

Foreword

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Abstract

This Foreword explores the interplay of world history and world literature in *India after World History*. The editor guides eight authors in discussing four key issues. In critique of global humanities theory, the book shows the advance of literary scholars in global theory, balanced by inclusive empirical historical studies. World-making is advanced as a technique for global interpretation; past and present examples clarify the concept and its value. Third, the global debate over Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy demonstrates how a single work can focus wide debate. And the "global," a twenty-first-century perspective, is shown to be balanced by an emerging "planetary" perspective. The book links these interpretive issues through well-chosen "meeting points" in world literature and history, at which varying perspectives contend in debate. In sum, the Foreword presents the work as opening a path for grappling with multiple perspectives in understanding the global and the planetary.

Keywords: World literature; world history; keywords; theory; world-making; *Ibis* trilogy; meeting points; global; planetary

Literature and history, the two largest fields in the humanities, now give significant attention to worldwide dimensions of their disciplines. This volume, with five essays by world literary scholars and five by world/global historians, explores issues that criss-cross the contested terrain of globalization. Historian Neilesh Bose, the leader in assembling this productive exchange, saw the benefits in focusing the book on India—long a nexus of global discourse and institutional diversity—without abandoning the subcontinent's heritage of area-studies analysis. The result brings a fresh look at the global, with a wealth of materials.

The volume draws on two centuries of Indian writing in global literature and history—a nexus of global thought from numerous perspectives. For scholars in India as elsewhere, a core concern within the two expanding disciplines is contemporary globalization, with its social and environmental transformations and crises. At the same time, authors and critics in both fields are expanding the scope of their work along temporal, spatial, and topical axes. Attention to topics beyond elite dominance creates space for such issues as the lives of commoners, the complexities of gender, the significance of ancient antecedents, assumptions on human

agency, and the limits of nature. Each of the resulting perspectives necessarily entails challenges to the priorities of others, so that a growing range of issues now contends for space in the understanding of the global.

The expanding scope of topics and perspectives in the humanities threatens to fragment the discourse, raising fears for its coherence among some observers. Dependably, however, the human search for connections reasserts itself. World history and world literature identify unexpected links within the historical record and the human imagination, the two great archives on which history and literature draw. Such exploration requires new skills, notably how to debate numerous perspectives at once and how to be at once global and specific. The confluence of world history and world literature provides a privileged arena in which to select priorities in this era of expanding inclusivity. India and the Indian Ocean world stand out as a locus of innovation and debate in both literary and historical perspectives.

In a multifaceted introduction, Bose artfully guides readers across four related issues addressed in the chapters: theory in the unfolding of world literature and world history; world-making as a technique for global interpretation; the debate over Amitav Ghosh's smash-hit *Ibis* trilogy; and the "global" as a twenty-first-century perspective. Beyond these main themes, Bose introduces the concept of "meeting points" of world literature and history, at which varying perspectives contend in debate.

Beginning with theory, Bose takes the lead in surveying the ancestry and theories of world literature and world history over more than two centuries. Much is new in each field, so that theory is a mix of old and new. In the contemporary age, three outstanding literary theorists—Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, and David Damrosch—articulated alternative visions that enlivened their field, in a pattern that anticipated what Bose would call meeting points. Bose reconsiders the initial collection linking world literature and world history, edited by May Hawas, and finds that its disciplinary overviews show literature and history to explore globalization along different paths, although Bruce Robbins, in the same volume, made a plea for concerted work in the humanities on the issue of violence.¹ Bose here pursues the directions of theory in the two fields, balancing the work of scholars from the North Atlantic, India, and the Indian diaspora. He highlights historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam's lifetime of research on mid-level interconnections in the globalization of the early modern world, especially in the Indian Ocean world; he draws on the literary scholarship of Dilip Menon and B. Venkat Mani; and he recalls Ramayatar Sharma's voice from the early twentieth century, recounting the genesis of the world and narrating its changes to the present. Bose's comparison of the two fields shows that theory in world literature is more articulated than in world history, especially in that interpretive statements in world literature are more backed up by the specifics of key texts.² As for theory in history, luminaries

have not dominated the field since the days of E. P. Thompson, nor has graduate study given much attention to world history. Nevertheless, historical study has steadily expanded its scope, providing evidence and analysis to support global interpretations. Bose confirms the latter point through studies of empire, arguing that recent authors intend to decenter and provincialize the view centered on extractive British and French empires. The new works focus on earlier empires worldwide, on linking modern empires to capitalism, and on the concerns of the colonized.

