**Lindsey Collen’s narrative gift: a challenge to the commodification of African literature**

**Key words**: gift economy; Lindsey Collen; *The Rape of Sita*; *Boy*; postcolonial literature; Mauritius; postcolonial publishing

**Abstract**: Debates over publishing in African publishing tend to circulate around long-standing arguments about the appropriate language in which to write and whether it is better (or more ethical) for writers to support local presses or to seek international publishers to promote their writing more globally. In this article, the idea of the gift economy is used to explore how one African writer’s publishing practices – Lindsey Collen from Mauritius – can be interpreted as a challenge to such debates. Collen self-identifies as a story-teller (in oral and written narratives) who is gifting her narratives to her audience; this allows an exploration of her novels as more than mere commodities in the material form of published books. Instead, using John Holloway’s notion of the “social flow of doing,” Collen’s publications are seen as only one element in a network of activity that enables the political and activist elements of her work to be foregrounded.

As Walter Bgoya reminded delegates during his keynote address at the African Studies Association 2014 UK conference, debates about indigenous versus multinational publishing are still proving “intractable” within the fields of African and Postcolonial Studies (“50 Years” 115). That is not to imply that publishing in Africa has stagnated or failed since those debates were first aired in the 1960s. The success story of *Kwani?*, the literary network and publishing venture set up initially as on online magazine for writing by Binyavanga Wainaina, for example, was also the subject of a literature stream keynote at the conference given by *Kwani?*’s current managing editor, Billy Kahora. As discussed by Bgoya and Mary Jay (21), the possibility for wider distribution via print on demand and eBooks is also opening the door to a brighter future for African publishing; but whilst there is room for optimism, the fragility of publishing infrastructures in many African countries do make them vulnerable to erosion when economic or social circumstances become less favorable (see for example, Davis and Johnson).

With evidence for success and failure available, it appears that discussions over whether African writers should, or can, publish with local or international publishers, or how they should shape their publishing ambitions, are set to continue; and whilst many writers publish with both, there appears to be an assumption that the generally desired trajectory is towards major international publishers who can offer wider distribution. For example, as noted by Lizzy Attree (the Caine Prize for African Writing Administrator), whilst a main function of the Caine Prize is to build opportunities for publication within the African continent “there is little the Caine Prize can do to tackle the … widespread publication of African fiction by Western journals and magazines and the fact that this leads to a greater chance of success and a wider readership than publishing at home” (41). Winning prizes such as the Caine Prize, The Commonwealth Short Story Prize (formerly the Commonwealth Writers Prize), or the Man Booker Prize is just one recognized pathway to that literary “success,” implicitly defined by Attree as western publication opportunities and access to a global market.

The author Lindsey Collen, may well owe her success – in part, at least – to being awarded the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Africa, twice. Her writing career is described by Peter Hawkins as:

typical of postcolonial writers in that she is dependent for her access to a global market on the language and the publishing industry of the former colonial power. It is only at the price of such compromises that the postcolonial situation of Mauritius can gain some form of recognition in the global market of what is sometimes called “World Literature”. In this investment of her “cultural capital”, Collen has benefited considerably from the immense privilege of being Anglophone, but also from the consecration of the two Commonwealth Prizes, which have given her an international profile that would not have been conceivable had she remained with [Mauritian publisher] LPT and continued to write in Creole. (12)

Collen’s biography, and her own discussion of her writing, indicate that she is well aware of the complexities of these compromises and understands that as a postcolonial writer she is “irrevocably implicated in the expanding global market for English-language literary texts” (Brouillette *Postcolonial Writers* 3). However, as will be discussed here, Collen does not passively accept this set of circumstances, nor shrug them off as inevitable.

In the long interview Collen did with *Triplopia* magazine, she acknowledges that “there is some conflict in my feelings when I see a book maybe becoming a commodity” (*Triplopia*) revealing her Marxist political leanings. Born and raised in South Africa, Collen left the country after she graduated from university, travelling to the Seychelles, England, and Tanzania. In South Africa, she had been involved with student politics and the anti-apartheid movement becoming “increasingly militant” including being arrested for illegally distributing political leaflets (Allan 208-209) and she continued to explore her political interests actively in all these new locations. When she finally arrived in Mauritius (initially to visit her husband’s family), the “politically interesting” climate persuaded her to settle there from 1974 (Hand “Lindsey Collen”). As Vanessa Baird notes, writing in *The New Internationalist*, since then, Collen has had “time enough to get to grips with a lively political culture that suited her own inclinations” and, additionally, has been an active participant in overtly left-wing activism. She was a founding member of the socialist political party formed in 1981, Lalit (a Mauritian Creole word that translates as “(class) struggle”), “that has remained in the front line of political activism, especially those causes that directly affect working people” (Hand “Lindsey Collen”). Her work in these areas would suggest that she both understands and explicitly responds to the marketization of postcolonial literature as she is a Marxist who believes that Marxism still has the capability to shift society towards equality and freedom (Allan 219).

Collen’s hedging in her statement about the commodification of her literature, suggests that she concurs with Sarah Brouillette’s pragmatic argument that “talk of saving literature from ‘reduction’ to commodity status is now scarcely possible” (*Postcolonial Writers* 3) perhaps accepting the inevitability, as a postcolonial author, of participating in the literary economy as “a profoundly complicit and compromised figure” (Brouillette *Postcolonial Writers* 3). This is clear also from Hawkins’ description of her career to date. However, what will be explored here is Collen’s assertion that she considers her narratives as gifts (a claim made in the interview she did with *Triplopia* magazine for example). Coupling this with Collen’s political ideas enables one to make the argument that Collen’s authorial practices operate alternatively and simultaneously in an economy other than the global literary marketplace. This is not to suggest that this is an exclusive alternative; rather, it is to argue that, whilst there is an economic return for her stories when they are published in the commodified form of a book, equally we can find evidence that Collen’s work operates within a gift economy; this provides returns that may be more ambiguous but are of more value – and more a measure of “success” – for Collen.

