

Earth, World, Planet

Where Does the Postcolonial Literary Critic Stand?¹

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Another world is possible²

Where does the subject of global inquiry or injury stand, or speak from?³

THIS ESSAY BEGINS with two questions. What is the appropriate language for conveying what is at stake in globalization? What has postcolonial theory to offer to globalization studies? In addressing “cosmo-theory,” Timothy Brennan suggests that “a brief over-

¹ I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding this research, which benefited from overlapping support through a standard research grant, “The Ends of Postcolonialism,” and an MCRI grant, “Globalization and Autonomy.” Heike Härting and her colleagues at the Université de Montréal inspired the essay through an invitation to speak in January 2004, and I benefited enormously from their input at that time. Lily Cho, Western, and Lynn Mario Menezes Trinidad de Souza, São Paulo, provided essential advice during my early preparation. Chris Prentice and her colleagues at the University of Otago in Dunedin heard and critiqued a later version in September 2005. I am grateful to them all.

² This is the motto of the World Social Forum, set up by civil-society groups in 2000 as a network of networks, originally meeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and designed to function as an alternative to the neoliberal globalization agenda of the World Economic Forum, which meets annually in Davos, Switzerland. For a fuller description, see *Another World is Possible: Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum*, ed. William Fisher & Thomas Ponniah, foreword by Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri (London & New York: Zed, 2003).

³ Homi K. Bhabha, “Unpacking My Library... Again,” in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers & Lidia Curti (New York: Routledge, 1996): 200.

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view of a single decisive concept may be useful for illustrating a kind of inquiry that is seldom taken up in cultural studies: one that links intellectual producers to their own products in a localized matrix of intellectual work."⁴ In assessing three metaphors that emotively suggest how global contexts shape a space for action, I will question the matrix they afford for situating postcolonial intellectual work while briefly specifying my understanding of my own situatedness within these debates.⁵

This article remains a preliminary investigation, one in a series I have written over the last several years bringing together a range of issues related to identity and belonging that have been bubbling up in postcolonial and social-justice discussions across a variety of fields. I have focused on how to write and visualize 'home' under globalizing conditions, how notions of "cosmopolitanism, diaspora and autonomy" become newly relevant under such conditions, how the politics of postcoloniality are changing, how "the social life of stories"⁶ functions in local and global contexts, and how citizenship is being reconceived within Canadian multicultural debates. This essay re-situates my fascination with these themes within the contexts of earth, world, and planet, each of which offers global options for thinking space in newly grounded ways. If John Berger is correct in linking the loss of political bearings to the loss of home as a "territory of experience," then such a task is crucial to reclaiming globalization for poetry and the particular. Berger cites Édouard Glissant to argue:

The way to resist globalisation is not to deny globality, but to imagine what is the finite sum of all possible particularities and to get used to the idea that, as long as a single particularity is missing, globality will not be what it should be for us.⁷

⁴ Timothy Brennan, "Cosmo-Theory," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.3 (2001): 661–62.

⁵ There are important institutional, national and disciplinary contexts shaping the localized matrix for my thinking to which I can only gesture here. I itemize these in more detail elsewhere: see Diana Brydon, "Canada and Postcolonialism: Questions, Inventories, and Futures," in *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature*, ed. Laura Moss (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2003): 49–77.

⁶ Julie Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory*, (Lincoln & London: U of Nebraska P, 1998).

⁷ John Berger, "'I'm getting into a train... I'll call you later': Ten dispatches about place," <http://mondediplo.com/2005/08/14place> (accessed 11 August 2005): 2.

Although this sounds as if it could assume an additive model for understanding globality, I do not believe that is what is implied here. Rather, the insight that I find in this notion is the idea that each particularity alters the whole and so refracts understanding anew. For Berger, poetry, a mode of thinking seriously endangered in our contemporary moment, is where particularity most intensely names itself. With poetry, he claims, "We will take our bearings within another time-set."⁸ These beliefs, he concludes, are part of why he remains a marxist.⁹

The ways in which poetry and politics intertwine are central to the postcolonial project and the resistances it has posed to capitalism in its imperialist and late-imperialist neoliberal guises. Postcolonial mappings take on different configurations depending on the location from which they are charted and the dialogues that develop when they move into different kinds of social space. As a result, there is no single answer to my question: where does the postcolonial critic stand? It is the kind of question that we need to keep asking, and answering within the contingencies of the moment, but it is not the kind of question we can just raise, answer, and be done with.

I have put two epigraphs at the head of this essay, which function for me as points of orientation within a wide-ranging exploration; but I do not address them directly in what follows. They signal my attempt to bring together discourses too often kept apart: those of social activism and the literary imagination. This essay derives from several sources: my fascination with the different but overlapping resonances conjured up by the three terms of my title – earth, world, planet – and the different trajectories each suggests for how to make sense of the ways in which people are reconfiguring spaces of belonging under globalization, on the one hand, and, on the other, my wrestling with the various critiques of postcolonial theory that deplore its anti-foundationalism, its lack of grounding in particular forms of political struggle, or, as Peter Hallward puts it, its "refusal of any identifiable or precisely located centre, in favour of its own self-regulating transcendence of location."¹⁰

⁸ Berger, "'I'm getting into a train... I'll call you later,'" 3.

⁹ "'I'm getting into a train... I'll call you later,'" 4.

¹⁰ Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2001): xv.

For the purpose of my argument, I want to bypass the controversial question of who legitimately can *be* a postcolonial critic by suggesting that, for me, the postcolonial critic is anyone who professes to be working with and through postcolonial theory today. This essay is meant to be descriptive and questioning rather than prescriptive. Each critic will find her own ground. What I describe here is part of my own continuing search. I seek postcolonial reading strategies that might prove appropriate to the contexts out of which I am working and I hope that you, my readers, wherever you may be located, will find some resonance for yourselves in my mapping of these questions.

