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Vernacular Cosmopolitanism in Anglophone World Literatures: Comparative Histories of Literary Worlding

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Abstract: The article explores the concept and practice of world literature from the perspective of postcolonial Anglophone literature. To account for the agency of literature and to move beyond the old centre/periphery model, the contribution focuses on literary acts of worldmaking rather than on the circulation of literature across the globe. It is argued that Anglophone world literature thrives on a poetics that bind diverse literary histories, languages, and distinct creative practices into patterns of exchange and thus exposes the constitutive exteriority within European (literary) histories. The use of the vernacular is identified as a central element of world literature's poetics, staging a conflictual interplay between transcultural relationality and the formative impact of locality. As the vernacular binds the global and the local into loops of relation, it also offers an opportunity to consider the classification of “language as a language” (Young 1209). A reading of Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) provides insights into literary ways of worldmaking, showing how the poetics of Anglophone world literature shuttles among several places to create a *vernacular cosmopolitanism* (Bhabha). Finally, the article examines how an understanding of world literature as a polycentric network emerging from different literary traditions changes our practice of comparative literary history.

Keywords: Anglophone world literature, worldmaking, vernacular cosmopolitanism, monolingualism, literary history, Creole

1 The Worlds of World Literature

In the convoluted history of modern literature, the notion of literature as a universally shared reality, as world literature, has habitually been associated

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with ideas of the world as an undivided, traversable space (cf. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* 72; Mufti 5).¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who, in 1827, programmatically heralds an imminent “epoch of World-Literature” (Goethe et al., *Conversations of Goethe* 213), famously defines world literature by its capacity to transgress borders. Emphasizing the many intertwinements between “intellectual” and “economic commerce” (Goethe, *Ästhetische Schriften* 870, 866), Goethe maintains that the novel technologies and means of transport driving 19th-century globalization are the enabling conditions of world literature (cf. Stockhammer 259). Anticipating the commodification of world literature on a global market, Goethe understands world literature not only as an aesthetic artifact defined by literary value but also as a cultural, institutionalized object caught up in complex systems of economically organized exchange.

Almost two centuries later, Goethe’s ideas have lost none of their urgency. His linking of world literature to various, historically variable forms of circulation resonates throughout contemporary scholarship. Most prominently, it is manifest in David Damrosch’s almost standardized definition of world literature as a literary work that “circulat[es] out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin” (Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* 6).² The circulation of texts, typically made possible by interlingual translation, sets off a dynamic of transformation, which invests the text with locally inflected meaning and a new lease of life: “[A] literary work,” Damrosch has it, “manifests differently abroad than it does at home” (6). The study of world literature should therefore center on the “phenomenology” (6) rather than the ontology of a work of art, i.e., on the multiple ways in which it is received, appropriated, and institutionalized in different contexts.

To me, as well as to a number of other scholars in the field, approaches that tie world literature to circulation seem unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. Firstly, to varying degrees, they equate the world of world literature with movement across boundaries and with exchange on a global market (cf. Cheah 5).³ These

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2 True, Damrosch also notes that a literary work must be “read as literature” (*What is World Literature?* 6) and thus draws attention to the criterion of literariness. Yet, he immediately adds that there are no text-immanent criteria that would qualify literature as an instance of world literature.

3 Hitchcock criticizes the “world” in world literature as “studiously neutral” (5), whereas Saussy considers world literature and translation as “filtering techniques: they unavoidably impart their selective bias to the literary field in the act of representing it” (14).

largely heteronomic factors contribute to establishing a text's global visibility, its prominence, and its availability, or, to put it differently: The faster a text travels, the greater its world literary value. Given that the global pathways of world literature have been and continue to be pre-eminently determined by literary institutions located in the Global North, linking world literature to mobility inevitably reproduces geopolitical hierarchies and confirms the old center-periphery model (cf. Friedman 2).⁴ Secondly, though world literature appears to allude to a "‘one-world’ reality" (Mufti 3), even a kind of cosmopolitan, shared world-consciousness, the global circulation paradigm rests on a fairly strict demarcation between seemingly separate cultures and distinct literary traditions, i.e., in the words of Damrosch, between "our own culture" and "foreign traditions" (*How to Read World Literature* 46, 86). It ignores the fact that cultures are entangled and transcultural literary exchange inscribes itself *into* a literary work. And thirdly, as Pheng Cheah (5) has cogently argued in his book *What is A World?*, the focus on circulation and interlingual translation reduces the specificities of literature to a minimum and makes it almost impossible to assess the value of world literature other than in terms of numbers, instrumentality, and impact.

