

When was the Global South?

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Six months ago, from October to January, I watched as the Eastern Coast of my native Australia burned. An area larger than some mid-sized European nations was burnt out, capital cities were hidden under the smoke haze for weeks, and the smoke circled the earth, passing over South America and returning to Western Australia ten days after its departure. It was clear that a mixture of Global Warming created by fossil fuel industrialization and the ecological degradation of White settler agriculture had combined to make the Imperial Anthropocene an apocalyptic reality on the great southern continent. Only rarely were Indigenous Australian voices to be heard in the public debates, pointing out that Indigenous fire technologies, as part of a raft of sustainable practices of Country, would have pre-empted such destruction in the first place, and that the judicious implementation of Indigenous Knowledge could prevent such occurrences in the future.¹

The Australian fires, fearsome as they were, nonetheless faded into oblivion as the initially localized outbreak of a new strain of Corona-virus escaped its Chinese epicentre and neighbouring countries, and spread to Western Europe, and then to the USA. It gave the most powerful industrialized nations a shock-laden sense of the collapse of public health systems and economic shut-down that had hitherto been reserved from the nations of the Global South. There has been a delay in seeing the impact of the virus in the nations of the South. Initially, it seemed that the virus was doing less damage in the crowded and under-resourced townships and favelas of the Global South than the loss of livelihood to millions of workers in the informal economy in the wake of shut down, or to strapped Southern economies for whom borrowing in US dollars put their already strained budgets under immense pressure.² The ravages of the virus are now becoming clear in Latin America, with the peak in Africa expected later in the year. Within a broader framework, the connections between ecological depredation, especially deforestation on a continental scale and increasing levels

of consumption all around the planet, and the abrupt ferocity of the pandemic, gradually acknowledged as Anthropocene-related causes of the global pandemic are also beginning to emerge.³ These connections will also include the uneven global distribution of the costs of climate change.

The astonishing acceleration of a concatenation of global crises that appeared to turbo-charge global warming and its vicious side-effects leaves one with a dizzying sense of change. One has the impression of speeding away from the very recent past like a rocket pulling away from the earth as one crisis after another butts its way into centre stage. Foucault's notion of writing a "history of the present"⁴ once sounded like a daring oxymoron: now it genuinely describes the task of contemporary socio-political and cultural analysis.

Under these conditions, it's hardly surprising that the notion of the Global South is already "disappearing", if we are to believe AbdouMaliq Simone writing in 2014, and by 2019, according to him, was a thing of the past.⁵ Similarly, Peter Wagner, writing in 2018, claims that the Global South is a conceptual device which contains the signs of its "its imminent demise" at the very moment of its emergence; at best it remains a "moving target".⁶

It's all the more paradoxical, then, that my own preliminary attempts to make sense of the notion of the Global South, and to make the concept do some useful work within the fairly open-ended field of literary and cultural studies, came packaged in the monumental form of a Cambridge University Press publication, which as at least one of the contributors in the present forum was not slow to observe, is the epitome of Northern scholarly solidity. And it is all the more paradoxical that the fluidity and mobility of the concept that most of the contributors, and myself as the book editor, held up as a salutary aspect of its utility, is both acknowledged but chastised by several of the contributors. I wonder, with the benefit of two years' hindsight, whether the Global South may not indeed, be already on the way out, not because the challenges the term serves to identify and focalize have magically disappeared overnight, but because the larger framing out of which the term emerged are already changing so rapidly.

I begin in this fashion because it is the giddy fluidity of contemporary history that sanctions, I think, a work with terminology of this sort that eschews the stabilizing function of definitions and foregrounds instead the pragmatic aspect of what Wittgenstein called "ostensive" indices of terminological utility. That question then becomes the question of the concrete work that terms are made to do and the products and processes that may emerge from that work. This is not tantamount to throwing intellectual stringency out the window, but of transferring the work of definition from a policing of thought to a politics of connections and genealogies. What does a term do in the hands of those who use it? Who exactly, in fact, uses it, and in what company, and to what purposes?

I wish to thank the contributors to this forum for their responses to the volume because in remarkably varying and divergent ways they register the already shifting parameters in which intellectual work is being done at the current moment. What the various contributions do is an interesting index of the ways

in which they respond to the fluidity of the contemporary situation. Most heartening among them are Gupta's use of the volume as a springboard for a series of stimulating and imaginative conceptual assemblages that emerge along the respective lines of flight of Southern chick-lit, art, and biography; or Ghosh's riff on *sambandha* (संबन्ध, "relation"), which takes off, cheekily oblivious to the dictates of academic decorum, on its own jaunty conceptual trajectory towards a South that for many of us may still be *terra incognita*. These are signs that the volume is being productive. These contributors are making the volume make things happen.

