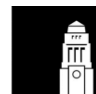

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RE-EVALUATING THE POSTCOLONIAL EXOTIC

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Introduction

It's now almost twenty years since the publication of *The Postcolonial Exotic*, my 2001 study of the clash between *postcolonialism*, which I originally connected to the implicitly or explicitly anti-colonial sentiments of postcolonial literature, and what I called *postcoloniality*, the suspiciously neo-colonial uses to which these are often put. My suggestion back then was that these uses stretch from the late twentieth-century metropolitan rage for "Indo-chic" (a term for its time if ever there was one)[1] to the glamour associated with so-called "multicultural writing" (another painfully anachronistic label, now happily consigned to the past). Put together, I went on to suggest, these uses point to the exotic appeal attached to a booming "alterity industry" (Suleri 1992) in which the perceived otherness of postcolonial writers/writing is commercially exploited as a package of attractive cultural commodities circulating within a global marketplace of culturally "othered" goods.

Twenty years is a long time in academic publishing, and it might well be asked why I haven't just laid the book and its not-so-topical topic to rest. However, since the book was first published, I've been asked several times to expand upon it, while the "alterity industry", still alive and well, has attracted some excellent follow-up work in the shape of the sociology of postcolonial literature and the colonial history of the book (Brouillette 2011, 2014; Fraser 2007; Koegler 2018; Orsini 2013; Squires 2009). There have been a few fleeting attempts on my part to update things, too (Huggan 2010, 2012), but generally I've been reluctant to do so. There are several good reasons for this. The first reason is that like many postcolonial scholars, I

suspect, I tend to move on quite quickly from one subject to another. In that sense, I've always been a victim of my own impatience – to the detriment of the field, no doubt, which if it is to shake off the perennial criticism of being faddish requires painstaking scholarly work. The second reason, as I stated explicitly in the book when it first came out, is that I saw my work as opening up a field of inquiry – broadly speaking, the sociology of postcolonial literary production – that would then require the kinds of quantitative analysis and empirical endeavour for which I never saw myself as being cut out. Aided by what's sometimes seen as a new "quantitative turn" (Hoover 2013), this field is now flourishing, with a number of works taking much more care than mine to address what remains one of the key issues in postcolonial studies, namely the relationship between postcolonial books and their readers, who are both more widely dispersed and more socially and culturally differentiated than has often been supposed (Benwell, Procter and Robinson 2012; Newell 2006).

The Postcolonial Exotic attracted critique, and rightly so, for just this reason: for assuming the figure, however rhetorically self-conscious, of a general, usually English-speaking western reader, to whom works of postcolonial literature were implicitly if not explicitly addressed (Brouillette 2011; Innes 2007). In my own defence, what I also said back then was that "postcolonial literatures […] are read by many different people in many different places; [and] it would [therefore] be misleading, not to mention arrogant, to gauge their value only to western metropolitan response" (Huggan 2001: 30) Notwithstanding, the charges largely stuck, with the "exotic" often being seen as a codeword for what Asma Azgenay (2017) has recently called the "Manichean drama of postcolonial exoticism", whereby exoticism becomes a default mode for speaking about colonial/postcolonial otherness, from either the position of the sovereign western subject or the reversed perspective of the "non-

west". Azgenay aims in her work to deconstruct this binary, attributing it to centuries of self-aggrandizing western theory about "non-western" societies and cultures. This theorizing she separates, creating binaries in her turn, into essentialist and relativistic categories, each of which she abandons in favour of a form of radical alterity in which otherness is inassimilable to either idealist constructions of the self (as sovereign subject) or materialist constructions of the other (as cultural commodity) – linked constructions she sees as laying the foundations for postcolonial cultural encounter and exchange.

This familiar tendency to use postcolonialism as a straw category can also be seen in the latest version of exoticism to find favour within the Euro-American academy: "auto-exoticism". Auto-exoticism, as I understand it, takes issue with those by now orthodox approaches to the exotic that are assimilated to the "postcolonial critique of cultural and epistemological imperialism", thereby reducing exoticism to a blunt instrument of imperial and colonial power (Li 2017: 392). "A more fluid and relational approach to the exotic is needed" (2017: 392), theorists of auto-exoticism insist, which is fair enough except for the fact that their arguments seem often to be based on a simplistic understanding of earlier conceptions of the colonial exotic, which assumes (in Xiaofan Amy Li's words) that: "exoticism always involves a dichotomy between self and other; that exoticization and translation necessarily depend on notions of cultural authenticity and textual originality; that interculturality is something that happens *between* cultures, thereby disregarding how it is inherent *within* a perceived cultural identity; or that there are multiple cultures (often with distinct differences) to exoticize about but not multiple *natures*", as has recently come to attention by way of the "ontological turn" in anthropology and other disciplines (2017: 394; see also Holbraad and Pedersen 2017).

