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BOOK FORUM

"Language and the Periphery" Response to Book Forum on *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery*

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Abstract

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I am honored by distinguished colleagues' commentaries on *Insurgent Imaginations.* Having learned from their scholarship over the years, I take this opportunity to reflect on some of the issues that they have highlighted, especially language.

Perhaps this is a good time for world literature. Significant research has appeared on the topic in the last decade. The emphases on border-crossing figures illustrate mutual exchange and influence, nuancing David Damrosch's earlier notion that the field would consist of readerly texts that circulate beyond their native context. There is growing documentation of capacious cultural and social histories outside the West. A further notable aspect is the attention to politics, not the humdrum noise of parties and elected representatives, but what Alain Badiou terms the "primacy of politics," the shaping of all life by the human struggle for domination. In short, world literature increasingly seems to name an activist *process*, a verb, rather than a list of proper nouns from different parts of the world.

Seen another way, however, world literature is an untimely, indeed "utopian" (to borrow Sandeep Banerjee's term in this forum) affair. The discipline of literary humanities still remains overwhelmingly monolingual and focused on the Anglo-American. As this journal's readers will recognize, teaching and

writing about the non-Anglo-American world are restricted to a small spread of courses, peer-reviewed journals, press titles, and even fewer scholars. English translations from other languages comprise only about 3 percent of the books published in the United States each year, of which the percentage of non-European languages might be even smaller. Then there is "asymmetric ignorance": the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty's coinage, a condition of academic knowledge production where postcolonial researchers dialogue with Europeanist scholarship but Europe specialists can afford to bracket the non-European world. The peculiar dilemma of world literature, then, might be framed as: the non-European material is more global yet also pitifully esoteric and less "relevant."

Much of this has been said before. The point to underline is, what I have termed "peripheral literatures and languages" are *rendered so.* The contemporary university, its critics complain, correctly of course, has an unhealthy obsession with numbers. Our literature departments, chronically underfunded and precarious, appear to resist the tyranny of numbers by focusing on less than a tenth of the globe, including "American"—meaning the United States—British, and a few European languages and literatures. Attempts to broaden the scope include the various Euro-phones, and the recent category of transnational/global/world literature. On the face of it, the last is one of the salutary if perhaps unintended outcomes of higher education's marketization, the pressure of student enrollments, shifting demographics, trying to match the business schools in global appeal, and so on. Now, university literature curricula regularly feature translated texts from Francophone Africa and the Caribbean; Hispanophone or Lusophone Latin America as well as the Caribbean and Africa; to lesser extents the Russophone or Sinophone; and perhaps most notably, the Anglophone. Of the last, the literary critic Jonathan Arac calls attention to "Anglo-globalism" as the cultural medium through which knowledge translation occurs from the local to the global. We may add that, by inserting transnational/global/world literature as adjunct components of the main business of American and British literature, the category of the Anglophone serves to maintain the older hierarchies in literary studies (accommodating, for example, an Amitav Ghosh or a Chimamanda Adichie). In other words, the ways in which the questions of breadth and diversity are often addressed end up reinforcing the structure of exclusion.

Such practices in the literary field reflect and reinforce the broader paradigms of what the Dutch sociologist Abram De Swann calls "the global language system," a pyramid of not only the innumerable peripheral but also the dozen or so "supercentral" languages that are subsumed by "hypercentral" English.[1] With few exceptions (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak come to mind), literary critics have not been as attentive to the global language system as the more familiar notion of the "world literary system." Among others, the Japanese writer Minae Mizumura draws attention to the soulful impact of what she terms the "universalization of English": the atrophy of "national" languages

[1] Abram De Swaan, *Words of the World: The Global Language System* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

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and their profound transformation by English.[2] This includes the replacement of words, syntax, and indeed entire structures of feeling. The United States yields an outsized international influence, in Mizumura's account, in the export of English.

But the origins of such mastery in the domestic context also need illustrating. Let me provide an anecdotal example: in the southern US city where I live, Spanish-speaking peoples, many with roots in Mexico and central America, form a near majority, alongside Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Hindi-Urdu, Bengali, and other language speakers from the global south. However, right to language, like access to the health-care system in the United States, is far from universal. Languages other than English may be a feature of the nation's lived every day, notable in the urban areas and not negligible elsewhere. Yet English—and monolingualism—monopolizes state policy and ideological apparatus such as schools and media, relegating to the sidelines every other language and the complexity of their multi-hued variations.

