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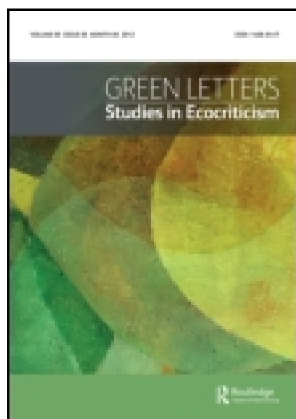

Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rgrl20

World-Economy, World-Ecology, World Literature

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Published online: 26 Oct 2012.

To cite this article: Michael Niblett (2012): World-Economy, World-Ecology, World Literature, Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism, 16:1, 15-30

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2012.10589097

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WORLD-ECONOMY, WORLD-ECOLOGY, WORLD LITERATURE

MICHAEL NIBLETT

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In much of the renewed debate that has taken place around 'world literature' over the past decade or so – arising in large part from a sense that 'globalization' has thrown the received disciplinary protocols and critical presuppositions of literary studies into question – it has become commonplace for critics sketching the genealogy of the concept to reference its citation in *The Communist Manifesto*.[1] Materialist scholars have sought to analyse the correlation between Marx and Engels' identification of the self-expansionary logic of capital, which 'chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe' (1967: 83), and the emergence of a *Weltliteratur*. My conceptualization of world literature will proceed on the basis of the fundamental importance of this connection. However, I will approach it from the perspective of a particular dynamic described in a passage directly preceding the *Manifesto's* discussion of literary production:

> The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. [. . .] All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries [. . .] that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. (1967: 83-84)

Here, the globalizing propensities of the capitalist world-system as outlined by Marx and Engels – in particular, its drive to appropriate raw materials from the 'remotest zones' and its destruction of local and national self-sufficiency – implies a radical transformation of the global environment. Indeed, as Immanuel Wallerstein argues, during the transition to capitalism in the 'long' sixteenth century the rising demand for food and fuel meant that '[w]orld ecology was altered and in a way which, because of the social organization of the emergent European world-economy, would primarily

benefit Europe' (1974: 44). In other words, the tendency towards core-periphery polarization inherent in the logic of capital entailed the unequal exchange not just of economic surpluses but of ecological ones too.

This article explores how world literature, understood as the literature of the capitalist world-system, registers the transformations in world ecology that have been both cause and consequence of the transition to, and subsequent reorganizations of, the capitalist world-economy. Its specific focus is on fiction from those peripheral regions forcibly integrated into the world-system and subject to the violent imposition of capitalist modes and structures as a result of colonization and/or imperialism, a process that inevitably caused massive disruption to local ecosystems. I will consider how ecological ruptures and the phenomenon of 'the metabolic rift' (a concept deployed by Marx to characterize the breaks in nutrient cycling between town and country under capitalism), imprint themselves on the aesthetics of texts from China, Nigeria, and the Caribbean. Underlying my approach will be a claim for a comparative model of literary study that holds out the possibility of detecting likenesses (and likenesses of the unlike) between peripheral literary forms as they respond to the same – yet differentially articulated – world-historical forces of capitalist modernity.[2]

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The Capitalist World-Ecology

The epochal reorganization of world ecology that marked the rise of the capitalist world-economy also signalled the emergence of what Jason Moore terms a 'capitalist *world-ecology*' (2003a: 323). Drawing on the work of world-systems analysts, particularly Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi, Moore has made a compelling case for understanding world-economy and world-ecology as representing 'distinct angles of vision onto a singular world-historical process' (2003b: 447). The hyphenation of the phrase 'world ecology' is more than a simple terminological manoeuvre; it is designed, writes Moore, to illuminate a substantive *problematique*:

> The distinctiveness of capitalism as world-ecology [. . .] is not found simply in its large-scale transformations of nature. Rather, its distinctiveness might be best located in the ways that it progressively deepens the world-historical character of microlevel socio-ecologies in the interests of the ceaseless accumulation of capital, which generates geometrically rising pressures for ceaseless global expansion. [. . .] With the rise of capitalism, local societies were not integrated only into a world capitalist system; more to the point, varied and heretofore largely isolated local and regional socio-ecological relations were incorporated into – and at the same moment became constituting agents of – a capitalist world-ecology. Local socio-ecologies were at once transformed by human labour power (itself a force of nature) and brought into sustained dialogue with each other. [. . .] Hence, the hyphen becomes appropriate: We are talking not necessarily about the ecology of the world (although this is in fact the case today) but rather a world-ecology. (2003b: 447)

Thus, to grasp capitalism as world-ecology is to grasp the way in which the production of nature under capital becomes fundamentally world-historical, with the connections between local socio-ecologies increasingly determined by the vectors of the market.

