

The Crisis of Imagination: Postcolonial Studies and Migrant Literature

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Felicitous Liaisons: Postcolonial Studies and Migrant Literature

In the book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Elleke Boehmer observes that “Whereas early post-independence writers tended to identify with a nationalist narrative and to endorse the need for communal solidarity, from the late 1980s and into the twenty-first century many writers’ geographic and cultural affiliations became more divided, displaced, and uncertain” (Boehmer 225). With the memory of the national liberation struggles hastily disappearing along the ever-expanding horizon of globalization, it seems as though the “orthodox” postcolonial text has, if not become an anachronism, then at least been rivalled or even superseded by a writing that seems much less self-assertive, less rooted in one particular history, and less politically committed at a collective level.¹⁾

1) Boehmer continues: “In the 2000s the generic postcolonial writer is more likely to be a cultural traveller, or an ‘extra-territorial’, than a national. Ex-colonial by birth, ‘Third World’ in cultural interest, cosmopolitan in

But if it ever was possible to identify a “paradigm shift” within the discourse of postcolonial literature, regardless of what might have caused it, from nationalist- or regional-based narratives to cosmopolitan or diasporic writings, it would have been difficult to tell from the particular development of postcolonial studies as such.²⁾ Rather, if cultural expatriation, as Boehmer writes, “is now widely regarded as intrinsic to the postcolonial literary experience, impinging on writing and the making of literature world-wide” (226), it is perhaps because “now” signifies that moment when the trajectories of postcolonial studies and postcolonial

almost every other way, she or he works within the precincts of the Western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and/or political connections with a national, ethnic, or regional background” (227). In a comment on Elleke Boehmer’s account, Carine M. Mardorossian observes that “some critics have argued that the success of migrant literature is not a sign of the West’s increasing engagement with alternative perspectives and aesthetic criteria so much as a celebration of cultural forms that come closest to Western ideas of high art” (Mardorossian 17).

- 2) It would perhaps, with some justification, be more correct to talk about “diaspora criticism” instead of “postcolonial studies.” In the book *Fictions of Migration*, Roy Sommer argues for the development of a new critical framework more consistent with the specific concerns of migrant literature, which has often been treated through the postcolonial perspective, a treatment which Sommer finds inadequate. Sommer’s own theoretical framework is, however, not as different from the postcolonial perspective, as he makes it sound, but his argument surely raises a concern which is central to mine, namely the relation between contemporary critical discourse and migrant literature (see also Lars Ole Sauerberg’s *Intercultural Voices in Contemporary British Literature* for a similar critique of the inadequacies of a postcolonial perspective in readings of migration literature). Like Boehmer, however, I will continue throughout this article referring to postcolonial studies, as I think it is vital to address some issues closely related to the historical formation of this field in order to illuminate some of the current impasses. For a detailed historical theoretical exposition of the development of diaspora criticism, see Sudesh Mishra’s *Diaspora Criticism*.

literature have finally merged into a harmonious, albeit hybrid, unity. As Elleke Boehmer argues,

In the western academy and liberal literary establishments, poly-cultural 'translated writing' ... is now widely accepted as one of *the* oppositional, anti-authoritarian literatures or textual strategies of our time ... That this should be so is not too surprising. The minglings of migrant writing accord well with political and critical agendas in western universities ... Its heterogeneity symbolizes the kind of integration and absence of fusty provinciality that, on a cultural level at least, many critics and opinion-makers seek to promote ... But perhaps an even more powerful reason for the agreement between the writing and the criticism is simply the fact of location. As numerous critics have noted in recent years, both postcolonial narrative and narrative criticism are situated in the increasingly more heteroglot yet still hegemonic western (or Northern) metropolis. Critics therefore feel able to identify with migrant writing because they occupy more or less the same cosmopolitan sphere as its authors. (229)

There is something vitally important about this development, I believe, this movement toward synthesis, not least because a series of theoretical issues related to this "paradigm shift" have conspicuously been left unaddressed.³⁾ What does this agreement between writing and criticism tell us about the trajectory of postcolonial studies, let alone migrant writing, as well as its discursive premises?⁴⁾ If the circumstances from

3) Elleke Boehmer's discussion does include a critical awareness of the dangers of this "enthusiastic reception" of postcolonial migrant writing. By focusing one-dimensionally on one particular kind of postcolonial literature, she argues, postcolonial studies may give the false impression that *all* postcolonial literature "is *necessarily* transplanted, displaced, multilingual, and, simultaneously, conversant with the cultural codes of the West" (230).

