Birgit Spengler

Literary Spinoffs

Rewriting the Classics – Re-Imagining the Community

campus

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Introduction

In the spring and summer of 2001, a literary "case" kept readers of the *New York Times* and other American dailies busy. Like other literary headlines, this case involved central aspects of the United States's literary and cultural heritage—questions as to the ways cherished authors of the past and their *oeuvres* "live" in the contemporary imagination, how they are constructed in popular and academic discourses, and what effect the publication of new or hitherto unknown material has on such constructs. However, Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* was a case in the literary *and* the literal sense of the word: a novel that triggered a lawsuit and fostered debates concerning the nature of creativity, intellectual property, and cultural communication—about who "owns" culture and whether literary and cultural artefacts and the imaginative realms associated with them constitute "private" terrains that can or should be protected from trespassing, or a "commons" available to the imaginative strolls, or even extended excursions, of all.[1]

The Wind Done Gone put the limelight onto a type of text that proliferates in contemporary literature and that I will refer to as "literary spinoff." As applied in the following, the term "spinoff" describes fictional texts that take their cues from famous, and often canonical, works of literature, which they revise, rewrite, adapt or appropriate as a whole or in parts, thus producing alternative voices and/or historical or geographical re-locations for texts that are generally well known to contemporary audiences—be it because of their status as cultural classics and long-term readers' favorites, or because of their medial presence in cinema or tv versions.[2] Specifically, Randall imag-

1 I am developing an imagery used by copyright expert James Boyle in *The Public Domain: Enclosing the Commons of the Mind*. Lawrence Lessig, too, speaks of the dangers of intellectual property becoming "feudal" (xvi). A related imagery is also prevalent in Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, and in Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers*.

2 The term was first applied to literary rewritings by Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier in their study of contemporary Shakespeare appropriations (cf. Sanders, *Shakespeares* 1). The *OED* defines a "spin-off" or "spinoff" as a "by-product, an incidental development,

ines the story of a female (ex-)slave from the Tara Plantation of Margaret Mitchell's Civil War epos *Gone With the Wind*. As Scarlett's half-sister and Rhett Butler's mistress, Cyanara's story unveils an alternative vision of the "Old South," one that includes miscegenation, gay relationships, and the death, both actually and symbolically, of the Southern heroine. The "danger" that plot elements such as these pose to the "myth" disseminated by Mitchell's novel and its famous film version becomes apparent when considering the Mitchell estate's considerable efforts to protect it: In fact, Randall broke each of the conditions that are pre-requisites for authorized rewritings, continuations, or prequels—no miscegenation, no homosexuality, and the survival of the heroine.[3]

Although most contemporary spinoff novels do not start their public careers as court cases, *The Wind Done Gone* highlights a problem increasingly encountered by writers who propose to explicitly rework the popularly and/or critically esteemed texts of the past and the cultural heritages associated with them: Just like *The Wind Done Gone*, J. D. California's parodic reprise of Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), *60 Years Later: Coming Through the Rye* (2009) has recently triggered a lawsuit, as did *Lo's Diary* by Pia Pera, a rewriting of *Lolita*, on the eve of its publication in English translation (1999), and, on the other side of the Atlantic, the Astrid Lindgren retelling *Die doppelte Pippielotta* in 2009. As the back and forth between the lawyers of the Mitchell estate, Randall's defenders, and the affidavits of literary and scholarly heavyweights such as Toni Morrison, Harper Lee, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Linda Hutcheon, and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. demonstrate, the question as to who "owns" culture, and who may claim the leeway to meddle with powerful mental images and interpretatory traditions as conveyed by literary texts, hits the nerve of the time and has far-reaching consequences. Not the least, these include the bases of plurality in societies increasingly determined by ownership and the accumulation of resources in the hands of a power-

side-effect, or benefit," specifically as "a show, television programme, etc. developed from an idea or character in another." I am using the term to refer to a specific form of contemporary rewriting, i.e., fictional texts that "spin off" earlier works of literature in a way that challenges our understanding of the pre-textual world. As will be clear from my analyses, I do not regard such texts as "something that is [merely] imitative or derivative of an earlier work, product, or establishment" as suggested in the *Merriam Webster Dictionary*.

