

Articulating a World of Difference

Ecocriticism, Postcolonialism and Globalization

In *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Edward Said counters the generally textualist tendency of literary critical conversation of the early nineteen-eighties with an argument about the essential worldliness of texts. By this he means not only that the meaning of literary texts is indelibly inscribed by the circumstances (“time, place and society”) of their production and reception (35), but also that their effectiveness, “in some cases even their use, are matters having to do with ownership, authority, power, and the imposition of force” (48). Recognition of the material and political significance of texts has important implications for reading; as Said notes, the “closeness of the world’s body to the text’s body forces readers to take both into consideration” (39). A crucial question for criticism thus becomes how to read the worldliness of the literary text, and, secondarily, of literary criticism itself. In addressing this question in general terms, this essay focuses more specifically on the connections and disjunctions between postcolonialism, the theory with which Said is most strongly associated, and ecocriticism, a mode of criticism that understands the “worldliness” of literature in a radically different way. While the world, in postcolonial terms, comprises the political and economic structures that shape, and are shaped by, culture, ecocriticism focuses on the interface between culture and the physical environment.¹

The last few years have seen tentative moves from both sides to bridge the gap between the two approaches.² This impulse towards convergence can be attributed to many factors, not least of which are the profound changes that have occurred in the “world” (both symbolic and material) in which liter-

ary scholarship is produced. In particular, the changes associated with globalization, a process that is characterized in part by the intensification of connections between and within different realms of global activity—political, cultural, economic, environmental, and so on—have had a significant impact on the terrain in which postcolonialism and ecocriticism operate.³ At the same time as globalization multiplies and complicates the connections between culture and ecology (by harnessing indigenous plants, animals and knowledge within the framework of international copyright law, for example), it also expands and intensifies our awareness of those connections: most recently, the use of the globalizing technology of the internet facilitated the international dialogue between labour activists, environmentalists and peace activists that generated the Seattle and Washington, DC protests, while television and other media helped convey their message to the public at large. Finally, globalization has changed the climate in which we do academic work, influencing both the economic structures that define universities and funding bodies and the kinds of research they foster. For reasons I will discuss in more detail in my conclusion, these changes in the academy have also driven the trend toward the integration of postcolonialist and ecocritical theories. The main part of this paper is a frankly speculative attempt to address the practical question of how to combine postcolonialist and ecocritical approaches to understanding contemporary culture. It does so in part through a critical reading of Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk*, a novel that engages explicitly with the world, and with the text-in-the-world, in the context of globalization. The heuristic value of this exercise will justify, I hope, what might seem to be a broadly schematic treatment of large and unwieldy concepts—postcolonialism, ecocriticism and globalization. While this paper proceeds from the premise that there are compelling reasons for thinking through these concepts together, the final section also points to some of the hazards attendant on such an exercise.

1978, the year of the publication of Said's seminal postcolonial text, *Orientalism*, also saw the publication of an essay that garnered much less attention at the time, William Rueckert's "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." Generally attributed with the coining of the term "ecocriticism," Rueckert's essay was actually preceded by a book by Joseph Meeker (also little heralded at the time), *The Comedy of Survival: In Search of an Environmental Ethic*, which proposed a new mode of studying literature "to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare

and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us" (25). While both ecocriticism and postcolonialism are committed to locating the text in the world, they conceive of both world and text in radically different ways such that their intersection has been, until recently, virtually unimaginable.

A major difference between the two theories centres on the way they conceive of the literal worlds, or places, in which the texts they study are located. In keeping with a commitment to recognize the land as "more than a scape, but a picture and a story in which humans participate along with other life forms" (Murphy 12), ecocritical conceptions of the world tend, not surprisingly, to privilege non-urban settings, in which those other life forms predominate. Without disputing Raymond Williams's contention that "the country," in English literature, works, like the city, to represent in disguised or displaced form relations of human labour and culture, ecocritics argue for an extension of this reading to consider the representation of nature in more biocentric terms. Notwithstanding a strong strand of pastoralism in postcolonial literatures,⁴ postcolonial *criticism* tends, by contrast with ecocriticism, to envision the world through urban eyes. An obvious historical explanation for this worldview is that one of the fundamental preconditions of postcolonialism's production was the arrival of Third World intellectuals, both writers and critics, in the metropolitan centres of the First World.⁵ The reasons for postcolonialism's urban outlook extend beyond this, however, to the political and cultural possibilities represented by the city. As a model of multicultural diversity, generally progressive politics and cultural activity, the world-class city functions metonymically and symbolically as a microcosm of a new decolonized world.⁶ As a synthetic creation, both in the sense of its artificiality, and of its simultaneous promise of community and heterogeneity, the city further offers an explicitly postcolonial "home" which, while it admits traces of nationalist feeling in the form of diasporic longing, refuses the kind of claims to "natural" belonging that are seen to smack dangerously of colonialist forms of essentialism. Thus in direct contrast to ecocriticism which stresses "the platial basis of human experience" (Buell, Letter 1001), postcolonialism privileges "cosmopolitan restlessness" (Gandhi 153), emphasizing the provisionality and the constructedness of our relations to place.⁷