Enter auto-exoticism, which Li and others define in terms of what happens when the exotic becomes an imagining of the *self* rather than of the *other*, allowing for such empowering and/or subversive acts as *indigenous self-fashioning*, which involves a reclaiming of exoticist discourses from the original cultures from which they sprang; *pseudo-identity*, which involves various “foreignizing [*sic*] techniques and effects [that] can [potentially] lead to a mutual transformation of the original (the familiar) and the translated or derived (the exotic)” (2017: 395); and the empowering creation of “*autoexoticist spaces* […] that allow different literatures and cultures to interact and rupture the boundaries of cultural identity” (2017: 395; emphasis mine). Postcolonial theorists will be immediately aware that these very techniques have long been part of the arsenal of postcolonial literature and criticism; more frustrating still is that they are also part of the arsenal of the first-wave postcolonial practitioners (Edward Said especially) that the “new”, paradigm-shifting auto-exoticist critics are eager to reject. This frustration at the persistent misrepresentation and pigeonholing of postcolonial critics is the third and probably greatest reason behind my reluctance to reconsider *The Postcolonial Exotic*, which also deploys and critically examines many of the techniques that Li mentions above. It’s also disappointing to hear from an otherwise well-informed critic like Azgeyan that: “Despite the presence of a whole spate of studies on ‘exoticism’ and the ‘exotic’, there is to my knowledge no existing critical study of the articulations of exoticism on colonial/postcolonial culture, history and subjectivity” (2017: n.p.) – which is manifestly unfair to some of critics she references, as well as some of the critics she does not.

Perhaps, in this last sense, it is mere pique that has prompted me to revisit my earlier work, but the need certainly exists to update it. In what follows, I want to look at three areas within which current ideas about the colonial and postcolonial exotic

percolate. The first of these is *social media*. Postcolonial critics, by and large, have been slow to respond to the huge social and cultural changes that have been produced worldwide by the introduction and proliferation of new technologies. This sluggishness can be explained in part by the residual conservatism of the western humanities departments that still house the majority of these critics, though there have been encouraging signs for a while now that postcolonial practitioners are foraging across the disciplines in search of a more holistic, up-to-the-minute approach (Huggan 2009; Gohrisch and Grünkemeier 2013). This makes them more favourably disposed to addressing *popular* aspects of cultural production, including the myriad forms of creative and critical writing to be found on the internet, which has arguably transformed the way many readers *think* about literature and the literary, as well as the way many writers *produce* literary and other cultural texts.[2]

The second area is closely related to the first, namely the rise and rise of *global celebrity culture*. Celebrities, suggests Sharon Marcus, are "public hubs, linking even people who do not seek out information about them" (2015: 23). While it is easy to see celebrity today as a more or less direct effect of the new avenues of publicity opened up by social media, there is a longer history of celebrity promotion attached to other technologies, such as photography and journalism in the 1870s, film and radio in the 1910s and 1920s, TV in the 1950s, and video in the 1980s (Marcus 2015: 22). The so-called "demotic turn" (Turner 2004) in celebrity today – the various processes by which celebrity potentially becomes accessible to us all, even though only very few of us will ever become celebrities – is part of this longer history, which relies on the shadowing of celebrity presence by representation; for, as Marcus puts it, "every representation of a celebrity is haunted by the desire to grasp the star in the flesh" (2015: 30). This has implications, in turn, for the figure of the *celebrity writer*,

who is as much a real-life embodiment of social desire as a virtual product of media machinery – a desire that isn't necessarily sexualized, but certainly can be, for example in the case of writers deemed to come (or fashioned as coming) from "exotic" backgrounds, and/or whose "exotic" looks are played upon to create a series of tantalising effects.