Postcolonial theory, as I understand it, requires re-thinking the foundational categories on which the academic division of disciplines has traditionally been based, including examining the categories in which literary studies has operated. In forcing a re-thinking of the status and role of the nation-state, globalization has also compelled renewed attention to the category of national literatures and the supposed ability of Literature (with a capital L) both to reflect and to transcend the nation. Postcolonial criticism, whether it traces its roots to anticolonial liberation struggles, to Commonwealth literature, or, more recently, to notions of *francophonie* and the post-Soviet imaginary, began with a clear sense of its grounding in community and cause. Charges of groundlessness have come with the gaining of some theoretical purchase within the academy, which inaugurated a move away from geopolitical specificity toward a "world embracing"¹¹ level of generalization that linked postcolonial, postmodern, and poststructuralist critique in a common philosophical endeavour: to question the legacies of the Enlightenment and its modernity.

As a result, categories that have structured understanding of spatial, political, economic, temporal, and cultural organization are now all in question. The nation, the people, the local, the market, the human – these no longer function as they once did to anchor intellectual inquiry and emotive investment. They still function, but differently. They are no longer seen as stable ground but more often as shifting ground. What provides the grounding, then, for meaningful work today?

¹¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003): 4.

In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy laments “a failure of political imagination” in which “translocal affiliations” seem almost unthinkable outside “the limited codes of human-rights talk, medical emergency, and environmental catastrophe,” attributing this sorry situation to the fact that “the human sciences have become complacent.”¹² While it is far more usual to argue that the human sciences are under threat, and more anxious and defensive than complacent, Gilroy’s argument needs to be taken seriously.¹³ As Gilroy sees it, Western society is in danger of forgetting the lessons of imperial history and of the Holocaust, and is on the way to repeating their abuses. But he also believes that we can reset “our moral and political compass [...] by acts of imagination and invention.”¹⁴ This metaphor of re-setting the compass is in use across the political spectrum and already risks cliché, yet it expresses so compactly the spatial dynamic implicit in the threat and potential of the current moment that it is hard to resist.¹⁵

These questions of grounding and orientation motivate a range of inquiries across the disciplines and within the public sphere. According to some, postcolonial theory’s greatest strength resides in its insistence on asking these questions. To others, especially those who see “Western discursive rules, norms, and sensibilities as the proper context for global exchanges,” it is precisely that search for revised grounds that disqualifies the postcolonial from legitimacy.¹⁶ In the broadest terms, postcolonial work shares the belief that motivates the World Social Forum: “another world is possible.” Such a belief, in being goal-oriented, sits uneasily with

¹² Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005): 5.

¹³ I engage this question of the complacency of the human sciences at more length in my forthcoming article, “Do The Humanities Need a New Humanism?” in *The Culture of Research*, ed. Daniel Coleman & Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2009).

¹⁴ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 52.

¹⁵ In their “Foreword” to Fisher and Ponniah’s *Another World is Possible*, for example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write that “The World Social Forum at Porto Alegre has already become a myth, one of those positive myths that define our political compass.” See Hardt & Negri, “Foreword,” in *Another World Is Possible*, ed. William Fisher & Thomas Ponniah (London & New York: Zed, 2003): vi.

¹⁶ Siha N. Grovogui, “Postcolonial Criticism: International Reality and Modes of Inquiry,” in *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations: Reading Race, Gender and Class*, ed. Geeta Chowdhry & Sheila Nair (London: Routledge, 2002): 38.

dominant models of disinterested research. At the same time, in its future-oriented relation to time, it may seem complicit with Western norms. Those of us coming from a postcolonial training within the interdisciplinary collaborative research group studying "Globalization and Autonomy" find ourselves negotiating simultaneously on both these fronts. How many of the founding assumptions of disciplinary practice can we throw into question and still complete our work?¹⁷ Can describing the world be separated from changing it, if we understand space itself as produced rather than merely given? Postcolonial work continually confronts the knowledge that space itself is metaphorical rather than a given and stable physical entity, because not all cultures conceive of space as colonizing Western cultures have.

In reading a first draft of this essay, my Brazilian colleague Lynn Mário Menezes de Souza drew my attention to this point through his work with indigenous Brazilian cultural logics and the challenges they pose to Western notions of space, agency, subjecthood, and especially writing as a privileged form of communication.¹⁸ He explains that, for this community,

writing, from an indigenous 'visionary' perspective is just the spatializing of knowledge (knowledge becoming space and materializing; knowledge reduced to a single dimension, and accessible to a single body-sense, that of sight, rather than the multisensorial synaesthesia of the indigenous non-spatial 'vision'.

Seen from this perspective, as he argues,

writing diminishes rather than enhances perception and the very notion of space itself [if thought of in the terms that writing establishes, will] in all its subsequent metaphorical realizations – earth, planet, globe – go[es] on colonizing our thought.

"I see space," he writes, in this context of writing "as depending on the attendant concepts of sight and a seeing subject. When space becomes natu-

¹⁷ The first two books of this multi-volume series have now appeared: *Global Ordering*, ed. Louis W. Pauly & William D. Coleman, and *Renegotiating Community*, ed. Diana Brydon & William D. Coleman. As we prepare our concluding volume, we continue to wrestle with these questions.

¹⁸ For published versions of his work, see the texts listed in my Works Cited.

ralized, the presupposed seeing subject becomes invisible and disembodied and escapes criticism."¹⁹ Part of the task of postcolonial literary critics is to make that presupposed seeing subject visible but without privileging the sense of sight over other ways of understanding space and inhabiting, dwelling, and living in the world.

