

## **Response to The Global South and Literature**

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Let me state from the get-go that I read this volume with great pleasure and am in general enthusiastic about the potential opened up by the frame of the Global South in literary studies. The productive aspects of the notion of the Global South – a somewhat slippery term that several authors in this edited volume try to define according to their own analytic and critical aims – are well emphasized throughout. For one thing, the fact that the term is in itself situational and flexible is already visible in the choice of words such as “deictic marker” (2), “multilocal context” (7), “geopolitical polyvalence” (7) or “transversal categorization” (115), to mention just a few. This could have led to a dangerous situation, in which the idea of the Global South all but disappears behind such malleable definitions, but I did not get that impression at all from reading the different contributions to the volume. It is laudable that most contributors attempt no fixed definition, while still advancing an operable description that they and their readers can think with.

Judging from the multiplicity of contributions to this volume from distinct angles, a Global South perspective indeed opens up new debates. Based on my own scholarly as well as personal interests, I profited much from reading on topics such as the special significance of Latin America within the Global South, with its longer history of decolonization; the importance of thinking about the Cold War as a special setting for South Atlantic transnational exchanges (not all of them ‘just’ cultural, and certainly not all of them positive – e.g., the collaboration between military dictatorships in Latin America and South Africa’s apartheid regime); or the major contribution of recent novels from such ostensibly disparate settings as the Congo and Aboriginal Australia to a critical reflection on extractive industries. I will admit that I also used much of the volume’s theoretical underpinning and contributions referring specifically to the Brazil-Angola colonial axis – much of it was founded on the highly profitable sugar industry based on slave labour – for my own current work on oral poetry and rap from these two countries. In short, I am thoroughly convinced of the value of adopting and further exploring a Global South frame.

As a malleable concept, the Global South will be used differently not only by scholars, but also by different actors. This is a point that comes across most convincingly in Isabel Hofmeyr's closing chapter, provocatively titled "Against the Global South". Hers is a welcome critical contribution to the debate, urging us not to fall into idealizations of the concept. In this vein, it is also important that so many chapters highlight the collusion between Global South governments and late Capitalism (especially countries like Brazil, South Africa and China, although no nation is totally left out of these entanglements). Indeed, because most contributors never lose Capitalism (and its articulations in the form of Imperialism) out of sight, the Global South perspective actually becomes a way of addressing many of the injustices that affect those nations once bundled up under the concept of the Third World or even the notion of the 'postcolonial'. The very fact that the volume addresses these related concepts and their limitations opens up a fruitful discussion – one that is by no means fully resolved by this book, as I will discuss below.

In short, the way the Global South has been tackled in this volume is very refreshing and exciting. The focus lies squarely on material conditions of life, involving colonization, exploitation, extraction, expropriation and often resistance as well as complicity. In some cases, but by all means not all, these material conditions are analysed in relation to their expression in literary and other texts. Indeed, the fact that the collection of chapters is not at all focusing solely on textual analysis in the narrower sense, but rather engages with Global South contexts and practices at large, is a welcome approach. It gives hope in the continued relevance of literary studies that boldly regard the world at large as 'text'.

Reading the volume, I got a sense of an ongoing debate. This is felt quite strongly already in the introductory chapter by Russell West-Pavlov, which purposefully addresses several paradoxes of the term and its application. But it is particularly Hofmeyr's contribution that points out the serious danger of looking at the Global South as some sort of formula for politically "progressive" ideas or movements of the type previously celebrated by the concept of Third World or even the notion of "postcolonial". Hofmeyr's suggested distinction between an uppercase Global South as expression of the more neoliberal agenda of the nations and cultures constituting it, and lowercase global south as the expression of "a spirit of non-alignment" is valuable in reminding us that the vast area subsumed under this construct of the Global South/global south is itself immensely diverse and includes competing perspectives and interests.

