Canadian Literature in English “Among Worlds”

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IN THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH of the events of September 11, 2001, at the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, assertions that “the world” had irrevocably changed dominated American media coverage of the attacks. Early counter-reactions from voices such as Susan Sontag and Noam Chomsky met with intense resistance as tantamount to treason. Within a fortnight, Slavoj Žižek was pointing out that Peter Weir’s film, The Truman Show, offered an appropriate gloss on the dominant American reaction to the events of the 11th as a radical disruption of “the world”:

The ultimate American paranoiac fantasy is that of an individual living in a small idyllic Californian city, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he lives in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he lives in a real world, while all people around him are effectively actors and extras in a gigantic show. The most recent example of this is Peter Weir’s The Truman Show (1998) with Jim Carrey playing the small-town clerk who gradually discovers the truth that he is the hero of a 24-hours permanent TV show. (1)

Canadians subject to what Glenn Willmott has anatomized as a national proclivity for “ressentiment” would want to add to Žižek’s observation that both Peter Weir as Australian director and Jim Carrey as Canadian star of The Truman Show are products, in part, of national discourses at least once removed from the continuing isolationist predilections of late twentieth-century United States.

Indeed, in the days following the 11th, Australians were watching their prime minister, who happened to be in Washington at the time of the attacks, being pointedly ignored as he offered feverish statements of support. Simultaneously, Canadians were protesting the failure of President Bush even to mention Canada in the long list of allies included in his initial address to Congress. Meanwhile, the immediately affirmed bond between the British prime minister and the American president as each other’s best ally in both peace and war served as a reminder of the powerful partnership in the new millennium of the dominant national and imperial discourses of the two preceding centuries. For
Australians and Canadians subject to neo-colonial resentment, it could also spur memories of Peter Weir’s *Gallipoli* if not Jim Carrey’s *Dumb and Dumber.*

In addressing this alliance of British and American power in the limited sphere of Canadian literary study in English, this paper uses as a focus the addition of Alice Munro to the most recent edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature,* the first and only Canadian writer to be represented there. Interested neither in British canon-bashing nor in knee-jerk nationalist reactions to the power of American publishing, I nevertheless want to argue that even in an age of instant Web anthologies and individualized course packs, *The Norton* and its imitators function as both reflections and reinforcers of powerful and continuing neo-colonial assumptions underlying literary study in Canada. That anthologies are designed in relation to their perceived primary market and that they function as conservative instruments of interpellation is hardly new news. But in looking at the doubled imperialism of *The Norton* in a Canadian pedagogical context, I want to suggest that amid the daunting array of post-colonial pedagogies advanced inside our classrooms, this strong national alliance should breed reflection on the curricular and departmental structures and contexts surrounding classes on Canadian writing.

At the same cultural moment as we rigorously contest constructions of the national inside our classrooms in order to address issues related to First Nations, multiculturalism, and globalization, “nations continue to exist because the major players have a vested interest in their continuing” (Brennan 673). Those national vested interests are clearly evident in the union of canonical and publishing power in London and New York. While not unaware of potential charges of being both reactionary and reductive, I want to suggest, first, that dismissal of the national at the level of our institutional negotiations may be premature, and secondly, that one measure of our commitment to post-colonial pedagogies addressing Canadian writing could be how much attention we give to the national literatures in English of India or Nigeria, Australia or New Zealand. As Stephen Slemon observes, “an inculcation of local and nationalist knowledges goes nowhere as a post-colonial pedagogy unless it enters into specific negotiations with the practices of an anti-or counter-colonialist theoretical critique” (157). The opportunity for an encounter with those knowledges at a more than superficial level seems, however, to be a necessary element in an informed post-colonial pedagogy.