**Gift economy**

Collen explicitly sets the gift of her narratives against the commodification of the material object of the book, prefacing the quotation above about commodification with:

I see story-telling as something like making a gift. A kind of gift relationship. And when people like the gift, it is a source of pleasure in addition to the preparing of it. This means that there is some conflict in my feelings when I see a book maybe becoming a commodity. (*Triplopia*)

This statement implies that Collen only recognizes the readers’ pleasure as reciprocation for her gift which Mark Osteen suggests may not be in itself adequate exchange to confirm the status of the story as a gift: “it is not at all clear how reading or viewing a work of art ‘repays’ the artist” (29). He cities Charles Rzepka’s argument that the relationship created in this case is not one of “gift-*exchange*” but a one-sided “gift-*giving* or sacrifice” measured only by the gratitude of the receiver (the reader in this case) (Rzepka 58 cited in Osteen 29). However, as Osteen notes, unlike Rzepka’s notion that the reader is a “mere supplicant,” one could consider that, as a novel is “nothing but dormant words until a reader activates it” then “the writer is indebted to the reader” (Osteen 29). Collen makes it clear that she does construe the exchange between story-teller and recipient as a “relationship” but in any case there are other returns from the gift operating for Collen which are more clearly an exchange.

Collen describes her creative process in terms of a gift; a “feeling of both creating a narrative and preparing a present.” (Reynolds 180). Gifting incorporates her oral and written storytelling which arise from her compulsion “to tell a story” (Reynolds 181). As Brouillette makes clear, separating creative writing from a market economy is not possible; yet, for the creative artist there is an alternative to mere complicity with the market economy via the notion of the gift. As Lewis Hyde explains in his book on the gift and the creative spirit, “works of art exist simultaneously in two ‘economies,’ a market economy and a gift economy. Only one of these is essential, however: a work of art can survive without the market but where there is no gift there is no art” (Hyde xxii). For Hyde, the “fee” we may have paid to gain access to a work of art is disconnected from our experience of that work in which we can be “touched” by “the spirit of an artist’s gifts which can wake our own” spirit (Hyde xxii). Similarly for Collen, the gift of narrative is that it “leaves people free to take what they find in the gift” (Reynolds 182) beyond, or in addition to, the economic payment for the text or story itself.

However, the notion of the narrative as a gift has a further purpose for Collen than offering an inspiration to an individual reader or listener; its capacity to create community. Collen describes storytelling with her “story-telling colleague,” Anne-Marie Sophie, as collaborative and communal. The version being told by Collen in any particular performance can be corrected or contested by Anne-Marie Sophie or by the audience (*Triplopia*). Collen acknowledges that, “telling stories orally is more collective in a palpable way” (*Triplopia*) but she is clear that her writing too similarly responds to an audience. She writes in response to requests from friends to “put such-and-such a thing into your next novel,” includes “little individual presents: the way a character puts her tika on for one friend, the name of a character for another, a shard of a private story that no-one else will recognise [sic] for someone else,” and more formally, “change[s her] finished draft in direct response to helpful comments by [her] first readers in Mauritius” (*Triplopia*). This is an example of how Collen’s narratives conceived of as gifts participate in one of the fundamental tenets of gift-giving as initially formulated by Marcel Mauss: that they are “concrete representations of social relations” (Osteen 2). Mauss argued that gifts were not free but operated within socially specific systems of reciprocity. For Mary Douglas, who wrote the introduction to Routledge’s 1990 translation of *The Gift*, Mauss had, through his notion that gifts created obligations and connections between people, “discovered a mechanism by which individual interests combine to make a social system, without engaging in market exchange” (xviii). At the root of this theory was the idea that the “things” of exchange, as gifts rather than commodities, are endowed with the spirit of the giver or the receiver, which means that “by giving one is giving *oneself*, and if one gives *oneself*, it is because one ‘owes’ *oneself*—one’s person and one’s goods—to others” (Mauss 59). Such a description is apt to works of literature in which the creative output of a specific author is offered; however, it also articulates the responsibility of the author to their community in ways similar to that expressed by Collen.

In purchasing a novel, “the terms of trade are clearly specified … in the form of an explicit or implicit contact” (Klamer 243); for your money you get covers, pages, words and the author retains control over the “moral rights” pertaining to her publication. However, those words are infused with elements that are not captured by monetary exchange: “the value of the gift is usually not priced or explicitly measured in any other way … when there is an expectation of reciprocity, the conditions of exchange remain undetermined and ambiguous” (Klamer 243). This reciprocation, for Collen, is located in the active and politicized engagement between the text and the person who receives it. Osteen offers caution in assuming that the novel can “destroy the duality between gifts and commodities” as for him, “it restores it” (Osteen 243) but the argument being made here is that both operate simultaneously for Collen who, whilst having to participate in the global market place, still insists that her stories are gifts. Those gifts are intended to reinforce the idea that all people need to operate “not as the self-interested individuals of neoclassical economics but as a nexus of social obligations” (Osteen 4) which is engendered for Collen through the notion of storytelling.

**Storytelling and Audience**

Key to Collen’s participation in a gift economy is how the concept of storytelling creates an obligation to reciprocate for the gift of the narrative made by the storyteller. Osteen, critiquing Hyde, asks how the mere reading of an author’s work creates the reciprocal arrangement required by a gift (29) and this is answered through the idea that storytelling is a dialogue created between Collen and her audience in which the audience has a responsibility to participate. Collen’s writing arose from her work as a storyteller for the Women’s Movement in Mauritius and this gave her the confidence to write as it “made [her] love telling stories and this is [her] main driving force to write a new novel” (*Triplopia*). Later Collen would write, as well as “tell” her stories, but as Tuzyline Allan notes: “While she has successfully fused the role of storyteller and writer, Collen’s persistent self-perception is that of the oral storyteller” (214). That self-perception makes audience a very tangible concept for Collen and makes it very “important to [her] that people read beyond this commodity” (*Triplopia*) in encountering her books. The example she gives of this is when a suicidal woman found some (temporary) purpose in living when her psychiatrist suggested that she translated *There is a Tide* into French as a more active mode of reading, which provided a means for discussing the ideas of the novel with his patient. Collen hopes – indeed requires – that readers engage with her writing actively (rather than just passively consuming them), something that will be discussed below in more detail in relation to the gift and the autonomist Marxist, John Holloway’s ideas.