Under these conditions, as Marx noted in his analysis of capital's tendency to drive 'beyond every spatial barrier', agriculture ceases to be 'self-sustaining': it 'no longer finds the natural conditions of its own production within itself, naturally arisen, spontaneous, and ready to hand, but these exist as an independent industry separate from it' (1973: 527). Combining these insights with Justus von Liebig's study of soil chemistry, Marx developed the concept of metabolic rift. Liebig, along with other agricultural chemists and agronomists in Germany, Britain, France and the United States, had warned of a soil crisis caused by 'the loss of soil nutrients [. . .] through the export of food and fibre to the cities. Rather than being returned to the soil, as in traditional agricultural production, these essential nutrients were being shipped hundreds or even thousands of miles away and ended up as waste polluting the cities' (Foster and Clark, 2004: 188). Marx tied soil exhaustion squarely to the logic of capital and its intensification of the division of labour between town and country, both within regions and, increasingly, on a world-scale:

> [L]arge landed property reduces the agricultural population to an ever decreasing minimum and confronts it with an ever growing industrial population crammed together in large towns; in this way it produces conditions that provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself. The result of this is a squandering of the vitality of the soil, which is carried by trade far beyond the bounds of a single country. (1981: 949)

As the town-country antagonism became progressively globalized, so too did the metabolic rift. This was most evident in the context of colonialism, which created 'a new and international division of labour' involving the conversion of 'one part of the globe into a chiefly agricultural field of production for supplying the other part, which remains a pre-eminently industrial field' (Marx, 1990: 579-80).

The ecological contradictions engendered by the rift are inseparable from the contradictions attendant upon the accumulation process. Expanding on the perspective opened up by metabolic rift theory, Moore draws attention to the way capitalist regimes of accumulation periodically exhaust the gamut of socio-ecological conditions – the 'very webs of life' – that originally sustained them (2011: 46). Capitalism, he argues, is constituted through a succession of ecological regimes – the latter signifying 'those relatively durable patterns of class structure, technological innovation and the development of productive forces, organizational forms and governance (formal and informal) that have sustained and propelled successive phases of world accumulation' (2010: 392). If 'ecological regimes' thus refers to 'the historically stabilized process

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and conditions of extended accumulation,' then 'ecological *revolutions* mark the turbulent emergence of these provisionally stabilized processes and conditions' (392). Such revolutions tend to occur as a result of an accumulation crisis that is itself the expression of a breakdown in the capacity of the dominant ecological regime to maintain the conditions for the capitalization of surplus-value on an extended scale.

All great waves of capital accumulation, asserts Moore, have 'unfolded through a greatly expanded ecological surplus, manifested in cheap food, cheap energy and cheap inputs' (2010: 392). These are 'cheap' to the degree that they drive down the system-wide organic composition of capital, that is, they help reduce production costs and so counteract the falling rate of profit. Cheap food, moreover, reduces the value of labour-power and consequently places a downward pressure on wages. Systemic reorganizations of world-ecology, therefore, by producing an ecological surplus, create the conditions for a revival in accumulation. However, the self-expansionary logic of capital and its drive to realize ever larger amounts of surplus value compels the intensification and extension of the exploitation of human and extra-human nature. This results in rising capitalization as hitherto undercapitalized areas of nature are subordinated to the law of value, while the demands placed on already capitalized resources are ratcheted upwards. The increasing strain this exerts on such resources leads to their relative exhaustion, which in turn spurs on further capitalization in order to maintain the rate of exploitation. The upshot, as Moore puts it, 'is that the *rising capitalization of nature creates a world-historical situation of rising production costs stemming from the degradation of the conditions of production*. Rising socio-ecological exhaustion and rising capitalization are two sides of the same coin' (2010: 405; emphasis in original). The ecological regime that liberated accumulation now constrains it, and another ecological revolution is required to free up a new ecological surplus. Each revolution, however, only resolves the contradictions of the previous regime by positing them on an expanded scale (exemplified by the progressive widening of the metabolic rift).