Three early chapters of this volume pursue the theme of origins and theories. Jonathan Arac, in a wide-ranging, autobiographical tour, retraces his life of studies in world literature and world history of the North Atlantic during the past two centuries. He is the one author besides Bose to review both fields, noting for instance that as the scope of history expanded, the cultural work of historians became weaker. Arac focuses especially Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946), the founding analysis of realism in world literature, providing a convincing portrayal of Auerbach's way of picking out the most 'realistic' of texts through the detail of their representations. Arac then steps beyond his own broad expertise in European and American studies to give an enthusiastic account of Sheldon Pollock's analysis of cosmopolis in his study of Sanskrit literature.³ Yet Arac scolds Pollock for neglecting Auerbach, especially since Pollock's portrayal of early vernacular literature follows Auerbach's model for discussing Dante. Bose too grapples with Pollock, arguing that Pollock's nostalgia for the Sanskrit cosmopolis makes him a biased critic of nations, "keeping in place an airtight division between premodern and modern worlds." These critiques reveal a meeting point, linking three perspectives in the portrayal of communities over the centuries. In a different approach to theory, Alex Beecroft treats literary history as a container for theory. He provides an impressive exploration of histories of world literature, then deploys them to locate inspiration and cautions for his own effort. His projected history of world literature in six periods, from the first millennium BCE to the present, turns at major world-literary events of cultural interaction, narrating regions of literary activity and interaction of texts within literary periods, yet abstaining from imposing an encompassing narrative. Kedar Kulkarni's chapter brings back to life the nineteenth-century literary theory of Vishnushastri Chiplunkar, whose writings revealed the two visions of literature in Marathi poetry, expressing them in terms of his deep reading of European literary criticism. Kulkarni, in his appreciation of Chiplunkar, argues that the theorist's insights constituted a "regift" to the colonizer, an ironic response to the Eurocentric claim that colonialism was a "gift." These instances show that literary theory is assembling global perspectives with increasing energy and breadth.

'World-making', the second of Bose's four cross-disciplinary themes, identifies a promising path to global interpretation in the humanities. Bose treats world-making

not as a structured analytical framework but as “a lens into the making of literature as well as an approach to thinking about the world as an object.” In intellectual history, Bose relies on historian Ayesha Ramachandran to remind readers that Nathaniel Fairfax coined the term ‘world-making’ in late seventeenth-century England.⁴ Ramachandran’s volume arguably launched current historical study of world-making: she traces world-making by early modern writers and also presents her own model of their world of conceptualization.⁵ It becomes clear that the agents of world-making can be either the *protagonists* of literary and historical works or the *authors* of texts, each envisioning a world as they think it is or might be. Bose’s passages on world-making provide the reader with guidelines for use of the approach: he supports Ramachandran’s argument that early modern world-making was an ‘imaginatively ambitious response to forces of entropy and disorder’.⁶ Bose turns to philosopher Nelson Goodman, whose concise 1978 book has remained a touchstone in conceptualizing world-making, then links Goodman to Duncan Bell, who adopted an explicitly world-making approach to the study of global intellectual history, focusing on the rise of neoliberalism.⁷ In my opinion, an observation by historian Bruce Mazlish adds a qualification relevant to worldmaking. Mazlish, in analyzing the eighteenth-century concept of civilization, showed how the initial ‘reflective’ and open-ended study of civilization, from the 1750s to the 1790s, was displaced in Napoleonic and subsequent times by an ‘ideological’ effort to narrow the concept of civilization into a tool for building empire and European commercial dominance.⁸ This distinction between reflective analysis and ideological use of key concepts may be generally valuable in the discourse on worldmaking.⁹ That is, Bose’s comments on the worldmaking interpretation by ethnographer Dorinne Kondo and others, emphasizing the reflective side of these studies of globalization, contrast with the ideological worldmaking of neoliberalism.¹⁰

Bose mixes writers who apply explicitly the logic of world-making with those who apply it implicitly, opening the door to discussion of other works. In a chapter presenting what amounts to a dual exercise in world-making, historian Jos Gommans seeks to introduce Neoplatonism as “a new category in comparative and connective global history.” Gommans, seeking to link South Asia to the world without tying his analysis to modernity, turned to Neoplatonism. His chapter presents two skillfully condensed world-making narratives of Neoplatonist philosophy. The first traces continuities from Plotinus to the twentieth century; the second focuses on the global “Renaissance” of Neoplatonism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, showing parallels of Tudor-Stuart England and Akbar’s Mughal state to convey the eclectic and absorptive properties of Neoplatonist thought.