If cast within a frame that continues to privilege Western notions of space as something measurable and quantifiable, then earth, world, and planet may all be employed as colonizing metaphors, as Menezes suggests. I want to argue, though, that they need not be subjected so rigorously to the domain of sight alone. Auditory space may also shape our understandings of these metaphors in different ways. Furthermore, what seems to be the relative interchangeability of earth, world, and planet on the most general level can also obscure consideration of the significant ways in which they differ as employable images of how we configure our relation to space, and conceive of where we live and what it might become. Each name carries different associations, which may be stabilized in writing but which surely also convey different connotations within different contexts. As used within the World Social Forum, 'world' signals a socially based opposition to the supposedly impersonal economic forces of globalization. The 'globe', as a 'spherical representation of the earth', derives from a certain kind of scientific knowledge, a privileging of the visual and the panoptic, and need not include humanity as social agents within its visualization. 'Earth' has more varied meanings, some of which are more immediately tangible: it can signify the planet, the people who inhabit it, and the material that composes its surface. Similarly, 'world' can indicate the planet earth but also all people on the earth and, beyond that, the universe itself. Although environmental movements such as Earth First! advocate "a biocentric instead of a homocentric way of looking,"²⁰ the word 'earth' may be employed in the service of either vision. For me, 'earth' has a particularity that neither 'world' nor 'planet' can match. It has a touch, taste, and smell, a graspable concreteness, which make it more intimately resonant of home.

¹⁹ All citations from Menezes, taken from his email communication to me (25 February 2004).

²⁰ John Barnie, *No Hiding Place: Essays on the New Nature and Poetry* (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1996): 81.

I do not wish to make too much of these kinds of slipperiness in conceptual orderings of how ordinary usages image our relation to global place. I mention them because I think that they might help us to conceptualize the challenges currently posed by globalization. To me, some of the most alarming developments in the current world order seem to derive from the colonial experiment: the growing apparent tolerance for increasing inequities, for torture, and the growing numbers of people treated as “disposable” (Bales) or named as “illegal” (Dauvergne). In identifying the “illegality” of people as “a new discursive turn in contemporary migration talk,” Catherine Dauvergne sees a dangerous realignment of old ‘us’ versus ‘them’ divisions,²¹ noting, further, that “human rights norms have done little to assist illegal migrants.”²² Kevin Bales, in his analysis of “new slavery in the global economy,” and Paul Gilroy, in his consideration of the continuities and breaks between old racialisms and new, each identify the need for research into the history and current practices of race that are not based on forms of identity-politics but can instead address the changing forms of exploitation today.²³ These critics agree with Bryan Turner that “We do not possess the conceptual apparatus to express the idea of global membership”²⁴ or, we might add, of global accountability and global entitlement to the kinds of protections traditionally granted by citizenship within the nation-state and claimed more universally by human rights.²⁵

²¹ Catherine Dauvergne, *Making People Illegal: What Globalization Means for Migration and Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008): 16.

²² Dauvergne, *Making People Illegal*, 21.

²³ The Special Topic October 2008 issue of *PMLA* 123.5, on “Comparative Racialization,” addresses this issue in more depth.

²⁴ Cited in Sheila L. Croucher, *Globalization and Belonging: The Politics of Identity in a Changing World* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004): 81.

²⁵ And as popular books such as James Hughes’s *Citizen Cyborg* suggest, the very idea of ‘human’ already seems too limited and inappropriate for what is rapidly becoming a posthuman society. Hughes suggests that the concept of the ‘person’ is more appropriate than what he sees as “human-racism, the idea that only humans can be citizens”; Hughes, *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future* (Cambridge MA: Westview, 2004): xv. In his view, personhood and its attendant rights could be extended to “posthumans, intelligent animals and robots” (xv). But whatever we name a new rights-bearing global subject, the questions of how that subject might attain agency in making decisions to govern global actions and in reforming or devising new global institutions to manage change

In addressing inequities on a global scale, attention to the metaphors that legitimate or disguise their practices should be helpful. This is not mere theory unconnected to practice. As David Harvey reminds us, there is more at stake than just "getting the metaphors right."²⁶ But we do need to understand the metaphors we have, and how they are functioning, for, as he suggests, we seem to have come "to an intellectual impasse in our dominant representations."²⁷ As a geographer, Harvey suggests that "we cannot deal with 'the banality of evil' [...] because, in turn, we cannot deal with geographical difference itself."²⁸ I find this notion puzzling but think that he may be suggesting the kind of critique that Spivak and Menezes note: Western notions of mapping and measuring space obliterate the particular space-time relations that derive from other cultures in ways that question the very foundations of Western thought, and the resultant inequities that they legitimate.

Perhaps terms such as earth, world, and planet, in their urge to stress interconnectedness, move beyond geographical difference too quickly. As Joyce Davidson and Christine Milligan note,

Recent geographical work has recognized the significance of emotion at a range of spatial scales. As we move 'out' from the body, emotions are no less important but they are arguably less obvious, less centrally placed in studies of, for example, the home, the community, the city and so on.²⁹

Have we the emotional imagination to think space at this degree of abstraction? Or could the banality of evil derive, at least in part, from the

within the global sphere remain pressing. For a good introduction to some of these questions, see *A Possible World: Democratic Transformations of Global Institutions*, ed. Heikki Patomäki & Teivo Teivainen (London & New York: Zed, 2004). For a new research project, "Building Global Democracy," see the website www.buildingglobaldemocracy.org

²⁶ David Harvey, "Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils," in *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, ed. Jean Comaroff & John L. Comaroff (Durham NC & London: Duke UP, 2001): 284.

²⁷ Harvey, "Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils," 290.

²⁸ "Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils," 290.