The dominance of English should not be seen, as is too-often the case, as the mere byproduct of globalization, a view that in turn naturalizes the Anglophone and renders it unproblematic. Rather, the universalizing tendencies of the present are nourished by murkier processes of the not-so-hoary past. The global language system has a history of persuasion and coercion; the latter is, predictably, inseparable from the expansion of European and especially Anglo-American colonization. The imposition of the colonizer's language on the colonized was, and continues to be, a vital component of the "civilizing mission," as Frantz Fanon dryly observed:

> To speak ... means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization ... Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation.[3] (8–9)

Among numerous instances, a few: In the case of British India, the politician Thomas B. Macaulay (himself a Scotsman) would outline the key importance of English-language literature in his 1835 "Minute on Education": namely, nourishing a class of Indians that would be "English in taste, in opinions, in moral, and in intellect." Meanwhile, the native bourgeoisie had already taken up the offer—one it could not refuse—setting up liberal arts institutions on their own initiative, such as the Hindu College in Calcutta in 1817 among others. Closer home, in Ireland both the language of school instruction and place names on the map would be taken over by English in the 1830s, a cultural obliteration that Brian Friel's *Translations* later dramatized.

Similar examples obtain on the other side of the Atlantic. In the United States, boarding schools for Native American children, the first of which were

[2] Minae Mizumura, *The Fall of Language in the Age of English*, trans. Mari Yoshihara and Juliet Winters Carpenter (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

[3] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto, 2008), 8–9.

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established in the 1860s, were characterized by the emphasis on English speech and writing and the firm suppression of indigenous tongues. The poet Rudyard Kipling must have conceived of English as part of the "The White Man's Burden" that the United States should take up from Britain. On the other hand, President Theodor Roosevelt, a keen demagogue for an American English distinctive from British English, nonetheless declared, "We have room for but one language in this country, and that is the English language."

Like capitalist economic globalization, the "trickle-down" of English through a mix of persuasion, enticement, and, of course, frank violence, nurtured assimilation and resistance. In the latter we might mention creole "englishes," if only in passing given a discussion of their notable variety lies outside our scope. These challenge the imposition of English, and, through decentering, appropriation, and reversal, attempt to overcome the psychosomatic inferiority complex that Fanon described among the colonized. The linkage between language and colonial reparations is amply invoked, to take just one example, in the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett-Coverley's "Colonization in Reverse"[4]:

Oonoo see how life is funny
Oonoo see de tunabout?
Jamaica live fe box bread
Out a English people mout'

The stress on "mout(h)" connects two functions at once: the ingestion of food to satisfy material need and the utterance of language as embodied speech. In similar vein, the mock-menacing tone of the poem's ending anticipates a looming day of reckoning, a glimpse of the world turned upside down: "Wat a devilment a Englan!/ Dem face war an brave de worse/ But me wonderin how dem gwine stan/ Colonizin in reverse." Today by contrast, the global Anglophone seems staid and shame-faced, largely missing the decolonizing spirit of its mid-century predecessors, seeking to complement rather than undo metropolitan English.

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Broadly, the literary and cultural texts I discuss in *Insurgent Imaginations* fall into two groups. The first is a relatively unified category, the global Anglophone. The second comes from my mother tongue, Bengali. The latter is marginal compared to the former, not surprisingly, despite having more than 200 million native speakers and multiple dialects, and a rich literary corpus in the standardized vernacular.

Written and spoken Bengali attest to the history of class, caste, religious, and spatial forms and their attendant tensions. Some of this but not all owes to the British colonial period, lasting approximately 200 years. The Bengal region's global interactions and the latter's impact on literature—much of it written by multilingual authors—stretch wider. Bengali prose, for instance, underwent

[4] Louise Bennett-Coverley, "Colonization in Reverse," in *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*, ed. Paula Burnett (London and New York: Penguin, 2006), 32.

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significant grammatical changes at the hands of Portuguese missionaries in the seventeenth century. Similarly, poetry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries shows an influx of Hindustani loanwords and styles through contact with northern and western India. The emergence of Bengali as a literary language underscores a composite array of influences, not only the colonial European languages, but also Arabic, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian languages, Hindustani or Hindi-Urdu, Persian, Sanskrit, Turkic, and so on.

Such examples can be multiplied. Multilingual regions outside the metropolitan West, such as the Indian subcontinent—or to take another example, sub-Saharan Africa—are home to hundreds of languages, both major and minor, and worlds of expression. Leaving aside the practical issue that we can acquire familiarity with only a few texts, usually the "important" ones, such texts articulate varied themes. World literature would look quite different if these corpuses were taken into account, and much scholarly work undoubtedly remains to be done.

But how would we organize such texts and traditions beyond the empirical elements of richness and variety: languages, genres, narrative forms, with as many commonalities as differences? It seems tempting, and even reasonable, to appreciate the myriad world literatures without running the risk of totalization. Conceptually, however, this approach does not take us far. As Keya Ganguly rightly notes in this forum, affirming the pluralism of multiple modernities instead of the dominant singular substitutes a wish for a fact, "shunting the antagonism of the one and the many to the side." A *political* reading would be key to world literature, I submit, for elaborating its philosophical and processive bases, not only for undoing Eurocentrism but also colonialism. In lieu of an argument, I offer a few key milestones.

