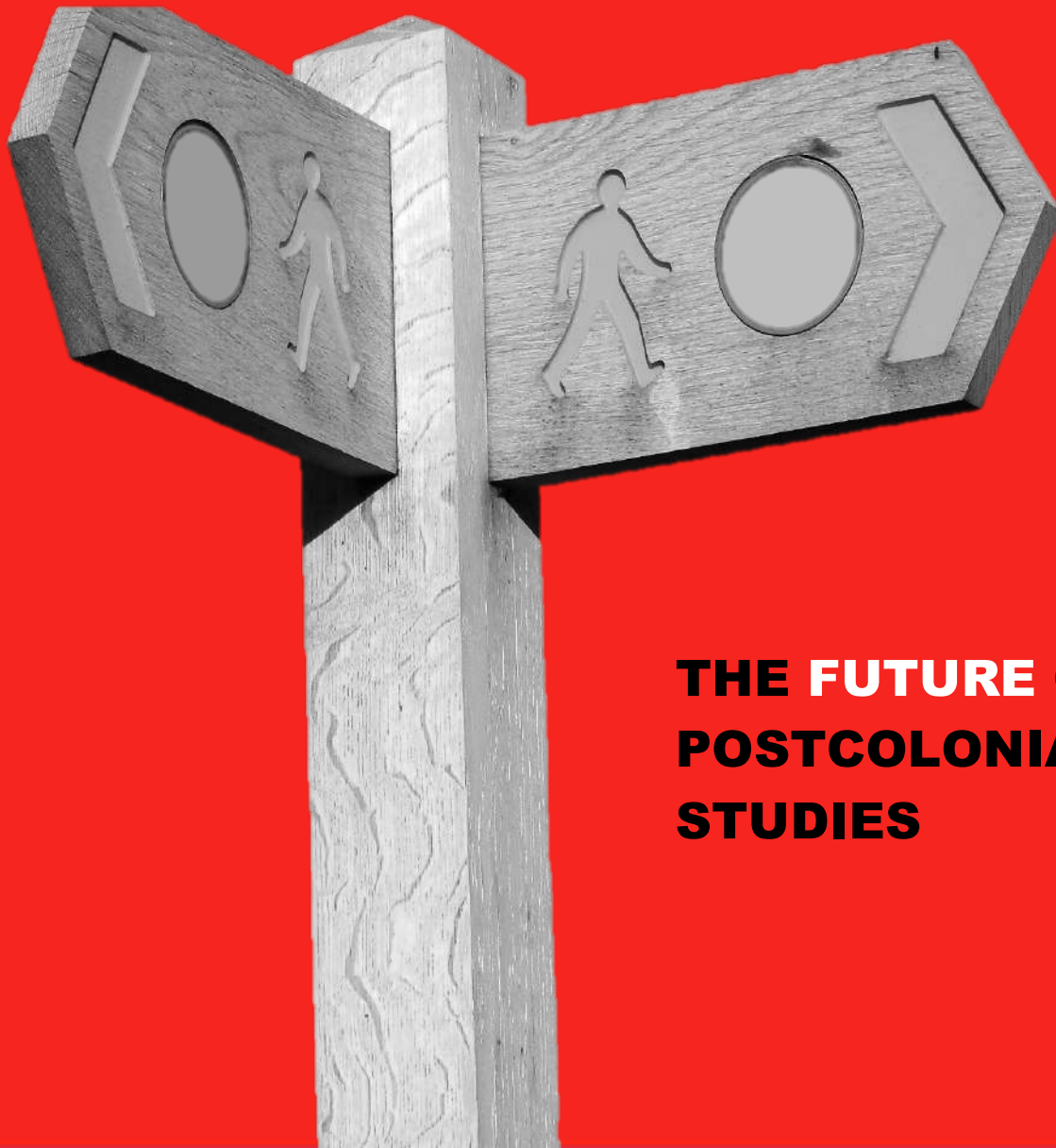


#19

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committee



THE FUTURE OF POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

A special issue of the
Postcolonial Studies Association newsletter
• Summer 2017

#19

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editors' introduction

Welcome to **Issue #19, Summer 2017**, of the **Postcolonial Studies Association Newsletter**. This special issue on 'The Future of Postcolonial Studies' was inspired by a panel discussion the PSA organised at the recent 'English: Shared Futures' Conference (Newcastle, 5-7 July 2017) on the past, present and future of the field. In response to the challenges that our increasingly globalised world continues to throw up, postcolonial studies, as both a sub-disciplinary practice and critical lens that moves across disciplinary boundaries, must think about the way in which its contested past and vibrant present can be drawn on to look forward toward its imperative future. The panel discussion asked (and sought to answer) broad but crucial questions, such as: what has postcolonial studies achieved? Where has postcolonial studies failed? And what should postcolonial studies look like in the future?

