

Lorna BURNS, *Postcolonialism after World Literature. Relation, Equality, Dissent*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, ISBN 9781350053038, 256 p.

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Lorna Burns's 2018 book, entitled *Postcolonialism After World Literature. Relation, Equality, Dissent*, proposes a critical matrix through which both postcolonial and world literature can be understood, with a focus on how their inseparable relationship functions. Stating that the canon is now, perhaps unintentionally, hybrid, as a natural result of the mass circulation of international values and the clash of different cultures through colonialism and globalization, Burns argues that literature poses a challenge to the assimilation of such hierarchies, in exchange creating new patterns of belonging for the newly emerged hybrid individuality, and that world literature allows for subversive interpretations which alternatively envisage a different perspective on equality, as contrasted by global inequality.

In the author's words, two directions of research are identifiable within the volume: the former concerns the status of world literature as a self-standing field of study at the "advent of European imperialism," whereas the other regards postcolonialism beyond poststructuralism, in relation to the "lessons of contemporary world literature studies" (3-4):

Postcolonialism after World Literature seeks an alternative to the notion that the text is 'an object of perception and understanding', an approach that risks reaffirming the all-knowing critical stance which will reveal the repressed desires or political unconscious of the inert text, as Rita Felski (2015) and Bruno Latour (2004) have argued [...] while we cannot determine in advance what a text is capable of (Latour), we equally cannot rule out what it is incapable of (Rancière) (8).

The volume consists of four chapters, each dealing with a certain aspect of postcolonialism after world literature and devising a certain critical lens through which to regard and analyse literary phenomena. The first chapter, "A World Empire of Letters: Theories of World Literature from Nation to World-System" discusses key

concepts for the analysis, as well as two novels, Dany Laferrière's *I Am a Japanese Writer* and Roberto Bolaño's *By Night in Chile*. A more in-depth exploration of Latour's actor-network theory, applied to Pauline Melville's *Eating Air*, can be found in Chapter Two, "Modernity in Relation: Rethinking the Sociology of World Literature." Chapter Three, "Globalizing Dissent: Active Resistance and the Politics of Relation in Postcolonial and World Literatures," brings forward the question of literary dissent, in relation to Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*. It should be noted that it also represents a continuation of previous work by the author, on the subject of postcolonialism as an erasure of the opposition between "colonizer and colonized, self and other" (17). Last but not least, the notion of literary inequality in relation to changing systems of values is addressed in Chapter Four, "Enacting Equality: Postcolonialism After World Literature," which employs Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* and Kamel Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation* as central textual focuses.

A key aspect of Burns's book lies in its incredible thoroughness in the analysis of the subject: what is particularly striking is the complexity of the theoretical documentation, which includes the philosophies of Bruno Latour, Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, Jacques Rancière, Gilles Deleuze, Aamir Mufti, Edouard Glissant, etc. As such, the author avails of notions concerning the politics of reading, the virtual and the actual, the dialectic of dissent, textual form and visibility, or the notion of diversity as an imperialist concept (to name only a few), thereby pinpointing another underlying question of her research: to what extent literature crafts reality and its hierarchies, or, conversely, to what extent they craft one another. In fact, the act of reading and of readerly engagement with a text is analysed minutely throughout the work, particularly from the perspective of its position within the realm of world literature; Burns regards these acts as particularly powerful and revolutionary:

World literature is refigured as a process of reading, of interaction with a text and the experience of the transformations it induces; [...] however, its force will come from the text itself, from our readings and translations of it, and from the new literary world or symptomatology that, in a small way, our writing itself creates (17).

Moreover, towards the end of the volume, she notes that it is also the status of the reader or the writer that can solve the seeming opposition between Rancière and Deleuze, as far as the duality of the actual world and the literary text is concerned:

As we have seen, crucial to resolving the dispute between Rancière and Deleuze is a precise understanding of the role of witnessing: the writer or reader who is sensitive to moments of deterritorialization and disruption within this actual world, as well as to their reterritorialization in forms of consent. The writer, then, is always witness to ‘the promise of a new humanity’ and not its actuality; they are both an observer of this actual world and a prophet of its renewal (205).

The chapters are preceded by an introduction that examines the problematic of understanding world literature through postcolonial critique. According to Burns, world literature as we know it is innately “troubled by the shadows cast by historical legacies of colonialization and their postcolonial afterlives” (1) – that is, there is an undismissible tension generated by the choice to perceive world literature as a byproduct of colonialism. It is further argued that, provided one takes into account the fine line between embracing diversity and an overly *laissez-faire* attitude towards it, literary works can emerge as mechanisms of understanding “relations of force” (8) within the texts, which translate into colonial and capitalist practices that influence the assimilation of otherness and, thus, upkeep inequality. Drawing on Young’s views regarding the politics of world and postcolonial literature, Burns notes that the latter is essentially a “literature of resistance” (3), whose impact on events of “injustice, exploitation and oppression within the world that it represents” is particularly evident. Thus, it is claimed that, as far as the aesthetics of representation is concerned, postcolonial and world literature stand in opposition to each other.