²⁹ Joyce Davidson & Christine Milligan, "Editorial: Embodying Emotion Sensing Space: Introducing Emotional Geographies," *Social and Cultural Geography* 5.4 (December 2004): 524.

same failures of the imagination that denigrate colonized cultures? Post-colonial work, along with the rest of contemporary inquiry, inherits the problem of how to address the 'banality of evil', Hannah Arendt's striking characterization of fascism. Her phrase provides a context for what David Dabydeen terms the "pornography of empire" and what Susan Sontag addresses as the unmet challenge involved in "regarding the pain of others." Harvey's assessment of why we cannot deal with the banality of evil leads him to question the ground, or knowledge-base, on which theorizing of global belonging might be based: "What kind of geographical knowledge is adequate to what kind of cosmopolitan ethic?"³⁰ In exploring this question, he notes that "postcolonial writings [...] have opened a vital door to a broad-based critical geographical sense in several disciplines"³¹ and points to "the extraordinary proliferation of spatial, cartographic, and geographical metaphors as tools for understanding the fragmentations and fractures evident within a globalizing world."³² "Cosmopolitanism," he concludes, "is empty without its cosmos."³³ A striking thought. The cosmos of cosmopolitanism, in its various current revivals, is clearly not understood by everyone in the same way, although it is often assumed as the given ground for a discussion of how people should live together. Daniele Archibugi's edited collection *Debating Cosmopolitics* provides an excellent introduction to the range of these debates, but does not consider whether or not there might be a postcolonial way of understanding the cosmos and pays almost no attention to the contributions of the humanities.

Harvey discerns an "embedded geopolitical allegory" in the concept of cosmopolitanism.³⁴ Are there also geopolitical allegories embedded in the three terms of my title: earth, world, planet? If so, what are they and where might they lead us? My personal first orientation to earth comes as a gardener rather than a theorist. Gardening, in its practical and its literary groundedness, brings the cosmos "back to earth," as it were. From that base, I find myself wondering what kinds of communities are constellated around new organizational structures such as the Earth Summit, and what

³⁰ Harvey, "Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils," 290.

³¹ "Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils," 298.

³² "Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils," 299.

³³ "Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils," 298.

³⁴ "Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils," 302.

relationships those communities bear to the World Social Forum. Is the environmental movement split between such orientations or are there splits and overlaps that require much more detailed scrutiny? I suspect that these metaphors are being asked to carry sometimes widely divergent agendas. In a similar vein, the idea of civil society, whose groups so often employ these metaphors, is currently being made to carry too heavy a burden of hopes for progressive social change when much of the evidence suggests that civil-society groups may organize as often for discriminatory as for liberatory ends and may often find themselves advocating band-aid solutions and charity in place of what is really needed: radical reorganization in the cause of equity.

How are these metaphors affecting disciplinary practices? In English departments, postcolonial studies began with a comparative nation-based focus within a model of progress that linked the attainment of autonomy and territory with independence from imperial control. Much current postcolonial theory, although not the versions that I endorse, remains hostile to the nation-state, advocating cosmopolitical, transcultural or planetary consciousness as superior replacements. Yet the nation-state, at least in its liberal manifestations and despite its many shortcomings, remains the best provider of many public goods, such as universal public education and public medical care. In theory and often in practice, it provides citizens protection under the rule of law and institutional avenues for redress when this fails. Many problems remain, but they can be noted and addressed. I see no necessary contradiction between the survival of the nation-state and movements toward conceiving of the world as an interactively global space requiring new global institutional arrangements for managing the increasingly complex interactions that globalization promotes. People can operate on a number of complementary scales at once without having to make absolute choices among them.

As a Canadian who benefits from the current global order, while also feeling guilty about the many ways in which my benefits make me complicit with it, I still invest hope in the nation-state as a governing structure that can benefit all its citizens in a more equitable fashion and contribute to a well-ordered, peaceable, and just world through modification of existing international and global structures. I do not, however, believe that allegiance to the place of my citizenship contradicts allegiance to the global

community. A citizen of Canada can also be a citizen of the world, but those two forms of citizenship may be lived out in different ways and require different exercises of responsibility.

As a literary critic, even though I owe my first jobs to the national divisions that structure this discipline, having first been hired as a Canadianist and Commonwealth-literature specialist before the postcolonial existed as a category, I have always felt constrained by nation-based models that make it difficult to trace international patterns of interaction and the differences between local specificities in meaningful ways. The postcolonial can be construed as a transnational category, following the imperial languages of the West, most prominently English, wherever they went, and advocating attention to everything that they missed, or misconstrued, including alternative modes of charting complex connectivities. That is the model that I prefer for work in the classroom. But the postcolonial, in curricular practice, more often functions as a kind of grab-bag of national literatures, a supplementary afterthought added to the unchallenged base formed by the British and US experiences. In theory, of course, it must challenge that base, but in reality, it often serves to entrench it. Postcolonial criticism has brought new energy to established fields and enabled the addition of a category once termed 'English literature outside British and American' and, increasingly, simply 'postcolonial literatures' or 'world literature' but has not yet succeeded in changing the organization of English or other language departments nor of making many inroads into the analysis of globalization within globalization studies. Special issues of *PMLA* on "Globalizing Literary Studies" (2001) and "Literatures at Large" (2004) testify to changes afoot but have not yet been translated into major curricular change or degree requirements within many North American institutions.

Current postcolonial theory and civil-society movements are now forcing me to ask just what is at stake in shifting the focus of analysis away from the nation-state toward space-based metaphors, such as earth, world, and planet? Do they really suggest different ways of imagining place and communal action within it? What do ecological, environmental, and indigenous concern about the fate of the earth, Edward Said's advocacy of a worldly criticism, and Gayatri Spivak's of planetarity, have in common? Each suggests modes of engagement beyond the nation for re-conceiving

home, but to me such shifts need not deny the importance of the nation-state as a space of engagement. While the trend in much current cultural theorizing is to dismiss the nation-state and its institutions, from my Canadian-based perspective I want to resist this trend and question its politics.