Different conceptualizations of individual places extend to different ways of conceiving the relationship between the local and the global. At the same time as it stresses the importance of local place, ecocriticism has an explic-

itly global focus; as Jean Arnold puts it, “ecocriticism encompasses the very earth it studies, assuming its size and shape” (1090). Rather than representing a contradiction in the focus and mandate of ecocriticism, the easy slip-page from the particular to the general represents a logical conclusion of the “planetary consciousness” of ecological thinking.⁸ Postcolonialism also recognizes an interplay between the local and the global, but in a more cautious, indirect way. Wary, with good historical reason, of the ideological and material implications of globalizing impulses, postcolonialism admits the force of the global in a way that explicitly prohibits its recuperation into a formula that confirms the place of the individual in a universal order, either of nature or culture. The global and the local come together, not by way of simple synecdoche, or the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm, but in a way such that each interrupts and distorts the other, thereby refusing the possibility of concrete platial or abstract global belonging in favour of what Homi Bhabha terms the “unhomely . . . the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world” (141). The study of “world,” or postcolonial, literature, according to Bhabha’s definition, becomes “the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of ‘otherness’” (141). Postcolonialism is interested in diversity and hybridity, then, not just in the sense of different cultures jostling against one another in a kind of productive tension, but more profoundly, in the sense of the radical alterity that inhabits even singular cultures, singular identities.

The explicitly poststructuralist bent of postcolonialism, demonstrated in formulations such as Bhabha’s, is part of what makes it difficult to reconcile with the concerns of ecocriticism. What is true of cultural studies in general is also true of postcolonialism: part of its mandate is “to explode the category of ‘the natural’—revealing the history behind those social relations we see as the products of a neutral evolutionary process” (Turner, qtd. in Hochman 86).⁹ Of course, postcolonialism also has a strong materialist impulse; it is this that distinguishes it from other postmodernist theories.¹⁰ However, it is a materialism whose Marxist humanist focus seems, at least initially, to be fundamentally irreconcilable with the goals of ecocriticism. In the process of highlighting the contradictoriness of the European concept of “man,” postcolonialism seeks not so much to destroy it as to erect a more truly humanist model in its place, one which firmly establishes the place of the colonized on the right side of the species boundary. The colonized, Frantz Fanon famously argued, “knows that he is not an animal; and it is precisely

at the moment he realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure its victory" (43). Conflicts between postcolonialism and ecocriticism over the species question are exacerbated by clashes in the political arena between anti-colonial activists and environmentalists, over policies that seem to pit animals against humans. The forcible removal of humans living on the borders of Kruger Park in South Africa, for example, on the grounds of protecting endangered wildlife, could be seen to reflect the untenable idea that "rhinos and hippos are more important than people—or at least than poor people" (Martin 2).¹¹ While this characterization amounts to a caricature of the environmentalist movement, postcolonial critics rightly deem ecology—and by extension, ecocriticism—to be relatively unconcerned with the status and rights of man. Ecology takes up Darwin's invitation to "let conjecture run wild," to imagine that "animals, our fellow brethren in pain, diseases, death, suffering and famine . . . may partake [of?] our origin in one common ancestor—we may be all melted together" (Darwin 368). Even those forms of ecology which stop somewhere short of the radical biocentrism of deep ecologists are predicated on a recognition of the interdependence of all living organisms in a network of relationships which "man"—as individual or as species—cannot transcend.

