

# The evolution of Commonwealth, postcolonial, and decolonial scholarship: Tracing the impact of field transformation on the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature and vice versa*

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## Abstract

This article explores the title change from the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature (JCL)* to *Literature, Critique, and Empire Today* using a tripartite structure. We are the journal's most recent ex-editors, and so the article is the culmination of about 15 years of thinking on these and related matters. In the essay's first part, we interrogate the limitations of the term "Commonwealth" across the axes of global geopolitics as well as literature, in order to draw out some common threads within and beyond postcolonial studies. The second section thinks through the journal's role in shaping postcolonial studies over time. Changes have been wrought in response to literary-critical and political concerns, as well as amid the self-transformation the journal has undergone over the past decade so as to open itself up to more diverse perspectives. Finally, we analyse the likely impact of the journal's altered title for both registering and challenging understandings in its field. We hope that the article constitutes a thought-provoking exploration of the journal's present and future avenues, and the knock-on effects this will have for postcolonial, world, and decolonial literary studies more broadly.

## Keywords

Commonwealth, decolonial, empire, *JCL*, literary studies, postcolonial

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## Introduction

To mark the significant change from the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* to *Literature, Critique, and Empire Today*, this article will engage with the shift in title in three ways. As former editors of the journal, with Rachael Gilmour serving for five years and Claire Chambers for over a decade, we have long been contemplating these and related issues in the context of *JCL*'s scope and remit. First, we will critically examine the limitations of the word "Commonwealth", in both literary and political terms. To highlight some salient debates within and beyond postcolonial studies, we discuss Salman Rushdie's "Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist" (1991/1981); Amitav Ghosh's decision to withdraw his novel *The Glass Palace* from the 2001 Commonwealth Writers Prize; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Commonwealth* (2010); Derek Gregory's *The Colonial Present* (2004); and Patricia Noxolo's "Decolonial Theory in a Time of the Re-colonisation of UK Research" (2017). Second, we reflect on *JCL*'s role in shaping the area of study over time, in response to both literary-critical and political concerns, and the shifts the journal has made over the past decade in order to engage with new questions and approaches. Finally, we examine the potential of a transformation in the journal's title for both anticipating and recalibrating answers to key questions in our field. By tracing the evolution of the discipline, we will assess the impact of these changes on its scope, methodology, and areas of enquiry. Above all, this article aims to provide a suggestive exploration of the new direction the journal is taking and its implications for the specialization of postcolonial studies.

## I

The term "Commonwealth" has been employed widely since the 1949 declaration of the British Commonwealth of Nations in order to describe the web of relations that exist among countries once under British imperial rule. Initially coined to signify a loose association of nations sharing historical ties and values, the term has evolved over time, often revealing its inherent problems and limitations. In the field of literary studies, it has more often than not appeared with heavy caveats when used. This was even the case in the inaugural issue of *JCL*, when "Commonwealth" was of course the title term for a new journal. Writing anonymously, founding editor Arthur Ravenscroft declared:

The name of the journal is simply a piece of convenient shorthand, which should on no account be construed as a perverse underwriting of any concept of a single, culturally homogeneous body of writings to be thought of as "Commonwealth Literature". (n.a., 1966: v)

Ravenscroft's disclaimer, at the moment of the journal's founding, conveys both a certain investment in, and simultaneous desire to disavow, the category of Commonwealth literature. This (often productive) ambivalence has characterized both the journal and the approaches of its subsequent editors, throughout its history to date.

In alignment with this warning, in his essay, "Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist" (1991/1981), Salman Rushdie argues that the label "Commonwealth literature", which by the early 1980s was commonly being used to describe writing such as his own,

is a confection that homogenizes diverse voices from the former British Empire within a single category. He contends that this classification significantly excludes the metropole itself. This was an exclusion which by the 1990s *JCL* itself was challenging, for example when the journal published pioneering work on Caryl Phillips (O'Callaghan, 1993; Ledent, 1995). Rushdie also suggests that the term fails to acknowledge the complexities, tensions, and distinctive narratives of each nation in the Commonwealth, writing, "I became quite sure that our differences were so much more significant than our similarities" (1991/1981: 62). The category suggests a unity which obscures its own "ghetto[izing]" tendencies and "patronizing" underpinnings (1991/1981: 63). That said, Rushdie is himself condescending about Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's paper to a Swedish conference on Commonwealth literature, which the Kenyan author is said to have delivered "in Swahili, with a Swedish version read by his translator, leaving the rest of us completely bemused" (1991/1981: 62–63). Ngũgĩ writes in Gikuyu rather than Kiswahili, and the gaffe betrays a strain of incurious Anglophone reductivism on Rushdie's part. This reductive tendency has only grown over the years, even if this is to some extent understandable given the novelist's psychic anguish during his hiding period (1989–1998) and his physical trauma in 2022 at the hands of an assailant inspired by the fatwa. The novelist's point about marginalization stands, for Rushdie shows how the term "Commonwealth literature" can function as a box in which authors find themselves confined.

