

*Decolonizing World Literature**Debjani Ganguly*

In the wake of a spectacular resurgence in racial violence and ethnonationalisms in hitherto-thriving democracies around the world, the project of decolonization has never been more urgent. How might we as teachers of English and world literatures come to terms with the chasm between our decades-long experience of training students in postcolonial and comparative modes of engagement with the world's literary riches, and the staggering racial divides, unspeakable tribalism, and broken psychic regimes that we witness in the wider world? Given the long history of English literary studies as an inextricable part of imperial governance and as a cultural touchstone until World War II, and its continuing flourishing well into the twenty-first century, the stakes of our intellectual and pedagogical engagement in English departments have scarcely been higher.

Ecumenical perspectives on literature have often emerged in the wake of revolutionary or catastrophic world events. The Napoleonic Wars for Goethe, 1848 for Marx, the colonial partition of Bengal for Rabindranath Tagore, the Russian Revolution for Maxim Gorky and Zheng Zhenduo, the Spanish Civil War for Pablo Neruda and W. H. Auden, Nazi-era Europe for Eric Auerbach and Victor Klemperer, the 1968 uprisings for René Etiemble, and the Israel–Palestine conflict for Edward Said, are well-known historical thresholds. Our turbulent global era after 1989 is no less responsible for the contemporary revival of world literature. The field's geopolitical backdrop is a series of catastrophes: the proliferation of global conflicts and civil wars with the end of the Cold War, genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, the spectacular implosion of 9/11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the violent ravaging of the Middle East by the conjoined interests of the global power elites and fundamentalisms of various hues. In the past decade, a wealth of world anglophone literary scholarship has emerged on classic twenty-first crises such as global terrorism, refugee displacement, environmental degradation, populist authoritarianisms,

and climate change (Nixon; Cheah; Ganguly, *This Thing*; DeLoughrey; Goyal).

Who and what the *world* is to which world literature refers and is constituted by is a question of deep import to scholars in the field. Theories of world literature have struggled to keep pace with the dramatic reconfiguration of the world since the end of European colonialism, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the resurgence of multipolar ethnonationalisms around the world. One can scarcely miss the disjunction between some recent influential theories of world literature that perpetuate a universalist narrative of European expansion and diffusion and the diversity of global comparatist work that illuminates cartographies of literary world-making across various scales and linguistic zones, and within temporal frames irreducible to European literary history or the capitalist world system. With the global turn in the English curriculum since the rise of postcolonialism in the 1970s and 1980s and the prominence of English as a world language and a translating medium (signposted by the term “global anglophone”), debates about world literature have gained substantial traction in English literary studies.¹

This essay explores the entangled histories of world literature, postcolonial studies, and global anglophone literatures as they shape English studies today. Drawing on my scholarly and pedagogical work, I offer a decolonial understanding of world literature along three axes: historical, cartographic, and linguistic. The historical axis illuminates the imperial backstory of current iterations of world literature in the rise of comparative philology and orientalist scholarship in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It also pluralizes the temporal framing of world literature by reaching back to medieval and early modern instances of literary worlding in Arabic, Chinese, Latin, Persian, and Sanskrit and situates the current valence of English in a literary *longue durée*. The cartographic axis highlights literary world-making athwart transregional zones such as the oceanic, the hemispheric, the archipelagic, and multilocal. These crosscut the binaries of Global North and South and resist being situated within a single world system in which non-European worlds invariably appear as belated or derivative or minor. Finally, along the linguistic axis, I explore how the contemporary resonance of world literature and its counterpart, global anglophone, cannot be grasped unless we disaggregate English from imperial models of the past. This paradoxical claim does not disavow the history of English under the British Empire and the rise of America in the post-War era. But it shifts the ground of discourse from under this Anglo-imperial shadow and illuminates new zones of multilingual transculturation.

