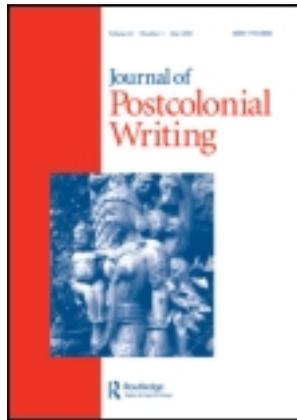


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Postcolonial studies and world literature

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A spectre is haunting the discipline of postcolonial literary studies – the spectre of “world literature.” If the materialist strand of postcolonial studies developed from a political grounding in the anti-colonial liberation movements of the late 20th-century (Lazarus, *Postcolonial Unconscious* 21–32), the re-emergence of “world literature” in the first decade of the 21st century parallels the ascendancy of neo-liberal capitalism and its attendant discourses, just as its first emergence in Goethe’s cosmopolitan *Weltliteratur* and Marx and Engels’s anticipation of a literature superseding “national one-sidedness” paralleled the 19th-century expansion of the world market (Marx and Engels 84). In the last two decades, the fields of comparative and postcolonial literary studies have belatedly acknowledged an epistemological crisis in their failure to address the historical changes in the world-system characteristic of late capitalism. However, their engagement with these changes has taken place predominantly under the banner of “globalization” discourses largely detached from critique of the world economy or through humanist modes of “worlding” literary criticism.

The latter approach has involved extending the scope of metropolitan literary studies to include work from diverse literary traditions: “world literature” as the canon writ large (D’haen 152–53) or as those transcendent works that achieve “universal” recognition. North American literary comparativists such as Damrosch, Lawall, and Prendergast have presented “world literature” as an invaluable form of cultural capital – construed as a vital corollary to humanist cosmopolitanism – for the new “global” elites. Other embattled comparativists defending the linguistic boundaries of their discipline, such as Emily Apter in *Against World Literature*, have argued against world literature on the grounds of the “incommensurability” and “untranslatability” of texts from different linguistic traditions, criticizing the perceived “oneworldedness” of world-systemic approaches that insist on the totality of a singular capitalist modernity (Apter, “On Oneworldedness”).

However, materialist scholarly approaches to worlding literary criticism have also emerged. These are more interested in critique of the underlying structures and conditions produced by the international division of labour, this serving as the “political horizon” of all literature (Brown 3). Encomiums to globalization as heralding a rising tide of prosperity that would equalize conditions between all in the “global village” have proved resoundingly hollow, as evidenced by the savage assaults launched on the livelihoods of the poor and the powerless in the wake of the global financial crisis. The world remains subordinated to the systematic logic of capitalist imperialism: it might be one world, but

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it is grossly uneven. Thus, Franco Moretti has argued that world literature should be more properly thought of as “literature of the capitalist world-system”, originating in a “world literary system” that is “one, yet unequal” and characterized by systemic disjunctures between literatures from cores and peripheries (56). Moretti’s useful proposition of a distant reading of the morphology of literary forms is overly provocative in its accompanying rejection of close reading of texts, and his conception of the circulation of literary forms is reductively uni-directional. Nonetheless, his invocation of world-systems analysis; his insistence that world literature is neither an object, a canon, nor a mode of reading, but rather a problem for the critic; and his suggestive indication of how literary devices such as the unreliable narrator might formally express systemic disjunctures – all offer rich possibilities for the development of new methods of literary comparativism.

