CHAPTER 24

Postcolonial Poetry and the Decolonization of the English Literary Curriculum

Nathan Suhr-Sytsma

"In 2190, Albion's Civil Conflicts Finally Divided Along Norman–Saxon Lines," states the title of a speculative poem by Trinidadian-British writer Vahni Capildeo (b. 1973), published in their Forward Prize-winning collection *Measures of Expatriation* (2016). Implicitly identified as a Norman invader, "with superior weaponry," the poem's first-person speaker addresses a second person interpellated as Saxon: "Soon, you stopped sounding wrong" (Capildeo 85). Is this a reference to the historical evolution of Old English into Middle English, with manifold borrowings from Anglo-Norman, or to the tuning of the arrivant's ear to the addressee's vernacular? The Norman–Saxon division between "I" and "you" maps onto other distinctions of body type ("thin" and "thick") and gender ("So far as I was woman," muses the poet, not quite claiming that identity while addressing their interlocutor as "Young man") (Capildeo 85). Capildeo has noted, too, that "'2190' encodes '1290', which was the year of the Jewish expulsion from England; a forced migration not enough remembered" (Parmar, "*The Wolf* Interview" 59).[1] Such divisions – linguistic, embodied, gendered, and religious – both displace and evoke another, unspoken distinction between non-White and White. As Vidyan Ravinthiran observes of Capildeo's writing, "this is poetry which enters phenomenologically, with heartbreaking and case-making fidelity, into racial travails" ("Myriad Minded" 169). The final stanza of this poem suggests how ideas of "home" and habits of speech are deployed against racialized immigrants, a long-standing current of British political discourse that would gain force in the run-up to the Brexit referendum over the months following the February 2016 publication of Capildeo's collection:

> Let's start a conversation. Ask me where I'm from.
> Where is home, really home. Where my parents were born.
> What to do if I sound more like you than you do.
> Every word an exhalation, a driving-out.
>
> (Capildeo 85)

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Anticipating the script of this "conversation," the poet satirizes it by deploying imperatives and turning racist clichés into declarative fragments. By the final sentence, it is ambiguous whose words are driving out whom. At once memorable and oblique, the poem conveys how the identities of "Albion" (or Britain) and the English language depend on the presence of outsiders over the past millennium and more.

A selection of Capildeo's poems were among the final readings I assigned for an upper-level undergraduate course in 2020 on Contemporary Literature, with the theme "Multicultural Britain." This course attempts to introduce students to the contours of postwar British literature, involving both fiction and poetry, while challenging dominant ways of charting that literary history by centering themes of decolonization, migration, and race. Thus, we read novels by Sam Selvon, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Bernardine Evaristo alongside a range of poetry: Louise Bennett's "Colonization in Reverse" on her fellow Jamaicans migrating to Britain; Philip Larkin's "The Importance of Elsewhere," which relies on a contrast between Ireland and England; poetry written in Northern Ireland during the Troubles by Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Ciaran Carson, and Medbh McGuckian, who hardly identified as British despite their passports; Carol Ann Duffy's "Comprehensive," a dramatic polylogue of immigrant and xenophobic students in an East London school; Linton Kwesi Johnson's poems, from "Sonny's Lettah" to "Liesense fi Kill," protesting decades of anti-Black violence by police; Daljit Nagra's metapoetic "Kabba Questions the Ontology of Representation, the Catch 22 for 'Black' Writers . . . " and "Hadrian's Wall," commissioned in 2016 by the Mansio project, which moves from the Roman wall constructed "to keep out the barbarous" to ask "Where will our walls finally end?" ("Mansio"; Nagra 15). Following on from Evaristo's Booker Prize-winning *Girl, Woman, Other*, a polyphonic novel in free verse or what Evaristo terms "fusion fiction" (Donnell 101), we considered Capildeo along with Sandeep Parmar's 2015 essay "Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK," in order to reflect on how readers' assumptions about race and aesthetic experimentation might lead to misjudging, or outright excluding, poets of color. Even as my students struggled with Capildeo's work, they grasped Parmar's dissatisfaction with the paths laid down by Larkin but also by Nagra's earlier poetry "voiced in . . . 'Punglish,' a faux parodic mix of English and Punjabi." According to Parmar, "the singular lyric voice should not merely reproduce poetic sameness through a universal 'I' or self-fetishizing difference through a poetic diction of otherness." Capildeo's writing, I added, was doing the difficult work of making something new; it warranted the same quality of close, appreciative reading as

the now-canonical early twentieth-century modernists. And in a literary field other than that of twenty-first-century Britain, less recognizably modernist poetic procedures, even the cultivation of a seemingly stable "I," may produce a different force or meaning equally deserving of close reading.