Historicizing World Literature

Bound by neither a finite and continuous periodicity nor a specific textual object, nor even any consensus about its theoretical ground, world literature poses a challenge for a literary historian of a magnitude scarcely encountered in fields such as romanticism or postcolonialism. One cannot but be struck by the dizzyingly heterogeneous range of scholarly articulations of it. Literary world-making as the travel and diffusion of forms, genres, and textual patterns; as elliptical movement and reception of works in different regions of the globe; as a site of global competitiveness over literary value; as born-translated works that echo other literary imaginaries; as bibliomigrancy and a global pact with books; as intermediate regional constellations between the nation and the globe; as a normative apprehension of the singularity of literary textuality that resists the technomaterialist coordinates of globalization; as an aesthetic and formalist response to globalization, catastrophic global events, and digital hyperconnectivity; as literature of the capitalist world system – there is no dearth of such substantial and compelling accounts of contemporary approaches to world literature. The reemergence of world literature as an ideal in our global era has unsurprisingly also generated contentious and skeptical accounts: world literature as a handmaiden of the forces of globalization; as a posthistorical triumphal narrative of an enforced unification of the world; as an alibi for an appropriative anglophone dominance; and as a translational scandal.

While one is not in doubt about the significance of *world* as a powerful constellating force in literary studies today, an historian is confronted with the monumental task of “weighing, comparing, analyzing, and discriminating” among this vast array of articulations, to paraphrase Rene Wellek. In what follows, I offer some insights on a decolonial approach to the history of world literature based on a two-volume editorial project I have recently completed. I also briefly discuss the outlines of a graduate course I teach on world literature and the British Empire.

Having undertaken my graduate studies in English, South Asian literatures, and postcolonial studies in Australia under the mentorship of the *Subaltern Studies* collective and having since published books in caste and dalit studies, postcolonialism, global anglophone literatures, and world literature in academic presses across the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, I am acutely aware of the complexity of navigating multilingual worlds within an anglophone academy. I have recently edited a two-volume *Cambridge History of World Literature* with forty-eight

contributors working across twenty-nine literary traditions (2021). Bound by neither a single market nor a single world history of capitalist unification, world literature, in these volumes, is perceived as a transversal and comparative framework for studying myriad literary worlds across history. The project bears little resemblance to the lamentable picture of world literature as “one-world talk” that projects Anglo-global dominance. Prior eras generated republics of letters across vast continental swathes. English, Arabic, Persian, Chinese, Hindi, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Swahili, and Tamil are large transregional literary-linguistic worlds today, albeit each with very different cultural capital. Collectively, *The Cambridge History of World Literature* offers an account of world literature that is informed by decades of excavation of the origins of modern disciplinary formations in histories of European encounter with civilizations across Asia, the Mediterranean, Latin America, and Africa. It situates the modern origins of “world literature” within a *longue durée* optic. Arab mapmakers from the tenth century onward were among the first to visualize the globe’s spatial expansiveness as a concept. European mapmakers in fifteenth century built on these cartographic practices. Ancient and medieval trade routes, like the Silk Route, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean, spanned continents and generated corridors of intense linguistic and cultural mixing. The rise of Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian republics of letters long preceded that of the European Renaissance. The vernacularization of languages and their proliferation through the modern era began toward the end of the first millennium in Asia and Europe. The vernacular languages existed in a robust ecosystem alongside classical tongues – Latin, Sanskrit, Arabic – and generated long periods of multilingual creativity. Oral, graphic, visual, and performative forms marked aesthetic engagement in much of Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific before European colonization. Such a long historical view of world literature offers a corrective to the historiographical distortion one finds in influential works such as Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters*, where the entire literary history of humankind is annexed to the rise of Europe in the sixteenth century. The myriad linguistic resonances of the term “world” – *orbis* in Latin, *kosmos* in Greek, *Welt* in German, *vishwa* in Sanskrit, *duniya* in Hindi/Urdu, *jahan* in Persian, *monde* in French – are a measure of its philological shaping as an aesthetic and a normative category, one that resists the homogenizing power of the global as it reckons with the plenitude and singularity of literatures from around the world.