To these I add my own exercise in world-making, which charts the beginnings of human language. New evidence suggests that early humans shifted rapidly, some 70,000 years ago, from limited vocal communication to syntactic language,

complete sentences, and worldwide migration. Following Bose's lead, I seek to construct a tale of world-making that argues for the extension of global humanities to very early times. The breakthrough came, I argue, from children of ages from seven to fifteen, who played word games, getting past monosyllabic nouns and verbs by creating the syntax that linked words into full and meaningful sentences.¹¹ Humans had previously voiced individual words but lacked the social organization to assemble words into syntactic sentences. The team of young Founders (as I call them) created common consent and a linguistic community—the first social institution of humanity. That institution grew from perhaps a dozen friends at the start to 100 speaking members after 15 years. The Founders were able to maintain their group, expand the specifics of language, bring in younger children, and become leaders of their society as they matured. Within three centuries the speaking population, organized into language communities of roughly 150 each, had grown and absorbed others to reach some 10,000 in population. In this new world of complete sentences and complete thoughts, one could convey details about the past and future as well as the here and now. Individuals gained membership in this institution only through years of practice in speaking. The institution was democratic at base, in that all shared the language and the possibility of adding innovations to it. Groups of speaking individuals then formed more institutions, first to strengthen the language community and then to design and implement further tasks. Rituals strengthened community identity, marriage alliances linked households, and workshops of specialists created visual art. Steadily, these processes brought absorption of all human populations into speaking communities that settled all the continents. World-making is a device for envisioning global dynamics that can greatly facilitate global discourse in this and other arenas. Filling in this story will rely heavily on imagination and literary techniques. Even if it is a strain on humanities disciplines to characterize this scantily documented early time, literary approaches to the early human experience may be deeply revealing, by exploring the agency and questioning of humans who could at last understand and misunderstand each other in explicit dialogue.

In his third introductory emphasis, Bose turns to a remarkable achievement in world literature, Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy. The *Ibis*, Ghosh's vessel for this world-historical epic, sailed from Calcutta to Mauritius at the time of the Opium War, and its human cargo included characters representing every nineteenth-century social tension. Bose notes comparisons and links of *Ibis* to literature on the nineteenth-century Atlantic but also Ghosh's extensive reading in Asian studies. Nandini Dhar's insightful chapter on the initial volume of Ghosh's trilogy, *Sea of Poppies*, emphasizes the issue of 'capitalist realism'. She criticizes binary visions of past and present: realism, as she sees it, must be diachronic. In comparison with vernacular-language Indian realist novels of the 1930s, she shows how Ghosh

sustained that tradition, chronicling both gender and indenture in far more substantial form as he wrote in the twenty-first century. Indeed, Ghosh's literary imagination anticipated historical research, notably in treating indenture as a significant element of capitalism rather than as an irrelevant side-issue. In other reviews, two academic roundtables brought a mix of interpretive admiration and specialist critique for *Ibis*. In the *American Historical Review*, historians acknowledged the success in linking global regions with literary characters yet added the defensive note that Ghosh had passed over the vast historiography on slavery and indenture. In the *Journal of Asian Studies*, discussion focused on intra-Asian histories, acknowledging that Ghosh's broad canvas conveyed a pan-Asian story that is not available in segmented historical works. Ghosh's Indian Ocean epic, though by no means definitive, continues to crystallize the interplay and debate of global perspectives.

In a fourth general point, on "the global," Bose opens a meeting point at a broader scale by setting the discipline of global studies in parallel to world history and world literature. He traces the early formulations of Arjun Appadurai and Raymond Williams and the ongoing update of Williams' *Keywords*, with attention to "global." Chapters of this book reveal the influence of global studies, for instance on violence: Nandini Dhar cites examples of the numerous forms of colonial violence in *Sea of Poppies*; Radha Kumar traces a South Indian narrative to show how police violence became integrated into colonial life. Both respond to the urgings of Bruce Robbins to give attention to violence in literature, though the authors wisely stop short of portraying violence as a monocausal source of social change.¹² Twentieth-century anticolonialism has regained attention as a global issue, yet through sharply different methodologies. Literary scholar J. Daniel Elam deploys M. K. Gandhi's version of *Bhagavad Gita* to introduce Elam's standpoint of radical postcolonial studies, centering on the discipline of philology. Historian Christopher Lee explores the anticolonial outlook of the South African writer Alex La Guma, showing that his twenty years of exile led him to a mix of writings in fiction and especially non-fiction—what Lee calls 'distant writing'—that built him a global as well as South African audience. Linking the approaches of Elam and Lee to Adom Getachew's worldmaking approach might yield a kaleidoscopic meeting point on anticolonialism.¹³ Finally, historical studies of the global have included several major oceanic histories, especially on the Indian Ocean, where it has included an emphasis on universality and cosmopolitanism.¹⁴ Nile Green, in response to the discourse on *Ibis*, emphasizes that to be global is not necessarily to be universal or cosmopolitan.¹⁵ He displays the perspectives of those who opened the print world of Indian Ocean vernacular languages, to challenge the notion of a "cosmopolitan" Indian Ocean, identifying a great range of outlooks and origins in the profusion of texts after 1850. Neilesh Bose emphasizes in addition that the Indian Ocean

is at once a region in itself and a component of a global order—rather than “a counter-site to Euro-Atlantic centered capitalist globalization.”