Asked about the importance of the reader or “listener,” Collen states that: “One has to defer to one’s readers a lot, I think. To respond. To have them with one. To listen to their hearts as well as one’s own. This relationship is central to my writing. But this is not the same as something sold through advertising campaigns” (*Triplopia*). The audience has its own responsibility to respond likewise, something which is encoded into the texts that Collen writes through the notion of a continual dialogue with the reader. In *The Rape of Sita*, Collen’s storyteller-narrator figure (Iqbal) is criticized by his fictional publisher for being “old-fashioned,” writing his novel as if it is “some kind of letter to an old friend” (*Sita* 1); a similar articulation to Collen’s own claim that she is “writing for specific friends” (*Triplopia*). Additionally, they both view the narrative process as two-way: whilst Iqbal insists “readers and listeners, *interrupt me*” (*Sita* 1; italics in original), Collen describes storytelling as emanating from the audience rather than the author/teller who only reacts: “The audience has to request a story … . And there has to be a very direct response” (*Triplopia*). An acknowledgement of connections between oral and written narrative is made explicit in *The Rape of Sita* by the narrator: “At this point in the story, there is usually one listener or another, when the story is told live, that is, and not just written down on paper for later reading by unknown (even if dear) persons like you, who will ask me, the story-teller, a certain question” (*Sita* 23). It is this dialogue that creates the interpersonal discourses of community that are so important to Collen’s purpose as a writer.

This community is clearly formed around political activism for Collen. She states that: “writing for me involves the very real driving impulse to write in novel form to give shape to some experience that has a deep, perhaps political or social meaning for me, and that is not expressible in any other form” (*Triplopia*). So, for example, the impulse for *Boy* derived from Collen’s disgust over the impact of drug legislation that had been introduced recently in Mauritius:

While do-gooders in Mauritian society went hysterical about the real problem of drugs, the Mauritian government responded by introducing the death penalty for drug dealing. And the very first person arrested was a very young woman, hardly of age, from the countryside in India, who had brought drugs in a suitcase with a false bottom for her employer. (*Triplopia*)

Collen’s outrage over the injustice of targeting punitive legal action towards a vulnerable individual, exploited by those who are more powerful, is only expressible through the medium of the novel: “How does one deal with the enormity of [the Indian woman’s arrest] in just an article?” she asks, insisting, “[t]hese things get into novels easier than into political speeches or pamphlets” (*Triplopia*). Dobrota Pucherova suggests that the idea of “the African writer as a witness and an activist … has been discredited by both critics and authors, who have pointed out that such images of the African writer are a burden that curtails literature’s aesthetic and ethical possibilities” (17), but Collen continues to insist that fiction writing is necessarily political and that as a political activist she does not “easily draw the distinction between the … political and writing self” (*Triplopia*). In contradiction to Pucherova’s division between political writing and aesthetic freedom, Collen insists that her purpose is still “to entertain you with a story that is riveting” (*Triplopia* ); thus she maintains that it is the aesthetic dimension that enables a social and political engagement from her audience which creates a different discourse than the popular, official or sanctimonious. It also means that Collen’s identity as a writer is just one strand of the range of political activities in which she is involved which includes work with Lalit, with women’s organizations and trade union movements, and in causes around education, health, and housing (Allan 213).

Such a combination of writing and activism is also noted by Magali Compan, writing about another (francophone) Mauritian author, Shenaz Patel. Of her, Compan notes that:

though her [literary] thematics signify resistance, they are still thematics and as such are compromised, for they still engage and constitute an entry into discourse and the Western literary and intellectual market place. However, Patel does that only part of the time, balancing that form of reinscribing a resistant French literary production “from the island” with a host of other local, Creole cultural projects: writing into Creole, serving as a local librarian, fostering multilingual local publishing endeavors, working as a journalist, and creating documentaries. (194)

I suggest that, if we look at Collen’s publishing practices, and her explication of some of those practices, rather than just the themes within the narratives themselves, the picture that emerges is not one that only seeks to counterbalance the complicit with the activist. Articulating ideas around storytelling, audience, community, and the gift of writing presents Collen’s writing as part of her activism and indicates that she takes a resistant stance against the inevitable compromises challenging postcolonial authors. Whilst Collen’s writing does participate in the market economy via financial returns from the commodified book, the more ambiguous and unplanned returns around political dialogue, community formation, and the local, which accrue from Collen’s notion that her writing is a gift, are more significant for the writer.

Despite the overt evidence that Collen’s career has followed the typical postcolonial writer’s trajectory from the local to the global (via winning a literary prize and publishing with a global publisher), her insistence that her writing should create a dialogue over inequalities in the Mauritian society, indicates that, in fact, Collen primarily operates in the milieu of the local. Likewise, Compan’s article more broadly concerns itself with the African writer who elects to stay in his/her natal home rather than moving abroad (usually to the global north) or shuttling between there and Africa. This commitment to the local in itself seems a somewhat resistant stance given that it defies normative “postcolonial” expectations that reaching global markets is not only desirable but also only possible through relocation (at least partially) to metropolitan centers (cf. Ekotto and Harrow 1). Whilst Patel, born, raised, and residing in Mauritius, fairly simply qualifies as a Mauritian author, Collen’s credentials as such have to be more carefully established. However, her long and permanent residency in Mauritius (for over 4 decades now), her involvement in island politics and issues, the local settings and characters of her books, “constitute the ‘place’ of [… Collen’s] writing of and from the island of Mauritius” (Compan 178) just as surely as Patel’s. Therefore she shares with Patel (and other resident Mauritian authors) a conscious commitment to an indigenous place of cultural production.