World literature in the twenty-first century, the *Cambridge History* contends, is primed to explore genealogies of world literary formations

that not only predate the rise of Europe but are also critically coextensive with it *and* demonstrably foundational to the very conception of the modern idea of world literature. The *adab* literary tradition, or *belle-lettres* in Arabic, with its beginnings in the late Ummayyad caliphal court in the eighth century and its consolidation in the early Abbasid period from 750–1256 CE is one such example. A chapter in volume I of the *Cambridge History* traces the influence of Middle Persian translations of Sanskrit on *adab* and follows a trail of translations until the sixteenth century of key texts from the Indo-Persianate and Arabic literary worlds into Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and the European vernaculars, including German, Danish, Dutch, Spanish, Italian, and English. One cannot conceive of world literature without calibrating the influence of such medieval and early modern philological endeavors, and their recovery and reconceptualization by European philologists in the nineteenth century (Al Rahim). Another chapter tracks the role of East India Company orientalists such as William Jones since the eighteenth century and those of German philologists who mined centuries of literary riches in Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, and Chinese across a vast swathe of Asia in the company of native scholars. How could Goethe's idea of world literature have emerged, the author asks, without these colonial philological endeavors that reached him via Fredrich Schlegel and other Weimar philologists (Bhattacharya)? Such complex genealogical accounts illuminate pathways toward theories and methodologies of doing world literature that are not invariably circumscribed by the modern nation state, an international competition for global prestige, the capitalist world system, and the European diffusionist model.

How might one bring these insights into the English curriculum? Typically, students in English departments fall back on canonical works by Damrosch, Casanova, and Moretti without being aware of the genealogical ground of world literature in the history of empires, and especially the British Empire. In a graduate course I teach on "World Literature, Orientalism, and Empire," the students explore how the bureaucratic machinery of the British Empire was instrumental in the emergence of key conceptual shifts that became foundational to the nineteenth century idea of world literature promoted by Goethe, Marx, and Engels. The shifts include orientalist scholarship, the rise of philology, the comparatist method, and translational endeavors. The course module covers vast ground spanning early orientalist scholarship between 1757 and 1789 to the towering influence of Sir William Jones's historical philology on the Indo-European family of languages. We read about the role of the East India Company in generating global circuits of print publication and the

promotion of English Literature in colonial education systems across South Asia and Africa. We trace what Srinivas Aravamudan has called “Enlightenment Orientalism” – a swathe of translational endeavors in European languages of magisterial premodern works in Sanskrit, Chinese, Arabic, Persian, and Tamil. The students begin to see the cross-cutting impact of these developments across India, Britain, and Germany as an exciting chapter in the history of world literature (Aravamudan).

Moving away from stock understandings of translation as contamination or devaluation, or merely a device to exoticize non-European worlds, the students also begin to appreciate the historic role of translation in world literary studies. Scholarly traditions across history have felt the influence of other traditions mainly through acts of translation. The European Renaissance is unthinkable without the discovery of medieval-era Arabic translations of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. As is the emergence of modern comparative and world literatures without the massive translation enterprises of colonial-era orientalists such as Jones, Schlegel, and Humboldt. The conception of world literature as a global network of intersecting influences has led to a reevaluation of the stature of translation as a foundational practice in the history of literary dissemination. Translation is now widely perceived as a perturbation of the settled economy of two linguistic systems and not a practice of distortion or deformation (Bassnett; Venuti).

The global reach of English appears in a different light when seen through a comparative and translational lens. Just as we are deliberating today about the global reach of English and its imperial foundations, scholars of ancient and early modern worlds have deliberated on the impact of other world languages such as Greek, Latin, Chinese, Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic. Conquests, commerce, migration, imperial adventures, and cultural influence have allowed languages such as English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Russian, Tamil, and Chinese to have a disproportionate historical influence on literatures around the globe. Ancient and medieval trade routes like the Silk Route and the Indian Ocean spanned continents and generated corridors of intense linguistic and cultural mixing. Sheldon Pollock’s work on the rise of the Sanskrit cosmopolis from Afghanistan to Java in Southeast Asia from 300 to 1300 CE traces this phenomenon. Muhsin al-Musawi traces the emergence of an Arabic republic of letters at the confluence of vernacular languages that flourished between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries, and which stretched across southern Europe, the Mediterranean, North Africa, West Asia, and Southeast Asia (Pollock; al-Musawi). Today, the influence

of English outstrips all others, and the forces of modern history – mercantile capitalism, colonialism, industrialization, the information technology revolution – have played a monumental role in its elevation as a world language and a global medium of translation. Currently, English also exists in a vast ecosystem with eleven other supercentral languages that boast more than 100 million speakers. These comprise Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Malay, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Swahili.