To account for the agency of literature and to move beyond the old center/periphery model, this contribution embraces the suggestion put forward by a number of scholars to expand the field of world literary studies to literary acts of worldmaking (cf. Borsò; Helgesson; Löffler; Cheah; Neumann and Rippl; Neumann, "Globalisierung, Migration, Exil, Diaspora"). Of course, this is not to deny the role of economic and sociopolitical factors shaping the field and practice of world literature. The literary text, however, is imbued with a distinct force, an agency, that resists full integration into the logics of the market. It creates a world of its own that introduces unruly frictions. These worlds cannot be understood in the terms established by a global market (cf. Cheah 17).

Instead of focusing on the ways in which literatures circulate out into the world, I want to shift focus onto acts of literary worldmaking. While worldmaking is, of course, characteristic of all literature (cf. A. Nünning, V. Nünning, and Neumann), world literature engages with the world in more explicit and specific ways. The worlds of world literature, I argue, perform a double gesture: they translate between transcultural connectivity and topographical singularity, be-

⁴ With an eye to the power structures organizing the world literary field, Mufti, in his seminal study *Forget English!*, is right in reminding us that "the cultural sphere now generally identified as world literature [...] has in fact been from the beginning a regime of *enforced* mobility and therefore *immobility* as well" (9). What is indeed needed is a historically sensitive analysis of how 'literature' and 'world literature' were produced at the intersection of colonialism and orientalist philology, ultimately producing a "plane of equivalence" (11) based on Eurocentric standards.

tween the particular and the cosmopolitan, between knowledge of a shared world on the one hand and the irreducibility of affective experience and situated embodiment on the other (cf. Borsò 41). My contribution explores this dimension of worldliness from the perspective of postcolonial Anglophone literature. Its commitment to the world finds its expression in a poetics that is marked by uneven histories of circulation, exchange, and translation, entangling diverse literary histories, languages, and distinct creative practices into patterns of exchange and thus exposing the constitutive exteriority within European (literary) histories. I am particularly interested in the usage of the vernacular, a central element of world literature's poetics, as a means of staging a conflictual interplay between transcultural relationality and the formative impact of locality.⁵ As the vernacular binds the global and the local into loops of relation, it also provides us with an opportunity to consider the classification of "language as a language" (Young 1209, italics B. N.). A reading of Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) will provide insights into literary ways of worldmaking (Part 3), showing how the poetics of Anglophone world literature shuttles among several places and among creative practices of several cultures to create a *vernacular cosmopolitanism* (Bhabha). Finally, I will briefly consider how an understanding of world literature as a polycentric network emerging from different literary traditions changes our practice of comparative literary history (Part 4).

2 Literary Worlding – Worlds in the Becoming

Literature not only travels through the world but also has, as Cheah puts it, a capacity "to world" (8), i.e., a capacity to open other, imaginative worlds that cannot be contained by the frequently market-driven world of globalization, in which literature is inevitably implicated. To take seriously the agency of world literature, we need to move beyond representational models of literature, which, broadly speaking, posit that literature refers to a given world outside itself, a world that exists as an object that may be seen and represented by the symbolic forms available to literature. Literature, Jacques Derrida maintains, displays a "paradoxical structure" (46), for it is both immanently literal and inherently relational. That is to say that literature is characterized by a distinct aesthetic polyvalence and openness that exceed pre-given concepts of the world and that

⁵ I understand the vernacular as a local language that differs from the prevailing official or cosmopolitan language. The vernacular typically has political overtones since it is directed at a specific, narrower community and the construction of a corresponding audience (cf. Pollock; Beecroft 148).

trouble literature's referential relation to the world. At the same time, however, literature only emerges from its complex relation to the non-literary. Although literature does not index "the historical, sociological, and ideological texture" (Attridge 7) of cultures, it carries traces of the world it pretends to refer to. Literature is permeated by the predicaments of what lies outside it, but it may also intervene creatively in existing orders. If literature can become a distinct agent in the making of the world (cf. Cheah 2), it is not least due to its paradoxical structure: Its referential dimension imbues literature with a sense of implicated and processual worldliness. Its immanence invites readers to probe different actualizations of the fictional world and to enter into an open dialogue with the text, a dialogue which defies homogenizing closure and opens new possibilities of perceiving the world.

