

Book Reviews

Warwick Research Collective (WReC): Sharae Deckard, Nicholas Lawrence, Neil Lazarus, Graeme MacDonald, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, Benita Parry, and Stephen Shapiro. *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*. Liverpool UP, 2015. Pp. 256. £19.99.

The recent study from the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) intervenes in current debates in world literature by highlighting a general failure within the disciplines of postcolonial and world literary studies to interrogate the subject of capitalism. While approaches such as the “alternative modernities” paradigm have affirmed a cultural pluralism in recent years, the materialist framework presented in *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* underscores the factors that continue to limit the texts and languages that are published, taught, and circulated within an uneven literary marketplace. By emphasizing “the context of capitalism as a world-system” (WReC 14), the Collective articulates an understanding of modernity as a singular and global phenomenon without precluding heterogeneity and difference. They are thereby able to address a series of timely questions: How, firstly, to reject Eurocentrism without recourse to a concept of postcolonial difference that loses sight of the global universality of capitalism’s origins and effects? How to configure modernity as a phenomenon that is both irreducibly specific to individual locations and relational, insofar as it is formed in and through the colonial relationship? And how, finally, to make postcolonial critique sensitive to the uneven structures, institutions, and markets that continue to shape the possibilities of world literature?

The Warwick study provides a way into these questions with its suggestive focus on combined and uneven development, a theory initially introduced by Leon Trotsky in his studies of early-twentieth-century semi-colonial Russia and China to explain the “amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms” (qtd. in WReC 11). Trotsky’s work shows how the spaces transformed by capitalist or capitalizing social relations continued to sustain rural populations, subsistence agriculture, and traditional social dependencies. Such phenomena were not simply the legacy of archaic cultural practices or psychic characteristics but were actively kept in place and reproduced. The result, according to Trotsky, was a hybrid landscape of modernity and tradition that saw “industrial plants built alongside ‘villages of wood and straw’; and peasants ‘thrown into the factory cauldron snatched directly from the

plow” (qtd. in WReC 11). One of the most striking examples of combined unevenness mentioned in the Warwick study is the rapidly expanding cities of semi-colonial China in the nineteenth century. The authors draw on Liu Kang’s account of the development of colonial enclaves and port cities such as Shanghai and Peking, where the latest evolutions in production, commerce, and finance were introduced under the control of imperial powers who were “actively propping up an archaic landholding system, and supporting landlords, officials, militarists, and comprador elites in prolonging prior forms of social organisation” (WReC 11). Modernization in such spaces is revealed to be a process of uneven development that involves industrialization and urbanization in certain areas and the “development of underdevelopment” in others (13). By drawing on these landscapes of uneven development, the Warwick Research Collective complicates the developmentalist narratives inherent to globalization and stagist-Marxist discourses alike—whether these celebrate the spread of capitalism as a “tide lifting all boats” or affirm the belatedness of “primitive” accumulation in the face of capital’s inevitable universalization (22). In contrast to both positions, the Collective suggests that capitalism “does not smooth away but rather *produces* unevenness, systematically,” such that the idea of an “achieved” modernity—in which unevenness is “superseded, harmonised, vanquished, or ironed out”—is “radically unhistorical” (12–13; emphasis in original).

As with the uneven landscapes of the capitalist world-system, so with the uneven “world” of world literature: here, too, the Warwick Research Collective rejects the idea of a “level playing field”—“a more or less free space in which texts from around the globe can circulate, intersect and converse with one another”—as an “idealist fantasy” that they identify in the work of a number of literary comparativists, including Jonathan Culler, Emily Apter, and even Gayatri Spivak (22–23). By insisting on material unevenness, the Collective departs from attempts to periodize or anticipate “world literature” as a particular stage of literary history, instead viewing it as a diverse body of responses to experiences of unevenness in different times and places on a world scale. These responses take place, they suggest, in locations as diverse as St. Petersburg in the 1870s, Dublin in 1904, rural Mississippi in the 1930s, a village on a bend in the Nile in the 1960s, or even Glasgow in the 1990s (14). The book’s subsequent chapters explore a range of texts that speak to the effects of combined unevenness—written from the “peripheral” regions in which these effects are most apparent—and show how texts “register” the compression of space and time, the juxtaposition of “asynchronous orders and levels of historical experience,” and the indication of “invisible forces acting from a distance on the local and familiar” (17). Such effects are