Such questions have been addressed in a number of recent publications, including Chantal Zabus's *The Future of Postcolonial Studies* (2014) and Anna Bernard, Ziad Elmarsafy and Stuart Murray's *What Postcolonial Theory Doesn't Say* (2016), both of which are reviewed in this issue. But there is still much to discuss. With this newsletter, we hope to open up a broader conversation among the membership about the directions in which we believe the field should be going.

We start off the issue with an introduction by **Nicola Abram**, organiser of the panel in Newcastle. This is then followed by the papers presented by our two panel speakers. **Shital Pravinchandra** begins with a reflection on the field's present, arguing that while many hitherto neglected areas have been attended to, postcolonial studies still has blind spots when it comes to generic diversity and non-Western languages. **Chantal Zabus** then opens up the conversation further to point to some of the varied directions that the field is (or should be) thinking about addressing in the future, in particular issues such as endangered languages, fundamentalism and Islam, gender diversity, and biodiversity. We are also lucky to have an interview (conducted by **Dominic Davies**) with one of the PSA's founding members, **Elleke Boehmer**, about her views on the future of the field.

As mentioned above, and in keeping with the issue's theme, we have reviews of the books *What Postcolonial Theory Doesn't Say* and *The Future of Postcolonial Studies*, conducted by **James Williams** and **Dominic Davies**, respectively. **Emma Parker** then reviews Stuart Hall's posthumously published memoir *Familiar Stranger* (2017), reminding us that in order to look to the future, we need to also look back at the thinkers that played such important roles in the shaping of the field. Many thanks to all our contributors for sharing their work with us.

In PSA news, we are excited to introduce your **new Executive Committee**, who have taken up their posts this August and will serve until 2020. We are also pleased to announce the **winners of the 2017 PSA/JPW Essay Prize**, who will be presented with their awards at the **upcoming PSA Convention**, 18-20 September at the School of Advanced Study, University of London. We look forward to seeing many of you there.

Finally, this will be our last issue as Newsletter Editors. We would like to sincerely thank our readers and, in particular, all those who have contributed their work over the last three years to make this such a lively space for postcolonial debate. It has been a pleasure working with all of you. We now leave the newsletter in the capable hands of the new editors, **Isabelle Hesse** and **Edward Powell** and wish them all the best as they develop the newsletter further.

Lucinda Newns and Dominic Davies

Lucinda Newns (Design) and **Dominic Davies** (Editorial) are the editors of the Postcolonial Studies Association biannual newsletter. Lucinda teaches Postcolonial and World Literatures at Queen Mary University of London. Her current research focuses on representations of domesticity and the everyday in contemporary diasporic fiction. Dominic is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Oxford currently researching the way urban infrastructures in post/colonial cities are represented by comics and graphic novels.

PSA Panel: The Past, Present and Future of Postcolonial Studies Organised by Nicola Abram

Organised by The English Association, University English and the National Association of Writers in Education, with support from the Institute of English Studies and the Higher Education Academy, the 'English: Shared Futures' conference (Newcastle, UK, 5-7 July 2017) promised to gather people working across the subjects of literature, language and creative writing to reflect on our present and plan for our future.

As a valued subject association within the English studies 'ecosystem', the PSA was invited to contribute to the conference. The variable typographic titling of our field – postcolonial, post-colonial, (post)colonial, post/colonial – reveals a hesitation about naming the relationship between the present and the imperial 'past', and suggests some uncertainty about the kinds of futures our scholarship should or could imagine. As Vice Chair I took on the task of curating a panel session to explore these issues.

My own research in the cultural production of the African diaspora has acquainted me with the principle of 'Sankofa': a proverb of the Akan people of Ghana, imaged by a bird looking backwards whilst holding an egg in her beak. If the egg represents the promise of the future, the backwards gaze of the bird advises us to look back and gather what has been forgotten in order that we might productively move forwards. Heeding this wisdom, the panel began by turning its attention to the past.