Having so far showered the volume with praise, let me also add some of my key reservations – which in no way undermine the value of the book as a whole. First and foremost, I felt that the way postcolonial studies were framed as a contrasting foil to Global South studies rather unjust. West-Pavlov states that postcolonial studies have a tendency of becoming "deempiricizing and depoliticizing" (16), which of course echoes current debates within academia about the development of the field. To me this criticism of postcolonial

scholarship seems somewhat overwrought, because it suggests that postcolonial studies are themselves not as flexible or situational as the notion of the Global South. I would argue that there is more than one definition of the term ‘postcolonial’, and more than one idea of what a postcolonial perspective offers. I myself have thought of and taught postcolonial theory very much in terms of relationships of disparity, neocolonialism and material realities and practices (rather than lofty theories) – terms which are in the volume celebrated as belonging specifically to a Global South frame. While I understand the criticism raised against some tendencies in postcolonial studies to focus too much on discourse and too little on the materiality of culture, I wonder if we really need to operate on this somewhat exclusionary basis? The notion that the Global South perspective will open us (literary?) scholars to decolonial voices such as Toussaint L’Ouverture, Che Guevara, Kwame Nkrumah, C.L.R. James or Eric Williams – to mention just a few – underestimates the fact that some of us may have already been dealing with these voices under the label of ‘postcolonial’. At this point, I feel that the critique of postcolonialism falls into the already overdone bashing of “the troika of Said, Spivak and Bhabha” (17) – even though I thoroughly believe this critical stance matters, particularly for younger scholars coming into this broad field of research and critical reflection, to create a distance from loftier ways of theorizing that alienate the very people some of these celebrated scholars are supposed to be writing about. If under ‘Global South’ we also understand a scholarship that remains accessible to the people affected by the complexities of practices studied under that label, then I am all for it. We should definitely not focus only on the loudest voices in a field of study, but I have the impression that this is a trap academics of all stripes often fall into. The fact that postcolonial studies have in some quarters revealed a tendency to do so does not invalidate much of the scholarship done under the label of ‘postcolonial’. Writing this response from Switzerland, where a critical perspective on the nation’s colonial entanglements is just rising under the very notion of ‘postcolonial Switzerland’, it seems counterproductive to throw the baby out with the bathwater. We can, I believe, operate with these different but very complementary terms in conjunction.

Another reservation, which is not totally disconnected from the criticism above, would relate more to the editorial choices made for this volume. With the exception of South Africa, itself a very unique space, there is a total absence of contributing scholars from the African continent. Does this not reiterate precisely the shortcomings pointed out in relation to postcolonial studies? While the introductory chapter declares that a Global South perspective would allow for greater inclusion of local publishers, ‘minor’ branches of literature, or indeed “southern theorists” (an expression borrowed from Raewyn Connell), the volume itself still somewhat excludes a considerable number of voices. This could potentially undermine the promise that Global South literary studies would allow for greater “intellectual acknowledgment” of the work of those who do not find themselves conducting research, writing or teaching in well-

networked and well-equipped universities in the ‘Global North’ or in more affluent (and hence visible) parts of the Global South.

In sum, while I am very enthusiastic about this publication, and look forward to the new angles it will open for researchers and lecturers, students and even activists, I am somewhat hesitant about the volume’s performative tone, especially in the introduction. The Global South perspective is announced yet again as a ‘turn’ of sorts in literary studies (although it is important that this term is not used), which seems to be the thing to do when putting out one of these volumes addressing a big new topic. I wonder if we really need to stick to this generic convention so prevalent in academic writing. Being far less interested in the groundbreaking potential of Global South literary studies on a rhetorical level, I nevertheless believe that the many avenues suggested by this volume and the combination of insights it provides are well capable of exciting new thoughts, viewpoints and collaborations. I sincerely hope that volumes such as this will usher in the creation of chairs for Global South Literary Studies in many university departments across the globe.

### **Works Cited**

West-Pavlov, Russell, ed. 2018. *The Global South and Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.