

The Emergence of Postcolonial Studies in Britain in the 1980s: A Personal Retrospect

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The study of writing from outside the UK and the US and the perspectives from which it was viewed underwent a major sea change in Britain in the 1980s. Among the factors contributing to this were the rise of Cultural Studies, the influence of continental theory on the British academy, a felt need to respond to the inner-city uprisings of 1981,¹ and an interrogation of the term “Commonwealth literature,” which at the beginning of the decade was the favored rubric under which Anglophone world literatures were studied in the small number of British universities that included them in their curricula. In the early eighties, when the term “postcolonial” was used, usually with a hyphen, it was mainly as a temporal marker, to indicate the period after colonialism. By the end of the decade, postcolonial studies, still in their infancy, had broader connotations and were making an impact as a field of study *and* as a critical practice that interrogated the hitherto largely unquestioned assumptions that had dominated the study of world literatures. More generally, while the UK’s culture wars were less obviously combative than those being fought in the US, they were nevertheless transforming “English Studies” in radical ways and, in some cases, with the rise of Cultural Studies, challenging the integrity of the subject as a free-standing discipline.

During the eighties I was teaching in London, in a theoretically progressive department,² and I was fortunate to be involved in various initiatives to reshape and

¹ At the time more generally referred to as “race riots.” See below.

² The English section of the Polytechnic of North London, later the University of North London and now London Metropolitan University.

promote the study of Commonwealth/postcolonial literatures. At the time, I was only dimly aware of the changes that were occurring. I think I was simply too busy with day-to-day tasks to fully appreciate that I was in the middle of a major paradigm shift in academe. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, it seems possible to offer an account of the upheaval that took place in the UK during the decade. This essay attempts to do this—from a personal vantage point. It concludes with a brief assessment of how the postcolonial practices that emerged in the eighties relate to issues and topics that are prominent in the field today.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the study of literature in the UK was for the most part based on a supposedly liberal “universalist” view, which could be very conservative. Structuralism had made an impact, particularly in progressive research communities, but Matthew Arnold’s definition of culture as “the best which has been thought and said in the world” (6) and his egalitarian aspiration to “make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light” (70) remained influential. However, Arnold’s version of “the best which has been thought and said in the world” was embedded in Western culture, and his ideals were associated with a form of Christian humanism rooted in the English nonconformist tradition. Interestingly, his credo had much in common with the premises on which the tertiary pursuit of the subject had been founded earlier in the nineteenth century. English had been introduced at London University in the second quarter of the century (Palmer 16), and around the same time it was brought into the curriculum on offer at working men’s institutes as a field that was supposed to have the socially beneficial function of providing the masses with a moral education. But it was a poor relative. The upper middle classes continued to study the more highly valued Greek and Latin classics. Literature, in Terry Eagleton’s words, was “literally the poor man’s Classics,” with “‘softening’ and ‘humanizing’ effects” that also made it “a convenient sort of non-subject to palm off on the ladies” (27, 28).

By 1980, the situation was, of course, very different. English literature had long superseded Classics as a central subject in the national academic imaginary, and university communities had become largely middle class. So, the subject’s supposed power as an agent for egalitarian social engineering had been dissipated. Other aspects of the early London promotion of English literature lived on. In its infancy, the subject had been associated with History, and this was a constant that remained relatively unchallenged into the third quarter of the twentieth century, though attempts to link changes in literary fashions with socio-historical forces were comparatively rare. Like that of many British institutions, the London University English curriculum continued to involve a steady march through the centuries, beginning with Anglo-Saxon and culminating with Modernism. In my own

institution, this was modified by combining period and genre study, and the compulsory spine of our undergraduate degree involved the study of Renaissance Drama, Romantic Poetry, and Modern Fiction, a unit that culminated in the 1930s. American studies, pioneered by Eric Mottram, who founded the Institute of United States Studies at King's College London in 1963, had found a place in the curriculum of various universities; a handful, including Leeds,³ Hull, and Stirling offered courses in Commonwealth Literature. That said, an emphasis on the historical development of *English* literature remained central. In the infancy of literature's life as a university subject, Charles Kingsley had spoken of it as a discipline that was part of the "the autobiography of a nation" (Palmer 39), and a nationalist agenda had continued to inform the study of the subject, even if the chauvinism involved was largely unconscious.