The differences between ecocriticism and postcolonialism are not only political or conceptual; they also inform what might somewhat problematically be referred to as their aesthetic orientation. By aesthetic orientation I mean the particular kind of readerly pleasure each approach seeks to cultivate, through the kinds of text it chooses to focus on, and the way it reads those texts. In postcolonialism and ecocriticism, a key aesthetic difference is reflected in their respective approaches to realist fiction. Postcolonial critics, as David Carter has incisively argued, tend to avoid realist texts in favour of those which, either through their naive conformity to colonial ideology or their postmodernist self-reflexiveness, allow the critic to perform satisfying deconstructive maneuvers, triumphantly in the case of the former and vicariously in the case of the latter.¹² Ecocritics arguably display the opposite bias, preferring to focus on realist texts, or those which seem to promise the kind of connection between word and world which contemporary literary criticism seems to deny ("Why," asks Lawrence Buell, "must literature always lead away from the physical world, never back to it?" [*Environmental Imagination* 11]).¹³

In each case, the tensions surrounding questions of human(ist) value and agency are resolved, without ever actually being acknowledged, at the

interface of critic and text: in postcolonialism, the imperative to debunk old-fashioned notions of individual agency can be upheld by deflecting the consolidation of self from text to critic: the critic, in the process of discovering the (thoroughly depersonalized, discursified) agency of the text, enacts, without actually acknowledging, the consolidation of the human ego. For the ecocritic, on the other hand, the realist text, by offering the aesthetic experience of congruence between the human imagination and the physical environment, enables the submersion of the reader not just into the text, but also into the world it represents.

I make these observations not to expose, in the hidden agendas of postcolonialism and ecocriticism, a fundamental emptiness or hypocrisy; nor do I want to suggest—as I think David Carter does—that these theories need to abandon their concern for “mere” aesthetics in favour of a concentration on more material, institutional concerns (a question I will return to later). I think it is important to consider these questions in the context of the larger problems that postcolonialism and ecocriticism grapple with, problems of identity and representation, and with the larger, related problem of the “worldly” responsibilities of the cultural critic. With the aim of exploring these problems in more detail, I want to turn now to *The Hero's Walk*, a text that highlights, both formally and thematically, the strengths and the limitations of ecocritical and postcolonial modes of critique.

In the circumstances of its production, as in its themes, *The Hero's Walk* reflects the postcolonial condition described by Bhabha as the envelopment of the world-in-the-home and the home-in-the-world. The postcolonial provenance of its author, Anita Rau Badami, is established in her response to the question of where she is from originally: “It’s hard to say” (Badami, Interview). Born in the south of India, she spent most of her life in the north and east, travelling frequently because of her father’s job, before moving to Calgary with her husband in 1991. Not surprisingly, her fiction, which to date includes two novels, *The Hero's Walk* and *Tamarind Mem* (1996), deals with themes of displacement and belonging, and tensions between old-world tradition and new-world mobility. *The Hero's Walk*, which takes place in the fictional Indian town of Toturpuram, describes two journeys: the metaphorical journey of a middle-aged Indian man, Sripathi Rao, from a timid provincialism to a more global consciousness, and the literal journey of his seven-year-old granddaughter, Nandana, who comes from Canada to India to live with her grandparents after the death of her parents

in a car accident. For both Sripathi and Nandana, the journey involves a kind of culture shock, followed by a gradual opening out towards otherness.

Sripathi's self-enclosure is symbolized in his residence, Big House on Brahmin Street, whose "clean strong walls" stand as a monument to a world in which caste and colonial structures guaranteed that everyone and everything knew its place (6). Its current state of disrepair is mirrored in the chaotic geography of the town itself, which has been remapped in accordance with a state decree ruling that no street can have a name that indicates a particular caste. Thus Brahmin Street becomes merely "Street"—"as [does] Lingayat Street, Mudaliyar Street and half a dozen others in Toturpuram" (5)—in a gesture of egalitarianism whose effects are literally, as well as symbolically, disorientating. The sense of displacement is compounded by changes that have occurred on the street itself over the last few decades: "instead of the tender smell of fresh jasmine, incense sticks and virtue, instead of the chanting of sacred hymns, the street had become loud with the haggling of cloth merchants and vegetable vendors, [and] the strident strains of the latest film music from video parlours" (5-6). The incursion of these loud and unsettling registers of cultural change into the sanctuary of Sripathi's study mirrors more significant assaults on his sense of tradition, including, most worryingly, the refusal of his children to lead the lives he has imagined for him: his daughter Maya has broken off her engagement to an Indian man to marry a Canadian with whom she now lives in Vancouver, and his son Arun has rejected a traditional job in favour of a career as an environmental activist. Sripathi responds to the affronts by ceasing to communicate, literally, in the case of Maya, with whom he has stopped corresponding, and figuratively, with Arun and the rest of his family, through a retreat into an increasingly self-enclosed world. The narrative traces the gradual expansion of his consciousness, a process initiated by Maya's death in a car accident, and his forced confrontation, in both imaginary and physical ways, with otherness.