4) In Krishnaswamy's words, one could furthermore ask: "How has the uprooting of postcolonial populations helped to generate a vocabulary of migrancy? What part has the 'cosmopolitan', 'Third World' intellectual played in the

which this agreeable relationship emerges, indicate something important about the development of postcolonial studies and postcolonial literature - such as a series of inherent contradictions which have never been fully worked through or managed - one would assume that these contradictions have been reconfigured and concealed precisely as the very sign of this process of harmonization. Hence, another way of getting underneath this problematic is simply to look at the relationship itself - the, by now, stereotypical and predictable ways in which this relationship is usually conducted, in books, articles, classrooms and in popular media. The relative *absence* of signs of contradictions, tensions, and resistance, I believe, ought to make anyone suspicious, not only with regard to whatever the ethos of postcolonial studies might have been (now and then), but also in connection with this new genre itself - the ethos and potentiality of postcolonial migrant literature.⁵⁾

Travelling Theory

Before I come to that part of my argument, it would be worthwhile here to trace more persistently the underlying reasons for this current “agreement between writing and criticism,” a liaison no doubt consisting

manufacture of ‘diasporic consciousness’? How have metropolitan discourses framed contemporary conceptions of hybridity and migrancy? Has the mythology of migrancy provided a productive site for postcolonial resistance or has it willy-nilly become complicit with hegemonic postmodern theorizations of power and identity?” (Krishnaswamy 127-128).

- 5) Besides Elleke Boehmer’s critical comments on the current agreement between writing and criticism, Timothy Bewes has questioned the “habits of critical reading”(Bewes 34) in relation to the works of a “typical” postcolonial migrant writer, namely Caryl Phillips; see Bewes 2006. See also my article “Postcolonial Melancholia” for a discussion of some of the impasses of the current field of postcolonial studies.

of more than a mere *coincidence* of, say, critical agendas and location. To the extent that postcolonial literature has undergone a change from nationalist-based toward a migrant aesthetic, one should add that the critical vocabulary of postcolonial studies, that is, the *academic* dimension of postcoloniality, was from the beginning orientated toward a cosmopolitan language - which Boehmer associates with the language of a new phase of postcolonial literature - precisely *because* of its opposition to an earlier, nationalist-orientated postcolonial discourse.

Postcolonial studies emerged as an academic discipline in the wake of what Neil Lazarus in the book *Resistance in Postcolonial Africa* has called “the mourning after” - the period of widespread disillusionment in the postcolonial world as a response to the unfulfilled or broken promises that had been bred by the event of independence. In addition, as Robert Young has observed, “The rise of postcolonial studies coincided with the end of Marxism as the defining political, cultural and economic objective of much of the third world” (Young 8-9).⁶ The field quickly distanced itself from the dreams and hopes that had flourished - and failed - in the years after independence, by developing an alternative, more theoretical,

6) Partly *because* postcolonial studies emerged as a “post-Marxist” response to the failures of the socialist-utopian dreams formulated by nationalist and liberation movements, one of the field’s distinctive (and distinctively poststructuralist) traits has been the emphatic employment of strategies of dismantling, subverting, disconnecting, and deconstructing - a cosmopolitan perspective orientated toward a discourse of the “divided, displaced, and uncertain.” To E. San Juan, however, “What is meant by post-Marxism or the ‘end of Marxism’ is really the reconfiguration of the international class struggle between the imperial metropolises and the masses of the periphery” (San Juan 221) - a reconfiguration which according to San Juan coincides “suspiciously with the anarchic ‘free market’ and the vicissitudes of finance capital on a global scale” (229). For an important discussion of national liberation theory and postcolonial studies, see Benita Parry’s *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*.

set of imperatives which gradually became bolder and more self-confident, as postcolonial studies came of age.

In the essay “Travelling Theory” (1982), Edward Said suggested that the first time the understanding of a cultural event or phenomenon is filtered through a theoretical formulation, this formulation’s strength derives directly from the source of a concrete, historical context. Focusing on Lukács’s theory of reification, Said argued that in later formulations of this concept – by Lucien Goldmann and Raymond Williams – the original force, emanating from the social upheavals in early twentieth-century Budapest, had been gradually domesticated, tamed and institutionalised. In a later essay, “Traveling Theory Reconsidered” (1994), Said revises his travelling theory in order to re-emphasise and re-actualise the revolutionary potential in Lukács’s concept, but notably in a “decapitated” way. By now, what Said identifies as the element which gradually domesticates and thus “reifies” the original potential of Lukács’s concept of reification, is not so much an effect of its subsequent and geographically dispersed formulations, as much as something already implicit in the original formulation by Lukács himself, namely what Said formulates as “the reconciliatory and resolvable aspect of his diagnosis” (“Traveling Theory Reconsidered” 438), that is, Lukács’s totalizing faith in the critical potential of class consciousness.⁷⁾ On the contrary, in the revised version of Said’s