In the context of last year’s special *PMLA* issue, “Globalizing Literary Studies,” and the powerfully transitive participle in that title, Canadian literature, along with those of Australia and New Zealand, may be particularly vulnerable to the forces of globalization given its position within the various disciplinary and interdisciplinary structures associated with postcolonial studies. As Graham Huggan observes, within this field, the putatively “non-hegemonic” literatures and cultures of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean are welcomed for the insights they provide on diasporic patterns of identity, history and self-empowerment, [but] the more ostensibly privileged, predominantly white literatures and cultures of former settler colonies like Canada, Australia or New Zealand are quite likely to disappear from view. (241)

Suffering the usual dilemmas of those dealing with the problematic status of invader-settler literatures, I want, on the one hand, to celebrate the long overdue advertising in the 2001–02 academic year of tenure-track positions in “African Literatures in English” and “Anglophone Literature of Africa and/or the Caribbean” at the University of Alberta and the University of Toronto respectively. Concurrently, I want to suggest that a failure
to expand the limited profile in our curricula of other national and regional literatures, including those of other invader-settler cultures, limits our capacity to situate Canadian writing effectively not only in relation to British canonical and American publishing power but also in relation to many of the issues associated with post-colonial pedagogy.

First published in 1962, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, through its first four editions, represented writing of the British Isles under a title untroubled by its homogenizing of the literature of England and literature in English. Acceptance of this conflation of the national and the linguistic rests on what Jonathan Culler identifies as a special structure of exemplarity at work in literature. The structure of literary works is such that it is easier to take them as telling us about “the human condition” in general than to specify what narrower categories they describe or illuminate.

But the combination of offering universality and addressing all those who can read the language has had a powerful national function. To present the characters, speakers, plots, and themes of English literature as potentially universal is to promote an open yet bounded imagined community to which subjects in the British colonies, for instance, are invited to aspire. In fact, the more the universality of literature is stressed, the more it may have a national function. (36–37)

As the multiple discussions of the impact of Wordsworth’s “daffodils” on colonial children suggest, the implications of the powerful link between the national and the universal in relation to the British canon have been the subject of intense analysis since the 1960s. What has received less attention in Canada is the actual representation in our curricula of the multiple national literatures in English beyond those of Canada, Britain, and the United States.

The elision in “English literature” of “literature in English” and “the literature of England” aroused no resistance in *The Norton’s* primary market in the United States at its inception because the study of American language and literature had already established a parallel political and linguistic legitimacy dating from Noah Webster’s *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language* (1783-85) and the subsequent publication of his *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828) and the related school “speller” that had sold more than sixty million copies by 1890 (Hart 902). In the United States by 1962, *The Norton’s* market was already marked for both curricular and publishing purposes by the organization of the study of English around the literary histories of both the British Isles and the United States, a structure subsequently reflected in W.W. Norton’s publication of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (1979) as a companion to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Even as Prime Minister Blair and President Bush reaffirm a parallel political partnership leading to a joint nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize, Harvard continues to name its department “The Department of English and American Literature and Language.”

In the wake of the canon controversies of the 1980s and 90s, Robert Scholes makes the obvious point that within such curricular and publishing structures, “other Anglophone literatures—even Canadian—have held a peripheral place” (145). What I want to recall, of course, is that in the Canadian market for the early editions of *The Norton* in the 1960s and 70s, Canadian literature was as peripheral as it was, and is, in the United States. Indeed, in a pattern notably contrasting with that of the United States, that status in Canada was often justified by arguments noting that American literature was also peripheral in Canadian curricula and program requirements dominated by the literature of the British
Isles. Even the great expansion of courses in English-Canadian literature in the 1970s left those courses viewed as “add-ons” rather than as announcements of a fundamental realignment in departmental curricula. Indeed, departmental curricular battles over required undergraduate course groupings usually found Canadian literature competing with American literature, but rarely threatening principles of coverage governing requirements for the study of British literature. Instead, when the number of Canadian courses approached or matched the number of American courses, nationalist aspirations were satisfied.

Canadian nationalism, even at its peak, could never sustain the presumption of a “Department of English and Canadian Literature and Language” to parallel Harvard’s. Instead, Alice Munro could satirize the limited horizons of American provincialism in Lives of Girls and Women with the arrival in Jubilee of Aunt Nile, the new American wife of Del Jordan’s Uncle Bill, and the bearer of a perspective much noted in the current president of the United States.

