

Postcolonial/Transcultural/Transnational: American Studies, American Literature, and the World

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Probably no debate has been waged as heatedly and persistently in American Studies over the last decade as the debate on how (or whether) to define the regional reach of the field. Where do American Studies end? As the theoretical terms and methodological devices of postcolonial and diaspora studies entered into the toolbox of American Studies, and as the concern with the effects of imperialism and globalization affected the territorial and conceptual design of our discipline, the adherence to national boundaries in order to delineate the field acquired the taint of obstinacy—or narrow-mindedness. Yet by opening its perspective and research agenda to “the comparative contexts of Western Hemispheric and finally global study” (Rowe 31), American Studies ran the risk of either engaging in self-annihilation or performing imperial arrogance.

These arguments have been rehearsed so often and in such detail that I do not have to map them out here once more. Neither do I have to argue the case for postcolonial theory's place in American Studies. This battle, too, has been won.¹ With the advent of the new millennium, it seems, the terminology and the positions of transculturality, transnationalism and postcolonial theory have established themselves firmly in the research on American literature and culture. Taking an inventory of the activities and accomplishments of postcolonial American Studies in 2004, Malini Schueller came to the conclusion that the “necessity of

1 To trace the debates around transnationalism, postcolonial theory, and American Studies see, apart from Rowe, the positions formulated by Kaplan; Wald; Sharpe; Desmond and Dominguez; Mackenthun; Saldivar; Giles' “Virtual Americas”; Radway, among many others. For an informed and succinct survey of these debates cf. Banerjee.

interrogating US culture through the lens of postcolonial theory" (162) was as urgent as ever, but that the relevance of postcolonial expertise for American Studies seems to be by and large agreed upon by now. The concrete actualizations and implementations of the postcolonial in American Studies, however, manifest an impressive range of incongruities and impasses as Schueller pointed out. Thus, the often-repeated assertion that postcolonial studies matter and the invocation of postcolonial catchphrases and slogans routinely bypasses the crucial "question of what difference postcolonial theory makes to ethnic studies" (165). Many of the critics who engage in such scholarship, Schueller contends, do what they always did, dealing "with cultural, historical, and identity issues within specific minority communities and occasionally refer to Bhabha's ideas of hybridity or third space" (165). Others change gear and focus, yet do so with problematical consequences because they tend to recast minority culture studies by means of a lexicon of "supposedly unracialized terms such as native, diasporic, anti-colonial, and so on" (168), invoking a transnational reach of their subject matter and approach with the effect of blurring culturally specific conditions and situations into a generic and trivial *mélange* of similarities and concurrences.

To draw upon postcolonial theory productively, however, means to foreground the fact that there is no colonial or postcolonial condition in a neutral or overarching sense. Instead, there are particular colonial practices, specific processes and procedures of decolonization or colonial protest and discrete national traditions, political systems or cultural conventions, which need to be carefully weighed against each other. When I was working on African images in the British and American popular imagination (*Artificial Africas*), I found the vocabulary and theoretical tools of established postcolonial theory eminently helpful, because the larger repertory of Africanist clichés and ascriptions is heavily indebted to a certain section of what has been called the "colonial archive" (Richards). Now, however, that I am concerned with cultural and political interactions between China and the United States, I have to relate to an image repertory that is organized differently and to which at least the postcolonial classics do not apply too well, even though China was of course by no means unaffected by colonialism. The greatest danger of 'master' theories which gain hegemonic status may very well be that they form a lens through which we perceive every- where the same constellations and structures: "hybridity," "mimicry,"

"subalterns, speaking or silent," "imagined communities"—the world over. While I agree, thus, with Schueller that postcolonial American Studies show a deplorable tendency to engage in categorial blurring and depoliticization which manifests itself in routine recourses to jargon, I see this as part of a larger trend in which categories are attributed with moral value and then tacitly configured into 'clusters' of good and bad concepts which do not require further discussion (so that concepts such as 'hybridity,' 'heterogeneity,' 'ambivalence,' or 'diasporic,' which should be used in a strictly descriptive sense, lose all of their heuristic potential since they are being used in largely celebratory terms or with utopian inflexions, cf. Mayer, *Diaspora* 7-29).