In an editorial in the venerable *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* entitled "Decolonizing English," Ruvani Ranasinha writes that her students want to see writers of color "included in canonical courses on Poetry or Modernism" (120), not relegated to the optional edges of the curriculum, and she herself emphasizes that "Britain was always 'multicultural'" (121). For Ranasinha, "it remains equally important to consider the *poetics* as well as the *politics* of postcolonial or minority writings in our teaching" (121). While *poetics* refers here to writers' "artistic strategies" across genres (Ranasinha 121), what better way to become attentive to poetics than by studying and writing about poetry? Postcolonial poetry, as both a body of poems and a field of critical discourse, furnishes opportunities to foreground anticolonial and antiracist work, whether in "canonical courses" or those devoted to postcolonial literature, without disregarding the aesthetic dimensions of such work. Would it be possible, Ravinthiran wonders, for postcolonial poetry criticism to live with a poem "intensively, combining appreciation – such as world poets rarely receive – with a susceptibility to the cognitions of form, the thinking that is uniquely done in poems and that outgoes simplistic frameworks of mimesis or subversion?" ("(Indian) Verse" 647). To elaborate some of the thinking that is done in Capildeo's "In 2190, Albion's Civil Conflicts Finally Divided Along Norman–Saxon Lines," for instance, I propose that their poem enacts a decolonizing practice in at least three ways that ramify throughout postcolonial poetry more broadly: (i) it questions the politicized distinctions between outsiders and insiders, (ii) it makes available for poetry undervalued forms of language and definitions of home, and (iii) it embarks on a project of world-unmaking and world-remaking. Highlighting these three modes of practice, this chapter reflects on how university-level aesthetic education and pedagogy might elucidate the decolonizing work of poets and poems. At the same time, it tests the limits of the term "postcolonial poetry" for such decolonizing work.

"Always with a House There Is an Inside and an Outside": Constructing Postcolonial Poetry

Postcolonial poetry has gained recognition over the past two decades, following the publication of Jahan Ramazani's *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (2001). Although poets had been studied in

the contexts of fields demarcated according to national borders (e.g. Nigerian literature), geographic regions (e.g. African literature), or transnational affiliations (e.g. Black literature), Ramazani's book was the first to name "postcolonial poetry" as a coherent field in its own right. The term tends to adhere to poets of the former British Empire following World War II. As a scholar of postcolonial poetry based in an English department, I follow the primarily anglophone focus of Ramazani's book and of Rajeev S. Patke's wide-ranging *Postcolonial Poetry in English* (2006). However, the appearance of two articles on "postcolonial poetry" in a 2007 special issue of *Research in African Literatures* on Lusophone African and Afro-Brazilian literatures, both translated from Portuguese, suggests genealogies for the field beyond English and possibilities for comparative research (Mata; Secco). From the start, "postcolonial" embeds tensions between emphasizing "peoples from regions of the so-called global South or Third World" and including those oppressed by settler colonialism in the Global North, whether peoples of the Celtic fringe or Indigenous peoples in North America (Ramazani, "Introduction" 1). As Ramazani acknowledges, "the term 'postcolonial' has been criticized for being too political, too homogenizing, too victim-centered, too colonially-fixated, or just premature amid persisting neocolonialisms" (2). Objecting in the early 1990s that "the term" both "lures us into a false sense of security, a seeming pastness of a past that is still painfully present" and "endows its principal morpheme 'colonial' with an originary privilege," Nigerian poet and intellectual Niyi Osundare (b. 1947) asked derisively, "When you meet me in the corridors tomorrow, will you congratulate me on my 'post-colonial' poetry?" (Osundare 208). While some scholars find "postcolonial poetry" a valuable framework for building institutional spaces that recognize underrepresented bodies of poetry, some poets wonder whether truly decolonizing the curriculum may entail dispensing with the term.

Having grown up in Canada but moved to the United States for college, I first read postcolonial poetry, marked as such, in a multigenre course in Twentieth-Century British and Postcolonial Literature. There I encountered Derek Walcott's lyric poems, taught by a scholar who was completing a book, begun as a dissertation advised by Ramazani, about Caribbean poets as the creators of "new world modernisms" (Pollard). Eventually, in my first book (Suhr-Sytsma), I attempted to recast the literary history of the mid-twentieth-century era of decolonization by focusing on anglophone poets from nonmetropolitan sites: Walcott (1930–2017), the tragically short-lived Nigerian/Biafran poet Christopher Okigbo (1930–67), and Seamus Heaney (1939–2013), along with their

nationally eminent but internationally underappreciated contemporaries such as Louise Bennett (1919–2006), J. P. Clark (1935–2020), and Michael Longley (b. 1939), many of them linked to each other by other cultural gatekeepers and itinerant intellectuals who had been mostly lost to literary history.