Collen’s belonging to the Mauritian literary heritage, is however, always qualified as a “South African-born Mauritian author” (Matsha 466). Whilst this does not make her claims to be a Mauritian author less authentic, her authorial identity is inevitably inflected by her origins. This might, for example, be indicated by her choice to write in English when most literary fiction from the island is in French (Gray 132), something that is discussed at more length below. However, it also might provide a certain “creative distance” (Julien 22). Eileen Julien’s discussion of this “critical disposition” (Julien 21) refers to the writer in exile; Collen is not in exile because as far as she is concerned she is at “home” in Mauritius (Allan 213). Yet, the element of the “foreign” and “separate” (Julien 21) might be found in her work. The specific distancing that Collen’s origins in South Africa might bring is from the “government’s system of categorization of the islands inhabitants [as Hindus, Chinese, Muslims and ‘general population’ which] has enhanced modes of identification with ancestral homes to the detriment of local identity” (Compan 181). For Compan, the silencing of an indigenous Creole population within those official government identity politics is what is at the heart of the short story that she analyses; and it is unwritable as indicated by the “silence, retreat, resistance, and refusal of the literary logic of the imperium delivered with insistence” (Compan 194). However, as will be discussed below, Collen often sidesteps issues of heritage in her novels, to emphasize class which is the focus of her political purposes. This is not to suggest that she is able to represent inequality more effectively than other Mauritian writers, but to note that it brings a different dynamic into her work.

These dynamics will be considered in two ways. First, to look into her publishing history, and how she conceptualizes the processes of publishing. Second, to examine her use of both English and Creole in her writing. These discussions will be framed through ideas of the gift economy to explore in particular how Collen’s writing can be considered to serve her local community when viewed as a gift, and the ways in which the returns on that gift build community at the local level, whilst, at times, incorporating a wider international community of readers and writers too. This will be illustrated using examples from *The Rape of Sita* and *Boy*, the two novels of Collen’s that were awarded the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize.

**Publishing**

In *The Postcolonial Exotic*, Huggan argues that commodity fetishism is the primary mode of dissemination of African literature. He suggests that the publication and marketing of postcolonial literature operates deliberately to enhance the already exoticized allure of the postcolonial text, and obscures the “material circumstances” through which the texts are produced (18). Writing from a tropical island “paradise,” as Mauritius is sold to tourists, additionally invites readers to engage with Collen’s fiction as exotica. For example, the review from *Ink* featured on the back cover of the Bloomsbury paperback of *Boy* emphasizes the location as “set amidst exotic Mauritian scenery” (2004). Another review for *Boy*, from the South African *Mail and Guardian*, illustrates Huggan’s view of the global reception of postcolonial literature as the “anthropological exotic … a mode of both perception and consumption [which] invokes the familiar aura of the other, incommensurably ‘foreign’ culture while appearing to provide a modicum of information that gives the uninitiated reader access to the text and, by extension, the ‘foreign culture’ itself” (37). The review exhorts the reader: “For the real Mauritius, chuck away the brochures and read Lindsey Collen” (Bloomsbury Publishing) suggesting that this literature can be “the more or less transparent window onto a richly detailed and culturally specific, but still somehow homogenous – and of course readily marketable – African world” (Huggan 37). This portrayal, the argument goes, is authenticated via the indigenous author who, with an eye to the global market, modifies her fiction both to be recognizably African to postcolonial readers (Collen’s tropical island setting) and authentic in presenting a specific culture (of Mauritius). This idea has been circulated most notoriously by Wainaina in his notes on “How to Write about Africa” (2005) where he details what writers must and must not include in their texts about Africa to make them marketable. Whilst his ire appears to be directed at non-African author’s portrayals, his exposure of stereotypical writing has also informed the critique of African writers’ novels.

Collen’s readers, we might suggest, would be disappointed in the representation that they find within her novels: how far can a reader maintain their belief in the tropical idyll reading *Boy* when the murdered body of a young, female prostitute is found floating in the lagoon (95)? However, this type of death might well be read as recognizably African or even as more authentic in its representation. The point is that Collen cannot remove her text from commodification – however knowingly she writes – if she publishes it. As Brouillette has explored:

Those writing from or about the developing world … are expected to act as interpreters of locations they are connected to through personal biography … . [S]uch demands are made in part because the niche marketing that some associate with the promotion of exoticism is also the publishing industry’s response to proliferating possibilities for accessing segmented markets of readers on a global scale. Writers become representatives of their purported societies, “cultures,” nationalists, or subnationalities. (*Postcolonial Writers* 70)

Collen, like other African authors, has to be such a representative – not only “expected” but “required” – and this is integrated into the consumption of her texts. However, Brouillette insists that authors still have some agency within those processes. The requirement to be representative is “not because writers are the market’s passive dupes, but instead because of the historical development of and then convergence between the market position of postcolonial literatures and the market function of signature authorship” (*Postcolonial Writers* 71). This means that there is room for a “postcolonial authorial self-consciousness … comprised of a set of literary strategies that operate through assumptions shared between the author and the reader, as both producer and consumer work to negotiate with, if not absolve themselves of, postcoloniality’s touristic guilt” (*Postcolonial Writer* 7). The commitment of Collen to a strategy of storytelling that emphasizes the connections between reader and writer is one indication of her self-consciously resistant practices.