Dr Chris Warnes (University of Cambridge), the inaugural Chair of the PSA (2008-2011), was invited to begin. Although he was unfortunately unable to attend the event, his intention was to recall the historical and current affinities between the 'post' in postcolonial and the 'anti' in anticolonial. Chris

wrote: 'Through a re-consideration of the juncture at which one pronounced strand of postcolonial theory severed its ties with Marxism, I aim to critique the idealist turn in postcolonial studies and to situate it in relation to the institutionalisation of the field.'

Dr Shital Pravinchandra (Queen Mary, University of London) was tasked to look to the present state of the discipline. Shital asked: 'Given the growing popularity of world literature and world Anglophone literature, what is the role of postcolonial studies today?' Her presentation argued for the importance of comparative scholarship, suggesting that the study of languages and literatures from beyond Europe opens up urgent thematic and aesthetic questions.

Finally, Professor Chantal Zabus (Université Paris XIII - Sorbonne Paris Cité) offered a comment on the future of the field, taking into account the increasing fluidity between the humanities and social sciences. Editor of *The Future of Postcolonial Studies* (Routledge, 2014), Chantal showed how postcolonial studies



'continues to interrogate new forms of colonial discourse and open new vistas – including postcolonial Islam, endangered languages, and new forms of activism'.

Discussion was chaired by Dr Lucinda Newns, and proved lively. Comments and questions from the audience covered the challenges posed by institutional and disciplinary structures to the teaching of postcolonial texts; conflicts of methodology; attention to generic and formal diversity; gender and sexuality, and concomitant experiments in language; and the retrospective writing of

history. It also turned our attention to another naming of the present, as the 'post-postcolonial'. As this panel, the subsequent discussion, and the contributions to this issue of the PSA newsletter show, postcolonial studies is characterised by disciplinary diversity, global consciousness, and the generosity of colleagues – and energetic debate will surely continue.

Nicola Abram is a Lecturer in the Department of English Literature at the University of Reading. She was Vice-Chair of the Postcolonial Studies Association from 2014-2017.

The Present of Postcolonial Studies

Shital Pravinchandra

Postcolonial studies has always been very prone to self-examination. The history of the field includes many a debate about its nomenclature, its purview and the privileged background of most postcolonial intellectuals in the Anglo-American academy. In the 21st century, that self-examination has been prompted by a sense of 'crisis,' as multiple challenges have called into question the field's relevance to contemporary patterns of domination and inequality.

In 2000, Hardt and Negri argued that postcolonial studies was flawed and limited, suited to provide revisionary accounts of history, but ill-equipped to explain the problems brought forth by Empire and globalization. In 2007, an MLA round-table inauspiciously titled 'The End of Postcolonial Theory?' saw Simon Gikandi note, not for the first time in the field's history, that postcolonial theory had very little to offer those who were not working in English literary studies and/or in European languages. And in 2009, Dipesh Chakrabarty suggested that postcolonial theory had little to contribute to the challenge posed by climate change.

Today, the field has become truly re-energised by taking on these multiple challenges. Scholarship on the representation of Islam and Muslims in the wake of 9/11 responds to Hardt and Negri's critique by making connections between colonialism and neo-imperialism, and unsettling the easy oppositions of religion and secularism, of terrorism and civilisation. Similarly, postcolonial refugee studies reveals that the nation-state and its borders continue to assert their restrictive presence, even as parallel

globalising forces encourage the free flow of goods, services and capital.

Postcolonial ecocriticism, perhaps the most interdisciplinary of the new subfields in twenty-first century postcolonial studies, wrestles with the challenges issued by Chakrabarty: yes, climate change is a threat to us all, but the global poor are infinitely more vulnerable to its effects.

Gikandi's critique, however, remains largely unaddressed by postcolonial scholars. It has fallen, instead, to the framework of world literature to address the fact that Anglo-American literature departments rarely read works in non-European languages. The first decade of the twenty-first century was also the decade in which proponents of world literature made a considerable impact on literary studies.¹ And although world literature scholars rarely refer explicitly to postcolonial studies, for many adherents, the appeal of their approach resides largely in its ability to overcome some of the important shortcomings of postcolonial studies: as its name indicates, world literature is not geographically restricted to formerly colonised societies, and it overtly welcomes literatures from all the world's languages (often in translation).

In my view, this is the development in our field's present that should most concern us. As many scholars have observed, the most worrying aspect of world literature's encroachment on the field of postcolonial studies is that it pays little attention to politics.² Organised around the history and fallout of colonialism, postcolonial studies, on the other hand, is necessarily political.