To decolonize the literary curriculum, however, it is not enough to elevate a handful of "great" postcolonial poets, nearly all of them male, to the canon. In an essay published two months after Walcott's death in March 2017, Jamaican writer Kei Miller (b. 1978) responds to the Trinidadian writer Earl Lovelace (b. 1935) – and through him to Walcott – by reflecting that "his generation of writers, they created a house. And always with a house there is an inside and an outside. We are interested in the outside – in the people you left out. . . . What of the Syrian-Caribbean writer who could never chant 'Black Power'? What of the queer Caribbean writer who never felt the freedom of independence?" ("In the Shadow of Derek Walcott" 9). Miller suggests a kind of agonism between different generations of Caribbean poets, yet he implies that Caribbean poetry cannot be circumscribed by agonism with British colonialism or the English lyric tradition. Rather, contemporary poets whom we might identify as postcolonial probe how inequity and injustice remain embedded in localized norms of race, gender, and sexuality – and the language in which these norms are expressed.[2]

Nor should the United States be exempt from this inquiry. Within the United States, the study of postcolonial literature is still too often understood as the study of the rest of the world. When US-based scholars began to teach and discuss "British Commonwealth Literature" during the 1940s through 1960s, they conceived of it as wholly separate from American literature, even as the CIA was secretly funding the Congress of Cultural Freedom to promote literary initiatives across the Commonwealth as part of the United States' postwar rivalry with both the waning British Empire and the ascendant Soviet Union (Raja and Bahri 1156–57; Kalliney). There are, of course, alternate genealogies for postcolonial literary studies in African Diaspora-focused institutions such as the journal *Callaloo* (est. 1976) (Raja and Bahri 1166–67). By the time postcolonial studies was finally recognized as a Division of the Modern Language Association, in 2007, "the designation 'postcolonial,' initially intended as a largely geographic or geohistorical designation, had grown into a full-fledged *approach* to all manner of literary, language and cultural studies" (Raja and Bahri 1179). Yet a risk remains that English departments treat the postcolonial as

a catchall term for issues related to canonicity, empire, otherness, and race without engaging squarely with settler colonialism or US empire.[3]

Poet Natalie Diaz (b. 1978), who "is Mojave, Akimel O'otham and an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Community" and also identifies as Latinx and queer, notes in an interview that genocidal language about Native people "is still present in our Declaration of Independence" (Diaz, "Natalie Diaz"; Rodriguez). Her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020) challenges readers to ask if or how poetry in the United States might be postcolonial. An epigraph precedes each section of the collection; the first, preceding the title poem, is from Joy Harjo (Muscogee Nation): "I am singing a song that can only be born after losing a country" (Diaz, *Postcolonial* n.p.; Harjo 7). Also featured as part of "Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry," Harjo's signature project as US Poet Laureate (2019–22), "Postcolonial Love Poem" locates itself in the Mojave Desert. Every line unexpected, the poem unfurls images of war, wounding, and erotic desire:

> I was built by wage. So I wage love and worse –
> always another campaign to march across
> a desert night for the cannon flash of your pale skin
> settling in a silver lagoon of smoke at your breast.
>
> (Diaz, *Postcolonial* 1)

As in Capildeo's poem above, the first-person speaker addresses a second person, but here the "you" is less adversary than lover. The poem's final lines emphasize the possibility for a shared first-person "we":

> The rain will eventually come, or not.
> Until then, we touch our bodies like wounds –
> the war never ended and somehow begins again.
>
> (2)

As scholar and novelist Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation) maintains, "in the Americas, colonialism continues; if anything, it has become an assumed part of the sociopolitical fabric that marks any claims to Indigenous political, social, economic, or intellectual sovereignty as being 'special' rather than Indigenous rights" (492).[4] In a prose poem – or lyric essay – later in *Postcolonial Love Poem*, "The First Water Is the Body," Diaz writes, "What threatens white people is often dismissed as myth. I have never been true in America. America is my myth" (47). If Diaz's poetry is postcolonial, it is so in the sense that it grapples with ongoing American colonialism, even as it turns away from the myth of the

United States to the life-giving elements of land and water, the Mojave language, and queer desire.