While acknowledging the unification of the world under a capitalist world system that hoists English as its dominant tongue, world literary approaches allow us to ask generative questions about literary globalism. How have these languages shaped diverse literary cultures in their intermixing with local and regional traditions? How have they been transformed in turn? How does a perspective that engages with older histories and other overlapping linguistic geographies produce a different account of literary evolution? What happens when we explore the use of English as a medium of literary translation instead of as a source language? Questions such as these urge us to pluralize the history of culture-power beyond primordialism, imperial absolutism, language sentiment, and linguistic monism. Comparative and *longue durée* perspectives on the emergence of literary worlds enable us to grasp the valence of English and anglophone literatures within a multilingual realm of expressive elaboration and spatial dissemination.

Decolonial Cartographies

The question of spatial scale in world literature is as urgent as questions of temporality and historicity. What constitutes viable units of analysis in world literature? How do we conceive of median scales larger than the nation but smaller than the globe that push against notions of a freewheeling globality and that better reflect the multi-scalar and spatially dispersed nature of contemporary literary world-making? What about multilingual nations whose literary worlds cross borders in ways that defy the classic polarization between the Global North and Global South or between the local and the global? An exciting development in world literature is the emergence of literary cartographies such as the oceanic, the hemispheric, the transregional, the archipelagic, and the multilingual-local. Works by Isabel Hofmeyr and Gaurav Desai on the Indian Ocean, Konstantina Zanou on the Mediterranean, Allison Donnell on the Caribbean, Teresia Teiawa on the Pacific, Anna Brickhouse on

hemispheric American studies, and Dan Ringgard on Nordic studies are good examples. Francesca Orsini, Karima Laachir, and Sara Marzagora's comparative project on "significant geographies" and "multilingual locals," with literatures from northern India, the Horn of Africa, and Maghreb, is another example of decolonial cartographic experimentation. Hemispheric and oceanic approaches have brought literary worlds from the Americas and Europe into meaningful conversation with those from Africa and Asia.

In an advanced-year undergraduate course that I developed a few years ago, entitled "Oceanic Connections: Black Atlantic and Indian Ocean Worlds," students explore the emergence of the "oceanic" as a powerful paradigm in world literary studies. The fluidity of the ocean as against terrestrial borders gives new meaning to categories such as empire, diaspora, postcolonialism, slavery, settler colonialism, and labor history. Through novels, philosophical tracts, and theories of history, we study the import of the transatlantic slave trade and its entanglement with global histories of modern maritime colonialism found in Indian Ocean worlds. We trace these entanglements through the novels of Barry Unsworth, Fred D'Aguiar, Amitav Ghosh, and Abdul Razak Gurnah. In engaging with the *Ibis* trilogy of Ghosh and the Zanzibari novels of Gurnah – works traversing the Indian Ocean world from East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Indian archipelago to the bays and estuaries in the South China Sea – the students become aware of the critical role played by this maritime route in the consolidation of British Empire. Both Ghosh and Gurnah stretch this historiography back to the preimperial phase and write about the centuries-old trading diasporas of Arabia, India, and China that intersected with the history of European maritime imperialism, and also of histories of slavery that precede the transatlantic slave trade.

In teaching oceanic novels such as the *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, *Sacred Hunger*, and *By the Sea*, I invite students to think about the genres these works embed: the classic historical novel and other sea-inspired novelistic and poetic genres, but also thalassography, a branch of oceanic writing that focuses on smaller bodies of water that are populated with habitations intimately connected with oceanic routes; bays, estuaries, rivers, gulfs, and deltas.² After all, much of the action in Ghosh's *Ibis* novels, for instance, has aqueous bodies as its backdrop: the Hooghly river, the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, the Pearl River Delta, and the Hong Kong Bay. The ocean has featured as a setting in any number of classic literary texts from Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and Verne's *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* to Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Conrad's *Lord Jim*, and

Walcott's *Omeros*. These works are often familiar to advanced-year undergraduates in the United States, and we spend a few minutes in the first seminar sharing perceptions about them. We also discuss the implications of moving from the thematic of the ocean in literature to conceiving the ocean as both a material force in, and a conceptual frame for, literary history. This we realize is a challenge of a different order and scale. The novels of Ghosh and Gurnah, and the vast scholarship on Afro-Asian oceanic histories, for instance, illuminate conceptual frames that can be deployed retroactively to better understand how past systems of globalism have impacted on the making and refashioning of modern literary worlds, such as the late eighteenth to nineteenth-century Franco-British maritime world system.

