

## **The Global Periphery, Between One World and Three: A Response to Auritro Majumder's *Insurgent Imaginations***

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The twin projects of producing an account of the history of world literature and of theorizing this object of inquiry have passed through multiple stages in the course of the past forty years. The waning and collapse of the Cold-War conceptual division of the globe into first, second and third worlds, in an era of ascendant post-structuralist theory and a rising wave of post-colonial criticism, was followed by seemingly inexorable processes of globalization at an ostensible liberal and postmodern “end of history.” This transformation in the world political scene was reflected in the changing critical resonance of studies of literature, in global extension. Prominent theoretical debates and manifestos of the 1980s, such as the polemic between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad regarding “Third-World Literature” (1986-1987) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), reflected the resonance of Marxism as a framework for critical inquiry with its continuing relevance for global political contestation up to the end of the 1980s. In the ensuing decades, however, that conjuncture gave way to highly influential novel conceptualizations of world literature, associated most closely with the works of Pascale Casanova and Franco Moretti. These latter theorists and the many who adopted their approaches built on the foundations of Marxist thought concerning global modernity – most importantly various iterations of dependency theory and Immanuel Wallerstein’s world systems theory – yet they often seemed to disavow left futurities, solidarity with past mobilizations, or the possibility of ongoing political contestation. World literature often came to appear to be a monolithic and perpetual shadow of a historically inevitable capitalist world system.

The debates of the 1980s and early 1990s had appeared to set the stage for integrative, yet differential study of interrelationship and ongoing struggles

between the literary and political regimes of the metropolitan centers of the capitalist western first world, the competing centers and networks of the second, state socialist world, and the decolonizing, post-colonial, or dependent third world, as they were then termed. We may take as emblematic Jameson's call for American academics, intellectuals, and student to emulate those of a socialist setting that "very much identifies itself with the third world," such as Cuba in the mid-1980s, whose curricula combine readings in works of the European and Cuban canon with the study of activist intellectuals such as Ho Chi Minh and António Agostinho Neto (Jameson 1986, 74-75). Yet the study of world literature in this mode, as the relations between the political and literary processes of the three worlds, remained only a nascent possibility. Scholarship of the next decades instead described a single, yet "profoundly unequal" world system (in Moretti's phrase, borrowed from Wallerstein), largely defined by binary structures of circulation, exchange, and imbalance between the western and developed core and undeveloped or developing peripheries and semi-peripheries. In the study of world literature, the socialist world appeared to vanish from the horizon of inquiry and theorization both as a political potential and as a cultural formation, as did historical relationships embracing it along with developing or peripheral sites or among the latter in their own right. Three worlds were eclipsed by a single world system.

In the study of literature and culture, among whose primary tasks is worlding itself, it is especially pertinent to recognize the heuristic nature of any reductive political or scholarly unification or division of a persistently multiply disunited, fragmented humanity. The conceptual vocabulary of "three worlds" has been with justification critiqued for its many shortcomings (its genealogical relationship to imperial and orientalist divisions of the globe, reification of global teleology and hierarchy, and facile assembly of unlike cultures and societies into ahistorical unities – summarized in Ahmad's response to Jameson, among other places). I will not rehearse these critiques in detail here. The flaws of thinking in terms of "three worlds," once recognized as such, are self-evidently reflections of the historical actualities of political divisions, struggles, and projections of power and violence during the mid-to-late twentieth century. By the same token, to abandon this vocabulary wholesale is to lose our grasp on these historical actualities. The alternative is to study and critique them, folding them back into the batter of historical inquiry. Such a step renders it possible to discern how, in parallel to the singular, yet "profoundly unequal" world literary system – a historically determined reflection of the inhuman unity of the capitalist world system – other networks, driven by distinct logics of affinity, linked together other worlding projects across twentieth-century global geography. Such a step may also make possible the recovery of something of these interlinked, alternate worlds in the present, in anticipation of a unified world of more genuine human commonality that may yet arise.