Postcolonial poetry criticism need not, then, cordon off histories of European empire from those of genocide, slavery, resistance, and survivance in North America. Indeed, the history of the university where I work, a private, predominantly White institution located on land that the Muscogee people were forced to relinquish, involves Indigenous dispossession and slave labor ("Land Acknowledgment"). For those of us in North America, there is no necessary contradiction between advocating for our institutions to reckon with such histories, including pursuing reparative actions toward the descendants of those harmed, and holding space in the curriculum for perspectives from outside North America. Writers have often been ahead of scholars in noticing parallel oppressions and possibilities for solidarity. For instance, poets and novelists from northeast India, who may identify India less as their home than as a colonial state, have found inspiration in Indigenous American and African American writing, as well as anglophone African and Latin American writing (Kashyap).

A matter of departmental decisions about what is required to major in English and which courses are offered, as well as school-wide decisions about degree requirements, the curriculum is also a matter of syllabus design. As I develop syllabi, I want my students to encounter the full breadth of poetry in English – to find poems to which they feel drawn and poets with whom they identify, to develop an informed appreciation for the craft of postcolonial as well as canonical poets, and to grasp the aesthetic, conceptual, and political stakes of these poets' projects. "We are confronted," write Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimbler of precedents for decolonizing practical criticism, "with the problem of deciding not only what or whom to read, but also *how* to read (or listen) . . . in a way that responds to the distinctive dimensions of verbal arts" (229). Confronting this problem involves different approaches both at different levels of the curriculum and in multigenre courses in Contemporary Literature or Postcolonial Literature as compared with single-genre courses in poetry. Even so, the most inclusive syllabus or incisive reading practice will not address the fundamental issue that John Guillory identifies in *Cultural Capital* as "access to the means of literary production" (ix), including literacy, higher education, and publication. Or as Ranasinha puts it, "access to English remains classed" (120). As a scholar and teacher, I look for ways to acknowledge *both* how poetry functions as cultural capital within inequitable systems *and* how poets strive to practice liberation in language.

"This Little Boat / of the Language": Revaluing Languages, Defining Home

The introductory poetry course I teach involves three movements: it begins with the fundamentals of how poems work, with examples from "Caedmon's Hymn" to Cathy Park Hong's "Ballad in O," moves to how to interpret poems, including through encounters with the drafts of published poems, and culminates with a unit examining postcolonial poetry in global Englishes and in translation from other languages into English. In this third unit, we read poems by Louise Bennett, whose satirical ballads in Jamaican Creole or patois the poetry establishment was slow to recognize *as* poetry (Innes 230–31; Suhr-Sytsma 91–92), in conjunction with her radio monologue about "Jamaica Language." Bennett's "Bans a Killin" takes to task a fellow Jamaican, "Mas Charlie," who has sworn to "kill dialec!" (Bennett 4). Playing dumb before humorously demolishing his classed linguistic snobbery, the speaker inquires, "Yuy gwine kill all English dialec / Or just Jamaica one?" (4). She goes on to point out that if he is against all dialects, he will have to "kill" numerous English, Irish, and Scottish modes of speech, not to mention swathes of the literary canon:

> Yuh wi haffi get de Oxford Book
> A English verse, an tear
> Out Chaucer, Burns, Lady Grizelle
> An plenty a Shakespeare!
>
> (5)

Each era, the poet implies, has witnessed the forging of new, nonstandard idioms for poetry, an experimental tradition that she extends. Having demonstrated her superior learning and logic through the medium of patois, Miss Lou's final blow is to caution Mas Charlie against dropping his "h" lest he become the victim of his own linguicide. As Janet Neigh observes of a recorded version of "Bans a Killin," Bennett "draws attention to how everyone (even Mas Charlie) speaks an accented version of English that does not correspond with its written representation" (169). English does not belong exclusively to any class, nationality, or race – and crafting written renditions of its spoken varieties has long been a productive challenge for poets now considered canonical as much as for those identified as postcolonial.