In one sense, the expansion of Sripathi's global consciousness follows an explicitly postcolonial course. His early education, in conformity to the Macaulayan formula,¹⁴ has produced in Sripathi a peculiar mix of arrogant worldliness, bolstered by enforced memorization of large chunks of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and timid provincialism, informed by a confused allegiance to traditional caste and race hierarchies. Coming of age in conjunction with the birth of postcolonial India, Sripathi is briefly inflamed by the passion of nationalism, which eventually turns into a tepid, secular

Hinduism, characterized not so much by positive adherence to spiritual tradition as by suspicion of cultural difference, and a residual attachment to the politics of caste. His position affords him the luxury of an attitude of superiority towards his wealthier but lower-caste next-door-neighbour, and a vague fear about the world outside India. When Maya sets off for graduate school in the US, Sripathi contemplates with incomprehension the impulse that leads people “to leave the familiar” (126). “What was it,” he wondered, “that had pulled his own daughter into the unknown world beyond the protective walls of home and family?” (126). His own engagement with that unknown world begins with his voyage to Canada to identify Maya’s body, and to collect her seven-year-old daughter, Nadana. The expansion of Sripathi’s concept of family to accommodate his Indo-Canadian daughter corresponds to a more general movement towards the embrace of postcolonial hybridity. The progressive trajectory of the novel is accentuated by the almost too-obvious coincidence, at the end, of the death of Sripathi’s mother, Ammayya, who is a caricature of old world prejudices, and the marriage of his sister Putti to the lower caste next-door-neighbour, Gopala. The expansion of Sripathi’s worldview is accompanied, interestingly, by a deepening of his Hindu spiritual beliefs. Once a proud rationalist who disdained his wife’s faith, he derives comfort from the observance of the traditional rituals ceremonies to mark Maya’s death (258). Thus, his accommodation of the chaos of the modern world is accomplished in tandem with a recognition of the need for ritual through which to exorcise the ghosts of his personal and cultural past.

In thematic terms, *The Hero’s Walk* conforms neatly to the conventions of postcolonialism. Rejecting the hierarchies of colonialism and nationalism, it reimagines identity as the product of an ongoing engagement with the alterity of the world. The world, in this conception, takes the form of a city whose shifting physical structures, like its human inhabitants, bear the imprint of elsewhere. The challenge confronted by Sripathi is in some senses the fundamental challenge of the postcolonial condition: to discover a balance between the preservation of identity and the embrace of difference, between remembering the past and dwelling in the present. From a formal perspective, *The Hero’s Walk* is less amenable to postcolonial reading. Though it celebrates values of hybridity and multiplicity on the level of theme, narratologically it adheres to a much simpler, even old-fashioned formula. Its uncomplicated presentation of the hero (in novelistic if not in mythological terms) and realist mode of narration seemingly reinstate the values of individualism

and universalism. The conclusion further conforms to a conservative formula through its consolidation of traditional institutions of marriage and family. In textual, if not political terms, it proves frustratingly resistant to postcolonialist reading practice, failing to provide the requisite tension to facilitate the critical pleasure of interpreting/performing heterogeneity.

If we complicate the postcolonial perspective with an ecocritical one, a more interesting picture of the novel emerges. Nominally the story of a man, *The Hero's Walk* is also the story of a place, whose physical environment powerfully influences the lives of its inhabitants. The story opens with the description of a heat wave that has cast Toturpuram into a state of suspended animation: "Only idiots ventured out to work" in such heat and, "once there, sat stunned and idle at their desks because the power had gone off and the ceiling fans were still. . . . The more sensible folk stayed at home, clad only in underwear, with moist cloths draped over their heads and chests, drinking coconut water by the litre and fanning themselves with folded newspapers" (2). Survival, it is suggested from the beginning, depends on an accommodation not just of human difference, but of the otherness of the physical environment: accordingly, the world Sripathi finally begins to admit encompasses nature as well as culture. When he travels to Vancouver, his horror of the foreignness of the place and the disorder it has produced in his life are expressed in his revulsion at the "things growing endlessly—enormous trees, brilliant flowers, leaves as large as dinner plates—a fecundity he found impossible to bear" (141). More than a symbol of the life of his daughter that he has shut out and now completely lost, nature here signifies the vitality of all life forms, denied by a human culture that is fatally insensitive to its own interdependence with them.