Literary worldmaking in contemporary Anglophone world literature entails a range of thematic, aesthetic, and conceptual strategies, which, broadly speaking, configure the world in terms of its immanent alterity and openness (cf. Neumann, "Globalisierung, Migration, Exil, Diaspora"), i.e., in terms of what Gayatri Spivak calls the "planet" (*Death of a Discipline* 72).⁶ The poetics of Anglophone world literature is shaped by a contradictory pull between the local and the global: Even as it binds diverse places, histories, and languages into networks of mutually transformative exchange, it accentuates the irreducible impact of locality and situated practices. It unsettles the conventions of national literature by drawing connections between different locally grounded practices and by showing that even the most local experience is implicated in global trajectories. Pushing binary oppositions and clear-cut boundaries towards their limits, this poetics imagines transitory spaces, polycentric geographies, and contact zones, from which nomadic epistemologies, migratory subjectivities, and entangled histories may emerge (cf. Mignolo; Ette 303; Müller; Borsò 201). As it oscillates between connectivity and singularity and holds in productive tension the translatable and the untranslatable, the poetics of Anglophone world literature provides opportunities for *border thinking* (Mignolo) that brings to the fore the difference within seemingly unified orders.

Moreover, literary worldmaking also resides in a number of narrative features that cultivate relationality and reach out for transcultural contact, while rendering the inevitable unevenness of global flows visible. The transgression of generic boundaries, multiperspectivity, the use of intermedial strategies, non-linear narratives that disrupt the tripartite division between past, present, and future, and

⁶ The "planet," according to Spivak, "is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan" (*Death of a Discipline* 72).

recursive plotting are some salient characteristics. Anglophone world literature is shaped by what Jahan Ramazani calls a “transnational poetics” that fuses diverse creative traditions and nation-straddling energies of poetic imagination (cf. 2). This transnational poetics no longer relies on the ‘appropriation,’ ‘adaptation,’ and ‘transformation’ of literary forms shaped by centuries of British (and later American) literary history, but emerges from an “intra-active transculturality” (Ghosh 5), i.e., a kind of exchange that is inscribed in any cultural configuration and involves different centers.

Among these strategies, the use of the vernacular, processes of linguistic creolization, and the recording of multilingualism, frequently within one language, play a pivotal role. Creoles, the vernacular, and pidgins are not “stylistic and rhetorical roadblocks thrown in the path of their reading publics” (Apter 9), but chief engines for world literature that index cross-cultural contact – frequently with all its violent implications – and invite us to consider relations and kinship between seemingly distinct entities. While registering the formative impact of space, Creoles also “bear [...] witness to the planetary circuit of tongues, the mixing of syntax and phonemes across continents” (Dimock, “African, Caribbean, American” 37). The vernacular must therefore not be taken for a signifier of some self-contained culture. Rather, it is a creative idiom emerging in interrelation with the imperial, global, and cosmopolitan language and forged through the transformative agency of translation, contact, and circulation. This “cosmopolitan vernacular” – as Sheldon Pollock aptly calls it – opens up a contact zone in which imposed norms can be renegotiated and in which language is decoupled from territory and nation to create transcultural bonds (cf. Young). From a somewhat utopian perspective, Édouard Glissant, in *Poetics of Relation*, imagines Creole as instating relations across the world, enmeshing a multiplicity of small worlds into an “interactive totality” (93). According to the Caribbean philosopher and writer, Creole is a “fragile and revealing *écho-monde*” (93), in which the spiraling, fluid, and transformative mode of Relation manifests itself to give voice to multiple histories.

Circulation and translation still matter in this understanding of world literature; however, they are not secondary activities, taking place after an original act of production. Rather, as noted by Susan Stanford Friedman, translation and “circulation impact [...] art *before* and *during* the creative process as well as *after*” (503). The exchange between diverse creative practices and languages, the negotiation between the local and the global, the predicament of having to draw on a colonially imposed language, and the attempt to ‘vernacularize’ it – these concerns underlie the poetics of Anglophone world literature. From this vantage point, world literature appears as a force that shows the effects of transcultural flows and that, by means of its worldmaking capacities, models connections across (literary) histories and geographies (cf. Walkowitz 30). It cultivates a

“planetary imagination” (Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* 96; Pratt 15), but remains responsive to the particular. Another way to say this might be that Anglophone world literature configures a world that “preserves something untranslatable” (Nancy 28), a potentiality that conjures up alternative meanings and repressed histories.⁷ It might well be this residue of untranslatability, an unruly force that exceeds existing orders and binds readers into open meaning-making processes, that keeps world literature alive across centuries and cultures, spurring ever new translations, adaptations, and remediations.

