, we thank Dr. Erwin Otto and his team for publishing this volume in the WVT handbooks series.

Giessen, July 2023
Nadia Butt, Alexander Scherr & Ansgar Nünning

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I. The Contemporary Anglophone Novel in Theory

1.

Fictions of Transculturality in an Age of Global Connectivity: The Anglophone Novel in the Twenty-First Century

Alexander Scherr, Nadia Butt & Ansgar Nünning

1. Introduction: New Cultural Concerns and Novel Forms

This handbook is a companion volume to *The British Novel in the Twenty-First Century* (Nünning & Nünning 2018a) and *The American Novel in the 21st Century* (Basseler & Nünning 2019a), which have already been published in the WVT handbooks series. Given its position as the third and final volume of this trilogy, some readers might surmise that the present volume covers 'the rest' of the English-speaking literary world – those literatures in English that are neither British nor American and that used to be (and are sometimes still) referred to as 'Commonwealth literatures', 'new English literatures', or 'postcolonial literatures'.

However, we conceive of 'Anglophone literature', our preferred choice of term, differently. Even though the corpus of novels assembled in this handbook is partly in correspondence with the previous labels, we aim to conceptualise our object in a way that differs from the 20th-century discourses in which the above notions originate. As Brian McHale reminds us: "If literary-historical 'objects' […] are constructed, not given or found, then the issue of *how* such objects are constructed, in particular the genre of discourse *in which* they are constructed, becomes crucial" (1992: 3). Paying heed to this constructivist lesson, we readily acknowledge that the concepts of new English and postcolonial literatures are productive in specific contexts. Yet, we are convinced that our theoretical position is distinct from the historical situation at the end of the 20th century when postcolonial studies consolidated itself as an academic discipline, and that Anglophone literature can therefore no longer be construed today in exactly the same way.

One way of approximating this changed situation is to start with the observation that the 21st century has been characterised by "[p]ervasive cultural, political, and technological changes" that "have created radically new contexts and predicaments for narratives" (Baumbach & Neumann 2019b: 3). While literary texts have always responded to pressing cultural concerns of their time, the 21st century has witnessed numerous crises that have a new quality insofar as they reveal our embeddedness in a 'mesh' of global interconnections (cf. Morton 2010). Whether it is the war in Ukraine or the concomitant energy crisis, climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic, terrorism or Islamophobia, mass migration or the so-called 'refugee crisis', Brexit or the 2007-2008 finan-

cial crisis, there is no denying the fact that socio-political as well as ecological transformations profoundly affect people's lives all over the globe, though they do so in uneven ways.

These large-scale transformations are vividly reflected in 21st-century Anglophone novels. Over the last two decades, the Anglophone novel has been examined under the rubrics of 'fictions of migration' (Sommer 2001), 'Black Atlantic literature' (Eckstein 2006), 'new Literatures in English' (Sarkowsky & Schulze-Engler 2012), the 'geopolitical novel', the 'digital migrant novel', and the 'world novel' (Irr 2014), novels of transcultural memory' (Butt 2015), the 'postcolonial novel' (Quayson 2016a), 'multicultural and transnational novels' (Howells, Sharrad & Turcotte 2017), the novel as 'planetary form' (Keith 2018), literatures of the 'Global South' (West-Pavlov 2018; Gremels et al. 2022), and 'narratives of the new diasporas' (Alonso Alonso & Fernández-Melleda 2022). Some conceptualisations of contemporary Anglophone fiction specifically relate to salient 21st-century global concerns, including 'Anthropocene fiction' (Trexler 2015; Vermeulen 2020; Caracciolo 2021), 'oil fictions' (Balkan & Nandi 2021), 'pandemic fiction' (Däwes 2021) and narratives of 'virus anxiety' (Schmitz 2021), the 'neoliberal novel' (Huehls & Greenwald Smith 2017), and global narratives of the 'war on terror' (Frank & Malreddy 2020), to name but a few. These publications do not only suggest that it is productive to examine how cultural concerns give rise to new forms in Anglophone fiction – a connection to which the present handbook attaches great significance. They also support our assumption that the most pressing challenges of our age are global concerns, urging us to consider Anglophone literature in a transnational, planetary perspective.

This shift in perspective is encouraged by recent developments in literary and cultural theory. A case in point is the mobility turn in the humanities or the 'new mobilities paradigm' (cf. Ette 2003; Cresswell 2006; Sheller & Urry 2006; Merriman & Pearce 2017). Research in this emerging area invites us to pay attention to different kinds of mobilities – political, cultural, individual – as well as restrictions of mobility. Mobilities come in various forms that concern the movement of both human and non-human actors. In this context, the phenomenon of migration and the key role of migrant writers in contemporary literary production deserve further scrutiny (see section 2). However, in addition to the various kinds of travel undertaken by Anglophone writers, the mobility turn also urges scholars to consider literary texts as "objects that do a lot of traveling" (Dimock 1997: 1061). In a global perspective, the "migration of books" (Walkowitz 2006: 529) is shaped by translation, the book market, reading technologies (print and digital), and several other social processes that turn Anglophone novels into travelling objects while rendering the entire field of Anglophone fiction as a surprisingly mobile formation without clear-cut borders. Therefore, any attempt to define contemporary Anglophone fiction must come to terms with the fundamentally transcultural, transnational, and translocal ways in which literature presents itself to us today.