Nile meanwhile looked amazed and unhappy as someone who had never even heard of foreign countries, and who is suddenly whisked away and deposited in one, with everybody around speaking an undreamt-of language. Adaptability could not be one of her strong points. Why should it be? It would put in question her own perfection. (92)

Thus, as nationalist Canadians of the 1960s and 70s looked to the United States for threats to our national culture, The Norton reflected and reinforced the continuing canonical power of British colonialism.

For its first four editions, then, The Norton ignored literature from outside the British Isles but, in doing so, conveyed quite different messages to American and Canadian students. By 1972, Tom Symons’ report for the Commission on Canadian Studies, To Know Ourselves, tempered earlier nationalist enthusiasm with the finding that only 8 percent of undergraduate courses in Canadian departments of English dealt in any way with Canadian literature. David Cameron’s 1996 successor to the Symons report, Taking Stock, found this number rising to 12 percent, and Cameron expresses surprise that English departments report the smallest proportion of Canadian content among the nine disciplines surveyed (53). An indication of the institutional ambivalence and ambiguity underlying this figure emerges when it is placed beside a report received by Cameron from the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English proclaiming Canadian studies “a very powerful force in the discipline” (142).

What I want to suggest is that the study of Canadian literature has not been a “very powerful force” in our discipline over the past 25 years, whether one judges by the naming of our departments, the program requirements for our undergraduate and graduate students, or the construction of “area” classifications for appointments, graduate comprehensive examinations, or graduate and undergraduate program reviews. I am, however, less interested in belatedly repeating nationalist arguments of the 70s than in stressing that a failure to acknowledge the actual status of Canadian writing in English in our curricular structures leaves us badly positioned to define appropriate local strategies for addressing a world in which “globalizing literary studies” becomes a PMLA mantra.

The status of American literature in the United States as the one invadersettler literature to function as a significant other to British literature has the potential, then, to reinforce
the link between nation and literature in London and New York while other post-colonial national literatures continue to be marginalized. Nationalists of the 1960s and 70s fought to gain a status for English-Canadian literature equal to that of American literature in Canada, but rather than seeking the ideological parity with British literature achieved by American literature in the United States, some proponents of Canadian literary study adopted a strategy more attuned to a different national culture by allying themselves with teachers and critics of “Commonwealth” literatures in English.

As a glance at just his early work reveals, no one has offered a better “Commonwealth” model of how it is possible to move between Canadian and other post-colonial literatures in English than W.H. New. Writing an introduction to George Woodcock’s first collection of essays on Canadian literature, *Odysseus Ever Returning*, New observes that for Woodcock, “the literature of Europe provides the touchstones by which to estimate the worth of the new” (xii); for New, those touchstones are in post-colonial discourse. In the Introduction to his 1971 anthology of “English stories from around the world,” *Four Hemispheres*, New acknowledges that most of the writers included in the anthology are not well known, and the few who are—Mansfield, Lessing, Naipaul, Spark, White—perhaps for that reason seem the oddities. One of the things this collection does, however, is to put them back into the context from which they emerged as major world writers, and to place beside their stories the interesting work of some of their compatriots, (v)

What interests New in these stories is “the distinctive use of the English language” (ix) and “the resilience of English as a literary language around the world” (viii).

In 1975, the Foreword to New’s *Critical Writings on Commonwealth Literatures: A Selective Bibliography to 1970* (the first book-length bibliography available to students of those literatures) identifies the book as “neither more nor less than a guide and aid to research in a field of literary study that is only just recently attracting serious international attention” (1); the adjective “Commonwealth” is a “bibliographer’s term of convenience for those countries still devising an English-language literary culture” (1). In that same year, New published *Among Worlds: An Introduction to Modern Commonwealth and South African Fiction*, with seven chapters (The West Indies, South Africa, East and West Africa, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, South Asia) attempting to outline “thematic parallels that mark the literary contemporaneity of each Commonwealth culture and examine some of the ways in which writers have used their cultures’ preoccupations to construct separate and multiple worlds” (1).