Thus, the work of Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, and others within a broad Marxist tradition that see world literature as a system shaped by determinate, that is, underlying and extra-literary structures, of Euro-American colonialism and capitalism—with metropoles (Britain, France, the United States) and semi-peripheries and peripheries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The latter also includes "internal" and "backyard" peripheries such as Ireland and the Caribbean. Literary production, circulation, and consumption approximately correspond to the politico-economic relations between nations, as evidenced in the preponderance of metropolitan languages—increasingly only English alone—over non-European vernaculars and narrative forms such as the novel over non-Western typologies.

Peripheral literatures speak to the conditions of peripheralization in which they originate and to which they in turn respond. They do so formally, that is, in terms of literary and cultural forms rather than content. The Brazilian literary critic Roberto Schwarz pioneers a reading method in this regard, as Maria Elisa Cevasco's article suggests in the forum. Roberto's analysis of the nineteenth-century Black writer Machado de Assis, one of Brazil's greatest literary figures, combines the literary and the historical aspects of the periphery. Examining fictional rhetorical, and generic aspects—what he terms the principles of composition in Machado's novels—yield insights on the author's aesthetic trajectory. In turn, such reading highlights a peculiar Brazilian mismatch, which is more

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properly termed as a productive contradiction, between Europe-inspired bourgeois liberalism and an illiberal social structure based on plantation slavery. (It is not incidental, perhaps, that Machado himself was a descendant of freed slaves.) To summarize a complex argument: Machado—according to Roberto—not only emplots Brazil's place in the world, but, also, the world from the standpoint of Brazil. The "backwardness" of Brazil, the dependence on slavery and so on, is not an anomaly in the "progressive" Europe-led modernization of the world. Rather, the former is revealed to be a necessary function of the latter, a marker of the unevenness fostered and nourished by the free market.

In a pithy essay, "Novel and History: Plot and Plantation," as vital to the current discussion as it is often overlooked, the Jamaican theorist Sylvia Wynter advances further insights. She describes the Caribbean islands as "plantation-societies," on the basis of the dominant mode of production, which "came into being as adjuncts to the [capitalist] market system," and whose history, destroyed and disfigured by a rapacious colonialism, resembles "fiction: a fiction written, dominated, [and] controlled by forces external to itself."[5] Wynter reads into or draws out three connotations of the word *plot*—small pieces of land, novelistic device, and attempted or conceived action against authority—thereby illustrating how language itself ventriloquizes the interactions among market forces, form, and politics:

> But from early [on], the planters gave the slaves plots of land on which to grow food to feed themselves in order to maximize profits. We suggest that this plot system, was, like the novel form in literature terms, the focus of resistance to the market system and market values. For African peasants transplanted to the plot all the structure of [use] values that had been created by traditional societies of Africa ... Around the growing of yam, of food for survival, he [*sic*] created on the plot a folk culture—the basis of a social order—in three hundred years.[6]

The importance of the folk, the culture of the masses rather than the elite, is also the focus of the Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui, alongside the Indian Bengali sculptor and artist Ramkinkar Baij—the subject of Rashmi Varma's intervention in this forum. The nationalist claims of the elite, including literary and other artistic productions, rest on the basis of caste-race inflected internal colonialism and control of the resources of land. By contrast, Mariátegui grounds his analysis of colonial and postcolonial Peru on the material difference between land-owing *criollos* (Peruvians of European descent) and the landless majority, *los indios* or the indigenous. Not only in his voluminous writings, but more so through the journal, *Amauta* ("teacher" in Quechua), which he edited, Mariátegui foregrounds the rich artifacts of indigenous culture that would provide the foundations for a truly *post*colonial Peru. His is no garden-variety nostalgia for blood and soil—an important reminder in today's resurgence of the far

[5] Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History: Plot and Plantation," *Savacou* 5 (1971): 95.
[6] Wynter, "Novel and History: Plot and Plantation," 99.

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right—but for the socialist traditions in the everyday work, and life, of indigenous communities. In the powerful words of the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano: "Allá en Europa descubrió América," Mariátegui found Marxism and Marxism found Mariátegui.[7] His "discovery"—in Europe—of America, like the trajectory of so many of trailblazing anticolonial activists and writers, offers an alternate pathway to the European colonization of the New World.

Surely, these figures are not interchangeable, or even easily comparable—given differences of focus, period, or location. However, Roberto Schwarz, Sylvia Wynter, and José Carlos Mariátegui name elements of an *American* tradition of thinking and practice. They gesture to the broader contours of hemispheric America, in Brazil, the Caribbean, and Peru, beyond the United States. Dialogue across these and other peripheries is vital for correcting dominant assumptions about world literature and underlining the inseparability of the language question from the more pressing issues of our times.

[7] Eduardo Galeano, *Memoria del Fuego 3: El Siglo del Viento* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2012), 67.

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