Moore has identified a number of such ecological regimes and revolutions across the *longue durée* of historical capitalism (2000: 142-45). In this article, literary analysis of texts will be linked to three signal episodes within these systemic cycles of ecological transformation. The first is the colonization of the Caribbean and the maturation of the plantation complex over the course of the long sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The role of the profits from the New World sugar plantations in providing capital to finance Europe's domestic industrialization is well-documented (Williams, 1944; Blackburn, 1997). But sugar and other plantation products such as coffee and rum also constituted an ecological surplus insofar as they served as low cost, high-energy food substitutes that helped cheapen the living costs of the labouring classes in the core (Mintz, 1985). The second episode is the ecological revolution integral to the 'New Imperialism' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, itself a reaction to the Great Depression of 1873-1896. The worldwide scramble for cheap inputs on the part of the imperialist powers led to the partition of Africa and the

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integration of Indian and Chinese peasantries into the world-economy (Davis, 2001: 16). The third focal point concerns the ecological transformations of the neoliberal regime of accumulation, which emerged in the 1970s (Harvey, 2005). In what follows, I will consider what kinds of aesthetic forms are generated in peripheral locations in situations of ecological revolution, and how we might compare them.

World-Ecology, World Literature, and Irrealist Aesthetics

Discussing how a world-systems perspective can be 'marshalled as a means of understanding the rise and fall of aesthetic forms, generic conventions, and the varying centres of cultural consecration,' Stephen Shapiro notes that, at its heart, world-systems analysis 'relates political geography to economic history by mapping long waves of economic expansion and contraction caused by the intrinsic falling rate of profit generated by capitalist regimes of accumulation against the spatial reorganization of commodity chains' (2008: 35, 30). We have already seen how Moore's work builds on this model by rethinking it in terms of ecological regimes and revolutions. Shapiro suggests that the value of a world-systems approach for new kinds of socio-historical and literary study lies in how it enables comparison of not only one subunit of the system to another at the same point in chronological time, but also one subunit to another at the same location within the recurring rhythmic cycle. For instance, he argues, 'nineteenth-century India might be reviewed alongside fifteenth-century England as both regions express their entry into the global capitalist world market through similar alterations in precapitalist caste, belief, and narrative systems' (303). By combining this comparativist methodology with Moore's concept of world-ecology, we can begin to think about tracking the aesthetic codification of ecological revolutions in different areas of the globe at different points in time.

First, some further explanation is required as to why such revolutions and the ecological regimes they give rise to will be mediated within literary production; and why likenesses in this fictional mediation might be evident across literary traditions emerging out of very different social contexts and cultural formations. The key here is the capitalist world-system itself, the globalizing propensities of which mean that it comes to stand as a common reference point for all societies. But if capitalist modernity must be grasped as a singular and simultaneous phenomenon, it is also one that is everywhere heterogeneous and specific – its simultaneity is (as Fredric Jameson puts it, borrowing Ernst Bloch's formulation) the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous (Jameson, 1991: 307; 2002: 12). In other words, for any location integrated into the world-system, the shared experience of capitalist modernization provides 'a certain baseline of universality,' in Nicholas Brown's phrase (2005: 2), even as this experience is lived differently across different locations.

Now, if we take the capitalist world-system as the 'interpretive horizon' of world literature (Brown, 2005: 1), then at some level this literature will bear the impress of the structural totality of that world-system – whether it grasps towards its mapping as the condition of possibility for making some ultimate sense of social experience; or

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whether it registers it negatively through its absence as a repressed yet fundamental history. But this world-system, as we have seen, is not just a world-economy but also a world-ecology. Hence, world literature is also the literature of the capitalist world-ecology: this too is its interpretive horizon. To put it another way, world literature will necessarily register ecological regimes and revolutions (again, even if only negatively) since these organize in fundamental ways the material conditions, social modalities, and areas of experience upon which literary form works. There are many texts for which the registration of the world-ecology will occur only at the level of the 'political unconscious'; but there are others for which it will be a critically conscious act, one involving the deliberate elaboration of a distinctive set of aesthetic forms.

Generally speaking, it could be argued that while Brown's 'interpretive horizon' might constitute some distant and dimly perceived limit for literatures from the core, marking a totality that, where it is not repressed, may be posited as unrepresentable or mystified as a static Absolute, for peripheral literatures the situation is somewhat different. On the other side of the international division of labour this horizon is more immediate and pressing, its historical character more apparent. I would argue, in fact, that for literary production from those areas subject to imperialist intrusion and forcible integration into the world-system, there will be a structural tendency towards not just registering a particular ecological regime, but also marking in explicit fashion – albeit not necessarily at the level of content, but perhaps at the level of imagery, style, or form – the disjunctions and ruptures, the breaks and rifts, engendered by ecological revolutions.[3] This is not to say that every text will consciously encode such disjunctions. But given the particular violence entailed by ecological revolutions in the peripheries, and the degree to which this violence saturates the social world – being inextricably bound up with the radical reorganization of everyday practices, forms of labour, and bodily dispositions imposed by imperialism – it seems reasonable to suggest that representations of social experience will be compelled to engage in some way with this history.

