

Introduction: Genre in Africa

Tsitsi Jaji and Lily Saint

In this introduction to this special issue, “Genre and Africa,” Jaji and Saint theorize genre from the perspective of the African continent to explore how such an orientation necessarily interrogates and transforms previous understandings of genre. After a brief review of pivotal work in genre studies, the authors turn to Africa’s particular colonial and postcolonial predicaments to theorize the specific interventions to genre theory that such a vantage point affords. Interwoven are summaries and commentary upon the six essays included in the issue. The introduction then concludes by highlighting several new directions of genre study occasioned by this issue’s contents, including the rise of new media and renewed interest in the intersections of popular forms and affect studies.

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This special issue continues a scholarly conversation seeded in the recent issue on African science fiction edited by Moradewun Adejunmobi.¹ Where that issue delved into a genre primarily concerned with the future, technology, and what *new* (the novum) could come out of Africa, the essays in this collection pursue the implications of genre writing *per se* within the longer history of African cultural production. In recent years, genre has increasingly resurfaced as a key literary and cultural concern.²

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1 Moradewun Adejunmobi, “Introduction: Science Fiction,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3.3 (2016): 265–72.

2 “Special Topic: Remapping Genre,” *PMLA* 122.5 (2007); Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Jonathan Haynes, *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Yet, in the age of the mash-up, the hybrid form par excellence, what use is genre as a classificatory device that once safeguarded a vanished purity? Definitional unease distinguishes contemporary forays from previous models of genre theory that had gained authority precisely through their confidently universalist formulation and policing of genre boundaries (see works by Leavis and Empson³). Today's thinkers question instead whether genre is a cousin of form or mode, a mere marketing category, or the remainder of period formations like romanticism, modernism, and the like. In what we might call the *new genre studies*, there is a strong interest in loosening rather than codifying genre, a will to explore what attention to genre enables, or, to borrow Caroline Levine's turn of phrase, "what it affords." Gone is the version of genre studies preoccupied with Aristotelian classification; Northrup Frye's neoclassical distinctions are more likely to appear on a syllabus for the history of literary criticism than in a current methods course. Instead, the slipperiness of *genre* as a term enables new questions to arise, particularly in the postcolony.

Many contemporary African writers are working *around* rather than *against* genre's constraints. Such approaches are not without ample precedent; indeed, one might say that genre is the dilemma that drives the invention and development of African literature. Affective responses to history have long manifested themselves in, and in response to, generic forms. Genres of protest, *ressentiment*, ridicule and misrule, for instance, are particularly germane to the continent, and yet under-recognized in scholarship because these responses lie buried below the surface of generic convention, erupting like unpredictable landmines. For example, South African writer Motlalo celebrated genre's radical energies under apartheid, urging African writers to "pee, spit and shit on literary convention."⁴ Recent scholarship shows that far from contradictory, genre, politics, and play in the post-colony not only coexist but are, in fact, co-constitutive. As Leela Gandhi has shown, postcolonial queer writing, for instance, disrupts categories of biological filiation, unmasking the "self-confirming orderliness of imperial habitation" in pursuit of a "world without taxonomy."⁵ If for Frantz Fanon, the life of the colonist "is an epic. An odyssey," this special issue attends instead to the genres and anti-genres that elaborate postcolonial African experience.⁶

Levine's recent book challenges the perceived split between aesthetic formalist approaches (where form is taken to be a primary concern) and historicist and materialist approaches (where form is viewed as suspect and quietist), long a concern of African literary scholars. Her approach uncovers ways to expand "our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience."⁷ This split between the aesthetic and the sociopolitical has often manifested itself within African literary studies as an uneasy neglect of the former and a dutiful privileging of the latter, leaving both experimental and popular (not to mention

3 William Empson, *Some Versions of the Pastoral*. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1935); F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*. (London: Heffer, 1930).

4 Mutloatse, Motlalo, *Forced Landing: Africa South, Contemporary Writings* (Ravan Press, 1980), 5.

5 Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anti-Colonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 7.

6 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press), 201.

7 Levine, *Forms*, 3.

popular experimental) work on the margins of the field. Nevertheless, the work of Moradewun Adejunmobi, Karin Barber, Stephanie Newell, and others points toward a fresh examination of genre in African writing and media, as new kinds of texts demand new questions.