I will return to this theme later – in which exoticism, eroticism and celebrity are triangulated in a number of often problematic ways – but for now I want to mention one last development that requires a rethinking of the mechanisms, both actual and virtual, that underlie the production of the postcolonial exotic as a particular, readily marketable cultural commodity form. This development is the recent emergence of *world literature* as a field that has taken root and subsequently blossomed in the western academy, and that is sometimes hailed as a logical successor to postcolonial studies, replacing that field's faded critical orthodoxies and persistent Anglocentrism with a more flexible – at once multilingual and polycentric – approach to the study of literature among other forms of cultural production in an increasingly globalized world.

Needless to say, there are as many versions of world literature as there are versions of the world, several of them in seemingly direct conflict with one another. To compare two such versions, WReC, a Marxist research collective based at the University of Warwick in the UK, has recently assembled a theory of world-literature (they hyphenate the term) around the contemporary workings of the capitalist world-system, according to which the social and economic effects of combined and uneven development are calibrated to specific aesthetic strategies and literary forms (Deckard et al. 2015). This overtly materialist model is very different from the one proposed by the Chinese American literary theorist Pheng Cheah, for whom world literature is

conceived of in broad liberal-humanist terms as a dynamic project of shared world-making in which “literature and its criticism enhance our sense of being a part of humanity”, and literature has the capacity to “performatively bring humanity into being by integrating individuals into a universal whole” (Cheah 2016: 44–45).

Neither model, at first sight at least, seems compatible with the back-and-forth dynamic – the emotional push and pull – associated with most versions of the exotic, which continually estranges the familiar even as it represents a more or less systematic attempt to assimilate the unfamiliar to the known (Huggan 2001: 31–32). However, as I will suggest in more detail later, the postcolonial exotic implicitly draws on *both* of these models, using the first to show the local/global effects of cultural marketing under the conditions of late capitalism (what I will go on to refer to as *globalism*), and the second to reiterate the importance of cosmopolitan alternatives to nationalist imaginaries (alternatives to which I will attach the term *worldliness* – see also Huggan 2011). This in turn evokes Edward Said’s well-documented appeal to the “worldly” critic, whose global sensibility also implies global responsibility, and whose critical consciousness is a prerequisite for addressing the conspicuous inequalities, both economically derived and ideologically driven, of a deeply divided world (Said 1983).

In the rest of this essay, I want to explore some of the effects these recent developments have had on my earlier notion of the postcolonial exotic, especially in terms of its double function as “a mechanism of cultural translation for an English-speaking mainstream [as well as] a vehicle for the estrangement of metropolitan mainstream views” (Huggan 2001: 32). To help with this task, I will refer to two postcolonial writers, both of Sikh-Punjabi origin, who have come to prominence recently: the British-based poet Daljit Nagra and the Canadian-based poet Rupi Kaur.

Both writers, Kaur especially, owe their popularity in large part to the skilful management of their self-image on social media. Both have attained a form of minor celebrity that they also comment on in their writing, whether this is articulated through an ironic politics of cultural branding (Nagra) or a self-empowering form of strategic exoticism that plays to an international (mainly female) audience while also reaching out to a more specific readership (transnational women of colour) with whose shared experiences of separation and suffering it identifies, and whose intersectional connections to histories of exploitation and marginalization it seeks collectively to represent (Kaur). Both writers are controversial, still one of the defining markers of celebrity; and both are clearly aware of, and indeed have sought to profit from, the mixed reception of their work. Both are attuned, finally, to the country-specific debates that surrounded the late twentieth-century incorporation of "multicultural" and/or "diasporic" writers into a postcolonial canon. More recently, similar debates have informed the emergence of world literature as a locally inflected global project, albeit one in which "English in culture, like the dollar in economics, serves as the medium through which knowledge may be translated from the local to the global" (Arac 2002: 35). This exercise also tends to *assume* the translatability of the one into the other, and the easy digestibility of both cultural knowledge and literary form.

