

FLORIAN SEDLMEIER

Rereading Literary Form: Paratexts, Transpositions, and Postethnic Literature around 2000

The article observes the persistency of the paradigm of cultural or communal representativeness as a politics of reading that defines the discourses of U.S. ethnic and postcolonial studies. Historically, the focus on the literary representation of communal identity scripts and subject positions can be conceived as an effect of a professional cultural economy, which derives from the institutionalization of multiculturalism during the late 1980s and early 1990s. I diagnose the need for a methodology that enables a comparison of contemporary literary texts, which articulate gestures of resistance to this particular professional cultural economy through a self-reflective investment in literary form. Some literary texts by writers such as Sherman Alexie, Jamaica Kincaid, or Chang-rae Lee defy the prevalent classifications by accumulating literary capital and by producing textual effects that continue to irritate critics. Initiating a self-conscious play upon their being marked and marketed as ethnic texts, they carve out a postethnic literary space. This space is characterized by a collision of the ascribed subject positions with self-fashioned authorial gestures, which are expressed through what I call intermedial transpositions that, in turn, contest the paratextual framings of multicultural discourse from within.

The essay commences with the reading of a short literary manifesto by Native American writer Sherman Alexie, which critically negotiates the conditions of marking and marketing texts as ethnic. These processes of being marked and marketed as ethnic are proliferated by the paratextual framing of the anthology where the text has been published. Instead, the literary prose piece reclaims a postethnic authorship and charts a distinct postethnic literary space by means of an investment in a range of intertextual and intermedial allusions. Literary form thus functions less in terms of a rewriting of a set of stereotypical tropes of Indianness but rather as a means of positioning oneself from within and against the paradigm of

communal representativeness, which critically refashions these tropes of subjectivity and their circulation as distinct cultural capital.

Based upon this reading, I develop a methodological framework that facilitates the theorization of a postethnic literary space that texts by Alexie, Kincaid, and Lee spell out.

A short discourse analysis traces the persistency of the paradigm of cultural representativeness back to the academic institutionalization of multiculturalism and postcolonial studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Interestingly, this process of institutionalization is accompanied by a focus on conceptual metaphors of displaced cultural identity such as hybridity. While this may seem like a paradox, it is important to note that discourses of difference necessarily operate with a circular logic of differentiation, dedifferentiation and redifferentiation of identity scripts and subject positions, a logic that informs modes of critique such as strategic essentialism. As inevitable as this strategy might be for a cultural politics, it runs the risk of ascribing such a specific politics to a literary text and of confusing subject positions and authorial gestures – a deliberate strategy that can be designated as autobiographical fallacy.

In my methodological reassessment, the notion of the paratext – conceived with Gérard Genette as a contract not only of authorship but also of genre – is motivated as a critical concept for analyzing the discursive framing of multicultural and postcolonial literatures. A conglomerate of practices and institutions produces a professional cultural economy whose function as a paratext regulates receptive protocols. The autobiographical fallacy is the major reading pattern in this respect: the blurring of subject positions and formally expressed authorial gestures ultimately collapses contracts of authorship and contracts of genre, thereby producing ethnic and postcolonial literatures alongside the paradigm of communal representativeness. It is from within and against these paratextually instantiated protocols that the postethnic literary space emerges and is negotiated.

While writers such as Alexie, Kincaid, or Lee insist on the differentiation between postethnic authorial gestures and ethnic subject positions, their texts produce this insistence through a substantial investment in artistic and literary capital, in a broad variety of intertexts and medial registers. Commonly, multicultural and postcolonial discourse conceives of such investments in terms of a politics of corrective rewriting – either as literary rivalries from within the respective community or as recodifications of intertexts and representational practices which are located outside the community. Against this communal notion of intertextuality, I propose Julia Kristeva's concept of transpositions of sign systems in order to map an intermedial postethnic literary poetics. On the one hand, the concept allows for grasping the dynamic configuration of various positions in the fields of culture and literature. It therefore describes the border position the writers reclaim for themselves by means of intertextual allusions. On the other hand, it accounts for reading the investment in artistic and literary forms from within and against

the paradigm of cultural representativeness and the politics of rewriting. The self-reflective transpositions that the texts under scrutiny perform and the effects these intermedial investments spawn are thus authorial gestures, which resist the paratextual demands of communal representation and produce the paradoxical desire for a postethnic literary presence that is expressed through and emerges from the exhaustion of intertextual allusions themselves. The coda of the article traces these processes in a reading of the final passage of Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, which I understand as a postethnic novella of the arts.

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