This is the brilliant accomplishment of Auritro Majumder's *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery*. Majumder's work joins a growing

wave of scholarly contributions that revise the study of world literature by reintroducing, as a foundational analytical presupposition, distinctions and affinities between diverse worlding projects along the lines of their political and structural positions in a global geography that is riven by ideological contestation and varied imperial and post-colonial trajectories. Among the most prominent works, one might mention here the late Katerina Clark's *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941*, Rossen Djagalov's *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema Between the Second and Third Worlds*, and the late Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War*. Majumder, as his title makes plain, and in distinction from Djagalov, for example, largely deploys the currently dominant terminology of a singular world, with its centers and peripheries. Yet his key term, "peripheral internationalism," gestures towards the alternate worlding projects of socialist internationalism that were associated in the later twentieth century with the erstwhile second world. Among Majumder's great feats, in this work, is his success in balancing between these vocabularies. Yet I would propose that there is a case to be made – perhaps even an urgent case – for a greater foregrounding of three, rather than one world in our present critical work. I will return to this topic at the conclusion of this short essay.

*Insurgent Imaginations* makes an equally significant intervention to those of the highly influential recent studies just mentioned. Each of those works recovers the imaginaries and interrelationships of alternative twentieth-century worlds in competition and becoming. Each of them is founded in recognition of the global pretensions of cultural projects centered on the USSR, both in terms of institutional structures – from Maksim Gorky's World Literature Publishing House, founded in 1919, to the Tashkent Film Festival, which took place from 1968-1988 – and in terms of projections of a world bound together not by capitalist empire and capitalist exchange but by anti-capitalist, anti-imperial struggle and socialist internationalist solidarity. Although each of the three works has its own distinct geographical focus and all explicitly recognize that circuits of affinity and interrelation in the twentieth century were multidimensional and multidirectional, in each case analysis is oriented predominantly towards networks centered on rival state socialist and capitalist global powers, presenting colonial and post-colonial societies and cultures as zones of conflict between competing Cold-War projects of global futurity. In these indisputably significant contributions to scholarship, the third world figures as a scene of contestation between the first and the second.

More than Clark or Djagalov, Popescu's readings and her book as a whole, even though focused on competition between Cold-War political blocs, bend towards a call to recognize the internationalist imagination and agency of the formerly colonized societies in their own right, in order to "decolonize leftist tools of analysis" and discover "more comprehensive and democratic models of world literature" that "arise from the ... Global South" (Popescu 2020, 191).

This is Majumder's project and his achievement in *Insurgent Imaginations*: a radicalization of past decades' critical search among leftist circuits for "a tradition of world literature that provincializes the 'West'" (Majumder 2021, 3). While keeping the centers of state socialist power and their projections of cultural and intellectual hegemony in view, Majumder turns attention to networks of affinity and exchange that link diverse sites and projects of the non-west together "marginalizing the center and placing the periphery in a new center" (ix). Rather than a study of reception or representation of decolonial struggles in metropolitan accounts and languages, Majumder attends to emancipatory projects on the terms and in the languages of colonial, decolonizing and dependent societies and cultures. In place of a competition between Moscow and Paris for cultural sway in French West Africa, we gain access to networks of relationship between the cultures and intellectuals of Beijing, Calcutta, and México.

The chapters of *Insurgent Imaginations* offer close analyses of these networks in their varying forms. Some episodes present accounts of intellectual and cultural exchange and affinity, as in the first chapter's account of an "impossible' dialogue" (Majumder 2021, 11) between Rabindranath Tagore's lecture on "World Literature" (1907) and Mao Zedong's Yen'an lectures on art and literature (1942), articulating commonalities in visions of the conjunction of left and national, as well as of aesthetics and politics, as seen from sites of Asian anti-imperial insurgency. Or the third chapter's presentation of the films of Mrinal Sen in relation to Brazilian *Cinema Novo*, linking Latin American and Indian sites of indigenous resistance to capitalist exploitation. Others involve the peregrinations of itinerant intellectuals, such as Majumder's investigation in his second chapter of N.M. Roy's movements across multiple sites of socialist mobilization and imagination, from New York, to México, to Tashkent, to Moscow – resembling the trajectories of many other twentieth-century figures that have recently been described as "socialist intermediaries" (Shaw and Iordachi 2023). As Majumder shows in his close reading of Roy's memoirs, such movement across global geography made it possible to knit together and correlate the conditions of struggle of African Americans, Latin Americans, Asians, and others across diverse continents and distinct logics of racial, caste, and class oppression. Still others involve innovative forms of reading against the grain, as in Majumder's fifth chapter, where he uncovers disavowed histories of Naxalite insurgency in Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger*, which superficially appears as a politically inert pathology report on capitalist ambition.