Local forms and genres often limn both popular and elitist spheres, escaping generic and world market demands, and Nollywood is perhaps the best known “new” (if one can claim such a thing after more than two decades) of the African genres that have important local purchase. But, as Olubukola Gbadegesin’s essay on Yoruba photoplays shows us, it is often possible to read backwards from a contemporary popular form to its local antecedents and to discover that such genealogies yield rich insights into earlier forms previously studied in different terms. Contemporary technological and digital inventions also contribute to generic intermediality and creativity with pre-existing forms, as Dina Ligaga and Carmela Garritano investigate in their essays here. On the one hand, Tzvetan Todorov has noted that genres are dynamic, often reshaped to fit local needs, metastasizing to generate new, relevant cultural epistemes.⁸ But such dynamism in Africa, as Karin Barber writes, is often as likely to reinforce “traditional” generic boundaries that are “continually consolidated through a series of departures from what already is.”⁹ What is proper to genre itself, and what distinguishes the African context? In his oft-cited essay, “The Law of Genre,” Algerian-born Jacques Derrida gleefully observes that genre theorists are prone to a sort of “terminological . . . rapture” or “taxonomic exuberance” as they go about their work delimiting generic boundaries.¹⁰ This special issue on “Genre in Africa,” however, embraces this rapturous abundance, because, as the essays collected here attest, cultural production on the African continent is proliferating and mutating in ways that far exceed European theoretical models of explanation. In its African incarnations, and in an era of ambivalence, genre expresses rebellion, more the artist’s tool of insurgency than the critic’s cuff of discipline.

In an African context, genre’s rapture lies in its potential to disrupt the very violences of classification at the core of colonial processes, as Sylvia Wynter’s work on “genres of human being” demonstrates.¹¹ Wynter’s thoroughgoing renovation of critical conceptions of the human turns to genre to account for the singular exclusions to which black bodies have historically been subject. She shows how Western intellectuals invented “new genres of being human” in the wake of the Renaissance shift from a Judeo-Christian to a hybrid religio-secular conception of “Man as the Rational Self and political subject of the state.”¹² That this is precisely the historical moment in which European settler colonialism gets underway is hardly incidental. Indeed, neither the paradigms of the liberal state nor the rise of empirical scientific inquiry can be accounted for apart from colonial processes of racialization.

8 Tzvetan Todorov, “The Origin of Genres,” *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. David Duff (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000), 193–209.

9 Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 44.

10 Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” trans. Avital Ronell. *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1980): 59.

11 Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003): 281.

12 *Ibid.*, 281.

Alexander Weheliye extends Wynter's thought showing that neither Michel Foucault's biopolitics nor Giorgio Agamben's bare life offer sufficient analytical tools for grappling with racialization.¹³ For Weheliye, the supra-genres of the (European/White) Human, the (Native American) Almost-Human, and (the Black) Not Human depend upon a classificatory logic that reasons with some, yet still maintains an unreasoning exclusionary border barring the Black from inclusion in the Human. This wild unreasonableness, also implicit in Derrida's attention to the prodigious capacity for genres to multiply, is precisely what Achille Mbembe identifies as the anti-humanism of the West in *Critique of Black Reason*. Mbembe argues that in the contemporary moment, the founding assumptions behind Western principles of classification and hierarchies are being applied to new and broader populations.¹⁴ When Mbembe suggests that the world is "becoming-black," it is in the sense that these generic operations once perfected and limited in application to black bodies are now becoming generalized operations of the state. Mbembe's innovation arises, in part, from the most mundane of details—his address. Having spent much of his academic career on the continent, at CODESRIA and now University of Witwatersrand, Mbembe's analysis is anchored in his training as a historian of Africa engaged with the entanglements of thought that have produced the African, the Black, the Nègre.

The attention that scholars like Wynter, Weheliye, and Mbembe have been paying to the problem of classification, distinction, taste, and categorization indicates a set of philosophical engagements with *genre* as a term and as an operation of unique valence where blackness and African-ness are concerned.¹⁵ These shared epistemological conditions structure the discussions of specific genres in our special issue. Of course, any given genre holds out a specific set of possibilities. Rather than a single genre, however, very the proliferation and precariousness of genre writing, genre invention, and that delirious super-abundance that Derrida describes, we would argue, is a message in and of itself. Not necessarily new, but perceptible in a new way, when genre as such is centered. Indeed, we believe the excessive energies apparent in the prodigious deformations and proliferations of genre fiction, film, and media in Africa demonstrate a crucial contemporary tactic for the dismantling of rigid structuring of genres of human being that have been so spectacularly harmful for Africans, and more broadly for black people around the globe.

Although attention to these commonalities between African and other black contexts are productive, the specificities of the African experience remain central. The literary as we understand it operating on the African continent is a field of play where difference is deployed strategically to push against fixed categories of analysis, such as the now dominant framing devices of world literature and the global novel. A focus on genre allows us to attend to how the circulation of international cultural forms can flatten out the specificities of local African experiences. Where does African writing fit within the

13 Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Thought, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

14 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

15 See also, Simon Gikandi *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

economy of world literature? What gets excluded when certain genres rise and others fall? As Ligaga, Garritano, and Gbadegesin's essays each demonstrate, disciplinary investments in the world literary framework and in the global novel tend to exclude the very genres that Africans engage most often with. Thus, we agree with Moradewun Adejunmobi's observations in the Afterword to this issue and see the "popular" particularly in these essays as a conceptual node deserving of renewed attention and redefinition. As popular literature and film increasingly embrace science fiction, romance, detective fiction, horror, and Westerns, the appeal and contradictions of genre on the continent become more apparent. Several of the essays here address this phenomenon by surfacing insights into genre writ large through the dynamics of a particular genre. Peter Hitchcock and Pim Higginson assay these questions more broadly.

