

Mario Laarmann

Hybrid Aesthetics and Social Reality: Reading Caribbean Literature in the Postcolonial Present

Abstract: With the work of authors such as Édouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau, Edwidge Danticat, Earl Lovelace, Junot Díaz, Maryse Condé, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, or Dany Laferrière, Caribbean literature looks back on a prolific and influential tradition of ‘hybrid’ aesthetics and transcultural social realism. Simultaneously, contemporary literary and cultural scholarship is increasingly becoming aware of its post-postcolonial and post-postmodernist condition, deferring text-immanent arguments of deterritorialisation, agency, or representation for the sake of a more material criticism which questions the very premises of our modern social systems. The concept of a minor universality reflects this necessity. Against this backdrop, the present paper investigates the potential of critics such as Jacques Rancière, Stuart Hall, Pierre Bourdieu, and Shalini Puri to both (re)read the aforementioned tradition and also approach the present generation of Caribbean writers.

Keywords: Caribbean literature, postcolonial present, literary sociology, aesthetics, hybridity, cultural studies, conjunctural reading

Rather than the anticolonial problem of overthrowing colonialism (or the West), or the decolonization of the West’s representation of the non-West, what is important for this present is a critical interrogation of the practices, modalities, and projects through which modernity inserted itself into and altered the lives of the colonized. (David Scott 1999, 17)

[W]e need to connect a poetics of hybridity to a politics of equality. (Shalini Puri 2004, 1)

1 Prelude

“These texts [. . .] speak to my childhood, to the magic, the free vision, the differing vision, to the factors that have structured my imagination, shaped my sensibility, and that would abound today in the schemes of my writing” – with these

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words, Patrick Chamoiseau (1996 [1990], 12) introduces his autobiographical trilogy *Une enfance créole*.¹ In the three volumes of the series, he remembers episodes from his childhood and invites his readers to share his innocent and magical worldview at the time. Simultaneously, however, these descriptions trace Chamoiseau's socialisation as a *créole* subject – that is, his inheritance of the culture and traditions of Martinique's transracial and transcultural society; a sensibility and cultural knowledge his fictional and non-fictional oeuvre aims to keep alive.²

As a consequence, *Une enfance créole* features an aesthetics similar to most of his fictional work; the “imagination” or “sensibility,” whose development inspires the narrative of his childhood, clearly informs Chamoiseau's way of writing, of relating to the world. Much has been said and written about this aesthetics, but there seems to be a consensus that – inspired by *créole* deconstruction of racial categories and subversion of French language – it has a certain proximity to post-modernism (Ueckmann 2014, 14–16), or at least poststructuralist theory. One might argue that these markers – transracialism and transculturalism, cultural and linguistic subversion, deconstruction of the novel – have long been relevant in Caribbean literature beyond his work. Inspired by their societal reality, by poststructuralist criticism of Western cultural imperialism, postmodernist writing, magical realism, and other sources, writers such as Earl Lovelace, Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, or Dany Laferrière all experiment with a *hybrid* aesthetics to a greater or lesser extent.

The strategic thrust of this paper is not a generic eulogy or criticism of such experimental Caribbean writing. Rather, I want to propose a theoretical framework that would permit to specifically locate individual literary projects in the light of questions that are pressing today: To what extent is Chamoiseau's *créole* aesthetics able to address the lived reality of different social groups in Martinique? Torn between French republican universality and poststructuralist deconstruction of identity per se, does his writing still find ways to think and express differently gendered, racialised, or class-experiences of *créolité*? To what extent do his deconstruction of language and literary genre and his focus on ‘culture’ permit a material – social, or sociological – criticism? What is his take on social and ecological implications of the *modern* mode of living which seems antagonistic to pre-colonial, but also *créole* cultural forms? These are some of the questions my reflections on literary theory will need to be capable to address. But what is this contemporary moment that makes these questions – developed here at the example of Patrick Chamoiseau – so pressing?

1 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations into English are my own.

2 For Chamoiseau's theoretical interventions on the subject, see for example his *Écrire en pays dominé* (1997) or the influential *Éloge de la Créolité* (1989).