Although curricula were only changing slightly, the counter-culture challenge to older Establishment values that had emerged in the 1960s was beginning to make an impact on the study of literature, and by 1980 sociological approaches grounded in cultural materialism had established the discipline of Cultural Studies. Raymond Williams's influential *Culture and Society* had been published as far back as 1958. The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies had been founded by Richard Hoggart in 1964 and had Stuart Hall as its Director from 1968 to 1979. Williams's Marxism and the Birmingham Centre's work in developing new methodologies and expanding the subjects of cultural inquiry to include the mass media, subcultures, "race," gender, and sexuality not only were at odds with Arnoldian-derived cultural politics, but also took issue with forms of Anglo-American formalism, which, at the beginning of the decade, were tempering the historical study of literature in many institutions. The British origins of such formalism were in I. A. Richards's work in practical criticism, which dated from the 1920s, but UK critical practice was also influenced by mid-century American New Critics, such as Cleanth Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt.⁴ Now, though, Marxist-based Cultural Studies approaches were challenging the formalist belief that the text is an independent entity to be studied in isolation, as well as the historiographical narratives endemic in the literary curriculum in 1980.

Challenges from within the Anglo-American academy were, however, to seem

³ ACLALS (the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies), which would become the major body for the study of Anglophone world literatures in the ensuing years, was founded at Leeds in 1964. See below. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* was launched there under the editorship of Arthur Ravenscroft, publishing its first issue in 1965.

⁴ Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* and Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy" were particularly influential.

comparatively minor, when theoretical approaches from continental Europe, particularly Paris, blew across the Channel, gathering momentum during the course of the 1980s. The extent to which “theory” was embraced by particular English departments varied considerably, but a new pluralism introduced a plethora of methodologies to contextualize and explain literature in many institutions. Practical criticism gave way to literary theory, and instead of being considered through historiographical or Anglo-American formalist lenses, texts were subjected to a broad array of ideological methodologies. In a few brief years, unreconstructed Marxism and post-Althusserian Marxism, structuralism and poststructuralism, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Russian formalism became standard tools for the study of literature. New French feminisms competed with the Anglo-American-Australian feminism that had been popular with students in the 1970s. Discussions of focalization such as Henry James’s late nineteenth-century emphasis on “point of view” and Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) enjoyed something of a revival in a decade that aspired to find more scientific modes of inquiry, but such work began to seem impressionistic when put beside the more systematized study of the mechanics of narrative in Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse* (1980). In some ways, UK academics were latecomers to the feast, partly because there was a time lag between the first publication of seminal works in these varied fields and their translations, but once the vogue for theory took hold, the pace of change was rapid. It was accelerated by a flurry of primers, of which Catherine Belsey’s *Critical Practice* (1980) and Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory* (1983) were the most widely used.

In the midst of the eighties theory revolution, postcolonial studies began to come to the fore. My own experience as a lecturer, researcher, and participant in initiatives to promote the field and to broaden the readership of work that I considered neglected because of its geographical provenance may be an instructive case-study. As a lecturer, in the late 1970s, I had been teaching Contemporary Fiction in a course which mainly focused on British and American novelists. In my section, I extended its remit to include writers such as Margaret Atwood, Patrick White, and V. S. Naipaul. I had been reading and writing on Caribbean literature since the time of my first lecturing post in Guyana, and I tentatively sought approval to teach a West Indian Literature course. To my slight surprise, my colleagues welcomed it, and it was approved to run as a final-year special option. I first taught the course in the 1980-81 academic year. At that point it mainly represented an extension of the curriculum beyond its hitherto limited geographical range. My colleagues *were* supportive, though I think their support was for what they saw as a minority interest that would appeal to a small number of students.