7) Lukács’s concept of reification can, at a rudimentary level, be seen as a Marxist “translation” of the Kantian formulation of the insurmountable gap of the subject-object relationship presented in the work *The Theory of the Novel*, which was first published in book-form in 1920. As Said points out, in this early work the reconciliation of the subject-object problematic is imagined in such an exaggeratedly utopian rhetoric that it remains suspended and postponed almost indefinitely. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Lukács historicises and concretises this problematic of an escalating and contradictory subjectivity trapped within the iron cage of capitalist

travelling theory it is now precisely the geographical dispersal which allows for a renewed revolutionary potential to emerge.⁸⁾

Implicit in Said's revised concept of travelling theory is the argument that an initial, normative theory (e.g. Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*) of a particular historical event may produce - as a consequence of its historical limits - an "after-life" of interpretations;⁹⁾ but for these interpretations - like Adorno's theory of Viennese twelve-tone music or Fanon's Algerian resistance theory - to be truly

reality, and, crucially, identifies the possibility of an objective understanding of history through the class consciousness of the proletariat. However, to Said, Lukács's "solution" represents a kind of theoretical short-circuit; an equally contradictory and largely "unreal" leap of faith as the condition of reification itself - that is, an illusory synthesis or *Aufhebung* of the impasse of reification through yet another reifying projection, the concept of totality. In other words, Said argues that as soon as Lukács had diagnosed and identified the uncontrollable and nihilistic force of the figure of reification, he immediately reified this diagnosis by authorising a pseudo-solution, which then was to become synthesised into an increasingly prescriptive and dogmatic protocol of interpretation for subsequent theorists, including the later Lukács himself.

- 8) Said discusses two very different works - Adorno's *The Philosophy of New Music* from 1948, and Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* from 1961 - both allegedly following a similar figure as Lukács's reification, yet rejecting the reconciliatory gesture. Said's travelling theory here takes on a new and important dimension, not so much implying loss and degradation, but rather the opposite; a revolutionary liberation and a reaffirmation of the original idea made possible only through the very process of dislocation which unleashes a critical potential that was already implicit in Lukács's formulation of the concept, but implicit in a reified form. As John K. Noyes has argued, Said's emphasis on *travelling* adds a crucially *geographical* or *spatial* dimension to a given theoretical discourse, a spatial displacement which may "set a dialogue in motion between the place of its articulation and its transcendence of place" (Noyes 350).
- 9) Cf. Adorno's argument that "philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realise it was missed" (quoted in Jameson's essay "'End of Art' or the 'End of History'" 81).

de-reifying in a revolutionary sense, and not just continuations, or, worse, repetitions, they need to distance themselves enough so as to be able to reignite the revolutionary potential of the original theory, in different locations and situations, such as for example Adorno's extreme isolation of the subject-object tension, and Fanon's rejection of reconciliation in colonial Algeria.

In extension, I am arguing that among the elements constituting the determining relevance of postcolonial studies, coming after the failures of nationalist and liberation movements, we find a dynamic similar to the one Said describes in his revised travelling theory (albeit one that is crucially different from both Adorno's as well as Fanon's travelling theories), that is, a trans-national re-mapping of a revolutionary project which originally, within a specific national context, had failed.¹⁰⁾

The irony of this trajectory of a theoretical "re-mapping" of postcolonial thought - at the end of which theory and contemporary literature seem to have come together in a harmonious unity, an agreement between writing and criticism - becomes evident precisely to the extent that we more seriously take into account the actual historical circumstances from which this new phase of postcolonial literature emerges. As Elleke Boehmer writes;

10) As Rey Chow has argued, "The space of 'third world' intellectuals in diaspora is a space that is removed from the 'ground' of earlier struggles that were still tied to the 'native land'" (Chow 18). The dangers of this physical alienation, Rey Chow points out, is that it "can mean precisely the intensification and aestheticisation of the values of 'minority' positions that had developed in the earlier struggles and that now, in 'third world' intellectuals' actual circumstances in the West, become defunct. The unself-reflexive sponsorship of 'third world' culture ... becomes a mask that conceals the hegemony of these intellectuals over those who are stuck at home" (ibid.). See also Revathi Krishnaswamy's article "Mythologies of Migrancy: Postcolonialism, Postmodernism and the Politics of (Dis)location" for a critique along similar lines.