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To come back to the question posed earlier, therefore, what specific kinds of aesthetic forms are generated in situations of ecological revolution in peripheral regions? Is it possible to identify an aesthetics of the metabolic rift, the widening and deepening of which is the corollary of the intensification of capitalist exploitation such revolutions entail? The *Communist Manifesto* again provides a useful way into thinking about these issues. Here, in a well-known passage, Marx and Engels describe the revolutionary transformations unleashed by capitalist modernization as a process in which all 'fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air' (1967: 83).[4] Ecological revolutions cleave to this modernizing logic insofar as they represent – in Moore's terms – the overturning of the historically stabilized process and conditions of extended accumulation that constitute the existing ecological regime, and signal the turbulent emergence of new processes and conditions. In each revolution, therefore, the 'natural' and social unities stabilized by

the regime are disaggregated and dissolved under pressure from the imperative for new formations capable of driving forward the accumulation process.

The significance of Moore's theory for literary form lies in its implications for realism. Realism, argues Jameson, 'requires a conviction as to the massive weight and persistence of the present as such, and an aesthetic need to avoid recognition of deep structural social change as such and of the deeper currents and contradictory tendencies within the social order. [. . .] Realism can accommodate images of social decadence and disintegration, [. . .] but not this quite different sense of the ontology of the present as a swift-running stream' (2007: 263). It is precisely this kind of ontology of the present, however, that we have to do with in situations of ecological revolution, suggesting that realism will be inadequate to them – or at least that realist modes will experience distortion and disruption when confronted by such situations.

If realism is problematic, therefore, what alternatives present themselves? In a very general sense we might look to the concept of 'irrealism' as defined by Michael Löwy. 'Irrealism,' writes Löwy, 'does not oppose realism. It describes the absence of realism rather than an opposition to it' (2007: 195). An irrealist literary work might include elements of fantasy, the oneiric, and the surreal; it may well be founded on 'a logic of the imagination, of the marvellous, of the mystery or the dream' (194). Clearly, as Löwy emphasizes, the concepts of realism and irrealism should be seen as, to some extent, '"ideal-types" in the Weberian sense: that is, as entirely coherent and "pure" epistemological constructions; in contradistinction to empirical literary texts, which tend to be an "impure" combination of both realism and irrealism' (195). On the level of a simple reversal, then, if realism falters when confronted by situations of ecological revolution, irrealism might be expected to flourish. Equally, we might anticipate that moments of the emergence or intensification of the metabolic rift will coincide with the eruption into a text – even if otherwise broadly realist – of irrealist elements.

I will return to the issue of irrealism in a moment. First I want to consider another point made by Jameson, this time in relation to generic discontinuities in peripheral literatures. Jameson has argued that such discontinuities can be read as mediating the violence entailed in the imperialist imposition of capitalist modes and structures on non-metropolitan societies (2000: 334). This violence destroys the pre-existing social unities that might have provided the unified referent required by 'realist' representation. As we have seen, however, insofar as it is simultaneously the expression of an ecological revolution, such violence also destroys pre-existing 'natural' unities. Thus, adapting Jameson, we might grasp the generic discontinuities in peripheral literary works as mediating also the disruption caused to local socio-ecologies and nutrient cycles by integration into a capitalist world-ecology or, equally, by the intensification of the metabolic rift as a result of reorganizations of this world-ecology in line with the demands of core areas.

Perhaps the clearest example of the kinds of generic discontinuities Jameson speaks of is to be found in 'magic' or 'marvellous' realism (itself, of course, a form of irrealism). In its juxtaposition of different narrative modalities magic realism