In fact, the very terms 'transcultural' or 'transnational' and 'post-colonial' seem to be affected by the same momentum of euphoric inscription. This is what I will investigate in some more detail in the following, starting from the observation that the academic debate around the postcolonial and transcultural turn seems to have left its mark on a sizable segment of the American—and by extension the global Anglo- phone—book market at large. What emerged as an arcane academic category in the 1980s has become a staple term in the business of literary production and distribution, in particular. A glance at the parameters of the marketing machine around postcolonial literature may be instructive with regard to our academic debates, because it throws into sharp relief what in the scholarly debates is being expressed and addressed in more careful and guarded terms. Moreover, in the sphere of literary practice and production some savvy strategies emerged in response to a market that is increasingly marked by conformity. The literary strategies, I argue, might be taken as inspiration for an academic reconceptualization of the phenomena of the postcolonial, the transcultural, and the transnational.

1 Middlebrow Postcolonial

Within the last decades, a substantial amount of scholarship has endeavored to position postcolonial literature in the context of a global market. Critics from Timothy Brennan to Graham Huggan, from James English to Sarah Brouillette, to name just a few, have been concerned with the insight that postcolonial literature sells, and that it constitutes one of the

most compelling examples for the emergence of a new—and by no means unproblematic—idea of ‘world literature.’ By contrast, the categories of the ‘transcultural’ or ‘transnational’ may be fashionable, but they are arguably moored in academic discourse, only beginning to make an appearance on the pages of intellectual magazines or journals’ culture sections. Ironically, especially the lexicon of the transnational would be so much more appropriate to capture the range of texts and debates subsumed under the postcolonial label these days. But ‘post-colonial’ it is—so that I will focus for now on this term and its implications and connotations in the usage of an increasingly globalized literary market and in its relevance for American—and transnational—readers and the critical community surrounding them.

Taking stock of the American market of literary production in a review of 2011, Paul Giles came to the radical conclusion that “[a]ll of American literature now seems postcolonial” (“Postcolonial Mainstream” 214):

For better or worse, postcolonialism has become entangled in the era of Obama with the symbolic centers of American power. Those who seek valiantly to uphold the integrity of the subject and to explore complicated questions of how postcolonialism intersects with the administrative apparatus of the nation-state will henceforth have to deal, like Obama, with the responsibilities of office. (214)

Like all exclusive claims, this one is debatable. But Giles has a strong point when noting the fact that in many respects the postcolonial has moved from the periphery to the center, or, to be more precise, that more easily than other categories of literary classification, the category of the postcolonial has accommodated the fact that the periphery and the center have become, in many respects, indistinguishable, and in others seem farther apart than ever before. Both as a theoretical currency and a cultural category, the postcolonial is at risk to become a tool to replicate and habituate this transformation rather than serve as a means of critical reflection or dismantling. In the course of this transformation or consolidation, in the sphere of publishing the category of the postcolonial came to mean almost anything that stems from what used to be called the ‘third world,’ regardless of whether the country of the text’s or its author’s origin has ever been a colony in a narrow sense. And in line with academic discursive practice, ‘postcolonial’ is used synonymously with

'ethnic,' so that the term seems to have lost much of its semantic distinctiveness, while gaining a whole range of connotations and associative qualities for the literary market (Huggan 1-33).

What then, can we concretely say about this chimera of the postcolonial? Combining "an urban, cosmopolitan aesthetic with [a] sort of local color that strikes contemporary editors and reviewers as exotic," as John Marx put it in a review essay (812), postcolonial literature addresses a sophisticated, not necessarily academic audience. It targets readers who are willing to engage and 'work' with a text but also turn to it in order to learn, to widen their horizon, to identify with others, and to immerse themselves into worldviews which otherwise would remain foreign to them—that is, at least, if one trusts the blurbs on the covers of recent publications in the field.² It is on these grounds that Chris Bongie came up with the category of the 'postcolonial middlebrow' in order to define the predominant style and format of current literary production, and to get a grip on the field mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. What I find particularly intriguing in Bongie's assessment is that his reflections on the principles of success in a global literary market do not only account for the conditions of cultural and linguistic access, or the effects of marketing decisions by the transnational publishing corporations, but that he also insists on the importance of tone and claim. Comparing the transnational success of the Caribbean 'middlebrow' author Maryse Conde with the only regional appeal of her peer Tony Delsham, who is widely popular in the Antilles but not in the United States, Bongie came to the conclusion that one reason for the discrepancy could be constituted by "the conciliatory position [which] Delsham consistently preaches in his novels and [by the circumstance] that in his countless editorials for Antilla [he] does not offer the incendiary agenda that would be immediately attractive to critics programmed to sing the praises of a 'denunciatory tradition'" (288). Bongie lists an array of other principles and patterns of inclusion and exclusion, but this one interests me particularly. It highlights the fact that the middlebrow literary market has changed its face and function over the twentieth century—its earlier obsession with harmony, universality, and reconciliation has been abandoned because today the goal of educational self-

