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Towards Eurasia: remapping Europe as ‘upstart peripheral to an ongoing operation’

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ABSTRACT

In order to heed the call in world literature studies to work against disciplinary Eurocentrism by refiguring both what constitutes world literature and how this is read, in this article I propose world literature as an archive of world-making practices and as an impulse for the articulation of alternative methodological approaches. This takes world literature from the postcolonial South as, following Pheng Cheah, instantiating a modality of world literature in which the need for imagining worlds with alternative centres to those determined by coloniality is particularly acute. A response to this is facilitated and illustrated by a reading of Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore’s *Letters from Russia* (1930), and South African writer/activist Alex La Guma’s *A Soviet Journey* (1978). By drawing forward connections between the postcolonial South and the former Soviet Union, this complicates traditional colonial arrangements of the colonial ‘centre’ as cradle of civilisation and culture, as well as postcolonial scholarship’s cumulative fetishisation of ‘Europe’, by allowing a reshuffling of the co-ordinates determining ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’ and a more nuanced grasp of ‘Europe’ simultaneously. These imaginative journeys destabilise ‘Europe’ as closed category and call forth *Eurasia* as a more appropriate categorical-cartographical framework for thinking this space and the connections and (hi)story-telling it stages and fosters.

KEYWORDS

Eurasia; Europe;
Eurocentrism; Soviet Union;
world literature

Scholarly debate in the field of world literature studies has increasingly called for a recognition of the essential Eurocentrism that has underwritten the production of ‘world literature’. Canonical and institutional versions of world literature have been very limited in their understanding of the ‘world’, and indeed of ‘literature’, both in terms of which and whose texts are deemed to warrant inclusion, and how they are read.¹ Such limitations serve as an impulse to reconceive both the *what* of a world literature and, as the calls for methodological reappraisal suggest, to creatively rethink the *how*. The former speaks to the meaningful inclusion of historically marginalised writings, writers and perspectives, not least from the postcolonial South. The latter – to ensure that this inclusion amounts to

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something more than a mere additive logic – is imbricated with an important demand for the examination of categories of analysis previously deemed neutral, and imposed as universal.

Postcolonial thought, in turn, has long recognised an imperative to unpick Eurocentrism in its various permutations. Traditional colonial narratives of Europe's relationship to the global South, or the formerly colonised world, would have it that these 'peripheral' spaces were taught to look to the European metropolitan 'centre' as an aspirational space: the home and origin of a 'civilisation' and 'culture' that colonialism's 'civilising mission' presented as eminently desirable. Postcolonial scholarship's call to decentre Europe in this arrangement has often done so through discussions of various incarnations of the 'empire's writing back',² and cumulatively has also had the effect of homogenising 'Europe' and the 'West'.³

This article takes its impetus from these two sets of concerns. Reading Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore's *Letters from Russia* (1930), and South African writer/activist Alex La Guma's *A Soviet Journey* (1978) alongside each other facilitates, as I argue, an opening out towards *Eurasia* as an analytical framework. This move broadens the scope of what is read as constituting a world literature, and works to answer the call for innovative methodological approaches in world literature studies through the literature itself. It enables relocating 'centres' and 'peripheries' in relation to coordinates better understood as Eurasian. Simultaneously, this contributes both to a more differentiated understanding of 'Europe' (while it troubles 'Europe' as closed category) within postcolonial paradigms and to performatively decentring 'Europe' by bringing to the fore narratives that bypass the colonial Western 'centre' altogether.

To frame this discussion, I take such world literature from the postcolonial South as an archive of world-making practices and processes, as well as an archive from which alternative methodological approaches might be gleaned. In *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, Pheng Cheah offers a useful articulation of the relations between world literature, cosmopolitanism and postcoloniality. Cosmopolitanism is borne of an ethico-political stimulus to view 'oneself as part of a world, a circle of political belonging that transcends the limited ties of kinship and country to embrace the whole of deterritorialised humanity'.⁴ Of course, however, much of the 'cosmopolitanism' experienced in the world today is not of the elite and desirable variety envisioned by Kant in his much-cited essay 'Towards Perpetual Peace' (1795), but necessitated or enforced: 'It is doubtful whether transnational migrant communities can be characterised as examples of cosmopolitanism in the robust normative sense. It is unclear how many of these migrants feel that they belong to a world'.⁵ Such migrants are often forced into situations in which they must develop cosmopolitan practices. In many contexts, the dangers of these kinds of cosmopolitanism reveal the essential vulnerability of these positions.

Nonetheless, the recognition of the descriptive should not necessarily forestall the envisioning of the normative: looking towards the kind of cosmopolitanism which might be ethico-politically desirable. Such cosmopolitanism, which asks for a broadening of 'circles of political belonging', depends on the work of the imagination to allow human beings to understand ourselves as belonging to a wider world than we can directly access. This is imaginative work that a world literature can participate in, or facilitate: 'World literature is an important aspect of cosmopolitanism because it is a type of world-making activity that enables us to imagine a world'.⁶ Its capacity for world-making is imbued, by Cheah, with

normative force, that is, with a sense of not only what a world literature can do but what it *should* work towards. As such, it is characterised by its ‘normative vocation of opening new worlds’⁷ as both site and agent of such opening. World literature as literature from the post-colonial South is thus a modality of world literature in which the need for imagining different worlds – alternative connections, affinities and paths to the future to those determined by (former) colonial centres – is particularly acute.

