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Reading in the Global Literary Marketplace: Material and Textual Affects

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Reading in the Global Literary Marketplace: Material and Textual Affects

Materialist scholarship on postcolonial literature's relationship with global publishing industries has radically altered the ways in which we conceive of writers' and texts' postcolonial agency. Its interest in the foreclosures of the marketplace has made it difficult to identify texts and practices of reading alike as postcolonial, as textualist traditions have long done so. Yet, even if somewhat devalued by materialist postcolonialisms, reading remains valuable, particularly because it presents opportunities for self-reconstitution and political self-recognition. Indeed, it is precisely because reading is not material or textual, but *hybrid*, that it holds such ethical and political potential. This article departs from materialist and textualist postcolonial scholars' tendency to prescribe strategies of reading, instead concerning itself with describing reading as it actually takes place. Drawing on Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, in conjunction with affect theory and theories of the ethics and politics of reading, the essay develops an innovative model of reading, which understands readers as comprising a *reading self* and a *self-in-the-world*. This model of reading reasserts postcolonial literatures' agencies at the site of consumption as well as democratizes reading by undermining prescriptions of reading and meaning.

Keywords: global literary marketplace; reading; reader-response; reception; affect

Since Gayatri Spivak's 1983 intervention, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?,' in which she questioned the validity of the representation and receipt of cultural differences, and charged authors and critics alike with variously speaking *for* the subaltern rather than speaking *with* the subaltern (Spivak 1993, 71), the discipline of postcolonial studies has sought to more carefully address the material circumstances of cultural production and consumption. Spivak's sense that genuine subaltern agency is an impossibility – to the extent that it is either subordinated or prefigured by epistemologies from without – has led many to question the extent to which writers and texts possess postcolonial agency. The position of readers, writers, and critics remains at the centre of debate, even if in recent times the emphasis has started to shift from geographical units of measurement to more complex cultural, geopolitical, economic, and linguistic coordinates. This article argues that materialist interrogations of postcolonial literatures in the global literary marketplace, though worthwhile insofar as they contest textualist assumptions around the radical energies of readers and postcolonial texts as well as their authors, can distort the reading process through necessarily homogenizing systemic analyses, and foreclose the transformative affects of reading. Materialist critics tends to resign themselves to texts' relative vulnerability at the sites of production, circulation and reception. By developing Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, I seek to recuperate the material-textual dimensions of reading and its pursuant ethical and political significance. I conceptualize readers as made up of a *self-in-the-world* and a *reading self* in order to account for the simultaneously material and textual process of reading. This model of a composite reader manifests Iser's understanding of reading as dialectical. It registers both the way in which reading is determined by the self's embeddedness in much larger cultural, economic and political systems and the way in which the act has the self affectively generate new epistemic logics via the text, which undercut the authority of such systems. Importantly, my conceptualization of reading does not represent the advocacy of a more just or equitable

interpretive approach, but is rather an attempt to describe the ambivalences and contingencies – the materialities and textualities – that characterize the act of reading.

An ethical dilemma

Let us begin with an overview of recent materialist scholarship and its conclusions about reading postcolonial literatures. In recent years, materialist critics have targeted the constraints of publishing industries, and their consequences for the transmission of postcolonial discourses. The world's largest publishing houses are predominantly located in major metropolitan cities in the Global North (Huggan 2001, 4; Brouillette 2007, 10). Historically, this spatial skew has seen publishers in the Global North champion and canonize Global Southern writers even as those same publishers sustain the political marginalization of peoples and regions in the Global South (for example, see Davis 2013, 5). Today, the predominance of metropolitan Global Northern publishers can mean that writers from elsewhere are at the mercy of cultural milieus and literary tastes from without. Even as the operations of multinational corporations such as Penguin in the Global South remain crucial to the accessibility of books both locally and internationally (Fraser 2008, 187), their global dominance can see the prioritisation of English-language literatures (Brouillette 2007, 59).[1] Moreover, (often Global Northern) publishers opt for works according not just their socio-historically produced literary tastes and the particularities of their particular spatial, cultural, economic and political locations, but also writers' perceived associations with particular spatial, cultural, economic and political locations (see Brouillette 2007, 59-61). They also co-opt such works by way of these locations: they have a hand in fashioning authors' narratives to cater to the perceived preferences of foreign audiences. John K. Young identifies alarming instances in which "the predominantly white publishing industry" (Young 2006, 4) sanitized, depoliticized and

mythologized black authors' representations through editorial work in an attempt to make texts more palatable and more saleable (for overview, see 3-4). In her discussion of South East Asian writers, Ruvani Ranasinha similarly finds that Anglo-American "publishers and reviewers [act] as socio-historical filters through which culture is transmitted" (Ranasinha 2007, 15).