In "Literature for the Planet," Wai Chee Dimock launches an attack on the nation that posits literature as an anarchic force, "impossible to regulate or police."³⁵ She sets up a straw man to argue that

we need to stop assuming a one-to-one correspondence between the geographic origins of a text and its evolving radius of literary action. We need to stop thinking of national literatures as the linguistic equivalents of territorial maps.

Growing up in Canada and then with postcolonial theory, I don't believe that I ever did think this way, but I am prepared to accept that this is the dominant mode in which English and comparative literatures have been and may still be largely conceived. Dimock suggests that global readership "brings into play a different set of temporal and spatial coordinates. It urges on us the entire planet as a unit of analysis."³⁶ In her view, "As a global process of extension, elaboration, and randomization, reading turns literature into the collective life of the planet."³⁷ But from what perspectives are we to understand that collective life? Given that reading is a highly specialized skill, not currently available to many, what does such a view of community really mean? Can there be such a collective life, really, when reading is an elite activity currently confined to the privileged, and when even those within this elite global community read in situated ways? It is this realm of conflicting readings that most interests me and that I worry that Dimock is implicitly denying by privileging what seems to me to be an unconsciously-based US-based reading. Like her, I hope there can be such a collective life, but I worry that the diversity she celebrates may be unhelpfully constrained by her invocation of a "practised reader" who can make sense of it all.

Dimock contends that "To a practised reader the hearable world is nothing less than the planet as a whole, thick with sounds human beings

³⁵ Wai Chee Dimock, "Literature for the Planet," *PMLA* 116.1 (January 2001): 174.

³⁶ Dimock, "Literature for the Planet," 175.

³⁷ "Literature for the Planet," 178.

have made across the width of the globe and across the length of history."³⁸ I love this image of the planet thick with sounds but I am somewhat chilled by the vision that the phrase "the practised reader" conjures for me in this context. Reading is a highly culture-specific skill of great complexity, yet it can be practised in a range of fashions, so that to rush to assume that one may always know how to identify which readings are practised and which naive, in our culturally diverse world, makes me nervous. Even though this practised reader is skilled in hearing and distinguishing diversity in the "thick sounds" that she imagines, it is this very assumption that there can be a culturally centred connoisseur of diversity, writing out of the pages of *PMLA*, that troubles me. As Menezes points out, while indigenous communities may adjust their writing to accommodate their non-spatial forms of knowledge, when "this writing is read 'spatially' in the west, it becomes lacking and rudimentary, even infantile." Dimock substitutes a form of auditory mastery for a visual one and stresses the reader's receptivity to what she "hears," but this metaphorical "hearing" still occurs through print-based reading and relies on assumptions that we know what "mastery" is in ways that may too readily disguise a continuing ethnocentrism.

If Simon Gikandi is correct in suggesting that "postcolonial theory is the assertion of the centrality of the literary in the diagnosis and representation of the social terrain that we have been discussing under the sign of globalization,"³⁹ then what difference do these two signs – the postcolonial and the global – make? What does it mean to assert the centrality of the literary? And what difference does it make in analyzing a global social terrain? What have literary postcolonial studies to offer analyses of globalization and what are the implications of globalization for the future of literary studies? These are some of the questions we are asking within the Globalization and Autonomy research team discussed earlier in this essay. Many of us in the team have come together out of frustration with the limits of our own disciplinary expertise and the frames they offer us, which seem inadequate for addressing the challenges of our times. What we are learning, however, is how entrenched our different disciplinary values

³⁸ Dimock, "Literature for the Planet," 180.

³⁹ Simon Gikandi, "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.3 (Summer 2001): 647.

may be and how hard it is to think outside them. Our ongoing on-line discussions and our conversations in person have revealed that the concept-metaphors we assume, and those we employ, can prove major stumbling blocks to true communication. We have breakthroughs and moments of illumination that make it all worthwhile, but it can be a profoundly destabilizing experience. We may use the same terms but we do not stand on the same conceptual ground. I conclude that there are many lessons that those of us in the humanities can learn from our colleagues in the social sciences, but at the same time I realize more clearly where the value may lie in the kind of disciplinary work – undisciplined as it may seem to outsiders – that we in literary and cultural studies in fact manage to do.

Charles Taylor suggests that “the language of traditional political theory – rights, citizenship, the demand for equal recognition, class, race, colonialism, etc. – is terribly inadequate” for enabling any “really fruitful conversation,”⁴⁰ the kind of conversation in which one can inhabit one’s own first position but also begin to enter the different position of one’s interlocutor. “Part of the problem with our contemporary philosophical language,” he continues, “is its surrender to an exclusive Kantianism. But this is only part of it. Much more crippling is its phenomenological poverty.”⁴¹ Perhaps literary and literary-critical languages can address this phenomenological poverty. Pheng Cheah, in his essay “Of Being-Two,” in which he explicates and interrogates Luce Irigaray’s theories, argues that “Irigaray’s sexual ethics clearly entails not only a revisioning of the relations between and among the sexes but also a reconceptualization of what both thinking and politics are.”⁴² In *Spectral Nationality*, Pheng Cheah addresses what Taylor had identified as the problem with an exclusive Kantianism to move toward the question: “If political organicism is now being deformed in contemporary globalization, what is the most apposite metaphor for freedom today?”⁴³ Against Hardt and Negri’s

⁴⁰ Charles Taylor, “Response to Bhabha,” in *Globalizing Rights*, ed. Matthew J. Gibney (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003): 186.

⁴¹ Taylor, “Response to Bhabha,” 186.

⁴² Pheng Cheah, “Of Being-Two,” in *Futures of Critical Theory: Dreams of Difference*, ed. Michael Peters, Mark Olssen & Colin Lankshear (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003): 182.

⁴³ Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom From Kant to Post-colonial Literatures of Liberation* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003): 382.