Sheldon Pollock and colleagues point to what might happen ‘if we were to be archivally cosmopolitan and to say, “Let’s simply look at the world across time and space and see how people have thought and acted beyond the local.” We would then encounter an extravagant array of possibilities’.⁸ A world literature in this sense can be understood as an alternative array of archives: archives that draw out oft-neglected connections (such as those between the so-called ‘second’ and ‘third’ worlds which I discuss here), and make it possible, or easier, to imagine worlds in which colonial power centres are decentred, and in which centres are pluralised and multiply reshuffled. This work overlaps with post-colonial scholarship’s understanding of the importance of drawing forward historically marginalised perspectives. My reading of Tagore’s and La Guma’s accounts of their experiences in the Soviet Union works not only to tease out these marginalised perspectives but also to recalibrate the assumed relationship of the ‘third’ world to a thing called Europe, since before and during the Cold War, which coincided with the independence struggles of many colonised nations, the ‘European centre’ was not necessarily viewed within the prescribed frameworks of either traditional colonial narratives or dominant postcolonial trajectories. Specifically, in the heyday of the great socialist experiment the Soviet Union was regarded by many left-leaning intellectuals and political activists to be undertaking, ‘Europe’ was rather more complexly configured. Their eyes might have been looking northwards, but it was not to the (colonial) European ‘centre’ that they directed a desiring gaze. In this context, rather than imagining something to be sought in the Western Europe that in fact housed their colonial oppressors, many freedom fighters found an aspirational space in Eastern Europe.

Rabindranath Tagore’s *Letters from Russia*

Both a passionate poet and teacher, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), in his *Letters from Russia*, positions education as the most central of his concerns. He had been invited to the USSR a number of times since 1925, and ‘in spite of ill health he was fairly determined to make the visit when the VOKS (All Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) again invited him in 1930’.⁹ Despite plans to travel further afield, his journey lasted only about two weeks, and was limited to Moscow and its surrounds due to his poor health. Of course, moreover, his experiences will have been starkly determined by the fact that he was on an officially monitored tour, and by linguistic barriers that made communication with locals possible only through interpreters. His letters were published more or less as they arrived, in *Prabasi*, a well-regarded centrist Bengali literary journal, and shortly afterwards in 1931 in a collection as *Russiar Chithi*, in the original Bengali. Parts appeared in English translation, but a full-text English version only became available in 1960 – partially due to efforts of the British colonial government.¹⁰ It should be signalled that his attitude towards the peoples of Central Asia, as suggested by the letters, is not unproblematic.

On his journey to the Soviet Union, Tagore's aim is to mine what he finds there for potential solutions for his native land; and to take a deliberately positive attitude in this. As such, the position he emerges as occupying in relation to the Soviet space he imaginatively produces is simultaneously wilfully positive and somewhat ambivalent. In his words, 'I hear there is a good deal of coercion; summary punishment without trial also exists; there is freedom in other respects, but none to call in question the dispensation of the authorities: But this is only the shadow side of the moon; my main object was to see her bright side'.¹¹ He sees the global problems of capitalism and colonialism – and they are not to be divorced from each other. He notes that 'Not much statistical intricacy is involved to see that during the last hundred and sixty years the all round poverty of India and England's all round prosperity lie parallel to each other',¹² and finds a 'radical solution' being sought in Russia.¹³

Writing from Moscow in 1930, Tagore is 'filled with wonder. It [Russia] is unlike any other country. It is radically different'.¹⁴ There is a sense of this 'radical difference' constituting a potential alternative to the problems of colonialism and capitalism that Tagore recognises as afflicting his homeland. Due to the alternative or 'challenge' to the West the Soviet Union presents, it is besieged by enemies on all sides: 'the whole world is their opponent',¹⁵ they suffer 'violent opposition both at home and abroad',¹⁶ and 'all the capitalist powers today are their enemies and their armouries are full to overflowing'.¹⁷ What emerges is a narrative of an embattled Russia that has proven remarkably resilient in some contexts.

Particularly and significantly, the Soviet Union emerges in Tagore's letters as a space that has improved the lot of both women and racialised peoples: a reputation it held in many areas of the global South, and for a notably long time. In Tagore's letters, Soviet Russia has solved, so it is suggested, the problems of multiple co-habiting nations, and of racism. He notes, 'I have also seen that in their State there is no difference whatsoever of race and colour';¹⁸ the Soviet project is one that creates and fosters 'community which includes also the swarthy skinned peoples of Central Asia. There is no fear, no concern that they too should become strong'.¹⁹ The construction of the Soviet Union as a space that has achieved solutions to problems with which his homeland is still grappling, and consequently as a site of envy, emerges even more strongly in terms of education.