Majumder's work returns us from the quiescence and quietism of the theorizations and scholarship of previous decades to a renewed critical recognition of and engagement with ongoing global historical contestation by means of a recovery of dormant potentials of twentieth century literary and political history. His work also stages an intentional return to the theoretical discussions of the 1980s, splicing them together with more recent positions. Among Majumder's central interlocutors are the theoretical touchstones

mentioned at the start of this essay: Jameson's 1986 statement on "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," and Spivak's 1988 manifesto "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Majumder effects a masterful redeployment and updating of Jameson's central thesis, that "all third-world texts are necessarily [...] allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as [...] *national allegories*" (Jameson 1986, 69, italics in the original). Jameson's essay was legitimately called to task by Ahmad, as noted above, for its lack of a developed critique of three-worlds terminology and for other flaws. Nevertheless, in Majumder's explication, it is shown to be of enduring significance, as an invitation to analyze "third-world literature" in terms of the "determinate relation between artistic representation and historical circumstance – that is, the objective form of the national allegory" (Majumder 2021, 28).

Neither the term "national allegory" nor Jameson's application of it to third-world literature should be taken as a snub. In the post-structuralist critical circles in which Jameson moved in the 1980s, allegory was recognized as the most unsettled and sophisticated of rhetorical figures – as the most available to interrogation of the arbitrariness and historical situatedness of the chain of signifiers. Furthermore, as Majumder rightly points out, Jameson's method in those years more broadly was to read *all* literary works as allegories of position in the global political landscape of contestation and struggle: "Neither the national nor the allegorical moreover is limited to the third world" (Majumder 2021, 30). The distinction between the literary works of the liberal capitalist west and those of the post-colonial or dependent cultural context is that whereas in the former the force lines of global political struggle are obscured by the monolithic and unquestioned forms of reified metropolitan western modernity and postmodernity, in the periphery they are always and everywhere present to consciousness. This, then, is the specific gravity and potency of the literary and intellectual work of the global periphery, of non-Western societies, of indigenous cultures, for whom it is apparent to all that "culture is, in fact, a site of emancipatory contestation" (Majumder 2021, 28).

Equally startling and innovative is Majumder's explanation that Jameson's argument offers a proleptic rejoinder to the central thesis of Spivak's essay. Jameson and Spivak each conceptualize the relationships between the first and third worlds, between the first-world critic and third world literature and historical experience, via the master-bondsman dialectic of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Spivak's pessimistic account describes an unbridgeable gulf between the subaltern subject and emancipatory political articulation – the province of intellectuals who are always infected by metropolitan pretensions to power. The subaltern postcolonial subject, in the grips of the epistemic violence of an alien metropolitan modernity, is always "irretrievably heterogeneous," cast in the position of bondsman even when – or precisely when – the "elite" or the "first-world intellectual" seeks to lead them to emancipation (Spivak 1988, 284).

Jameson, in a more explicit reading of Hegel that is indebted to Lukács and (one may surmise) Kojève, may be taken as offering a dialectical counterpoint to Spivak. Here, the bondsman, forced to labor, gains a consciousness of the world that is denied to the master: “in the end, only the slave knows what reality and the resistance of matter really are; only the slave can attain some true materialistic consciousness of his situation, since it is precisely to that that he is condemned.” *Pace* Spivak, it is the first world intellectual who is unable to speak. He (*sic*) is condemned:

[...] to the luxury of a placeless freedom in which any consciousness of his own concrete situation flees like a dream, like a word unremembered on the tip of the tongue, a nagging doubt which the puzzled mind is unable to formulate. [...] The view from the top is epistemologically crippling, and reduces its subjects to the illusions of a host of fragmented subjectivities, to the poverty of the individual experience of isolated monads, to dying individual bodies without collective pasts or futures bereft of any possibility of grasping the social totality. (Jameson 1986, 85)

In effect, from the vantage offered by Jameson, we may read Spivak’s portrait of the silent subaltern itself allegorically: not as a representation of the irretrievable heterogeneity of the subaltern subject, but rather as an allegory of the first-world intellectual who is powerless to speak for her – or for anyone else.