Given these arguments, there is a certain irony in the fact that it was partly in the pages of this journal, with its "Commonwealth" title, that a small coterie of writers, Rushdie central among them, were canonized from the 1980s onwards as being at the centre of the newly-minted field of "postcolonial literature". His arguments continue to be relevant, though, and we wonder whether many or any of the writers whose work has featured more recently in the journal would identify with the term "Commonwealth".

The idea of "Commonwealth literature" tends to prioritize English as the primary language of communication and cultural exchange — as was the explicit remit of *JCL* when it was founded. Ravenscroft, in his inaugural editorial, committed the journal to "the many areas of the Commonwealth where English letters are valued and where English literary traditions are being bent to new and often exciting tasks" (n.a., 1966: vi). The synonymy of "Commonwealth" with "Anglophone", in the way Ravenscroft frames it, aims to establish a supposedly equal field of literary exchange. However, this exchange comes at the expense of minoritized and formerly colonized languages and cultures, further reinforcing linguistic and cultural hegemony, while muting voices that do not conform to the Anglocentric narrative.

In 2001, Amitav Ghosh — another writer, alongside Rushdie, whose work became part of an emergent "postcolonial canon" — withdrew his novel, *The Glass Palace* (2000), from the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, for which he was Eurasia regional winner and had been nominated for the overall prize. In a letter to the prize's organizers, Ghosh argued against the category "Commonwealth Literature". As he put it, "this phrase anchors an area of contemporary writing not within the realities of the present day, nor within the possibilities of the future, but rather within a disputed aspect of the past" (2001: n.p.). Equally, he objected to the fact that the prize was awarded only to Anglophone writing, which, he rightly contended, "excludes the many languages that sustain the cultural and literary lives of ['Commonwealth'] countries" (2001: n.p.).

In other words, “Commonwealth” establishes commonalities on the basis of a backward-looking relationship to the British Empire but, just as importantly, at the expense of privileging English over regional-language writing and global over local contexts.

These arguments were made forcefully in a 1992 article in *JCL* by Ashley Halpé on the neglect of “vernacular literatures” within the Commonwealth literature “industry” (1992: 5). Indeed, in their inaugural editorial in the same issue, co-editors Shirley Chew and John Thieme concurred with Halpé’s arguments about the prevailing Anglophony of the field, while underscoring their encouragement to readers “to send us articles on non-anglophone writing” (Chew and Thieme, 1992: 2). As incoming co-editors they reported having, in their “more fanciful moments”, “toy[ed] with the idea of changing *JCL*’s name” (Chew and Thieme, 1992: 2). Ultimately, they opted to keep it, valuing what they saw as the openness the term at that time retained. The direction *JCL* has taken, for at least the past decade, has been increasingly to publish scholarship which addresses writing in languages other than English, and which contests the language politics on which assertions of Anglophone hegemony are founded.

However, the real issue, as we see it, lies in the way the term “Commonwealth” downplays the colonial violence and dispossession that underpinned British imperialism. This issue also encompasses the way colonial scars and mutations continue to shape the contemporary world, in the ways geographer Derek Gregory explores in *The Colonial Present* (2004). In the occupations of Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq which Gregory scrutinizes, the consolatory idea of a common wealth allows former colonial powers to avoid confronting their oppressive histories and the ongoing repercussions of imperial occupation. As we write, this fallout is being felt with particular force in the contemporary Middle East, in the aftermath of Hamas’s bloody attacks in southern Israel, and as the Israeli blockade and bombardment of Gaza continues and intensifies, with the enthusiastic support of the US and UK governments.

In a not dissimilar vein, in *Commonwealth* (2010), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri continue their work from *Empire* (2000) to present the idea of a late capitalist global order, where power is diffuse and decentralized. These theorists critique the idea of the Commonwealth, viewing it as a continuation of imperial structures under a different guise. In opposition to this and to globalization, they champion the socialist idea of the common or “commons” as a site of struggle for radical change. Empire’s twenty-first century manifestation, they suggest, perpetuates hierarchies through economic and political control within a new world order. Viewed from this perspective, conventional notions of a Commonwealth can be seen both as misleading and as hugely damaging.