2 Post-postcolonialism and Caribbean literature

In his 1999 *Refashioning Futures. Criticism after Postcoloniality*, anthropologist and *Small Axe* editor David Scott sketches the moment he calls the *postcolonial present*. As the title of his study already suggests, this contemporary moment in artistic and philosophical discourse goes beyond the criticism of what has come to be known as the postcolonial school. In the postcolonial present, Scott argues, additional and new questions are relevant that exceed the anti-essentialist impetus of postcolonial deconstruction and put the emphasis on concrete social issues – even questioning the very constitution of “the social” (Scott 1999, 16).

The postcolonial present, as Scott describes it, is marked by a new global condition, “defined by the collapse of the Bandung project and, with the dismantling of the Soviet Union, of the international communist movement as well, and the rise of a revived/revised liberalism” (Scott 1999, 14). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the advance of neoliberalism Scott evokes here are crucial markers, as they seem to corroborate the longstanding promises of a Western idea of modernity. With Francis Fukuyama, who calls out the “end of history” in his 1992 *The End of History and the Last Man*, one could be tempted to declare the Hegelian dialectic development towards greater liberty to have reached its final phase. At the turn of the millennium, “liberal democracy remains the only coherent political aspiration that spans different regions and cultures around the globe,” Fukuyama (1992, xiii) writes, making a case for the (apparently indispensable) benefits of the ‘free market’ and its “limitless accumulation of wealth” (Fukuyama 1992, xiv). But while it is arguably true that ‘the West’ has triumphed over the socialist vision of modernity, the promise of a completed progression toward universal well-being has certainly not fulfilled itself after 1989. “On the whole, we are living better today”, Felwine Sarr (2017, 9) put it in his *Habiter le monde*. But:

The times we are living in, without yielding to alarmist disaster-mongering, are characterized by crises in various forms. Misery projects its multiple faces on them, namely economic and ecologic crises, the rise of violent nationalisms and religious extremism, terrorism, and the large-scale production of social inequalities and structural conditions of human indignity for a majority of individuals (Sarr 2017, 11).

The importance of 1989 for Scott’s postcolonial present is therefore not the *celebration* of Western modernity, but much rather the realisation that this ideology can serve as a solution to neither ecologic nor social issues. As opposed to the postcolonial school, whose central impetus lay in the deconstruction of (neo)colonial discourse, Scott argues that fundamentally new questions need to be asked today – going to the core of the very premise of Western modernity. Similarly *radical* approaches – which go to the *roots* of the issue – have of course existed

for a long time; one might think of Audrey Lorde's call to "dismantle the master's house" or Paulo Freire's *critical pedagogy*. But now that the principal and major alternative utopias have failed since 1989, the question of alternatives becomes ever more urgent.

If we turn to literature, the central focus of this paper, it is relevant to note that a similar argument has been advanced over the last years by a number of scholars working in literary and cultural studies, often criticising not postcolonial, but *post-structuralist* theory and *postmodernist* aesthetics. For the *post-post*-moment which they describe, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 arguably plays the same pivotal role: An important strand of contemporary literature foregrounds social questions, constituting what Wolfgang Asholt (2013) has called a *new literary realism*, and the search for adequate tools to address and analyze this new realism – and also older literature, but from a contemporary vantage point – is common to both these arguments one might describe as *post-postcolonial* and *post-postmodernist*.³

The new literary realism, this "desire to write about the Subject, the Real, about historical or personal memory" (Viar and Vercier 2008 [2005], 16), is 'political,' for a start, due to its ability to capture a societal sensibility of the present. It often is a melancholic sensibility, Markus Messling (2019, 19–20) writes, arguing that contemporary French literature, for example, "has returned its attention to the question of 'reality' and has brought to the fore the intensities haunting Europe today: uncertainty, rage, a yearning for ideals, melancholia." It is an inquisitive literature, a tentative one, that replaces the old European or 'Western' habit of self-assured interpretation. Thereby, the post-post momentum does not simply draw on pre-deconstructivist notions of 'essence' and 'truth' when describing social realities, but clearly is mindful of the insights of deconstruction. It is to this effect that Scott (1999, 14) argues: "There is a real sense in which we now write *in the wake* of Edward Saïd". Wolfgang Asholt (2013, 28–29), in his article on contemporary francophone literature, observes that despite the renewed interest in social realism, "all these writers have given up [. . .] on generalizing projects that would explain the 'real world' in its totality, or at least some of its social or cultural milieus." They inherit "the debates of postmodernity and of poststructuralism, even though they would less and less claim this 'theoretical' heritage openly. Therefore, if there is today such a thing as a narrative 'realism,' it can only be a fragmented one" (Asholt 2013, 28–29).