These limitations at the sites of production and circulation have affected what and how authors themselves write. In anticipation of particular, historically-bound criterion and preferences within the global literary marketplace, writers deploy narrative tropes and bodily figurations that align with the values of foreign publishing industries and the cultural horizons of target audiences. In a satirical essay for Granta, the late Binyavanga Wainaina (2006) registers this demand, recommending that aspiring African authors homogenize, exoticize and primitivize Africa in order to secure readers abroad. Writers' appropriation of foreign standards and sensibilities is marked by greater ambivalence than Wainaina's polemic implies. Their participation in assimilation and mimicry can be subversive. However, and as Huggan says of "staged marginality" – which sees minorities imitate a kind of self-subordination for the amusement and utility of majority groups – "the practical results of this covert resistance are usually limited" (Huggan 2001, 88). Mimicry can be experienced as masquerade, and "merely act to reconfirm the disempowerment of 'subordinate' groups *vis-à-vis* the dominant culture" (88). Writers may assimilate target audiences' values in order to interrogate prejudices; yet, in so doing, they risk inviting readings which affirm European exceptionalism and superiority as well as testify to cultural differences. The potential differences between authorial intention and interpretation here pose problems for postcolonial agency. Writers' participation in the global marketplace may represent less a kind of 'writing back' than a 'writing for.'

By dint of postcolonial literatures' troubled genealogies, Gail Low goes as far to suggest that we ought to appreciate the text as "less an object than a palimpsest of the process

of making and unmaking as writers' manuscripts are edited and packaged for publication, and then studied" (Low 2011, 141-142). An understanding of postcolonial literatures as palimpsests makes clear the processes of erasure and reinscription built into their production, marketing, circulation and reception. Perhaps one area in which postcolonial literatures' realities as palimpsests is most clear is in the transformation of manuscripts into marketable, distributable texts by way of paratexts "such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations" (Genette 1997, 1; see also Waring 1995). Drawing on Lizarríbar's landmark historical study, Graham Huggan has highlighted the "blatantly exoticist packaging" of Heinemann African Writers Series books (Huggan 2001, 107). John K. Young meanwhile finds that publishing and marketing houses essentialize and allegorize representations by black authors, "mark[ing] [authors] in advertizements, prefaces and other paratextual material as black, even when their texts themselves might belie such a strict classification" (Young 2006, 4). Perhaps more subtly, Ruvani Ranasinha recounts how Penguin italicized all non-English words in the proofs returned to Mulk Raj Anand; resultantly, the publisher increased the 'foreignness' of both the text and India, despite the author's efforts to normalize and humanize Indian peoples and cultures (Ranasinha 2007, 32).[2] As these accounts from Huggan, Young and Ranasinha demonstrate, paratexts can inhibit the transmission of postcolonial discourses even as, ostensibly, they ensure books' distribution. There are paratextual traditions that limit the transformative or radical potential of postcolonial literatures by inviting anthropological interpretive approaches or readings that variously confirm, rather than challenge, readers' orientalist assumptions.

The issues associated with paratexts raises questions about the institutional use of 'postcolonial' to describe certain texts and to designate a pursuant academic field. Might ascribing some texts as 'postcolonial' valorize particular interpretive approaches? To redeploy Aijaz Ahmad's critique of Third World literature and colonial discourse analysis, might too the application of 'postcolonial' to texts "privilege coloniality as the framing term of epochal

experience" and establish "national identity…as the main locus of meaning, analysis and (self-)representation"? (Ahmad 1992, 93). Might the 'postcolonial' at least a priori determine the text by histories of colonialism, and consequently imply particular epistemic and affective economies? Alternatively, might the 'postcolonial' counterproductively commodify texts, and reproduce their marginal status in the global literary marketplace and in canons (see Brouillette 2007, 3). And "[c]an 'postcolonial' be understood as a brand" whose primary beneficiaries are critics themselves? (Koegler 2018, 2). These accounts above clarify the extent to which professional readings in the academy that identify 'postcolonial literature' as an object of study may actually reproduce the marginalizing tendencies of the global literary marketplace and its readers, even as they critique and seek to overcome such tendencies.[3] Of course, this is not to underestimate the practical, political and aesthetic utility of the postcolonial, nor to propose that there is a necessarily better approach that does not compromise self-representation. Rather, it is to acknowledge our role as critics in the interpretive foreclosure, marginalisation and monetisation of postcolonial literatures.

By registering texts' subjection to the inequalities and oppressive forces of the global literary marketplace – and thereby revealing the contingencies and compromises embedded in writing and reading – materialist approaches challenge us to consider the extent to which postcolonial literatures and their authors have agency, and perhaps even to consider whether they can be considered properly postcolonial at all. The turn to reading and reception "risks compromising some of the more general that have been made in the field around the transformative, resistant or subversive capacities of isolated postcolonial texts" (Benwell, Procter and Robinson 2012, 8). A recognition of the power operations embedded in publishing and reading makes it difficult to uphold, for example, C. L. Innes' claim that "[p]ostcolonial literature is concerned above all with the issue of self-representation" (Innes 2007, 4). How are "[w]riters from the former colonies…to speak for themselves, [or] to tell their own stories" (4)