From questioning how English is defined and valued, we move to reading an English-language collection that draws on another language, such as *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987) by Kashmiri-American poet Agha

Shahid Ali (1949–2001), whose poems repeatedly allude to the Urdu ghazals of Ghalib (1797–1869) and Faiz (1911–84), or *The January Children* (2017) by Sudanese-American poet Safia Elhillo (b. 1990), whose poems incorporate lines in Arabic from the songs of Abdelhalim Hafez (1929–77). Each of these collections meditates, moreover, on experiences of migration accessed through dream and fantasy as well as personal and familial memory. In a riveting conversation with the class in spring 2021, Elhillo explained that the term *asmarani*, the "dark-skinned" or "brown-skinned" beloved of some of Abdelhalim's songs with whom the speaker of many of her poems identifies (v), helped her to name the intersection of Black and Arab. Her choice almost entirely to eschew capitalization owed something to the absence of capitalization in Arabic. At the same time, Elhillo's "self-portrait with lake nasser," in which the speaker declares, "there once was a world / & then there was only water," relates the damming of the Nile to the unmourned loss of the Nubian language: "i call arabic my mother tongue / & mourn only that orphaning" (Elhillo 44). Having read a pair of recent poems in the form of the ghazal, Elhillo shared that Patricia Smith's "Hip-Hop Ghazal" and Fatima Asghar's "WWE" had won her over to this form about obsession and sound even before she encountered Agha Shahid Ali's ghazals.

Finally, we read translation theory, and I invite students, in preparation for becoming poet-translators themselves, to think critically about the dual-language format of Irish-language poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's *Pharaoh's Daughter* (1990) and the varied approaches of its thirteen translators. The collection's title is drawn from its closing poem, "Ceist na Teangan," translated by Paul Muldoon as "The Language Issue":

Cuirim mo dhóchas ar snámh	I place my hope on the water
i mbáidín teangan	in this little boat
[. . .]	of the language, [. . .]
féachaint n'fheadaraís	only to have it borne hither and thither,
cá dtabharfaidh an sruth é,	not knowing where it might end up;
féachaint, dála Mhaoise,	in the lap, perhaps,
an bhfóirfidh iníon Fhorainn?	of some Pharaoh's daughter. (154, 155)

Ní Dhomhnaill, who has referred to this poem as her "final answer to why I write in Irish" ("Why I Choose to Write" 22), taps into the biblical book of Exodus, in which Moses's mother places her son in a basket in the river to avoid Pharaoh's death sentence on Israelite boys, and Pharaoh's daughter, finding Moses, decides to foster him rather than obey her father's edict.

Even without reading Irish competently or comparing Muldoon's translation with Ní Dhomhnaill's own English-language crib of the poem as "The Language Question" ("*Dánta Úra*" 45), sharp-eyed students notice the absence of Moses ("Mhaoise") and the final question mark from the right side of the page, leading to a discussion of Muldoon's translation strategy. They also notice the layered metaphor, in which the Irish language is likened not to Moses but to the basket. Are those of us who speak English as a primary language being interpellated as Pharaoh's daughter, the scion of the oppressor in the biblical story, and if so, what kind of responsibility do we bear to Irish and other endangered languages? I try to emphasize, in sum, that as poems revalue denigrated, non-Western, and endangered languages through which their speakers inhabit or pursue a sense of home, poems engage in a decolonizing practice. That such poems may unsettle those of us who feel secure in English as a home tongue might lead us, rather than engaging with texts only in English as is habitual for English departments, to advocate for and contribute to programs that center the study of nondominant languages.

"Maps That Break / Eggs": Unmaking and Remaking Worlds

Poems can be portals to understanding the world; they can also enact the unmaking of a world tainted by colonialism in order to make new worlds in language. In an undergraduate senior seminar entitled Poetry Worlds that I led a few years ago, students investigated the world-making capacity of poetry in tandem with actual social worlds in which poets have lived and written, from London, England, to Lagos, Nigeria, and from Belfast, Northern Ireland, to Kingston, Jamaica. Having read Una Marson, Bennett, Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite – poets who grew up, studied, or taught in Jamaica – early in the semester, we read two full collections by poets from Kingston during its second half: Lorna Goodison's *Guinea Woman* (2000) and Kei Miller's *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (2014). In the title poem of *Guinea Woman*, Goodison (b. 1947), Jamaica's Poet Laureate from 2017 to 2020, pays homage to her great-grandmother as a dark-skinned African woman. The very next poem, "Nanny," in the voice of Queen Nanny or Nanny of the Maroons, to whom Goodison referred at a 2018 reading not only as a national hero but as "original Wonder Woman," "could be seen as paradigmatic of the decolonizing struggle in postcolonial poetry" in that it honors one who literally fought colonial authority (Goodison, "Poetry Reading"; Ramazani, "Introduction" 8). Even more than these historical poems,

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though, my students gravitated toward poems in which Goodison seems to theorize her own experiences with poetry as a decolonizing practice.