Finally, in “Decolonial Theory in a Time of the Re-colonisation of UK Research” (2017), Patricia Noxolo argues that postcolonial studies has tended to be dominated by “Commonwealth” migrants and their children, among whom she includes herself. She points forward to decolonial writing as posing important challenges to the neo-colonized mindset that perpetuates the dominance of Western knowledge production and hinders true decolonization efforts within academia. Focusing on the leading role of Indigenous and First Nations decolonial scholars, she observes: “there is nothing ‘former’ or ‘post’ about the colonialism that they write about: they are writing out of and about the continuous colonisation and re-(or neo-)colonisation of the countries where their ancestors have always lived” (Noxolo, 2017: 342). Decolonial theory, she submits, forcefully challenges

existing norms, amplifying radical voices and inspiring direct confrontations with established practices.

To put Noxolo's arguments in a broader context, since the early 2000s, Latin American scholars including Aníbal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, and Freya Schiwy have gained attention in Anglophone academia for their scholarship in the new field of "decoloniality". The decolonial perspective challenges colonial legacies that continue to shape our world, stressing the economic inequality and power imbalances that persist as a consequence. Particular emphasis is put on modernity as a Eurocentric construction that in turn produces a skewed epistemology. Clearly, decoloniality and postcolonial studies share many common themes, priorities, and questions. However, they have typically operated in separate silos, with little interaction between them. Mignolo in particular asserts that his work goes beyond postcolonialism (1993; see also Batchelor, 2024: 37–39). This distinction appears to be on shaky foundations, however, insofar as it reduces postcolonial studies and overlooks complex discussions within the field, for example about the meaning of the "post-" prefix (Appiah, 1991; Hall, 1996). Indeed, we would argue that there are more similarities than differences. Postcolonial scholars like Satya P. Mohanty (2011) and Rajeev S. Patke (2013) have addressed the same issue of modernity's intertwinement with colonialism, unsettling the notion of an absolute difference between the two fields. Decolonial scholars are reluctant to engage with postcolonial theory due to perceived Western metaphysical biases, while postcolonial academics sometimes see decoloniality as old wine in new bottles. The latter charge is reductive in its turn, as decolonial theory offers a more confrontational, constructive, and dynamic approach and challenges some of postcolonial studies' most abstruse ideas and practices. In contrast to postcolonial theory, decoloniality proposes a severing of ties from a modern or colonial mode of thought. However, this might be seen as an impossible ideal and, moreover, decoloniality's emphasis on resistance is not as original as its practitioners often claim (for implicit refutation, see Mirza, 2023).

Thus, productive dialogue between decoloniality and postcolonialism requires a more precise understanding of both fields, as offered for instance by Gurminder K. Bhambra (2014), Kathryn Batchelor (2024), and Sara de Jong (2024). More intellectuals need to bridge these silos, realizing that, despite distinctions, the common mission against the empire and its present-day incarnations unites both postcolonialists and decolonial thinkers in search of equity and justice. It is to be hoped that the journal's name change will facilitate such engagement, dialogue, and creative thinking taking place within its pages.

In terms of empire's present-day incarnations, the purpose of the Commonwealth, as an association of nations, remains ambiguous. Indeed, the Commonwealth oscillates between a political alliance and a cultural association, which hinders its effectiveness in addressing pressing global issues. This lack of clarity limits the organization's ability to tackle issues such as climate change, human rights abuses, and economic inequality. What possible purchase can the term have when one member nation, Britain, solicits agreement to send vulnerable people seeking asylum to another member nation, Rwanda, for processing — including refugees from other member nations, such as LGBTQ+ Ugandans facing the death penalty? What kind of "Commonwealth" does this bespeak?

To conclude this section, the term Commonwealth, initially conceived as a means of fostering cooperation among nations, carries significant limitations that hinder

understanding of postcolonial realities. Here we have pinpointed the term's various shortcomings. To overcome these constraints, it is crucial to acknowledge the complexities and inequalities that persist within this purportedly united group of nations and to strive for more inclusive forms of global cooperation. Small wonder, then, that this journal — which has been engaged in this kind of work for many years — is registering such important commitments in its change of name.