when publishers market and edit their work in non-self-identical ways, and when acts of reading necessarily involve the recalibration of such politically-ambivalent acts of self-representation? Likewise, the 'neocolonial' economics of the publishing industry, together with the influence of publishers and global readerships on what gets written and published, dispute taken for granted assertions of postcolonial literatures' capacity for resistance. Publishing constraints clearly limit the extent to which postcolonial texts can successfully "undercut thematically and formally the discourse which supported colonization – the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination," something with Elleke Boehmer deems their central ambition (Boehmer 2005, 14). As I have clarified, the marginal status of postcolonial texts in the marketplace can uphold "myths of power" (cf. Brouillette 2007, 3); paratextual conventions can demarcate ethnic and racial identities in ways that sustain "race classifications" (cf. Young 2006, 4); strategies like staged marginality can be interpreted in ways that buttress an "imagery of subordination" (cf. Huggan 2001, 88). Furthermore, given that "postcolonialism and its rhetoric of resistance have themselves become consumer products" (Huggan 2001, 6), premature celebrations of postcolonial literatures' resistant capabilities themselves risk commodifying, and thereby diminishing, postcolonial agency.

An awareness of readers' and texts' position in the global literary marketplace also frustrates attempts to locate capacities for self-representation, resistance and transformation – which is to say, the postcolonial – in practices of reading. Materialist, book history-inflected interrogations of postcolonial literatures question the value of reading postcolonial texts, emphasizing that reading in the global literary marketplace for postcolonial literatures can reproduce extant, unequal relations between readers and texts. For example, it becomes difficult to maintain that "our reading practices…contribute to the contestation of colonial discourses to which postcolonialism aspires" (McLeod 2010, 34) when some re(-)presentations and some paratextual devices foreclose just readings. We also cannot subscribe to Stephen

Slemon's view that, in "a radical critical practice," "the critic would become no more and no less than a facilitator of the kinds of cultural work certain post-colonial allegorical texts inherently seek to perform" (Slemon 1987, 10). Nor can we perceive the postcolonial text "as a score for reading" (Boehmer 2018, 7) which "the ideal postcolonial critic" (10) capably performs in ways that "activat[e] the political energies of postcolonial texts to resist, concatenate, and reshape worlds, and, where necessary, begin anew" (15). Both Slemon and Boehmer here forget that readers are not passive translators of postcolonial discourses nor are they capable of suspending their material reality and epistemic position in the service of an other. Any interpretive "facilitation" of resistance and any performance of a "score" is a kind of rearticulation. The notion that postcolonialism is a methodology of reading, and one which translates difference and resistance, therefore conceals readers' attendant practices of enunciation. In particular, it disregards the extent to which interpretation may compromise texts' resistant narratives. Slemon and Boehmer's valorization of particular, *professional* practices of reading only attest to the contingencies and problematic aspects of reading postcolonial texts. It conceals the partialities of their own interpretive approaches which, to deploy Procter's critique of professional reading, operate within a formalist tradition of "specialist postcolonial reading, whereby politics are 'read off' at the level of the aesthetic" (Procter 2009, 182). By way of summary, an appreciation of the material conditions of production, circulation and reception refutes characterizations of postcolonial literatures as those which resist, subvert and transform imperial discourses, and undermines notions of reading as postcolonial.

Indeed, it is accurate to say that, if there is a corollary of studies of postcolonial literature and the global literary marketplace, it is the advocacy of a politically-informed, ethical interpretive approach, perceived as capable of mitigating our abiding complicity as readers with the industry of postcoloniality and of recognising and circumventing a subjugating

form of interpretation. In 'Postcolonial Studies and the Ethics of the Quarrel,' John McLeod reaches a similar conclusion, albeit focusing primarily on Sarah Brouillette's materialist contribution. He reflects that the "circular[ity] and tautology[y]" of materialist approaches, especially in their critique of postcolonial critique, seems to be overcome by "the identification of 'ethical challenges'" and ultimately "the (self-)narrativization of the postcolonial critic's guilt-ridden standpoint" (McLeod 2017, 106). Critics' acknowledgement of their positions in the global literary marketplace and their sustenance of systems of oppression appear to "keep open a vital critical traction on their part amid their circumscription by economies of disempowerment" (106). What materialist critical studies then encourage is greater self-consciousness, self-reflexivity and even guilt on the part of readers and critics lest they unknowingly reproduce the very structural inequalities they aspire to analyse and dismantle: as McLeod puts it: "this quarrel with conscience does not stymie critique but sparks the momentum to reach for a more ethical location where we can support and sustain the political purposefulness of cultural and critical work" (108). This tendency amongst materialist critics to locate ethics within the kinds of self-conscious critique they perform represents the valorization a variety of professional postcolonial reading (in much the same as we have seen of textualist approaches) that is capable of evading the strictures of the marketplace. As Caroline Koegler has astutely noted, "these acknowledgements of postcolonial critics' implication in markets appear to function primarily as a form of (defensive) self-legitimisation" (Koegler 2018, 5). This is to say, such self-conscious and self-critical approaches may be motivated less by the need to identify more ethical locations from which to read postcolonial literatures, than they are by disciplinary demands to appear to inhabit more ethical interpretive positions than other critics or lay readers.