The principal agent of Sripathi's developing ecological consciousness is his son, Arun, who counters his father's skepticism about his activism by pointing out "you had your independence of India and all to fight for, real ideals. For me and my friends, the fight is against daily injustice, our own people stealing our rights. This is the only world I have and I feel responsible for it" (239). The interconnections between the human world and the natural environment are highlighted through the significance of water, which functions in the novel as both a symbol—of expression vs. repression, of fluid relationships in contrast to rigid identity, and so on—and as a literal force of mortality, whose life and death-giving properties connect the fates of human and non-human animals. As Arun starkly puts it, "All the industrial

effluents being dumped into the sea are destroying the turtles, and soon they will destroy us too. Before long the water table will be affected, and instead of drinking water we will be drinking chlorine or whatever poison is being unloaded” (246). The significance of water is heightened by the drought that persists through much of the book, giving way at the end to storms that end up flooding Big House with sewage. Metaphorical and material implications of the flood converge in Ammayya’s horrified response to the liquid sloshing around her knees:

“Whose is that?” she asked faintly.

“What do you mean, whose, Ammayya?” demanded Putti. Now her anger had been replaced by contempt for her mother. . . . “All the drains on this road are connected. So it could be our neighbour’s for all I know. Maybe Chocobar man’s. Maybe Munnuswamy’s. Does it have a name on it, you want me to check? (343)

The image of the caste distinctions Ammayya has so fastidiously upheld being washed away in shit effectively cancels the authority of all social hierarchies, exposing the biological underpinnings such hierarchies seek to deny. It is those underpinnings that Arun is committed to protecting.

Sripathi gains some understanding of the meaning of Arun’s work when, after depositing Ammayya’s ashes in the sea, the two men wait all night on the beach to watch the arrival of the turtles. Watching as they laboriously dig holes for their eggs, Sripathi is “humbled by the sight of something that had started long before humans had been imagined into creation by Brahma, and had survived the voracious appetites of those same humans. In the long continuum of turtle life, humans were merely dots” (355). The image of the turtles, which occurs near the end of the book, precipitates the final crumbling of a worldview in which ethnocentrism is entangled with, and bolstered by, anthropocentrism. Sripathi’s intuition of the truth of the Darwinian precept—that the origins and fates of humans and other living forms are “all melted together”—culminates not just in a revised worldview, but also in a renewed sense of responsibility for the world.

While Arun’s activism represents the most obvious embodiment of how that responsibility might be discharged, Badami offers another model of ethical engagement through Sripathi’s career as a writer. As a once-aspiring journalist who ultimately resigned himself to a career as an ad-man, Sripathi satisfies his frustrated ambitions by writing letters to the editor of the local paper. Though the letters, which he writes under the pseudonym “Pro Bono Publico,” he sees himself fulfilling a civic duty: “Like his boyhood heroes . . . he was a crusader, but one who tried to address the problems of

the world with pen and ink instead of sword and gun and fist" (9). His commitment to his subject matter, though, is relatively superficial—"he could write about anything under the sun"—and his concern about the issues he writes on is almost incidental to the frisson of pleasure he gets from the writing itself, and from reading one of his published letters that manages to be "forceful, to the point and with an edge of sarcasm" (10). Like his encyclopedic world knowledge, his writing style is the product of a colonial education system, "learnt at the end of Father Schmidt's bamboo cane at St. Dominic's Boy's School" (10), and, notwithstanding the pleasure it gives him, he is often surprised, on rereading one of his letters, "at how different and removed from himself it look[s] in print" (8). Maya's death, and all the changes it precipitates, prompts a gradual change in his writing. On the morning after his night on the beach with the turtles, Sripathi eschews his preferred mode of withering wit, and begins a letter: "*Dear Editor . . . Early this morning, at Toturpuram beach, I saw the most amazing sight . . .*" (359). The beginning of this letter (which is the final sentence in the book), and the stylistic shift it represents, seems to endorse a kind of writing that aims for a direct engagement with—even a submission to—the world, rather than self-conscious abstraction from it. Where the mode of the latter style, represented in the clever detachment of Sripathi's early letters, is critical analysis, the new style is disposed towards affirmation and synthesis. Such an approach to writing, Badami seems to be suggesting, represents a more generous, and perhaps, ultimately, a more culturally and ecologically sensitive way of engaging with the world.

The idea that culture, in general, and narrative, in particular, might play a significant role in shaping the material practices that lead to social and/or environmental decay, on the one hand, or renewal, on the other, is shared by many postcolonial and ecocritical theorists. In the spirit of my argument that the problems to which postcolonialism and ecocriticism address themselves are increasingly intertwined, demanding a complementary approach, I want to turn now to the consideration of a possible starting place for the formulation of such an approach. Joseph Meeker's *Comedy of Survival*—one of the texts I cited at the beginning as an early proponent of the extension of the text into the (natural) world—speaks in interesting ways to some of the formal and thematic issues raised in *The Hero's Walk*, suggesting, in the process, some possibilities for extending connections between ecocriticism and postcolonialism.