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is frequently understood as registering the temporal dislocations and violent juxtaposition of different modes of life engendered by imperial conquest.[5] To this we might now add that it is just as likely to register ecosystemic ruptures. Indeed, with specific reference to the Caribbean and Latin America, magic realism could be said to encode the smashing of indigenous, 'closed-cycle' systems of subsistence agriculture and the rapid expansion of the metabolic rift as large parts of the continent were drawn into the 'flow system' of the capitalist world-ecology.[6] The imposition of latifundia and plantation monocultures turned the region into an external nutrient supply for the core, its ecological resources leached away via the export of sugar-cane, coffee, rum, bananas, maize, and other commodities. Miguel Angel Asturias's *Men of Maize* offers a clear illustration of the representational significance of magic realism in this context. Set in Guatemala, the novel's combination of modern novelistic discourse with narrative forms inspired by Mayan sacred texts mediates a clash between the native Indian world and the forces of market capitalism that is simultaneously a clash between different socio-ecologies: 'The maizegrower sets fire to the brush and does for the timber in a matter of hours. [. . .] Different if it was just to eat. It's to make money. [. . .] The maize impoverishes the earth and makes no one rich. [. . .] Sown to be eaten it is the sacred sustenance of the men who were made of maize. Sown to make money it means famine for the men who were made of maize' (1988: 5-6).

In her 1971 article 'Novel and History, Plot and Plantation', Sylvia Wynter adapted the distinction Asturias makes between sowing for profit and sowing for sustenance into a structuring principle for her claim that 'the history of Caribbean society is that of a dual relation between plantation and plot' (99). The latter represents an autonomously-organized socio-ecology; it has been a key component in the struggles of the enslaved and the peasantry for economic and cultural autonomy (Sheller, 2000: 44). By contrast, the plantation system – the preeminent factor in the production of nature in the Caribbean – is inseparable from external domination, its systematic extraction of surplus value and natural wealth fostering economic and environmental underdevelopment. For Wynter, the rise of the capitalist world-economy, as both cause and effect of the region's plantation-societies, marked 'a change of such world-historical magnitude that we are all, without exception, still "enchanted", imprisoned, deformed and schizophrenic in its bewitched reality' (95). In fact, she argues, history in the plantation context is 'fiction' – 'a fiction written, dominated, controlled by forces external to itself' (95). In other words, where Caribbean peoples lack autonomous control over the production of nature, and hence over the production of social reality, this reality appears illusory or irreal since it is authored and manipulated by outside powers.

As Wynter's referencing of Asturias implies, a situation wherein reality is experienced as 'enchanted' and 'deformed' will generate aesthetic responses marked by the marvellous, the surreal, and the oneiric. But her analysis also raises a further point of consideration with respect to distinguishing between the differently specific effects of ecological revolutions in different regions, and accounting for the different kinds of

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aesthetic responses these might occasion. In speaking of the Caribbean it will be evident that I have moved from emphasizing the impact of the ecological revolution entailed in the imposition of cash-crop monocultures, to a more general point regarding the irreal quality of a reality thoroughly imprinted by external forces. Now, recall that in Moore's thinking ecological revolutions not only dissolve pre-existing ecological regimes, but also mark the transition to new processes of accumulation, which are subsequently 'stabilized' as the basis of a new regime. If irrealism comes to the fore in those periods when 'all that is solid melts into air', would it not wane as an aesthetic strategy once the emergent conditions have been stabilized and new socio-ecological unities created? I think this might very well be the case in those peripheral regions (in Europe, say, or in territories subject to informal colonialism) where the penetration of capitalist modes and structures has occurred in less extreme or abrupt fashion than in areas such as the Caribbean, where colonial conquest involved the near complete destruction of pre-existing social formations, and where later reorganizations of the world-ecology have continued to be imposed in a particularly savage manner. While massive disruption to socio-ecologies occurs in both contexts, in the first example an ecological regime might be expected to emerge that at least generates the appearance of stability and perhaps offers some sense of autonomous control over the production of nature; conversely, the extent and degree of the coercions entailed in the second example ensure that no new socio-ecological unity can be properly stabilized and the leaching away of resources remains a highly visible, violently disruptive affair. Hence, because reality in the latter context will continue to be experienced as 'bewitched' and irreal, the irrealist current in the corresponding literary texts will not only flourish during periods of ecological revolution, but is also likely to be a constant narrative tendency.[7]

The theoretical writings and fictional practice of various other Caribbean authors would seem to support this hypothesis. Édouard Glissant, for example, has argued that the impact of imperialism on Martinique has produced a people whose 'relation with its surroundings (what we would call its nature) is in discontinuous relation to its accumulation of experiences (what we would call its culture)' (1989: 61). Aesthetic responses to this disjunction – such as Vincent Placoly's *La vie et la mort de Marcel Gonstran* (1971), Glissant's own 1975 novel *Malemort*, and Patrick Chamoiseau's *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows* (1986) – have, in turn, made use of elements of the schizophrenic, the delirious, and the fantastical. Or take the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris, whose distinctly irrealist style is characterized by an aesthetics of surplus and void that mirrors the impact of the metabolic rift. The narrative oscillation in Harris's work between linguistic / imagistic excess and dissolution figures the economic-ecological dynamic imposed on the Caribbean by the plantation regime, which generates huge surpluses but, in leaching them away, consigns the mass of the people to an experience of poverty.