Here it is important to remember the apparently self-evident but none the less significant fact that the emergence of migrant literature in many cases represents a geographic, cultural, and political retreat by writers from the new but ailing nations of the post-colonial world 'back' to the old metropolis. The literatures are a product of that retreat; they are marked by disillusionment, its turn from the political to the aesthetic as a zone of imaginative transformation. Since the early 1970s, as is widely known, post-independence nations have been increasingly plagued by neo-colonial ills: economic disorders and social malaise, government corruption, state repression, various carry-overs from the prebendal and command structures of the colonial period. In much of the once-colonized world, decolonization in fact produced few changes: power hierarchies were maintained, the values of former colonizer remained influential ...The practical response by many writers to what Fanon called 'the farce of national independence' has been to seek refuge - if not to be forced to seek refuge - in less repressive and richer places in the world. (Boehmer 230-231)

Thus a paradoxical distinction emerges between, on the one hand, the trajectory of a postcolonial literary discourse which, by now, seems to have sought refuge, given up the struggle, left behind the ills produced in the aftermath of postcoloniality, a literature marked by *retreat* and, on the other hand, the trajectory of an evermore dominating academic discourse of postcoloniality, which from its beginning was formulated precisely as the critical *response* to this disillusioning aftermath. That the former trajectory here, at least to some extent, should be understood as the manifest expression of what Elleke Boehmer refers to as the "self-evident but none the less significant fact" of history - that the aftermath of postcoloniality brought fewer positive changes than expected - also seems to suggest that it manifests the failures of the second trajectory, the critical response of postcolonial studies, that is, what E. San Juan, amongst others, has described as the "paralysis and

inconsequentiality of postcolonial theory in the face of globalized capitalism” (San Juan 221).

The fact that these two trajectories by now seem to have come together in an agreeable, harmonious unity testifies, I think, to the contradictory status of postcolonial thought today, the clearest sign of which is irony. In his first essay on the concept of travelling theory, Edward Said warned against a theory which turns everything into signs of its own validity, a theory incapable of self-irony, which does not recognize its limits - that it cannot explain everything at all times throughout history; such an instrumentalised theory, Said argued, “becomes an ideological trap” (“Travelling Theory” 241). The current agreement between theory and literature, I would argue, constitutes such an “ideological trap,” a reified constellation unable to work through the ironies of its current, discursive premises, and hence increasingly decoupled from the “self-evident fact” of history.

A "Gift" for Postcolonial Studies: Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore*

Among the writers who have contributed vitally to this current impasse is the Caribbean-born British novelist Caryl Phillips, whose works have typically circled around issues such as slavery, diaspora, and, most recently, black identity in British history. As Timothy Bewes comments, “Caryl Phillips seems like a gift for readers and critics interested in the theme of black ‘diaspora’ in contemporary literature”(Bewes 33). In particular, Bewes argues, Phillips’s works seem to invite discursive readings along the theoretical trajectories of works like Paul Gilroy’s hugely influential *Black Atlantic* (1993),¹¹⁾ a book which epitomizes

11) *The Black Atlantic* is, among other things, a radical attempt to replace nation-based thinking with that of transverse dynamics, such as the image

much of the theoretical work on contemporary postcolonial writing in recent years. “Phillips,” Bewes writes, “fits the postcolonial narrative of a theorist such as Homi Bhabha, just as he does - almost unbearably neatly, the ‘black Atlantic’ narrative of Paul Gilroy” (54).¹²⁾ But even if such a theoretical framework may be invited by the works themselves, it would only seem to make questions as to what extent such discursive conceptualizations might be adequate - in terms of the works, or, perhaps more importantly, in terms of the particular social antinomies to which they respond - all the more pertinent.

Caryl Phillips’s novel *A Distant Shore* certainly fits the postcolonial narrative of a theorist such as Paul Gilroy, almost unbearably neatly, and it would be tempting here to engage in a critical discussion of some of the postcolonial *readings* which the novel has prompted since its publication in 2003; however, I want to focus more specifically on one particular aspect of the novel itself which testifies, I think, to this paralysed situation of contemporary postcolonial thought, as discussed so far. *A Distant Shore* tells the story of two intertwined lives, the retired music teacher Dorothy Jones, and the 30-year old African refugee Solomon Bartholomew, set in a bleak and desolate contemporary England. At the beginning of the novel, Dorothy has recently moved to Stoneleigh, a new property development estate in North England, where she attempts to come to terms with a painful past in order to start life anew. Her life takes a positive turn when she begins a discreet but

of the ship. One of Gilroy’s sources of inspiration is James Clifford’s attempt to rethink culture through the notion of travelling - an attempt which in turn was inspired by Edward Said’s travelling theory. See Clifford’s “Travelling Cultures.”