Certainly, that was how it functioned initially: the course was popular, with the dozen or so students in the first cohort who opted for it. Then the summer of 1981 changed social attitudes in Britain, and suddenly it was attracting a far broader spectrum of interests.

The spring and summer of 1981 saw the outbreak of disturbances in inner-city areas of several British towns, including Brixton in South London, Toxteth in Liverpool, Handsworth in Birmingham, and Moss Side in Manchester. Associated with the Afro-Caribbean and to a lesser extent the Asian communities in these areas, the disturbances were widely referred to as “race riots,” but are more accurately described as civil uprisings. They were occasioned by increased unemployment and poverty at a time of high inflation, perceived to have been caused by the monetarist policies of Margaret Thatcher’s conservative government, and the criminalization of black people by a police force which ethnic minority communities saw as racist. Particular triggers included a fire in New Cross in South-East London in January 1981, in which thirteen young black people attending a party were killed in a suspected arson attack, and the “sus” law, widely used in the 1970s and early 1980s. This gave the police the right⁵ to stop and search “suspected persons,” a right that was disproportionately used against black British youths. The extent of the disturbances, comparable with the US uprisings that erupted in the wake of Martin Luther King’s assassination in 1968, shook the foundations of British society, forcing those in communities that had previously ignored inner-city deprivation and allegations of police racism to re-examine their attitudes.

Overnight I found I was being approached by colleagues in other departments to see if there was any way in which my work could feed into initiatives that would address the discrimination against the Afro-Caribbean community. Initially I think I disappointed these colleagues, when I explained that this could only happen indirectly. My West Indian Literature course dealt with Caribbean writing in the Caribbean, and only one or two of the texts I was teaching, such as Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*, addressed the situation of the Windrush Generation; none really engaged with second- and third-generation black Britons of Caribbean descent. My colleagues from other departments were hoping for a more direct engagement with contemporary social issues in inner-city Britain. Nevertheless, an increased willingness to see Britain as a multicultural country began to inform the academic climate, and courses such as mine were no longer perceived as marginal. I sought approval for a further course in world Anglophone writing, choosing to call this “New Literatures in English.” It was readily forthcoming. With

⁵ Under Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act of 1824. This was repealed in August 1981.

a slightly more prominent slot in the curriculum, it attracted a larger number of students, keen to explore texts from Africa, Australia, Canada, and India, not to mention Albert Wendt's epic *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, which, as one of the first cohort of students who took the course said to me, was the glue that held its varied parts together. So, the disturbances, which at the time seemed to have done little to improve the social and economic situation of inner-city Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities in obvious ways, had affected the academic imaginary and, despite the persistence of far-right activity, had done much to dispel the myth that England was a monocultural Anglo-Saxon country. By the end of the decade my institution had inaugurated a Caribbean Studies degree pathway, in which I collaborated with geographers, a sociologist, and a historian, developing a series of interdisciplinary courses, as well as continuing to offer my dedicated literature unit.

Elsewhere, Warwick University established its Centre for Caribbean Studies in 1984, and the University of Kent's programme in African and Caribbean Studies expanded, leading to a Centre for Colonial and Postcolonial Studies being founded there in 1994. The 1981 uprisings also had an impact on non-tertiary education. The teachers' organization ATCAL (the Association for the Teaching of Caribbean and African Literature) redoubled its efforts to bring diversity into the school curriculum. It achieved notable successes in the 1980s, when its newsletter was replaced by the magazine *Wasafiri*, which remains active today as a space that publishes new voices from the South along with the work of more established writers.