³ The terms *post-postcolonial* and *postcolonial present* (after Scott) are used interchangeably in this article. See also Graham Huggan's notion of *second wave postcolonialism* in his 2008 *Interdisciplinary Measures* and Lorna Burns' observations in her recent article "World Literature and the Problem of Postcolonialism" (Burns 2021).

It is in this sense that I understand the notion of *minor universality* to which this volume is dedicated: Poststructuralist and postcolonial discourse has dismantled the Western claim to universal values and knowledge as a potentially self-serving “rhetoric of power” (Wallerstein 2006; cf. Diagne 2018). Truth can no longer be found in universalist stances uttered from a presumably neutral position, but only in forms of situated, *minor* knowledge. Nevertheless, contemporary literature and thought go beyond the relativism and potential a-morality of continuous *deteritorialisaton* and postmodernist aesthetics, reintroducing notions of justice and lived experience that hold for social groups or society at large. What is crucial is the return of normative claims that can no longer be discarded (see Messling 2019, 173, 19–20). These approaches suggest a universality again. They permit to locate individual positions – of writers or characters, when it comes to literature –, but always in reference to social justice in society as a whole; they don’t give up the idea of global justice but look for it in forms of situated knowledge. The supposed universality of Western modernity has given way to a multitude of analyses of its pitfalls, a localised and *radical* questioning of *the social* and a decolonial quest for alternatives. It is a new *relation* to the world, Felwine Sarr (2017) contends, which both literary projects and their critics are looking for. As privileged sites for reflection and self-invention through narration and aesthetics, literature and art play a crucial role in the quest for these minor universalities and for the profound questioning of modernity it entails.

Against this backdrop, my question as a literary scholar in Caribbean studies is how to read Caribbean literature in the postcolonial present. What are literary and cultural approaches from and about the region that provide insights into the post-postcolonial moment? To what extent can the insights of post-postmodernism be relevant to Caribbean literature? I thereby start from the premise that a simple ‘application’ of (Western) post-postmodernist theories to Caribbean literary studies would be a perpetuation of western universalism; it would be a form of epistemic violence – the West producing again all knowledge, this time of its own deconstruction – and would risk missing some of the crucial elements of situated knowledge. At the same time, trying to neatly separate the West from the non-West would be artificial and equally misleading, as concepts are notoriously travelling and supposedly ‘Western’ knowledge has often long been appropriated by the Global South, as Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us in *Provincializing Europe* (2000). The very concepts and traditions of poststructuralism and postcolonialism, for example, have mutually influenced each other and are entangled through the common tool of deconstruction.⁴ In

4 While Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her famous *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988 [1985]), dis-cards Deleuze and Foucault on principle as idealists, Jacques Derrida, for example, in both

the following I therefore propose weaving together different positions that might foster a better understanding of the post-postcolonial problem space and of how to approach contemporary Caribbean literature – or rather, how to approach Caribbean literature per se, contemporary or not, from our present moment of relation to the world, bearing in mind the political and epistemological struggles they have been waging at given moments in time. Thereby, the notion of *transculturality* or *cultural hybridity* will repeatedly play a role. As a longstanding subject of discussion in the Caribbean, this notion has been widely used as a central aspect of postcolonial theory. While earlier criticism has already been pointing to some epistemological issues with the concept – such as its racist baggage (Young 1995; Krämer 2015) – or has tried to develop new concepts capable of breaking with this baggage (see Derrida 1972 [1971], or Ette and Wirth 2014, 10), I will argue here that the postcolonial present demands an analysis of the role it has played in various social contexts.

3 Rancière's politics of literature and aesthetics

If we intend to trace the return to social questions in literature after a period of postmodernist writing (or evaluate earlier writing for its social criticism), and if it is true that contemporary literature often comes in the form of a new, fragmented realism, the question of *aesthetics* is crucial. How to determine whether the composite writing of Edwidge Danticat, Patrick Chamoiseau, or Junot Díaz, for example, originate in a postmodernist logic of *anything goes*, the aesthetics of “late capitalism” (Jameson 1991), or in a form of social realism? In what sense would their writing be more than the postmodern self-sufficient aesthetics and become *political*, this is, relevant beyond the framework of artistic propositions itself?