2 On the discrepancy between these blurbs and many novels' own agenda and focus see Huggan 164-73.

fulfillment is associated with gestures of defiance and protest rather than accommodation. I find this assessment helpful, because it does allow us to focus on a particular tonality in contemporary postcolonial writing (apart from Maryse Conde, one could adduce the examples of Jhumpa Lahiri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, or Taiye Selasi).

In line with a longer tradition of middlebrow aesthetics, the postcolonial middlebrow positions itself alternately by means of gestures against the mainstream and signals to the common reader, and it entails frequent assertions of the narratives' status as 'art' as opposed to the extremes of elitist experimental abstractions or popular mass-appeal and sensationalism. This subtle tonality is particularly pertinent in life writing and ethnic autobiography where "alternative, culturally constructed notions of authenticity" are routinely entering into "discursive conflict" (Huggan 164). To navigate such discursive intersections, it helps to be familiar with the codes and conventions of a postcolonial aesthetic. This may sound obvious, but it is an insight which is difficult to reconcile with the self-assessment of postcolonial discourse. After all, postcolonial studies and postcolonial literature derive their very cultural significance from the claim of inclusion, their dedication to the office of retrieving "histories that have been silenced or erased by both colonial and nationalist powers" (Nayar 18). Postcolonial literature, in other words, derives its legitimacy and its distinction from its capacity to give a voice to the voiceless (not to mention the subaltern that shall speak).

But of course, inclusion is predicated upon exclusion. Only particular voices in a particular register and with a specific tonality will be heard. What Richard Brodhead wrote about an entirely different literary scene may thus be easily applied to the current market order. Referring to the literature of regionalism emerging from a first hot phase of modernist globalization, Brodhead conjured up a historical context "when local-cultural economies felt strong pressure from new social forces, from a growingly powerful social model that overrode previously autonomous systems, and incorporated them into translocal agglomerations" (119). And what Brodhead formulated in conclusion about the principles of success in this literary development bears repetition with regard to our world and the postcolonial scene too: "Literary forms [...] create different sorts of literary access; but no form creates access unconditionally. Such forms are always placed in some determinate set of literary-cultural relations, and the place they create for authors is inevitably a

place within this specification of their work's life and use" (141). Let's look at the form.

2 What Is the What's Hijacking of Form

While academic discourse is grappling with the discrepancy between claim and reality, literary practice is less caught up in such distinctions. It seems to me that the predominance of categories such as agency, identity, and authorial distinction—even if they are critically inflected—in postcolonial theoretical discourse is particularly detrimental to a recognition of certain recent trends in the field of postcolonial literary writing. And I would like to argue my case with the help of an example. Here is a passage from the preface of Dave Eggers' book *What Is the What*, which could be generically identified as life writing:

Because I was not a writer, I asked Mary [Williams, the founder of the Lost Boys Foundation in Atlanta] to put me in touch with an author to write my biography. Mary contacted Dave Eggers, and thank God Dave and I met and certainly became good friends. [...] Over the course of many years, Dave and I have collaborated to tell my story by way of tape recording, by electronic mailings, by telephone conversation and by many personal meetings and visitations. We even went to Sudan together in December 2003 [...]. I told Dave what I knew and what I could remember, and from that material he created this work of art. (xiv)

"Because I was not a writer"—this phrasing sounds almost paradoxical in the context of postcolonial debates on authorship. Everybody is a writer, you become a writer by telling your story, by sharing your experiences, by finding a voice and inscribing yourself into the dominant discourse. But Valentino Achak Deng, the author of the cited lines, thinks otherwise. He contacted the American success author Dave Eggers, and had him write his life. The outcome was *What Is the What* (2006). In marketing terms, this was a success story. The book with the unwieldy title and unappealing subject matter—relating the life of a Sudanese boy soldier, a 'Lost Boy,' on his trek together with thousands of others through the deserts of Sudan and Ethiopia to a refugee camp in Kenya, where Deng lived for 13 years, before moving to Atlanta—climbed the *New York Times* extended bestseller list to No. 25. It came

