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Self-Reflexivity and Generic Change in 21st-Century Black British Women's Literature

This doctoral research project seeks to gain further insight into how self-reflexivity intervenes in the process of generic change, specifically in 21st-century novelistic fiction by British women authors with African and African-Caribbean heritage.[1] By scrutinizing recent texts that deploy self-reflexive strategies to call attention to their own fictionality or constructedness (i.e., metafiction, see Hutcheon 2013; 1980), it aims to explore how crossings between self-reflexive strategies and genre conventions shape contemporary meaning-making processes. In doing so, the project updates traditional theories of metafiction, which have tended to dissociate self-reflexivity from realism and political engagement (Upstone 2015). Whereas pioneering studies of Black metafiction centred on its political function in an American, 20th-century context (Jablon 1992), this project, instead, explores the intersection between aesthetic, political, and cultural affordances of self-reflexivity in postmillennial texts by Black-British women authors, specifically Natasha Brown, Sarah Collins, Helen Oyeyemi, Zadie Smith, Patience Agbabi, Andrea Levy, and Bernardine Evaristo.

The project's affordance-based approach takes inspiration from the transmedial framework developed by Werner Wolf (2009) and new-formalist theory (Levine 2015; Sullivan 2021). Bringing together foundational theories of metafiction with feminist and postcolonial approaches to aesthetic experimentation, the project hopes to contribute to a revision of the gendered nature of the hegemonic theoretical discourse and to redress the field's almost exclusive focus on white male authors and Eurocentric conceptions of literature (see also hooks 2002; Ommundsen 1992; Fenstermaker 2008; Mwangi 2009). Moreover, in line with the 'aesthetic turn' in Black British studies (posited by Sommer 2007; Bekers / Cousins 2021), this study of Black British metafiction counters the historical tendency in postcolonial studies to overlook experimental works and treat Black authors as sociological informants, rather than artists.

As a methodological cornerstone, the project combines Alistair Fowler's (1982) distinction between genre development and genre multiplication with cognitive approaches to genre (Sinding 2005; Allen 2020; Gibbons 2022). Moreover, it relies on previous conceptualizations of metagenres that have emerged in contemporary literature (Barth 1997; Nünning 2004; Gymnich 2007; Zymner 2010; Hauthal 2013). Considering the criticism that merely "classifying texts as a method of analysis […] is a circular way of reasoning" (Bal 2017, 20), the analysis is interested in how genres are foregrounded, combined, and innovated, rather than in the attribution of labels. To analyse how a text self-reflexively foregrounds genre, the project proposes to distinguish between genre-reflexivity and metageneric reference, modelled on Wolf's (2009)distinction between self-reflexivity and metareference.

[1] This doctoral research is funded by the Research Organisation – Flanders (FWO) (junior research project with grant number FWOAL1007).

Moreover, genres can be understood as cultural institutions that direct readers' interpretation (Rupp 2010). The increasing popularity of politically engaged metafiction that self-consciously foregrounds this function of genre mirrors recent evolutions in media literacy, which become observable in criticism and readerly tastes (Sperber 2000; Mäkelä and Meretoja 2022). Hence, the analysis will demonstrate that contemporary metafiction instils in readers a sense of "new-responsibility" (Shaw & Upstone 2021), by eliciting a readerly awareness of the interconnectedness between aesthetic conventions, cultural institutions, and political meaning-making.

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