However, it is not just that materialist studies' promotion of a self-conscious, ethical form of reading represents a kind of "(defensive) self-legitimisation." It is also not clear that

such an interpretive approach is preferable to a textualist form of reading. Materialist positions operate an ethics of reading which is informed by the political location of the self (and its guilt). In so doing, they ossify the differences between readers and postcolonial texts because they depend on foregrounding power relationships and texts' relative vulnerability. Materialist strategies work from the premise of the uneven relationship between readers and texts, and therefore forfeit opportunities for a socially, politically and culturally transformative reading experience through which differences and the perceptions of differences can be renegotiated or whereby readers and texts might enter into more reciprocal relations. If we follow materialist postcolonialisms and understand the text as either a commodity or a mirror of (foreign) publishers' ideals or readers' hypotheses, we foreclose its meaning and value, and we prevent the text from affecting us as readers or effecting change in how we view the world. This is consistent with Gayatri Spivak's description of foreclosure, following Lacan, as "the idea of a rejection of affect" (Spivak 1999, 4). Materialist critics' recognition of the text as predetermined or an object of consumption devalues the act of reading. It disregards the uniqueness of the reading encounter and texts' (albeit ambivalent) potential to move readers in both senses: emotionally, and also transformatively moved to act or to change perception.

The development of this kind of ethics of reading, which is intended to be politically-sensitive, can also misrepresent the power relations between readers and texts (and their authors). Postcolonial writers often members of an elite intelligentsia. They frequently take up temporary or permanent residence in Europe and North America. Salman Rushdie may best exemplify the ambivalent position of the postcolonial writer, having consistently operated within a cosmopolitan tradition that is amenable to both liberal and conservative sensibilities in Europe and North America (Brennan 1989, 35; Brouillette 2007, 87). But countless other writers consecrated as postcolonial share with Rushdie class, cultural and geographic associations that would question claims as to their relative marginality. Such writers' proximity

to Anglo-American systems of cultural value are precisely why they are able to stage marginality for the enjoyment of Anglo-American consumers. Readers of postcolonial literature are similarly diverse. As Graham Huggan tells us,

> Postcolonial literatures in English – to make an obvious point – are read by many different people in many different places; it would be misleading, not to mention arrogant, to gauge their value only to Western metropolitan response. And it would be as difficult to distinguish a single reading public [of postcolonial literatures] as to identify its location, in part because readers of postcolonial works are part of an increasingly diasporised, transnational English-speaking culture, but most of all because literary/cultural audiences all over the world are by their very nature plural and heterogeneous. (Huggan 2001, 30)

Postcolonial literature's readers are not only 'Western'. And readerships are not monolithic. Simply because one can identify the location of reading (i.e. 'the West') does not entail that reading is determined by such a geopolitical/cultural identity in any straightforward way.[4] Readings, including those which take place in 'the West', can variously confirm and contest the value-regimes that underpin global commodity culture. Materialist conceptions of the relationship between readers and texts, and efforts to develop appropriate ethical reading strategies, can therefore overdetermine the identities and agencies of postcolonial writers and their readers.

What I have sought to demonstrate then is that textualist and materialist approaches alike attenuate the postcolonial agencies they admirably seek to locate and facilitate. Textualist critiques fail to account for the compromises encoded in the production and reception of postcolonial literatures, overestimate the resistant capabilities of both readers and texts, and in so doing conceal the problems of objectification, appropriation, domestication and commodification associated with both lay and professional readings of postcolonial literatures. In short, their reading strategies "serve to both magnify and mask the implications of reading *itself*" (Procter 2009, 181). Materialist critiques, meanwhile, advocate for self-conscious, ethical readings which reproduce the unequal relations between readers and postcolonial literatures, which deny texts' agency, and which thereby inhibit the attendant resistant and

transformative possibilities of reading. To summarize, and recalling Spivak's problematic with which I began this article, current theorisations of reading participate in forms of speaking *for* the subaltern precisely by addressing issues of self-representation and agency.

It is my view that these oppositional interpretive strategies not only fail to excavate postcolonial agency, but that they each distort the act of reading which is a necessarily material and textual affair because texts are ontologically ambivalent. Literatures are material and textual: their narratives variously evoke cultural histories and operate within extant epistemologies, but they also disrupt and transform the categories through which we think reality. In what follows, I refine Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory in order to clarify the material-textual form of reading. Importantly, this is not the same as *prescribing* a material-textual strategy of reading as, for example, Derek Attridge (2012) and Elleke Boehmer (2018) do so. My model *describes* reading. One consequence of describing rather than prescribing reading is a democratization of the activity. Thus, it is at the interpretive interstice of materialism and textualism, we might locate the possibility of postcolonial agency and, specifically, where we might render difference and the postcolonial processual. But it is also here that we may we find ourselves re(-)situated in the world, where we perceive our prejudices and privileges anew, and where we may undertake more or less ethically- and politically-generative performances of the self.