Deleuzian "nonorganic vitalism,"⁴⁴ Pheng Cheah argues that the "metaphor that has replaced the living organism as the most apposite figure for freedom today is that of the ghost."⁴⁵ Ghosts imply a different way of inhabiting space and time, a disembodied or differently embodied form of attachment to the earth, a place to which they no longer fully belong, at least in Western thought, yet cannot leave. Is there a link between hauntology as a theoretical and popular concern and the spatial crisis I am registering in this essay? Both James (Saké) Henderson, in his essay "Postcolonial Ghost Dancing," and Gayatri Spivak, in her lectures *Death of a Discipline*, imply that there may be such a link by turning to North American indigenous cultures to retrieve the metaphor of the ghost dance as a model for postcolonial practice.

The ghost dance is not the ghost and it is hard to write about without invoking inappropriate imagery derived from Western notions of time and space. The ghost dance is performed by embodied people in the hope of coaxing ghosts of the ancestors to return to the earth, but they may never have actually left. For Henderson, the ghost dances "were not part of a messianic movement," as eurocentric writers wrongly assumed, but

a sustained vision of how to resist colonization. It was a vision of how to release all the spirits contained in the old ceremonies and rites [...] back into the deep caves of mother Earth, where they would be immune from colonizers' strategies and techniques.⁴⁶

In his view, the diagnosis of colonialism and the restorative processes required to reconcile conflicting knowledge systems, can be "organized under the term 'postcolonial ghost dancing'."⁴⁷ In opposition to the perceived "abstraction of the world as a site of belonging,"⁴⁸ the earth as origin and context can seem much easier to embrace as a source of inspiration. But that ease may have its own pitfalls, as can be seen in the

⁴⁴ Cheah, *Spectral Nationality*, 382.

⁴⁵ *Spectral Nationality*, 383.

⁴⁶ James (Saké) Youngblood Henderson, "Postcolonial Ghost Dancing: Diagnosing European Colonialism," in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, ed. Marie Battiste (Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 2000): 57–58.

⁴⁷ Henderson, "Postcolonial Ghost Dancing," 73.

⁴⁸ Croucher, *Globalization and Belonging*, 189, paraphrasing Benjamin Barber.

popularity of New-Age philosophies, which misunderstand the philosophical bases on which postcolonial ghost-dancing rests.

Henderson's employment of the ghost dance locates a re-thought politics in a sphere of action in which freedom and responsibility may be re-joined. His postcolonial ghost dance is not backward-looking, as contemporary observers thought, but, rather, challenges their notions of time as linear. It combines materiality and spirituality, earth and world, in ways not readily amenable to Western philosophical constructions. Henderson's postcolonial ghost-dancing provides a basis for beginning the kind of conversation across cultures envisioned by Charles Taylor – if non-indigenous critics can attend to its practices without yielding to the temptation of appropriating its vision for New-Age or other agendas. Henderson's postcolonial ghost-dancing needs to be read alongside his powerful political essay "*Sui Generis* and Treaty Citizenship," which bases its claims for layered indigeneous citizenship, and for re-thinking the entire basis of Canadian citizenship, on the legal interactions of indigenous peoples and the British Crown. The layered nationality and planetarity he claims are based on his peoples' relation to the earth, a relation maintained through the principles of the ghost dance.

Ultimately, the problem embedded in the metaphors of earth, world, and planet is that of the "political status of space."⁴⁹ (To address that politics, it may be necessary to resist the pull of Heideggerrean mysticism and its elevation of art as possessing privileged access to truth.) According to Henri Lefebvre, when "points and systems of reference inherited from the past are in dissolution," whether under colonization or, more recently, through globalization, elites lose their bearings, and new ideas "have difficulty generating their own space."⁵⁰ Postcolonial ideas can find themselves trapped within older manichaeian structures (as analyzed by Gilroy) and psychologized, personalist modes of interpretation, even as they seek to generate alternative ways of conceiving and relating to space; but they can also turn their structures against themselves. I am thinking here of questions such as "Is Canada postcolonial?" and "Who is to blame?" – the question that, Susan Sontag argues, must be asked about

⁴⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith (*La Production de l'espace*, 1974; Oxford: Blackwell, 1991): 416.

⁵⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 417.

the problems raised by regarding the pain of others. Laura Moss's *Is Canada Postcolonial?* makes a major contribution to both Canadian and postcolonial studies, largely because the book's contributors take issue with the terms and orientation of the title, seizing the occasion to problematize the space it set for them. Similarly, Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* problematizes the politics of blame by developing a complex argument about complicity.

Lefebvre's conclusion to the section of *The Production of Space* quoted from above may help contextualize Spivakian notions of planetarity. He writes:

Formerly represented as Mother, the Earth appears today as the centre around which various (differentiated) spaces are arranged. Once stripped of its religious and naively sexual attributes, the world as planet – as planetary space – can retrieve its primordial place in practical thought and activity.⁵¹

Lefebvre concludes in full-fledged utopian vein:

The creation (or production) of a planet-wide space as the social foundation of a transformed everyday life open to myriad possibilities – such is the dawn now beginning to break on the far horizon.⁵²

Lefebvre's linking of the production of space to the "project of a different society"⁵³ may be found in the work of many postcolonial theories today.

In *Postcolonial Contraventions*, Laura Chrisman concludes her analysis of Fredric Jameson and Spivak by noting that each draws attention to

the need for materialist postcolonial criticism to engage theoretically with the topic of space [...]. What emerges from their work is the challenge of producing an account that neither aestheticizes space nor renders it a synonym for existential aporia but is sensitive both to phenomenological and political processes, to human production of as well as production within space.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 418.

⁵² *The Production of Space*, 422.

⁵³ *The Production of Space*, 419.