Of particular interest is Chapter 2, which Burns writes as an attempt to understand Latour’s critique of the ground of modernity in order to move towards an alternative that retains the potential for dissent. Starting from Bruno Latour’s claim that our intellectual life is “out of the kilter,” a notion backed by his example scenario of a newspaper with a “dizzying array of actors at work within each event,” she explains that the world, in general, is approached through three different epistemological positions: the real, the social and the narrated (84). Since our disciplinary responses tend to also fall into one of these incompatible approaches, she suggests that in the

modern critical stance we cannot find a single trait that is both real, social and narrated altogether. According to her, our intellectual life is out of kilter because our disciplinary responses are either universalizing abstraction, specificity, or simulacra, whilst world literary theory reproduces this train of thought. If, for Latour, modernity signifies the strict delineation of categories, such as subject – object, human – non-human, networks – translation, as well as a mixture of nature and culture which challenges the notions of absolute and transcendent, Burns sees a connection between his philosophy and the Nietzschean aesthetics of Apollonian – Dionysian, demonstrating it through the example of Pauline Melville's *Eating Air*. According to her, Melville's novel represents an exploration of revolutionary terror from a Dionysian perspective and can subsequently be read as a cautionary tale to those who reduce literature to a mere expression of ideologies. Additionally, Burns contends that, for Latour, literary criticism becomes an activity of observing the social as it is recreated in the text itself, on the premise that every literary work is driven by an imperialist force where even capital, race and gender can become actors in themselves. However, what the chapter fundamentally attempts – and succeeds in – is the overall investigation of Latour's dialectic, with the purpose of reimagining literature anew when viewed through a postcolonial framework.

In addition, should one take a closer look at Chapter 4, it could be argued that, to a certain degree, it functions as a summary of what was previously discussed, in the sense that, from its debut, one is already aware that the literary world is “one and unequal,” meaning that its individual literary pieces have yet to be unified by their “capital, visibility or circulation” (169). Burns mentions the existence of a new set of critical theories which places world literature in the spotlight and, as such, marks a shift in the understanding of postcolonial studies. Notably supported and researched by the Warwick Research Collective (abbreviated as WReC), this apparatus regards postcolonialism “by means of an interpretative framework driven by the structural premise of the capitalist world system” (169). Thus, materialism-wise, “contemporary world literary criticism [...] holds further interest for postcolonial studies in its focus on the unevenness or inequality of capitalism,” whereas literature dealing with these tropes is no longer as concerned with “difference” as it is with “inequality” (169). As a consequence, contemporary literary criticism implies offering a testimony, as well as an authentication of the performance of inequality on the textual level. According to Burns, this approach, albeit of great help in the reacclimatization of the postcolonial

viewpoint, leaves at least two major points of interrogation without a definite answer. On the one hand, although Latour's, Glissant's and Deleuze's philosophies are all attentive to the status of the actors in processes of becoming, their theorizations cannot be placed together under the same "ontology" of "commonality" or "comparison" (171). On the other hand, Burns claims that the point of view might change drastically if, instead of assuming the inequality of the aforementioned actors, the focal point would shift towards their equality. To the latter issue, she proposes what might be regarded as a concession, as well as a solution: "a theory [...] which retains the system's capacity for redistribution, rebalancing and reconfiguration" (172). Both Shamsie's *Home Fire* and Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation* are offered as examples of such systems, particularly due to their enactments of "processes of exclusion within the context of a nation state" (206); in Shamsie's case, Burns sees Antigone as a dissident, anti-capitalist, liminal figure, whilst in Daoud's case, she is especially appreciative of the revelatory power of the text, which manages to expose the shortcomings of the anticolonial revolution. Accordingly, both texts generate what she believes to be a new expression of equality in postcolonial studies:

[...] it is towards a renewed concept of equality that postcolonial studies can turn in light of contemporary world literary criticism and its attendant focus on world-systems: an equality that is enacted in every performance of dissent, making visible those lives and histories rendered invisible and heard the subaltern speech that has been silenced or considered mere animal noise (219).

For whoever might have an interest in postcolonialism, world literature or contemporary philosophy, Lorna Burns's *Postcolonialism after World Literature. Relation, Equality, Dissent* can be regarded as a comprehensive study, not only due to its meticulous review of literary criticism, but also because of the application of a plethora of philosophical theories in the analysis of numerous postcolonial works. Well-developed and detail-oriented, her work manages to place both the postcolonial framework, as well as its shifting morphology, in the wider context of contemporary world literature, along with its networks, politics and hierarchical systems of value.