Hitchcock's earlier provocation, in his 2003 "The Genre of Postcoloniality," implies that the logics operative in the construction of Human, Almost-Human, and Not Human genres of being are also in evidence when it comes to the construction and deconstruction of literary genre categories.¹⁶ Beginning with the premise that *all* classificatory gestures fall within a broader taxonomy of power regimes, Hitchcock picks up on Derrida's elaboration of genre as gender, generation, and biological classification, but translates Derrida's claims to postcolonial contexts to propose *postcolonialism* itself as a genre, albeit one that anticipates its own demise. In his contribution to this issue, Hitchcock alerts us that genres are materially determined, a point reinforced in Garritano's essay on the Ghanaian "ghost film" and in Gbadegesin's piece on Yoruba photoplays. Yet, Hitchcock goes on to argue, generic forms are not commensurate with the historical and material realities of postcolonial modernity and often "fail to fit [their] historical coordinates." In a challenge to David Scott's recent work linking postcolonial political trajectories to tragedy, Hitchcock reminds us that such an emplotment of decolonization disregards its constitutive unevenness, and writers such as Assia Djebar may employ genres as "parables of inconstancy." Hitchcock, like Derrida and Fanon before him, formulates insights from the vantage point of North Africa—a necessary act of political and critical geography in and of itself. And by generating a theory of genre by reading what is often distinguished as "literary" work such as Djebar's through new eyes, he reminds us that theory's etymological roots lie in *theoria*—speculation, contemplation—taking a fresh look.

Following a different critical axis, Pim Higginson addresses the conundrum posed in distinguishing between the "popular" and the "literary" in Africa. The opposition between these terms can be viewed as a residual inheritance from colonialism that inadequately accounts for African practices of what he calls "anarchic consumerism," but for Higginson, the "popular" itself remains a particularly vexed concept in Francophone African contexts. Higginson problematizes the concept of the "popular" itself by noting the ways the Frankfurt school's diagnosis of the alienation of the "culture industry" is a poor fit for Francophone African contexts. He shows how necessary it is for new theories of the popular to emerge that build on previous work (referring to works by Barber and Newell) and further complicate the frameworks of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and even Stuart Hall, who are bound in their examinations of cultural production to the Marxist analytic of late capitalism. As Higginson explains, many parts

16 Peter Hitchcock, "The Genre of Postcoloniality," *New Literary History* 34.2 (2003): 299–330.

of Africa cannot be described by the modes of late capitalism these theorists rely on, unless of course, the uneven development that late capitalism requires is part of the conversation. If we put African popular forms at the center of the theoretical frame, Higginson argues, we must reckon with modes of consumption that defy neat encapsulation within Adorno and Horkheimer's world of technologically conscripted automatism. Indeed, in some instances, popular forms may allow for the expression of certain modes of subversion that are precluded in more traditional literary genres.

Higginson also suggests why detective and related genres including crime, spy, and hard-boiled novels are so pertinent at present in grappling with violence in an African context. Such genres speak to the limits of postcolonial state formation (and "law and order" agendas), as well as the long-running crisis of a present brought into being through anticolonial nationalist violence that has run into a wall. The recent proliferation of crime fiction includes Mukoma wa Ngugi's novels *Nairobi Heat* and *Black Star Nairobi*, Ken Bugul's *Rue Félix-Faure*, and Chris Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas*.¹⁷ Their commercial success recalls the tremendous popularity of crime fiction in *Drum* magazine's short stories, *African Film*'s photocomic series *Lance Spearman*, and related works permitting alternative interpretations of the detritus of violence, whether criminal or state. But it is not only works that announce their relation to genre fiction through style and thematics most obviously that are engaged with crime genres. As already suggested, many writers find genre conventions the most appealing frames through which to write agonistically, subversively, and promiscuously. Tendai Huchu has stated that the challenge and aim when writing his most recent novel, *The Maestro, the Magistrate and the Mathematician*, was essentially to *disguise* what he considers to be a spy novel centered on an apparently minor character, Alfonso, behind the cloak of literary fiction.¹⁸ This willful dissimulation of generic investments may manifest itself in authorial decision around style, narrative structure, diction, as well as in the more paratextual apparatuses of publication and circulation.