At the same time, the challenge to monocultural modes of discourse that was at the heart of the oeuvre of theorists as different from one another as Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault ensured that the supposed "universalism" that still had a great deal of currency at the beginning of the decade became increasingly unsustainable. With the benefit of hindsight, Bakhtin's work on polyphony and Foucault's work on the discursive construction of identities, spatial poetics, and the relationship between power and epistemology make them seem the theorists whose thinking was most significant for the study of postcolonial literature, but in the late eighties and early nineties, Jacques Derrida's influence on the pivotal figures of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha made him seem more crucial. Foucault's work was, of course, more obviously an influence on the third of the triad of postcolonial theorists who first became internationally known in the 1980s, namely Edward Said. Published earlier than the major works of Spivak and Bhabha, Said's *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978) had more of an impact in the UK in the eighties than the work of the other two members of the so-called "Holy Trinity." His argument that the Orient was a European discursive formation spoke to the partisan nature of supposedly objective accounts of history

and culture such as those engrained in the work of many traditional Orientalists; and, as well as being a foundational text for postcolonial studies, it shared common ground with the theoretical revolution that was questioning the assumptions on which literary studies had been based. Meanwhile SOAS (the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London), founded in the early twentieth century, continued to offer a repertory of courses, which began to move towards reconstructed Orientalism.

Groundbreaking work in postcolonial studies that had its origins in the UK included the Subaltern Studies Project, founded at the University of Sussex by a group led by historians. Like *Orientalism*, it brought an aspect of radical European social theory into dialogue with Asian historical experience. In his Preface to the first volume, Ranajit Guha cited the *Concise Oxford* definition of a subaltern as someone “of inferior rank” and linked the group’s projected work with that of Antonio Gramsci (vii). And in the inaugural essay of the first volume, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” Guha outlined the project’s aims, pointing out that “parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes,” and arguing that “This was an *autonomous* domain. . . . Far from being destroyed or rendered virtually ineffective, . . . it continued to operate vigorously . . . adjusting itself to the conditions prevailing under the Raj” (4). While the majority of the participants in the Project were themselves from privileged backgrounds and although its primary objects of study were concerned with the subaltern presence in the colonial era, it was an important milestone in the promotion of a bottom-up postcolonial praxis. However, despite its UK beginnings, its impact in Britain was not as great as in India, where its collections of essays were published by Oxford University Press. Like the work of Homi Bhabha, who also developed some of his ideas at the University of Sussex, while lecturing in the Department of English, the Subaltern Studies scholars’ work was to achieve greater prominence in the UK in the 1990s. At this time, much of what was later to be subsumed under the catch-all term of “postcolonial studies” was often referred to as *colonial* discourse theory. Bhabha’s work on mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence, which at various points he has seen as characterizing both colonial and postcolonial discourse, would find a much wider readership when several of the essays he had first published in the 1980s were brought together in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Similarly, Spivak’s best-known essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” did not achieve a wide circulation until the 1990s, though it had first been published in 1985. And I know that I personally did not read her collection *In*

Other Worlds (1988) until the early 1990s. It was a volume which, along with its incisive interventions on “third world” issues, reprinted another piece from 1985, which seems especially relevant to this issue of *Ex-position*. This was a short paper on literary studies in the eighties, in which she discussed the way critics’ aesthetization of literature habitually separated it from life and argued for “a literary study that . . . might teach itself to attend to the dialectical and continuous cross-hatching of ideology and literary language” and “an active and involved reading of the social text within which the student and teacher of literature are caught” (101).