"The Mango of Poetry" begins in the lyric present: "I read a book / about the meaning of poetry" (*Guinea* 103). The poet confesses, "I'm still not sure what poetry is. // But now I think of a ripe mango," specifically "one from the tree / planted by my father / three years before / the sickness made him fall prematurely" (103). Together with the mango, the word "fall" alludes to the biblical account of Eden, in which the first humans bring death into the world by eating from a fruit tree, an association emphasized when the poet returns to "the shortfall // of my father's truncated years" (103). After this line, the poem shifts to the conditional mood, as the poet details how exactly she would enjoy this mango "while wearing a bombay-coloured blouse" to allow its juices to "fall freely" on her (104). The numerous "I'd" and "I would" constructions accentuate the capacity of poems to make a world that does not yet exist, in which the "fall" signifies vitality rather than mortality. The poet then joins the lyric present and conditional in the final stanza:

> And I say that this too would be
> powerful and overflowing
> and a fitting definition
> of what is poetry.
>
> (104)

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," asserted William Wordsworth in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) (xxxiii). Referring to the mango's juices as "overflowing," Goodison both literalizes and tropicalizes Wordsworth's definition, while radicalizing his emphasis, elsewhere in the preface, on poetry as pleasure.[5] Her quatrain stanzas evoke the ballad stanza, of which Wordsworth made occasional use, but are not fixed to its customary rhyme and rhythmic pattern. Her final line echoes the poem's eighth line but subtly shifts away from Standard English ("what poetry is") along the Creole continuum ("what is poetry") (103, 104). For Goodison, the mango tree becomes an apt figure for English-language poetry, which, though not indigenous to the Caribbean, metaphorically grows out of Jamaican soil, thanks to a previous generation of Jamaicans, and furnishes sensuous experiences that exceed colonial designs.

It is possible to appreciate Goodison's "The Mango of Poetry" and also Capildeo's satire, in their prose poem "Too Solid Flesh," of the mango as a trope that plays into the mainstream British reception of postcolonial poetry as exotic: "I opened a book and a mango fell out. I opened another,

and another mango fell out. . . . Woman doth not live by mango alone" (24). One of the last poems in Goodison's collection, "Was It Legba She Met outside the Coronation Market?", presents the ingestion not of a mango but of an eyeball as an image for poetry as a decolonizing practice. The name Coronation Market, like that of Kingston, in which it is located, refers to the British monarchy and thus to colonial history, but Goodison's poem seeks Afro-Caribbean rather than British precedents for poetic vision. Composed in three free-verse stanzas and the third person, the poem is focalized through a child (a figure of the poet as a young person?) who meets "a crooked man" or "bush doctor" (Goodison, *Guinea* 127). In a trance,

> he removes his eye's white ball
> and swallows it. It reappears in her palm, she returns
> the white sphere, he swallows it and speaks prophecy.
>
> (127)

This enigmatic exchange leaves the child "at the crossroads" between human and spirit worlds, which Legba is thought to guard. One of my students queried why this figure from Haitian Vodou would be in Jamaica. One possibility is that Legba authorizes a pan-Caribbean and – through his association with the Yorùbá òrìṣà Èṣù – pan-African lineage for poetry which, crossing colonial borders between former British and French colonies, may be cognizant of the colonial library but does not rely on it. The poem's final lines offer a finely balanced image: "The child is silent as the ball's / white weight levitates on the tip of her tongue" (128). The child's silence and restraint are all the more potent, given that Goodison's poetry notably celebrates the liberating potential of Afro-Caribbean women's speech and taste.

Miller, who disavows Walcott's influence, names Goodison as one of "the poets whose shadows I'd actually been writing in" ("In the Shadow of Derek Walcott" 8). Miller's Forward Prize-winning *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* is not dedicated but "livicate[d]" to "the bredrens and sistrens of 'Occupy Pinnacle', still fighting for Zion, still fighting for a rightful portion of land" (4). Formed in late 2013, Occupy Pinnacle sought to preserve the site of a Rastafarian community founded in 1940 by Leonard P. Howell and repeatedly raided by colonial police. Activists "argued that Pinnacle stood as an example of decolonisation many years prior to the 1962 declaration of independence from British rule" (Dunkley 37). Amplifying the associations among anticolonial, antiracist, and spiritual struggles, the collection juxtaposes Miller's livication with a pair of

epigraphs on the facing page: two stanzas from Bennett's "Independence" about newly independent Jamaica's position on the "worl-map" – Miller has recalled that his mother "was a brilliant reciter of poems by Louise Bennett, a dialect poet who stands in Jamaica's consciousness as our most national of poets" (Wachtel 28) – and two stanzas from a Rastafari chant contrasting the wearisome ever-presence of "Babylon" with the transcendence of "Holy Mount Zion" (Miller, *The Cartographer* 5).

