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The World and the Postcolonial

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This article examines the increasing competition in the academic market between conventional terms such as *postcolonial* and *anglophone literature* and their cognates, and the newly current term *world literature*. Even in postcolonial studies circles, world literature is increasingly taken to refer not only to 'the best ever written', as before, but to literature produced within and in response to a globalizing world. The paper explores the different valences of this shift, and the tensions and contradictions it has generated within the wider anglophone literary field.

In any number of literary critical circles today the term *world* is read alongside, and even in some cases appears to be supplanting, or is read as a synonym for, *postcolonial* whenever the reference is to anglophone literature, or literatures written after empire in English. Although postcolonial theory and literatures have always addressed world historical imperatives, in very recent times the pressures on the humanities in general and literary studies in particular to register the challenges of world events, especially in respect of globalization, have if anything been experienced more acutely in a field that has always taken the world, formerly the imperial world, if not as its domain, then as its horizon. Robert Young, speaking from within the postcolonial literary field, finds as recently as 2011 in an essay entitled, 'World Literature and Postcolonialism': 'little direct exchange between these two separately demarcated domains of literary study. … their respective positions with relation to literature [remaining] largely incompatible and disjunctive' (Ref. 1, p 213). Yet in institutional and pedagogic terms the growth of interest in world literary perspectives does appear to be producing some convergence of the field. It may even point to a gradual marginalization – thinking of worst case scenarios, perhaps an eventual trivialization – of a branch of literary study, the postcolonial, that has conventionally committed itself to intensive interrogation and a self-reflexive commitment to margins at once structural and epistemological.

Suman Gupta's *Globalization and Literature* is a case in point,[2] not least in respect of its title. Although Gupta's study is interested in how literature is used to 'perform and convey something of the intellectual scope and aesthetic stimulation of ideas of globalization', his discussion of the postcolonial, a branch of literary study

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that has conventionally always dealt beyond the borderlines of the European world, is confined to the sub-section of a single chapter (3). Throughout the book, *global* figures as a more telling and compelling term even than *world*. Indeed, in the index neither *postcolonial* nor *world* are granted their own entry. Only late on in the study is the new interest in world literature perspectives itself framed as a recent development in comparative literary studies, a turn to a world-systems focus that is related to the globalization of the academy and the publishing industry. Gupta does include an important reminder from the leading postcolonial theorist Edward Said in the *PMLA* special issue *Globalizing Literary Studies*, that: 'political and economic globalization [has] since the end of the Cold War […] been the enveloping context in which literary studies are undertaken' (Ref. 3, p. 66) – where 'literary studies' presumably embraces those (postcolonial) novels, poems and other forms of literary expression that respond in specific ways to the globalizing contexts both of empire and of decolonization. Yet the study does not go on to confront or expand on the formal and critical remit of Said's remark. It also does not consider the implications of its inference, later in the work, that as neoliberal capitalism is increasingly perceived as an expression of the same power-knowledge field as that which the postcolonial addresses, postcolonial and global literary studies must increasingly converge in terms of their interests and preoccupations. Rather, *Globalization and Literature* in large measure considers the postcolonial to be at fault: along with postmodern theory it misconceived the contemporary late capitalist or post-imperial order, precisely through its privileging of the 'colonial-postcolonial relational field' above all others.

To illustrate the new growth of world literary studies to the alleged disadvantage or marginalization of the postcolonial, I'd like to take the anecdotal evidence of two discussions that I have recently witnessed or participated in, one academic, and one pedagogic; both of them definitional and symptomatic. That they occurred within only a few weeks of each other testifies, I think, to the acceleration in the shift from postcolonial to world within the academic mainstream to which I am referring.

My first example comes from a recent conference paper given by a UK colleague on South Asian writing – an excellent paper, it might be added. In this paper, in order to set up the literary-historical context that his writer-subject was addressing, and which shaped his work, the colleague began by running through a now standard set of 'world literature' definitions, from Goethe, David Damrosch and Theo D'haen, amongst others, although he also included Marx and Engels on how capitalism sets up an international market for ideas. The case he wished to make was that his post-2001 writer-subject was addressing questions of worldliness in his fiction in both superficial and thoroughgoing if oblique ways. The burden of the example here however falls on that long preamble on the question of world literature in my colleague's paper, a preamble to introduce a writer who, till very recently, at such a conference, would simply have been taken to be South Asian and migrant by the writerly constituency, and hence postcolonial by default.