Jacques Rancière's *Politique de la littérature* (2010 [2007]) is a seminal study on the interplay of aesthetics, realism, and social structures, and it has proven useful for an analysis of new realist literature (Messling 2019). Therefore, one of the axes I explore is whether his engagement with nineteenth-century French bourgeois realism can be of use for the analysis of Caribbean literature in the postcolonial present, and how it connects to other scholarship in and on the region.

L'autre cap (1991) and *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (1996), points towards the anti-colonial background to his notion of deconstruction. See also Kwame Anthony Appiah's “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” (1991).

Rancière bases his approach to literature on his broader argument concerning the politics of art. This argument starts with an extra-textual case for what he calls the “distribution of the perceptible” (*le partage du sensible*) – the discursive and material structure of society:

This distribution and this redistribution of space and time, place and identity, speech and noise, the visible and the invisible, form what I call the distribution of the perceptible. Political activity reconfigures the distribution of the perceptible. It introduces new objects and subjects onto the common stage (Rancière 2010 [2007], 4).

Politics, for Rancière, is therefore not simply the implementation of political laws and decisions or the struggle for the power to decide on them, but the more general “configuration of a specific form of community” (2010 [2007], 3) which is lived on an experimental level as the distribution of the perceptible. Consequently, the politics of literature, or even of art more generally, is the way literature / art makes a particular distribution of the perceptible tangible through their aesthetics.

Beginning his analysis at the onset of the modern concept of literature, when around 1800 the term *literature* comes to denote the art of writing, replacing its prior significance as written scholarly knowledge, Rancière focusses on Flaubert and the bourgeois realism of the time, but his approach to aesthetic products is not confined to this time and genre. The same can be said for Pierre Bourdieu’s *Les règles de l’art* (1992), which equally analyses Flaubert’s literature in its capacity to shape the newly developing literary field, but also simply in its (realist) engagement with contemporaneous social structures. If apparently both Bourdieu and Rancière find that Flaubert’s oeuvre “supplies all the tools necessary for its own [. . .] analysis” (Bourdieu 1995 [1992], 3), this can potentially be argued for most aesthetic projects engaged with extra-textual social reality, whether contemporary autosociobiographic writing, magical realism, or Afrofuturism. These approaches to understand aesthetics in relation to the extra-textual are useful for our interest in the determination of a new realism and the realist potential of literature influenced by deconstruction.

While realism obviously endeavours to portray reality, the politics of its literature does not pretend to simply reproduce this reality, however. Realism is not simply a fictionalised rendering of social structures, as Rancière makes clear from the beginning of his study. The politics of literature, he writes, does not concern “the way writers represent social structures, political movements or various identities in their books” (2010 [2007], 4). Instead of focusing on the presentation of these structures and movements – which constitute, after all, the distribution of the perceptible – Rancière focuses on the aesthetics of literature. But what is this *eigenvalue* literature can conserve when it comes to the critique of social reality?

This question is crucial since postmodernist and modernist art has often been reproached of a self-sufficient and ultimately elitist obsession with aesthetics. How can art claim to engage with social reality while being, by definition, removed from it through the process of fictionalisation? As Nick Nesbitt (2003, 207) has it, there is a guilt attached to any aesthetic representation of suffering, for “in speaking of suffering, in representing it aesthetically, the writer participates in a theft in which images are taken from the living and, perhaps worse still, from the dead, and merely represented”. This is the reproach Chris Bongie (2008, 322–324), for example, brings to Édouard Glissant’s emphasis on the poetic (*le poétique*). Nesbitt and Bongie stress the importance of self-conscious, at least partially metafictional writing in breaking this remove. But can there also be, thinking with Rancière, a valid politics within the aesthetic itself?

Markus Messling argues that literary *eigenvalue*, for Rancière, consists in the potential of language to develop a new understanding of, and a new approach to, society. Instead of showcasing a mirror-image of the world, nineteenth-century realism, in his understanding, wants to “generate an *intensity* impossible to resolve through existing notions of emotions, producing a sensation in the reader which has yet to be named” (Messling 2019, 39–40, emphasis added). An aesthetics, in this way, might well be able to search for and express new approaches to reality; intentionally or despite itself. This is what Messling calls *Welthaltigkeit*, “an intensity through which an author gets to the heart of a knowledge about their time” (2019, 39), and what Viart and Vercier call a *poétique de la langue*, “which, without wanting to imitate, voices the Real in its very intensity” (2008 [2005], 218).