- 12) Timothy Bewes’s argument focuses on what he calls the “materiality” of Phillips’s writing, by which he means the contemporaneity of the text as a historical event - the formal elements by which the literary text reveals its own historicity.

promising friendship with Solomon, her neighbour. In the remaining parts, the novel retrospectively carves out Dorothy's and Solomon's haunting pasts, the gaps and silences that condition their encounter in the present. Solomon's traumatic refugee narrative contrasts radically to Dorothy's quotidian story of abandonment and rejection, but both share a sense of un-belonging, alienation and loneliness, each in their own distinctive way. The novel promises no more, however, than a temporary glimpse of what could have been a reconciliatory future - Solomon being murdered by racist skinheads, while Dorothy, as a consequence, succumbs to mental instability and ends up in a desolate psychiatric hospital.

A Distant Shore reads like so many attempts to narrate a story - stories, narratives - so as to prepare for the story itself, which however, precisely as an effect of these narrative run-ups, remains conspicuously absent throughout the novel. About Dorothy's life story there is, in her own words, very little to say; "Her story contains the single word, abandonment" (Phillips 203). Abandoned by her husband after a dull, loveless 30-year marriage, Dorothy starts an uneventful affair with the disillusioned Mahmood, the owner of a local newsagent's shop, who makes no attempt to hide his boredom while listening to Dorothy's life story. Her second affair, no less doomed by the dullness of everyday life, involves the part-time teacher Geoffrey Waverley; in his own words, Geoffrey bores people to death with his life story (223), and finds solace in Dorothy's company only because there is no one else around. Both affairs, like her marriage, end in abandonment and embarrassment, in between which we hear almost nothing except fragments of ossified lives that seem never to have been lived at all.

Conversely, in the case of the refugee Solomon, there seem to be almost too much to narrate. His life story contains adventurous anecdotes of heroism and cowardice; stories from his time as a soldier in a

West-African postcolonial liberation army fighting against a corrupt dictatorship; testimonies of incredible horrors and scenes of danger and fear. And yet, for all its dramatic power, Solomon's nightmarish past is also one that remains fundamentally irreconcilable with the present; a past which cannot be articulated, except in isolation, forever buried, repressed, silenced, as if the over-determined accumulation of violent events that made up his previous life cancels out the possibility of narrating anything in present time.

Shipwrecked marriages; friendships ending in betrayal and death; embarrassing affairs no one wants to remember; and destroyed families the memory of which is too painful to be preserved - the novel's paralysed plot consistently seems unable to imagine constellations of community, filiative as well as affiliative bonding, without simultaneously imagining their imminent elimination; as though the story reacts against the very principle of relations. "If I do not share my story, then I have only this one year to my life," Solomon at one point reflects, hoping that some day he might share his life story with Dorothy; but Solomon dies as a one-year old, and, with him, it seems, the past itself. Although the promising friendship between Dorothy and Solomon, around which the novel is sketched, suggests an impulse toward a point transcending this extreme isolation, it is no more than an impulse already quenched by the end of the novel's first part, concluding with the horrifying news of Solomon's undignified death at the hands of local racists. The transcendence of isolation is ultimately rendered impossible, unattainable, to the extent that this impossibility reads like a symptom of a larger, and more thoroughgoing, condition of imaginative paralysis, at which the self-defeating narrative threads of *A Distant Shore* can merely hint.

A Crisis of Imagination

Confronting this condition of imaginative paralysis, one is reminded here of Fredric Jameson's early comment, in the 1979-essay "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," that the "only authentic cultural production today has seemed to be that which can draw on the collective experience of marginal pockets of the social life of the world system," an authenticity which however is "possible only to the degree to which these forms of collective life or collective solidarity have not yet been fully penetrated by the market and by the commodity system" ("Reification and Utopia" 23-24). We might also recall Jameson's argument twelve years later, in his 1991-book *Postmodernism*, that to him "the novel is the weakest of the newer cultural areas and is considerably excelled by its narrative counterparts in film and video," adding, as if in afterthought, that "*in the Third World of course all this falls out very differently*" (298; emphasis added). But whatever has been left of these third-world utopian pockets today seems irretrievably to have migrated to isolated, distant shores, such as the ex-postcolonial figure Solomon, whose authentic life story remains forever imprisoned in between other isolated parts of the novel, unable to break through the atomization of contemporary western life; a transformation from postcolonial liberation fighter to history-less migrant which reads like a short-hand parable of the demise of postcolonial thought as such.