From the perspective of Meeker's theory, the crucial element in Badami's fiction is its conformity to the conventions of comedy, its celebration of the biological processes and social rituals concerned with the cycle of life. In spite of the constant threat of disaster, represented by Maya's death and the looming possibility of environmental catastrophe, the concluding images in the book, of Putti's marriage and the flowering of Sripathi's relationship with his granddaughter, affirm the strength and persistence of the forces of life. It is in the formal and thematic conservatism of this comic resolution (interestingly, the elements of the novel that prove the most *uncongenial* to the version of postcolonialism described by David Carter) that the novel proves most amenable to the ecocritical theory outlined by Meeker. In defining comedy as the genre most conducive to the promulgation of ecological values, Meeker argues that Western culture has traditionally accorded a privileged status to the genre of tragedy, a key feature of which is its affirmation of the dignity and nobility of man in his struggles against a hostile universe.¹⁵ That he cannot win the struggle does not mitigate—indeed it confirms—his heroism. Comedy, by contrast, represents a relatively unexalted view of humanity. While the dignity of the tragic hero is confirmed by his adherence to principle, the comic hero has no such commitment; his primary priority is survival. Comedy is therefore essentially conservative: it endorses change only when it facilitates the goal of adaptability rather than serving the grander—and ecologically dubious—project of progress. Comedy, Meeker suggests, represents a more viable narrative form for the embodiment of ecological values.

In an interview, Badami explains that part of what she sought to do in *The Hero's Walk* was to “explore the notion of heroism, ranging from the epic mythological heroes who are ‘so large, so enormous and so endowed with wisdom and bravery and goodness’ to the Indian movie hero ‘who’s also larger than life, completely unbelievable, almost a cardboard character’” (qtd. in “Author”) Against these images, Badami offers a more mundane vision of heroism represented in life itself, “in simply seeking to traverse life from birth to death” (qtd. in “Author”). Sripathi moves towards a recognition of the value of this process as he abandons the heroic models of his youth—images framed by the structure of the battle (*Hero's Walk* 275, 308), in favour of a less oppositional, more complex vision, embodied in the traditional dance classes his wife teaches. Nirmala reminds her students that Rama, the hero, must walk “with dignity, . . . with courage and humility” (136), while the walk of Ravana—also a great king, “is the walk of a braggart.

A man who is too proud and therefore not heroic" (136). "In Indian dance," Badami explains, "there's a hero's walk . . . and a villain's walk [sic] with a few different flourishes. . . . We walk that fine line between being completely good, completely bad and completely stupid" (qtd. in "Author"). The image of the hero's walk reflects Meeker's theory of comedy in its representation of the precariousness and moral ambiguity of human existence, and in its rejection of oppositional frameworks in favour of the more nuanced movement of the dance. Comedy "is the art of accommodation and reconciliation" (Meeker 48), expressed not through heroic transcendence but rather, as Sripathi comes to recognize, in "sturdy resilience," coupled with a recognition of interdependence, an acknowledgment that "a human being is not merely a ticking body, but a sum of all that happens in the world around him" (Badami, *Hero* 324, 213).

The comic worldview has important cultural as well as ecological implications. Because it is rooted in the biological circumstances of life, comedy "depends less upon particular ideologies or metaphysical systems than tragedy does" (Meeker 38). Thus, whereas tragedy is a largely Western form that achieved its height in ancient Greece and Elizabethan England, comedy "is very nearly universal" (Meeker 38). To the extent that the construction of narratives can be seen as an adaptive strategy for the human species, comedy would seem to be an exceptionally successful mode of engagement with the world. Meeker extends the biological reading of comedy to suggest that, "like comedy, mature ecosystems are cosmopolitan. Whatever life forms may exist seem to have an equal right to existence, and no individual needs, prejudices, or passions give sufficient cause to threaten the welfare of the ecosystem structure as a whole" (43). Comedy, it would seem, is conducive to the preservation of cultural as well as natural diversity.