My second example comes from my own institutional context, and concerns the naming of a new Masters strand or programme we are inaugurating in the English

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Faculty at Oxford from 2013–14 on. When the component courses of the new Masters are broken down, their content is clearly dominated by postcolonial theory and what until very recently would have been called postcolonial literature, the writing of South Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific, etc. Writers that feature on these courses include Rushdie, Coetzee, Ghosh, Ishiguro, Desai, Kincaid, Atwood. Naming wide-ranging, 'mixed bag' courses such as these 'postcolonial' has until recently always served as an eminently useful place-filler or stop-gap term. Yet the preferred title for the new programme refers to 'World Literatures in English', not postcolonial literature; as indeed do the titles for other new Masters' degrees in this subject in universities located, as it happens, not far from Oxford. In this different context from the South Asian fiction conference, that is a university where postcolonial literature has often been regarded as a deterritorialized and politicized mode of writing, *world* seems to be embedding itself, certainly on the administrative and pedagogic side, as a seemingly more neutral, more inclusive term. The prepositional phrase 'in English' is added to 'world literature' to assure those in other departments that our claim is not to the study of world literature in its more conventional comparativist sense.

To be sure, wrestling with terminology, in particular with the signification of the 'post' in postcolonial, or the presence or absence of the hyphen (as in 'post-colonial'), is hardly a new endeavour in the field of postcolonial literary studies. In imperial history and historiography there has been some vigorous discussion in recent years on related lines, concerning whether high imperialism equates to globalization, and whether current globalization takes late imperial, or 'empire', forms. Postcolonialism and its cognate critical historical approaches have always designated a restive, discontented, rebarbative field: self-interrogation has constituted its *modus operandi*. Recent conference and book titles have remained one with this ongoing trend, placing emphasis on reinventing, rewriting, re-addressing, as well as the shape of the reiterative future. To take a quick sampling: in 2010 the essay collection *Rerouting the postcolonial*, edited by Janet Wilson *et al*., appeared from Routledge, bringing together papers given at a 2007 conference bearing the same title.[4] It followed hard on the heels of *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, edited by Ania Loomba and others,[5] again mapping new trends in the field, which appeared in 2005. Both titles testify to that felt obligation in postcolonial studies to keep questioning the field's critical purchase and defining concerns.

As has been the case from its inception in the 1980s, given that the term 'postcolonial' takes an abstract historical boundary, that between an assumed colonial period and its aftermath, as antecedent, it is regarded as almost by definition open-ended in chronological terms. And this has implied for many if not most postcolonial scholars and readers a commitment to the repeated refreshing and revision of its agendas, something that the onset of a new century (and, for some, a new era, after 9/11 and the Afghanistan and Iraq wars), has only accentuated and reinforced. To take just the past decade as a representative cross-section, postcolonial literary studies has in this period embraced such issues as disability, environmental crises, questions of terror, as well as of war trauma, genocide and recovery, as in the situation in Rwanda.

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Yet, until the death of Edward Said in 2003 – my cut-off point is only partially random – that repeated add-on of issues to the critical and pedagogic terrain of the postcolonial was not perceived as problematic in any fundamental way – as tantamount to an undoing of the field, say, or as requiring a shift to the term *world* as some sort of conceptual bail-out. Different from the previous add-ons, therefore, the concern with 'worldliness' and world-related questions as the going new preoccupation required of postcolonial studies in a globalizing age, registers not merely a new anxiety or challenge, but something far more thoroughgoing. Whereas terminological concerns formerly had to do with an open-endedness or belatedness that was mainly registered within the field itself, there now is a felt need for a change of scale, for a revision of core terms far more rigorous and fundamental than any self-interrogation had undertaken heretofore. 'World', therefore, is certainly not a simple add-on. That almost obligatory genuflection in postcolonial criticism today to world literature, 'worlded' ideas and the world-historical, speaks to a development or series of developments that does not come only from within the field but arises in response to something outside. It points even, perhaps, to a sense of crisis.