Bénédicte Ledent, the foremost critical authority on Phillips' works, argues that *A Distant Shore* "raises questions about contemporary British fiction and what can be regarded as its enduring inability to mirror a society in flux" (Ledent 152),¹³⁾ which is no doubt a pertinent

13) Bénédicte Ledent here elaborates on a comment made by Caryl Phillips himself, that "an unwillingness to deal with change in society, and by extension that society's image of itself, characterizes modern Britain and permeates the language of all classes" ("The European Tribe" 122).

observation, but what is perhaps even more pertinent to address is Ledent's own inability to raise questions about *A Distant Shore's* inability to "mirror a society in flux," and the inability to see the desperate awareness of this inability manifested at almost every moment in the novel, as a narrative charting a crisis of imagination, the inability to grapple with the historicity of contemporary society.¹⁴⁾ And here, for

14) In her article on *A Distant Shore*, Ledent focuses on what she sees as "an ambivalent combination of attachment and detachment," a "never-resolved interplay" of chiasmic relations" (Ledent 152, 154) - a focus which however remains rather superficial, producing a somewhat short-sighted and random analytical mode that seems to miss the larger issues at stake in the novel; e.g. "the novel's most pervasive allegory may be provided by the numerous cups of tea that the English characters drink at any moment, especially in times of crisis. Not only does tea illustrate further the theme of deceptive appearances: in spite of being a quintessential symbol of Englishness, it originated in regions of the former British Empire. It is, in short, both of, and not of, England" (157). Ambiguity also figures prominently in Joanna Scott's reading of the novel, as "a powerful destabilizing effect," particularly on Phillips's *language*, which "expresses, with impressive understatement, the productive, unresolved complexity that is at the heart of this novel" (Scott 170). "Confusion," Scott concludes, keeps the novel's characters heroically "stumbling along, independent and rebellious" (171); that is, one might add, until one of the novel's two main characters end up being killed while the other involuntarily is being locked away in a psychiatric hospital. A more ambitious reading of *A Distant Shore* is offered in Dave Gunning's article "Anti-Racism, The Nation-State and Contemporary Black British Literature," which argues that the novel rejects global antinomies "by telling an international story that draws upon histories and peoples from all over the world, but that is finally located in a fixed location with fixed codes and laws: the British nation" (Gunning 39). As Gunning rightly points out, the novel seems eager to bring together a number of heterogeneous discourses, but whether this in itself should be interpreted as a sign of "continuity" (*ibid.*), and even "hope" and "a sense of the chance for a new beginning" (40), is perhaps true only in a very limited sense, given the fact that the novel in a quite deliberately systematic way undermines any directions toward reconciliation.

all its obvious obsolescence, it would nonetheless seem as if the novel's schizophrenic narrative perspective - the post-war England that is Dorothy's and the migrant narrative that is Solomon's, narratives clinically kept apart except for a few momentary encounters - which forms the basis of this crisis of imagination, sends us back, yet again, to the unresolved problematic of the Lukácsian subject-object antinomy, however far it may have travelled in the meantime, via Adorno, Fanon and Said. It is undoubtedly a problematic which has become "tougher, harder, more recalcitrant" - to reuse Said's words about Adorno's travelling theory ("Travelling Theory Reconsidered" 440), and ultimately more *unreal*, unimaginable, even in theory, travelling theory, let alone in narratives, or travelling narratives.

That Lukács (as well as Adorno and Fanon) was able to *grasp* the problematic from a theoretical point of view provided the basis for what he diagnosed as the solution (which was of course precisely what Adorno and Fanon, according to Said, rejected), namely the critical consciousness striving toward an understanding of the underlying causalities of the whole, that is, a mind capable of grasping the totality of a reality torn apart by the historical forces of modernity. Late modernity - the early contours of which Adorno and Fanon so relentlessly pursued in their travelling theories - presents an altogether different, more bleak, set of obstacles. If by globalization we mean a multi-causal, complex and contingent network of countless of interacting processes, the representation of which remains, in Jameson's words, "inaccessible to any individual subject or consciousness" ("Cognitive Mapping" 350), "nothing," as Bob Jessop puts it, "can be explained in terms of the causal powers of globalization" (Jessop 98)¹⁵⁾ - least of all,

15) Whereas Jameson - along with other contemporary Marxists - argues that globalization should be seen as determined by one main cause (the development of capitalism), many critics tend to support the view of multiple

it would seem, from a dialectical point of view like Lukács's critical mind.