From a postcolonialist perspective, the most obvious problem raised by Meeker's theory is its overt conservatism. Its rejection of the value or viability of resistance in favour of accommodation and "muddling through" (45) looks like a prescription for political passivity and acquiescence in the face of repression or domination. This may, however, be less of an obstacle than it immediately seems. Without forsaking its commitment to the recognition of difference and critique of inequality, postcolonialism has grown increasingly conscious of the liabilities of identitarian politics and a "rhetoric of blame" that helps fuel the proliferation of violent conflicts. "The world," Said notes, "is too small and interdependent to let these passively happen" (*Culture and Imperialism* 18-20). If, as both Said and Meeker suggest, the

world we live in is shaped in part by the way we conceive of it in narrative, the prevailing, tragic view in which “the world is a battleground” (Meeker 48) is no longer sustainable. Meeker’s theory of comedy, in its endorsement of the values of “accommodation and reconciliation,” offers one way out of the metaphorical battlefield. Yet it is arguably *because* of its embodiment of those very values that Meeker’s theory will not ultimately work as a model for the incorporation of postcolonial and ecocritical concerns. In its effort to highlight the universality of comedy—a universality underlined, in this case, by the authority of biology—Meeker’s theory forgets the necessary partiality of any attempt to *represent* that universality. In other words, while it might be accurate to say that the production of narrative, even of comic narrative, is a universal human trait, it does not follow that all narratives are mutually intelligible, or that there is a universal position from which one can read the world in narrative, or narrative-in-the-world. What is missing from this account is a history of the economic and cultural, as well as the ecological conditions from which narratives emerge, and a recognition of the role of politics in facilitating the emergence of some narratives and the repression of others. These elements, important to cultural critique in general, are particularly crucial in the case of ecocriticism and postcolonialism, theories that are concerned explicitly with the material contexts and consequences of representation. I note their absence here not in order to dismiss Meeker’s book, which I have cited at some length because I think it serves as a useful starting place from which to begin to think about connections between ecocriticism and postcolonialism, but because they point to the hazards attendant on *any* attempt to incorporate these two movements into a single, comprehensive theory. These hazards are heightened by the conditions of contemporary global(ized) culture, as I will argue in my conclusion, below.

The argument that we need to find a way to talk about postcolonial culture and environment together has come to assume the status of a truism in discussions of globalization. To be a “citizen of the world,” John Tomlinson suggests, one must be

open to the diversity of global cultures and to be disposed to understand the cultural perspective of the other. But [one] also—perhaps more importantly—need[s] to have a sense of wider cultural *commitment*—of belonging to the world as a whole: that is . . . of a world in which, particularly in terms of common environmental threats requiring lifestyle adaptation, there are *no others*. (186)

The formula is an appealing one, illustrating nicely the inseparability of

postcolonial and ecocritical concerns in defining the responsibilities of global citizenship. Globalization has worked, in significant ways, to enable the recognition of those responsibilities. It has also created conditions that constrain the terms in which they can be imagined. The growing consciousness attendant upon the shrinking of the globe that we are all, as Darwin had it, “melted together,” is facilitated by the scientific demonstration of the myriad networks that connect all life forms—a process that occurs in awkward conjunction with the increasing commodification of those forms. It is with a view to the ambiguous implications of those processes, in cultural as well as ecological terms, that I want to resist the move evident in the critical *discourse* of globalization to make everything commensurable. This move has material and symbolic dimensions, both of which affect profoundly the “worldliness” of literary scholarship. One of the signal characteristics of globalization is the conversion of progressively larger spheres of life, knowledge and experience into economic terms. The consequences for academic work are on one level obvious: scholars are increasingly forced to legitimate their scholarship in worldly terms, to make it pay. For humanities scholars in particular, whose work remains most stubbornly resistant to translation into real dollars, the imperative to demonstrate value gets shifted into the speculative realm (which, in the world of finance capital, is not that far removed from how the rest of the economy works anyway), where it is expressed as an escalation of rhetorical claims for the “risk” entailed in doing certain kinds of scholarship, and as an inclination towards the same metaphors of “synergy” and “convergence” that prevail in contemporary economic and political discourse.¹⁶ More generally, the move towards a more “worldly” form of scholarship is expressed in an increasing tendency, in the language of granting agencies and researchers, to claims of global comprehensiveness, accompanied by an increasing facility of resolution of difficult and complex issues; these are claims of which postcolonialism and ecocriticism should be particularly wary.