This is not the context in which to offer an exhaustive list of the reasons why world literature is not an adequate paradigm with which to replace postcolonial studies, but I do want to signpost two of my further misgivings. First, world literature continues to reproduce many of the blindspots of postcolonial studies, especially with regards to *genre*. The novel, poetry, and to some extent, drama, remain the genres of choice, while genre fiction, nonfiction and short fiction receive relatively little, if any, attention. Secondly, with its emphasis on circulation (and its implicit reliance on books being translated so that they can circulate at all), world literature creates a skewed yardstick for establishing what falls within its purview: if the measure of a text's worldliness is its ability to move beyond its national-cultural origins, this effectively obscures large bodies of work written in non-European languages and which remain untranslated or fail to circulate even when translated, typically because there is no overseas market for them. Such works are implicitly construed as 'parochial' by world literature, and, more ruefully, perhaps, as 'inaccessible' by postcolonial studies. But both approaches ultimately leave such bodies of literature to so-called 'area studies' specialists.

This brings me to what I consider to be the most promising work in the field of postcolonial studies, today. Broadly speaking, it is work that broaches all three fields—area studies, postcolonial studies and world literature—in productive and exciting ways. Toral Gajarawala's *Untouchable Fictions* (2013), for instance, looks at the Hindi-language writing of North Indian Dalits and is attentive to genre (she examines Dalits' predilection for short fiction and autobiography, for instance) and to the way caste is represented very differently in this vernacular literature than it is in the Anglophone writing of, say, Arundhati Roy or Arvind Adiga. And Rashmi Sadhana's work *English Heart, Hindi Heartland* (2012) looks at the politics of language and translation in North India in a discussion that is far more enriching than what is allowed by the now familiar debates regarding English's so-called 'authenticity' and Anglophone fiction's greater marketability.

It is hardly a coincidence, in my view, that such work is actively comparative. The present of the field shows that its most exciting future lies in comparative work, which by virtue of its European language *and* vernacular literary corpus carves out a space in which to address what neither postcolonial studies nor world literature are able to: that is, work in languages and genres that do not necessarily circulate, and

work which has very different (and challenging) visions about what kind of space the postcolony is.

Notes

1. I have in mind Franco Moretti's 'Conjectures on World Literature' (2000), David Damrosch's, *What is World Literature?* (2003) and Pascale Casanova's, *The World Republic of Letters* (1999, English translation in 2004).
2. See, for instance, Gayatri Spivak's conversation with David Damrosch, printed in *Comparative Literature Studies* 48 (4), 2011; and Bruce Robbins's 'The Uses of World Literature' in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, Theo D'haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kedir (eds.), London: Routledge (2011).

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Shital Pravinchadra is Lecturer Comparative Literature at Queen Mary University of London. She is interested in the relevance of postcolonial studies today, and whether it has been supplanted by other approaches, such as ecocriticism, world literature or globalization studies. Her current book project is entitled 'Same Difference: Postcolonial Studies in the Age of Life Science'.

The Future of Postcolonial Studies

Chantal Zabus

The Future of Postcolonial Studies, which I edited in 2014 and that was published a year later, celebrated the twenty-fifth Anniversary of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin through what I described as the 'The Five Faces of Intersectionality': 'comparing'; 'converting'; 'greening'; 'queering'; and 'utopia.' In these brief reflections, I wish now to outline four larger areas for future scrutiny:

English and Endangered Languages

The world currently counts 184 independent nations and hosts more than 5,000 race or ethnic groups, as well as over 12,000 diverse cultures. There are an estimated 7,000 different languages spoken around the world, 90 per cent of them used by less than 100,000 people. Most of these independent nation-states and languages have had their history shaped by colonialism. We must therefore continue looking at the effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism in postcolonial texts written not only in English, but in other languages in a world where the notion of 'one language, one nation' no longer obtains.

I will provide an African example. The postcolonial has availed itself of drastic linguistic biases with the result that Anglophone or Francophone literatures are still quantitatively more studied than literature written in the 2000 or so African indigenous languages. Given such polyglossia, we should therefore further examine literature in non-European languages; in creoles and pidgins; in indigenized Englishes, and in 'minorized' (rather than 'minor') languages outside of 'Global English'. After all, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who has been writing in Kikuyu after 'saying farewell to English' and subsequently turning to world literatures and 'Globelectics', is being considered as a candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature; meanwhile, Le Clézio, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2008, is being translated into Wolof, while Chinua Achebe's Igbo-inflected *Things Fall Apart* has now been translated into Yoruba.