Further evidence can be found in the material practices of publication Collen employs at times where her local readers are given control of the process of publication. Collen notes that her first two novels were published “as a kind of collaborative venture” (*Triplopia* ) by asking interested, potential readers to pre-purchase a coupon issued by the publisher (LPT) who would also print the novel. Only once enough were sold to underwrite the cost of printing, did they proceed, putting the “gatekeeping” responsibility in the hands of readers as well as the publisher, centralizing readers as active decision makers in the dissemination of published fiction, rather than as consumers restricted to choosing between predetermined outputs. The importance of audience collaboration in production is expressed (somewhat tongue in cheek) in the “Preface” to *The Rape of Sita*, voiced by the novel’s narrator Iqbal. He asks: “Since when did writers and publishers get on, anyway?” in response to the publisher’s apparent request for him not to address readers directly in the novel, with which he refuses to comply (*Sita* 1). Instead he indicates that he “will want to talk to you quite often, reader” (*Sita* 1) and challenges the very necessity for professional publishing to reaching that readership, threatening to “do fifty print-outs … collate them, then glue the pages together … and sell the novel without a cover” (*Sita* 1). For him, this is something he can “still call a ‘novel’” (*Sita* 1) and he is confident that he has “fifty readers who will buy copies like that” (1). Iqbal’s defiance, like Collen’s “crowd sourcing,” views the writers’ contract as primarily with the reader and not with the publisher who merely provides a conduit for the story to pass between writer and reader.

The role of the audience is part of a wider collectivity of literary production that Collen insists on and which subsumes the publishing house itself into a complex network of activity. For Collen, “writing a novel, however individual it is when you see someone sitting there alone at a computer, is actually a collective endeavour [sic]” (*Triplopia*). Therefore, publishing is not about how the commodified novel circulates for Collen, but how it operates within, holds together, and activates a web of communal actions which, by offering up her manuscript as a gift to those readers, creates the communal activity which propels the story into a new part of that network. Such work of others is recognized by Brouillette in her discussion of how the “laboring self” of the author is commodified:

Part of what is distinct about aesthetic production as a form of labor might be precisely this: rather than disguise the labor that goes into the production of the object [the book], commodity fetishism in the literary field obfuscates the realities of the making of the product by channeling our attention toward the author as the singular creator whose work is in a crucial sense irreducible, that is nonreproducibly original. (*Literature* 50)

Hence whilst “[m]any people are involved in making literature” (Brouillette *Literature* 50), their labor is not significant to the value of the text in Brouillette’s argument.

Collen, however, wants to make all this labor visible and to value it by showing that bringing the text into being is not possible without a network, which extends before and beyond the material processes of book printing. It ranges from the collectivity of language: in the ways that the “material in one’s memory … comes from collective experience,” how “the words a writer uses, the grammatical structures, the symbols, the idiom, all exist as a collective heritage too,” and that authors “write in relation to all [they] have ever read”; to the direct input of a range of readers, when the novel is changed “in direct response to … first readers … literary agent and editors.” In practical terms, there are “the people who plan the layout, the typeface, the book design in general, and the printers and binders, [who] all add to making the novel a collective work.” Post-publication, the net extends to include readers and those who enable readers “to get hold of [a book …] a whole network of wholesalers, shippers, retailers, sales personnel.” Reading itself, for Collen, is conceptualized as a collective endeavor in both formal and informal networks of readership as readers often come to a book by “rely[ing] on suggestions by critics and word-of-mouth recommendations”from other readers (*Triplopia*). Brouillette’s arguments are made to show how recent theories of creative labor, despite occupying different sides of the political divide, position the author similarly as capital. Both “creative class theorists” (who celebrate the rise of a “creative class” as of benefit to both capitalism and workers), and the Marxist autonomists (who seek to resist processes whereby “all of social experience” including creativity and invention contribute to capitalist labor) fail to “place the formation of [the artist-author] in any fundamental, contradictory, structuring relationship to capitalism” (Brouillette *Literature* 54). However, Collen’s insistence on the collective process can be interpreted as an attempt, at least, to reconfigure the position of the author in relation to capital.

Brouillette’s argument is that the author figure always becomes “inseparable from capital” because it is her/his “thinking [which] is being exploited by capital” in a knowledge economy (*Literature* 43). For creative class theorists this is only problematic when “noncreatives” creative potential cannot be tapped to produce creative capital (43). In fact, for them, the creative economy is positively beneficial as it allows work to be pleasurable and flexible. For the autonomists, there is contradiction between “creative expression and work”:

the model of the solo author is pitted against the collective intelligence that is actually held by everyone and merely appropriated for the author’s use; writing and codification are pitted against the universal possession of language and its ability to be constantly redeployed, reformulated, and recombined. (*Literature* 43)

Brouillette notes that, problematically in autonomist thinking, “mass intellectuality”[[1]](#endnote-1) is “mysteriously protected … untouched by the same market mechanisms that constantly fabricate and deploy its image” via the figure of the author (54). However, this might be addressed by linking Collen’s description of the wide network of activity around literary production with Holloway’s notions of the “social flow of doing” as an alternative view of mass labor or individual achievement; something that also fits with Hyde’s notion that “the gift must stay in motion” (Hyde 148).

Holloway expounded his ideas of the social flow of doing in *Change the World Without Taking Power*.[[2]](#endnote-2) In this book, he seeks to expose the “amnesia” at the heart of capitalism by focusing on the human labor (in his terminology, the “doing”) that produces the currently reified products of that labor (the “done”) rather than the capitalist model which forgets the labor and sees only the objects produced (34). For Holloway, the vulnerability of capitalism is located in that forgetting as its success is entirely reliant on the “doing” it chooses to ignore. By focusing on the “doing,” Holloway suggests that the “done” is subsumed by a network of process which produces the meaning of the object. Holloway uses the example of a book to explain this:

When I write a book, the book exists as a material object. It has an existence independent of mine, and may still exist when I no longer exist. In that sense it might be said that there is an objectification of my subjective doing, that the done acquires an existence separate from the doing, that the done abstracts itself from the flow of doing. This is true, however, only if my doing is seen as an individual act. Seen from the social flow of doing, the objectification of my subjective doing is at most a fleeting objectification … . The existence of the book as book depends upon your reading it, the braiding of your doing (reading) with my doing (writing) to reintegrate the done (the book) into the social flow of doing. (28-29)

In common with all the autonomists that Brouillette discusses, a focus on the commodity is what breaks this social flow. So, for example, Brouillette notes that for Virno individual creativity resides in the performer whose activity is sufficient without being objectified into an end product (*Literature* 42). This too is reminiscent of Collen’s identification of herself primarily as a storyteller and not an author. However, it is Collen’s insistence that her labor is “braided” into a host of other activity that undermines the idea that her published outputs could be mere commodities.