Daljit Nagra and the everyday exotic

The British Sikh poet Daljit Nagra is best known for his 2007 debut collection *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* As its title already suggests, the collection plays on Nagra's vertiginous blend of linguistic and cultural registers (with characteristic archness, he describes this idiolect as "Singh Song" or "Punglish"). It also engages

with Matthew Arnold's alternately desirous and fearful conception of the Continent in his famous 1851 poem "Dover Beach" as a turbulent place where beauty flourishes but dark revolutionary forces gather and "ignorant armies clash by night". This quintessentially exotic perspective on the "elsewhere", precariously poised between the alternative poles of attraction and repulsion (Bongie 1991), is effectively reversed in the title poem, Nagra's own version of "Dover Beach", which won the UK Forward Prize for best individual poem of the year in 2004. There is no space here to tease out the complexities of the poem: suffice to point out its ironic use of the racist vocabulary of immigrant "invasion"; its mock-triumphant reclamation of the new country; and its invidious contrast between the "lordly" strutting of the passport-carrying tourist and the surreptitious scurrying of the undocumented migrant or refugee (Nagra 2007 [2004]).

Anger is never far beneath the surface of Nagra's work, and it occasionally bubbles over into full-fledged rage, as in the hilariously abusive "GET OFF MY POEM WHITEY":

> *oi* get off my poem Pinky
> your porky fingers lard my lean sheets.
>
> look at my darkie mug — my indie tag
> do you think I could think in the same old English
> you keep to your standard my standard's bastarded
>
> your editors elect by taste
> if they like me they think I'm exotic

if they think I'm too English I'm a mimic

is it time for a fresh look Pasty Face

I can write with two heads

yet you groan on the head you get

(Nagra 2017: 38)

Elsewhere in the same collection (*British Museum*), Nagra makes it clear that one of his satirical targets is the bogus moralism of postcolonial criticism: hence the figure of the poet, contemplating the hidden histories of violence embodied in the *objets d'art* in the British Museum, feels duty-bound to counteract their anodyne representations of the exotic sublime by "read[ing] between the lines a Burmese Orwell/a Woolf in workaday Ceylon and a canon of post-colonialists" (2017: 51).

Nagra's hyper-awareness of the institutional uses to which his own poetry is being put, and of the particular market brand it has acquired, is brilliantly analysed by the Canadian critic Sarah Brouillette in her 2014 book *Literature and the Creative Economy*. For Brouillette, Nagra's poems, along with the packaging and marketing of his work, are "self-consciously designed to perform the writer's concern about his alienation from his purported community, a community that at once appears and is disclaimed as the source of his work's uniqueness and of its inclusion in official cultural-diversity initiatives" (Brouillette 2014: 120). Hence the deep ambivalence of his strategic exoticism: the cannily shape-shifting ways in which he presents different versions of his "marginal" self-image for consumption by a mainstream public. And hence also the different ways in which he plays on well-meaning liberal institutional initiatives, including postcolonial literary studies, to conscript his work to the cause of cultural difference – a cause that is then exploited by a range of literary publishers,

academics and other cultural actors who are all keen to rectify the ills of cultural racism but run the risk of reproducing it themselves (Brouillette 2014; see also Brennan 1997).

In commenting on the cover of the second printing of *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* Brouillette assesses Nagra's awareness of his own brand, which is brought out in the cover's random display of everyday consumer items. This is less like "Look We Have Coming to Dover," she mischievously suggests, than "Look We Have Coming to Market" – a self-conscious ploy to call readers' attention to the everyday lives of ordinary British Asians that form the substance of most of his poems, but also to draw a more critical eye to these lives as the commercial packaging of second-generation British Asian experiences, available for consumption alongside "the sorts of fungibles that are manufactured in Taiwan and sold at the stereotypical corner shop" (Brouillette 2014: 123). Another way of putting this is that Nagra and his publishers are ironically complicit in the production of a brand of *everyday exotic*. This cuts two ways, simultaneously domesticating the "foreign" and reproducing it as a cumulative effect of the cultural stereotyping of "minority" people's lives. Added to this is what we might call the "celebrity effect" of the Nagra brand, by means of which the author is able to draw attention to himself as at once a multi-purpose conduit for public debate on the lives and experiences of contemporary British Asians, and a commercially successful cultural creator "knowingly jockeying for position within a market glutted by more voices than can secure room in our reading lives or occupy niche positions cleared for them on bookstore shelves" (Brouillette 2014: 124).