Alternatively, consider *The Last English Plantation* (1988) by Harris's fellow Guyanese Janice Shinebourne. Set in the 1950s, the novel is broadly social realist in

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style; nevertheless, it invokes an underlying sense of irreality in the protagonist June's experience of the social world. At one point, for example, she notices 'a large foreign ship' on the river, apparently transporting bauxite (89). Symptomatic of Guyana's position as an overseas resource supply for foreign powers, the ship sets June thinking about the 'absurd' nature of an existence dominated by external forces. This in turn leads her to speculate whether 'Guiana [was] really just a big prison camp run by the British? If it was, all the freedom of the land that your eyes saw was just an illusion, a dream' (90). Through this invocation of an illusory, irreal reality, therefore, the novel registers the continued instability of the imposed ecological regime.

Further analysis is clearly required of the different ways in which irrealist narrative components feature in the work of other Caribbean writers. For reasons of space, however, and in order to substantiate the general claims made in this study, I want instead to cast the comparative net further afield. The world-systems approach adopted here, it was argued, opens the way to comparing analogous moments within different systemic cycles of accumulation, making it possible to test the argument for likenesses in the aesthetic codification of ecological revolutions on a wider historical and geographical scale.

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Ecological Revolutions across the World-System: China and Nigeria

Earlier I drew attention to the ecological revolution associated with the expansion of imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In China, as Mike Davis has shown, increasing intervention by the core capitalist powers had disastrous socio-economic and ecological consequences for the country's peasantries. Deeper integration into the world-economy and rising dependency on cash-crop agriculture left many vulnerable to price fluctuations on the world market (Davis, 2001: 344). Meanwhile, the new pressures placed on the land by intensified cultivation heightened the threat of drought and flood, as did the disintegration of traditional safeguards due to political changes stemming from the impact of foreign penetration (2001: 181-82, 290-91).

The ongoing effects of this period of ecological revolution and of the regime it imposed are discernible in the work of Mao Dun, whose trilogy of short stories from the 1930s – 'Spring Silkworms' (1932), 'Autumn Harvest' (1933), and 'Winter Ruin' (1933) – documents the disintegration of China's rural economy under the combined pressures of imperialism and landlordism. In 'Spring Silkworms', the peasant Old Tung Pao ruminates on the impact of the 'foreign devils':

> From the time foreign goods – cambric, cloth, oil – appeared in the market town, from the time the foreign river boats increased on the canal, what he produced brought a lower price in the market every day, while what he had to buy became more and more expensive. That was why the property his father left him had shrunk until it finally vanished completely; and now he was in debt. (1956: 14)

The inseparability of dependency and underdevelopment from the form of the production of nature forced upon the countryside is illustrated by the fate of the peasants. Locked into the cultivation of cash-crops, they are brought to the brink of ruin and starvation not by any shortfall in the silkworm and rice harvests - which are bountiful - but by a collapse in commodity prices. Mao's stories thus invoke a familiar pattern: on one side, the accumulation of an ecological surplus; on the other, the increasing immiseration of the direct producers.

Significantly, 'Autumn Harvest' shows how the creation of this surplus is dependent upon the rising capitalization of nature. The need for the peasants to sell to survive compels the increasing exploitation of ecological resources, in this instance the village stream used to irrigate the rice. Treadmills are 'placed on the bank to push the water into the paddy fields' (65). But in conjunction with a drought, the treadmills shrink the stream to a trickle. The only way to save the now ailing rice is to 'hire a "foreign pump" from town' (67), which will draw water from further upstream. We have here, then, something like the dialectic Moore identified wherein socio-ecological exhaustion resulting from market-driven pressures to ratchet up the exploitation of nature requires a further ecological revolution to overcome this barrier. The increasing mechanization of production, however, not only adds to the dependency and financial strife of the peasantry (Old Tung Pao must borrow another eight dollars, at twenty percent interest, in order to hire the pump), but also intensifies the despoliation of the environment, deepening the metabolic rift.