Once the network is activated, the flow of reading activity in particular takes on a reciprocity which garners returns for Collen from her gift of her writing (outside of economic exchange), undetermined at the point at which she makes that gift, but delivered in terms of the development of social justice within Mauritius. For example, we can consider the censorship Collen faced, soon after she published *The Rape of Sita*, in terms of social reciprocations. The novel was “banned within three days of its publication in Mauritius based on a spurious change of blasphemy and religious bigotry” (Allan 199). Collen remains convinced that the attacks she faced from the Mauritian government over the allegedly “blasphemous” use of the stories from *The Ramayana* in *The Rape of Sita* were politically motivated. Whilst she was threatened with death and public rape “by a small group of rather violent fundamentalists” (*Triplopia*), the State, instead of protecting her, “threatened [her] with seizing copies of [the] book, arresting [Collen], and slapping criminal proceedings” on her (Reynolds 169); this was “*because* [she] was a political activist in a left political party” (Reynolds 170; italics in the original). Simon Gikandi notes that censorship remains an issue in African publishing: in situations of “political censorship,” writers “who object to the repression or censorship of their ideas often try to get published overseas” (449). This unexpected and negative social return of choosing to publish at home, in Collen’s case, however created a backlash which generated debate against intolerance, turning the state censure into an issue of social justice. In time, the “struggle” for justice around the threats and censorship converted into a valuable return for Collen.

Support came locally from “literary and women’s organizations” and also internationally from, for example, the Canadian Centre of International PEN and the International Humanist and Ethical Union of the Netherlands (Allan 201). Margaret Atwood wrote on behalf of PEN, noting the ban was “a violation of the right to freedom of expression guaranteed under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the state of Mauritius is a signatory” (cited in Allan 201). Allan notes that “Atwood’s letter put the government under pressure by invoking the greater authority of international law” (201) and, similarly, the statement from the Netherlands “[r]eframed [the debate over the ban] as a human rights issue” (201). Thus, the “controversy revived debates over censorship and the widening power of thoughtless dogmatism” (Allan 199). The unsought return from Collen’s publication of her novel was a local and international debate around local religious and political intolerance in the context of Mauritius, framed within international law. In addition, the inevitable attention to the content of the book – purposefully political as with all Collen’s fiction writing – within that wider debate helped to promote Collen’s narrative suggestions about rape; to “expose[ rape] for what it is” and to contribute to “women’s emancipation” by countering popular perceptions of rape as women’s fault (Reynolds 172).

Following these events (although not necessarily connected to them), *The Rape of Sita* went on to win the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize: African Region, spreading the network of readers wider. The awarding of literary prizes is a potentially controversial aspect of publishing in an African context when African writers are critiqued for allegedly pandering to western notions of Africa and African literature in order to successfully win prizes and the potentially lucrative publishing deals with international publishers associated with these awards.. For example, Pucherova claims that the Caine Prize markets authors as representatives of some type of preconception of an authentic Africa. Attree disagrees, asserting that the “Caine Prize markets the shortlisted writers and the winner based on their success” (39). It might be suggested that this sets up somewhat of a tautology in which “success” is circularly defined given Pucherova’s suggestion that that the often western-based prizes maintain the colonial center as a “legitimizing” agent for African fiction however, Gillian Roberts offers an alternative consideration of what “success” in winning an international literary prize might look like, which is relevant in interpreting Collen’s prize-winning achievements in terms of a gift.

In her discussion of the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize,[[3]](#endnote-3) Roberts explores how local value is also conferred by the prize concurring with Claire Squires point that, “awarding a prize to a book acts not only to indicate value but to confer it” (97). Using Canada as her example, Roberts notes how:

celebrations [in winning literary prizes] generated outside the nation ultimately sold, and fed, the nation back to itself, as Canadian readers were encouraged by external arbiters to cultivate a taste for their own nation’s cultural products and to welcome their own culture and its consumption. (16)

In Canada, where home-grown culture struggles to assert its worth against its colonial history, external validation increases the local audience’s confidence in its value and promotes its consumption at home. The situation in Mauritius for writing in English is comparable as it has to prove its worth against the more established French-Mauritian literary tradition. This might be, or also be, the success for Collen in participating in international literary markets through prizes: it acts as a channel for feeding her stories with their interrogation of Mauritian values back into her own community in ways that assert their aesthetic and political worth to her Mauritian readers. Potentially, this builds a local readership but not exclusively for economic gain in terms of greater book sales; rather, it contributes further to building community locally where a story creates common ground for discussion and debate, and, perhaps, political action. The value of winning a second prize also makes more sense in this context. Collen had already established herinternational career with *The Rape of Sita* and the next novel to win the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize, *Boy*, was already published by a London-based publisher. Yet, a second prize would have a cumulative effect in terms of Robert’s arguments, conferring even higher value locally on the novels Collen continues to write.

In essence, all of this activity around *The Rape of Sita*, “would not have been possible had [Collen] been a writer sitting in isolation at a computer” (Reynolds 172). The networks of her political activities; the “luck” in winning the Commonwealth Writers’ Prizes; broader political networks, and support from fellow writers in Mauritius as well as the “letters of support [which] poured in from abroad” following the furor over *The Rape of Sita* (Reynolds 172): all this has created the circumstances that “taught [Collen] and a whole generation … how important literature is or can be” (Reynolds 173) as a tool for social justice. That specific purpose of literature is made visible through the notion of the gift economy as it relies on the unforeseen reciprocations of telling stories; for Collen, returns that are of more value than the economic returns that might accrue.