Autoeroticism and self-help in the work of Rupi Kaur

A still clearer case of a contemporary poet who plays self-consciously on her celebrity status is Rupi Kaur, the most prominent of several so-called "Instagram poets" whose work has attracted a large following as the result of a carefully cultivated self-image produced and disseminated on social media. The popularity of Kaur's poetry is inextricably linked with Instagram, the astonishing success of which confirms the increasing transformation of the Internet into a visual medium in which "more and more people are using images rather than written self-descriptions to express themselves" (Marwick 2015: 138). Kaur's brand of poetry is explicitly designed for this particular medium, combining short confessional poems with "authentically" handcrafted illustrations, and both of these with regularly posted images of her numerous public performances and suitably glamorous portraits of herself. The overall effect, as the media theorist Alice Marwick has suggested more generally of the "selfie culture" embodied by Instagram, is to produce a collective "advertisement of the self" that not only blurs the lines between private and public experience, but also doubles as an empowering mode of self-representation and an ironic tribute to the "epidemic of narcissism among the young" (Marwick 2015: 141–142).

Kaur's target audience is female, as she makes clear in many of her poems as well as in the dedications she sometimes provides for them, which advert to a community of women – especially but not exclusively women of colour – whom she invites to share the most intimate experiences of their lives. This is not to say that men are excluded from her poems, but generally speaking they are framed, either as dangerous sexual predators or, turning the tables on a history of masculinist representation, as physical objects of female sexual desire. A fairly typical example of the former is the ironically titled "Welcome", one of the early poems in Kaur's

smash-hit debut collection *milk and honey* (2015), a concrete poem in which the male sexual act is graphically portrayed as invasive and self-serving. As the feminist critic Sasha Kruger explains, "'Welcome's' visual treatment of space comments upon how a woman's body is regarded as a penetrable space for men to enter. At the same time, the persona reclaims the right to her own body, [which] is now 'impenetrable' by way of its speech" (2017: n.p.). Although "Welcome" doesn't make this clear, others among Kaur's poems posit a direct link between the invasion of the body and the colonization of land, suggesting her political self-identification as a South Asian poet for whom the bodies of women of the global south "are not their own, but exist for the purposes of reproducing [the nations of the] global north" (Kruger 2017: n.p.). These connections are made more explicit in Kaur's follow-up collection *the sun and her flowers* (2017), several of the poems within which specifically allude to her Sikh-Punjabi background, and some of which pick up on Hindu-nationalist as well as Euro-American histories of oppression, notably the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in northern India, in which more than 3000 Sikh civilians lost their lives.

Kaur's poems, in this and other respects, are political acts of postcolonial reclamation, often centring on the painful experience of diasporic separation and on the idea, to quote from her short poem "immigrant", of "what it is like/to lose home at the risk of/never finding home again" (Kaur 2017: 119). She is probably best known though for her confessional poems, which relay her personal experiences of men, her intimate relationship with herself, and her seemingly overriding desire for approval. For, like other regular internet users, she belongs to what Charles Fairchild calls a global "attention economy" in which the desire to be attractive to and recognized by others can easily turn into a personal obsession, leading to compulsive or, more

rarely, pathological behaviour born of the need to compete with others in a "media-saturated, information-rich world" (Marwick 2015: 138; see also Fairchild 2007).

In Kaur's case, personal obsession is normalized as self-love, which she sees as being the main purpose of her poetry, whether this is in terms of individual or collective self-affirmation or physical acts of self-gratification, as in one typically teasing poem, where she gamely confesses to the desire to "honeymoon" herself (2017: 107). The term "autoeroticism" comes to mind here, not just in the more secretive sense of masturbation but also in its open context, as an unashamedly sexualized form of self-affirmation that is the basis for a fulfilled life (Lorde 1984; see also Garber 2000). Here as elsewhere – notably in her notorious Instagram posts of herself menstruating – Kaur deliberately brings a private (if not necessarily proscribed) act into the public realm in order to celebrate it as perfectly natural. These borderline exhibitionist forms of self-display also have a more sinister side, though, for above all else Kaur's poetry is a public advertisement for her own *vulnerability*: as a physically attractive young woman; as a marginalized diasporic subject; and as a rapidly emerging celebrity figure whose celebrity is, precisely, an open invitation to others, not just to share her personal experiences but, potentially at least, to intrude into her personal life. This ambivalence is made clear in her more physical poems, which alternate, almost imperceptibly at times, between the desire to be touched and the horror of being manhandled. There is an exotic mechanism at work here whereby the desire to reach out to the other is countered by the fear of being violated by the other: in its most horrific manifestation, what starts out as mutual attraction may end up as violent rape, as in the poem "addiction", which records the experience of an abusive relationship in which the female persona still wants to be touched even if the

touching itself is vicious, and she feels as if her partner is "skinn[ing] me to the bone" (2017: 27).