Others, such as Sobral and Mukherjee, while registering the various valencies of the concept of the Global South, are concerned that the introduction (rather than the volume as whole) is over-simplistically dismissive of a postcolonial studies that I suggest is to be excessively focused on discursive rather than socio-economic materialities. The danger they flag up is that of neglecting the complexity and richness of such traditions of scholarship. They also focus on the performative contradiction of an editorial practice that espouses greater visibility for a wider range of Global South theorists but fails to fulfill that aspiration in its own line-up of authors. What do such readings produce? I think that this is the wrong question in fact, as the aim of such pieces rather is a different one, seeking, in the first instance, to police or monitor forms of thought that tend towards the ideological. Sobral does mention in passing, however, as part of the elided richness of postcolonial studies, an emergent attention in Switzerland, her institutional base, to a hitherto elided colonial legacy. Important as such initiatives undeniably are, they remain though within a framework beyond which Global South Studies seek to move.

My interest in the concept of the Global South is primarily motivated by its potential to increase connections between areas of knowledge and the regions and sites from which new knowledge might emerge, thereby generating further innovations in thought. Integral to this idea is the hope that thought itself will interact more strongly with areas of practice outside the university so as to enhance ongoing struggles for transformation and equity, rather than remaining in auto-referential networks of institutional self-perpetuation. These options are obviously not mutually exclusive dichotomies, but rather, necessarily reciprocally intertwined and interdependent relations of degree; but there is no questioning, I think, that the literary humanities, with occasional exceptions (teaching, creative writing, or translation studies degrees, etc.), generally tend towards the latter. I thus share Wiegandt's "surprise" when he notes that many of the volume's authors' "diagnosis is that literature and "high art", which not many years ago seemed to have become one amongst many ingredients in the cauldron of culture (and with it "literary studies" a minor part of "cultural studies") is by some authors invested with a quasi-religious, messianic force". This salvatory power is supposedly entails "the force to free the South from Eurocentric epistemes by offering Southern ones". What is missing from the equation here is an appraisal of the exact mechanism or procedure by which such epistemes

might take effect via the vehicle of literary writing. One might simply read literary discourses as reflectors of a broader range of discursive transformations, and leave it at that, in a gesture of historical contextualization. More often, a transformative potential is imputed to such counter-discourse per se, and it is here that more extensive study is called for.

Such an interrogative stance is not intended in order to discount this quite poetic and appealing strain of postcolonial discursive utopianism, but to enquire about the more tangible ways in which such transformation might take form. Who reads such texts? What do they “do” with those texts? What do the texts “do” with the readers? What forms of “literary sociality” are generated by the texts and what frames for reading does such sociality offer?⁷ What is the social “range” of such sociality, and what are its class, gender, ethnic, or species-related affiliations? What other social practices are linked to practices of reading and the imaginative work that underpins and arises from reading? What contiguous practices may link reading to social domains in which reading is not a common practice? What other cultural practices may be coeval with and linked to reading, e.g. various forms of popular culture, whether verbal (“spoken word”, poetry slams, other varieties of oral culture and tradition, to the extent that they still persist), visual, musical, performative, etc.? (The most obvious way of couching these questions of course lies at the core of our work as universities teachers: in our classrooms. Who are our students? What do they “do” with what they read? How do the texts comment on the practices and processes in the classroom itself? Where does it take them? How does it transform them, and in turn their activities outside of the university?)⁸

It is necessary to ask such questions, I believe, if one wants to avoid remaining caught in a politically correct, updated version of the text-immanent, reifying New Criticism of the 1950s and 1960s that continues to haunt much historically contextualized textual analysis nevertheless oblivious to its own immediate context of production. There is of course much to be said for the techniques of close reading, and there are many moments when great pleasure is to be had, and much to be learned about the material ecology of language by working closely with a text as a result of such reading. My concern, however, is about the extent to which such literary-critical practices can link up to other practices of social transformation, and what sorts of mediating instances must be set in place to achieve such coalitions. This, for instance, is the concern articulated in Raghav Verma’s response to the volume, a response embedded very concretely in the recent protests at JNU in New Delhi at the barrage of anti-democratic and segregationist legislation implemented by the Modi government. The savage repression elicited by those protests discretely hinted at between the lines of the piece, is an index of how seriously this conjunction of critical research and coalition politics are taken by those it opposes.

It is from this point of view that I would like to return to the two main caveats expressed by the contributors to the forum. It is years now since Eagleton wittily pointed out that the first rule for any self-respecting postcolonial studies

scholar is to trash postcolonial studies.⁹ It could be said that this call for an innovative Global South Studies merely confirms that quip. Sobral remarks very cogently that much of what the volume calls for has been practiced by the self-same postcolonial studies that Global South Studies are supposed to supersede. And Mukherjee helpfully lays out an incipient typology of various types of postcolonial thinking: diagnostic, emancipatory, planetary. Doubtless one could add numerous other labels to the trio evoked by Mukherjee: the historical-contextual, the creative-poetic, and so on. What are the valencies of each of these modes of thought? To which other practices and domains of practice, to which other geographical regions, or institutions, or groups, do they link up? If I were to take up Sobral's suggestion at looking at what "postcolonial" scholars (who may in fact be "Global South" scholars) do, the question would be less of labels than of connective or deconnective practices.

