

Historical Vantage Points: The Rise of the World Literature Paradigm

By Monica Popescu | July 6, 2022

In 2000, at the turn of the millennium, Aijaz Ahmad published an article that looks back at Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's "The Communist Manifesto" through the prism of its engagement with the concept of "world literature."^[1] At the time of his writing the article, world literature as a field was taking off with renewed energy, after waxing and waning in popularity since the nineteenth century. The previous year, Pascale Casanova had published *La République mondiale des Lettres* (1999), which was translated into English as *The World Republic of Letters* in 2004.^[2] In the early years of the millennium David Damrosch published *What Is World Literature?* (2003), while Franco Moretti's conversation-starting short article "Conjectures on World Literature" also came out in 2000.^[3] The feverishness which accompanied the field's rapid expansion points to a historical turning point, the importance of which we can glean from Ahmad's close reading of Marx and Engels's essay and of the political and economic context in which his article emerged.^[4]

Ahmad reads "The Communist Manifesto" as an engagement with the role of capitalism that, for Marx and Engels, was marked by a certain amount of ambivalence. Capitalism was both the worst thing that had happened in human history (as its depredations, both in the West and especially in the Global South, attest) as well as a reluctantly acknowledged breath of fresh air that shook up the stagnant feudal economic system and its attending political relations. Capitalism expanded on a global scale — connecting distant territories as a result of extraction of raw materials, manufacturing, and trade — and consequently spread the purview of its relations of exploitation. However, according to Ahmad, Marx and Engels observed two slightly positive effects to the largely deleterious effects of globalization. First, national approaches to the economy had to give way to global ways of conceiving manufacture and trade. That was a negative change because it carried capitalism across the globe, but also a positive development because it shook off the confining attitudes of nationalism. Nationalism, according to Marx and Engels, was associated with narrow-mindedness. Also, intellectuals from different countries (which for Marx and Engels, like Goethe before them, entail mostly Western European states) came to be connected beyond national frames, in what Goethe had called "world literature." Marx and Engels hoped that world literature could become a progressive force within the socialist project. Ahmad restated Marx and Engels's argument and formulated the problems that a retrospective understanding of the connections between capitalism and colonialism revealed:

The problem lay elsewhere, in the assumption that the globalization of the capitalist mode of production would itself perform this historic task of ensuring that a universalist culture of common aspiration would prevail over national or local "narrow-mindedness": the assumption, in other words, that there was some direct, one-to-one relationship between "world-market" and "world-literature" which could somehow be accommodated within the

socialist project as a progressive force. The methodological problem, of course is that both the “world market” and “world literature” are viewed here as unified wholes without internal tensions and contradictions, and as the polar opposites of “national economy” and “local and national literatures,” so that the rise of one pole, presumes the demise of the other. (Ahmad 17-18)

Ahmad then proceeds to show all the numerous ways in which colonialism in a country like India had made it impossible for representatives of “Indian literature” to transcend the level of the nation and circulate with equal ease on the global literary circuits as British literature texts. Ahmad states that (cultural) colonization and later the rise of postcolonial literatures in English did not produce world literature but simply placed English literature in a position of domination over local literatures. His argument ought to be studied carefully to see the extent to which the examples he gives from India are reproduced in other former colonies.

But this is not the point that I want to make about Ahmad’s article. As I mentioned earlier, Ahmad’s article was published in 2000, at a moment when the field of world literature was emerging (or reemerging) with robust conversations. From within that moment, Ahmad could not really see the relevance of that field-defining period or its relation to geopolitical shifts. It is only retrospectively, two decades later, that we can see the similarity between the mid-nineteenth century moment when Marx and Engels wrote their article and the turn of the millennium when Ahmad and other scholars returned, some with cautious optimism others with outright sanguinity, to the idea of world literature. If Marx and Engels hoped that world literature would forge cultural alliances beyond the narrow-mindedness of national perspectives and contribute to the socialist project, the recent supporters of the concept likewise expressed hopes for the intellectual connections forged by world literature.

While most scholars — Casanova and Moretti in particular — were not blinded to the relation between globalization, the global spread of capitalism, and world literature, they nonetheless must have seen world literature as one of the few positive aspects that even globalization could engender. After all, the 1990s had seen the end of the Cold War-era fragmentation into First, Second, and Third Worlds. Likewise, the aesthetic world-systems that I described *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies and the Cold War*, generated by the Eastern Bloc and the West, which ascribed literary value differently and defined the function of writers and literature in contrary ways, slipped into a semblance of unity (or at least uniformity).^[5] The rise of interest in world literature in the first two decades of the new millennium is the symptom of the historical transformations taking place both in geopolitical terms and of the rearrangement of aesthetic systems after the Cold War. Such important paradigm shifts in the study of culture are privileged vantage points from where we can peek into the past and distinguish the constitutive political, social, and cultural forces that shape cultural production.