Now often derided for promulgating national “false consciousness,” homogenizing anglophilia, and other sins often more evident to their attackers than to those subject to their pedagogical practices, “Commonwealth” critics nevertheless challenged the overwhelming dominance of the British canon in Canada by beginning the process of introducing courses in writing from outside of Great Britain, the United States, and Canada. Although the comparative courses have been the primary objects of attack, both for being under-theorized and for appropriative combinations of texts and cultures, they have survived as “Commonwealth” or “post-colonial” courses under various theoretical rubrics, usually focused exclusively on contemporary writing and, despite their critics, usually more concerned with facilitating distinctions than with conflating disparate cultures. For the purposes of curricular categories related to “coverage” requirements, these courses have been treated as “add-ons” to existing categories, leaving core geographic and temporal assumptions and biases in the curriculum intact.
The courses more rigorously focused on national or regional literatures in English outside of Canada, Britain, or the United States presented a stronger challenge to existing curricular structures by insisting on other literary histories predating 1960 and on imagined communities outside of Europe and continental North America. These courses, however, are now threatened by the dismissal of such geographic categories as nationalist or racist essentialisms even as other areas of the curriculum remain unaltered. As early as 1994, in his much-cited “Postcolonial Culture, Postimperial Criticism,” W.J.T. Mitchell could observe that just as writers in English outside of England and the United States were gaining unprecedented public recognition in the late decades of the twentieth century, the attention of the literary academy shifted from introducing them into classrooms and curricula to focus instead on literary theory emanating from those imperial centres. In Canada, a related shift towards “postcolonial” as framed by Said, Spivak, and Bhabha, but under-inflected by the work of those such as W.H. New on literature outside of the Anglo-American axis, arrested a development now frequently seen as obsolescent in the face of both globalization and the issues associated with post-colonial studies.

Approaching its fifth edition in 1986, *The Norton* offered ample canonical resources for exploring the concerns of interest to Euro-American theorists and so could largely continue to ignore that the literatures in English of Africa, the Caribbean, Canada, or Australia now claimed national and regional space. Derek Walcott was the only writer to be added to *The Norton* from any of these literatures, with any impact of this inclusion on the anthology’s editorial principles occluded by grouping Walcott with other “contemporary” poets, the others of course all working in Great Britain and Ireland. The inclusion of Walcott, nevertheless, marks the beginning of the breakdown of the strategic blurring of language and nation underlying *The Norton’s* editorial principles of selection. St. Lucia–born and a resident of Trinidad and the United States, Walcott, identified succinctly as “the Black Caribbean poet,” is the first writer not significantly associated with the British Isles to be included in *The Norton.*

The sixth edition in 1993 could note that Walcott had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in the preceding year, and the Preface tersely stated that “the writer of prose fiction Nadine Gordimer and the poet Fleur Adcock are now included” (xxxviii). The introductory essay for Gordimer cites her Nobel Prize in 1991, and the bio-critical introduction to Adcock notes that she is New Zealand–born but has been resident in London since 1963: “One of a growing number of Commonwealth poets whose work is enriching English literature, Adcock simultaneously reflects the decorum and distanced violence of life in the predominantly white former dominions” (2387). Although this comment invites further analysis on various fronts, my own immediate interest is two-fold. First, the “white former dominions” enter the literary economy of *The Norton* through the work of a New Zealand–born poet who published her first volume a year after moving permanently to London. Secondly, despite the influence of Salman Rushdie’s “The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance” in 1982 and his announcement a year later that “Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist,” the centripetal assumptions underlying *The Norton* remained undisturbed a decade later. Similarly, when Terry Eagleton proclaims that “the days when any half-decent verse or prose emanating from the former Empire could be recruited as ‘Commonwealth literature,’ ascribed a sort of country rather than town membership of the literary club, have vanished forever” and that “the Home Counties view of literature has now been decisively despatched” (19), I remain
unpersuaded. Although one homogenizing version of “Commonwealth literature” has been justifiably rejected by Rushdie and, more recently, by Amitav Ghosh, fulfillment of Rushdie’s call for “all English literatures” (”Commonwealth” 70) to be studied together is scarcely evident. Instead, I see the most recent edition of The Norton as a better indicator of the changes at work in the move from “English language and literature” towards Pico Iyer’s migrant “global soul” and singular “Global Lit” (Foran 64).