I suggest that this approach to literature and aesthetics can be highly relevant in the light of our postcolonial present with its necessity not simply to criticise social injustices within the existing tools of the modern framework, but to go to the core of the social as such. This analysis is at the same time necessarily a decolonial one, but the emphasis has shifted with respect to the decolonisation of the 1960s or the school of postcolonial studies:

This is what the postcolonial present demands. Rather than the anticolonial problem of overthrowing colonialism (or the West), or the decolonization of the West’s representation of the non-West, what is important for this present is a critical interrogation of the practices, modalities, and projects through which modernity inserted itself into and altered the lives of the colonized (Scott 1999, 17).

We might want to ask: What is the relation to modernity – or *modern power*, as Scott calls the colonial “discourse of progress and improvement” (1999, 16) – that speaks out of a given novel? What problems and emotions does this modernity produce in the logic of the novel? Which alternatives are being explored, and to

what results? This approach will permit not only for the reader to think and *live* differently in relation to the pitfalls of modernity and Western universalism, but also to come to a clearer evaluation of aesthetic projects inspired by cultural hybridity and deconstruction; it speaks to recent novels (Jamaica Kincaid's 2013 *See Now Then*, for example, in which a new language is being crafted to capture the despair and rage of an unhappily married West Indian woman) as much as to older ones (such as Andrew Salkey's 1960 *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* whose aesthetics transports the emotional tensions of West Indian gay men in 1950s London; cf. Ellis 2015a).

Reading Caribbean literature with a focus on aesthetics, and the intensities this aesthetics produces in its confrontation with the premises of modernity, draws a heightened attention to the time and space of utterance as well as the speaking subject, both on an intra- and an extra-textual level. If minor universality is always produced in concrete, subjective instances, what are these instances for the narrator and characters, but potentially also the author of a novel? Whose sensibility is being expressed, and by whom? What are their lived realities? These questions are crucial, because the politics of any given novel or artwork are highly personal in their reaction to social reality: Rancière traces the democratic aesthetics in Flaubert's post-revolutionary bourgeois realism, but all other sensibilities on the political and moral spectrum are possible; we might think, for example, of the horror in settler-colonial guilt of a Kenneth Cook or the lament of white male privileges of a Michel Houellebecq. Rancière himself avows that his politics of literature is a *metapolitics*, "leaving the great racket of the democratic stage to the orators in order to tunnel into the depths of society" (Rancière 2010 [2007], 21); it permits locating the politics of an aesthetics without inherent tools to judge its propositions. As an analytic instrument, it remains a-moral, the very term *intensity* carrying the epistemological baggage of poststructuralist a-morality. In order not simply to describe, but also to evaluate a specific politics of literature, it is therefore necessary to bring extra-textual knowledge to the reading of the text.

4 Stuart Hall's cultural studies approach

The generation of extra-textual knowledge, crucial for the evaluation of a text's aesthetic propositions, has often been achieved through a transdisciplinary dialogue between literary and social sciences in recent years. A forerunner of this dialogue between literary and social sciences is the field of cultural studies, both its continental and its British strand, that started in the 1950s and 1960s and regards literary texts as part of the larger context of cultural production. It will therefore

not come as a surprise that David Scott cites Stuart Hall, the long-time director (1969–1979) and maybe most prominent voice of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, as a major influence on his thinking. In a similar vein, Nadia Ellis, in a 2011 survey of Caribbean literary critique at the turn of the millennium, observes a “striking methodological shift towards the incorporation of cultural studies approaches into more traditional literary criticism” (Ellis 2011, 136–137), pointing to the disciplines heightened relevance in contemporary criticism. I therefore propose that cultural studies, and more specifically the work of Stuart Hall, is an important entry point into the study of Caribbean literature in the postcolonial present.