Over and above the ever more predominant processes of globalization that preoccupy Suman Gupta, and which postcolonial scholars clearly feel need to be addressed in their work through a greater attention to literary worldliness, we could venture several different but related speculations as to what motivates this sense of crisis, and the at-once-institutional, terminological and conceptual move from *postcolonial* to *world* that accompanies it. Recent debates in *New Literary History*[6] as to what remains of postcolonial studies, or what's left in it, are further expressions of this crisis. One speculation I propose is that the term *world literature* rather than *postcolonial literature* allows readers and scholars within what is still not everywhere a mainstream literary field, to stake a powerful new claim to an institutional and even theoretical middle-ground. It is a middle-ground – that of world literary studies, its historicity, and its critical genealogy based in the European 'classics' (in the sense of 'the best') – that has the advantage in postcolonial terms of being both historically founded, yet also addressed to the contemporary world, the now and its beyond which has always preoccupied postcolonial theory. *World* in other words – so runs my speculation – may be for the postcolonialist both mainstream and yet also omni-referential, in a way that *postcolonial* never is or was, by definition. So, where the postcolonial has typically been concerned with exploited peripheries, disruptive interfaces, schisms, third spaces and the like, *world* signifies far more stable entities such as canons and classics, issues at once global and local, in short, established global and even planetary themes, a remade post-Enlightenment univeralism. Not only in David Damrosch's translational account of world literature, but also in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's bid for a new comparatism in *Death of a Discipline*,[7] *world* stands for a qualified or conditional universalism, but a universalism nonetheless. To this Damrosch[8] adds an informational criterion: world literature's function is 'to represent the diversity of literary cultures and to act as a form of cultural translation for Western readers' (Ref. 1, p. 214). Whereas the postcolonial ultimately always returns us to political and geo-historical questions – who has voice,

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whose land is this – world literary studies with its commitment to what translates, and to distant reading and generic overview, etc, could be seen as overriding or conflating those often ethically difficult and historically specific questions. In short, a sense of the ongoing marginality and seeming tendentiousness of the field could be said to subtend the shift we're discussing from postcolonial to world terminologies.

Related to these classical and ecumenical associations of the term *world*, are also the considerations of a broader comparative scope that the term *world* and its cognates bring to bear. From this point of view, postcolonial literature, although generally still identified as overwhelmingly anglophone or francophone, may rightly be regarded as one of the bodies of contemporary writing that can at least potentially assume the qualifier *global* or *world* without conceptual jarring. That is to say, *postcolonial* permits a shift from the national or intra-national axes of comparison that still tend to shape literary studies (as in American literary studies, or critical discourses on the modern British novel, including by Black British writers), to transnational and cross-regional or more horizontal axes, in a way that pays attention to the new inter-connectedness and worldliness of the present-day context. As with high modernist writing, another hybridizing, defamiliarizing, out of place, cross-border writing with which postcolonial writing is often linked, as for example by Salman Rushdie as writer, and Jahan Ramazani as literary critic, postcolonial writing involves a relentless conceptual shuttling between the specific and the universal, the local and the planetary, and between networked space and cumulative time, to cite also from Mary Lou Emery's insightful work on Caribbean modernisms.[9] Postcolonial criticism therefore, as an always already 'worlded' mode of critical reading and commentary, can appear to *lend itself* to joining pedagogic and critical forces with world literary perspectives and studies.

Another, related speculation, which deserves more careful elaboration than I have the opportunity for here, is that hitching the postcolonial onto a revised world literary studies, or what I just referred to as the expansion of the former's already established horizontal axes of comparison, may be a way of addressing and contending with what Deepika Bahri in *Native Intelligence*[10] as well as others,[11] have discussed as the general lack of attention given to 'the aesthetic dimension' in postcolonial studies until very recently, that is, to literary technique and questions of form, style and genre. If it is true that, as Robert Young said some time ago, postcolonial studies 'first acquired disciplinary legitimacy', 'by devaluing the "aesthetic qualities" of a work and focusing instead on its depiction of "representative minority experience" ' (Ref. 12, p. 1, quoting Young[13]), then world literary studies might well be seen as a revaluing of these. With its antecedents in comparatism, a 'world literature' approach offers substantial critical tools to deal with questions of form, or what Said called the aesthetic integrity of a text. From this perspective, world literary criticism could also be productively regarded as a means of reconciling the culturalist/textualist and material/historicist strands of postcolonial anglophone criticism.

