

REVIEW ESSAY

Postcolonialism without Colonialism: Vestiges of a Method

Philip Dickinson, *Romanticism and Aesthetic Life in Postcolonial Writing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Joseph Hankinson, *Kojo Laing, Robert Browning, and Affiliative Literature: Relational Worlds* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

Charne Lavery, *Writing Ocean Worlds: Indian Ocean Fiction in English* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

It is a revealing exercise to search for variations of the word “colonial” in the indexes and tables of contents of these recent monographs in Anglophone literary studies. As the subdiscipline begins to chronicle contemporary cultural developments in which the British Empire’s legacies grow ever-less marked, it is perhaps inevitable that the terms and concepts that governed the preceding phase of scholarship—colonialism, imperialism, and postcolonialism—begin to recede into the background. The sudden and sharp recession of these terms, however, raises fundamental questions regarding the study of English-language texts from the Caribbean, South Asia, West, and East Africa (among other locales). Among the foremost of such questions may be: does the term “postcolonialism” now designate a mere literary *period*, as opposed to being what scholars over the last several decades seem to have agreed it also is, namely a critical *method*? What are the effects and implications of this shift, wherein not just literary works newly arrived to a world scene still marked and structured by colonial legacies, but older ones long identified as definitionally “postcolonial,” are increasingly treated without such concepts and terms? Suggestions of answers to such questions arise throughout these three books, all of which seek to reconsider one of the keystone concerns of postcolonial studies, namely the relationship between contemporary Anglophone writing and the authors and texts of the British literary canon.

The oldest of the three, Philip Dickinson’s *Romanticism and Aesthetic Life in Postcolonial Writing*, whose ambit is the legacies of British Romantic aesthetics across the former Empire, perhaps not coincidentally displays the highest quotient of postcolonial reading methods. The book deftly makes the case for the self- and world- interrogating tenor of Wordsworthian poetics as both an influence *visited upon* writers and thinkers such as Derek Walcott, V.S. Naipaul,

and Gayatri Spivak through the colonial education system and an *enabling* aesthetic and philosophical resource. For Dickinson (in explicit acknowledgment of other recent studies such as Mukherjee¹), if the interface between the British canon and the scenes of colonial and postcolonial writing was the direct product of exploitation and coercion, this fact need not delimit the terms through which such postcolonial giants, or even their explicit engagements with metropolitan texts, be approached. If the “postcolonial subject [is] pre-constituted ... as the subject of Romantic ideology” by structures of colonial knowledge and power (80), this subject’s appropriation of Romantic forms, genres, and tropes such as that of the Wordsworthian “spot of time” (“aesthetic experiences of formative significance” (31)) shows that Romanticism itself “is not a period, but a period metaphor for an aesthetic language that cannot in fact be contained within the boundaries of a historical period” (181).

Literature that emerged from a dominant cultural and geographical position may, then, be more smoothly adaptable to the discrepant conditions of colonial and postcolonial societies than has long been thought. While partly “mediated by” responsiveness to social and geographical *content* that diverges from Wordsworth’s British “spots,” Romanticism’s “aesthetics of unrelenting self-disturbance” furnishes *forms* whose translatability and portability imply, to some extent, a concomitant destabilization of the concept of the “postcolonial,” both as a period and as an interpretive method. Neither Romanticism’s immediate conditions of production during the later heyday of the Atlantic Slave Trade—which conditions furnished foundational postcolonial analyses like that of Said’s² *Mansfield Park*—nor its later dissemination through the apparatus of colonial education—whose conditions attained similar status through such landmarks as Viswanathan’s³ *Masks of Conquest*—bear any definitive implications with regard to its reception and role in postcolonial literatures. While Dickinson’s study, in keeping with its residual (in Raymond Williams’ sense) commitment to postcolonial methods, also accords substantial space to “Counter-Voices” such as George Lamming, Anita Desai, and J.M. Coetzee, the upshot of the book’s thesis is the idea that the writings of both colonizer and colonized can be equivalently “Romantic.”

The larger drift of such claims is yet more boldly underscored by the other two texts under consideration. The second (in order of publication), Charne Lavery’s *Writing Ocean Worlds*, positions one of the perennial *bêtes noires* of postcolonial studies, Joseph Conrad, on a level playing field with a trio of writers whose work emerged a century later in famous Conradian settings such as Zanzibar, India, and Mauritius: Abdulrazak Gurnah, Amitav Ghosh, and Lindsey Collen. Set amid this constellation, Conrad unexpectedly assumes a place as “a primary writer of the Indian Ocean” by virtue of his literary documentation of the southern British maritime cultures of the *Fin de Siècle* (25). Canonical novels such as *The Nigger of*

¹ Ankhi Mukherjee, *What Is a Classic? Postcolonial Writing and the Invention of the Canon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

³ Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1989).

the “*Narcissus*” and *Lord Jim* offer an early access point for a new literary geography of this nautical and coastal world, whose centuries-old “cosmopolitan trade networks” link together “Arab dhows, Indian food, Swahili music, Islam and hajj ... monsoon, coastal fishermen ... everyday acts of translation, and everyday encounters with racial and cultural difference” (5). Though chronicling it as a member of the British Empire, because “the Indian Ocean space is one in which someone is always an outsider ... Conrad’s work, while Eurocentric,” makes available not just documentary detail, but also the “sense of disorientation produced in the face of radical diversity” that defines these “later writers, too” (25).