We have seen that Ashold observes a *fragmented* realism in contemporary literature, which does not claim one universal Truth while still crafting *minor* truths and knowledge through narration. The same can be said for literary theory and its connection to social sciences. The problem space of the *post-post* does not centre deconstruction as its main impulse anymore, but clearly inherits it as an epistemological necessity. Therefore, in theory as in literature, insights into social reality now need to be explorative.⁵

In an extensive interview with Scott for the first issue of *Small Axe* in 1996, Stuart Hall already displays a very similar understanding, embracing the heritage of deconstruction while simultaneously claiming the possibility to name *formations* and *articulations of power*. This is evident, for example, in the quote from the interview Scott chooses as an epigraph for his introduction of *Refashioning Futures*, where Hall says: “I honour the moment that I am trying to surpass [. . .]. I’m not afraid of positionalities. I am afraid of taking positionalities too seriously” (Hall and Scott 2019 [1996], 258). Three central analytic tools that are helpful to Hall in this approach are the notions of strategy, contingency, and conjuncture, Scott proposes in his foreword to the interview:

Hall is preeminently a strategic intellectual. Because he has given up the epistemological preoccupation with First Principles, with the search for a Final Philosophical Ground of True Knowledge, his approach to political questions depends crucially on such concepts as “contingency” and “conjuncture.” That is to say, it depends on reading, at any given historical moment, the play of social forces and discursive hegemonies, and on identifying the

5 This is the approach of scholars such as Laurent Demanze (*Un nouvel âge de l'enquête*, 2019) who is interested in contemporary textual forms he calls *récits d'enquête*, narratives of investigation, that draw on journalism and empirical sciences, blending fiction and non-fiction – not in a positivist search for ‘truth,’ but for tangible social realities. Or of Ivan Jablonka (*L'histoire est une littérature contemporaine*, 2014), who argues that the nineteenth-century’s division between ‘literature’ and the social sciences is not tenable anymore.

move that will produce a shift in the cognitive-political configuration (Scott in Hall and Scott 2019 [1996], 235).

Scott here reads Hall as a forerunner to the problem space of the postcolonial present whose cultural studies approach analyses a certain *conjuncture* – that is, the entanglement between discourse and social forces at a given moment – with the intention to advance the possibilities of thinking and acting upon it. Scott’s observation thereby comes very close to Hall’s formulations in his influential 1992 essay “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?”:

I begin with a question: what sort of moment is this in which to pose the question of black popular culture? These moments are always *conjunctural*. They have their historical specificity; and although they always exhibit similarities and continuities with the other moments in which we pose a question like this, they are never the same moment. And the combination of what is similar and what is different defines not only the specificity of the moment, but the specificity of the question, and therefore the *strategies* of cultural politics with which we attempt to intervene in popular culture, and the form and style of cultural theory and criticizing that has to go along with such an intermatch (Hall 1992, 21, emphases added).

Hall’s essay, following this introduction, can be read as an endeavor to spell out the conjuncture, that is, the conjunctions or *entanglements* within the aesthetical / political / economic field in which black popular culture finds itself at the historical moment Hall alludes to and which he calls *the global postmodern*. His interest in popular culture connects to the general argument of cultural studies, moving away from elitist views on cultural expression in order to ‘read’ the semiotic propositions of a wide range of cultural products. By turning from his ‘orthodox’ Marxist training toward Althusser’s notion of *ideology*, Hall refines the argument of base and superstructure, arguing for a more complex analysis of social and economic forces and cultural expression, including literature. Having witnessed the colonial structure of class differences during his childhood in Jamaica, Hall’s turn away from high culture thereby goes along with a turn away from Western hegemony over the notion of *culture*. The growing importance of popular culture, connected to American cultural hegemony, in conjunction with the rising prominence of “decolonized sensibilities” (Hall 1992, 22), maps the field of black popular culture to which much of his work is dedicated. Significantly, the location of these decolonised sensibilities within the global postmodern, their politics and aesthetics, have little to do with a playful *anything goes*; Hall reads them as “modernism in the streets” (Hall 1992, 22). This approach, that is, to read aesthetic expression and sensibility (in the sense of both Hall and Rancière) *in conjunction* with the social, political, and discursive forces they are shaped by and they respond to, is what the postcolonial present demands.

5 Bourdieu and literary sociology

Before probing the notion of conjunctural reading some more in the last part of this essay, I return first to the usage of social sciences in literary studies, and more specifically to the relationship between author, society, and aesthetic propositions. I believe that we can gain important insights into the entanglements that Hall is interested in through the tools of literary sociology, a field which has gained in prominence in recent years. Both approaches – cultural studies as well as literary sociology, and connections to social sciences more broadly – can generate the extra-textual knowledge necessary for an aesthetical analysis of literature that would be *political* in Rancière’s sense of the term.