3 Cf. Pat Conroy's account of the Mitchell estate's handling of prospective rewritings or sequels.

ful few as well as by an increasing control of processes of social and cultural meaning-making that is a consequence of the above.[4]

Accordingly, and despite its somewhat unusual—although by no means singular—"career," the engagement with powerful myths and narratives of the past renders *The Wind Done Gone* an apt representative of what in fact constitutes a contemporary and timely genre as I will argue in the following. As characteristic of texts of this emerging literary tradition, *The Wind Done Gone* signals and even openly "advertises" its intertextual nature in the title and through other paratextual markers, as well as by means of shared characters and/or plot elements.[5] Through such striking gestures of affiliation, literary spinoffs direct their readers to a mode of reception that will acknowledge the text's deliberate association with a literary predecessor and take it into account. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), a rewriting of *Jane Eyre* (1848) and one of the founding texts of the genre, Jean Rhys resurrects the lost voice of Antoinette Cosway alias Bertha Mason, thus telling a well-known story from a previously neglected perspective and establishing a pattern that turned out to be extremely attractive to following generations of writers, including, just over the past twenty years and in the United States alone, Sena Jeter Naslund, Michael Cunningham, Jane Smiley, Geraldine Brooks, Anita

4 I will come back to the legal dimensions of spinoff fiction along with issues of copyright and questions of intellectual property in my discussion of the cultural work of the genre in chapter three. See also Spengler, "Geiselnahme," for Randall's and California's "cases," and Boyle, Lessig, and Siva Vaidhyanathan for a discussion of developments in copyright law. For an alternative point of view, see Dimitri Nabokov's preface to the English translation of Pera's novel, where he argues that "what was on the endangered list was not freedom of inspiration and expression, but the very principle of copyright" (ix) and dismisses writers like Pera as "plundering […] free riders" (ix) who produce "derivative work[s]" (x).

5 In the following, I will use the term "intertextuality" rather than Gérard Genette's "transtextuality" as an umbrella term to refer to the phenomenon of a text drawing on and relating to other texts. I will use the term "pre-text" to refer to a text's literary predecessor, i.e., in a sense that is largely congruent with Genette's "hypotext" (*Palimpsests* 9, 15). The term pre-text is also a play on words: It describes a text that precedes another text temporally, but it can also be read in the sense of "pretext" or excuse. In this sense, a literary predecessor provides a pretext for writing another story. Thus, the term raises but ultimately rejects the idea of subsidiariness: If a given pre-text is just a "pretext" for writing, the supposedly "subsidiary" work has its own agenda but uses the other text as a "hook" or "vehicle." I will use the term "intertext" for other literary or discursive contexts evoked in the spinoff's intertextual "game."

Diamond, Jon Clinch, Nancy Rawles, Cynthia Ozick, E.L. Doctorow, and Mat Johnson.[6]

In a less temporally and geographically determined context, the remarkable proliferation of spinoffs, especially in the 1990s and 2000s, becomes even more apparent, with considerable contributions from British and postcolonial contexts such as *Foe* (J. M. Coetzee, 1986), *Two Women of London* (Emma Tennant, 1989), *Mary Reilly* (Valerie Martin, 1990), *Indigo* (Marina Warner, 1992), *Tess* (Tennant, 1993), *Jack Maggs* (Peter Carey, 1997), *Windward Heights* (Maryse Conde, 1999), *Dorian* (Will Self, 2002), and *Mr Pip* (Lloyd Jones, 2006)—let alone less intensive or less demonstrative "rewritings" such as *The True Adventures of Lizzie Newton* (Smiley, 1998) and *Ragtime* (Doctorow, 1991), as well as earlier, and more playful postmodernist uses of intertextuality like Kathy Acker's *Great Expectations* (1982) and *Don Quixote* (1986), Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), *Snow White* (1967) by Donald Barthelme, and John Fowles's pastiche, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969).[7] Beyond the English language context, novels such as Pera's aforementioned *Lo's Diary* (originally entitled *Diario di Lo*, 1995), *Die Neuen Leiden des jungen W.* (1972) by Ulrich Plenzdorf, and Christa Wolf's *Kassandra* (1983) could be added to this fragmentary list.[8] The great number and variety of spinoffs and rewrit-