The relationship between cartography, cognitive mapping, and aesthetic representation is particularly complex in oceanic literary studies. Since the nineteenth century, the Atlantic has featured as the oceanic zone around which modern literary histories have coalesced. English and French literatures led the way and constituted a kind of universal gold standard in the field, or the literary Greenwich meridian, as Pascale Casanova puts it. The consolidation of British and French empires across much of the globe from the 1830s to the 1930s coincided with the rise of literary studies as a discipline, first in the colonies, and then in Europe and America. English literature, with its riches from the era of *Beowulf* to the Victorian period, became the pedagogical norm and was aggressively promoted as a force for cultural transformation in the colonies of Asia and Africa. A vast philological enterprise to master the linguistic and literary riches of Asia, East Africa, and the Arab world (the history of which I briefly revisited above) ran parallel with these developments. Not surprisingly, the North Atlantic, and especially Anglo-French literary historiography, did not intersect with this colonial philological history. And so it remained well into the twentieth century with the rise of America. The victory of the Allies in World War II consolidated a North Atlantic world view as the new universal. This was initiated during the war by the Joint Declaration of Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt in Newfoundland on August 14, 1941. The declaration, soon dubbed as the Atlantic Charter, envisioned an Anglo-American alliance that would lay the foundation for a post-War world era of peace based on principles of "sovereign rights and self-government" and the rights of "all the men in all lands." This declaration subsequently became the legal basis for the Charter of the United Nations in 1945 (Slaughter and Bystrom). These developments channeled the Atlantic imaginary toward imperial and national histories with

a triumphalist narrative from “encounter to emancipation between the late fifteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (Armitage 95).

The rise of Atlantic *world* histories toward the end of the twentieth century complicated this triumphalist political and literary history by drawing attention both to the transatlantic slave trade across the north and south of the ocean and to crosscutting networks of slave and indentured labor across the Indian Ocean after the abolition of slavery. The Atlantic world has featured as a major paradigm in oceanic literary studies since the publication of Paul Gilroy’s path-breaking *The Black Atlantic*. The making of Euro-America on the back of the slave trade provides a powerful and sobering counterpoint to the triumphant theatricality of Franco-British maritime domination in the same era, while simultaneously connecting literary discourses and literary themes previously understood as territorially and culturally distinct. Black Atlantic studies has revolutionized the way we study the emergence of modern French, British, and American literatures today. In postcolonial and world literary studies, the phrase Black Atlantic has reconceptualized the Atlantic seaboard as the site of the emergence of capitalist modernity as a transnational system. The African slave trade, the American plantation economies, and the industrial world of Europe are seen as inextricably linked, a phenomenon that the students are historically attuned to.

The students in my course are less aware of an equally resonant oceanic world – the Indian Ocean – that lies at the heart of the European maritime expansion from Africa and the Middle East to South and Southeast Asia, a world that Ghosh’s and Gurnah’s novels bring powerfully to the fore. Indian Ocean literary worlds have been disconcertingly absent in conceptions of modern European and world literatures. The history of the slave trade was followed by the history of indentured labor (commonly known as the *coolie trade*) from India and Malaya to outposts of the British and French Empires, primarily to the Mascarenhas archipelago, the Pacific islands, and the Caribbean. The Indian Ocean trade routes served as the primary conduit for this transportation. Indians, Chinese, Africans, and Arabs commingled in zones that continued to experience the dark memories of the slave trade. Frederic Douglass, the author of the novella *The Heroic Slave*, wrote in 1871 about his distress at the grim reality of the coolie trade. A century later, the Mauritian poet Khal Torabully articulated a transnational poetics of “coolitude,” drawing on the pan-African “négritude” movement of the 1930s and arguing for the centrality of the sea voyage – as both destructive and creative force – in the recovering of the coolie’s identity and story (Torabully and Carter). The opium trade