⁵⁴ Laura Chrisman, *Postcolonial Contraventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism and Transnationalism* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003): 68.

But whereas Bill Ashcroft argues that Saidean worldliness provides “a principle which retrieves the materiality of the world for political and cultural theory,”⁵⁵ valuing “a text’s ‘affiliations’ with the world rather than its filiations with other texts,”⁵⁶ Chrisman is less sanguine. She argues that both Said and Jameson “foreground an aestheticized analysis of colonial space at the analytical expense of space’s human occupants.”⁵⁷ Throughout the present essay, I have tried to stress the ways in which space is produced by human communities in ways that always incorporate an imaginative geography, which in different societies has produced radically different conceptions of what space is and how it may be inhabited.

I have attended to the spatial metaphors of globality as a way of trying to understand what motivates people to act on the global stage, how and where they locate themselves when they think of global action. Spivak provides an important test-case for the ways in which postcolonial criticism now locates itself between indigenous groundings in the land and planetary perspectives on global destiny.

Chrisman concludes, not entirely correctly, I think, that

The preferable political option for Spivak is, it seems, for subjects, like Kantian imperatives, to learn their limits, stay in their naturally separate places, as taught by Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The spatialized conception of subjectivity as occupying a distinct, fixed and rightful domain, is marked here; imperialism becomes the by definition expansionist and dominatory movement across these delineated territories.⁵⁸

Chrisman has accurately described what seems to be one tendency in Spivak’s work. Can such a conclusion be reconciled with Spivak’s advocacy of planetarity as the imagined project that may prove the antidote to globalization? Perhaps, depending on how we read her various invocations of ‘earth’ in *Death of a Discipline*. Spivak writes: “The Earth is a paranational image that can substitute for international and can perhaps

⁵⁵ Bill Ashcroft, “Edward Said: The Locatedness of Theory,” in *Futures of Critical Theory: Dreams of Difference*, ed. Michael Peters, Mark Olssen & Colin Lankshear (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003): 262.

⁵⁶ Ashcroft, “Edward Said: The Locatedness of Theory,” 263.

⁵⁷ In her view, Said’s worldly criticism is further weakened by its problematic presentation of economics. See Chrisman, *Postcolonial Contraventions*, 67.

⁵⁸ Chrisman, *Postcolonial Contraventions*, 57–58.

provide, today, a displaced site for the imagination of planetarity."⁵⁹ The Earth as a displaced site for imagining planetarity? Does she mean that instead of imagining it from above, from outer space, the Earth can help us see the world as interconnected from below? Or is she also suggesting displacing the globe of globalization by the planet earth, as invoked by environmentalists and especially the world's indigenous peoples, who claim a special relation to the concept? What kind of work can such displacements do to negotiate the contradictions between planet earth, as seen from outer space, and the earth as imagined in indigenous philosophies? For me, Spivak's spatial metaphors oscillate between these different concepts in troubling ways, as they may well be designed to do.⁶⁰

Mette Bryld and Nina Lykke argue in *Cosmodolphins* that

NASA's Blue Planet photo presents us with a modern version of the story of the Garden of Eden, mingled with a radically updated narrative of the 'sacred home' of nineteenth-century Romantic evangelism.⁶¹

In other words, Planet Earth as a concept is available for appropriation by environmentalists of all political stripes, by New-Age advocates, and by the military-industrial complex. Indeed, their book is designed to address the slippages between New-Age and Space-Age discourses. As Bryld and Lykke warn, "the lofty panoptican view of Earth, created by space flight, is definitely not an innocent one,"⁶² a point also made in Stephen Slemon's review of Spivak's book, when he notes that "*Death of a Discipline* ends with a kind of mountain-top vision of future possibility, one that will not be enacted here on earth in especially short order."⁶³ Nonetheless, Slemon generously finds potential in Spivak's "planetarity" as a thoughtful trans-

⁵⁹ Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 95.

⁶⁰ For an evocative meditation on the phenomenological productivity of "Dis/place," see Marlene Nourbese Philip's essay "Dis Place – the Space Between" in *A Genealogy of Resistance* (Toronto: Mercury, 1977): 74–112, and Selena Horrell's MA thesis, "'Worlding' Corporeality, 'Dis/Placing' Globalization" (August 2004, Centre for Theory and Criticism, University of Western Ontario).

⁶¹ Mette Bryld & Nina Lykke, *Cosmodolphins: Feminist Cultural Studies of Technology, Animals and the Sacred* (London: Zed, 2000): 2.

⁶² Bryld & Lykke, *Cosmodolphins*, 2–3.

⁶³ Stephen Slemon, "Lament for a Notion: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*," *English Studies in Canada* 29.1–2 (March–June 2003): 216–17.

formation of "globality." In his analysis, Spivak sees globality as "a conceptual mechanism for access and regulation," in contrast to planetarity, which "imagines worldly connectedness neither through 'information retrieval' nor through identities, but through literary figuration," a type of figuration that foregrounds the "arbitrary aspect of meaning-construction."⁶⁴ This interpretation links Spivak's position very closely to Dimock's as analyzed above, while also showing how important the choice of spatial trope remains. There is little to separate the practised reader's postmodern acclaim for diversity from the saving potential of the arbitrary aspect of meaning-construction.

In the meantime, the spectator-position that Bryld and Lykke find in the NASA Blue Planet photo seems further entrenched by the planetary perspective that Spivak employs from her airplane seat high above the earth. As Bryld and Lykke note, this picture

demonstrates perfectly the vantage point of the scientific world view in general, and positivist epistemology in particular: the disassociated gaze, which can command and keep everything under control.⁶⁵

Although Spivak writes of the view from her airplane seat, she invokes this gaze as in dialogue with more grounded positions. For example, she writes about "peripheral Islams" to ask: "Can the foothold for planetarity be located in the texts of these spread-out sectors of the world's literatures and cultures?"⁶⁶ The awkward, catachrestic notion of a foothold for planetarity underlines her refusal of the usual associations of these images. Spivak clearly states her refusal of the NASA perspective when she muses: "The planetarity of which I have been speaking in these pages in perhaps best imagined from the precapitalist cultures of the planet."⁶⁷

But her account of how that imagining might work is vague indeed:

The 'planet' is here, as perhaps always, a catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility as right. Its alterity, determining experience, is mysterious and discontinuous — an experience of the impossible.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Silemon, "Lament for a Notion," 216.