III

Amidst such shifts and debates, the most significant influence on the changes in the most recent edition of The Norton published in 2000 would seem to be the appearance of a competing anthology in 1999, The Longman Anthology of British Literature. The Longman explicitly announces a geographic principle of selection encompassing the whole of the British Isles but acknowledges that “most speakers of English live in countries that are not the focus of this anthology” (xxix-xxx). In response, after 38 years of avoiding or eliding such questions, the seventh edition of The Norton (2000) acknowledges nervously that “the national conception of literary history, the conception by which English Literature meant the literature of England or at most of Great Britain, has begun to give way to something else” (xix). That “something else” beyond the national quickly evaporates, however, in the continuing acknowledgment that “we have separated off, for purposes of this anthology, English literature from American literature” (xviii). And the spectre of the MLA’s Division 33 oft-cited but unchanged title, “Literatures in English other than British and American,” reappears as this sentence continues: “but in the selections for the latter half of the twentieth century we have incorporated a substantial number of texts by authors from other countries” (xviii).

At last, then, joining earlier Nobel winners, Walcott and Gordimer, and London resident, Adcock, are single figures from Australia, Nigeria, and Canada (Les Murray, Chinua Achebe, and Alice Munro), as well as V.S. Naipaul, Jean Rhys, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, and J.M. Coetzee. In addition, for the first time, a long essay titled “The Persistence of English” traces “the emergence and spread of the English language” (jacket copy). Not surprisingly, when the “Major Authors” edition of The Norton appeared last year, Les Murray, Alice Munro, and even that London-New Zealand hybrid, Fleur Adcock, disappeared as completely as John Howard, Jean Chretien, or Helen Clark do in Washington or London. A millennial discourse of globalization blindly frames The Norton’s Year 2000 changes: “English literature, like so many collective enterprises in our century, has ceased to be principally the product of the identity of a single nation; it is a global phenomenon” (xix).

Increasingly pushed to acknowledge the slippages inherent in their constructions of the national and the global, American users of The Norton now look for broader principles of recognition and representation. Robert Scholes, recently elected incoming president of the MLA for 2003, observing that “we have been thoroughly indoctrinated by ‘coverage’ as the organizational basis of our field” (148), argues for a curriculum that would allow us to get out from under the weight of a curriculum “oriented to English literary history” (153). For Scholes, the “old curriculum” can only see the introduction of new writers “as a drain on the basic mission of covering the masterpieces of British and American literature” while “a curriculum oriented to English textuality,” for which Scholes has been arguing for more than three decades, would see courses from a broader spectrum of contemporary writing in English as serving “a vital function” (153).
Michael Bérubé, acknowledging his indebtedness to Reed Way Dasenbrock’s work a decade ago, makes “a modest proposal” in The Employment of English for a focus on contemporary world literatures in English as a vehicle for, first, bridging literary and post-colonial cultural studies, and secondly, making it “possible for English departments to expand their concern with the English language while becoming less... well, English, in the process” (28) by moving away from a “centripetal” canon focused on the British isles:

This canon contains many of the greatest writers ever to inhabit and expand the English language, of course, but it also does double duty as an agent of Anglo-American national affiliation: just as the New Right likes to pretend that the United States has some deep genetic connection with Periclean Athens, so too do the Anglophile supporters of the centripetal canon like to pretend that you cannot understand “literatures in English” unless you have first completed the “coverage” requirements that will acquaint you with Gawain, the Miller’s tale, and MacFlecknoe—not to mention the three nineteenth-century British novelists who will secure your employment by Milton Rosenberg at WGN in Chicago. Yet it is not entirely clear, at the very least, that the British canon before 1790 (exclusive of Shakespeare, of course, who is not only our language’s greatest writer but also cannot be challenged in the slightest without provoking a national scandal) is quite as deserving of the place it now occupies in the United States; and it is not entirely clear why, if we now spend so much disciplinary time on British literature, we could not just as well (in some future incarnation) devote more of our time and energies to African, Indian, Caribbean, Australian and Canadian writing in English. (29)

Bérubé’s “modest proposal” stresses a radical increase in the inclusion of contemporary world literature in English but praises Dasenbrock’s complementary argument for shifting the existing canon from a centripetal focus “oriented toward the England of Pope, Fielding, Richardson, and Johnson, [to] a centrifugal canon [that] might focus on Swift, Defoe, Smollett, and Boswell” (cited by Bérubé 29).

Bérubé recognizes that his proposal will meet fierce resistance from colleagues who will see their own areas of specialization marginalized still further, and he acknowledges that “it’s one (relatively easy) thing to shuffle the canon;... it’s quite another (much harder) thing to shuffle the professoriate” (30). Like John Guillory, he sees canonical revision as “shifting the weight of the syllabus from older works to modern works, since what is in question for us are new social identities and new writers (Guillory, cited by Bérubé 30).

What is missing here is an acknowledgement of literary histories predating the contemporary in world literatures in English other than those of Britain and the United States. Our classrooms and The Norton now reflect the dramatic impact of colonial discourse theory and analysis on the study of every period of British and American literatures over the past two decades, but the pre-contemporary texts examined remain relentlessly linked to those two national literatures. Reflection on hiring committee discussions of temporally identified tenure-track positions in fields such as eighteenth-or nineteenth-century literature reveals the pervasiveness of this cultural myopia. As Tracy Ware notes in relation to Canadian literature, the insistent restriction of postcolonial literatures to the contemporary consigns earlier writing to “a prenatal limbo” (87).

As an alternative to Scholes’s and Bérubé’s respective emphases on an ungeographically marked textuality and on contemporary texts outside the Anglo-American axis, I want to argue for what Donna Palmateer Pennee labels “a strategic nationalism or a least a strategic particularity in a so-called borderless world” (191). The arguments against any appeal to the concept of “national literatures” are well known. We now explicitly challenge nationalist discourses by arguing that “no distinct national character or
essence exists that literature can express, even if we disguise the obsoleteness of the concept by rechristening it ‘cultural practices’” (Clausen 48) or by exploring the limits of any discourse constructing an imagined community at the cost of effacing some members of that community. What is missing in such arguments, however, is an acknowledgement of existing curricular power relations. Thus, when Christopher Clausen argues that “literary nationalism... ought to be a transitional rather than a final position” (48), we could acquiesce if the curricular playing field were level. But in the absence of such a tabula rasa, to assume that we have reached a point to celebrate “the study of a collective literary achievement that offers extraordinary rewards if explored as a multiethnic, multicultural whole” (48) seems Utopian if not just naive. Until the assumptions associated with literary study outside the Anglo-American axis approach those of their curricular rivals, the adoption of some form of strategic nationalism in debates outside the classroom seems crucial to informed post-colonial study inside those classrooms.

Although a shift in emphasis is possible at every institution, larger universities with comprehensive graduate programs in English have unique opportunities (and responsibilities) to assign tenure-track positions not just to specialists in “postcolonial theory” or omnibus “post-colonial literature(s)” but to specialists in national literatures other than those of Great Britain, Canada, or the United States. Bérubé argues that if literary study wants to become more cultural and cultural study needs to become more literary, it is hard to imagine a more fitting institutional negotiation of these desires than an English department whose curriculum centers not on the British Isles but on the global ramifications of the world travels of the language first spoken in the British Isles. (32)

He continues by suggesting that in the absence of our demoralized profession having “much of a public rationale for itself,” the study of world literatures in English offers the public a rationale it can understand. More specifically, I would argue that amidst the multiply inflected rhetorics of “internationalization” and “globalization” at the senior administrative levels of our universities, both deans and provosts are likely to be more responsive to arguments based on strategic nationalism than to those resting on the assertion that “before postcolonial studies, Western scholarship was an embarrassment” (O’Brien and Szeman 606).