**Language**

Turning to the second dynamic of Collen’s work, we can note that it is significant to that prize winning, was that Collen’s winning novels were written in English. Literary prizes for which African writers are eligible frequently stipulate that submissions have to be in English, or already translated into English (Attree 37). Felicity Hand suggests that Collen writes in English because “she has a predominantly Western readership in mind” (*Subversion* 3), but neither this nor the desire to win prizes tells the whole story. The choice of language in which to write for African authors is always a political one. Since the famous debate between Ngugi wa Thiongo, on the side of writing in African languages to aid decolonization, and Chinua Achebe, who argued for using colonial languages but making them one’s own,[[4]](#endnote-4) the most popular current position appears to be for an “hybridity” where English is inflected with the indigenous language of the writer. However, the resistance to English as an appropriate language for African writing continues. Bgoya, for example, promotes the use of African languages for African publishing, for education on the continent, and for fiction authors, insisting that “English serves fundamentally the interests of those for whom it is both an export commodity and a language of conquest and domination” (“Effect of Globalization” 286). Language choice is no less political in Mauritius (Hand 26) but, unusually, it can be argued that it is a resistant choice is to write in English as Collen does. As noted earlier, that choice may well be rooted in Collen’s South African upbringing, but also Collen’s choice to write in English is “unusual, as it forms a breakaway from the century-long Franco-Mauritian literary tradition that is, rightly or not, upheld as the epitome of Mauritian literature” (Matsha 467). Michel Fabre therefore suggests that choosing to write literary works in English instead of French may be a deliberately political move on the part of some Mauritian authors to “disassociate themselves from French tradition … in order to encourage a national tradition divorced from the language historically associated with the planter class” (123). As noted above, winning literary prizes consolidates Collen’s personal choice into a political and cultural one by giving value to literature in English in a Mauritian context.

Collen is also committed to the promotion of Creole in Mauritius, writing in both English and Creole. As Collen explained to Rachel Matsha, Creole is important in her opinion because: “Kreol is what we all speak” (468). Whilst LPT publishes Collen’s novels, she is also dedicated to LPT’s wider mission to promote the use of Creole in Mauritius, particularly in more formal settings such as education, government and law. Complementing the efforts of other Mauritian writers, Collen sees this work as anti-elitist and as working towards decolonization. Like Mauritian writer, Dev Virahsawmy, who “attempted to valorize the use of Creole in his capacity as militant activist in the early days of independence, as linguist, publisher and author of … published oeuvres exclusively in Creole” (Mooneeram 69), Collen also contributes to the promotion of Mauritian Creole as the national language of Mauritius through her writing. In 1996, she published the first full-length novel in Creole, *Misyon Garson* and has subsequently published a long poem and a novella in Creole (Gray 131).[[5]](#endnote-5) This presents a direct challenge to the perception of Creole as a low status language, an inferior form of French with an impoverished vocabulary and grammar, which works against its adoption beyond the informal (Allan 213). It is another way in which Collen’s writing can be considered as a gift for the local community, since publishing in Creole (as noted by Hawkins) makes little economic sense.

Matsha claims that “[b]y recasting English and Kreol as literary languages, Collen challenges the official discourse inherent to language dynamics in Mauritius” (468) and it might be argued that Collen’s challenge to the “status quo” through her use of language (Matsha 468) is through more than a decision to write in English or in Creole. Collen perceives herself as fundamentally multilingual from a young age. She was the only member of her small community growing up who could speak all three languages in common use: English, Afrikaans and Tswana and she was often called upon to translate between people. This experience gave her an understanding that “languages were not mirror images of each other” (Reynolds 175). This is an important appreciation for someone living now in the multilingual island of Mauritius, and it contributes to Collen’s writing as linguistically hybrid. As Matsha notes, “Kreol, English, and French cohabit in Collen’s novels, although [most] narratives are predominantly woven in English” (468).

A good example of this is the novel *Boy* which is an English-language reworking of *Misyon Garson*. The term “reworking” is used explicitly in the end pages of the Bloomsbury edition of *Boy* to show that this is not a translation into English which might be interpreted as primarily intended to enable wider and Western audiences to access the original text as if languages do mirror one another unproblematically. The idea of a reworking indicates instead the hybrid nature of the language of the novel. As pointed out by a review in Pambazuka news:

*Boy* is an adaptation of Collen’s 1996 Creole novel *Misyon Garson* and was therefore seemingly unwritten in English in order to be re-iterated in relation to the Creole native to Mauritius. Before we have even read *Boy* we have been pitched into the middle of a linguistic exchange; a dialogue that interfaces languages (French, Creole, and English) in order to both showcase the linguistic mosaic of Mauritian identity, as well as posit those languages in a larger spectrum of political power.

Amitav Ghosh notes that in societies that are multilingual “heteroglossia is commonplace. It’s a society where, if you seek to represent that society in a single language, no matter what that is, you are in some profound way distorting the reality of that society” (Kumar 104). The same could be argued for Mauritius: no one language can encapsulate its totality, with its population descended from colonizers, slaves, indentured workers, and more recently displaced persons who “commonly speak two, three, or even more languages” (“Mauritius” 2015) including, but not limited to, English, French, Creole, Bhojpuri, Hindi, Chinese, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. Therefore, Collen highlights through her writing that “any act of representation in [… a multilingual] circumstance cannot … even pretend to the kind of realism you would have in a monolingual society. You are already embarked upon some kind of translational enterprise” (Ghosh in Kumar 104) whatever the language in which you write.

The hybrid use of language is frequently expressed overtly by Collen’s narrators who “typically question, deconstruct, and redefine language conventions” (Matsha 468). For example, in *Boy*, the angry, young narrator, Krish Burton, makes a careful and detailed statement about distance: “I go a short distance, 200 golet or so. I would usually call it 600 yards or 500 metres [sic]. But today, when I am telling you, I know it is about 200 golet’ (*Boy* 84). How this might be read indicates the text’s capacity to construct multiple readers. The addressee might be known or at least local – that is someone familiar with the Creole word for measuring distance. Collen’s narrator would be, then, indicating his commonality with the local reader: “you.” Yet, it also works in providing an embedded translation for non-Creole literate readers probably outside of Mauritius, a “you” both begrudgingly included and alienated by the overt word choices of the narrator.