But it would be misleading merely to suggest that theoretical discourse or novelistic consciousness at this stage can no longer grasp, and hence represent and concretize, the disarraying realities of contemporary globalization, that there are no such narrative forms available to us today. Rather, it seems increasingly to be the case that the full distance traversed between the situation of Lukács's Budapest and the disarraying global realities of today becomes evident only to the extent that we go one step further and observe that not only would it no longer be enough to say that the Lukácsian reconciliatory denouement has become a fiction (as Said's Adorno and Fanon do), since fiction manifestly struggles to imagine such a prospect today;¹⁶⁾ paradoxically, we seem to have reached a point at which it would be more true to say that the impenetrability and unrepresentability of the disarraying global realities of today have cancelled out even the radical theoretical gesture of rejecting the Lukácsian reconciliatory denouement of the subject-object antinomy. Not, one should add, because there is nothing left to reject, but on the contrary because the current global antinomy manifests itself precisely as the systematic rejection of any utopian reconciliatory denouements, however imaginative, theoretical or real their force might be conceived.¹⁷⁾

causes, e.g. Arjun Appadurai (1996). For a critical discussion of this debate, see Crystal Bartolovich's "Global Capital and Transnationalism."

- 16) And this is exactly what, I am arguing, one should attempt to read contemporary migrant literature as an expression of; as the manifest expression of the defeat of orthodox postcolonial thought, rejecting the utopian reconciliatory gesture while seeing *that* in itself as a radical gesture. That migrant literature, on the contrary, is read as a "triumph" of postcolonial thought demonstrates, I argue, the extent of the failures in the contemporary field of postcolonial studies to come to terms with the current impasses.

In response to this systematic immobilization of what Jameson has called “the imaginative picture of global space today” (“Cognitive Mapping” 92), the current theoretical formation of postcolonial studies has been able to come up with very little.¹⁸⁾ Eric Cazdyn, wondering why the field of humanities has had so little impact on the globalization debate, observes that “culture is usually understood as *simply an effect* of globalization processes. A literary studies professor engaged in the globalization debates is expected to study either novels about globalization ... or how the novels travel globally” (Cazdyn 333; emphasis added). My point here is that this mechanical approach to the

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- 17) Deleuze’s and Guattari’s concept of “schizophrenia” can be criticized along those lines, as a form of “renewed privatization,” as Jameson has done in the essay “The End of Temporality.” Jameson argues that “The presentation of the ideal schizophrenic as the ‘true hero of desire’ ... is argued largely on the strength of the perpetual present attributed to this ‘conceptual personage’ ... This absolute present is then a new kind of freedom, a disengagement from the shackles of the past ... [but] what looks like a critique of our social order and the conceptualization of an alternative to it ... turns out in reality to be the replication of one of its most fundamental tendencies. The Deleuzian notion of schizophrenia is therefore certainly a prophetic one but it is prophetic of tendencies latent within capitalism itself and not the stirrings of a radically different order capable of replacing it. Indeed, it is questionable whether Deleuze was ever interested in theorizing any alternative order as such.” (710-711; also quoted by Buchanan 106).
- 18) As E. San Juan rightly has observed, the field of postcolonial studies has generally been obsessed with the dismantling of “totality, foundations, universals, and systematic analysis [which has lead] to a mechanical reification of ideas and terminology as well as the bracketing of the experiences they refer to” (San Juan 222). To San Juan, “the fundamental error [of postcolonial studies] may be traced to two sources. We have, first, the inability to conceptualize mediation or connections in a dialectical manner, substituting instead a seriality of differences whose equivalence or solidarity remains unpredictable; and second, entailed by the first premise, the incapacity to conceive of the conjunctural moment of society as inscribed in the uneven development of the world-system” (230).

literary, dominating most areas of contemporary global literary criticism, has precisely been reinforced and institutionalised by the academic formation of postcolonial studies — a formation which, over the last three decades, has become ever more dogmatic, unimaginative, mechanical and prescriptive in its statements and in its use of the literary; that is to say, a development increasingly taking the shape of what Edward Said called “an ideological trap.” Theoretical discourse, as Mark Currie wryly notes, “has come to designate a set of ideas about the nature of language, culture, history and identity, ideas which are then identified as the actual content of fiction” (Currie 28). The consequence of this reifying “identity politics,” that is, the contemporary “agreement between writing and criticism” (or, the celebration of an institutionalised textual strategy of opposition in the age of globalization, i.e. poly-cultural and heteroglot migrant writing), is that this ideological trap becomes the premature foreclosure of a utopian ethic, and thus, by implication, a reinforcement of what Jameson has described as “the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system” (*Archaeologies* 232).