6 See Naslund's *Sherlock in Love* (1993) and *Ahab's Wife* (1999), Cunningham's *The Hours* (1999) and *Specimen Days* (2005), as well as *March* (2005) by Geraldine Brooks, *The Red Tent* (1997, Diamond), *Finn* (2007, Clinch), *My Jim* (2005, Rawles), *Foreign Bodies* (2011, Ozick), "Wakefield" (2008, Doctorow), *A Thousand Acres* (Smiley, 1991), and *Pym* (2011, Johnson). See also earlier updates by John Updike, *S* (1988) and *Roger's Version* (1986), as well as *Hester* (1994) and *Pearl* (1995), a pre- and sequel to *The Scarlet Letter* by British scholar Christopher Bigsby.

7 Another recent example of a less demonstrative rewriting is Victoria Patterson's *This Vacant Paradise* (2011), an update of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Louis Bayard's *The Pale Blue Eye* (2006) is taking its cue from Edgar Allan Poe's life and *oeuvre*, but does not constitute a rewriting or continuation of any particular work. A prominent and early rewriting in the genre of drama rather than fiction is Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966).

8 See especially Christian Moraru, Liedeke Plate, and Marion Kühn for important, relatively recent studies of processes of rewriting. I am concerned with a specific form of rewriting that can be considered a genre in its own right and that comes close to what Peter Widdowson describes as "re-visionary" fiction, although I do not conceive of spinoffs as a subgenre of historiographic metafiction, and my ideas about the functions and results of intertextual dialogues are more varied. I am especially interested in the theoretical, aesthetic, and communicative dimensions of the phenomenon as well as in the specific forms of cultural work the genre and specific texts perform.

ings in general not only demonstrates the popularity of intertextual aesthetic practices during the past decades, but also that the boundaries between spinoffs in the narrow sense defined above and other forms of rewritings are fluid.[9] Perhaps the proliferation and success of the genre can best be demonstrated by the fact that fictional authors of spinoff novels have themselves begun to populate the pages of literary fiction, as is the case in Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), whose eponymous fictional authoress retrieves Molly Bloom from her reductionist portrayal in her extremely successful spinoff novel *The House on Eccles Street*.[10]

Viewing spinoffs as a contemporary genre has at least two important implications.[11] First of all, it is based on the assumption that forms of intertextuality are culturally and historically situated. In other words, specific forms of intertextuality emerge—or are particularly frequently employed—in specific historical and cultural contexts, and their aesthetic strategies and "ends" or "functions" are therefore by no means "uniform" or "universal" within literary and cultural history. Some intertextual forms are closely related to specific periods of literary history, whereas others, such as parody, have been firmly established as literary forms, genres, or techniques for centuries. Moreover, due to political climates, cultural preoccupations, aesthetic inclinations, and epistemological or discursive contexts, some periods in the literary histories of Western cultures have given rise to intertextual activities of a more pronounced and intense nature than others. Hence, conceptualizations of the literary and cultural work performed by intertextual forms *and*

9 I will come back to this point in chapter one. The most fundamental characteristics as already suggested above are the obvious, and usually titular, gesture of affiliation, and an intense intertextual relation of the kind that results in stories told from alternative points of view or temporal/geographical re-locations that adapt major plot elements from the pre-text. I consider updates and relocations as one strand of spinoff fiction, intensive rewritings that take place in the "same" diegetic universe as another. The latter category constitutes the focus of my analyses.