Via reader-response and affect theory

For the conceptualization of the act of reading as both a material activity and a textual activity, Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory serves as a useful entry point. Reader-response theory holds that meaning is co-produced between readers and texts. For Iser, as for Barthes before him, the author is dead (Barthes, 1967). More specifically, reader-response theory seems to comprehend that the act of reading has the capacity to encourage readers and texts to

renegotiate their differences even as it brings those differences to bear in the production of the literary works' meanings. It appreciates the material and textual qualities of interpretation, and it addresses the contingencies of readers and texts' identities and agencies during the act of reading. Indeed, as I will show in my development of reader-response theory, Iser's notion of reading invites us to think about the *affects* of reading and the extent to which readers and texts move one another to new horizons as well as mutually inspire a critical self-awareness of their abidingly different material, cultural and epistemic positionalities.

Let us trace here these key tenets of reading in Iser's work. During reading, Iser writes, and "[a]s text and reader thus merge into a single situation, the division between subject and object no longer applies, and it therefore follows that meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but is an effect to be experienced" (Iser 1978, 9-10). He posits the meaning of the literary work between the reader and the text, and thus destabilizes the reader-text paradigm and alludes to the text's agency. Crucially, this co-produced meaning is unstable; it is an effect of the reader and text's affective coming-together. Their merging in the process of meaning-making displaces their fundamental separateness, and exposes the reader and the text to their proximity, reciprocity and potential connectedness. It reminds the reader that "the designation of an 'I' or 'we' requires an encounter with others" (Ahmed 2000, 7), thereby rendering difference processual and as the *affective* node through which bodies (subject and object) become.

I have described reading as affective. Whilst I am in agreement with Gregg and Seigworth that "[t]here is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be" (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 3), a working definition might read that affect is *feeling-differently*. It is a sensation between 'bodies' other than that which is prescribed. It is crucial that we resist the temptation to either extrapolate human bodies or agencies from texts, or sublimate texts' imaginatively re(-)presented humans or subjects to (representative)

actual human/subject status. We must recognize texts' objecthood or actorhood.[5] This especially important given that the global literary marketplace can encourage allegorical and metonymic (mis)readings of characters and authors (as native or unreliable informants, for example).

Affect is not just a kind of *feeling-differently*, but is understood as offering the potential of *being-differently*. Affects "can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension" (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 1): they transformatively move us.[6] We can perhaps observe this most clearly in Gregg and Seigworth's conceptualization of affect as a body's being "pulled beyond its seeming surface-boundedness" and becoming "*as much outside itself as in itself* – webbed in its relations – until ultimately *such firm distinctions* [of self and other] *cease to matter*" (3; emphasis added). Affect dissolves the division between the subject and the object; in the eminently dialectical encounter between a subject and an object, both become other than what they were. This description of affect is strikingly consonant with Iser's description of reading through which "text and reader…merge into a single situation, [wherein] the division between subject and object no longer applies" (Iser 1978, 9-10). Reading appears to be, for Iser, an affective activity. To incorporate the language of affect more forcefully within Iser's account of reading, we might just as well concur that "meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but is an [affect, or range of affects] to be experienced" (10).

For Iser, central to the dissolution of the boundary between the reader and the text is the sense that meaning is co-produced on the neutral ground of 'the liminal space.' The liminal space "replace[s] all overriding orientations such as authority" and thereby negates the primacy of either reader or text (Iser 1978, 48). The liminal space is not just the location of meaning, but is implicitly the location of affect. In its original definition, liminality refers to a space of affective becoming. In 'Liminality and Communitas,' Victor Turner describes the liminal phase as

> a 'moment in and out of time,' and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties. (Turner 1977, 96)

For Turner, the liminal phase is that indistinct site between bodies, formerly in stasis – where state denotes "any type of stable or recurrent condition that is culturally recognized" (94). And, insofar as this moment of liminality marks a coming-together of bodies, it also represents their changing-form. In this liminal space or phase of ambiguity, when the reader is "neither here nor there" but "betwixt and between," they are "fashioned anew" (95). The liminal space, so central within Iser's model of reading, is cast as the space of becoming in Turner's original hypothesis, and it is therefore also the space of affect. Returning to Gregg and Seigworth's language of affect, the liminal space thus becomes a "threshold or conversion point" (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 9) that makes possible both a dialogue between readers and texts, and readers' becoming-different (in relation to texts). Reading engenders the 'to come': Iser shares with deconstructionists Jacques Derrida and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak an understanding of reading as a promise whose gift is as yet undecided, and as an ethical act with political potential (Derrida 1992, 38; Spivak 2003, 6).