The correspondence Tagore produces is both personal and for a larger readership back home; he positions himself as an Indian wanting to help his native land, an – at this point in time – India-in-the-making. Most especially, he wishes to learn from the achievements made in the sphere of education,²⁰ and expresses his intention to take the practices he has witnessed on his journey back to Santiniketan in Bengal.²¹ The Soviet world he produces can serve as a model to emulate for Indians due, in his construction, to the two regions' many similarities: 'Only a decade ago they [the Russians] were as illiterate, helpless and hungry as our own masses: equally blindly superstitious, equally stupidly religious'.²² He sees, moreover, a comparability in scale, in which the Soviet Union has achieved better results in less auspicious conditions: 'their political dominion spreads over Europe and Asia. Even India does not contain as many races as they have. The contrasts of geographical and human characters are far greater among them than with us'.²³ Not only, then, is Tagore's instinct to learn what he can from this new space, and apply these ideas at home, but of course the experiences of his journey cause him to make comparisons. His first frame of reference is the India to which he will return; the second is 'Europe'.

Impressed as he is by the Soviet Union, then, neither his native country nor 'Europe' come out of the comparison particularly well: 'In the background of the picture of Russia that has taken shape in my mind lurks the dark misery of India'.²⁴ The 'dark misery' of India that emerges in contradistinction to the Soviet space is characterised by slowness, stagnation and, crucially, backwardness. Backwardness is attributed, in the letters, both to the inhabitants of the poet's home country and to those of the Soviet Union's Central Asian republics, variously 'the semi-civilised races of Central Asia',²⁵ the 'semi-savage races',²⁶ and the 'many non-European races, who by European standards are called uncivilised'²⁷ – a ranking in which, however, his countrymen still come out at the bottom. He laments: 'The people spoken of are backward races ... I ask myself: are we more backward than even the Uzbeks and Turcomans?'.²⁸

Comparison with the Soviet Union serves 'Europe' even less well, and to some extent Europe and its 'Western civilisation' become all the more contemptible for belying their barbarism: 'behind the scenes everything is topsy-turvy, filthy and unhealthy, dense with the darkness of sorrow, misery and evil deeds. But to us outsiders, looking through the window of the shelter we obtain, everything appears proper, elegant and everybody well-fed'.²⁹ It is the conceit and deceit of claiming to be civilisationally superior that seems most irksome in the letters. Europe wilfully forgets its own histories where 'they burnt innocent women as witches, killed scientists as sinners and remorselessly crushed freedom of religious belief and denied political rights to religious communities other than their own',³⁰ and hypocritically points the finger elsewhere:

It is proclaimed to the people of the world that Hindus and Mussulmans cut one another's throats ... but once upon a time even Europe's different communities were engaged in murderous strifes which have now turned to desolating wars between different European countries ... displaying the primitive mind of suicidal stupidity, before which our petty barbarism must bow its head in awe.³¹

In the contrast, Europe furthermore emerges as the home of greed and decadence, which it exports to its colonies: 'The pride arising from the difference in wealth has come to our country from the West'.³² As a welcome antidote to this, the Soviet Union has, 'at the very threshold of the rich invincible Western civilisation',³³ created an environment for 'the complete disappearance of the vulgar conceit of wealth',³⁴ where there 'is no barrier of greed'.³⁵

Not only, then, is Europe, or the 'West' (used more or less interchangeably in the letters), more barbarous than it pretends, but it is also, interestingly, caused to emerge as less 'civilised' in the sense of being a locus of high culture. Prior to the revolution of 1917, high art in Tsarist Russia was the sole purview of the wealthy: 'In the old days, only the royalty and nobility enjoyed it. Today the theatres are crowded, so that it is difficult to get in, with those who in the earlier days had no shoes to their feet'.³⁶ Audiences for the theatre, the ballet, the opera are now made up of 'wage-earners, such as masons, blacksmiths, grocers and tailors. And there also come Soviet soldiers, army officers, students and peasants'.³⁷ The Soviet Union, for Tagore, is to be lauded not only for making this possible for its citizens, but for possessing and producing citizens who are able to find such high culture desirable. He notes: 'One cannot imagine Anglo-Saxon peasants and workers enjoying it so calmly and peacefully until the small hours of the morning, let alone our people'.³⁸ The Soviet Union emerges, in this sense, as

civilisationally and culturally superior not only to the poet's homeland but to the 'West' against which he defines it.

The rhetoric of backwardness that recurs throughout the letters, and indeed in so many other iterations, speaks to an assumed teleological progress narrative in which, classically, the 'West' is positioned as most advanced. Tagore's discursive construction, however, associates the Soviet Union and what it represents with the future. The Soviets are 'determined to raise a new world'³⁹; 'Russia is engaged in the task of making the road to a new age; of tearing up the roots of ancient beliefs and customs from its ancient soil'.⁴⁰ The path to the future is being carved by this 'grand experiment'; this imagined Soviet Union strikes out into the future, a locus of hope, inspiration and potential for Tagore's imagined India to learn from, emulate and envy.

Alex La Guma's *A Soviet Journey*

Alex La Guma (1925–1985) was a South African writer and political activist vigorously involved in the struggle against apartheid. La Guma went to the Soviet Union in 1975 as a guest of the Union of Soviet Writers, and this journey, along with experiences gathered on trips in 1970 and 1973, provided the raw material for his travelogue,⁴¹ a text whose aim is overtly to present a positive image of the communist project being pursued there. Originally published by Progress Publishers in Moscow, the book belongs to the 'Impressions of the USSR' series and forms a part of the image of itself the Soviet Union was interested in presenting abroad. No mention is made of the existence of the gulag system.