10 I am indebted to Helmbrecht Breinig for having drawn my attention to Coetzee's novel. Ironically, in their discussion of Costello's novel, Coetzee's characters never mention the fact that *Ulysses* itself constitutes one of the most famous rewritings in world literature.

11 It also deserves some further explanation. In the context of my argument, the concept of genre is important insofar as the identification of patterns and conventions in the process of reading impacts our approach to a given text and thereby guides readerly expectations. Understood in this way, genre is less an absolute category than a frame or lens that highlights particular properties of a text. I will come back to this point and concepts of genre as proposed by John Frow and Jacques Derrida in the section "Oscillation and Good Continuation."

those forms themselves are subject to historical change—and so are the intertextual strategies employed. Like changing definitions of the novel, of literature's relation to the world, or changing theories of knowledge, conceptualizations *and* conventions or forms of intertextuality change over time, react to socio-historical, and, above all, ideological, philosophical, and discursive shifts, and can, in turn, affect these. This implies that the emergence or preponderance of a distinct form of intertextuality at a given moment in literary and cultural history, as well as shifts in the theoretical explanations that account for the phenomenon, can also serve as appropriate tools for reflecting on their respective historical and cultural contexts.[12]

The present project seeks to contribute to the field by approaching the fashion of American spinoff fiction in terms of a contemporary literary genre that responds to, reflects upon, and in turn affects its cultural and historical moment: a genre that arises from present cultural needs, anxieties, and concerns as well as socio-historical developments, and that performs specific kinds of cultural work within its historical and cultural contexts. This assumption, in fact, is the second implication of my suggestion to treat contemporary spinoff fiction in terms of a genre. As literary and cultural forms change in response to social and cultural developments, so, too, does the cultural work performed by literary texts.[13] Accordingly, it seems less productive to distinguish competing genres at a given time period in terms of their aesthetic or literary "value"—i.e., highbrow and popular—than by the ways they seek to interfere in and contribute to processes of cultural meaning-making.[14]

12 For a related claim see Terry Eagleton's assumption that literary theories "are more or less definite readings of social reality" (90). Although I would not conceive of a given theory as a *definite* reading of a specific and clearly identifiable social reality, the development and influence of a particular theory clearly reflects cultural preoccupations as well as the discursive make-up of a given cultural moment—an observation that also applies to theories of intertextuality. See also Schamma Schahadat, who suggests that intertextual practices vary from epoch to epoch (375).

13 For the notion of the "cultural work" of literary genres, I am indebted to Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* and Winfried Fluck, *Das kulturelle Imaginäre*. Tompkins introduces the distinction I am drawing here with regard to nineteenth-century American genres and fictional texts. I will explore this notion more fully in chapter three.

14 In other words, what my conceptualization of literary spinoffs in terms of a genre seeks to achieve is not the addition of merely another term to literary discussion, or the nobilitation of a particular type of text at the cost of another—although turning spinoffs into objects of scholarly attention is a form of "ennobling" them. As such, my approach is informed by the conviction that artefacts traditionally placed in the category of "popular

The notion of literary spinoffs as a contemporary genre is reinforced by the phenomenon's transnational character. As the examples above demonstrate, spinoff fiction has appeared in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and in many other European and postcolonial contexts over the past forty-five years, and it has firmly established a niche in national and international literary markets. It would appear, then, that spinoff fiction responds to contemporary preoccupations that transcend cultural and national borders and that may even be related to processes of globalization—be it the aforementioned accumulation of intellectual property in the hands of multi-nationals or the need to define national, cultural, historical, sexual, or ethnic specificity in the face of the imposition of "global" narratives of meaning, identity, religious belief, and progress. On the other hand, the trend towards rewriting and revising may also bespeak the attempt to render individual pasts more compatible with present convictions by establishing a revised literary genealogy that corresponds more fully with shared or hegemonic contemporary cultural norms and needs than the texts of the past have ostensibly done.