3 Literary Worlding in Anglophone Literatures – Creole and Vernacular Cosmopolitanism

While it might be argued that there are plenty of literary texts that enact the kind of worldly poetics described above, there are texts that do so more explicitly, visibly, and vividly than others. In these texts, the translation between the transculturally entangled and the locally situated is not a distant horizon that enters the work in an implicit and indirect way, but is openly and critically mapped, giving rise to new, transcultural poetic ontologies. We find such ethically resonant scenarios of worlding in a range of Anglophone literary texts such as in those by Sam Selvon, V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Amitav Ghosh, Nuruddin Farah, Timothy Mo, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Michael Ondaatje, Kazuo Ishiguro, Teju Cole, Zadie Smith, NoViolet Bulawayo, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Mohsin Hamid, and many more. These texts, frequently in the minor key of Homi Bhabha’s *vernacular cosmopolitanism*, cross borders to disperse totalizing orders and to interrogate possibilities of community building. Here, I want to focus on literary works that thrive on the use of the vernacular, more specifically of Anglo-Creole, as an important resource for worlding, including the negotiation of the right to world in an unequally structured world. The vernacular, according to Bhabha,

shares an etymological root with the “domestic” but adds to it – like the “Un” that turns *heimlich* into *unheimlich* – the process and indeed the performance of translation [...] to vernacularize [...] is not simply to *be* in a dialogic relation with the native or the domestic,

⁷ Globalization, by contrast, “has already translated everything in a global idiom” (Nancy 28) and, exerting a centripetal pull, works towards “the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere” (Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* 72).

but it is to be on the border, *in between*, introducing the global-cosmopolitan “action at a distance” into the very grounds – now displaced of the domestic. (202)

The result, for Bhabha, is a vernacular cosmopolitanism that reclaims localized creative practices and inscribes them into global networks. As the vernacular cosmopolitanism produces orders that are both localized and traveling, it confronts the Western metropolis with its frequently unacknowledged histories of transcultural contact.

A focus on the vernacular as an engine for Anglophone world literature takes us to the 1950s, when a number of Anglo-Caribbean, -African and -Indian writers, many of them temporarily or permanently located in London, started experimenting with language as a means of intervening in established regimes of representation. Against the backdrop of imperial language politics, which involved the forceful imposition of English upon local populations, the use of vernacular in literature can be understood as a resistant act aimed at cultural decolonization: The “programmatically declaration of a new vernacular literature is [...] frequently a political and politicized gesture,” writes Beecroft (96). More specifically, the use of the Creole tongue renegotiates “language prestige” (Mühleisen, *Creole Discourse* 8) and revitalizes suppressed local knowledges. Endowing marginalized agents with a distinct voice, it opens alternative subject positions. A milestone in putting Creole onto the page is Sam Selvon’s landmark novel *The Lonely Londoners*, published in 1956 (cf. Mühleisen, “Samuel Selvon”; Rupp). Selvon’s search for new poetic forms must be seen in the context of a number of inter-related endeavors, which he takes up and takes on: It bears the traces of the pioneering works of writers such as Nicolás Guillén, Langston Hughes, Louise Bennett, and Ralph Ellison, who experimented with orality, folk traditions, and jazz patterns; it shares with T. S. Eliot’s modernist aesthetic an appreciation of oral speech and an investment in fragmentation; and it connects to the concerns of the legendary BBC radio program *Caribbean Voices* (airing 1943–1958), to which Selvon regularly contributed. The program, which promoted Anglo-Caribbean literature from the islands and the diaspora, emphasized the materiality of spoken language, the rhythmicity of speech, and the affective potentiality of voice and in so doing raised the awareness of the (presumed) characteristics of the Anglo-Creole tongue (cf. Neumann, “Liberationist Political Poetics”).

The Lonely Londoners, Selvon’s third novel, draws on the vernacular to negotiate the historically strained relation between black diasporic cultures and the white majority in London of the 1950s, a decade which sees the beginnings of mass migration to Britain. The novel revolves around several working-class “West Indian and African men”, who seek “companionship and support in the face of a bleak, impoverished and unfriendly white London” (Innes 180). The novel’s first sentence

memorably evokes the repressive atmosphere that Selvon's "rootless, unlettered characters" (Nasta, "Introduction" v) are confronted with: "[I]t had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if is not London at all but some strange place on another planet" (Selvon, *Lonely Londoners* 1). It is significant that the fog and blur not only serve as markers of locality, which accentuate the inhospitality of London; they also evoke a sense of dislocation, which contests, even cancels out, the very centrality of the former imperial center. From the beginning, London is remeasured on a planetary scale, which spans the distance to the Caribbean islands and in so doing foreignizes the imagined city, i.e., turns it into "some strange place on another planet" (1). *The Lonely Londoners* invents new spatial scales that allow replacing the old center/periphery model with a polycentric world-ecology in which so-called central and peripheral spaces connect laterally and are put in what Kenneth Reinhard calls "traumatic proximity" (785). Importantly, these open and disjunctive geographies do not represent a given world existing outside the novel; rather, they only emerge from acts of worldmaking, modeled in the realm of fiction and intricately tied to the black protagonists' claiming their right to 'world.'