The same redress applies to any place where languages are 'minorized' to the point of being 'endangered'. For instance, of the 187 languages still spoken in the United States and Canada today, 149 of the remaining North American languages and all of Californian Indian tongues – that is, 80% of them – will become

extinct with this generation. It is therefore imperative to retrieve these 'dying' languages embedded in narratives in dominant languages through what I have called elsewhere the ethno-text or ethnotextualities.

Fundamentalisms and Postcolonial Islam

The very concept of 'nation', and its corollary, nationalism, which once had been deemed a redemptive project for the colonized subject, has been on trial. The nation-state, which derives its legitimacy from European ideas of popular sovereignty, territorial autonomy and cultural homogeneity, is now threatened by alternative constructs such as the new cosmopolitanism or the 'transnation'. But resurgent religions have a greater worldwide popular appeal and capability for mass mobilization than its nationalist counterparts.

Religious revival stretches from the rise of Evangelical Protestantism in North America and Africa, radical Hinduist teachings in South-East Asia, and Orthodox Judaism in Israel to the reinvigoration of Islam in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia and among immigrant populations in Western Europe. Postcolonialism has been notoriously reluctant to engage with religion, which reflects its privileging of a secular, Euro-American stance, even though it was almost coerced into engaging with Islam with the 1998 publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. The idea of an 'Islamic postcolonialism' has since been put forward, which disambiguates Islam from jihadism, while we reconsider the much-criticized understanding of nationalism as a distinctively secular phenomenon.

Swathes of the Muslim populace have been demonized as a result of the global visibility of fundamentalist versions of Islam and various calls to replace the nation-state by a pan-Islamic caliphate. These Muslims have now joined the new huddled masses of asylum seekers, climate refugees and illegal immigrants. Hence 'migrant Islam' finds its roots in the event of migration as well as the proliferation of the sacred. Post 9/11 narratives should continue to engage us, a decade and a half later, just as post-Nakba narratives after 1948 should also continue to pertain.

Meanwhile, new forms of neo-colonial or neo-capitalistic violence ensure that formerly colonized countries are kept in check and have

fostered the mass migration of persons fleeing from persecution on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, and gender but also from famine, genocide, civil war, and 'natural' disasters. Refugeeism, especially after Brexit and Trump, raises the issue of refugees' access to citizenship and calls for accounts by refugees and asylum seekers in search of sanctuary through qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and oral history. This is where an intra-action between the Humanities and the Social Sciences can best serve the postcolonial.

Gender Diversity

If women can be considered on a par with colonized subjects and other 'inferior' Others, and therefore liable to 'write back' to the 'double yoke' of patriarchy and (neo-)colonialism, it follows that gender and sexual minorities are also entitled to 'write back' to the regime of 'the normal'. This 'writing back' gesture is vested with a political import in countries where homosexuality is vociferously criminalized. Eighty-six United Nation member countries currently have laws against same-sex relations; some thirty-seven African countries, along with Middle Eastern countries, constitute a majority of those. Consider the anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda and the Kill the Gays Bill in Nigeria in 2014. Some thinkers have pitted the 'Gay International' against 'the Arab World' and politicized both African indigenous and Islamic same-sex desire as a form of resistance to 'Westoxification'. In the first decade of this century, African states' responses to the internationalization of Western LGBTQIA+ identity politics triggered off research on same-sex practices. Not all African men or women who have same-sex sex think of themselves as gay or homosexual or bisexual or queer. They are seldom members of activist LGBT organizations and are not computed in the sexual health literature on HIV/AIDS. Also, in Africa, Asia, Latin America and elsewhere, there is a tension between homosexual identity and homosexual practice. We need to imagine a post-queer space and find a critical compromise between Western understandings of sexual identity and non-identitarian politics in postcolonial societies.

There has been a shift from the fixity of gender to transgender as well as a move away from the nation as the dominant form of social organization and of nationalism as a principal source of state legitimacy to embrace more fluid

concepts of the nation-state. This shift has impacted on the conventional gendering of the nation as male. Efforts to 'en-gender the nation' as female find a necessary complement in 'transgendering' the nation, as the TG or TS individual acts as a Litmus test for the nation in flux.

Biodiversity

Ecocriticism has moved beyond the paradigm of Deep Ecology, with its suspected misanthropy, and has cross-pollinated with postcolonialism to encompass environmental justice. The need is now urgent to mediate between the competing claims of wilderness ecosystems, animals (the more-than-human world), and humans in a human-dominated world. Even though works of the 2010s have introduced a postcolonial brand of ecocriticism, huge chunks of geopolitical territory such as 'the Arab world' have been left out of the picture. The same neglect regarding the circumpolar Arctic, which connects Asia, North America and Europe and therefore 'provincializes' the imperial centres of the Northern hemisphere, has only partly been remedied.