This special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* brings together colleagues who reject the triumphalist discourse of globalization, and seek instead to recalibrate the emergent field of world literature from a materialist perspective. A first area of emphasis in this reformulation is the development of new forms of reading praxis attentive to the specific articulations of and engagements with unevenness in literary works. This perspective has been most trenchantly advanced by postcolonial materialist critics such as Benita Parry, Neil Lazarus, Upamanyu Mukherjee and their colleagues in the Warwick collective on world literature. Parry, with reference to Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz, has advocated a theory of “peripheral modernism” as referring to specific aesthetic mediations of disjuncture between core and periphery: those “formal qualities – whether realist, fabulist or avant-garde – [that] can be read as transfiguring and estranging incommensurable material, cultural, social and existential conditions attendant on colonial and neo-colonial capitalism” (33). In this project, peripheral is not intended as a statement of value but rather of systemic relation, and neither core nor periphery is perceived “as a homogeneous or static geographical region, but rather as clusters of internally differentiated nation-states, the periphery existing in an asymmetrical relationship to the older imperialist centres which had pursued capitalism’s unilateral intrusion into pre-capitalist worlds” (Parry 27). Similarly, Lazarus has described the project of the Warwick collective as a reconstruction of “world literature”, one operating within a tripartite conceptualization – “capitalist world-system/modernity/‘world literature’” – wherein modernity corresponds to the uneven time-space sensorium of capitalist modernization and is understood to be “both what ‘world literature’ indexes or is ‘about’ and what gives ‘world literature’ its distinguishing characteristics” (“Cosmopolitanism” 122–23).

A second area of emphasis in criticism seeking to grapple with the materiality of world literary production, found in texts such as Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* and Sarah Brouillette’s *Postcolonial Writers and the Global Literary Marketplace*, is on the communication circuits through which books move as commodities, and the power of particular literary centres (Paris, New York, London) and their publishing houses to influence the formation of canons. Exemplifying this approach is the work of cultural geographer Clive Barnett, who has argued that the Heinemann African Writers series has latterly come to disseminate a post-nationalist “idea” of Africa to the western world due to its increasing dependence on the UK and US tertiary markets. Further emerging strands of research in postcolonial studies seek to explore the circulation and reception of literary forms not only transnationally, but also at the level of local literary markets and reading publics in the peripheries.

In addition to offering readings of the aesthetics of individual literary texts, contributors to this issue also attend to the specific material circuits of production, reception and consecration through which literary works move. The articles collected here are therefore grouped

around three aspects of literary production – reading, publishing, and translation – which explore both the aesthetic mediations of the experiences of unevenness within particular literary texts and the dynamics of consecration and domination to which they are subject. Casanova’s methodology provides a useful starting point, as contributors take up her call for Bourdieusian analysis of the world literary field, but also seek to refine or move beyond the more reductive tendencies of her argument. More generally, we would suggest that despite the limitations of her Franco-centric insistence on the centrality of Paris as prime mediator of literary capital, Casanova’s approach offers the lineaments of a valuable paradigm for reading combined and uneven development. In a case study of travelling revolutions of the novel form, she argues that Faulkner’s aesthetic became a model for literary expression throughout the global south precisely because of its potential for registering the peculiar mixtures of modern and residual social formations produced in the periphery, thus “offering the novelists of the poorest countries the possibility of giving acceptable literary form to the most repugnant realities of the margins of the world” by describing “archaic cultural structures” in the most daring style and avant-garde form (337).

These configurations and asymmetries might be productively explored through the lens of spectrality, since figurations of systemic inequality and the lingering residues of pre-capitalist social formations violently destroyed by capitalist modernization frequently manifest in postcolonial literary texts through tropes and thematics of ghosts, spectres and revenants, and are equally discernible through the systems and circuits of their production, circulation and consumption. In a key passage in José Rizal’s novel *Noli Me Tangere* (1887), the young Filipino hero, Ibarra, recently returned to colonial Manila from Europe, looks out of his carriage window at the municipal botanical garden, only for “the devilry of comparisons [to place] him back in front of the botanical gardens of Europe, in those countries in which one needs a great deal of will and even more gold to bring forth a leaf and make a flower open its calyx” (54). As Benedict Anderson has observed in an important analysis of this scene, Rizal’s hero finds that the gardens in Manila “are shadowed automatically – Rizal says *maquinalmente* – and inescapably by images of their sister gardens in Europe”; Ibarra “can no longer matter-of-factly experience them, but sees them simultaneously close up and from afar” (2). Anderson underscores Rizal’s name for “this incurable doubled vision”: *el demonio de las comparaciones*, or, as he translates it, the “spectre of comparisons” (2).