between British India and China is equally crucial to foregrounding the importance of the Indian Ocean in the making of capitalist modernity. Opium was Britain's solution to the imbalance of trade with China. The British import of Chinese tea, silks, and porcelain in exchange for silver had vastly drained British resources. Aware of the Chinese addiction to opium, the East India Company forced peasants in eastern India to turn to the cultivation of opium. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the British used the port of Calcutta and the waters of the eastern Indian Ocean to send more than 4,000 crates of opium via third-party traders to Canton. This consignment quadrupled in the years leading up to the Chinese crackdown on the trade in the 1830s and the decade leading up to the First Opium War. The war led to the victory of the British imperial military forces in 1842 and the handover of Hong Kong to the Crown.

The interconnectedness between the Atlantic slave trade and the movement of labor on Indian Ocean trade routes, and the consequent entanglement of literatures of slavery and indenture, are brought to the fore in the early weeks of our coursework. The students read excerpts from works by Gaurav Desai, Isabel Hofmeyr, Enseng Ho, Sanjay Subramanyam, Sunil Amrith, and Nile Green, among others. They become aware of the need for a renewed attentiveness to interconnected print and literary public spheres of the Indian Ocean world from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. European imperial incursions in this region can be seen as generating renewed cultural mixing with pre-European worlds. Literature during this period is broadly understood to cover diverse genres in multiple languages including Gujarati, Hindi, Swahili, Arabic, English, and French. Itinerant travelers such as pilgrims, sailors, soldiers, traders, merchants, and administrators have left records of their experiences. Records also exist of prisoners in the penal settlements of Robben Island and the Andamans. The genres range from travel writing, folktales, and letters to poems, testimonies, short stories, and novels. Many of these exist in special collections primarily in South Africa, the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Mauritius, and Madagascar. Extant texts on the Zanzibari Gujaratis such as Gunvantrai's *Dariyalal* exist alongside Mia Couto's *Voices Made Night* and Zuleikha Mayat's weekly columns from Durban in *Indian Views*. Cynthia Salvadori's three-volume publication, *We Came in Dhows*, records the movement of Indian traders across the Indian Ocean between the west coast of India and Kenya, and their eventual settlement in East Africa during the colonial era. Memorabilia, photographs, travel narratives, diaries, and memoirs feature in this collection and offer a powerful tableau of Indo-British-African cultural

connections. A not-insignificant proportion of this literature finds inflection in the works of contemporary novelists such as Abdul Razak Gurnah, M. G. Vassanji, J. M. G. Le Clézio, and Shenaz Patel.

Much like Deeti in *Sea of Poppies*, who sees an apparition of the ship *Ibis* from her landlocked hut in Ghazipur and is filled with fear about what it entails, the students experience considerable trepidation as they dip their feet into the Indian Ocean world and especially the world of Ghosh's *Ibis* novels. Despite their readiness to learn about a world from a relatively unknown past, a world they have not encountered in their English Literature classes in the United States, their disorientation is quite serious. They encounter a facet of the global that resists easy translation. The hybrid languages of oceanic mobility in the early nineteenth century, we realize, is lost to generations who have grown up in the age of air travel.

This becomes an opportune moment in our seminar to turn to linguistic experimentation in the novels and their revival of the many lost idiolects of nineteenth-century Asian maritime worlds. The language weave in Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy is truly astonishing, ranging from sea-trading argot like *laskari* and Cantonese pidgin to Baboo English and Butler English, not to mention the generous sprinkling of various regional Indian tongues such as Hindi, Gujarati, Bhojpuri, and Bengali. The students are especially intrigued by Ghosh's use of *laskari*, the extinct idiolect of the lascars, the laboring Afro-Asian underclass on board these ships, and of Cantonese pidgin spoken only by those involved in the Canton trading system in southern China in the first half of the nineteenth century. The entanglement of these tongues with specific bodies of water is brought to the fore through characters like Jodu, Serang Ali, Ah Fatt, Bahram Modi, and his Cantonese mistress. We spend a few minutes in class reading aloud excerpts where exchanges occur in Cantonese pidgin. I share with my students the story of Ghosh's discovery of a Laskari Dictionary in a library in Harvard that provided him with the impetus to make generous use of this now-extinct vocabulary in his trilogy. Compiled by Lt. Thomas Roebuck in 1811, *A Laskari Dictionary of Anglo-Indian Vocabulary of Nautical Terms and Phrases in English and Hindustani* was a major inspiration for the novelist, as was Yule and Burnell's *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases*. The students also research the chrestomathy developed by Ghosh as an appendix to the novels. This philological appendix has a narrative about Neel Rattan Haldar, the disgraced Raja of Raskhali, as the reborn lexicographer who makes it his mission to document every possible word used by girmityas, lascars, and their Anglo-Indian masters during their oceanic journeys. This vocabulary,