Interestingly, perhaps the most influential study in literary sociology, Pierre Bourdieu’s *Les règles de l’art* (1995 [1992]), equally bases its analysis on the literature of Flaubert – on his 1869 novel *L’éducation sentimentale* to be precise –, and like Rancière, it declares to find all the clues for its ‘political’ analysis in the novel itself. Bourdieu generates the necessary background knowledge to these clues through sociological insights, however; both with regards to society, and to the individual author. How Rancière as a philosopher generates this knowledge is less clear.

In the beginning of his study, Bourdieu challenges the longstanding argument of the independence of ‘pure’ art, asking: “Is it true that scientific analysis is doomed to destroy that which makes for the specificity of the literary work and of reading, beginning with aesthetic pleasure?” (Bourdieu 1995 [1992], xvi). While Rancière salvages literary *eigenvalue* through a focus on the aesthetic, Bourdieu simply proceeds to redefine aesthetic *pleasure*. Instead of purely intra-textual formal craftsmanship, it is a deeper understanding of the social criticism inherent in a given novel – “that is to say, its informing formula, its generative principle, its *raison d’être*” (Bourdieu 1995 [1992], xix) – that makes reading enjoyable; the act of reintroducing into an “apparently self-contained literary space [. . .] the neglected ‘margins’ of the text, all that ordinary commentators leave aside” (Bourdieu 1995 [1992], xviii). While more formalist literary scholars have reclaimed a certain *incomprehensibility*, *ineffability*, or *transcendence* in their readings of Flaubert according to Bourdieu (1995 [1992], xvi),⁶ he himself shows that one may “construct the social space of *Sentimental Education* by relying for landmarks on the clues that Flaubert

⁶ Glissant’s notion of *opacité* might lend itself to similar readings and will require a more extensive analysis.

supplies in abundance and on the various ‘networks’ that social practices of cooptation such as receptions, soirees and friendly gatherings reveal” (1995 [1992], 5).

The shift that Bourdieu – but also Scott, Rancière, and Hall – effect in literary studies is a fundamental one. They break with the *dictum* of the *death of the author* and make the long-standing distinctions between author, narrator, and characters somewhat more complicated. This does not mean, evidently, that authors simply fictionalise their own lived experiences and that the logic of a novel needs to be linked back to its author’s biography. Instead, an author obviously invents and thereby *chooses* the intensities unfolding in the fictional social space. But the latter can potentially find its counterpart in an actual social space, in the case of literary realisms habitually linked to the author’s own experiences and sensibilities. In his discussion of *L’éducation sentimentale*, Bourdieu goes as far as to suggest that Flaubert sees in his main character, Frédéric, “an enterprise of *objectification of the self*, of autoanalysis, of socioanalysis,” but that by the very act of “writing a story which could have been his, he shows that this story of a failure could not be the story of the person who wrote it” (1995 [1992], 25–26).

This becomes even more complicated in the various contemporary genres of *creative nonfiction*, *literary journalism*, and so on, and in what Annie Ernaux calls *autosociobiography*. In these genres, the author often does assume the position of both narrator and main character. While studies on autosociobiographical writing frequently focus on Ernaux, Didier Eribon, and Édouard Louis, whose interest in sociology is evident, rereading the autobiographies of various Caribbean authors in this light is also generative, as I have suggested in my Prelude with reference to Patrick Chamoiseau’s autobiographical, and even, one might suggest, autosociobiographical, publications.

While Bourdieu’s text-immanent analysis of Flaubert gives credit to the author to affect his own social analysis and criticism, others have conducted extra-textual sociological analyses on an author’s social background or on the reception and circulation of their work (see e.g. Gesine Müller’s *How is World Literature Made?* 2022). However, taking a sociological approach to Caribbean literature or using sociological insights for an aesthetic analysis does not claim the complete determination of writers by social structures. Just as the notion of *habitus* was conceived to prevent that an agent would “disappear” by reducing them “to the role of supporter or bearer (Träger) of the structure” (Bourdieu 1995 [1992], 179), literary sociology is mindful of the author’s ability to make their own choices:

[S]cientific analysis of the social conditions of the production and reception of a work of art [. . .] seems to abolish the singularity of the ‘creator’ in favour of the relations which made the work intelligible, only better to rediscover it at the end of the task of reconstructing the space in which the author finds himself encompassed and included as a point (Bourdieu 1995 [1992], xix).