This formulation, alongside Anderson’s emphasis on the automaticity of comparison, has proved suggestive for a number of critics seeking to rethink or reorientate comparative studies. Harry Harootunian, for example, while taking issue with Anderson on a number of points, amplifies his insight into the “excluded possibilities lived by societies outside of Euro-America but still implicated in its imperial expansion and colonial expropriations”, arguing for comparison as a structurally enforced experience arising out of the “systematic relations of social interdependence” established by capitalism on a global scale (“Ghostly Comparisons” 139, 142). The point is reinforced in a later article, when Harootunian observes: “the peoples of the world outside of Euro-America have been forced to live lives comparatively by virtue of experiencing some form of colonization or subjection enforced by the specter of imperialism” (“Some Thoughts” 26). Echoing Harootunian’s reading of the spectre of comparisons in terms of a structurally generated necessity, Pheng Cheah contends that comparison “is a specter precisely because it is a form of inhuman automatism conjured up by capitalism’s eternal restlessness” (12). The colonized intelligentsia, he adds,

does not possess a monopoly over the comparative moment. It would not be solely *their* gift/curse. Instead, they would be possessed by comparison. They are the earliest recipients

of its visitations merely by virtue of the accidental fact that their social situation enables them to be the first members of their society able to perceive these material-technological forces at work and to recognize how these forces can radically destabilize and change human consciousness by bringing what is alien up close and defamiliarizing the complacent immediacy of everyday life that we take for granted. (12)

Cheah's point concerning the colonized intelligentsia's precocious but not exclusive apprehension of the "comparative moment" – that is, of the combined and uneven development of the capitalist system – is a useful one for thinking through the particular ways in which literary works from the global peripheries register the dynamics and disjunctions of the world-system. In line with the implications of Cheah's argument, we might expect such works to tend towards encoding the logic of this system and its effects in more explicit fashion (whether consciously or unconsciously) than texts from core zones. The latter, of course, will still of necessity register that world-system at some level, since it stands as the ultimate horizon of experience; but they are likely to do so in less visible and vivid ways.

Within this understanding, "world-literature" with a hyphen might refer specifically to those works in which the world-system is not a distant horizon only unconsciously registered in immanent form, but rather consciously or critically mapped – that is, to literature that is in some way world-systemic in its perspective.¹ Correspondingly, we might use the term "world-literary criticism" to denote a deliberately world-systemic inflected mode of critique. The essays collected here exemplify and demonstrate the interpretative possibilities opened up by world-literary criticism. What also unites their different approaches is a conviction that the "postcolonial" remains vital to the critique of the capitalist world-system precisely because it names the particular configurations of social experience and traumatic historical legacies in those once-colonized peripheries which continue to exist in asymmetrical relationship to the older imperialist centres (Parry 27). The historical particularity of the violence of formal imperialism and colonization clearly differentiates postcolonies from other kinds of peripheries, such as those within Europe.

Perhaps surprisingly for an issue reconceptualizing postcolonial studies in relation to world literature, the essays are organized around two geographic nodes, Africa and the Caribbean. Our selection is not meant to replicate the persistent tendency in postcolonial literary studies to privilege writing from certain anglophone sites of empire, particularly South Asia and the Caribbean, which seemed to most easily fit dominant poststructuralist modes of reading. This has had the insalubrious effects not only of reifying the importance of anglophone empire to the exclusion of other European empires, thus Balkanizing postcolonial studies, but also of contributing to the marginalization of literary production from other regions or national traditions and effacing new forms of imperialism and capitalist domination arising throughout the 20th century. As we conceive it, the turn to world-literary criticism offers a potential corrective to these blind spots by advocating a new comparative methodology attentive to the systemic quality of global capitalism and its structured unevenness. Although the essays in this issue focus on regions already "traditionally" covered by postcolonial criticism, our interest is first and foremost in how new world-literary methodologies might move away from reified notions of the "west" vs the rest, identitarian politics, globalist discourses or humanist-cosmopolitanist models to open up possibilities for new kinds of comparativism attentive to the production, circulation and reception of texts in the world literary field, and to how they mediate social experience in the peripheries of the world-system. Sharing an emphasis on the idea of a one and unequal world literary system, such methodologies could be extended to take in texts from Beijing and Dubai as much as from Johannesburg and Fort-de-France.