La Guma positions himself as a communist, a South African, and an African, writing for Africans, South Africans, communists and would-be communists. Not only does he wish to disseminate knowledge about the Soviet Union in a positive light, but he explicitly presents it as practising a viable alternative to the global capitalism of the West, which is yoked to the ongoing colonial oppression under which he sees his country and other countries suffering. He is invested in looking at the Soviet space as one that has solved many problems the world, and especially his country and people, still face. As such, the Soviet model emerges as one that can be learnt from, and which allows for transnational solidarities to be forged and fostered. It is clear, then, that it is possible to place La Guma's impetus in a lineage with Tagore's motivations for going to Soviet Russia. Both Tagore's book of letters and La Guma's travelogue are documents of the attempt to look towards the Soviet Union as a space of alternatives, inspiration and hope, specifically as they are confronted with anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles at home. Of course, the contexts and contingencies of India and South Africa in these situations differ enormously, and the texts emerge nearly fifty years apart from each other – yet precisely because of these differences, it is interesting to note the overlaps, and the remarkable persistence of certain narratives.

Like Tagore, La Guma uses the language of backwardness throughout. Due to his overtly communist point of view, this takes the form of a Marxist teleological progress narrative.⁴² As such, 'backwardness' – attributed as in Tagore to the peoples of Central Asia – is combatted by the communism brought to these regions by their inclusion into the Soviet Union. The Soviet introduction of socialism 'enabled once backward peoples to catch up quickly with the advanced',⁴³ specifically, the 'backward hinterland became modern industrial-agrarian republics without going through a capitalist stage, and caught up with the

more advanced nations of the USSR'.⁴⁴ The Soviet Union facilitates the 'catching up' of its 'non-European' brethren, allowing them to bypass capitalism and become associated, along with the rest of the Union, with the future.

The book indicates something of an ambivalent attitude to the precise relationship between the Soviet centre and its Central Asian satellites. While La Guma suggests an even-handed relationship of exchange in an economic sense, he presents a less equitable relationship with regard to culture, as the text understands it. On the one hand, he credits Soviet Russia with having 'created' culture of a certain sort in the Central Asian republics. On the other, La Guma notes of the 'eastern hinterlands' that 'each of them was a world of its own, with its own ways, customs and economy',⁴⁵ and makes efforts to give a nod to local poets, for instance, in each of the smaller and larger towns he visits in his journeys through Central Asia. Explicitly, he problematises the language of backwardness he otherwise uses, by questioning its latent Eurocentrism: 'Once backward, one could say. But really, what is "backward"? Around the years 950–1050 the territory known today as Central Asia and Kazakhstan produced such outstanding scientists and thinkers as ibn-Sina whom the Europeans called Avicenna'.⁴⁶ Specifically, he critiques as a bourgeois idea the

familiarisation of the people not with national culture, but rather with European culture, which was supposedly becoming a world culture; the theory that Europe was the source of wisdom ... based on the underestimation of the enormous contribution made by the non-European peoples to the development of mankind.⁴⁷

Implicitly, though, he endorses the attribution of backwardness, through his own sustained use of such language, and through his overarching argument in favour of the Soviet Union because of its success in accelerating the development of 'backward' peoples. He questions Europe as originary point of culture – and concomitantly all echoes of the colonial 'civilising mission' – but he also implicitly reproduces a version of this narrative when he speaks of what the Soviet Union has done for Central Asia. There are indeed several different, but parallel iterations of the 'civilising mission': that which colonial Western Europe espoused in relation to its global South colonies (the so-called 'white man's burden'); that which Russia from its tsarist incarnation to its Soviet permutation presented itself as having in Central Asia⁴⁸; and that which the Soviet Union in some instances alleged to have in relation to countries of the global South: 'the attitude of the Soviet and Eastern European leaders toward African nations often took the form of yet another "civilising mission", with startling similarities to the discourse of European colonialism'.⁴⁹

La Guma uses the kind of language associated with colonial constructions of colonised territories, particularly in his descriptions of Siberia: '[f]or hundreds of years Eastern Siberia had remained unknown',⁵⁰ though of course it wasn't unknown to the Indigenous peoples who lived there – it was unknown to the Russian explorers who came later. The cartographic surveys of this space seem to have much in common with similar colonial imperatives to map and control: 'new names have appeared on the map of Siberia: Neftiyugansk, Svetly, Nizhnevartovsk'.⁵¹ Thus are maps filled and places 'discovered'. La Guma registers this basically colonial gesture, but imbues it with ostensibly positive content: 'They were conquerors of Samotlor, the new *conquistadores* of a new wilderness, finding and opening a new El Dorado for socialism'.⁵²