Acknowledging the challenges of defining Anglophone fiction, we offer a way of locating contemporary writing in the interconnected world of the 21st century in sec-

tion 2 by conceptualising Anglophone novels as 'fictions of transculturality' which can be read on various scales. In section 3, we aim to situate our approach to the Anglophone novel more explicitly in the landscape of contemporary theory, introducing postcolonial studies and world literary studies as two disciplines that provide helpful frameworks for understanding the Anglophone novel as a global form. With regard to the disputes and tensions that characterise the relationship of these two disciplines, we advocate a collaborative spirit, proposing that each discipline stands to gain something from the other. We conclude with a concise summary of the handbook's main objectives and an overview of the chapters (section 4).

2. Locating Anglophone Writing: Anglophone Novels as 'Fictions of Transculturality'

The notion of the 'Anglophone' is, in many regards, an elusive and fuzzy term. Sharing this impression, Rebecca L. Walkowitz claims that "it has become […] difficult to assert with confidence that we know what literature in English is" (2006: 529). She goes on to specify several facets of this problem, mentioning migration as one crucial factor: "Anglophone works of immigrant fiction are not always produced in an Anglophone country; some immigrant fictions produced in an Anglophone country are not originally Anglophone; and some do not exist in any language at all." (Ibid.) Walkowitz's point is that migrant writers – those authors "who have belonged or who continue to belong to more than one nation, region, or state and who now participate in a literary system that is different from the system in which they were born, educated, or first published" (ibid.: 533) – trouble the boundaries of where the Anglophone novel begins and where it ends. Since the role of such writers in 21st-century literary production is anything but marginal, it would not be particularly productive to reserve the notion of Anglophone literature only for those authors who are based outside of Britain and the United States. Nor would we gain much by studying Anglophone literature only in the terms of 'immigrant fiction', that is, as a subgenre of British and US-American national literatures that "involves books generated by immigrant populations" (ibid.).

To exemplify some of the complexities that are involved in the construction of Anglophone literature, let us consider the place of Bernardine Evaristo in the present volume, in which her novel *Soul Tourists* (2005) is examined by Nadia Butt and Michelle Stork. Evaristo also features in the companion volume on *The British Novel in the Twenty-First Century* (see the chapter by Birgit Neumann therein) and there are indeed several good reasons for discussing her as a Black *British* writer: she was born in London in 1959 and many of her novels cover themes that are hallmark features of British 'fictions of migration' (cf. Sommer 2001) or 'Black British literature' (cf. Stein 2004; Dawson 2007). Yet, Evaristo's works resist a focus on an "insular Britain" (Gustar 2015: 434) and are "deeply invested in reevaluating the transcultural and interconnecting histories of Europe, the UK, Nigeria, and the Caribbean in the context of the Black

Atlantic, the history of transatlantic migrations, and the largely unacknowledged black presence in European history" (ibid.). While she appears in the company of writers such as Ian McEwan, Zadie Smith, Nick Hornby, and Hilary Mantel in the companion volume on the British novel, Evaristo's literature is considered in the present handbook alongside work by Chinese-born British novelist Xiaolu Guo, Zimbabwean writer Valerie Tagwira, Waanyi (Aboriginal Australian) novelist Alexis Wright, Indian author Aravind Adiga, South African novelist Zakes Mda, Jamaican writer Marlon James, and Anishinaabe (Canadian First Nations) writer Waubgeshig Rice, to name but a few. It is also discussed next to writers whose biography is entirely shaped by migration (Shani Mootoo was born in Dublin to Trinidadian parents, grew up in Trinidad, and later relocated to Canada) and authors who hold more than one citizenship (J. M. Coetzee was born in South Africa but also became an Australian citizen in 2006).

This might seem like a heterogeneous cast of authors. However, what the novels of these authors have in common is that they can be read as examples of what we propose to call 'fictions of transculturality' – literary works that emphasise global transactions beyond the borders of the nation state. This does not mean that national, regional, or local concerns do not play a role in these novels – far from it. But the novels under consideration also invite a global and planetary perspective which exerts some pressure on the national boxes in which literature has often been placed (the British novel, the Nigerian novel, the Indian novel, the US-American novel, etc.). In other words, these works articulate both global *and* local, that is, 'glocal' concerns (cf. Robertson 1995; see also Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2012). Indeed, Anglophone novels such as Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) or Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009) can be understood as 'glocal novels' (cf. Kiczkowski 2016; Neumann 2019), since the local and the global not only converge and coalesce within their storylines, but the novels become an alternative archive, unfolding new ways of preserving and writing global narratives in fiction.

A brief look at the representation of Pate Island in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's novel *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) may serve to exemplify this idea. A Kenyan island in the Lamu Archipelago in the Indian Ocean, Pate Island is introduced in the text in the following way:

> To cross the vast ocean to their south, water-chasing dragonflies with forebears in Northern India had hitched a ride on a sedate "in-between seasons" morning wind, one of the monsoon's introits, the *matlai*. One day in 1992, four generations later, under dark-purplish-blue clouds, these fleeting beings settled on the mangrove-fringed southwest coast of a little girl's island. The *matlai* conspired with a shimmering full moon to charge the island, its fishermen, prophets, traders, seamen, seawomen, healers, shipbuilders, dreamers, tailors, madmen, teachers, mothers, and fathers with a fretfulness that mirrored the slow-churning turquoise sea. (Owuor 2020 [2019]: 1)

Although the setting is presented as "a little girl's island" – that is, the Kenyan birthplace of the protagonist Ayaana, who will later embark on a journey that takes her to China, Turkey, and back to Kenya – the novel emphasises from the first paragraph that Pate Island is entangled with other parts of the globe. Not only are its non-human inhabitants,