The first two contributions specifically explore mediations of unevenness in city space through the lens of world-systemic theorizations, the first exploring the aesthetic mediation of combined and uneven development in the semi-peripheral city as it is manifested in literary texts, the second tracing the material operations of cultural institutions in metropolitan cores as they impact on the circulation of cultural forms from the periphery. Thus, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's essay on the South African writer Ivan Vladislavić demonstrates how an "aesthetics of uneven development" can be traced in the author's early short stories and more recent creative non-fiction. In its meticulous yet also fabulous rendering of the Johannesburg everyday, Vladislavić's writing gives expression to the dialectics of scarcity and superfluity – rest and restlessness – that exemplify the uneven conditions of existence in a particular semi-peripheral node of the capitalist world system. Chris Campbell's essay offers a rereading of George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), examining its treatment of the Haitian ceremony of souls, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and the history of the BBC radio programme *Caribbean Voices*. Campbell's analysis not only posits *Caribbean Voices* as a microcosm for the kinds of struggles over circulation, reception and consecration that go on in the world literary system, but also shows how the BBC acted as a complex intermediary in the dissemination of post-war Caribbean writing.

The essays by Ranka Primorac, Ruth Bush and Sarah Burnautzki focus on questions of literary production and reception across the world literary system: *in* a peripheral national literary tradition (Primorac on Zambian literature) and *among* national literary spaces and languages (Bush on the translation into French of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; Burnautzki on Yambo Ouologuem's reception in France and later "at home" in Mali). In her essay, Primorac argues not merely that there exists a thriving *national* literary culture in postcolonial Zambia, but that this culture is supported by modes of reading that challenge the generic and normative understandings of "literature" and "literariness" which are taken for granted in both regional and global literature surveys – the same surveys which otherwise reinforce Zambia's peripheral position in the world literary system. Both Bush and Burnautzki probe the methodological implications and limitations of Pascale Casanova's conceptualization of world literature as the "world republic of letters". In different ways, their essays critique discourses around "authenticity" within postcolonial studies and argue for more nuanced, materialist analyses of the dynamics of the reception and production of African texts in the French literary field.

Our final two essays offer meta-theoretical approaches to the problem of world literature, each turning to theorists from within the postcolonial world in search of alternatives to prevailing models. Ben Etherington's polemical essay seeks to reorientate the "problem" of world literature around the question of literary "material" as defined by Adorno and, alternatively, Kamau Brathwaite. In a deliberately provocative piece, Etherington contends that materialist readings – partly in reaction to the worst excesses of post-structuralist criticism – run the risk of losing sight of the local and of the specificity of aesthetic matter in the effort to identify the global power relations and material structures encoded in literary texts. Finally, Saskia Schabio's article undertakes a sustained engagement with the work of the Martinican poet, novelist and intellectual Édouard Glissant. Schabio seeks to defend Glissant's notion of *la poésie du Tout-Monde* from its co-option by and seeming compatibility with triumphalist discourses of neoliberal globalization, arguing that even in his late work an attention to the structured inequality of the world-system is an integral feature of his attempt to imagine a utopian future.

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Note

1. This understanding of “world-literature” differs slightly from that of Alexander Beecroft, for whom the hyphenated phrase designates the “world-system within which literature is produced and circulates” (87), which we prefer to call the *world literary system*.

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