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But what interests me in particular is the way the arrival of the pump is also the signal for the narrative to introduce an element of irrealism. Old Tung Pao, on watching the pump in action, becomes convinced that 'some demon must be concealed in [its] engine and the long snaky hose. Maybe it was the mud-fish spirit that inhabited the slimy pool in front of the village's Temple of Earth. The water probably was the saliva of the mud-fish spirit; tonight the spirit might decide to suck it all back' (69). As Theodore Huters has observed, the pump is 'something profoundly alien to the old man that embodies for him all the changes that have disabled his old familiarity with the world' (1993: 166). The narrative irrealism generated by the juxtaposition of Old Tung Pao's mythic worldview with the modernity of the pump is underscored by his perception of the water as saliva the mud-fish will reclaim. This saliva, notes Huters, 'is indisputably wet [. . .], but with a spectral wetness that lacks water's virtues of slaking the thirst of either animal or plant. [Old Tung Pao], in other words, fears that the water pumped in by Western technology is merely represented and that since it comes from nothing, it can just as easily return there' (166). Thus, the current of irrealism in the text registers an encroaching sense of irrealism in Old Tung Pao's lifeworld, one arising from the way in which the ecological revolution represented by the pump begins to reorganize and defamiliarize the existing socio-ecological unity.

As noted previously, the imperialist ecological revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that so impacted upon China had an equally significant - if

differently specific – effect on parts of Africa. Thus, we could compare the encoding of this revolution in texts from, say, Nigeria. Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, for example, has as one of its central motifs the disruption of the agricultural cycle in the villages of Umuaro. Significantly, the climax of this storyline, which serves as a synecdoche for the wider disruption caused by imperialist intrusion, is preceded by a 'strange' dream on the part of Ezeulu, the priest who is directly responsible for the delay in the yam harvest. In the dream, Ezeulu discovers with alarm that his compound is deserted: 'He ran into Matefi's hut but all he saw were the ashes of a long-dead fire. He rushed out and ran into Ugoye's hut calling her and her children but her hut was already falling in and a few blades of green grass had sprouted on the thatch' (1988: 547). The appearance of this irrealist passage in what is, broadly speaking, a realist novel, and the sense evoked by the dream of a place leached of life, can be read as mediating the impact of the metabolic rift engendered by the imposition of a cash-crop economy.

Or take Amos Tutuola's more broadly irrealist work *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952). As Jennifer Wenzel has pointed out, the 'pressures of the centuries-long international trade in palm products must [. . .] be read into the novel' (2006: 452). Indeed, the generic discontinuities generated by Tutuola's combination of novel form and Yoruba narrative traditions can be interpreted (in line with the argument advanced earlier) as registering the ruptures in local socio-ecologies and nutrient cycles engendered by forcible integration into the capitalist world-ecology.

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Neoliberalism: SAPping the Environment

In the concluding section of this paper, I want to move forward in time to an analogous moment of ecological revolution from a different systemic cycle of accumulation. The emergence of neoliberalism in the early 1970s was a reaction to stagnation in the global economy. In order to revive accumulation, a new imperialist offensive was unleashed against peripheral regions. Much of this was carried out under cover of the IMF and the World Bank. Policies such as structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) formed part of an ecological revolution that helped secure cheap inputs for the core capitalist powers, with countries in the global South encouraged to substitute agro-exports for staple foods as a means to service debt repayments (Patel and McMichael, 2009). This led to rising agro-industrialization and the increasing dispossession of peasant farmers. Indeed, SAPs 'devastated rural smallholders by eliminating subsidies and pushing them sink or swim into global commodity markets dominated by heavily subsidized First World agribusiness' (Davis, 2006: 153). The result was a large increase in rural to urban migration and the rapid expansion of Third World cities, including an explosion in slum dwellings.

The impact of the neoliberal ecological revolution and its associated effects has been keenly felt in Nigeria. In the mid-1980s, the Babangida military regime introduced its own IMF-sanctioned SAP. This reform package led to a rise in extreme poverty from 28% in 1980 to 66% in 1996 (Davis, 2006: 156). The encouragement given to agrarian capitalism accelerated 'land grabbing and alienation' in rural areas, with 'agribusiness

concerns, agro-allied industries, and a coterie of wealthy individuals' granted a host of incentives, including governmental guarantee of access to land on highly generous terms (Egwu, 1998: 10). As increasing numbers of dispossessed peasants left the countryside, urban areas such as Lagos grew at breakneck pace, despite the general stagnation of the economy.