## II

Surveying the contents of *JCL* over the ten years from 2011 to 2021, the expansion of the journal's remit in response to some of the questions we raise above is already plain to see. This expansion has taken place in concert with a shifting understanding of the valences of "empire", and of the political as well as intellectual concerns of our field and times. In their inaugural editorial as co-editors, Claire Chambers and Susan Watkins framed the journal's mission of literary critique in relation to "the British Empire and its residues" (2011: 388). They simultaneously invoked "the deterritorialized, shapeshifting, but no less violent imperialisms of the present day" (2011a: 391). Writing in June 2011, in the wake of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia as well as NATO airstrikes on Libya, they insisted on the need to place the idea of the Commonwealth "under erasure" (2011: 391). This is necessary, Chambers and Watkins argued, in order to take account of the complex operations of power in the present, as instantiated by the monumental scale of events which were then underway in the Middle East. A South–South response to the so-called Arab Spring has recently been delineated in Nadeen Dakkak's article for the journal on Malayalam writer Benyamin's portrayal of the 2011 Bahrain uprising (2023). While honouring the journal's legacies as the pre-eminent forum for detailed, literary-critical postcolonial research, Chambers and Watkins looked forward to an expanded field of study and to new directions in the discipline. As feminist scholars, they called in particular for more work on women writers, and theorization at the intersections of gender and empire.

Looking at the special issues published over the decade, a number are devoted to individual writers, building on *JCL*'s reputation for serious and detailed textualist scholarship while marking new directions in their respective fields: to Ivan Vladislavić in relation to currents in global visual art; to the republication of Olive Schreiner's unfinished, posthumously published *From Man to Man, or Perhaps Only*; and to new directions and shifts in Rushdie studies, partly precipitated by the opening of the author's archive at the Harry Ransom Centre. Several other special issues are concerned with questions of literary form: the contemporary South African short story, postcolonial life writing, and the role of "craft" in "world literature".

Yet also, studded through the decade, are special issues devoted to key questions in an expanding and diversifying field, with a markedly materialist emphasis: to postcolonial print cultures, ecocriticism, and environmental disaster; 9/11 and the so-called "war on terror"; and Dalit literature. These are representative, in many ways, of strands of critical concern throughout these ten years in *JCL*, and of the journal's commitment to publish critical and theoretical work that considers how literature operates at the multiple and dispersed frontiers of empire, and on the fault lines of racial and gendered power. These are the lines of connection we tried to trace, too, in initiatives such as the 2018 online

special issue on refugees, migrants, and border security, which we published in response to what is often misleadingly termed the “migrant crisis”, drawing together articles from across the preceding decade in the journal to ask “what literary texts have to tell us, and what kinds of engagements they invite, in confronting these escalating concerns of the current moment” (Chambers and Gilmour, 2018b). The journal’s special issues, including digital-only curations, have played a pivotal role in exploring its key questions about the complexities of empire’s frontiers as represented in literary texts.

For our first joint editorials in 2016, we (Claire Chambers and Rachael Gilmour) pointed to the persistent legacies of the British Empire. This time the focus was on these legacies’ indelible relationship to structures of racial power in the present day. The specific context was decolonial insurgencies then taking place on university campuses in South Africa and the UK around #RhodesMustFall and Black Lives Matter (2016a), and in India out of resistance to Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (2016b). Two years later, in 2018, we considered again the developments in our discipline in relation to that year’s embattled politics at the global level, asking how “the field’s vital critical energies may be devoted to literature’s intersections with the pressing issues of the present: globalization, environmental justice, the growing gulf between the world’s rich and poor, and ongoing inequalities of race, class, and gender” (2018a: 5). It was clear to us then, and remains clear now, that cultural critique is a space for interrogating the structures and operations of power. Moreover, critical analysis cannot and should not be seen as discrete from the operations of power, as the two are inextricably intertwined. It is these convictions which are, as we see it, reflected in the journal’s change of title, which we welcome.

### III

In this section, our objective is to predict how the alteration of the journal’s title will influence the perception and reevaluation of core enquiries in postcolonial or decolonial studies. Having conducted retrospective analysis of the field’s development, we will gauge the repercussions of the move from Commonwealth past to colonial present to decolonial future on the field’s purview, approach, and subjects of investigation. It is our contention that the shift from the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* to *Literature, Critique, and Empire Today* is likely to come as a positive change even to those understandably sceptical of rebranding exercises. Years in the making, the new name reflects not only transformations in the academic landscape but also some of the most pressing political issues and intellectual currents of our times.