Edward Said’s revised travelling theory constituted an attempt to reinforce a dynamic, critical, and restless theoretical trajectory which resisted institutionalisation and dogmatism, epitomised in postcolonial thought. The implication of this revision in the context of contemporary global discourse, is, however, as I have argued, the elimination of any utopian imagination, any reconciliatory gestures per se - a rejection which is no longer radical, but rather limiting, and even reinforcing status quo in the sense that the theoretical and the literary have entered a self-reinforcing and self-congratulating dialectic (no less dogmatic and institutionalised), detached from and unable to confront the concrete, direct and practical problems that postcolonial thought faces today.

In his first essay on travelling theory, Edward Said made a crucial distinction between *theory* and *critical consciousness*:

The critical consciousness is awareness of the differences between situations, awareness too of the fact that no system or theory exhausts the situation out of which it emerges or to which it is transported. And, above all, critical consciousness is awareness of the resistances to theory, reactions to it elicited by those concrete experiences or interpretations with which it is in conflict ... [the task of critical consciousness is to] provide resistances to theory, to open it up toward historical reality, toward society, toward human needs and interests, to point up those concrete instances drawn from everyday reality that lie outside or just beyond the interpretive area necessarily designated in advance and thereafter circumscribed by every theory. (“Travelling Theory” 242)

If the institutionalised predictability and agreeability which so frequently haunt contemporary readings of postcolonial literatures epitomize this absence of critical consciousness, the concluding point I am making here in extension of Said’s argument is not simply to identify the literary with critical consciousness as such (or for that matter the utopian moment of critical consciousness),¹⁹⁾ but rather to reignite and reaffirm the initial, but now reified, dialectical tensions between literary and theoretical discourse, which more specifically means to read the literary and the theoretical as expressions of each other’s failures, as failed utopian

19) In *History and Class Consciousness*, as well as in the later essays “Narrate or Describe” and “The Intellectual Physiognomy in Characterization,” the actual utopian moment of critical consciousness is identified by Lukács as a *narrative* moment (as epitomized in Lukácsian realism), the moment at which the abstract utopian “leap of faith” is concretized (and which Adorno, devoting his attention to the non-narrativity of music, rejects). Cf. Sara Nadal-Melsió’s article “Georg Lukács - Magus Realismus?” (72), and Fredric Jameson’s *Marxism and Form* (173-174).

trajectories. That is to say, to defetishize the current “agreement” by addressing the *singularities* of each discourse, what distinguishes one another, their particular strengths and short-comings; what potentially - in a genuinely dialectical sense - squares them against each other as oppositional, and to some extent irreconcilable, forces, similar to the way in which Edward Said, in his revised travelling theory, conceived the relation between an original idea and its subsequent re-mappings. And hence, within the shared space of each map, however incomplete and flawed these might seem today, continuing the travelling theory of postcolonial thought.

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❖ ABSTRACT

The Crisis of Imagination: Postcolonial Studies and Migrant Literature

Eli Park Sorensen

This article investigates the contemporary relationship between postcolonial theory and postcolonial literature, arguing that a problematic “agreement” between criticism and writing in recent years has emerged, which has marginalized and repressed a series of critical issues, thus compromising the utopian and radical potential of postcolonial thought. Tracing the developments of postcolonial criticism and writing, the article argues that whereas postcolonial literature has undergone a change from nationalist-based toward a migrant aesthetic, postcolonial theory was from the beginning orientated toward a cosmopolitan language - precisely *because* of its opposition to an earlier, nationalist-orientated postcolonial discourse. Postcolonial studies emerged as an academic discipline during a period of disillusionment - as a response to the unfulfilled or broken promises that had been bred by the event of independence. The academic field distanced itself from the dreams and hopes that had flourished - and failed - in the years after independence, by developing an alternative, more theoretical, set of imperatives. The current agreement between theory and literature constitutes an “ideological trap” in the sense that it represses the “original” failure, from which postcolonial studies initially emerged; a failure, the after-effects of which still constitute many of the critical issues crucial to contemporary postcolonial thought. The article finally argues for a critical rethinking of the relationship between criticism and writing, in

order to reignite and reaffirm the dialectical tensions between them; and thus continue the radical and utopian potential of postcolonial thought.

Key Words

Postcolonial theory, literature, diaspora, Edward Said, travelling theory, Caryl Phillips, *A Distant Shore*, Georg Lukács

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