⁶⁵ Bryld & Lykke, *Cosmopolitans*, 4.

⁶⁶ Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 87.

⁶⁷ *Death of a Discipline*, 101.

⁶⁸ *Death of a Discipline*, 102.

The impossible for whom, from what perspective? We know that we must read this word in Derridean terms, yet the questions remain. When read in the context of Bryld and Lykke's critique of the ways in which Space-Age and New-Age narratives intersect with colonialism, I find Spivak's Derridean utopianism troubling. And while I share her search for an alternative to the current status quo, I am less convinced by her idealization of the "precapitalist cultures of the planet." She devotes considerable space to canonical Western and postcolonial texts but only gestures toward the indigenous as alterity and impossibility. She quotes no indigenous writers or theorists. Spivak counsels that

The ghost dance does not succeed. It can only ever be a productive supplement, interrupting the necessary march of generalization in 'the crossing of borders' so that it remembers its limits.⁶⁹

But is that the case? From a Western utilitarian perspective, the ghost dance does not succeed, but according to Henderson, that is to misunderstand its purpose and the nature of its success. Menezes writes that, for the people with whom he is working,

the 'Vision' does not treat past/present/future as separate entities but as superimposed dimensions difficult to conceive through the metaphor of space [...] like amazon philosophies, the ghost dance may not be using the metaphor of space or its imposition on time. It may be simply re-establishing the connectivity between subjects and different knowledges – those of the past and the present, where the past coexists on a different dimensions with the present. I would see the ghost dance as a recuperation of a non spatial, lost concept of agency and knowledges.

As employed by Henderson and Menezes, then, the ghost dance always succeeds in its very re-enactment of an alternative world-view. The postcolonial indigenous critic, as described by Henderson, stands in a distinctive relation to earth, land, articulation, and space.

The question this essay asks, "where does the postcolonial critic stand?" needs to be modified to reflect these various answers, perhaps to something like "where do various postcolonial critics stand?" or "where and how might a postcolonial critic stand, and take a stand?" Spivak ad-

⁶⁹ Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 52.

vocates a tricky kind of planetarity, in which literary study functions as an appropriated kind of ghost dance rather like a Greek chorus, which interrupts the work-drama of the social sciences and requires interrupting by them. For those uncomfortable with the difficulty of finding a foothold on such constantly shifting ground, Spivak's reasoning can lead to the kind of conclusions drawn by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, who believe that "the term *postcolonial* blurs the assignment of perspectives,"⁷⁰ or Chris Bongie, who terms the postcolonial "a geographically free-floating concept."⁷¹ Spivak refuses to ground her work in the standard expected ways. She notes:

Politically correct metropolitan multiculturalists want the world's others to be identitarians; nationalist (Jameson) or class (Ahmad). To undo this binary demand is to suggest that peripheral literatures may stage more surprising and unexpected manoeuvres toward collectivity.⁷²

These surprising and unexpected manoeuvres toward collectivity are precisely what our globalization team is documenting in our various field-work projects. By grounding her thinking in the concept of planetarity, Spivak seeks to undo this binary demand while finding an alternative to the almost-exhausted figures for a comparative literary practice provided by the "continental, global, or worldly."⁷³ She warns:

To talk planet-talk by way of an unexamined environmentalism, referring to an undivided 'natural' space rather than a differentiated political space, can work in the interest of this globalization in the mode of the abstract as such. (I have been insisting that to transmute the literatures of the global South to an undifferentiated space of English rather than a differentiated political space is a related move).⁷⁴

I read this as a warning against the kind of 'global soul' arguments advanced by Pico Iyer and gratefully embraced by a Canadian media overly

⁷⁰ Ella Shohat & Robert Stam, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, ed. Shohat & Stam (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003): 14.

⁷¹ Chris Bongie, "Exiles on Main Stream: Valuing the Popularity of Postcolonial Literature," *Postmodern Culture* 14.1 (September 2003): 10.

⁷² Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 55–56.

⁷³ *Death of a Discipline*, 72.

⁷⁴ *Death of a Discipline*, 72.

anxious to see nationally based writers as 'world-class'. It is also, of course, an argument that Spivak's project of "transnational literacy" might be better advanced through the carefully orchestrated collaboration, in the USA, of comparative literature with area studies rather than through English departments or cultural studies, as is the trend today.

Outside the USA, disciplinary alignments are organized differently, but the substance of Spivak's message stands. English departments must resist the trend to imagine that they can encompass interdisciplinarity simply by absorbing the texts of other disciplinary practices into the protocols that have been developed for interpreting literature. There are other, differently constituted, "practised readers" out there. Because nothing can be taken for granted if we are to move towards achieving the conditions that could enable genuine dialogue to begin across currently privileged and eclipsed cultures, we need to continue to pay attention to theory and the arts, even when at first sight they may seem to divert us from the urgent social issues of our day.

To return to the questions with which this essay began, I have surveyed debates about the appropriate language for conveying what is at stake in thinking about globalization, to conclude only that the challenge is serious and has not yet been resolved. What postcolonial theory can offer to globalization studies is precisely this caution about rushing too quickly to conclusions based on unexamined assumptions and this reminder to pay attention to other modes of knowledge production and other priorities in imagining human relations in spatial and temporal modes.

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