Iser's notion of the liminal space finds some resonance in notions of 'transculturation' and the '*cultural* contact zone,' specifically Mary Louise Pratt and Bill Ashcroft's deployments of the terms. However, articulations of reading as a contact zone depend upon making individual authors' and texts' differences representative of much broader cultural and epistemological differences. More significantly for our focus, both Pratt and Ashcroft fail to clarify how exactly meaning is materially and textually negotiated between the reader and the text. By consequence, they either overstate the cultural-material dynamics of reading (as in Pratt 1991; 2008) or prematurely celebrate the transformative dimensions of reading (as in Ashcroft 1989; 2015). Put another way, they restrict the affects of reading. Iser, by contrast, attempts to systematize the dialogue through which the reader and the text transformatively

arrive at meaning. By way of example, he clarifies that the dialogic exchange of meaning requires imaginative and epistemological compromises on the part of the reader along the temporal axis of reading. This is most apparent if we turn to Iser's comparison of reading and recursive looping. He suggests that, during the interpretative "interchange,"

> a prediction, anticipation, or even projection is corrected insofar as it has failed to square with what it has targeted. Consequently, there is – at least potentially – a dual correction: the forward feed returns as an altered feedback loop that in turn feeds into a revised input. (Iser 2000, 85)

This description of reading as an exercise in recursion makes explicit the particularities of the reader's interpretive moves, directed by their own "own treasure-house of experience" (Iser 1978, 24) as well as their effect on the meaning derived. Iser suggests that readers tend to come to texts having already ideated their meaning (perhaps according to a synthesis of their paratextual information and readers' existing epistemic and experiential repertoire), but that they must return empty-handed as texts evade determination. From misalignment, readers are persuaded to rethink their hypotheses, and try again to approach the text in question. Every time readers come away from the text, reformulate their position and try again, they get closer to the text. And this getting closer to the text is on the condition that readers get further away from their original hypotheses and themselves, and that they allow the text to participate in the direction of its meaning. However nebulous its actions may be, the text is doing something: it is acting on and affecting the reader such that they approach it, and receive it differently. The nature of this different relation is as yet undetermined.

Though readers may be encouraged to adapt their approach to a given text in order to 'communicate' with it and participate in the production of its meaning, Iser never goes as far as to suggest that readers' movements sees them united with the text or their differences eradicated. Even as the reader is persuaded to move toward the text, and to take up the singular standpoint it offers, "the reader's own disposition will never disappear totally; it will tend instead to form the background to and a frame of reference for the act of grasping and

comprehending" (Iser 1978, 37). This is a crucial caveat through which Iser recognizes the *politics of reading*. Readers' movement is predicated on their existing positionality, including their material location, their cultural inheritances, their epistemic horizons, their bodily experiences, and their existing relationships to literature, reading and literary culture. As Paul B. Armstrong puts it: "[e]ven when one seems to be reading most freely and imaginatively, […] one's subjectivity is enacting the potentialities of subject positions that one has learned to inhabit and that may vary socially, culturally, and historically" (Armstrong 2011, 95). Reading is both material and situated, and textual and transformative. The material and the textual pole interact in affective ways. Acts of textualism affectively generate ethical possibilities, which are themselves affected by the political exigencies affectively engendered by acts of materialism.

Especially in my articulation, then, reader-response theory identifies a *politics of reading* and its interaction with an *ethics of reading*. The ethics of reading originate with an individual's attention to the language of literature and its singularity. In this way, the ethics of reading depend on close reading: "[their] primary obligation will be or ought to be […] a love for language, a care for language and for what language can do" (Miller 1987, 190). Ethical attention demands self-abandonment (Marais 2006, 81-82). It "interrupt[s] … the epistemological" (Spivak 2012, 374). This imaginative generosity empowers that which is not of the self or the self's sociocultural and linguistic horizon by refusing to name its radical alterity (Marais 2000, 164). Whereas the ethics of reading are borne from a necessarily ahistorical and "disembodied" situation, as Peter McDonald points out (2010, 489), the politics of reading are situated responses to the particular socio-historical dynamics of reading. They are underpinned by questions such as "Who writes? For whom is the writing being done? In what circumstances?" (Said in McDonald 2010, 487) as well as "who reads[?]", "who publishes?", "[f]or whom is the publishing being done?", and "[i]n what circumstances?"

(McDonald 2010, 490). Political responses are moreover interested in the extent to which particular iterations of writing and reading fit into much larger historical formations, including colonial exploitation and global systems of economic dispossession. They insistently situate the self in relation to texts and their production journey.

We might intuit that reader-response theory is principally ethical in as much as it prioritizes aesthetic structure, and the effects of indeterminacy and singularity on readers. Reader-response theory's guiding principle that reading entails experiencing the self as other in the co-construction of meaning coheres with J. Hillis Miller's notion that the ethics of reading recognize that "literature gives access to a virtual reality not otherwise knowable" (Miller 2002, 81). Though certainly the politics of reading are less developed within reader-response theory, we can identify their latent importance to Iser in his acknowledgement of "real reader[s'] own beliefs" and their possession and mobilisation of "whole repertoire[s] of historical norms and values" during reading (Iser 1978, 37). Indeed, reader-response theory does not merely incorporate ethical and political aspects, but tacitly characterizes the politics and ethics of reading as dialectical. The ethics of reading implies the politics of reading; the politics of reading implies the ethics of reading. Let us take time here to explain this as clearly as possible. For Iser, reading is a socio-historically situated act between a reader with particular coordinates and their "own treasure-house of experience" (Iser 1978, 24) and, by reverse logic, a text with a particular social, historical and cultural genealogy of production.[7] Yet, reading is also singular and arresting: its interactive occasion can transport readers and texts beyond the world. This paradox does not concern Iser, precisely because it is not perceived as a paradox. The notion of reading as historically-situated or political is premised on the ethics of reading, particularly the affective re-recognition of one's self through the self-othering horizon of the text. The notion of reading as ethical is similarly dependent on the politics of reading, of being aware of where one was first stationed in order to know how far one has travelled. To adapt