It is possible to read these pressures into a work such as Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004). Following the fortunes of its protagonist Elvis Oke, Abani's novel is set in Maroko, a slum neighbourhood in Lagos. The text presents us with a *Bildungsroman*-style narrative that fails to fulfil generic expectations: as Ashley Dawson puts it, *GraceLand* represents 'an unequivocal failure of self-formation and socialization' (2009: 19-20). This formal disjuncture mediates the breaks in national development associated with the impact of the neoliberal ecological revolution, including the continuing disruption to nutrient cycles and exhaustion of natural resources attendant upon an externally-oriented economy of extraction.

If Abani's novel registers the long-term effects of the imposed ecological regime via its distortion of a realist formal model, it deploys a much more explicitly irrealist style when representing the ecological revolution that gave rise to this regime. Part of the book recounts an attempt by the authorities to demolish Maroko. The narrative sets this in 1983, on the eve of the imposition of the SAP, but the events also clearly allude to the infamous bulldozing of the neighbourhood in 1990, when it was targeted by the government as a prime site for the expansion of high-income residences (Davis, 2006: 101). By linking these dates, the text emphasizes that what we are witnessing is the opening assault in the era of structural adjustment and its drive to reorganize the spatio-economic and socio-ecological order. It is at this point that the narrative shifts gear, introducing elements of the magical real. For example, at the moment the settlement is razed, Elvis's father, Sunday, is confronted by the ghost of his wife and a spirit leopard; on being shot by a policeman as he attempts to attack a bulldozer, Sunday leaps outside his body as the leopard and delivers a fatal blow to his aggressor (287). Thus, the experience of ecological revolution in the periphery once more seems to demand an irrealist aesthetic for its encoding.

It would be possible to go on and compare the figuration of the neoliberal ecological revolution in works from other peripheral literatures. In each case, the particular social configuration out of which a text emerges, as well as the cultural and literary traditions upon which it draws, will impart an irreducible specificity to its mediation of the effects of the capitalist world-system. The comparative model outlined here is not meant to minimize or erase such specificities. In order to establish the grounds for comparison, I have offered a preliminary sketch of how we might identify and understand likenesses – and likenesses of the unlike – in the aesthetic encoding of ecological revolutions and the metabolic rift in narratives from the peripheries. I have suggested that, in general terms, an irrealist aesthetic, or at least the introduction of irrealist narrative elements, is a predominant tendency. However, more detailed analyses of the different forms this aesthetic can take are required in order to discern

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the particular inflection given to the registration of world-ecological forces in any single social instance. In addition to the distinct pressures exerted in different historical periods and geopolitical contexts, interesting contrasts are likely to be engendered by, for example, the unique political-ecological complexes surrounding the production or extraction of different resources (or, to put it another way, how and why might petro-fiction differ from, say, sugar-fiction?). The methodological framework advanced here – based on the proposition that if world literature is understood as the literature of the capitalist world-system then it must also be understood as the literature of the capitalist world-ecology – provides a good starting point for comparative analysis and opens up vistas for further investigation of this kind.

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Endnotes

I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Leverhulme Trust, which funded the research project out of which this article emerged.

1. See, for example, Moretti (2000); Pizer (2000); Damrosch (2003); Saussy (2006); and Lawall (2010).
2. The term 'periphery' is used here, of course, to signify a structural position within the capitalist world-system; it in no way implies a civilizational hierarchy or value judgement.
3. It would be necessary, in extending this paper, to explore in more detail whether it is possible to trace a relationship between the different forms of ecological revolution and the different degrees and modes of disruption they entail, and the particular levels (content, imagery, form, etc) at which this is registered.
4. This process, it should be emphasized, is not a one-off, total event but rather a ceaseless dynamic characterized by unevenness and discontinuity.
5. Jameson himself, for instance, characterizes it along these lines (see Jameson, 1986: 311).
6. The terms 'closed-cycle system' and 'flow system' are borrowed from M. Fischer-Kowalski and H. Haberl (1993). Societies with closed-cycle systems 'continuously recycle their own nutrients', whereas those with flow systems are dependent upon 'an external nutrient supply' (416).
7. Cf. Benita Parry, whose distinction between peripheral regions I borrow from here: 'it seems to me necessary that we observe the extent and degree of the coercions visited on those societies that were seized for their natural and labour resources, or invaded for both material and political

reasons. Such determinants inflected the singular accents of the modernisms in these locations, registering a consciousness of a violent imperialism that we will not expect to find in Eastern Europe or Portugal' (2009: 29).

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