out in Eggers' own publishing venture McSweeney's, only on the grounds of Eggers' own reputation, without a marketing machine or public relations agent to boost it. All its proceeds went into the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation to support other Sudanese refugees and migrants. Since then, Eggers wrote another book based on the same principle of collaboration, this one bearing the name of its protagonist in its title: *Zeitoun* (2009)—about the trials of a Syrian immigrant in post-Katrina New Orleans, another success. Both stories underwent a decisive transformation in the course of their adaptation—they were marketed as novels rather than non-fiction. "Only maybe 433 people would've read [a nonfiction] book. So we made it a novel," Eggers justified this decision with regard to *What Is the What* (qtd. in Kirschling). In literary studies, both *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun* were almost immediately associated with the concerns of postcolonialism and trans-nationality. *What Is the What* was called "postcolonial creative non-fiction" (Wood) by sympathetic readers, while a not so sympathetic recipient deplored the "innocent expropriation of another man's identity" as an instance of "post-colonial arrogance—the most socially acceptable instance of Orientalism you are likely to encounter" (Siegel). In one of the most lucid responses to the novel, Paul Giles identifies it as a text steeped in the conditions of digital communication and taking on the exigencies of economic globalization:

All of this testifies [...] to Eggers's attempt to write an ostensibly trans-national novel, one where the Sudanese immigrants to the United States construct a virtual community among themselves through e-mail, and where the fates of Africa and America are inextricably linked together by the spectres of international terrorism and politics—Valentino talks of "the web of money and power and oil that made our suffering possible"—as well as by the tentacles of the global media. (Giles, "Planetary")

From the beginning, the critical reaction to the novel was widely enthusiastic. It has been celebrated as an accomplishment akin to Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (cf. *Prose*), with Eggers "adopting Achak [Deng's] voice" (Adams), a voice which was "distilled from countless hours of conversation with the real Valentino, and [which] bears no trace of the media-savvy postmodern ironist [Dave Eggers]" (Krist). It is precisely the often praised skillful "ventriloquism" (Kakutani; Hamilton;

Jones) of the text, its success as a “literary impersonation” (Krist), which is then turned into the central object of critique in one of the rare negative readings on the text—Lee Siegel’s review in *The New Republic*: “The eerie, slightly sickening quality about *What Is the What* is that Deng’s personhood has been displaced by someone else’s style and sensibility—by someone else’s story. Deng survived his would-be killers in the Sudan, only to have his identity erased here.” For Siegel, the book constitutes a case study in contemporary dishonesty and sensationalism: “Deng does not represent himself. Eggers represents him. [...] How strange for one man to think that he could write the story of another man, a real living man who is perfectly capable of telling his story himself—and then call it an autobiography.” Siegel’s critique revolves around the allegation that Eggers took advantage of Deng and committed some sort of ‘identity theft’ by telling his story. Thus, the review echoes other critics’ more guarded apprehension that “a story so concerned with so many different forms of dispossession should itself be subject to a variety of appropriation” (Jones; cf. also Kakutani). Indeed, however successful the impersonation may be, there is something troubling about the fact that Deng needs somebody else to speak for him. Yet if we accredit Deng’s preface, this is not how Deng perceived the interaction.

I find two aspects of this preface particularly suggestive. First, what sounds like a cursory reference to God—“Thank God Dave and I met”—is by no means a set phrase here, but needs to be taken literally. Deng directly attributes his cooperation with Dave Eggers to God’s intervention. Here and elsewhere, his thinking and writing is clearly steeped in the evangelical tradition: “*What Is the What* is the soulful account of my life” (xiii), the preface opens, and then continues in the diction of the Old Testament: “As a helpless human, I survived by trekking across many punishing landscapes while being bombed by Sudanese air forces, while dodging land mines, while being preyed upon by wild beasts and human killers” (xiii). For Deng, neither Eggers nor himself are in charge of the narrative of his life—God is. This is how Deng rationalizes the collaboration time and again, in the preface and in interviews.