Neel predicts, would make its way into the first major lexicographic project undertaken on behalf of the English Language, namely the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but which Neel calls the “Oracle.” In the 1840s, the *OED* was nowhere on the horizon. We see this new Neel as the painstaking lexicographer of a global English before the era of globalization in the final novel of the trilogy *Flood of Fire*. Ghosh’s brilliant lexicographic excavation bears significant purchase on contemporary debates about English as a world language in the era of globalization.

In brief, the students not only begin to see the Indian Ocean as a powerful archive through which to understand modern literary world making, but also learn to trace lines of intersection with Atlantic perspectives to which they are much more attuned. They also begin to appreciate how the ocean might function as an exciting cartographic frame for a decolonial understanding of world literature. Significantly, they begin to appreciate the embedding of the English language in vast multilingual realms. It is to this multilingual realm of global anglophone worlds that I turn to in the final part of this essay.

Multilingualism and Global Anglophone Worlds

“Decolonizing (the) English,” notes Peter Hitchcock, “is . . . an allegory of abnegation in which the power to decolonize does not exhaust the power that English confers, but [it] . . . confounds the process of selving that globalization demands” (751). Just as we need to rethink the language of endings and death in relation to postcolonialism, we might also consider the possibility that global anglophone is much more than an intractable literary monoculture out to extinguish the multilingual provenance of world literature. In recent years, many scholarly works have illuminated the multilingual face of anglophone worlding at different scales. Jeanne-Marie Jackson’s *South African Literature’s Russian Soul: Narrative Forms of Global Isolation* (2015) is an outstanding example. What might two regions at a vast geographical, geopolitical, and temporal remove have in common? A literary imaginary, it appears, one shaped by oppressive political circumstances, distance from Western centers of influence, and a lag in participating in transformative world historical events. If the Tsarist reign of terror in nineteenth-century Russia prevented the radical social reforms that transformed Europe, apartheid delayed South Africa’s entry into the history of decolonization. The former produced Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Chekhov, the latter Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee, Njabulo Ndebele, Van Nierkerk, Janet Suzman, and Reza De Wet.

Having established a plausible template for comparison, Jackson proceeds to parse the legacy of realism of the Russian masters and its influence on apartheid-era novelists. In the process, Jackson brings to the fore a transcontinental history of literary realism that rarely features in standard scholarly works on realism in the Anglo-American sphere. Her knowledge of realism's Anglo-American history, combined with her expertise in Russian literature and South African writing (both in English and Afrikaans), enables Jackson to undertake a rich comparative study of this modern narrative form. Multilingual anglophone comparativism can often emanate from places far removed from hegemonic centers of influence.