The ambivalence of La Guma's portrayal of Central Asia is in evidence particularly in his representation of some of its peoples. While recognising that many of these peoples had 'worlds of their own', he represents these worlds in stylised and exoticised ways. He describes 'bearded men out of the Arabian Nights ... Women in national dress dotted the distant fields like far-off flowers and Scheherazade people became more frequent in the countryside';⁵³ and '[a]n old man in the robes and big turban out of an Eastern fairy-tale'.⁵⁴ This exoticisation also manifests in his treatment of 'gypsies', with whom he shows a particular fascination. He describes 'a trio of Gypsy women, shawls, blouses and long skirts all appearing worn and mouths flashing new-looking gold teeth in their dark faces. They insisted on telling my fortune gabbling in heavily accented Russian'.⁵⁵ 'Gold teeth flashing in dark faces' and language reduced to 'gabbling' breaks into fragments and renders incomprehensible these Soviet citizens, whom La Guma hastens to add were the "real thing", genuine Gypsies',⁵⁶ in language that is strikingly Orientalist in tenor.⁵⁷ His generalised expectations and stereotyping of this group carry an undertone: the Soviets are to be lauded for including *even* 'gypsies' in their all-embracing project.

Within La Guma's comparative framework of 'progress' and 'backwardness', it is not only Central Asia that comes off second best. Of course, the 'capitalist system, disguised under ... "Western civilisation"',⁵⁸ which brings with it racism and colonial oppression, is presented as the source of problems to which the Soviet Union proffers solutions. These problems, created by the 'West', are the cause of the 'backwardness' of his native continent, which is relegated to a past out of which it is struggling to emerge. When La Guma relates the financial hardships of South African workers expected to survive on a very meagre wage, a 'withered farmer' replies, 'It was like that in the time of the tsar'.⁵⁹ South Africa's present is placed in line with the Soviet Union's tsarist past. Similarly, La Guma recounts the reaction he experiences from Soviet citizens vis-à-vis the racism of apartheid: 'Most Soviets I have met find racial discrimination difficult to comprehend and it usually takes a lot of explanation'.⁶⁰ Apartheid and its racism are construed as inconceivable to the Soviets. Elsewhere, La Guma explains the situation in his home country to some interested workers: 'they listened, looking extremely puzzled, almost uncomprehending. They had never experienced such a state of affairs'.⁶¹ Monica Popescu accounts for a widespread sense in the (formerly) colonised world that the Soviet Union and its satellite republics presented a non-racial society: 'Never an active participant in the 'scramble for Africa', Eastern Europe appeared to be free of material interests in these former colonies. This premise was the foundation of a theory of colour-blindness and solidarity with exploited nations'.⁶² She notes also, however, that 'an increasing body of research shows that dormant racial discrimination was present in the Eastern Bloc'.⁶³ In La Guma, however, the Soviets' ability to live ostensibly without racial discrimination shows them as clearly superior to and 'ahead' of apartheid South Africa. Not only, moreover, has the Soviet Union created a racially egalitarian society for La Guma, but it has also produced one that regards women as the equals of men.

La Guma thus presents the Soviet Union as the 'opening of a new era in world history'. This 'new era' inaugurates a vision of the future, 'the prototype of a future world communist culture'.⁶⁴ La Guma's future, written some forty-eight years after Tagore's, takes a shape roughly congruent with that of the Indian poet. The Soviet Union, as a space characterised by a connection to the future, then, presents an alternative present that La Guma, like Tagore before him, finds valuable:

The Soviet Union is a multinational state; it is populated by more than one hundred large and small nationalities ... All of these have caused the USSR to become of irreversible international importance, a major landmark in social development ... grappling by common effort with a complex national question, [it] has won world recognition, and the attention of all those who still seek the answer to such questions.⁶⁵

‘Those who still seek the answer to such questions’ are many, but it is clear for whom this represents a most valuable alternative: ‘the movements of the colonial peoples could not ignore the socialist alternative’.⁶⁶ He notes communist sympathies across Africa, as well as Asia and Latin America.⁶⁷ The alternative offered by the Soviet Union manifests a possible solidarity that, in La Guma, is key. He has already noted it within the family of the Soviet nations, representing this as a system of sharing and cooperation: ‘Such is the Soviet Union that every region of the country came to the rescue ... [offering] deeds of solidarity and family duty’.⁶⁸ Crucial to his envisioning of the Soviet space though, is its capacity in this sense to transcend its own borders, to reach out and lend a helping hand (metaphorically as well as actually, as it happens) to those engaged in struggles in other parts of the world – especially those confronting the legacies of colonialism and neo-colonialism. This speaks to its cosmopolitan practices, which open and enlarge ‘circles of political belonging’ to facilitate, in La Guma’s imagined world, solidarity between the ‘second’ and the ‘third’ world. The capacity for putting aside narrow individual or nationalist interests for a common good, created and fostered in the Union, has thus produced for him a new kind of collectivity: ‘a new historical community of people has emerged, namely, the *Soviet people*’.⁶⁹

The helping hand of the Soviet Union is apparent on the macro and micro scales; it can be historically described, and is full of normative future potential. He notes that ‘the Soviet Union supported the anti-colonialist struggles, condemned apartheid, aided the national liberation movements’,⁷⁰ and ‘added impetus to the development of struggle in the colonies’.⁷¹ On a more abstract level, ‘the USSR lodged in the minds of the poor, the struggling. Sometimes sophisticatedly, sometimes simply. They were on our side. In a prison cell in Cape Town an unknown prisoner had scratched crudely on the wall: “Russia will never die”’.⁷² On a more intimate scale, this solidarity manifests in La Guma’s human-to-human interactions: for instance, upon meeting the heads of local brigades: ‘When they heard I was from South Africa ... their enthusiasm mounted. “We know about affairs in your country from the newspapers and the TV. We are with the African people in their struggle”’;⁷³ and when someone proposes ‘a toast to Bram Fischer’.⁷⁴ These solidarities come out of connections, and La Guma creates a Soviet world densely connected to other peoples and other struggles. This is manifested in the movement of goods, people and knowledge; as well as in his various experiences of finding copies of his own work in local book shops.⁷⁵