Early in the collection, "Quashie's Verse" stands out as a postcolonial *ars poetica*, like "The Mango of Poetry," and as a concrete poem resembling a jar. Miller's poem asks what "measure," a recurring term in the collection that is relevant for both cartography and prosody, is available for the Afro-Caribbean poet "who can no longer / measure by *kend* or by / *chamma* or by *ermijja*" – measurements from Ethiopia based on individual human bodies rather than standardized units (Miller, *The Cartographer* 12; Berhane). "As emblematic Jamaican Everyman, Quashie is the guttersnipe offspring of slaves and slavery," explains British-Jamaican poet Karen McCarthy Woolf (93).[6] Salvaging this archetype, Miller's poem treats Quashie sympathetically as a figure of the postcolonial poet, alienated by colonization from his ability to shape poems to "earthenware," formed by his hands with "no two jars" identical (12). The poem concludes:

> So what now shall Quashie do – his old
> measures outlawed, and him instructed
> now in universal forms, perfected by
> universal men who look nothing
> and sound nothing
> like Quashie?
>
> (12)

The repetition of "nothing" at the line endings casts doubt on the neutrality of the repeated adjective "universal," which should be heard in scare quotes.

Such questioning – of whose experiences are included in or excluded from definitions of poetry, who is authorized to speak or expected to listen, what kinds of language are considered acceptable, and how worlds are cognitively mapped – is deepened by the twenty-seven-poem title sequence, "The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion." Jamaican scholar Carol Bailey describes the sequence this way: "Miller's poems capture the postcolonial challenge to the colonial-era land grab in a back-and-forth between a mapmaker who feigns innocence and objectivity and a rastaman who is grounded in folk wisdom, fully aware of colonial

dispossessions, and equally well versed in the vernacular strategies available for rethinking the relationship to land." The students in my Poetry Worlds seminar noticed that the rastaman's voice is rendered in what Brathwaite named "nation language" – Bailey, following Velma Pollard, specifies that "dread talk is a form of nation language" – as well as that the title sequence is intercut both with individual poems and with another, "Place Name" sequence. I pointed out, in turn, how Miller's poems develop the relationship between rastaman and cartographer as dialectical rather than dichotomous. Compare, for example the openings of poems "vi" and "xiv": "For the rastaman – it is true – dismisses / too easily the cartographic view" and "But the cartographer, it is true, / dismisses too easily the rastaman's view" (Miller, *Cartographer* 21, 34). Far from offering a false balance between colonial and postcolonial points of view, however, the poems examine what is at stake in the inevitable process of trying to know the world and recreate it in language.

Referring in an interview to cartography as a "way of knowing" like language, Miller contends that "every language is partial" (Wachtel 24). He confides, "it was easy for people to think I was the Rastaman in the book, but in my mind I was clearly the cartographer. . . . How does my education make me see the world, and how do I challenge myself to see other things?" (Wachtel 24). The poems search for ways of knowing that would redress colonial misrepresentation without rejecting mapping wholesale. Inspired by Kai Krause's "The True Size of Africa," critiquing Mercator's projection (Miller, *Cartographer* 71), poem "vi" amplifies the rastaman's belief that such European-made maps "have gripped like girdles / to make his people smaller than they were" (21). The next poem, "vii," submits a more planetary perspective:

> And what are turtles born with
> if not maps that break
> eggs and pull them up from sand
> guide them towards ocean instead of land?
>
> (22)

This rhetorical question leads, tellingly, from the unmaking of the creatures' first worlds into a watery world. Here, postcolonial poetry imaginatively models noncoercive forms of belonging that are not defined by the colonial-turned-national borders into the service of which maps are so often pressed.

If the rastaman may underestimate the prospects for decolonizing cartography, poem "xiv" suggests, tongue in cheek, that the cartographer

certainly underestimates the rastaman's ease with institutionally accredited ways of knowing,

> has never read his provocative dissertation –
> *"Kepture Land" as Identity Reclamation*
> *in Postcolonial Jamaica*. Hell!
> the cartographer did not even know
> the rastaman had a PhD (from Glasgow
> no less) in which, amongst other things, he sites
> Sylvia Wynter's most cryptic essay: *On How*
> *We Mistook the Map for the Territory,*
> *and Reimprisoned Ourselves in*
> *An Unbearable Wrongness of Being*. . .
>
> (34)