Matt Eatough's essay on infrastructure, national(ist) development discourses, and their translation into literary genres, particularly speculative fiction, shares Higginson's materialist concerns. In dialogue with the recent special issue on science fiction, Eatough raises some broader theoretical questions. Not only does he discuss infrastructure as a *thematic* concern that coheres with Afro-futurism's current vogue in postcolonial and Black Studies, but perhaps more importantly, he shows that genre might be understood as part of the infrastructure of emerging African literary institutions. A related attention to the material and technological can be seen in Garritano, Ligaga, and Gbadegesin's essays, and indeed these concerns are key to troubling facile conceptions of the global.

Garritano investigates recent trends in Ghana's video industry paying meticulous attention to the materiality of filmmaking technologies and production values. Honing in on the Ghanaian ghost movie, "a tangle of media and discourse

17 Mukoma wa Ngugi, *Nairobi Heat* (New York: Penguin Global, 2009); Ngugi, *Black Star Nairobi* (New York: Melville International Crime, 2013); Ken Bugul, *Rue Félix-Faure* (Paris: Éditions Hôebeke, 2005); Chris Abani, *The Secret History of Las Vegas* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

18 Tendai Huchu, in discussion with the author, April 12, 2017; citing *The Maestro, the Magistrate and the Mathematician: A Novel* (London: Parthian, 2015).

flows,” she explores how the concept of genre itself corrals the “prolific, messy, (mostly) informal and rapidly innovating” forms of film and video production, aiding viewers’ consumptive decisions. Because profits are not easy to come by, she notes, producers tailor their films to viewers’ expectations—and to their pleasures—and by so doing they affirm their role as “cultural insiders,” with the films serving as the latest technological incarnation of a much longer history of locally specific ghost stories.

Gbadegesin’s essay also reconfigures the popular through the introduction of new technologies and new terminologies—in other words, there is *technological* as well as terminological rapture. In her discussion of Nigerian photoplays in relation to the traveling Yoruba theater, Gbadegesin demonstrates that it is often possible to read backward from a contemporary popular form to its local antecedents. Another function of genre is also highlighted here: viewers and readers have generic expectations, and these in turn guide their purchasing decisions.

Like Garritano, Ligaga focuses particularly on how digital inventions contribute to generic intermediality and creativity with pre-existing forms—in her case, the radio drama and the popular press—thus gesturing toward possibilities for genre innovations to come. Ligaga confronts some of the challenges of writing about the digital and other new media formats, yet it is precisely technologies of mediation such as online videos and Instagram that repurpose a trope like “rogue femininity” to new ends. As users are sorted into genre- and gender-specific audiences, Ligaga identifies an alternative to the way moral narratives work to stabilize or calcify gender norms. Pairing her discussion of “old media” forms such as moral narratives in the pamphlet literature genre with new and emergent social media platforms challenges us to build on foundational work like Emmanuel Obiechina’s in the new context of digital humanities.¹⁹

Given the intense interest and funding support available for digital humanities (particularly in a US academic context), Africanists have a perfect opportunity to seize upon emergent forms and to formulate methods of reading comparatively that elucidate textual analogs to the cutting-edge innovativeness apparent in Africa’s rapid embrace of e-banking. Digital technologies are changing the way we read, and as Édouard Glissant has proposed, there are parallels between orality (and particularly its aesthetics of accumulation) and the Internet that make Africa a particularly good context in which to think through how literary and cultural studies will need to shift attention.²⁰ Glissant observes, “Today we write the way we read and vice versa. . . in an incredibly active and rapid way, adapted to all of this momentum that the world has and to the surge of the technologies of modernity, which carry us along in their unstoppable flow.”²¹ The unique capacities for the Internet (and indeed each new media form in relation to its precedents) to produce a radically more coeval world upends the dynamics Johannes Fabian describes in *Time and the Other*, which

19 Emmanuel Obiechina, *An African Popular Literature: A Study of Onitsha Market Pamphlets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

20 Édouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997. Cited in translation in by Roxanna Nydia Curto, *Inter-Tech(s): Colonialism and the Question of Technology in Francophone Literature* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016).

21 *Ibid.*, 175.

historically constructed Africa (and other global Southern spaces) as always belated in relation to modernity.²² Ligaga and fellow new media scholars like Matthew Brown and Brian Larkin point the way. But as Moradewun Adejunmobi discusses in her thoughtful Afterword to this issue, “cultural intermediaries” such as academics and critics have historically played a pivotal role in the articulation of genre, working with considerable success to outline the boundaries for many genres, all the while dismissing others. Like several of this issue’s essayists, Adejunmobi encourages us to expand such “modalities of recognition” so that the genres that are most widely consumed on the continent—and most widely enjoyed—become objects of study. These should be considered, of course, as carriers of meaning and ideology, but also as exemplars of the processes by which genres emerge, disintegrate, or implode. The degree of pleasure that readers, viewers, and users take in such iterations of genre has only to be matched by our critical attention.

22 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).