But there is another, less foregrounded reading of the venture inscribed in the preface, when Deng lists the means of communication which allowed for his collaboration with Eggers: “[We] have collabo-

rated to tell my story by way of tape recording, by electronic mailings, by telephone conversation and by many personal meetings and visitations." The reference to the technical tools and electronic media which facilitate the recording and transfer of personal memories elicits an instrumental concept of authorship not unlike the evangelical model, although admittedly much more profane: Eggers figures here as a tool, a channel, or transmitter—a medium. If one reads the collaboration along these lines, its implications of agency and appropriation are being inverted. It seems to me that the predominant modes of making sense of the novel—whether they come to positive or negative conclusions—all fail to seriously engage with Deng's own understanding of the collaboration. Whether the book is read as a case of a white author usurping a black person's experience (as Siegel had it) or, more neutrally, of a white author speaking on behalf of a black partner, or even more subtly, as "a reification of the process of mutual cross-cultural exchange" (Twitchell 638)—almost invariably what I regard as the novel's most fascinating aspect, and what figures in the foreground of Deng's recollection of the production process, is getting lost: Rather than negotiating issues of authorship, authorization, or 'voice,' the text seems to be concerned with the modalities of modern (transnational) storytelling and its modes of dissemination. With this, *What Is the What* seems to present a remediation (rather than representation) of the very predicament of literary access which Brodhead marked as the regulating force of any literary market since the advent of media modernity.

To take Deng's preface and Eggers' novel seriously would consequently mean to read the text as an instance of a black story invading a white space, a sort of hijacking of a literary format or a book market. Paul Giles pointed out that there are obvious recursions of *What Is the What* to the narrative strategies of "more conventional narratives of U.S. immigrant literature," but that a reading of the novel exclusively in these terms would be "reductive" ("Planetary"). By extension I am skeptical about readings which posit the text in the tradition of the American slave narrative (Moynagh 46-47), regardless of a number of obvious parallels. Furthermore, the invocation of more recent precedents of literary 'ghostwriting,' such as New Journalism, seems to fall short of the mark of lending contextual depth to *What Is the What*. True, writers like Hunter S. Thompson or Joan Didion and nonfiction writers like Norman Mailer or Truman Capote have earlier on experimented with similar

techniques of representation and documentation. But the newness of Deng's and Eggers' experiment should be taken seriously—this is a project very much of our time, a book of the twenty-first century, which owes its effect and its effectivity to the transnational conditions of our days. What Is the What invades and takes over the territory of the postcolonial middlebrow, forcing access to a field that neither Deng nor Eggers could enter with comparable success on their own. To pursue such a reading further, however, we need to abandon the imagery of identity, authorship, and agency, and turn to a different lexicon of literary analysis.

Several critics, including Eggers himself, have made note of the fact that what Eggers brought to Deng's material can be captured mainly in terms of drainage, depletion, or distancing (Eggers in Kirschling; Giles, "Planetary"; Twitched). Where Deng's style in the preface is heavily informed by the conventions of evangelical storytelling, the style of the main body of the text is neutral, sparse, laconic—which made readers complain about the bad storytelling.³ Indeed there are almost no defined narrative arcs, no conclusions, and—especially given the story's dramatic potential—no strong devices to create thrill or identification. The writing does not draw attention to itself. It seems impersonal, unmarked. The book's sophistication consists in this affected artlessness, and in the arrangement of its material by means of loops and frames. It sets in with a grim vignette depicting Valentino's⁴ early days in the United States, and then takes this episode as a point of departure to unfold the memories of expulsion, expropriation, and displacement in Africa, pulling Africa and America together into a tight web of cross-references. The African memories are thus reviewed from a markedly American vantage point, but the novel's retrospective mode is by no means made out as a position of certainty, security, or safety from which the past can be assessed and filed away. The episode that gets the narrative going relates a robbery in Atlanta; Valentino is being bound and gagged and held captive in his own apartment, while one of his captors is watching television, waiting for the two others to come back from securing the loot.

3 For a representative sample of reader responses see the discussions on <<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/4952>>.

4 In line with other literary takes on the novel, I will call the character in the text Valentino, while I refer to the real person as Deng.

This incident triggers a silent monologue, which introduces a major motif for the model of storytelling at large in and around *What Is the What*:

When I first came to this country, I would tell silent stories. I would tell them to people who had wronged me. If someone cut in front of me in line, ignored me, bumped me or pushed me, I would glare at them, staring, silently hissing a story to them. You do not understand, I would tell them. You would not add to my suffering if you knew what I have seen. And until that person left my sight, I would tell them about Deng, who died after eating elephant meat, nearly raw, or about Ahok and Awach Ugieth, twin sisters who were carried off by Arab horsemen and, if they are still alive today, have by now borne children by those men or whom- ever they sold them to. Do you have any idea? Those innocent twins likely remember nothing about me or our town or to whom they were born. Can you imagine this? When I was finished talking to that person I would continue my stories, talking to the air, the sky, to all the people of the world and whoever might be listening in heaven. It is wrong to say that I used to tell these stories. I still do, and not only to those I feel have wronged me. The stories emanate from me all the time I am awake and breathing, and I want everyone to hear them. Written words are rare in small villages like mine, and it is my right and obligation to send my stories into the world, even if silently, even if utterly powerless. (29)