India after World History emphasizes the experience and outlooks of India as a guide to the experiences of globalization, the global, and the world. The population—its rich cultural and historical experience—and its insightful scholars in every field provide a solid base from which to consider global humanity. The chapters advance theory and interpretation along several axes in world history and world literature; they enable the location of meeting points at which varying perspectives interact. The expanding scope of both disciplines continues to generate new perspectives. Those perspectives, in their contrasting logic, highlight Sanskrit cosmopolis, literary realism, nationalism, indentured servitude, Neo-Platonist incorporation, Marathi poetry, periodization of world literary history, the beginnings of spoken language, oceanic history, anticolonial impulses, and concerns for environmental change. The strategy of linking them through discourse at meeting points is aimed at creating flexible paths along which world literature and world history can maintain their own trajectories yet be explored in orderly subgroups, leading toward coherence in discourse. Neilesh Bose’s introduction reviews well-selected issues within this great arena: theory in the paradigms of world history and world literature; the approach of world-making; the intellectual and cultural impact of Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy; and the “global” as a keyword for interchange between world literature and world history. The editor has structured the book around a search for topics of discussion linking world literature and world history. He has taken on the role of coaching members of the two disciplinary groups into advancing their thinking and learning through exchange. In a further guideline, Bose commends the approaches in the recent works of Sujit Sivasundaram, Coll Thrush, and Dipesh Chakrabarty—works that pursue the expanding scope in analysis of human agency yet underscore the need to emphasize the constraints of the natural world, in an approach that Chakrabarty has called “planetary.” With India as the base for a detailed discourse linking world literature and world history, this book’s multi-scalar discourse can become a model for expanding such discussions. This exploration of a numerous yet limited set of themes may also lay the groundwork for other regions and scales of interdisciplinary exchange, giving due recognition to new perspectives as they emerge. For the present, at least, the momentum of overall discussion in history and literature leads away from monocausal interpretations and toward inclusiveness. This path may lead toward discovery of methods for grappling with multiple factors and multiple participants in historical processes and literary encounters, expanding our understanding of the global and the planetary.

Notes

- ¹ B. Robbins, "What world history does world literature need?" in M. Hawas (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to World Literature and World History* (London: Routledge, 2018), 194–206.
- ² Of the overlapping groups of 'world' and 'global' historians, the global historians have been most cited and perhaps most prolific in their programmatic statements. The sharpest difference between world historians and global historians is that global historians almost never venture before early modern times, while some world historians explore a much deeper past.
- ³ Arac describes Pollock's *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* as "a work far from my immediate area of study in which I find great promise for better relations between historical and literary scholarship." S. Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006).
- ⁴ A. Ramachandran, *The Worldmakers: Global Imagining in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 8.
- ⁵ Ramachandran fixes her study of world-making firmly within the framework of modernity, a framework from which Bose expresses a desire to escape. Ramachandran, *Worldmakers*, 14–17.
- ⁶ Can one distinguish literary and historical fashions of worldmaking? Ramchandran has doubtless developed an opinion on this question. Ramchandran, *Worldmakers*, 13.
- ⁷ N. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978); D. Bell, "Making and Taking Worlds," in S. Moyn and A. Sartori (eds.), *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 257.
- ⁸ B. Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); see also P. Manning, "'Civilization' in History and Ideology since 1800," *New Global Studies* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1515/ngs-2021-0049>.
- ⁹ Mazlish's distinction is useful in reconsidering Bell's argument that neoliberalism can be seen as an exercise in worldmaking. By this logic, Bell is correct in saying that neoliberalism was a campaign for building a certain sort of world—just as capitalist empire and civilization were an equivalent campaign of the nineteenth century—but that each of them was an ideological campaign focused on narrow gains rather than a world-making campaign of reflective analysis. Goodman, however, was arguably not responsible for Bell's oversimplification of the notion of worldmaking. For a view challenging René Wellek and emphasizing the similarity in nuance of Goodman and Auerbach, see B. Maine, "Erich Auerbach's 'Mimesis' and Nelson Goodman's 'Ways of Worldmaking': A Nominal(ist) Revision," *Poetics Today* 20 (1999): 41–52.
- ¹⁰ A. Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).
- ¹¹ P. Manning, *A History of Humanity: The Evolution of the Human System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 36–61.
- ¹² B. Robbins, *Perpetual War: Cosmopolitanism from the Viewpoint of Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). For a social-scientific effort to explain society through violence, see D. C. North, J. Wallis, and B. R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- ¹³ Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*.
- ¹⁴ S. Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- ¹⁵ N. Green, "The Waves of Heterotopia: Toward a Vernacular Intellectual History of the Indian Ocean," *American Historical Review* 123 (2018): 846–874.

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