These connections are lasting, and so represented as meaningful rather than superficial. This produces an imagined something shared that binds people the world over, producing connections, affinities, sympathies and grounds for solidarity. This, in its ideal version, allows different stories to co-exist without cancelling each other: allowing them, rather, to supplement each other. Thus La Guma’s telling of stories from home in response to a narrative of the origin of mountains: ‘There is an African folk-tale, from Tanzania, I think, which gives another explanation for how mountains came to be’.⁷⁶ ‘Another explanation’ claims no universality and no supremacy for itself. On another occasion, he relates

the story of how '[s]tars were first made in South Africa, you know',⁷⁷ but ends his anecdote with 'if we invented the stars, it must have been your people who invented the sun'.⁷⁸ This allows La Guma's text to imagine a shared, inclusive world in which different stories can live alongside each other.

Towards Eurasia

Read together, these texts participate in making worlds with alternative horizons of possibility, and facilitate alternative imaginings of 'Europe'. By relocating 'culture' and culturedness, they shift cultural and civilisational 'centres' to Eastern Europe. Particularly interesting in this light is Tagore's conclusion, also suggested in La Guma, that the Soviets are *more* 'cultured' than Westerners. Of course, the parameters defining what constitutes 'culture' and how this is to be valued and assessed are not without problems for either of the authors. But, however they or their texts choose to understand 'culture', it is worth noting that whatever it is, in their texts they envision a space in which the Soviets have *more* of it than Western Europe – a significant inversion of dominant imaginative constructions of the continent as explicated by, among others, Larry Wolff and Maria Todorova⁷⁹ – and it also goes some way to indicating how very different things look from perspectives outside the 'Western centre'.

Tagore's and La Guma's texts also relocate 'the future', and possible role models, in ways that complicate those dominant teleological narratives that place the West as most 'advanced', while 'the Rest' is left to bemoan its belatedness. Instead, the 'second' world stands as shining example of how to move past the racism, capitalism and greed endemic to the 'first', which the 'first' has imported to the colonies. It is for this, in their imaginings, that their home countries should strive: the vision of a more desirable, just future. In Tagore and La Guma, a journey to the Soviet Union is thus also a journey to the future, and they look here for solutions to problems produced by the 'first world'.

Reading the two texts together can extend, enlarge and reshuffle the way 'Europe' is thought, in a manner that makes *Eurasia* become a more meaningful category. Indeed, in mapping the imaginative journeys traced in these texts, Eurasia becomes the only category that makes sense. As the travellers note, the Soviet Union is a unit that makes a hard border between Asia and Europe inherently tricky anyway; La Guma observes, 'we were crossing into Lithuania, but the landscape took no notice of borders and did not change – after all it is all the USSR'.⁸⁰

A move towards 'Eurasia' entails a refiguring of categories of analysis that can enable productive and inclusive reimaginings of 'Europe' – creating a perspective from which it is not only *possible* to 'to escape from the binary of Europe and the rest of the world',⁸¹ but called for. In the ambit of discussions of world literature, Alexander Beecroft notes that

theories of world literature, then, are in fact frequently theories of European literature and only secondarily of the ways non-European literatures find themselves integrated into the European world system, leaving little room to discuss, for example, inter-Asian literary relations, which from the perspectives of the world system are seen as minor links between peripheries.⁸²

One means of countering the Eurocentrism implicitly critiqued here is through the fundamental redrawing and re-imagining of the axes allowed by 'Eurasia'. This is a geographical

landmass characterised by more intense interconnectedness than much Eurocentric historiography allows, and a framework determined by Eurasian co-ordinates moves from seeing ‘minor links between peripheries’ by re-triangulating what constitutes a periphery.

Such envisionings of Eurasia, which broaden the angle of view both spatially and temporally, can remind us of the historical *cosmopolitanism* of this region of the world. Cheah notes that it is ‘erroneous to regard cosmopolitanism as the transcendence of the particularistic and parochial limits of the nation-form because cosmopolitanism may in fact precede the popular nation-state in history and nationalism in the history of ideas’.⁸³ It seems not that this might be the case, but that it indeed *is*: Walter Mignolo signals that cosmopolitan practices predate any European ‘invention’ thereof by pointing to Guaman Poma de Ayala’s use of the Quechua-Aymara *Tavantinsuyu* to ‘imagine a global and social organisation of the human species ... 250 years before Kant’;⁸⁴ Sheldon Pollock explicates the ‘Sanskrit cosmopolis’ of pre-modern South Asia, arguing that the Sanskrit and Latin worlds ‘produced a sense of belonging that affiliated readers to each other across vast space and time’.⁸⁵