Equally resonant are works that explore anglophone worlds at the juncture of multilingual cultures in Asia. A recent essay by B. Venkat Mani compares Mauritian Hindi writer, Abhimanyu Unnuth's novel *Lal Pasina* (Crimson sweat, 1977) with Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008). Mani situates Ghosh's global *tour de force* alongside an ultraminor literary work written in Mauritian Hindi within an Indian Ocean frame (Mani). Both novels bring to life the British empire's infamous opium trade and the intricacies of forced labor migration in the Indian Ocean after the abolition of slavery. In neither novel is the narrative weight borne by a standard language. Unnuth's novel is written in Mauritian Hindi that is inflected with Bhojpuri, a demotic version of Hindi spoken by agricultural laborers in eastern India who were transported as indentured laborers to work on British plantations in Mauritius, Fiji, and the Caribbean. French and Mauritian creole also feature in the linguistic weave of this work. Mani uses the term "ultraminor" to describe Unnuth's novel, for it has only been translated into French nearly three decades after its publication, and no English version exists yet. Ghosh's novel, while occupying pride of place in the pantheon of anglophone literatures, dethrones standard English, as we saw, and compels the latter to share the stage with fragments from languages such as Hindi, Bhojpuri, Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Malayalam, Arabic, Persian, Malay, Cantonese, Mandarin, Portuguese, and French. Patois of seaborne Afro-Asian worlds such as *Laskari* and Cantonese pidgin feature alongside Anglo-Indian colloquial lingo derived from the *Hobson-Jobson*. Mani's comparative approach capitalizes on the obvious disparity of status between the two novels not to mourn the global invisibility of Unnuth's work, but to make visible its multilingual energy that is on par with Ghosh's. Mani's essay channels multilingualism as a structuring and generative force in world literature, while situating English in the realm of the subaltern and the vernacular.

A similar intent informs Akshya Saxena's book *Vernacular English* (2022). Saxena traces the movement of English in postcolonial India across a range of media – print, visual, and sonic – and offers a theory of anglophone vernacular aesthetics that is legible across the nation. English in her reading is woven into the nation's multilingual and multiregional weave through films, music, billboards, literary festivals, and digital media. Lower castes and neglected regions of the country such as the Northeast deliberately seek out English to counter the political domination of the Hindi. As a medium of desire and empowerment for the nation's underprivileged, as also a language of upward mobility for the Indian middle class, English in Saxena's work breathes as a heteronymic language. Ashley Cohen's project on the Global Indies that crosscuts Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds, Roanne Kantor's excavation of Latin American influence on modern South Asian anglophone and Hindi-Urdu literatures, and Duncan Yoon's project on the aesthetics of speculation in anglophone and francophone African literatures that trace the cultural texture of Chinese capitalist incursion on the continent are other examples of exciting decolonial work in global anglophone studies. Each project situates its anglophone corpus alongside a multilingual spectrum and navigates translational worlds in multiple languages: French, Hindi, Urdu, Spanish, Chinese, Zulu, Swahili, and Igbo.

A less dramatic and more effective means of demystifying the colonial horrors of English – to dispel the anglophone imperial specter so to speak – may be to attend to the ways in which its contemporary manifestation does the work of decolonization as it adapts to and is transformed by diverse literary traditions and cultural worlds, even those that have never been under its thrall. Where our disciplinary field is concerned, English does not invariably erase but is rather woven into myriad literary and linguistic cultures around the globe. In the process, the language itself has been transformed beyond measure. These manifest a logic of culture-power not reducible to English's colonial history. A recent survey notes that, apart from its 400 million native speakers, more than a billion people know English as a second language, and that it is an official language in more than sixty countries. For most of its life, English was an unabashed importer of words. As the twentieth century came to a close, it became the largest net exporter of words (Mikanowski). The multiple cultural contexts of English in South Asia, East Asia, Southeast and Northeast Asia, the non-francophone Africa and the Caribbean, the Russo-Slavic region, Scandinavia, the Indian Ocean Rim, and the Pacific; the emergence of multilingual diasporic enclaves in the advanced capitalist world; the

circulation and reception of translated multilingual literary texts in a world radically transformed by information technology; and more generally, a loosening of the isomorphic fit between a nation and its literary culture, all constitute exciting points of entry for a decolonial approach to English literary studies and the curriculum at large in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. A clarification about my use of the term “global anglophone” may be in order here. World Literature and English Literature are two distinct fields with some overlaps. In the essay, I explore points of intersection between them. The late twentieth-century iteration of world literature originated in departments of Comparative Literature in the United States and Europe that sought to enlarge their focus beyond European literatures by engaging seriously with non-European literatures from the ancient to the modern. Global anglophone (a term that has gained substantial traction in the US academy) is the primary point of intersection between English Studies and World Literature. The term is understood in two ways: (1) literatures published in English from around the world including sites that have no history of British colonialism; (2) texts translated into English that often feature in both world-lit and Eng-lit curricula. Debates about multilingualism and translation in world literature routinely reckon with the dynamics of English as a world language and a major translational medium.
2. See Miller, a recent work on it.

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