grouped together under the banner of “irrealis[m]” due to their ability to “mediate the lived experience of capitalism’s bewildering creative destruction (or destructive creation)” (51). The Warwick Research Collective thus largely avoids the periodizations of classicism, realism, and modernism, which they claim often co-exist within individual literary works. While there may be a danger here of destabilizing literary categories to the point that formal “ir-realism” can be identified as a feature of literature from any space or time, the study allows for a global and relational historicization of twentieth-century formal experimentation that refuses to separate “peripheral” experience and aesthetics from metropolitan movements such as modernism. Thus, in chapters on Tayeb Salih, Victor Pelevin’s “new Russia,” and Ivan Vladislavić’s *Johannesburg*, the act of comparison is centred less on the period of writing than on the specific historical situations to which the texts formally respond. In this way, the Collective offers a convincing interpretation of the aesthetic juxtaposition of classical and contemporary forms as a historically specific response to lived unevenness.

One of the book’s most significant contributions is its refusal to limit the analysis of unevenness to economically peripheral nations—its insistence that “core countries have their own peripheries and semi-peripheries” (70). Consequently, the Collective argues that it is not *Johannesburg* or Dubai but London that is one of the most “radically unevenly developed cities in the world” (12). The study takes aim at a Saidian separation of East and West that prioritises political domination and overlooks the economic exploitation of sectors of core and semi-peripheral regions. Yet this argument exposes a certain ambiguity in the text regarding the importance of the nation state. Political rights for those granted citizenship mark important differences between experience in the peripheral-cores and core-peripheries, given the extent to which a nation’s economic and military capacity determines its vulnerability to capital flight, corruption, foreign military and financial interventions, the erosion of public services, or attacks on organized labour by multinational corporations. While citizens of peripheral nations frequently find themselves vulnerable to political, economic, and ecological violence, the elite sectors of peripheral and semi-peripheral states are often guaranteed immunity from such violence precisely because of their ability to purchase a stake in the core countries, whether through citizenship, real estate, or off-shore arrangements in the world’s largest and safest financial centres. Similarly, within the uneven playing field of literary studies, not only do scholarly mobility and employment prospects vary according to national status, but research opportunities remain contingent on structures of access including property rights, accreditation fees, language tests, and visa stipu-

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lations, as well as racialized systems of cultural capital and prestige. In an age of enduring institutional imbalances and global divisions of academic labour—not to mention ongoing militarism and refugee crises exacerbated by the radically uneven effects of climate change—should we be so quick to dismiss the singularity of experience in peripheral nations?

Of course the Warwick Research Collective acknowledges that “it is only those citizens inhabiting the privileged spaces of dominant nation-states in the contemporary world system who tend to speak confidently of their ability and desire to transcend nations” (42). At the same time, their study makes a strong case for considering the unevenness and heterogeneity of Europe and its own internal history, thus presenting the peripheries of “core” areas as complex and critically illuminating spaces—whether we speak of the peripheries of Europe (such as Ukraine, Turkey, and Greece) or the cores of Asia (such as Hong Kong and other “Tiger” economies). Focusing on the peripheries of the cores also means refusing to overlook the systematic discrimination faced by those designated immigrants, minorities, and temporary workers, and the Collective provides a useful entry point for approaching these subjects and spaces as peripheral. Nevertheless, if we view racism as both an organizing logic and a *symptom* of the inequality among nation states, we are forced to confront the similarities but also the differences between the violence and precarity experienced within core and peripheral nations. Indeed, as politicians forcefully proclaim the need to put Britain or North America first, there is an urgent need for postcolonial scholars to look not only at the intersections between cores and peripheries but also at the increasingly fortified borders that separate them.

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