The end of the 1980s moved the debate as to what might constitute postcolonial studies forward, when another foundational text, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), appeared. Co-authored by Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin, and Gareth Griffiths, it set out its stall in its opening pages, where the authors explained that their usage of the term covered “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day,” justifying this by saying that “there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression” and suggesting that it is also “most appropriate as the term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years and for the discourse through which this is constituted” (2). So the distance between “colonial” and “postcolonial” was effectively collapsed, along with the distinction between the objects of study and the practices through which critical inquiry was to be undertaken, and this kind of multivalent usage came to characterize the amoeba-like way in which term “postcolonial” would subsequently be used. Just over a decade after the publication of *The Empire Writes Back*, Helen Gilbert, in one of the clearest and most balanced summaries of how “postcolonial” has been employed, summarized its usages as follows:

In many contexts, the term indicates a degree of agency, or at least a programme of resistance, against cultural domination; in others, it signals the existence of a particular historical legacy and/or a chronological stage in a culture’s transition into a modern nation-state; in yet others, it is used more disapprovingly to suggest a form of co-option into Western cultural economies. What is common to all of these definitions, despite their variant implications, is a central concern with cultural power.

For those less interested in staking out disciplinary boundaries, “postcolonial” has become a convenient (and sometimes useful) portmanteau term to describe any kind of resistance, particularly against class, race and gender oppressions. (1)

Meanwhile, numerous initiatives to further the study of “Commonwealth Literature,” with their primary focus on writers and writing, rather than theory and practice, did much to expand the study of the field in the 1980s. ACLALS (the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies), which had been founded at Leeds in 1964, received significant sponsorship from the London-based Commonwealth Foundation, and disbursements to its regional branches particularly helped to foster the study of the subject in the global South. At the end of the decade, the Association’s Silver Jubilee conference, a particularly successful and widely attended gathering, was held in the UK at the University of Kent. Organized by Lyn Innes, it attracted one of the most impressive line-ups of postcolonial/Commonwealth writers ever gathered together at the same time. They included Ama Ata Aidoo, Dennis Brutus, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Anita Desai, Lorna Goodison, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Wilson Harris, Keri Hulme, Jackie Kay, Shirley Lim, Jayanta Mahapatra, Micere Mugo, Gabriel Okara, Michael Ondaatje, Nayantara Sahgal, Sam Selvon, Olive Senior, Derek Walcott, and Archie Weller, not to mention Edward Said. And it was at this conference that *The Empire Writes Back* was launched by A. Norman Jeffares, who had been instrumental in the foundation of ACLALS a quarter of a century before.

As Vice-Chair of the Association, I played a part in its UK and particularly its London-based activities, representing it at meetings of the Commonwealth Professional Associations held at the Commonwealth Foundation in the former royal palace of Marlborough House, a stone’s throw from Buckingham Palace. Although I personally sometimes felt out of place in these Establishment surroundings, the Foundation’s support for literature was invaluable. ACLALS’s Australian Chair Anna Rutherford persuaded the Director of the Commonwealth Foundation, Tongan Inoke Faletau, who had an enlightened interest in literature, to fund what would come to be known as the Commonwealth Writers Prize. I was involved in the day-to-day discussions that brought this into being, though its first staging was something of a disappointment. The first phase of the Prize involved each of four world regions choosing a Best Book. Subsequently, the winners and the chairs of the regional panels were brought together for the final judging. In its first year, 1987, the judging was held in London. I was not a judge myself, but the process appeared to have descended into something of a fiasco, when the Chairman allegedly vetoed the judging panel’s decision to award the Prize to Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the winner of the Caribbean and Canadian region. To compound the fiasco, the book that had been the runner-up for that region, Olive Senior’s *Summer Lightning*, was then promoted to become the overall winner. For admirers of Senior’s stories like myself, this was a wonderful choice, but the disregard

for the competition's rules, allegedly prompted by a reaction against Atwood's feminism, appeared to have made a travesty of the judging. The regional winners had been brought to London for the judging and, for the overall winner, a subsequent audience with the Queen. I remember Atwood's ironic smile at a reception, from which Senior, who could have had no idea that she might be awarded the Prize, was absent—reportedly far away in Jamaica.