However, the more or less global proliferation of spinoff fiction can also detract from the strategies and implications endorsed in local or national contexts. By concentrating on contemporary U.S. American spinoffs which set out to rewrite nineteenth-century American classics, I have chosen an analytical focus that goes against the contemporary interest in transatlantic or transnational interactions. My approach proposes that there are traits, impacts, and agendas that distinguish the American spinoffs discussed from their international "family." Indeed, the spinoffs in question are very much concerned with the national and cultural community that is the United States, and engage with the ways in which the U.S. is imaginatively constructed.[15]

It is these context-specific interventions in national narratives, cultural myths, social relations, and discursive constructions of reality that render literary spinoffs most interesting and that will be the focus of the following analyses. Although generalizing headings such as "writing back" or "feminist

culture" are interesting and "worthy" objects of cultural analysis and participates in a widespread probing of the borders between high and popular culture. As a contemporary genre, spinoffs are cultural products that perform a specific form of cultural work by means of their shared characteristics and strategies of meaning-making, along with more text-specific forms of intertextual "labor."

15 Cf. Benedict Anderson for the notion of the nation as an "imagined community."

rewriting" can do much to explain prevalent trends in contemporary forms of rewriting, they do relatively little to elucidate the cultural work performed by an individual text—and neither do structuralist attempts at categorization or formalist descriptions of the operations that define a text's intertextual dimensions. Whereas some fundamental principles unite examples of the genre across national divides, a great part of their re-visionary impetus is tied to place as well as time, and is therefore most interesting when considered on the micro-level of close, but culturally situated, readings. This allows addressing questions as to the specific contexts that are revisited, revised, or re-(en-)visioned, as well as focusing on the text's negotiations of popular notions about the pre-text and its historical setting, and its engagement with processes of national self-definition, group identity, and cultural meaning-making. In other words, the preoccupations of a specific text, or the shared concerns of a group of texts that evolved in close geographical and temporal proximity, can reveal much about the present cultural moment, especially about the status of particular narratives in the cultural imaginary, and its contemporary preoccupations. However, it is a given that such imaginative constructions of the United States are the result of competing notions about what the cultural community is or should be, which reflect the multicultural, and far from consensual make-up of American society.

Accordingly, my approach to the genre will have a dual focus: I will first describe the genre on a general level by addressing its constitutive characteristics (chapter one) and then concentrate on a subgroup, U.S. American spinoff novels of the past twenty years which re-visit canonical nineteenth-century literary pre-texts and their diegetic worlds in the form of historical fiction set in the nineteenth century (chapters four to six). In other words, I will focus on novels that are characterized by their obvious, and usually titular, gesture of affiliation, and an intense intertextual relation of the kind that results in stories told from alternative points of view, but which take place in the "same" diegetic universe as their pre-text.[16] This subgroup results in a relatively small number of texts, all of which—as far as I am aware of them—will be considered in the following. By combining two contempo-

16 In other words, I will neither focus on temporal or geographical re-locations, nor on the earlier works by the British author Christopher Bigsby. The latter decision is based on three factors: my focus on what could be categorized as U.S. American writers in the widest sense and on works of fiction published over the past twenty years, which engage with their pre-texts *in ways that go beyond temporal additions* in the forms of pre- and sequels. I will come back to this latter point in chapter one.