Chris Hann’s envisioning of Eurasia entails Europe in its entirety, creating a unit in which ‘Europe’ might be relegated to a subcontinent, and is a spatial collectivity to which he adds Northern Africa.⁸⁶ This resonates with, for instance, world historian Marshall Hodgson’s use of ‘Afro-Eurasia’ to discuss the development of an ‘Islamic world’, as well as – read against the grain – the project of scholars such as Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson to think a concept of *Eurafrica* as integral and antecedent to current formulations of ‘Europe’ and ‘Europeanness’, which heeds a similar vocation, pointing to ‘the necessity of perceiving Europe and Africa from the perspective of a theory of globality and international relations unconstrained by national, continental and Eurocentric categories’.⁸⁷ Again, this allows a shift in the focus of frames of comparison, such that the United States, Western Europe, or the nation-state construct itself are not always privileged as analytical categories or nodes of power that continue to determine the terms of the conversation. As Beecroft points out, then,

[a]ll major regions of Eurasia, *including* Europe, were the site of competing literary tensions ... When viewed comparatively, we are reminded that Europe is not exceptional in this period, and that the Eurochronology which made it seem so was the product not only of Orientalist constructions of other cultures, but also of a willed forgetting of the significance of Latin literature in early modern Europe.⁸⁸

A willed forgetting not only of the significance of Latin literature, but of many other circuits of communication, culture and trade. Beecroft moves from this critique of Eurochronology – a Eurocentric construction of chronology imposed as universal – to the proposition of a *Eurasiachronology* and extending quickly to a *Eurafrasiachronology*. This speaks to a growing sense of the inadequacy of existing spatial and temporal frameworks.

One way out of the ossified understandings of ‘Europe’, and brittle constructions of history that place it as progenitor of universal history and ‘culture’, is to remind ourselves, as Beecroft proposes, of Janet Abu-Lughod’s crucial injunction to think history ‘in terms of networks of circulation rather than of fixed territorial entities, and of accepting that those networks necessarily (rather than exceptionally) overlap with one another’.⁸⁹ Abu-Lughod’s tracing of what might well be thought of as a Eurasian-centred world system

includes Muslim sailors who had circumnavigated Africa from East to West long before the Portuguese made the journey in the opposite direction. She points to the existence of a 'world' economy of sorts (not including the Americas and Oceania) in the thirteenth century, of

increased economic integration and cultural efflorescence ... [in which] parallel advances in navigation and statecraft facilitated contact among distant societies ... In all areas, prosperity – at least at the top – yielded high culture, and Europe, hitherto the least developed region, perhaps had the most to gain from the new links being forged.⁹⁰

It was a system that 'contained no single hegemonic power',⁹¹ and which reveals that 'the principles of organisation of world systems can have considerable variability; and ... world systems are dynamic and therefore undergo periodic restructuring'.⁹² As such, she details a historical system with a number of cores, not ordered hierarchically, unpicking the necessity of a 'centre' and the ostensible inevitability of the dominance of the 'West'. This view entails 'treating Europe at that time as it should be seen, as an upstart peripheral to an ongoing operation'.⁹³ Pollock makes a parallel observation about pre-modern South Asia: 'Sanskrit cosmopolitanism was not about absorbing the periphery into the centre but turning the periphery itself into a centre ... it was a world of all centres and no circumferences'.⁹⁴

The imagining of the Soviet Union from the global South perspectives drawn together here can help us take a long view of history in this sense. It emphasises long-existing 'flows of goods and ideas along established overland and maritime routes',⁹⁵ and envisions a world in which what might otherwise be rendered as the omnipotent, or at least determining, colonial powers of Western Europe become the periphery, or at most one of several possible 'centres'. Indeed, whether implicitly or explicitly, these texts remind of just such histories and relationships. La Guma observes that '[w]hat was known as 'the great silk road' of old times – linking Byzantium with China – crossed the south of Kazakhstan, as well as the caravan trails to South-Western Siberia. These gave rise to settlements and cities'.⁹⁶ His journey into the Central Asian Soviet Union calls on him to note this long view of history, which speaks to a Eurasian network of connectivity in existence before any presumed centrality of 'Europe'. The space also offers up a counter to the 'backwardness' otherwise attributed to Central Asia in the texts, La Guma seeing the local pride in the 'history of Tajik astronomy – they had a long association with the subject, dating back to before the Persians'.⁹⁷ The encounters with this space do not allow Eurocentric histories, because this kind of narrativising simply does not work here.

