

Whither Postcolonialism in the Era of World Literature Studies?

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Abstract:

From the beginning of the 21st century, world literature has been a resurgent concept and a highly influential field. But it has also been relatively weak and uniform on literary theory, as well as susceptible to perpetuating an old world order. On both counts, Lorna Burns's *Postcolonialism after World Literature: Relation, Equality, Dissent* offers a major intervention and essential reading for anyone interested in global and postcolonial trajectories of literature today. Engaging theorists in discourse – from Bruno Latour and Rita Felski to Gilles Deleuze, Édouard Glissant, and ultimately Jacques Rancière – as well as writers like J. M. Coetzee, Arundhati Roy, and Kamila Shamsie, the book assembles new philosophical and post-critical perspectives for conjoining postcolonial and world literary studies.

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World literature, for not a few scholars, appears to be postcolonialism's next stop. In the light of 21st-century globalization and of academic paradigms such as transnationalism and transculturality, the study of literature can hardly be contained within neat geographic boundaries anymore. As a legacy of world-spanning empires and colonialism, the border-crossing lives and works of postcolonial, diasporic and migrant writers are cases in point. They have no doubt contributed to the currency and revival, from the 2000s onwards, of world literature studies, updating the concept as first popularized by the likes of Goethe and Marx in the 19th century. In terms of periodization, one might thus be tempted to locate (the new) world literature after postcolonialism (and the latter's origin in the post-WWII era of decolonization). However, the two terms appear in reversed order in the title of *Postcolonialism after World Literature: Relation, Equality, Dissent* (2019), Lorna Burns's study under review. This alternative chronology makes clear from the start that there is no easy way in which postcolonialism might become subsumed under world literature. In fact, Burns mobilizes a rich array of philosophical and literary-critical perspectives around the three key terms in her subtitle – relation, equality, and dissent – to propose major conceptual redress, in an attempt to facilitate postcolonial inquiry in the spirit and wake of world literature, in the first place.

Postcolonialism's complex and complicated relationship with world literature stems from both the concept's origin and its more recent circulation in the 21st century, as Burns argues in her introduction. She follows starkly politicized interventions, by Aamir Mufti and others, to point out the concurrence of world literature's gestation with the heyday of imperialism and its Orientalizing exoticism of difference, as in Goethe's interest in writing from the Far East. In the 21st century, nothing much seems to have changed, at least if one goes by some of the dominant

models of world literature studies. Influential scholars in the field, such as Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova, as well as the Warwick Research Collective have all drawn on world-systems theory and its account of capitalism's long reign and global expansion, in sync with colonialist exploits post-1500. As a result, today's world has been shaped profoundly by the overall capitalist world-system, one replicated by a world-literary system that is one, but unequal, to take up Moretti's much-quoted phrase. Here, writers have to pass through the global hubs of Paris or New York, as centres which constitute the Greenwich Meridian of Casanova's *World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004; French original *La République mondiale des lettres*, Paris, 1999). This state of affairs has occasioned little contact between world literature and postcolonialism yet, as Burns argues with Robert Young – for where do ideas of universal value and hegemonic world-literary capital leave postcolonialism's original task as a literature of resistance?

To accommodate the contestatory potential of postcolonial writing under the rubric of world literature, Burns sets out to revise concepts of both 'world' and 'literature'. She productively complicates the question David Damrosch posed at the onset of current debates in *What is World Literature?* (Princeton, 2003). Where for Damrosch the world is largely external to literature, as a space of circulation, Pheng Cheah's *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, 2016) draws attention to agentic processes of literary world-making, by which the world made by capitalist globalization can be challenged. Probing further into what literature is and may hope to achieve, arguably the most fundamental question of all, Burns significantly adds to reappraisals of world literature from a postcolonial perspective. In particular, she rejects materialist approaches based on world-system theory, by which literature may 'register' inequalities (in the critical parlance of the Warwick Research Collective, a major interlocutor for Burns) – but as a superstructure will always be secondary to the capitalist world-system.

After critiquing the state of the art in (predominantly materialist) world literature studies in the first of four major chapters, Burns moves on to compile an alternative framework in the three chapters to follow. In a wide-ranging exercise of general literary as much as world literature theory, she engages the post-critical turn in literary studies and its scepticism over symptomatic reading as well as aesthetic philosophies to foreground "literature's capacity to challenge assimilatory pressures and the global, social hierarchy; to imagine new forms of belonging for

both national and world citizens” (23). Key theorists guiding her argument are Bruno Latour and Édouard Glissant for concepts of relationality, Gilles Deleuze for the notion of writing as becoming “rather than a passive reflection of a world of global inequalities” (72), and Jacques Rancière for ideas of dissensus and equality. From these perspectives, “the literary text [...] operates as an *active force*, [...] as a site of creativity and of dissent,” enabling a “properly postcolonial resistance, engaged in the (literary) work of imagining a people no longer determined by an imperialist framework, a new humanity and people yet-to-come” (130). Burns’s literary-critical and philosophical reflections are complemented and tested by a range of close readings, covering more recent novels of the past two decades by writers like Arundhati Roy and J. M. Coetzee alongside a number of lesser-known authors, such as Kamel Daoud, Kamila Shamsie, and Dany Laferrière.

Paradoxically, *Postcolonialism after World Literature* is a highly incisive and well-written book, but not always an easy read. The four major and rather baggy chapters move between theory and close reading in rhizomatic loops, with a concern for letting philosophy speak to literary works and vice versa. This relational assemblage, at work in envisioning postcolonialism after world literature, includes the individual critic herself: “both literature and our critical engagements with it can participate in the ongoing reimagining of new forms of belonging, community and global citizenship no longer regulated by an imperialist hierarchy” (219). Given this express future orientation and overall spirit of becoming, it is perhaps fitting that the book does not contain a proper conclusion. Its critical resonance will be intriguing to watch. For now, its major contribution is to bring new philosophical perspectives to postcolonial studies as well as a promising and rejuvenating dose of (post-critical) literary theory to the study of world writing.

Postkoloniale Perspektiven in der Ära der Weltliteraturforschung

German Abstract:

Weltliteratur hat sich seit Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts zu einem wiedererstarkten Konzept und höchst einflussreichen Feld entwickelt, das sich jedoch relativ schwach und uniform zeigt, was die literarische Theoriebildung betrifft sowie dazu tendiert, eine alte Weltordnung zu perpetuieren. In beiderlei Hinsicht bietet Lorna Burns' *Postcolonialism after World Literature: Relation, Equality, Dissent* eine wichtige Intervention und essentielle Lektüre für all jene, die sich mit globalen und postkolonialen Entwicklungen zeitgenössischer Literatur beschäftigen. Indem Theoretiker – von Bruno Latour und Rita Felski über Gilles Deleuze und Édouard Glissant bis zu Jacques Rancière – und Schriftsteller wie J. M. Coetzee, Arundhati Roy und Kamila Shamsie miteinander ins Gespräch gebracht werden, versammelt das Buch neue philosophische und post-kritische Perspektiven für eine Verbindung postkolonialer und Weltliteraturforschung.