In the continuing and impossible project of “provincializing Europe” (Chakrabarty) and internationalizing the United States, postcolonial strategic nationalism may seem an outdated response to the macro-narratives of globalization. But “the world” may have changed less after September 11th than we are encouraged to assume, and the effects of thinking about our curricula and appointments in terms of strategic nationalism may not only help us situate Canadian writing more appropriately but also help us address the consequences of Canadian political and academic complicity with colonialism by reducing our own provincialism.
WORKS CITED


NOTES

1. Jim Carrey’s announcement of his intention to seek American citizenship within a week of the presentation of the conference version of this paper and Celine Dion’s emergence from temporary retirement to sing “God Bless America” (“my home sweet home”) within a week of September 11, 2001, should suggest an appropriately ironic perspective on these introductory distinctions.

2. See Ashcroft for a useful comment on the post-colonial/postcolonial debate: “A simple hyphen has come to represent an increasingly diverging set of assumptions, emphases, strategies and practices in post-colonial reading and writing. The hyphen puts an emphasis on the discursive and material effects of the historical ‘fact’ of colonialism, while the term ‘postcolonialism’ has come to represent an increasingly indiscriminate attention to cultural difference and marginality of all kinds, whether a consequence of the historical experience of colonialism or not.... Admittedly the hyphen can be misleading, particularly if it suggests that post-colonialism refers
to the situation in a society ‘after colonialism’, an assumption which remains tediously persistent despite constant rebuttals by post-colonialists.... Undoubtedly the ‘post’ in ‘post-colonialism’ must always contend with the spectre of linearity and the kind of teleological development it sets out to dismantle. But rather than being disabling, this radical instability of meaning gives the term a vibrancy, energy and plasticity which have become part of its strength, as post-colonial analysis rises to engage issues and experiences which have been out of the purview of metropolitan theory and, indeed, comes to critique the assumptions of that theory” (10–11).

Following Ashcroft’s arguments, and particularly resistant to the tendency of many proponents of “postcolonial” to exclude invader-settler literatures, I have retained the hyphen in this paper.

3. See Karen Welberry.

4. In his review of Jill Lepore’s A Is For American (New York: Knopf, 2002), Hugh Kenner notes: “Americans still say ‘Look it up in Webster,’ alluding to a man who devoted his long life (1758-1843) to reorganizing the ‘English’ people spoke and wrote in a country that had just severed its ties with England. There had been other proposals for a national language, for instance Hebrew, both to distance Yanks from Britain and to signal them as a chosen people. French and Greek were also considered. But what Noah Webster proposed was simply to teach all Americans to spell and speak alike, yet differently in detail from the people of England. The result would be an ‘American language, to become over the years as different from the future language of England, as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from German, or from one another’” (12).

5. Peter Hitchcock notes the power of the word anglophone in this peripheralization: “What could be more harmless than the OED definition of Anglophone as a person who speaks English? As soon as one begins to specify this person, and this English..., the innocence of the word dissolves into a history of colonial and postcolonial import. Anglophone is always somebody else’s English just as Anglophone literature is somehow not American or English” (758).

6. Salah Hassan cites Jonathan Arac’s invocation of “hypercanonization” in discussing the prevalence of single authors or texts being asked to assume “a singular representative function” (298) as post-colonial texts are slowly admitted to the pedagogical canon: “In fact, the critical opening of the canon attributed to postcolonial theory and its related pedagogical practices has meant only a slight revision to canonical practices in literary studies...” (303).

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