This utopian script of transformation finds a dystopian corollary in the newly charted 'aerial empire', which strikes back. Through new US military forms of electronic data control, an asymmetric collusion of two forms of planetary conflict – the technological and the biological – has joined such disparate phenomena as extreme weather, drone-war, and even satellitic forms of connectivity between war machines and the human brain. War in the aerial empire, which is now both *macro*-cosmic (outer-spatial, climate-based, atmospheric) and *micro*-cosmic (inter-spatial, neurological, cybernetic), is forcing scholars and strategists alike to rethink the boundaries of what it means to be a human being.

As the world is entering a non-anthropocentric phase of unprecedented planetary violence, it is the task of postcolonial studies to continue to examine the effects of post-human colonialism so as to ensure that, in keeping with the movement of 'afterness' in modern aesthetics, the 'post' is indeed 'after' the past.

Chantal Zabus is Professor of Comparative and Postcolonial Studies at the Université Paris 13, France, the author of a number of monographs relating to postcolonial studies, and the editor of *The Future of Postcolonial Studies* (2015).

The Future of Postcolonial Studies: An interview with Elleke Boehmer Conducted by Dominic Davies

Elleke Boehmer is Professor of World Literatures in English at the University of Oxford and author of numerous articles and several books that have been important for—indeed, have helped to define—the field of postcolonial studies, including Colonial & Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors (1995), Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890-1920: Resistance in Interaction (2002), and Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation (2005). Her new book, Postcolonial Poetics, will be coming out next year.

Dominic Davies: Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me today Elleke. You and I did an interview for the 'Postcolonialism and Feminism' special issue of the PSA Newsletter back in 2015, so you will know that we take a special topic for each alternate issue.

Inspired by Chantal Zabus' 2014 collection, *The Future of Postcolonial Studies*, members of the PSA, along with Chantal herself and other postcolonialists, participated in a roundtable discussion at the 'English: Share Futures' Conference in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in July of this year on the same theme, and some transcripts of which are included in this issue.

It seems that this question about the future of postcolonial studies is really resonating with scholars at the moment, and so we decided to theme this summer issue of the newsletter around the question as well.

Elleke Boehmer: Yes, there have been other related developments, too. There was the 'What Postcolonial Theory Doesn't Say' conference at the University of York in 2010, and which has led to the collection with the same title edited by Anna Bernard, Ziad Elmarsafy and Stuart Murray. And then there was also the 'Peripheral Postcolonialities: Postcolonial Studies and World-Systems' Workshop at the University of Warwick just this past June. They all raise this question of how we should confront the postcolonial future, especially in the light of adjacent but countervailing theories such as

world literature, or 'world-literature', that seem to be gaining in prominence.

A number of postcolonial critics are going through what we might call throat-clearing manoeuvres at conferences and in classes at the moment, to acknowledge their awareness of world literature or world-literature, with the hyphen, but I feel this sometimes takes place at the expense of postcolonial discussion. So on one level the future of postcolonial studies feels quite bothered, or perhaps side lined at the moment, suspended, more so than before perhaps. It's previously taken inspiration and pedagogic strength from the many productive negotiations and reevaluations that it has been through, but it does seem very threatened at the moment.

DD: Do you think that this preoccupation with the future of postcolonial studies is then basically a response to the institutionalisation of world literature, with or without a hyphen?

EB: Interestingly, even the most vocally self-identifying postcolonialists now have on their bookshelves—or feel they should have—all of the classics of world literary criticism, from Cassanova and Damrosch through to Apter and Moretti. One of the reasons that I think some postcolonialists have moved over to world-literature in recent years is because of geopolitical events; we are now working in the time of Trump, of Modi, of Theresa May, and of fully-fledged globalisation. There may be the sense that world literature or world-literature discourse is more relevant, and is more able to speak to, world politics today, given that postcolonial literature and theory tends to have been associated with the independence movements of the 1960s.

DD: Perhaps understanding this reinvigorated idea of 'world-literature' as perhaps in part a response to our post-2008 financial crash world, and the chaos that that has unleashed, is comparable with the rise of postcolonial studies in the academy at the time of Reagan and Thatcher's neoliberal restructuring efforts?