Besides affecting the outcome of the inaugural Prize, these circumstances raised a larger issue about its ownership and the particular version of the Commonwealth that it represented: a UK-Establishment version or a version that represented the breadth and diversity of a post-colonial Commonwealth of equals? Subsequently, largely thanks to the campaigning of Anna Rutherford, its administration was wrested from British control, and for a number of years it rotated around the Commonwealth with the venue for the final judging changing biennially. In 1989, a year when a second prize, an award for the Best First Book, was added, I was fortunate enough to chair the panel for the Eurasian region, with Eunice De Souza and Punyakante Wijenaiké as my fellow-judges, and after a regional meeting in Mumbai, travelled to Sydney for the final judging and the Awards Ceremony at the Opera House. Again, ironically, it was something of a case of Hamlet without the Prince. The overall Prize was awarded to Janet Frame for her novel *The Carpathians*, and she alone of the finalists had not come to Sydney for the judging. The administrator, William McGaw, phoned her to invite her to travel from New Zealand to receive the Prize. Expressing humble gratitude and reportedly a degree of incredulity that her work had been chosen, Frame declined, because it would mean leaving her cats alone! Nevertheless, a healthier ethos now surrounded the Prize. "Commonwealth" has meant different things to different people, with some people seeing it as retaining residual traces of Empire, but in this version, it gave one the feeling that it had been well and truly decolonized.

Like many of my colleagues and associates, in the late 1980s and into the 1990s, I would personally wrestle with the terminology surrounding the subject that is now almost universally known as "postcolonialism." "Commonwealth" was, and is, problematic for the reasons suggested above and the sometimes arbitrary demarcations involved in separating the countries that are members of the organization from other Anglophone nations as well as countries where English is not the national language but is, increasingly, both spoken and employed by writers.⁶ "Postcolonial," as Gilbert's summary indicates, was becoming an increasingly

⁶ At different moments in their recent history, South Africa and Pakistan have been excluded from the Commonwealth. The arbitrariness has been further compounded by the admittance of non-Anglophone countries, such as Mozambique, that had no colonial ties to the UK, into the organization.

fuzzy term; and, just as “Commonwealth” could suggest the aftermath of Empire, “postcolonial” tended to emphasize the legacy of colonialism, albeit usually from an adversarial point of view, and with the passing of the years this legacy would seem increasingly irrelevant to later generations of writers. “World literature” was a term that had a long genealogy, dating back to Goethe, and had remained popular in German and other circles, but in its multiple incarnations and in its breadth, it was vague and did not carry the same kind of progressive ideological baggage as the other descriptors, varied though this baggage was. And then there was “New Literatures in English.” In 1990, I was appointed to a Chair in English at the University of Hull, and a year later I was given the opportunity to change this title. Aware that writing in English from India, Australia, and Canada was hardly new in the most obvious sense of the word, I nevertheless chose “Professor of New Literatures in English,” feeling that this was more open and could be justified by the innovatory newness of attitude that characterized Anglophone writing from non-metropolitan locations. At the same time, I became a co-editor of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. Any thoughts of changing the title were discounted by the publisher on the grounds of brand recognition, and so we embraced it, while making it clear that the *Journal* would now cover related areas that were outside the immediate remit of the title. I continued as its main Editor until 2011 and, although the issue of the title has been debated again, it has remained unchanged, continuing to give *JCL* a distinctive character in the world of “postcolonial” journals.⁷ For me, the question of terminology recurred in 1994, when the publishers Arnold asked me to compile a large anthology of writing from the field. I suggested that a questionnaire be sent to canvass opinions from leading scholars around the world. In the replies we received, there was a small majority for “New Literatures,” and Indian respondents mainly favored “Commonwealth.” But the most persuasive voices rightly said that it must be called *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, and this was the title under which the 900-page collection eventually appeared in 1996. Subsequently I have published three further books with the title “postcolonial” in them. For one, *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon*, this was my first choice, because it was a book that directly engaged with responses to canonical English texts, which explicitly or implicitly engaged with colonialism, but in the other two cases I was nudged towards using the term by publishers, who, again rightly, argued that this was the term that now had most visibility. Also in the mid-1990s, I assumed the General Editorship