rary trends, i.e., an intense form of rewriting and the predilection for neo- or pseudo-"Victorian" fiction, the spinoffs in question are very much a product of the present, which implies that they might also offer particularly cogent insights into current cultural and imaginary preoccupations. In order to conceptualize the cultural work performed by these texts as a function of their intertextual nature—their status as spinoff fiction—I will also develop a model of intertextuality that negotiates between broad poststructuralist and narrow text-descriptive notions of intertextuality by taking the cultural dimensions of the phenomenon more explicitly and more systematically into account than previous intertextual theories have done (chapter two).[17] Even though this model has been developed to account for the ways in which spinoff fiction interferes in processes of cultural self-definition, it may be of a more general heuristic value for approaches that conceptualize intertextual strategies as part of a larger process of cultural communication and meaning-making rather than as a predominantly formal literary operation or an agent-less, source-less play of signifiers. On the basis of the assumption that it is necessary to take the historicity of intertextual forms and of the strategies they pursue into account, I will define literary spinoffs in terms of a contemporary genre characterized by its pronounced intertextual nature, the form of reader engagement potentially triggered through this, and its dialogic relationship to the literary and cultural past. This dialogic relation gives rise to a distinct form of "cultural work" that the genre performs for and at the present cultural moment by means of its formal characteristics, which will be addressed in chapter three, *and* through content- and context-specific strategies of meaning-making and re-vision with regard to a literary pre-text and the pre-textual diegetic world, which will be analyzed in chapters four to six.

One of the general hypotheses about the genre of contemporary spinoff fiction, as it will emerge from the readings of the intertextual dialogues between *Ahab's Wife* and *Moby-Dick* (ch. 3), *March* and *Little Women* (ch. 4), as well as *My Jim*, *Finn*, and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (ch. 5), is the observation that spinoffs revisit the literary and extra-literary past not simply to

17 In this, my model seeks to follow new historicist insights and practices and takes a more recent trend in conceptualizations of intertextuality into account, one most notably represented in memory studies, in which intertextuality is approached in terms of a system of cultural semiotics. For the latter, see, for example, Renate Lachmann, "Ebenen," Schahadat, and Oliver Scheiding. In his analysis of postmodern American rewritings, Moraru also emphasizes the cultural dimensions—mainly in the form of the ideological implications—of rewritings in an attempt to salvage postmodernist intertextuality from the accusation of being depthless.

revise our notion of this past, but to intervene in the ways we imagine and understand the present, a process in which culturally formative narratives such as *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*, as well as the discursive formations addressed and revisited by spinoffs play central roles. In their attempts to reconstruct or re-imagine the cultural community, spinoffs such as *Ahab's Wife*, *March*, *Finn*, and *My Jim* engage in social, politically committed, and ideological ventures: Canonic pre-texts and influential cultural discourses become vehicle(s) for participating powerfully and effectively in processes of cultural imagining. In other words, what may be dismissed as a form of literary "piggy-backing" in fact provides an entrance point into the cultural imagination. This strategy allows the texts under consideration to engage explicitly and recognizably with cultural narratives and discourses—and, thus, with highly charged symbolic systems, which provides ideal ground for reassessment and effective contestation.

The genre thus highlights the cultural work performed through strategies of intertextual engagement, a dimension of intertextuality that cannot sufficiently be accounted for by means of traditional approaches to intertextuality. In contrast to these relatively a-historical conceptualizations, the notion of intertextuality as a form of literary memory or literary memory work is helpful in conceptualizing the cultural dimensions of the phenomenon of intertextuality. However, it should be expanded to include processes of cultural meaning-making and imagining more generally. It is not only or not so much the memory of a given text or time period that is at stake in forms of intertextual re-vision, but current self-conceptualizations and the contemporary cultural imagination, which spinoffs seek to remodel and remold by engaging with the "grand narratives" of the past and their impact on the present via the cultural imagination.

In this context, it is also important to note that despite the postmodern demise of "master narratives," in which they clearly seek to participate, spinoffs differ from the kind of intertextual "play" and endless semiosis frequently employed by highly intertextual, aesthetically avant-garde postmodern texts.[18] In contrast, contemporary spinoffs insist that forms of sense-making and communication cannot be given up, and neither can the "common

18 See, however, Moraru's aforementioned study on postmodern rewriting, in which he establishes a tradition of postmodern texts that distinguish themselves from this intertextual deference of meaning and that pose comparable interventions in the myths of the past as Moraru convincingly argues.