“The stories emanate from me all the time”—the formulation suggests a powerful thrust, an impersonal momentum, a ‘release’ rather than conscious design or strategic positioning. The episode figures as one of the text’s many elegantly crafted anchoring points—forceful little narrative hooks which pull the diverse threads of the narrative together and allow for orientation and reflection in a large and unwieldy fictional universe. It would certainly not be wrong to read this episode in terms of Eggers’ expertise as a ‘post-postmodern’ storyteller, as clever self-referential gesture or skillful maneuver of authorial control. But such a reading would also fail to capture the complexity of the maneuver at stake. It helps to take the subject matter and the sheer material suggestiveness of the incident at face value to start with and to acknowledge the “right and obligation to send [...] stories into the world” as a principal entry on the bill of rights for an age in which the postcolonial and the transnational have in many respects become hegemonic. This right, however, entails certain responsibilities. It is not enough to just tell stories, to find a

voice, to express oneself: One needs to also find and sustain audiences for these stories, to generate attention and to provoke reactions, to keep stories in circulation, until they finally take real effects in the social and political realities worldwide.

3 Texts Writing the Self and Texts Writing Themselves

"A Lost Boy Who Found His Voice," "Lost Boys Who Found Their Voices" (Adams; Holmes)—these headings of review essays on *What Is the What* could actually be used for almost all the journalistic approaches to the novel. Almost all of the early reviews make reference to a passage of Deng's preface in which he refers to Eggers' part in the project as "approximating my own voice" (Deng 5). Elizabeth Twitchell's scholarly assessment precisifies this inflexion, highlighting the pointed artificiality of the voice that is being produced: "We are left with a voice that is both hybrid and singular, distinctly audible and yet impossible to locate" (639). I think it is important to note that in the paperback edition of the novel that came out in 2007, and that dropped the earlier subtitle "The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng. Novel" in favor of the plain "A novel," this often-quoted line is missing. And instead of pointing out that he "told [his] story orally to the author" (5), Deng now lists the above listed range of media of communication which facilitated the traffic in information between himself and Eggers. It is no longer the voice—stolen or faked or approximated and ventriloquized—which is of vital importance, but the material that is being communicated and the various media of communication that are used. "I wanted to reach out to others to help them understand Sudan's place in our global community" (Eggers xiv), Deng proclaims in the preface now—this is about the message put out, the story told, not the person to tell it.

To take this perspective seriously is to return to poststructuralist debates on authorship with which postcolonial theory, even in its post-structuralist inflections, never sat well. In a field as concerned with disparities of power, access, and legitimation as the field of postcolonial writing, the poststructuralist dismissal of the categories of the author and her agency seemed to be frivolous and cerebral, given the ongoing relevance of these constructs in the social and political world. But at this

moment in time we are faced with another major rearrangement of the very principles of transnational representation and communication, a rearrangement which calls to mind the pervasive overriding of “previously autonomous systems” of publication and authorship which Richard Brodhead evoked for an earlier epoch of medial revolution: the 1880s and 90s. As the genre of life writing explodes the confines of the printed page—with blogs or social networks like Facebook or Twitter acting as hybrid sites between the personal and the public—new modes of expression and self-fashioning on a transnational scale come into being for which formats of collaborative authorship, ghostwriting, impersonation, and what could be called the aesthetic of the avatar play an unprecedented role. Seen in that way, novels like *What Is the What* seem to write themselves, rather than being attributable to one particular ‘voice’ or author. As scholars of literature and culture we will have to deal with these changed conditions of access and reach, inclusion and exclusion, agency and mediation. In the course of this ‘actualization’ performed by *What Is the What* and other recent experiments in life writing, the distinction between the categories of access and exclusion, message and medium, instrument and agent, does not lose its significance. The categories are in fact more urgently in need of demarcation than ever before. But they change their contours and coordinates profoundly. If we want to update postcolonial theoretical discourse to the demands of the day, we need to take these current rearrangements seriously.

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