Kaur's huge popularity – she is currently estimated as having 3 million Instagram followers, and both of her books spent considerable lengths of time on international bestseller lists – thus comes at a price, though like Nagra she is well aware of the perils of celebrity, and also like Nagra she is finely tuned to the (western) market value of her ethnicity as well as the shock value of her work. A further aspect to Kaur's work that places her apart from Nagra is *self-help*, a huge industry worldwide with book sales to match (Illouz 2008). Both *milk and honey* and *the sun and her flowers* are styled and structured as self-help books, with the former tracing a progression from "the hurting" (its first section) to "the healing" (its last) and the latter charting a trajectory from "wilting" to "blooming", following what in one poem, highlighted on the back cover, is melodramatically described as the "recipe of life".

The grandiose ambitions of self-help culture are easy to mock, but they have their high-culture equivalents in so-called "recovery narratives", and they are inscribed as well into some of the world's best-known and most durable folktales and myths. The universal dimensions of self-help are also deeply embedded within contemporary celebrity culture, which preaches that anyone can be famous as long as they are determined enough to open up spaces of visibility for themselves. Self-help, of course, is not necessarily about being famous – it is often anything but – but it is arguably tied in to neoliberal scales of achievement in which material success in the attention economy becomes a measure of personal self-worth. Kaur, as one might suspect, is well aware of this; and she is equally alert to the broader function of "microcelebrity", which Marwick defines in terms of a pseudo-egalitarian "mind-set and collection of self-presentation strategies endemic in social media, in which users

strategically formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status" (Marwick 2015: 138).

This isn't to say that Kaur's appeal to others – especially other women – to share their experiences with her is disingenuous, but it is motivated at least in part by a desire to command the greatest share of attention herself. Similarly, Kaur's heartfelt appeals to social justice are well meant, and are apparently well received by the vast majority of her followers, but they are also self-motivated insofar as they allow her to accumulate further symbolic capital for her own work. Finally, Kaur's preferred medium, Instagram, is only egalitarian insofar as it allows ordinary people to share their manufactured views of themselves; and it remains the case that, even if more democratic forms of "microcelebrity" are frequently practised, most followers are precisely that, seeking to emulate a stardom that they tacitly recognize they will never be able to attain themselves (Marwick 2015: 139).

Kaur would no doubt be horrified to hear herself described as an "exotic" figure; but the representational machinery of exoticism – cultural stereotype, sexual fantasy, the decontextualized fascination for other countries and peoples – seems to be very much part of the general appeal of her work (Ali 2017). As I have been suggesting, auto*eroticism* (the personal reclamation of an embodied self) may be more pertinent to her work than auto-*exoticism* (the assertion of a fluid self that at once incorporates and is actively transformed by the other), but both processes can readily be detected in her transformative encounters with other people, who are largely assimilated into her encounter with herself. Both kinds of encounters can also be seen in the discourses that have surrounded the emergence of *world literature*, and in the last section of my essay I want to assess the place of Nagra and Kaur within a

transnational framework that both gives meaning to and challenges the "worldly" aspects of their respective texts.

Nagra, Kaur and the antinomies of world literature

World literature, like postcolonial literature to some extent, is a misnomer, an impossibly broad placeholder term for the equally impossible exercise of finding a critical metalanguage capable of translating a multiplicity of national literatures into an idiom that the western academy can comprehend. Nor is it just, as Simon Gikandi suggests, that: "there always seems to be gap between the desire for reading literature on a global scale and the claims of national languages or privileged cultural regions" (Gikandi 2016: 1199). Rather, the fundamental question of world literature is how many different worlds, each equipped with its own distinctive epistemologies and histories, are supposed to fit, indeed are *permitted* to fit, within the one world (Radhakrishnan 2016: 1397). As the literary theorist Rajagopal Radhakrishnan argues, this is less a question of "translatability" per se, though the specific methods and combined effects of linguistic/cultural translation are at the heart of the world literature enterprise (Apter 2013), than a matter of recognizing that various "virulent centrisms [not least Eurocentrism] have axiomatized themselves as imperatives and preconditions for the worlding of the world" (Radhakrishnan 2016: 1398). As Radhakrishnan goes on to state:

> Try as nobly, generously, and self-reflexively as it might, the world-literature phenomenon cannot solve, transcend, or even ameliorate the self-other problematic. On the contrary, it surfaces as yet another symptom of the same old binary crisis: advocacy and any kind of solicitude on behalf of the world

> are constrained to take the form of an advertent or inadvertent exoticism in which the figure of the other fills in for the world and the self is rendered exceptionalist or invisible. (1398)

World literature, seen in this way, risks merely replicating the *antinomies* (rather than *dichotomies*) of the postcolonial exotic, from whose familiar western, metropolitan and, above all, Anglophone clutches it is hoping to escape. "Otherness" is writ large here, but largely in terms of the (sometimes hidden) self that validates it. Thus, what is initially set up as a worthy pedagogical exercise in intercultural learning or cross-cultural negotiation turns instead into yet another lesson on global cultural marketing, in which the ostensible aim of world literature – the fostering of a cosmopolitan sensibility of *worldliness* that is open to different worldviews and is temperamentally averse to totalizing explanations – is challenged by a late-capitalist ideology of *globalism* that seeks to market cultural difference in its own image, and to establish a basis for the material conditions that govern the international trafficking of readily identifiable (multi)cultural texts.[3]

The success of contemporary writers like Nagra and Kaur owes at least in part to their manipulation of these antinomies. In Nagra's case, "global" perspectives and "national" ones frequently clash, with the poetic persona caught in the crossfire between them. In some of his pithiest poems ("Booking Khan Singh Kumar", "He Do the Foreign Voices"), the educational value of literature – Nagra is a secondary schoolteacher – is pitted against the same neoliberal British creative industries that seek to exploit it. Meanwhile, in some of his longer, more meditative poems, fired-up critiques of British colonial history are ironically damped down by amnesiac apprehensions of London as a thriving global city. Take the last stanza of the typically

provocative “A Black History of the English-Speaking Peoples”, when the speaker, having just visited the Globe Theatre and mused on its “glorious” past, now finds himself “stroll[ing] toward Westminster”, where “the waters of Britannia bobble/with flotillas of tea and white gold/cotton and sugar and the sweetness-and-light” (Nagra 2011: 53). This saccharine vision of a prosperous national past soon reveals the brutal histories of violence that underpin it:

> […] blood lettings and ultimately red-faced Suez.
> And how swiftly the tide removes from the scene
>   the bagpipe clamouring
> garrisons with the field-wide scarlet soldiery
>
> and the martyr’s cry: *Every man die at his post!*
> Till what’s ahead are the upbeat lovers who gaze
>   from the London Eye
> at multinationals lying along the sanitised Thames.
>
> (53)

In Kaur’s case, micro- and macro-worlds continuously interact, as the poet repeatedly enjoins her readers to celebrate the privileges she shares with them, but also to use those privileges to socially responsible ends:

> bombs brought entire cities
> down to their knees today
> refugees boarded boats knowing

their feet may never touch land again

police shot people dead for the colour of their skin

last month I visited an orphanage of

abandoned babies left on the curbside like waste

later at the hospital i watched a mother

lose both her child and her mind

somewhere a lover died

how can I refuse to believe

my life is anything short of a miracle

if amidst all this chaos

i was given this life

(Kaur 2017: 130)

The above poem ("*circumstances*") is typical of Kaur's work in bringing together stricken conscience with feel-good individualism, and in sparing both geographical and historical details in order to gesture towards a universal form of affective solidarity with the other that is firmly founded on the triumphant celebration of the self.[4] Kaur's is clearly literature that *inhabits* the world, but it tends to organize its worldly sensibilities around the incorporation of others into an all-embracing self. Thus, when Kaur claims in one of the poems in *milk and honey* that "our struggle to/celebrate each other is/what's proven most difficult/in being human" (Kaur 2015: 201), she is both reaching out and reeling in, skilfully fashioning a community of like-minded (female) readers whose appreciation and approval stoke her own celebrity image. And thus, when Kaur dedicates *milk and honey* to the "arms that hold me" (2015: n.p.), she is both soliciting attention and absorbing it, both honouring those

who have emotionally supported her and re-establishing her command of a particular form of celebrity "affective power" (Marshall 1997).