This brings me to the second main caveat raised by both Sobral and Mukherjee. They point out a "performative contradiction" between the volume's call for a much higher visibility of Global South scholarship and the paucity of contributions from scholars in the South. Only about half the crew work in the South or are affiliated with a Southern institution. Their objection is pertinent, and I regret not to have been better able to rectify the imbalance in global knowledge production that is criticized on many occasions in the volume. An explicit brief of the volume was to recruit Southern scholars working in the South where possible. This was a more difficult task than expected, and showed how entrenched these material inequities are. Some Southern scholars declined to be involved out of political conviction. But many of the scholars who were recruited for the project eventually pulled out – almost half the original cast, in fact – giving a glimpse of the difficulties of finding even minimal time for research in what are often grinding teaching loads, with gigantic cohorts of students generating huge quantities of marking, not to mention baroque bureaucracy – also exacerbated by additional external work necessitated by the simple need to make ends meet. In a tragic sense, then, the real existing Global South left its traces on the volume by virtue of the numerous colleagues who should have been on board but were finally unable to. The *ideal* of the Global South remains nonetheless an aspiration to be aimed at, in a participative future of inclusivity and interconnectivity that in very concrete and specific terms continues to be "a moving target".

Notes

- ¹ Chenery, Susan, and Ben Cheshire. 2020. "Fighting fire with fire". *ABC News online*, April 12. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-13/how-victor-steffensen-is-fighting-fire-with-fire/11866478>; Milton, Vanessa. 2020. "Indigenous fire knowledge the latest Australian export in an emerging global wildfire crisis". *ABC News online*, January 17. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-18/harnessing-australian-indigenous-fire-knowledge-worldwide/11878562>; Morrison, Joe. 2020. "How First Australians' ancient knowledge can help us survive the bushfires of the future". *The Guardian online*, January

12. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/11/how-first-australians-ancient-knowledge-can-help-us-survive-the-bushfires-of-the-future>.
- ² Furceri, Davide, Prakash Loungani, Jonanthan D. Ostry. 2020. "How Pandemics Leave the Poor Even Farther Behind". IMF Blog, May 11. <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/05/11/how-pandemics-leave-the-poor-even-farther-behind/>; Tooze, Adam. 2020. "The Coronavirus Is the Biggest Emerging Markets Crisis Ever". *Foreign Policy* online, March 28. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/28/coronavirus-biggest-emerging-markets-crisis-ever/>.
- ³ Andersen, Kristian G, Andrew Rambaut, W. Ian Lipkin, Edward C. Holmes, and Robert F. Garry. 2020. "The proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2". *Nature Medicine* 26: 450-52. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-020-0820-9> . McMahon, Jeff. 2020a. "Deforestation and Climate Change Could Unleash A Mind-Boggling Number Of Coronaviruses". *Forbes Magazine* online, April 1: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffmcmahon/2020/04/01/there-are-30000-more-coronaviruses-environmental-disasters-are-bringing-them-to-your-door/#7283ca59e85c>; McMahon, Jeff. 2020b. "How Deforestation Drives the Emergence Of Novel Coronaviruses". *Forbes Magazine* online, March 21. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffmcmahon/2020/03/21/how-deforestation-is-driving-the-emergence-of-novel-coronaviruses/#703c346c1723>; Pérez, Beatriz. 2020. "La deforestación, clave en la propagación del coronavirus". *El Periódico* online, February 15. <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/sanidad/20200215/la-destruccion-de-ecosistemas-origina-nuevos-virus-como-el-covid-19-7848963>; Tooze, Adam. 2020. "We are living through the first economic crisis of the Anthropocene". *The Guardian* online, May 7. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/07/we-are-living-through-the-first-economic-crisis-of-the-anthropocene>.
- ⁴ Foucault, Michel. 1991. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 31.
- ⁵ Simone, AbdouMaliq. 2014. *Jakarta: Drawing the City Near*. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 25–30; Simone, AbdouMaliq. 2019. *Improvised Lives*. Cambridge: Polity, 11.
- ⁶ Wagner, Peter. 2018. "Finding One's Way in Global Social Space." In *The Moral Mappings of North and South*. [Annual of European and Global Studies], edited by Peter Wagner, 1-17, here 12-13. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press,
- ⁷ See for instance, Doecke, Brenton. 2019. "Rewriting the History of Subject English through the Lens of 'Literary Sociability'". *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education* 26 (4): 339-56.
- ⁸ See for instance Coetzee, Carli. 2013. *Accented Futures: Language Activism and the Ending of Apartheid*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- ⁹ Eagleton, Terry. 1999. "In the Gaudy Supermarket". *London Review of Books* 21: 10. May 31. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v21/n10/terry-eagleton/in-the-gaudy-supermarket>.