The effect of this is firstly to push against assumptions that Collen writes in English to create fiction that is more acceptable to a western audience by appearing to present the “transparent window onto verifiable events” (Pucherova 16) that Pucherova critiques. In fact, Collen’s language obfuscates a single interpretation as noted above. In addition, this can be seen in her use of italicization in *Boy*. As is common, this indicates non-English or “foreign” words within the text: Krish’s mother is described as “sweeping … with a *balye fatak*” (*Boy* 3; italics in the original) which is Creole for a broom. However, Collen also italicizes many English words too, reminding all her readers that meaning in any language is not fixed or transparent. From the first page of the novel, in the phrase: “Not that I *said* anything about it to them” (*Boy* 1; italics in the original), or later when Krish notes he is beginning “to tell lies *for nothing*” (64; italics in the original), and continually throughout the novel, the reader is thrown into a heteroglossic world where even apparently straightforward words are thrown into doubt, prompting the readers “writerly” engagement (in Roland Barthes terms[[6]](#endnote-6)) that Collen requires.

Secondly, in her language choices, Collen again seems to prioritize the building of community, drawing language together in a commonality through the idea of heteroglossia. This resists the division of communities on the basis of the language they speak, challenging the implications of hierarchy that this implies in Mauritius.

**Conclusion**

At the end of both *The Rape of Sita* and *Boy*, Collen provides a clear vision of what, for her, progression towards a more egalitarian society should look like. Sita defends another woman attacked by her neighbors for being a “witch” by promising that “[h]undreds of women will stand by you in public” through the activity of the “All Women’s Front” (Sita 196). *Boy* concludes with another collective image as Krish, his mother, and a trade union leader help to push the fishermen’s old car in a symbolic act of collectivity: “You see […] what a bit of cooperation can do” (*Boy* 198) says the trade unionist. For the left wing writer such as Collen, the power fiction has over fact is that it can enact the way things “might be” rather than being limited to describing “what is” (Holloway 7). This is where its political potential lies. Holloway suggests that in order to act, we should not be only focused on the facts of the present but also recognize that “[s]ociety is, but it exists in an arc of tension towards that which is not, or is not yet” (7). *The Rape of Sita* ends with an expression of such projection: “we will have wanted to be equal. Equality. And then we will become equal” (*Sita* 197).Neither *The Rape of Sita* nor *Boy* offer fairy tale endings, but nor do they play out a gruesome or disaffected “reality” of the postcolonial state.

These endings open up possibilities indicating Collen’s genuine belief that a “new world” is possible where barriers of class, race and gender “will ultimately dissolve into a potent pluralism based on difference and complementarity” (Allan 219). This is not “idle” or “utopian” but based in Collen’s “acute sense of justice” grounded in her experience of apartheid and her determination to shift the debate away from race towards an “understanding of the mutuality of suffering under a malleable and stubbornly persistent capitalist system” (Allan 219). Hence her insistence in *Boy* that the agricultural laborers’ current working conditions are “slavery returning” (*Boy* 153). In fact, Krish’s realization that “behind every cane field, … and this has gone on for two hundred years, there are workers going to work like this” (*Boy* 153-4) makes the condition of slavery a continual practice in Mauritius as far as Collen is concerned. Yet, for Collen, the practices that she labels as slavery are rooted in class-based oppression rather than the “ideological formulations of racial categories” rejected by Lalit (Allan 219).

Stories are, for Collen, a powerful driver of collective action. In *Boy*, Krish’s transformation into manhood is effected through hearing the stories “happening all around” him (*Boy* 150-1). However, I suggest here that it is not just through their content that Collen’s texts are “resistant narratives,” as Allan identifies them following Barbara Harlow’s definition. What has been explored here is the specifically resistant practices that Collen uses, and often articulates in interviews, around the “historical and material condition of [the texts’] production” (Harlow cited in Allan 226). These are the choices she makes about: the language of her writing; how and with whom to publish; and her conceptualization of literature as circulating in a network of doing. All these practices push back against the more common discourses around the postcolonial literary marketplace some of which have been discussed here.

To consider Collen’s authorial practices through this paradigm of a gift economy enables us to embrace and explore the conjunction of her identities as author, storyteller, and activist, and to show how Holloway’s ideas of a collective “doing,” as articulated by Collen, gives her published texts an alternative purpose that denies their wholesale cooption into the global literary market. In fact, her attention to production and reception of texts suggest that for Collen writing is, as it was for Stuart Hall, a “critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled” (Procter 1). Collen’s engagement is rooted in the moral responsibility to act against injustice as an author. As she explains:

Consciousness, meaning we know what we are doing, we know what we are thinking, and we can choose what to do next, almost tautologically involves the possibility, at least, of moral responsibility. It also … means that we have the burden of trying to work out what effect if any, our actions will have. (*Triplopia* )

Success then for Collen is not measured in how many prizes she wins, how global her publisher is, or in terms of book sales and profit, even if she inevitably has to participate in this economy. How her books make contributions to her political activities towards social justice is the return that she values from the gift of her stories.

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1. ENDNOTES

   Paolo Virno’s term derived from Marx’s concept of general intellect which Virno describes as the power to think rather than what is produced by thinking. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I am very grateful to Elinor Rooks for reminding me of John Holloway's work precisely when I needed it for this research. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Roberts’ discussion relates to the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize given to novels; Collen’s awards were both for this prize. It was discontinued in 2011, replaced by the Commonwealth Short Story Prize. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See for example, Chinua Achebe’s *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1977; and Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: Heinemann Educational, 1986. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. These are: *Komye Fwa No Finn Trap Enn Pikan Ursen* (1997), and *Teddy Rant dan Distrik Kawnsil* (2000) as listed in Stephen Gray’s article. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes describes writerly texts as those which require reader to produce a meaning or meanings which can never be considered as final or official. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)