While my focus in *At Penpoint* has been on the intersection between decolonization processes and the geopolitical and cultural landscapes produced by the Cold War, in the Conclusion I allude to the rise of the world literature paradigm as a research field. As I argue above, the effervescence around this concept over the past two decades gives us a vantage point from which we can look both into the past as well as at current transformations. The scholarship of Kerry Bystrom, Elizabeth Holt, Lauren Horst, Mathias Orhero, Carolyn Ownbey, Jini Kim Watson, and Mingqing Yuan published in this roundtable takes hold of this vantage point in

order to reconsider essential elements of the changing cultural landscape over the past seventy years. I am extremely grateful for the insights they draw out from my work as well as for the opportunities which their own research open. If we shift the attention slightly from the Cold War to its aftermath and the rise of the world literature paradigm, their work illuminates methodologies in the study of world literature, from questions of comparability (Ownbey, Yuan) to questions of scale (Orhero), and from the relation between forms of imperialism and cultural production (Watson, Holt, Ownbey, Horst) to the financial mechanisms undergirding cultural production (Holt, Horst, Orhero).

Take for instance Carolyn Ownbey's comparison of two dissident writers — Mongane Wally Serote (South Africa) and Václav Havel (Czechoslovakia). She makes a compelling case for comparisons between artists embedded within the two Cold War aesthetic world-systems, urging us to consider the similarities and differences between writers who opposed the state machinery in South Africa and in Czechoslovakia. Her work makes visible the different types of imperialism at work across the world and within the two world-systems. In South Africa, the Black and Coloured population were subjected to "colonialism of a special type," whereby the metropolis and the colony lived side by side yet separated by segregation, disparity in ownership of means of production and political power.[6] This form of oppression was historically layered on top of the forms of imperialism and colonialism Western powers had exercised over the Southern part of the African continent. Within the Eastern Bloc, the satellite countries within the USSR's orbit were also subjected to a form of imperialism, marked by the imposition of the Soviet political, economic, and cultural system.[7] Without the clarity offered by Ownbey's comparison we would be unable to understand why, in 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is perceived differently by some governments in the Global South than their counterparts in Eastern Europe and the West. If for Eastern European countries Russia's aggression appears as a continuation of its earlier forms of imperialism, for many governments in the Global South, the Soviet Union's former opposition to Western forms of imperialism and support for liberation struggles translates into a more sympathetic or at least ambivalent approach to Russia.[8] As Lauren Horst argues with her astute interpretation of Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Our Sister Killjoy*, we can read our way through Cold War-era literature by attending to the relations of "seduction—romantic, ideological, and otherwise" between former and current superpowers, on the one hand, and avowedly non-aligned Third World (or contemporary Global South).

The longevity of cultural affiliations developed during the Cold War, such as the Afro-Asian solidarity networks that Mingqing Yuan explores in her discussion of Kofi Awoonor's travels to China, is also visible in post-Cold War aesthetic choices. As Mathias Orhero argues, minority poets from the Niger Delta choose a "hybrid realist mode" with a focus on the themes of resistance and revolution in order to oppose "the politics of modernism and its association with multinational oil capitalists and the so-called economic core nations that have destroyed their region through reckless and unsustainable oil exploration and extraction" as well as "the Nigerian state whose derivative and asymmetrical nationalism and neocolonial tendencies." Although no longer under sway of or fighting against the Cold War aesthetic world-systems promoted by the two superpowers, minority Nigerian writers continue to dissociate themselves from literary forms promoted in the West.

Orhero poignantly brings to the foreground the role of oil and the forms of domination

conjoined with its extraction in creating not only political fault lines but also cultural and aesthetic divides. Elizabeth Holt's ideas-packed article looks back to the Cold War period and draws connections between the in-house publications of international petroleum companies, the writers for these publications and their penchant for Western modernist literature, the invisible role of oil in carrying around and connecting the intellectuals convened at conferences and events sponsored by organizations like the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), and the more visible funding of CCF magazines with money from oil adds. In the context of the unfolding war in Ukraine, which highlighted the dependence large swathes of the world have on Russian fossil fuels, one wonders what forms of cultural sponsorship and relations between oil, imperialism, and literary production we will be able eventually to uncover? How are we going to read the relation between contemporary world literature and world-changing events like Russia's aggression of Ukraine?

Although analyzing different cultural contexts and historical moments, Holt and Orhero demonstrate the importance and usefulness of "theory from the South," to borrow the title of Jean and John Comaroff's book.^[9] In her contribution which focuses on new methodological and theoretical paradigms, Jini Kim Watson brilliantly observes that "the dominance of both US military power and US knowledge apparatuses has occluded [East and Southeast Asia] as a site that *produces* Cold War theorizing." She proceeds to present three productive directions which scholars have taken to destabilize the West's domination of knowledge production about East and Southeast Asia. We can expand her observations to think how the rise of the world literature paradigm over the past two decades can be theorized from ex-centric perspectives that move beyond Eurocentric models.

[1] Aijaz Ahmad, "The Communist Manifesto and 'World Literature,'" in *Social Scientist* 28.7-8 (July-August 2000): 3-30.

[2] Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, translated by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004).

[3] David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003); Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," in *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54-68.

[4] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "The Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Communist Manifesto with Related Documents*, edited and introduction by John E. Towes (Bedford: St-Martins, 1999).

[5] Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies and the Cold War* (Durham: Duke UP, 2020).

[6] The South African Communist Party's 1962 program "The Road to South African Freedom," launched the thesis of apartheid as colonialism of a special type, presenting the South African situation as a case of an oppressing minority group, "the white nation," subjugating the majority of the population.

[7] For Russian imperialism, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001), and Harsha Ram, *The*

Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2003).

[8] For an explanation of several African governments' hesitation to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, see Hilary Lynd, "[The Politics of Imperial Gratitude](#)," *Africa Is A Country* (March 14, 2022).

[9] Jean and John Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving toward Africa* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2011).

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