Creatively mixing characteristics of Trinidadian calypso, Caribbean orature, and modernist techniques (most notably episodic fragmentation, the recourse to free indirect discourse, and the use of stream of consciousness), *The Lonely Londoners* brings together a multiplicity of stories of its immigrant characters. The fragmentary, disjointed, and meandering stories revolve around Moses Aloetta, a melancholic veteran of the city, and Sir Galahad, a newcomer to the city, arriving full of hope "from Trinidad on the boat-train" (Selvon, *Lonely Londoners* 1). Together with a number of other, largely male migrants, they struggle to make a home away from home and to find places to which they can lay claim. We witness their everyday difficulties in finding accommodation and work and their struggles against growing racism. Their persistent sense of alienation and loneliness is curbed only by their regular "coming together for a oldtalk" (134) in Moses's room, "laughing kiff-kiff at a joke" (135). As the 'boys' swap their stories about the grim realities of black life in London and indulge in dreams of "green islands in the sun" (134), *The Lonely Londoners* debunks colonial constructions of the fabled metropolis. For Moses, Galahad, Big City, Tolroy, Captain, Tanty, and many other black immigrants "the streets of London" are not "paved with gold" (103); rather, they are gray and bleak (cf. Nasta, *Home Truths* 75), only occasionally brightened by the characters' defiant transgressions and sexual adventures.

The objectification and marginalization the black immigrant characters experience is counteracted by a reverse impulse at work, an impulse that points towards the creative intervention and "democratizing possibilities" (McLeod 27) made possible by the fabrication of new literary forms. Language and style are

major forces in this process. The characteristics of oral storytelling, including the sharp beat, jaunty tone, and anecdotal structure of Trinidadian calypso (cf. Nasta, *Home Truths*), lie at the heart of the novel's 'worldly' poetics. Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* weaves into the Western generic model of the novel, closely connected to bourgeois subject constitution, the musicalized, performative, and collective patterns of calypso, "the dominant narrative genre of Trinidad" (Thieme 53). More specifically, it marries modernist techniques, such as the interior monologue and free indirect discourse, with the calypsonian mode of storytelling so as to make established forms for representing consciousness available for the fostering of a subaltern community. The result is a pluralized, disjunctive narrative, which more or less corresponds to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call a "collective assemblage of enunciation" (98), characteristic of *minor literature*. *The Lonely Londoners* does not present a unified, coherent, and linear narrative, but consists of a multiplicity of small accounts, presented in varied registers of creolized English and only loosely woven together by the equally creolized voice of a heterodiegetic narrator (cf. Eckstein 271). Each one of the episodes registers different, subjective, and affective ways of experiencing immigrant life, conveying a sense of transience that characterizes diasporic communities. At times they clash, at others they resonate with one another and it is only through their interplay that readers gradually come to grasp the complexities of diasporic life. Simon Gikandi rightly highlights the epistemic potential of popular cultural styles of performance like calypso to "challenge the very foundations of Eurocentric cultural codes and suggest an alternative hermeneutics" (*Writing in Limbo* 96; cf. Eckstein 278). Most importantly, calypso epitomizes "the principle of creolization" (McLeod 31), which Neil ten Kortenaar identifies "as the form that modernist ambivalence takes in the Caribbean" (19). Drawing on Anglophone, Francophone, and African traditions, calypso in *The Lonely Londoners* becomes a resource for an alternative mode of worldmaking, which invests established European narrative forms with new epistemic and sociopolitical possibilities of pluralization.

The use of Creole in the novel is as much rooted in Caribbean folk practices as it is inspired by T. S. Eliot's modernist updating of "poetic language with modern speech" (Pollard 11). *The Lonely Londoners* employs Creole for both story and discourse and in so doing profoundly renegotiates the hierarchies between the so-called English standard and what many consider(ed) its flawed and inferior derivative.⁸ Language is turned into a force with which the characters carve out

⁸ Selvon claims that he "was the first Caribbean writer to explore and employ dialect in a full-length novel where it was used in both narrative and dialogue. I was boldfaced enough to write a complete chapter in a stream-of-consciousness style" ("A Note on Dialect" 63). Thieme notes that the honor of being the first belongs to V. S. Reid's *New Day* (1949) (55).

new spaces of belonging and renew the rigid traditions of British society. In complex acts of ‘taking place,’ the immigrant characters inscribe their experiences, desires, and frustrations into the iconic places of the metropolis and in so doing claim their right to belong:

“Which part you living?” Galahad say.

“In the Water. Bayswater to you until you living in the city for at least two years.” “Why they call it Bayswater? Is a bay? It have water?”