Iser's own description of reading as dialectical, "the familiar [or the political conditions of our existence] facilitates our comprehension of the unfamiliar [the situation presented in the text to which we are ethically obliged], but the unfamiliar [the situation in the text to which we are ethically obliged] in turn restructures our comprehension of the familiar [the political conditions of our existence]" (Iser 1978, 94). Ethics and politics are thus inseparable in the liminal space of meaning. Politics provides access to ethics, and ethics provides access to politics.

This dialectical form of reading – in which readers epistemologically move and remain still – can best be elucidated if we understand the reader as made up of the *reading self* and the *self-in-the-world*. On one hand, we have the self-in-the-world: the reader as a cognate, corporeal agent with material, social and epistemic coordinates. On the other hand, we have the reading self: the persona we adopt when we read, which represents temporarily suspending the 'reality' of our interpretive frame, and what is understood as mortal life, and investing in the text world: the world of another, or otherness. When we take up the guise of the reading self, however, a sense of our self-in-the world "will never disappear totally". Only because the reader holds on to their self-in-the-world, and the knowledges and experiences by which it is constituted, can the text's meaning, "which has no existence of its own…come into being by way of ideation' (Iser 1978, 38). Texts rely on the reading self in order to make themselves 'heard,' but must affect the self-in-the-world, too, if they are to mean something beyond their organizing structures. It is the self-in-the-world that ultimately facilitates the 'translation' of the texts' imaginaries into the present, and that has the potential to form meaning, and have meaning formed, anew. "The necessity of playing a role" – of proceeding by way of the reading self – "makes reading (like any other norm-governed social activity) a doubled experience of 'me' and 'not me'", where 'me' refers to a pre-existing subjecthood as self-in-the-world and 'not me' refers to a world-suspending reading self (Armstrong 2011, 95). This means that "the

self is paradoxically present to itself only by acting as another", a situation that variously inspires alienation, empowerment, transformation and innovation "that would be impossible either if the self were unified and monolithic or if the role to which one is hailed [by the implied reader, for example or production history] were all controlling" (Armstrong 2011, 95-96). Put simply, "[b]ecause reading is a doubled experience of staging oneself as another, it can move us in ways we may not anticipate and may feel we do not completely control" (Armstrong 2011, 96). The sensation of movement – of affect – is perceptible only insofar we as readers inhabit two horizons at once (associated with the self-in-the-world and the reading self), and develop an interstitial vantage point through which to perceive the distance between them and process the text. Reading is thus the location of the "[t]he performative dimension of subject creation": it prompts the re(-)production of subject (Armstrong 2011, 96). The "potential in the text […] triggers the re-creative dialectics in the reader" between the reading self and the self-in-the-world (Iser 1978, 30).

My consideration of the reader as composed of the reading self and the self-in-the-world accounts for the at once material and textual characteristics of reading. It enables us to regard the transformative, aesthetic possibilities of reading at the same time as the material circumstances of cultural production and consumption. The reading self accounts for the textual dimensions of reading, and the ways in which reading entails producing one's self and one's immediate horizon of experience as other. It transmits affects, which make possible ethical interfaces like empathy, which may bring about imperatives for self-reconstitution. The self-in-the-world extends the material impetus of reader-response theory, and entails our embeddedness in the political conditions of the present, including our knowledge and experiences as well as our material, linguistic and literary-cultural access to reading and systems of cultural evaluation. It transmits affects which enable proto-political forms of self-recognition, including recognition of the ways in which the self is institutionalized and

implicated in systems beyond its own volition. My notion of a composite reader therefore respects the many possible material, cultural and epistemic differences between readers and texts whilst also attending to the way in which they might, through reading, imaginatively renegotiate those differences. To reiterate, this reader is not intended as a more ethical and more political invention, but rather as a more accurate model for the materialities and textualities of reading.