With these different speculations in mind, it's worth briefly looking at the word *world* again from a literary critical point of view, and to ask what kind of heuristic work it does that the postcolonial may no longer be seen to do. In other words, to ask

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an eminently postcolonial question, which world and whose world are we referring to when we say 'world literary studies', remembering that when we say postcolonial we are rarely, if ever, referring to the centre in isolation from its margins? Given that all worlds are necessarily partial worlds, even or especially those explored from multiple different angles, such an interrogation may provide some insight into what a comparative and 'worlded' postcolonialism might entail. It may also shed light on such contingent issues as to where in this globalized world of post-postcolonial world literary studies the zones of centre and periphery, and even of semi-periphery, might be said to exist? Or is the world now so networked, at once so transitional and translational, also at the level of textual criticism, that all such zones might be seen to merge and interconnect? Where the geo-political scope of the postcolonial conventionally privileged the representation of nation, region and locale in narrative, does *world* move us away from specific locations, and from geopolitical territories with defined or even disputed borders, but borders nonetheless? And, if so, does this *world* not threaten to empty the politics out of the postcolonial, especially in so far as world literary criticism is 'hard pressed to avoid traditional [European] questions of judgment and taste', and is shaped by an imperial history where 'European cultures were set as the universal standard' (Ref. 1, p. 214)? Is the entire planet somehow magisterially designated by the term 'world literature', or does that 'world' of world literature in fact have a more limited meaning, as it does in the pedagogic tradition to which Young is referring. There are two trends of restriction here: the first where the 'world' of world literary study in fact denotes Europe and hence points to a bias towards European literature; the second, which is its obverse, where the term 'world', especially when used in conjunction with the postcolonial, denotes 'the rest'; as in, the west and the world.

With this restriction in mind, I would like to recast the question of 'where is the world?' yet again, on linguistic as well as institutional lines. I would like to probe whether the 'world' of a new post-postcolonial world literary studies does not in fact entail the English-speaking world as seen from the vantage-point of the Anglo-American academy: a world in which the hegemony of English is to some extent questioned, yet largely left undisputed? And, if so, might this not shed a sharp new light on the politics of the convergence of world literary studies and postcolonial literary studies? What does it mean in political terms when anglophone postcolonial writing becomes one of the predominant new areas of interest for world literature? To this, other related questions of literary sociology attach, concerning when and how postcolonial or anglophone writers become world writers. Is it when they become recognized by an academy of letters, such as the Anglo-American or the French, as Pascale Casanova might say?[14] Is it when certain prizes are conferred and institutional recognition is gained? At what point, for example, and how, did J.M. Coetzee escape his South African condition to become widely considered as a world writer, if South African-born, in a way that the late Chinua Achebe, for all his status as a writer included in the *Norton Anthology* (with his well-known essay on Conrad), is still widely considered an African writer first and a world writer second.

As the mention of Casanova reminds us, within certain branches of world literary study also arise important considerations of mediation and the material, not only of

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who writes but who reads, and where, on which circuits, within which institutions. Certainly, the division of the world into areas of uneven distribution, of capital flows and concentrations, is something that an influential theory within the new world literary studies, Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems thinking, lays down as an inevitable corollary.[15] Wallerstein's is a world map to which most postcolonial materialists would probably be happy to sign up. Yet, even while signing up, committed postcolonial readers might also ask themselves whether this 'one, yet uneven' world map of flows, consortia and networks, is not as (or more) homogenizing and circumscribed a map as that which earlier underpinned postcolonial writing and criticism, which was grounded in a geography of nation-states? The earlier map, it should be remembered, ceaselessly qualified centre-periphery models of the world and also repeatedly drew attention to the writing of borderlands, shadow-lines and interstices.

By now my array of sceptical questions will have sketched in sufficiently clear terms some of the reasons for my definitional and 'field' concerns about the convergence of the postcolonial and the world – concerns that in practice involve the overwriting of the specificity of the former by the universal cultural values implied by the latter. There is, I suggest, a certain historical amnesia in evidence on the part of postcolonial scholars where they accept the convergence without due circumspection. In doing so they not only disregard the politics of world literary study and its Enlightenment legacies, but they also overlook the place of the still-persistent margin in relation to the globalized world.

In moving on to the closing paragraphs of this essay, I'd like to reconsider the growth of the world literature field and its encroachment on the postcolonial from a less comparative and objective stance than I have been maintaining up till now. I want to consider the apparent convergence of the world and the postcolonial, or the shrinking of what Young calls the unmarked territory between them, from *within* the postcolonial field, that is, from the perspective of some of its central definitive preoccupations. Importantly, these preoccupations have always been in dialogue with findings from anthropology, in particular, with ideas of colonial relationality and ongoing cross-border interaction between cultures, such as we find in the writing of Nicholas Thomas.[16] From this perspective, I spell out in anticipation of my conclusion, the marrying of the world and the postcolonial presents the danger of bringing the postcolonial to overlook or neglect the fact that many of its core tenets emerge from traditions of recalcitrance and opposition, specifically from anti-colonial histories of dissent and struggle.[17]