“Take it easy,” Moses say. “You can’t learn everything the first day you land.” (Selvon, *Lonely Londoners* 16)

Creatively remaking the city according to their own standards, the characters enact a pluralizing transfer of knowledge, which displaces colonial mappings and remodels London as a black, postcolonial city. Though racist, gendered, and class-inflected boundaries are far from being overcome, the narrative maneuvers of the text transform these boundaries into possible contact zones in which dualisms such as ‘us’ vs. ‘them,’ ‘here’ vs. ‘there,’ ‘original’ vs. ‘translation,’ etc. lose their epistemological plausibility.

The sociopolitical force of Creole in Selvon’s postcolonial novel resides in the way in which the voice of its narrator resonates with the voices of the major characters. It is remarkable that the narrator’s variations of Creole subtly echo the whole range of the protagonists’ language use. In this way, the narrative performatively expresses “the pleasures of a participatory and embodied collective” (Levine 49), which recognizes the value of difference. As a matter of fact, in the course of the novel the distance between the narrator and the ‘boys’ diminishes to an extent that their respective voices become almost indistinguishable (this holds true in particular for the relation between the narrator and Moses). As the following passage, situated towards the end of the novel and describing one of London’s many swinging parties, vividly illustrates, it is through Creole that the narrator expresses its solidarity with the characters:

Well things warm up fast in St Pancras Hall that Saturday night. Around half-past ten a Jamaican fellar bust a cocacola bottle over Five head because Five was dancing too close with his girl. Big City finish dancing and he beating pan in the steel band and every now and then jumping up when the weed hit the sky and screaming out for everybody to dance or come and beat pan in the band. Bart drunk as hell and he sitting in a corner holding his head. [...] Lewis like if he is the happiest man in the hall how he get this divorce from Agnes, and he going to everybody and telling them how he used to thump she every night.

It look as if Moses know everybody in the hall, for it ain’t have a fellar who pass what didn’t ask him what happening. (Selvon, *Lonely Londoners* 113)

Step by step, Creole becomes a sociopolitical principle that brings into being a sense of egalitarian togetherness. Its aim is not only to throw into relief the

particularities of the diasporic Caribbean community but, more importantly, to provide symbolic forms by which the imagining of community beyond the nation becomes possible.

As the novel translates the particularities of the Caribbean tongue into a metropolitan context, it considerably propels processes of “linguistic and cultural decolonization” (Nasta, “Introduction” x) and turns the migrants, “the most disadvantaged peoples” (Apter 9), into agents of global change. The vernacular foregrounds the sonic dimensions, the syntactic form, and rhythmic polyphony of Caribbean orality to inscribe a largely suppressed heritage into the English standard. Bearing the abiding traces of European colonization and transatlantic slavery, but also of Trinidad Carnival, Creole, a vernacular of “tangled parentage and laterally reproduced” (Dimock, “African, Caribbean, American” 39), reveals century-long connections between England, Africa, India, and the Caribbean. As such, it conjures up forgotten pasts that pervasively disrupt celebratory narratives about Western modernity and homogenous constructions of the nation. The “etymology-trailing words” of Creole gesture towards an interconnected world, “with many levels of grafting and mixing, generating linguistic kinships across vast distances and across the Western/non-Western divide” (Dimock, “African, Caribbean, American” 39).

In the context of such an alternative, planetary geography, it is worth noting that Selvon, for the novel, has created an “artificial” vernacular, i.e., a creative mixture of Trinidadian, Jamaican, and Barbadian as well as of Standard English:

I only tried to produce what I believed was thought of as a Caribbean dialect. The modified version in which I write my dialect may be a manner of extending the language. It may be called artificial and fabricated. The way I treat the language is not the way it is spoken in Jamaica, or Barbados, or Trinidad either, for that matter. I only resorted to a modified Trinidadian dialect because, much more than Jamaican or Barbadian English, it is close to ‘correct’ Standard English, and I thought it would be more recognizable to the European reader. (Fabre and Selvon 67)

Radically decoupling the vernacular from notions of authenticity and fixed origin, Selvon highlights the work of creative inventiveness. Importantly, the bonds that Selvon’s Creole forges not only strive to establish an affirmative sense of a black community; but also, as Selvon suggests, they reach out to the European reader. While being marked by a shared, violent past, Creole, in *The Lonely Londoners*, also points in a forward direction, namely to a transcultural community yet to come, a community that is neither based upon national or racialized categories nor created by the global networks for distributing power and capital. Along the lines of Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*, Creole, in Selvon’s postcolonial novel, gestures towards a rhizomatic relationality, a “relation iden-

tity” (Glissant 144), that entangles multiple small worlds into unpredictable forms of exchange.