Although Lavery’s work is dedicated to familiar postcolonial projects such as the illumination of “alternative modernities” (5) to those of European imperialism and capitalism and the centering of “knowledge ... forgotten or suppressed” by such structures in “non-white, southern, globalized and diversely networked space” (7), it thus unexpectedly re-centers one of the chief figures of the British colonial canon. This move is complicated by the more direct relationships between Conrad and the contemporary authors under consideration, such as the well-known responsivity of the Nobel Laureate Gurnah’s novel *Paradise* to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. After quoting Gurnah’s wry response to the Conrad comparisons accompanying the book’s initial reception (“I can only rejoice ... because I assume they are intended to flatter” (23)), Lavery sidesteps such disaffiliative suggestions by comparing his oeuvre instead to Conrad’s more Indian Ocean-centric fiction. Ghosh’s work proves a bit more stubborn in this regard. “Explicit in his rejection” of associations and comparisons with “Conradian perspective,” Ghosh locates a major component of what Lavery dubs his “Subaltern Sea Histories” in the effort to counteract the damaging effects of Conrad’s representations of the figure of the “lascar” (a term applied variously to Indian, Arab, and Southeast Asian sailors) (24). Robbed of their “voice” and reduced to a stereotypical, “malign presence” by these canonical portrayals, the lascar can only recover recognition through the sort of “cosmopolitan” vantage it is the goal of Ghosh’s pre- and post-imperial writings to erect and resurrect (24).

Lavery’s contribution to moving the comparison of British texts with literatures of the postcolonial period away from hard-and-fast distinctions between colonizing and colonized cultures is then even more radical than Dickinson’s in that the author she selects from the former cohort was directly engaged in imperialism both as a laborer and a chronicler. Where Dickinson’s Wordsworth proves adaptable to postcolonial settings through a phenomenological universality of literary form, Lavery’s Conrad contributes to postcolonial creativity both through form (e.g., Gurnah’s “recognizably modernist, even Conradian” style (120)) and through the striking, if limited access his books provide to Indian Ocean cultures at an earlier historical point. Here, then, it is not merely the implication of British texts’ conditions of domestic production in imperial economies or the coercive colonial distribution and consumption of those texts that must be muffled to assert a positive, generative relationship to postcolonial writing, but also—if either Ghosh or the last four decades of Conrad criticism is

to be believed—their direct misrepresentation of and baleful agenda toward colonized peoples and territories.

The third text under consideration is one that connects Anglophone post-colonial writing to a segment of the British archive falling between those of Dickinson and Lavery: Joseph Hankinson's *Kojo Laing, Robert Browning, and Affiliative Literature: Relational Worlds*. The interlocutor in question is one of the chief figures of the Victorian era, whose career begins where Wordsworth's ends and ends where Conrad's begins. Hankinson pursues "affiliative" comparisons between Browning and the Ghanaian novelist Kojo Laing, whose work has gained increased recognition in recent years for its linguistic hybridity, formal innovations, and "post-postcolonial" sensibilities. Hankinson borrows his keyword from Said, who in *The World, the Text, the Critic* distinguishes between "filiative" relationships founded on "direct genealogy and lines of inheritance" and "affiliative" ones, which are instead "fluid," "open," and elective (Hankinson 8). The book further frames its collation of the Browning and Laing oeuvres as part of a larger effort crucial to "the study of literature in the twenty-first century," whereby "literature is increasingly being reframed in terms of ... relations that exceed those defined by a shared period, nation, or identity—in terms of its multiplicity, heterogeneity, and [an] often utopian seeking after new forms of connection and exchange" (25). The "affiliative" commonalities adduced via the two writers thus center on their common imagination of "significant geographies that rarely coincide with national or linguistic borders" and "an insistent desire to discover and think through points of juncture with other linguistic, political, and cultural communities" (32–4).

While thus bracketing the "filial," colonial relationship between Browning and Laing, Hankinson's method of "affiliation" nonetheless seeks to "trace new, decolonial forms of interrelation and connection" (33, emphasis added). Such forms, here, do not arise from imperial structures of feeling shared by canonical and postcolonial authors or from the latter critically reworking the legacies of the former. Indeed, in contrast to the "decolonial" lines of influence traced by Dickinson and Lavery, no direct response to the British forebear in question is here required. Hankinson draws only one direct link between the Browning oeuvre and that of Laing, when he claims that Laing's early poem "More Hope Than Dust" shows him "reworking" Browning's "Love Among the Ruins" (35). Even when the moment arrives, however, in the book's second chapter, to address this "reworking" (following a far more conclusive demonstration of Laing's repurposing of a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem), the assertion of a direct relationship loosens, such that instead of an explicit or overt patterning after "Love," the Laing poem merely "appears to allude" to it (62). The ensuing comparison of the two texts yields uncertain results, for while Browning's⁴ famous work constitutes something of what Hankinson, citing the work of Isobel Armstrong, calls a "double poem" through its method of enjambed self-commentary, "More Hope" evinces instead a far more radical and visual/