⁷ *Commonwealth Essays & Studies*, the journal of the French Société d’Étude des Pays du Commonwealth, has also continued to use the term—from the 1980s to the present day.

of a then-new Manchester University series of monographs, and here the Editor made it clear from the outset that she wanted it to be called “Contemporary *World Writers*” (emphasis added). So, by this point I found myself, perhaps shamelessly, invested in four different incarnations of closely related versions of the field. On balance, though, I welcomed this, because it seemed appropriate to be avoiding fixity, given the field’s evolving ethos and parameters. Subsequently, “postcolonialism” would become almost universally accepted, though in the present millennium there has, of course, been discontent with it, and other terms, including cosmopolitanism and global studies, have provided alternative filters, in each case shifting the remit and approach of the area of study.

In the 1970s, I had had some doubts as to whether the various literatures grouped under the “Commonwealth Literature” label belonged together. That was changing by 1980, and, listening to papers on Australian writing at a conference in Barcelona in early 1981, I was persuaded that, amid significant differences, there were very real affinities; and in the ensuing years, I moved beyond my interests in “third-world literatures” and began to read both Australian and Canadian literature avidly. The 1980s was a decade when both countries were promoting their literatures abroad. With encouragement from the Canadian High Commission in London, a literature group of the British Association of Canadian Studies was formed, and UK interest in Canadian Studies was furthered by Faculty Enrichment Awards, for those entering the field as new teachers of courses, and Research Grants. Both enabled recipients to travel to Canada, and I was fortunate enough to receive a grant to work on the Robert Kroetsch papers in the Special Collections of the University of Calgary. When I first read Kroetsch’s novels, his writing immediately struck a chord with my interests in postmodernism, but I was also fascinated by his distinctively Western Canadian poetics, which were bringing a new version of Canada into being, in a kind of regional postcolonial counter-discourse that was a world away from the Establishment Canadianness of the East. I was also able to travel to Australia under the aegis of a Literary Familiarization Visitor programme and during a month-long stay visited most of the state capitals, as well as Canberra, the Red Centre, and several rural areas, meeting with numerous writers, academics, publishers, and arts administrators. I had been covering Australian Literature for *The Year’s Work in English Studies*, which first devoted a chapter to New Literatures in English in the 1980s, and this intensive Australian visit put flesh on the bare-bones of the literature and criticism in which I had been immersing myself from a distance. Again, I was persuaded of affinities, amid differences, between the situations of writers from the “third world” and the so-called “settler” colonies, whose varied demographics and regional diversity belied this term.

By the end of the 1980s, then, numerous iterations of “postcolonialism” were coming into being, and in subsequent decades the range of issues and practices associated with the term has proliferated further. Globalization (sometimes seen as the new colonialism), cosmopolitan theory, and an increased interest in the consequences of North/South polarities have all attracted attention, but perhaps the most significant twenty-first-century development in the field has been a movement away from formalism and “high theory,” such as poststructuralism, and towards more obviously ethically driven itineraries, such as eco-criticism. In the Age of the Anthropocene, there is an increased awareness of the extent to which colonial and post-colonial societies have been at the sharp end of environmental neglect and exploitation. For all its shortcomings, the postcolonial project continues to contest the asymmetrical power hegemonies, which dispossess or discriminate against subaltern groups. Now, though, in addition to offering “resistance . . . against class, race and gender oppressions” (Gilbert 1), this contestation often involves a praxis which, in the face of climate change, challenges the use of fossil fuels, deforestation, and hydro-electric projects that destroy subaltern communities, along with the threats to endangered animal species and botanical biodiversity posed by anthropocentrism.⁸

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⁸ See Armstrong; DeLoughrey and Handley, eds.; Huggan and Tiffin; Ghosh; and Thieme, *Postcolonial Literary Geographies*.

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