Despite postcolonialism's well-known collaboration with post-structuralist philosophy in respect of its understanding of the contingency of meaning and the constructedness of identity, its critical-theoretical approaches have at the same time always been grounded in a radical understanding of colonial and anti-colonial history. Postcolonialism, therefore, sees global interaction, especially when viewed from the condition of the less empowered, as something imposed from without, often violently, without choice or consultation. The tenet holds both for those who hold a circulatory model of the postcolonial (Young, Bhabha); and those who subscribe to a

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more dichotomous, conflictual model (Parry, Lazarus, and so on). From this vantage point, it is the colonial encounter, past and ongoing, and the means of resistance to it, both overt and subtle, that still generate the definitive terminologies of postcolonial studies. As this suggests, postcolonial literary criticism has from its inception been concerned with those texts, and those lacunae within and around texts, that have given specific shape to the disruptive penetration of colonial capital, also referred to as capitalist modernity, around the world. Postcolonialism, therefore, is preoccupied with the ways in which texts and documents including memoirs, journalistic essays, pamphlets, proverbs and poems manifest colonial history and historiography – a history that does not exclude narratives of colonial resistance and anti-colonialism. In short, for postcolonial criticism there is no transparent medium to a literary work, and no a-political content. As a field, postcolonialism has consistently taken histories of dissent on the world's margins, and knowledge and theories from below, as formative.

It is perhaps a post-political discomfort with this critical scenario that provides another motivation behind the turn from a conflictual postcolonial studies, to an altogether more emollient and reconciliatory post-postcolonial world literary studies that is both implicitly and explicitly predicated on the cultural predominance (presented as neutral value-judgement) of today's major (dare I say imperial?) power-blocs. World literary studies has conventionally always tended to enshrine large-scale entities or powers as arbiters or standards of 'universal' critical opinion, and no less so today, with literatures from interstitial spaces inevitably cast as contingent and inconsequential, or as untranslatable and hence inaudible in the so-called neutral forums of world literary opinion. And yet, as we have seen, postcolonial writing and theory have from their inception, by contrast, been concerned to convey in both realist and experimental ways colonialist experience around the world in its local, on the ground, often resistant or recalcitrant manifestations. And the postcolonial novel, such as by Amitav Ghosh or Kim Scott or Zoë Wicomb, far from beating a retreat from mainstream world history, has explored the complex counterpoint of local subjectivity and broader political engagement in order ceaselessly to question, and to continue to question, what we understand to be mainstream and universal, and what provincial and 'minor'. For this reason, as Benita Parry urges, perceptions from the colonized or overlooked margins should remain in place as 'the primary form and substance of anti-colonial [and I would add postcolonial] understanding'. It is of vital importance that we continue to ground and re-ground the core postcolonial concepts of freedom, struggle and difference in these histories of relationality and dissent (Ref. 18, pp. 42 and 9).

We postcolonial critics should worry, therefore, whenever collaborations with world literary studies, or indeed any other branch of study, threaten to erase, merge or incorporate our margins. It is from them, from the margins, from the non-cooperation politics of M.K. Gandhi, for example, or the invective against development of Walter Rodney, or the pan-African humanism of Steve Biko, that postcolonialism has drawn its most radical energies: its epistemology of anti-colonial subversion and contestation, for example, and its ethical and linguistic means of

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resisting the west. For postcolonialism to join forces with world literary studies in order to pay recognition to an already prevalent but often oppressive global connectivity, is to risk forgetting some of these core geo-political legacies of the postcolonial, and to overlook the fraught histories through which worlds and words collide.

Then again, the reference to the radical energies of the postcolonial reminds us that other ways forward may yet be feasible. A conjunction of world literary and postcolonial studies need not necessarily involve the co-optation of the one by the other; of the seemingly more peripheral by the increasingly more hegemonic field. To turn the terms of the debate one last time, in a globalizing world it is at least conceivable that, if world literary studies were to join forces with the postcolonial, this could produce a more radical and expansive conception of the world than previously existed in the former domain, and, as a corollary, a constructive interrogation of its still-definitive Eurocentric paradigms. It may not be inevitable that a convergence of world and postcolonial betrays the core task of postcolonial studies, which is to make invisible exploitation visible, especially as it manifests in texts, and to allow knowledge from below to count. In the face of the powerful trend towards 'world' over 'post-colonial', this is an expectation or at least a hope that deserves vigilant critical attention and vigorous (re-)articulation at every available opportunity.

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