This shifts the axes within and around which we think – in terms again both temporal and spatial. Jennifer Suchland notes that the category of Eurasia allows it to become apparent that 'there are multiple iterations of the East and the West and of the axes that mark the centre and the periphery'.⁹⁸ And again, this is a recognition that travelling through the Central Asian Soviet Republics seems to call forth from the travellers, implicit in La Guma's description of Siberia as 'like the Wild West gone socialist'.⁹⁹

Understanding the malleability of these axes is crucial, particularly as it emerges dependent on the positioning of the viewer. These imagined cartographies are made, and can be un-made, or re-made: world literature understood also as literature from the marginalised spaces of the postcolonial South can serve as an archive for how this might be done. By following their movements, and the implicit (re)mappings and redrawings of flexible

borders they entail, and by keeping the frames within which we think a concept like 'Eurasia' in motion – not choosing or settling on any one version of it, but attempting to think various iterations at the same time – such texts can contribute to a world literature that 'responds to the need to remake the world as a place that is open'.¹⁰⁰

Notes

1. See David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003; David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008; Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', in *Debating World Literature*, ed. by Christopher Prendergast, London: Verso, 2004; Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, London and New York: Verso, 2013; Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
2. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, London: Routledge, 1989.
3. Neil Lazarus, 'Spectres Haunting: Postcommunism and Postcolonialism', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48(2), 2012, p 122.
4. Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, p 3.
5. Pheng Cheah, 'The Cosmopolitical', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Cosmopolitanism*, ed. by Maria Rovisco and Magdalena Nowicka, Ashgate Publishing, 2011, p 220.
6. Pheng Cheah, 'What Is a World? On World Literature as World-Making Activity', *Daedalus* 137(3), 2008, p 26.
7. Cheah, *What Is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, p 16.
8. Sheldon Pollock, Homi K Bhabha, Carol A Breckenridge and Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Cosmopolitanisms', *Public Culture* 12(3), 2000, p 586.
9. Malini Bhattacharya, 'The Russian Revolution and the Freedom Struggle in India: Rabindranath Tagore's Letters from Russia', *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 6(2), 2017, p 249.
10. See Bhattacharya, 'The Russian Revolution', p 238.
11. Rabindranath Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, trans. Sasadhar Sinha, Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1960, p 64.
12. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 103.
13. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 3.
14. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 1.
15. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 10.
16. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 24.
17. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 25.
18. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 39.
19. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 48.
20. Tagore is not the first Indian to wish to emulate the educational achievements of the Soviet Union (see Bhattacharya, 'The Russian Revolution', p 246).
21. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, pp 49, 52.
22. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 27.
23. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 26.
24. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 97.
25. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 3.
26. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 39.
27. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 76. Tagore here takes a critical distance from a culture of labelling in which he elsewhere – as evident in the prior citations – very much participates.
28. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 78.
29. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 7.
30. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 62.

31. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 16.
32. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 8.
33. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 14.
34. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 9.
35. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 108.
36. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 50.
37. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 56.
38. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 51.
39. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 10.
40. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, p 115.
41. Roger Field, *Alex La Guma: A Literary and Political Biography*, Abingdon: Currey, 2010, p 210.
42. Monica Popescu offers a reading that focuses particularly on La Guma's treatment of temporality; see Monica Popescu, *South African Literature Beyond the Cold War*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p 25.
43. Alex La Guma, *A Soviet Journey, Impressions of the USSR*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978, p 34.
44. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 35.
45. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 34.
46. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 94.
47. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 96.
48. Kalpana Sahni, *Crucifying the Orient: Russian Orientalism and the Colonisation of Caucasus and Central Asia*, Bangkok: White Orchid Press, 1997.
49. Popescu, *South African Literature*, p 36.
50. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 181.
51. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 203.
52. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 204.
53. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 46.
54. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 137.
55. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 30.
56. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 31.
57. See also Field, *Alex La Guma*.
58. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 230.
59. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 148.
60. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 175.
61. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 67.
62. Popescu, *South African Literature*, p 35.
63. Popescu, *South African Literature*, p 35.
64. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 98.
65. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 17.
66. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 13.
67. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 13.
68. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 127.
69. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 98.
70. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 11.
71. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 12.
72. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 12.
73. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 61.
74. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 114.
75. Paul Hollander suggests that 'the CPSU actively courted pro-Soviet intellectuals and writers by publishing their work in several languages', in Field, *Alex La Guma*, p 216. It is possible that La Guma's serendipitous findings are not entirely accidental.
76. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 115.
77. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 131.

78. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 132.
79. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilisation on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994; Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
80. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 215.
81. Chris Hann, 'A Concept of Eurasia', *Current Anthropology* 57(1), 2016, p 7.
82. Alexander Beecroft, 'When Cosmopolitanisms Intersect: An Early Chinese Buddhist Apologetic and World Literature', *Comparative Literature Studies* 47(3), 2010, p 266.
83. Cheah, 'The Cosmopolitical', p 215.
84. Walter Mignolo, 'Cosmopolitan Localism: A Decolonial Shifting of the Kantian's Legacies', *Localities* 1, 2011, p 24.
85. Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006, p 571.
86. Hann, 'A Concept of Eurasia', p 2.
87. Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism*, London: Bloomsbury, 2014, p 10.
88. Alexander Beecroft, 'Eurafrasiachronologies: Between the Eurocentric and the Planetary', *Journal of World Literature* 1, 2016, p 21.
89. Beecroft, 'Eurafrasiachronologies', p 24.
90. Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p 4.
91. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, p 5.
92. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, p 364.
93. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, p 12.
94. Pollock, *The Language of the Gods*, p 572.
95. Hann, 'A Concept of Eurasia', p 3.
96. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 82.
97. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, p 68.
98. Jennifer Suchland, 'Is Postsocialism Transnational?', *Signs* 36(4), 2011, p 856.
99. La Guma, *A Soviet Journey*, pp 76–77.
100. Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, p 19.

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