This eventual *rediscovery* of the author's individual choices and positions with respect to social structures permits association to a specific socially locatable habitus or believe system by "either filiation or affiliation," as Rodolphe Solbiac (2020, 75) puts it in a recent socio-historical study on Martinique. An approach of literary sociology therefore requires both, an insight into the structures of a given society more generally and into the individual positions of an author, in order to make sense of a novel's aesthetic propositions.

6 Shalini Puri's conjunctural reading

I close with an intriguing example of a sociological study that I consider fundamental for an understanding of the Caribbean postcolonial present and contemporary literary sociology. Shalini Puri's *The Caribbean Postcolonial* (2004), which carries the subtitle *Social Equality, Post-Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity*, goes to the core of the post-postcolonial problem space and can serve as a solid base for a reassessment of literary hybridity, both through its insights and its methodology.

The Caribbean Postcolonial is a social analysis of the various concepts of 'cultural hybridity,' such as *mestizaje*, *créolisation* and *Créolité*, *douglarisation*, *jibarismo*, and others, thereby approaching postcolonial notions with post-postcolonial criticism. "At the core of my work is the belief that we need to connect a poetics of hybridity to a politics of equality," Puri (2004, 1) writes, pointing to the connection between aesthetics, discourse, and politics her study effects.

Puri starts by acknowledging some of the epistemological criticism that has been brought forward against the notion of 'cultural hybridity,' such as the aforementioned conceptual legacy it carries of the Victorian extreme Right's discourse on race (Puri 2004, 4) or its reliance on concepts of *nationalism* as a "structuring absence" (Puri 2004, 27). However, her main criticism is another one, aiming at the sociopolitical mobilisations of the various notions of hybridity in given historical contexts. Significantly, the concept she employs for this post-postcolonial analysis is the same we have already encountered in Scott's reading of Stuart Hall: *conjunctural reading*, a notion she herself develops from a quote by Ella Shohat:

A celebration of syncretism and hybridity per se, if not articulated in conjunction with questions of hegemony and neo-colonial power relations, runs the risk of appearing to sanctify the *fait accompli* of colonial violence. [. . .] As a descriptive catch-all term, hybridity per se fails to discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity, for example, forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political cooptation, social conformism, cultural mimicry, and creative transcendence (Shohat 1992, 109–10).

Similar to Hall, Puri uses the notions of *conjuncture* and *conjunction* to address aesthetic concepts “in relation to material and discursive issues at the time” (Puri 2004, 52). Conjunctural reading permits her to lay bare the origins of various notions of hybridity, the classist, racialised, and gendered interests that are connected to them and the political purposes they may serve. Another recent example of a similar undertaking is Deborah Thomas’ *Modern Blackness*, also from 2004. Like Puri, Thomas elaborates the social and historical background to notions of cultural hybridity, but with a focus on the specific case of the Jamaican People’s National Party’s “mid-twentieth-century creole multiracial nationalism” (Thomas 2004, 48).

The insights and the methodology of both Puri’s and Thomas’ studies are instructive in the light of my discussion of the postcolonial present. Not only do they engage critically with postcolonial notions of cultural hybridity, they are also driven by a radical enquiry into the classist, racialised, and gendered foundations of *the social* in Caribbean societies. Connecting this form of *conjunctural reading* to a thorough investigation of the aesthetic politics displayed in a given novel could be a promising way of reading Caribbean literature in the wake of Scott’s *Refashioning Futures*, and it might draw us closer to the *minor universalities* proposing responses to the crises of Western modernity, in the Caribbean and beyond.

7 Coda

An investigation of literary and cultural theory, this chapter has perhaps raised more questions than it provided answers. The issues proposed at the example of Patrick Chamoiseau in the beginning have not been resolved, but rather multiplied and complicated with reference to the postcolonial present. They have given way to a more general reflection on Caribbean literature within the current problem space, be it forms of ‘hybrid’ writing, contemporary new realism, or other literary projects we might want to reread from our contemporary vantage point. The Caribbean has itself brought forth an important corpus of literature and literary scholarship. Nevertheless, I hope that the connection of post-postcolonialism to post-postmodernism may elucidate some aspects of the study of literature from the region, and that it does not lead to a lack in specificity, but rather foster this specificity in the prerogative of conjunctural reading.

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