The agency of Selvon’s visionary novel resides in these alternative, non-Eurocentric acts of worlding, which also make it possible to move beyond conventional, identitarian, and territorially bound ways of thinking about community. In so doing, the novel, as Jan Rupp notes, changes both “the idea of ‘world literature’ as well as the status of ‘English’” (147), including the hierarchies between so-called major and minor English-language writing. While it pluralizes world literature “into world literatures,” it pushes English “in the direction of ‘global Englishes’” (147). “Is English we speaking” (Selvon, *Lonely Londoners* 82), Galahad defiantly proclaims and thus confirms the power of migrants to unsettle the standards of dominant languages. By using Creole, a “national ‘anti-language’” (Mühleisen, “From Mother Tongue to Metaphor” 258), *The Lonely Londoners* weaves into seemingly unified English traditions the unruly force of the untranslatable, which points towards cultural difference, while also throwing into relief relations across centuries and continents. For the untranslatable of Anglophone world literature does not index an absolute Otherness but a repertoire of possible relations that call for different actualizations. In the words of Barbara Cassin, “[t]o speak of *untranslatables* in no way implies that the terms in question [...] are not and cannot be translated: the untranslatable is rather what one keeps on (not) translating.” (xvi) In this way, the use of Creole invites readers to reconfigure Western histories, languages, and spaces from the perspective of an unacknowledged relationality and an immanent ex-centricity.

But the use of Creole also begs questions on how the limits of seemingly “distinct languages of Europe” (Young 1208) are created, not only in terms of the distinction between ‘native’ and ‘foreign’ languages but also in terms of the conflict between a plurilingualism within a language and institutional standardization of a national language, i. e., the implementation of the monolingual model (cf. Apter 9; Beecroft 98). The monolingual model, *The Lonely Londoners* suggests, is a chimera since all languages bear the traces of other languages, cultures, and peoples and come into being through processes of creative mixing, traveling, and adaptation. Language can therefore not be tied to a single nation, let alone be ‘possessed’ by native speakers. Once the “nationalist nominalism of language” (Apter 246) is discarded, language becomes available for sociopolitical intervention and “the right to language” – but also the right to world – are “distributed more freely” (Apter 246).

The experimentation with the Caribbean vernacular and the creolization of Eurocentric world-visions pervading Selvon’s novel have opened up many creative trajectories for diasporic and transcultural writers in Britain. They inflect the world literary texts of, e.g., Zadie Smith (*White Teeth* [2000] and *NW* [2012]),

Andrea Levy (*The Long Song* [2010] and *Small Island* [2004]), and Bernardine Evaristo (*Mr Loverman* [2013]). Their weaving of the vernacular into Standard English renegotiates the right to world and binds England to other geographies, other languages, and cultures. But of course, by employing Creole to explore the deeper implications of the world, Selvon's novel also calls for connections and comparisons with other Anglophone texts produced outside Britain. Claude MacKay's *Banjo* (1929), Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* (1967–1969), Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979), Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990), Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996), and Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014) are only the most obvious examples. Together, they form a dense network that is permeated by an entangled world (literary) history, which is irreducibly local in its sub-histories.

4 World Literature: Comparative Histories on a Planetary Scale

The proposed perspective on literary worlding and a poetics of transcultural exchange, here exemplified in the use of the vernacular, entails “new scales of literary history” (Walkowitz 44) and new principles of comparison, which dispel the logic of “Eurochronology” (Appadurai 30; Prendergast). A comparative history of worlding delinks world literature from global circulation and *distant reading* (Moretti) and seeks to reveal the specificities of literary worldmaking, precisely to show how literature models the world in ways that cannot be contained within the potentially homogenizing orders of globalization. Gayatri Spivak expounds the premises of such an approach when arguing that literature offers a site in which readers can experience the world not in terms of a unifying globalism but in terms of an open planetarity, traversed by otherness. The alterity of a text, i.e., the invitation to understand it as a singular literary event, makes possible an apprehension of the planet because responsive reading involves “suspending oneself into the text of the other” (Spivak, *Other Asias* 23). A comparative literary history of worlding thus puts emphasis on the specificity of literature in making and remaking the world, while also accounting for the fact that these specificities must be seen in relation to other discourses, sociocultural configurations, economic structures, and reading practices. Literary worlds carry the symptoms of these referents, but they may also change them creatively. Given that all figurations of the world are necessarily partial worlds, such an interrogation of literary worlding may also shed light on the question of which world and whose world we are referring to when we say ‘world literature.’