For all their appeal, it seems unlikely that either Nagra's or Kaur's poems will be designated any time soon as works of world literature. Probably the most obvious reason for this is that world literature, at least to date, has tended to be arranged around readily translatable canonical works even as it interrogates the assumptions that govern their translatability and canonicity. Rather, as I have been suggesting in this essay, Nagra and Kaur are only too well aware that their work owes its popularity, as well as its commercial success, to its morally attractive status as niche writing – one resonant paradox of this being that such writing can often command considerably more attention, and in some cases generate considerably more product sales, than so-called canonical texts.

That both world literature and postcolonial literature, which have more in common with each other than is sometimes supposed (Cheah 2016), have hierarchies of their own should be immediately apparent, and the latter field, in particular, has come over time to be identified with a relatively small number of celebrity writers and critics who have seemingly unimpeachable institutional standing, to the detriment of other, often equally gifted writers and critics who have yet to acquire the symbolic capital that accrues to these better-known figures. In this and other ways, both sets of literatures might be seen as failing to promote the very kinds of literary and cultural diversity they set out to champion; and they are not always well served by the various cultural industries – which operate at both national and transnational levels – on which their local/global recognition depends.

As the Tamil writer and critic S. Shankar observes, "By now the back-and-forth arguments about world literature have become somewhat tedious and repetitive"

(2016: 142). A similar observation might be made, perhaps, about postcolonial literature, and about the "exotic" stereotypes and preconceptions to which both fields, despite their best attempts to banish them, remain inextricably bound. Let me close now with a brief anecdote. Shortly after *The Postcolonial Exotic* was published, I gave an academic talk in Rupi Kaur's hometown, Toronto. The talk, to put it mildly, wasn't successful. No one there seemed much interested at all in the functioning of the postcolonial exotic; rather, what interested them was when it (the exotic, that is) might eventually end. I could have given a pat response, along the lines of Tzvetan Todorov's nutshell definition of the exotic as "praise without knowledge" (1993: 265). This is as good a definition as any, indicating the ambivalent ways in which exoticist registers succeed at once in celebrating and assimilating cultural difference; and do so precisely by *decontextualizing* it, by foreclosing those kinds of situated knowledge that might open up local and regional perspectives that throw exoticist assumptions and the ideologies that sustain them into serious doubt. It's equally doubtful, though, that all the situated knowledge in the world will put a stop to the exotic mode, which has a chameleonic capacity to refashion the relationship between, as well as within, the mutually informing categories of self and other. It goes without saying that this relationship needs to be tracked, and that it continues to require rigorous critical scrutiny. Or at least that's what I said then – and I might as well say it again now.

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NOTES

[1] The term "Indo-chic", which one would be hard put to find anywhere today, is very much a product of its time: the same time – more or less the last two decades of the twentieth century – that saw a revived interest in what Salman Rushdie and others called "Raj nostalgia" (see, for example, Rushdie 1984). Though his novels remain popular and some of them (cf. his latest, *Quichotte)* still make it onto international prize lists, the decline of Raj nostalgia in the early twenty-first century parallels a perceptible decline of academic interest in Rushdie's work.
[2] Be that as it may, the global technological revolution has not necessarily led to a corresponding revolution in the way that national and international literatures are *taught*, which might account for the conspicuous absence of authors like Nagra and Kaur from "postcolonial" and/or "world literature" university courses on both sides of the Atlantic – a point to which I will return. Nor does popular culture at large feature in many of these courses, which (in the UK especially) often conform to very conventional understandings of what qualifies as "literature", and what does not.
[3] To be fair, these tensions apply best to certain *models* of world literature that run along broadly liberal-humanist lines, and that are based on conventional – sometimes deeply conservative – understandings of what qualifies as a "world" text (see Huggan 2011). WReC's conception of a world-literary system structured around *inequality* seems the best way forward, potentially creating space for non-canonical texts and authors that have been banished to the fringes of this system, and whose reinstatement reveals – as in J.G. Ballard's well-chosen epigraph to the Collective's 2015 volume – that "the periphery is where the future reveals itself". To a large extent, though, these inclusive principles have yet to be acted upon, leaving the dominant, liberal-humanist model of world literature – which depends on the very market system it artfully disguises – more or less intact.
[4] Thanks to Sam Perks for first bringing the resonant phrase "affective solidarity" to my attention.