The danger as I see it, in the attempt to merge the concerns of ecocriticism and postcolonialism in a new “world” literary theory, is that the ethical commitment of both to the articulation of complexity—of expression, of culture, of communication, of life—will be sacrificed to the compulsion towards economic and/or aesthetic resolution and conquest. To guard against this, we need, while remaining consciousness of the place of the text in the world, to resist the danger of confusing the two in a gesture of critical heroics. It is helpful in this regard to recall Said’s comments, in “The World, the

Text and the Critic,” on the function and limits of the critical essay. Citing Lukács, Said reads the essay as an expression of “a yearning for conceptual-ity and intellectuality, as well as a resolution to the ultimate questions of life” (52), whose form is always inadequate to its desire. The typical essayist figure, for Lukács, is Socrates, whose profound yearning is expressed and concealed through his talk on mundane matters, and whose debates are incommensurate to his death. Socrates’ death, Lukács suggests, “perfectly symbolizes essayistic destiny, which is the absence of a real tragic destiny” (qtd. in Said 52). If, as a critic, one cannot claim the role of tragic hero, nei-ther is it possible to immerse oneself in the comedy of existence, to literally embody the aims of ecology or postcolonial hybridity. Rather, the activity of literary criticism remains, like Sripathi’s letter-writing, an oddly clunky, almost anachronistic, activity, insufficient to its claim to function “Pro Bono Publico,” but committed to the process of articulating the responsibil-ity of the self to the demands of an increasingly complex world of others. It is with a view to this reminder about the power and the limitations of liter-ary criticism that I argue for the need to work out the differences between ecocriticism and postcolonialism with respect to “world” literature.

NOTES

- 1 These radically simplified definitions of “postcolonialism” and “ecocriticism,” adopted for the heuristic purposes of this paper, cannot pretend to do justice to the complexity or diversity of ideas or methodologies encompassed by these terms. For more extensive definitions of ecocriticism, see, for example Glotfelty; Cohen; “Forum.” For elaborations on postcolonialism, see, for example, Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back*; Hall; Shoat.
- 2 While postcolonialism has made few gestures (see, for example, Hutcheon, Spivak and Tiffin) towards the inclusion of an ecological perspective, ecocriticism has recently—in part, perhaps, to counter charges that it is primarily a white, American movement—made a concerted effort to address issues of culture and race. See, for example, Lengler; Martin; Murphy; Slaymaker.
- 3 While definitions of globalization abound, most commentators stress the idea of intensi-fied connections: Held et al. suggest that “globalization may be thought of initially as the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life . . .” (2). Roland Robertson defines globalization as “the com-pression of the world and the intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole” (8), while John Tomlinson emphasizes the production of relations of “complex connectivity” in globalization. For other accounts of globalization, see Waters; Giddens.
- 4 The natural world figures prominently in the novels of Markandaya, Ngugi, and Lamming, for example, as well as the poetry of Senghor and Walcott. For a discussion of “new world” pastoralism, see Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* 53–82.

- 5 Dirlik stresses the significance of this often unacknowledged material context of post-colonialism.
- 6 Ball discusses these functions in an essay on Hanif Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia*.
- 7 "In some ways," Ashcroft et al. suggest, "place is language, something in constant flux, a discourse in process" (*Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 391)
- 8 That the development of what Mary Louise Pratt terms "planetary consciousness" (9-10) occurred in conjunction with colonial conquest points to a historical connection between postcolonialism and ecocriticism that I have explored in more detail elsewhere (see O'Brien).
- 9 Hochman cites this formulation in an essay that explores the difficulty of constructing a "green" cultural studies.
- 10 For discussion of this critical difference between postcolonialism and postmodernism, see, for example, Slemon.
- 11 As Martin and Slaymaker have both argued, ecocriticism's relative indifference to problems of economic inequality explains in part the reluctance of African critics to embrace it.
- 12 Carter's characterization of postcolonialism is supported by Brennan and by Gandhi, who notes a tendency for postcolonial critics to invoke "the discourse of literary hybridity [as] . . . a sort of guilty political rationalisation of readerly preference" (162).
- 13 For a critique of Buell's ecocritical defense of realism, see Phillips.
- 14 In his infamous Minute on Indian Education, Lord Macaulay called for the cultivation of "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (249).
- 15 Meeker's distinction between comedy and tragedy simplifies, but basically conforms to, Frye's more extended treatment of their generic differences.
- 16 An interesting example of the latter appeared in an editorial in the *National Post*, in which Preston Manning promoted the idea of a strategic alliance of conservatives, less on the grounds of the specific benefits such an alliance might bring than because of the intrinsic appeal of the concept itself. Pointing out how it has worked in the business world, through corporate mergers and trade agreements, Manning goes on to venture that, "'Building strategic alliances' could well become the watchword of progressive politics during the opening decade of the 21st century" (A14). What's interesting and disturbing about this argument is not just the easy conflation of politics and economics, but also the rhetorical movement that reflects and legitimates it: in the language of economics, in which everything is commensurable with everything else, the obligation to demonstrate material relationships between things is abandoned in favour of the "strategic alliance" of ideas through empty analogy.

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