Miller, too, has a PhD from Glasgow, although his dissertation focused on Jamaican epistolary practices ("Jamaica to the World"), including verse epistles by Bennett and Goodison, whose "Heartease I" (*Guinea* 32–33) Miller quotes in poem "xix" (*Cartographer* 44). In "xiv," the rastaman sites (positions) rather than cites (summons) Wynter, the Jamaican writer and critical theorist, whose essay argues "that the systematic devalorization of racial blackness [is], in itself, *only* a function of another and more deeply rooted phenomenon – in effect, only the map of the real territory, the symptom of the real cause, the real issue" (115), which is a constrained imagination of "*genres* or *kinds* of being human" (119). Ultimately, the poet's vocation is to make not just a new map, but a new territory.

The relation between map and territory, concept and material world, becomes an especially acute subject for inquiry at the graduate level. In graduate seminars on poetry, I structure readings around notable poets, but also around what alternative frameworks to the nation – postcolonial, transnational, cosmopolitan, diasporic, global, and/or planetary – might be adequate to twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry that registers the violence of the Atlantic slave trade, European colonialism, and contemporary migration while inventively refashioning poetic form. A recent multigenre graduate seminar on African Writing and Futurity – the course posed the question, how have African writers imagined not only their place but their time in the world? – concluded with a virtual visit by Motswana poet Tjawangwa Dema. Her collection *The Careless Seamstress* (2019), which bears cover artwork by the South African artist Mary Sibande, features a number of seamstress figures. Responding to a question about these figures and women's labor, Dema reflected that sewing was historically gendered, with women being assigned the role of home-makers, men

that of heroes or world-makers. As the speaker of the title poem, dealing with her husband's sexism, declares, "A woman knows the way things puncture and hold" (*Careless* 21). For Dema, poetry poses the challenge of "world-building" in an economical or brief form, and her experience of "trying to stitch together an entire collection" opened up "entire worlds" (Dema, African Writing).

While poets exert some agency over their language and labor, institutional issues with editing and publishing differentially afflict both poets in the Global South and poets of color in the Global North, affecting which poets are included in anthologies aimed at the classroom as well as which individual collections can be assigned. Those of us engaged in university teaching can support presses in the Global North that keep crucial poets in print while also assigning poets whose work is not being promoted or published in the Global North. The digital is no panacea, but the digitization of archival or out-of-print materials and the efflorescence of digital publications across the Global South offer possibilities for our pedagogy beyond what the campus bookstore can order.

Decolonization is a perpetually unfinished business. Even as I have tried here to present the postcolonial less as geography or identity than as critical practice, many geographies and identities vital to the decolonizing work of poetry have gone unmentioned. Whether or not "postcolonial poetry" remains the most efficacious framework, poems and poets will continue to enact decolonizing practices, at least until the thorough reimagining and reordering of "*genres* or *kinds* of being human" is effected (Wynter 119).

Notes

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1. The poet adds, "The (non-Jewish) narrator in that poem is transhistorical, inhabiting one after another 'foreign' body that arrives or invades as Other but eventually may be absorbed into the story of 'Englishness'" (Parmar, "*The Wolf* Interview" 60).
2. For an overview of gender and sexuality in postcolonial poetry, focusing on the trope of motherhood, see Innes.
3. Although there is no chapter on US poetry in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, edited by Ramazani, he makes the case, in his introduction to a subsequent special issue on poetry and race, for the need "to bridge Americanist with transnational or postcolonial perspectives" ("Poetry and Race" xiii).

4. Writing in a Canadian context, Heath Justice "offer[s] 'paracolonialism' (coined by Ashinaabe theorist Gerald Vizenor) as a term more suited to the material and intellectual struggles of the Indigenous peoples of this land" than "the term 'postcolonialism'" (485).
5. Wordsworth's daffodils, which often stand in for postcolonial poets' jarring encounters with the colonial curriculum, appear in the following poem, "To Mr William Wordsworth, Distributor of Stamps for Westmoreland," which plays on the shared name of the historic county in northwest England where Wordsworth lived and the parish in southwest Jamaica where Goodison's great-grandmother "wrote her lyrical ballads on air / scripted them with her tongue" (Goodison, *Guinea* 104).
6. Derived from the Akan name Kwasi, "Quashie" is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which identifies the word as "*Caribbean* (chiefly *derogatory*)," as a "generic name for: a black person, esp. one considered as credulous or insignificant" and by the online *Jamaican Patwah* dictionary as a "vulgar" synonym for "low class." See also McCarthy Woolf (101 n. 4).

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