Together, the reading self and the self-in-the-world occupy and move between the material and the textual. We might visualize this as the text requiring that the reader maintain one foot in the world whilst stretching the other foot out to the fictional or unknown universe. With this in mind, if we resituate the reader and the text, again, according to the conventional subject-object paradigm, we have a composite subject (the reader) that is not separate from the object (the text) but, rather, both inside and outside the text, according to the movement of the reading self and the self-in-the-world. This might remind us of Edward Said's notion of 'contrapuntal reading,' where, as George M. Wilson summarizes, "interpreters move back and forth between an internal and external standpoint on the work's imaginative project" (Wilson 1994, 266). However, unlike Said's internal-external reader, the reading self and self-in-the-world interact and affect each other, mutually shaping their viewpoints as they strive to accommodate the material-textual impetuses of the text along the temporal axis of reading. Recalling Iser's recursion analogy, the reading self, as directed by the self-in-the-world (its other half), partially enters the text, moving along the temporal axis of reading. When the text brings the reading self up short, representing something which does not naturally accord with a frame the reading self already knows or has adopted for the purpose of reading, the reading self must return to the self-in-the-world (outside the text), consult its in-the-world knowledges and experiences, and at the same time implore that the self-in-the-world revise its standpoint. The reading self and the self-in-the-world co-develop an interstitial vantage point through

which to read the text. As the reading self and, by proxy, the text continually encourage the self-in-the-world to move or open up its frame of reference, the self-in-the-world is dislodged. And as it turns back to itself, or where it was once stationed, the self-in-the-world acquires a new critical sensitivity with which to critique that site from whence it came. In short, the text affects the reading self and the self-in-the-world to alter their relationship to the text and the world respectively. This inside-outside formation of the reader thus allows us to harness the relational potential of ethics and politics simultaneously. In as much as it draws attention to the text's role in affecting the perspective of, first, the reading self and, second, the self-in-the-world, this model also troubles material accounts of the uneven distribution of power that characterizes cultural consumption.

Conclusion

This article has sought to engage with the material-textual dimensions of reading, as enacted by the self-in-the-world and the reading self alongside the text. It has identified ethical and political potential in the act of reading postcolonial literatures. In the process, it has challenged the materialist and textualist paradigms through which postcolonialism explores reading and through which the discipline advocates particular – ethical or political – interpretive strategies in often unsatisfactory ways. Indeed, it has found that these paradigms tend to obscure the ambivalent ways we read, preferring to prescribe rather than describe acts of reading, and that in so doing they foreclose the affects of reading and limit postcolonial agency. Notwithstanding the importance of materialist interrogations of the production, circulation and reception of postcolonial literatures in the global literature marketplace then, I conclude by relocating the ethical and political potential of postcolonial literature in the ambivalent affects of the material-textual act that readers carry out. Of course, this potential also represents dangers. An

understanding of reading as affective has the potential to resolve the problems of objectification, appropriation, domestication and commodification associated with reading postcolonial literatures – and documented by materialist scholars – precisely because it makes explicit the text's agency. But it also recognizes that the text and the act of reading might elicit a wider range of readerly affects than prior conceived, including those that undergird the power structures at the site of production. I maintain that this conceptual realignment is crucial however, because it democratizes the reading of postcolonial literatures. It works against notions of more ideal interpretive practices by making clear that we cannot prescribe reading or meaning (as I have shown is typical of materialist and textualist critics alike in their valorisation of self-conscious, 'ethical' reading and 'resistant' reading respectively). In this conception of reading as affective, we recognize the text as an actor at the site of consumption, capable of inspiring and being inflected by multiple readings. This has to be the case or we risk misplacing such responsibilities with individual authors and texts, or delegitimizing reading as it variously takes place outside the academy.

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[1] Issues to do with the politics of language are not specific to postcolonial literatures in the global literary marketplace. Pascale Casanova suggests that, partly independent of their political and economic capital, some languages have acquired greater literary prestige on the world stage (Casanova 2004, 17-18). The Warwick Research Collective (2015) meanwhile link the inequality of literatures and languages to the inequalities of the modern capitalist world-system.

[2] In consonance with Young's reading of black authors, Ruvani Ranasinha (2007) finds that South East Asian authors are similarly read through a lens of material and cultural authenticity, and as representatives of broader cultural and ethnic communities. She argues that readers in Britain characterize writers as "native informant[s]" or "unreliable informant[s]" according to authors' fidelity to an imaginary South Asia that is a priori constructed in the West (Ranasinha 2007, 21-22).

[3] For a discussion of the limitations and specificities of professional postcolonial critique, see Procter (2009).

[4] In place of the assumed links between reading and geopolitical/cultural identity, Procter and Benwell (2014) have described the way in which we adopt 'reading identities'.

[5] My characterisation of postcolonial texts as 'actors' is intended to evoke work carried out by new materialism scholars and those in the field of object-oriented ontologies. See especially Latour (2005) and Bennett (2010) who each make clear that objecthood need not amount to powerlessness or dependence, and might instead be understood as giving rise to an affective singularity.

[6] We can locate an understanding of affect as *feeling-differently* and *being-differently* across influential thinkers in the field, particularly in the Deleuzian strand of affect theory. Brian Massumi effectively posits affect between potentially iterable points as "the notion of a taking-form" (2002, 9). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari similarly put it that "[a]ffects are becomings" (2003, 256), and Rosi Braidotti (2011) maintains this quasi-definition.

[7] With respect to Iser and the politics of reading, see also Fluck (2000, 177-183) on the historical origins of Iser's thought in post-war Germany, and the necessity amongst bourgeois Germans to gain critical distance from the politics of Nazism.