Yet further, as Majumder argues, despite the architectural centrality of this concluding passage in Jameson’s essay, the relationship of third-world subjectivity to that of the first world is not, in fact, the crux of the matter. For the general tenor of Jameson’s essay turns us in a different direction, moving “beyond the liberal cosmopolitan politics of representation (to let the subaltern speak, so to say, the very opposite of Spivak’s thesis)” and linking “the role of the intellectual to the very different terrain of socialist politics” (Majumder 2021, 33). In effect, Majumder reads Jameson as a call to see the third world not, or not only, as the periphery of the first, but also as belonging to the second, socialist world.

I write that the third world “belongs” to the second, socialist world, rather than that it is located in its “periphery,” advisedly. For this brings us back to the terminological debates with which I began, concerning the distinct implications of a description of twentieth-century history in terms of one world or three. As noted above, literary history inherited the term “periphery” from world systems theory, a totalizing account of modern global capitalist economic relations. In the present, decades after the collapse of Eurasian state socialism and following the now completed reinvention of the PRC as the world’s most potent authoritarian capitalist state, it may appear self-evident that any society or cultural position may be allegorically mapped against the all-embracing structures of the singular world of global capitalism. Yet twentieth-century socialisms imagined and sought to bring into being different worlds than the one we currently inhabit. Indeed, Majumder’s book is a testament to the efforts of intellectuals such as Tagore, Roy, Devi and others to world these alternatives.

If one were to describe the positionality of these figures, as brilliantly explicated by Majumder, in terms of three worlds rather than of one, where would they be placed? One might propose that they are located in the peripheries of both first and second worlds. Yet the economic resonance of the term “periphery” must give pause: in its global projections, the second, state socialist world was never able to compete in terms of economic relations with the first, capitalist world. Socialist worlds are held together by other forms of value, those of political affinity and cultural exchange. Despite the economic determinism of the leaders of the second world, central figures of Majumder’s account such as Tagore and even, one might propose, the Mao of the Yenan lectures, operated according to a more flexible conception of the dialectical relationships between theory and praxis, cultural and economic life, according to which the work of the intellectual could become a fulcrum in the movements of history (and we may note, in passing, that Wallerstein himself adopted a related stance).

Perhaps more to the point, Majumder’s analysis presents the labors of third-world intellectuals to claim agency not only with respect to the liberal-cosmopolitan first world, but also in relation to the metropolitan centers of the second world. Majumder describes this as their work to place “the periphery in a new center.” Yet we could instead see it as claiming the agency of third world socialism as a world in its own right, and as the only location from which emancipatory global politics can ultimately be enunciated. As Majumder has shown, the urgent task of the historian of the global twentieth century is to recover these alternate worlding projects not just as historical curiosities and naïve fantasies of the “era of three worlds,” but to allow them to echo forward in a still ongoing contest of alternate worlds yet to be realized.

To inflect Majumder’s account in this way is to bring to the fore other possible angles of analysis. His book offers an account of key moments when third-world intellectuals spoke back to second world authorities – such as M.N. Roy’s polemical position in relation to Lenin in the debates of the second congress of the Comintern in 1920 regarding Marxist revolution, colonial empire, and national resistance (Majumder 2021, 62-63) – which Majumder situates in the company of other influential third-world rejoinders to second-world socialism such as those of Mirsaid Sultan Galiev, Aimé Césaire, and José Carlos Mariátegui. One might propose that a more fully structured theoretical account of relationships of both collaboration and resistance between third and second world actors and political and cultural formations, equal in scope and subtlety to Majumder’s account of the relationships between the third and first worlds, could further advance comprehension of Majumder’s peripheral internationalists and of their works and worlds. How, one might ask, may we describe the distinction of the national allegory in a second-world socialist realist novel – in works by Furmanov or Polevoy – in comparison to its role in novels of the third world, and how does this distinction illuminate the power relations that structured Soviet and eventually also Chinese cultural and political exchange with third-world socialist movements and actors?

*Insurgent Imaginations*, this is to say, brings us to face new, as yet unanswered questions about the dual insurgency of the colonial, post-colonial, and dependent world in the face of hegemonies of both Washington and Moscow. In no way should this suggestion be taken, however, as a critique of *Insurgent Imaginations*. Instead, my own are just some of the proposals for further work prompted by this volume, as always ensues with exposure to brilliant scholarship. Majumder's work is truly significant, excellent, and generative contribution to world, worlds, and worlding.

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