⁴ Robert Browning, "The Ring and the Book," ed. Richard Altick (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971).

typographical “doubleness,” whereby the poem’s primary narrative is interspersed with capitalized lines constituting a separate, and even autonomous, second narrative (62–3). Such textual observations hardly matter for Hankinson’s goal of drawing “affiliative” links between the two writers, however, because it is not the authors’ own role, but rather that of the critic to construct the “decolonial” relationship via Browning and Laing’s common sensibility of “discovery” and border-crossing.

Other connections drawn between Browning and the postcolonial archive render the book’s relationship to longstanding approaches to “decolonial” interpretation more legible. The juxtaposition of Browning’s long, religious, true-crime poem *The Ring and the Book* (regarding whose own polyglot and off-kilter aesthetic Hankinson persuades) with one of the signal texts of Caribbean postcolonial literature, Philip’s⁵ *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, provides a counterintuitive point of departure for a section titled “From Gaps to Junctures.” Philip takes the title of one of the book’s constituent poems, “Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue,” from the Browning work in question, a fact that Hankinson leverages to argue that Philip conceives of her relationship to the British archive as a synergetic “juncture” rather than a critical “gap” (Hankinson 86). “Testimony” itself, however, quotes an additional portion of *The Ring* in its epigraph and uses Browning’s titular “symbol”—comparing the impure alloy of its speaker’s “ring” (as the “sign” for the “thing signified”) to the miscellany-like “book” chronicling the original murder—as a Derridean segue into Philip’s famously deconstructive postcolonial stylings (Philip 52). Though Philip’s aims may appear to comport with Browning’s “mother tongue,” the poem’s overriding emphasis is instead on the ways in which the slavery-driven, imperial imposition of English creates a “confusion of centuries,” a cognitive gap that spurs the Caribbean poet-subject to “revenge the self/broken/upon/the word” (Philip 52–6).

To reread such signature postcolonial texts as, instead, affirmative responses to the imperial archive appears to offer a well-nigh quantum methodological swerve. At times, however, one questions the sanguine, historical baggage-free collisions modeled by Hankinson’s Browning and Laing. In an otherwise passing observation, he speculates that “neither author can be said to have intended to be read with the other” (35). While this is indisputably the case with regard to the former, it is harder to believe in the case of the latter. Even aside from the book’s own argument that Laing’s poetry “reworks” (or “alludes” to) that of Browning, one wonders how a Ghanaian writer entering the haunted, increasingly crowded arena of Anglophone literature in the decades after independence would not anticipate being read (pending career success) alongside the major writers of the Victorian archive. We may begin to wonder, at such moments, whether in the well-intentioned effort to move prevailing approaches to contemporary literature away from the label and limitations of the “postcolonial,” some more avant-garde methods may prove a touch too weightless vis-à-vis the “combined and uneven development” (in the Marxist terms of the Warwick Research Collective⁶) of global power both past and present.

⁵ M. NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989).

⁶ WReC: Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

For her part, Lavery acknowledges the structural and historical realities faced by Anglophone authors when she states that Conrad's centrality to her project is, to some degree, "due to his canonical status and consequent relative familiarity," which stature in turn "helps us to map the contours of the fictional space with which the postcolonial writers must contest" (23). Not only does the British canon's accumulated, globalized cultural capital continue to structure the Anglophone literary field—for writers like Gurnah and Ghosh and for scholars who seek to attract the interest of their peers through the comparative inclusion of more "familiar" names. Given Conrad's more substantive role in Lavery's project, as one of the only Anglophone points of access to the earlier reaches of the "Indian Ocean World," we may even be forced to accept that, for scholars working predominantly (or exclusively) in English, imperial and even imperialist writing may remain a necessary resource (absent a far more robust, translated indigenous archive) for those fashioning longer-gauge, "decolonial" genealogies.

It is here, with what we might call, adapting Casanova,⁷ the "World Republic of Anglophone Letters" more directly in view—as both a residual structure of the British Empire and as an emergent, expanding network fed by US economic dominance—that we may encounter obstacles to our hopes for a fully "post-postcolonial" literary studies. If we opt not to heed Mufti's⁸ plea and "forget English," but hope nonetheless to devise and refine "decolonial" modes of reading and comparing, we must continue to attend to such structuring realities both within and beyond the text. A return to New Critical methods of decontextualized, autonomous comparison will hardly do, at the same time as we recognize that the traditional protocols of "postcolonial studies" will need updating and expansion in response to developing global circumstances. Toward this latter end, the texts surveyed here all represent noteworthy and productive experiments.

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⁷ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*. trans. M.B. DeBevoise, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁸ Aamir Mufti, *Forget English: Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

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