Comparative history that takes seriously the agency of literary worldmaking deduces categories for comparison from the literary text itself rather than imposing pre-given paradigms from without. That is to say that we need to consider the text as an *epistemic object* (Rheinberger) that creates parameters and pathways of comparison. Being shaped by and modeled on exchange, the world literary text is best understood as a multilayered node, a route of transit for crisscrossing trajectories, enfolding diverse, locally inflected aesthetic practices (cf. Dimock, *Through Other Continents* 3–4). The space of comparison is therefore both between and within literary texts; it is akin to the “translation zone” (Apter) that Apter has in mind when spelling out her “program for a new comparative literature” (243). It is by means of their poetics of exchange and translation that world literary texts inscribe the comparative perspective into the text. By linking the Caribbean calypso tradition to the Western genre of the novel and to modernist techniques, Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*, for instance, brings to the fore affinities and differences between these symbolic modes and asks readers to appraise their implications as alternative forms of world- and community-making. In so doing, the novel forges new principles of comparison that do not rely on an either/or logic but that embrace difference, mixings, and ambiguities. At the same time, Creole in *The Lonely Londoners* also points beyond the novel, connecting it to a multiplicity of other texts that make use of this tongue to give voice to marginalized communities and to redress asymmetries in the “ability to think the ‘world’ itself” (Mufti 10). Instead of choosing between the inside and the outside of a literary text, between theory and practice, comparative literary history of worlding adopts both an immanent and a relational/contextual perspective, showing how literature affects the world it inhabits by literary acts of worldmaking.

The scales and principles of planetary comparative histories necessarily move beyond conventional national approaches to world literature and the well-known ‘from national to world literature’-approach (King). They highlight aesthetic affinities, entanglements, contacts, imbrications, and juxtapositions across temporal and spatial boundaries rather than the “simultaneity of language or historical period” (Walkowitz 44). Their emphasis on transformative exchange between different creative traditions builds on what Jessica Berman calls *comparative thick descriptions* that reveal movements of literary forms and “circles of interconnection” (69), while remaining attuned to “specific local modes” (69) of writing and reading that “co-exist with a dynamic and varied global interconnection” (69). The global in this context should therefore not be taken as the other of the local; rather, as Wai Chee Dimock amongst others holds, it is made up of a disjunctive network of distinct localities and multiple agencies (“African, Caribbean, American” 40–41). Such a polycentric approach moves beyond the conventional center/periphery model because it accentuates

the mutually constitutive interplay between creative practices and their circulation across the world.⁹

More specifically, Creole “heralds a condition of linguistic postnationalism” (Apter 245) and contests the idea of mono- and even multilingualism. Revealing the multilingualism within a language and showing that “translation is intrinsic to the use of language” (Gikandi, “Introduction” 1219), Creole undoes the idea that the world literary text can be read as an expression of a national literary culture and be tied to a fixed geographic location. Approaching world literature from the perspective of literary worlding and a poetics of exchange means replacing the “nominalist monolingual model” (Young 1209) with histories of migration, traveling, translation, and mixing of languages. These processes of migration and mixing, which are both registered in and propelled by world literature, invite us to reconsider the conventional classification of English – just as of French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and German – as a national or even European language and to acknowledge that it is marked by a constitutive exteriority.

While indicating association and exchange across cultures, Creole – and the poetics of Anglophone world literatures more generally – also conjures up the violence, loss, and asymmetry that histories of cross-cultural encounters entail. If this violence is to be taken seriously, comparative history must dispel the conventional parameters of compatibility, influence, and intertextual genealogy, typically geared towards assimilating the singularity of a text into presumed universals and creating what Aamir R. Mufti calls “a plane of equivalence” (11). Methodologically, this might be achieved by a practice of “neighboring” that relies on a “traumatic proximity” of disparate texts. Broadly speaking, *neighboring* and *traumatic proximity*, concepts coined by Kenneth Reinhard (cf. Apter 245), introduce moments of incommensurability and unpredictability into comparative history, which work towards a *reciprocal defamiliarization* of texts (cf. Radhakrishnan 2003). The bringing together of texts “prior to their similitude” (Reinhard 785) and compatibility provides the grounds on which they might be understood in terms of their singularity and difference, not just in terms of their “perspectival genealogies and intertextual relations” (Reinhard 796). Traumatic proximity, Reinhard argues, is an ethical principle that places a text “before or beyond comparison and contextualization”; this kind of “[a]symmetrical substitution implies that there is no original common ground for textual comparison, but only the trauma of originary non-relationship, of a gap between the theory and practice of reading that is only retroactively visible” (804).

⁹ “Circulation,” according to Susan Stanford Friedman, “involves connection, linkage, networks, conjuncture, translation, transcultural: in a word, polycentricity.” (512)

The suggested dynamic oscillation between the immanent and the relational, kinship and traumatic proximity, singularity and relation, commensurability and incommensurability, the local and the global might provide starting points for rethinking world literature and comparative histories on a worldly and planetary scale. If world literature is connected not only by economically and institutionally enabled processes of traveling but also by a poetics of exchange, its landscape would seem to be made of multiple small worlds, alternate histories, and multi-layered temporalities, which might point a way out of the often-bemoaned Eurocentrism of world literature.

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