In the context of the journal’s title change, the term “Literature” signifies a broadening of scope and a renewed emphasis on inclusivity. While the original title, “Journal of Commonwealth Literature”, implied a more specific focus on writing from the Commonwealth nations, the new name, “Literature, Critique, and Empire Today”, augurs the willingness of editors over the last 13 years or so to publish articles on literary works from across the globe and in languages other than English. This rubric alteration acknowledges that the study of literature works both within and across geopolitical boundaries, and must be able to address the complex relations between centres and peripheries in the contemporary world-system (Warwick Research Collective, 2015). “Literature” underscores the enduring importance of storytelling and artistic expression, in an age of

technological advancements and a proliferation of digital media. The marker reflects the capaciousness of literature in the broadest sense to register the operations of power, to capture inequalities in human experience, and to mediate the complexities of empire's operations on the world. By placing "Literature" at the forefront of its identity, the journal reaffirms its long-standing commitment to literary analysis and scholarship, while also bringing forth the ways creative writing helps us to understand the conditions under which we live.

The inclusion of "Critique" in the journal's new moniker highlights the critical and analytical nature of contemporary postcolonial literary studies, in all the ways discussed above. It is not enough simply to say that literatures emerge out of a shared history of colonial domination or the contemporary operations of empire. More than that, contributors to the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* have used literary analysis in its varied forms as the critical ground to understand how these forces work. In an era where literary analysis has expanded well beyond the confines of textual interpretation, this term signifies a commitment to rigorous examination and engagement with texts as they reflect, refract, and circulate in the world. "Critique" implies not only the act of dissecting and evaluating cultural works but also the interrogation of those broader social, political, material, and economic contexts in which these works are situated. It opens itself up to all the many critical approaches which focus on and aim to understand literature's role in world-making. The term acknowledges that literature is not merely a passive repository of stories but a dynamic force that both mirrors and moulds the societies it emerges from. The category encourages scholars and readers alike to question assumptions, challenge prevailing narratives, and unearth obscured meanings. By prominently featuring "Critique" in its name, the journal signals its determination to nurture critical analysis committed to using literary studies to think the world differently.

The most striking, radical, and evocative term in the journal's new name is "Empire Today", and it is this which we embrace most for signalling its continuous direction of travel. This phrase evokes the undeniable connection and complex interplay between the historical legacies of imperialism and contemporary global power dynamics. In the twenty-first century, the (after-)effects of empire continue to shape the world and the literary systems that operate within it. The choice of "Empire Today" reflects a recognition that the effects of imperialism persist in various forms, ranging from cultural hegemony to the imbrication of economic inequality, extractivism, and climate collapse. All of these forces are felt most immediately and acutely in the places which were once subject to imperialist domination, and which continue to function as peripheries in the present. The significance of "Empire Today" lies in its acknowledgement of the ongoing struggles and narratives of marginalized voices, often overshadowed as they are by the legacies of colonialism. This term invites scholars to explore how contemporary literature engages with issues of postcoloniality, subjectivity, displacement, and the movement to decolonize. It urges a reevaluation of literature in the context of global power dynamics and the enduring impact of historical empires. This reevaluation implies not only the materials of literary scholarship, and the approaches taken, but also the way literary studies as a field is still dominated by Global North perspectives that are privileged by power structures that were shaped through the operations of empire, even as they set out to critique it.



In this sense, “Empire Today” also recommits the journal to a decolonial agenda within academia, of publishing work for and by Global South scholars, including the Dalit scholarship it has championed over the past decade. “Empire Today” prompts us to ask challenging questions about representation, privilege, and the responsibilities of writers and scholars in a world still grappling with the consequences of imperialism. It underscores the need for a critical examination of the role of both literature and academia in perpetuating or challenging systems of domination and exploitation.

## Conclusion

In this article, our primary intention was to offer insider insight into the journal’s new direction and its significance for the fields of postcolonial and decolonial studies, from our perspective as the journal’s most recent former editors, based on our endorsement of what we see as the motivations for the journal’s important change of title. As we argue here, the term “Commonwealth”, initially a facilitating term in opening up Anglophone literary studies to writing from Britain’s former colonies, is problematic and limiting in both literary-critical and political terms, and has long been held “under erasure” in *JCL*. The Commonwealth paradigm is insufficient to the task of reckoning with the legacies of empire and their enduring, varied, and diffuse impacts, as well as the distinctive role of literature in anticipating or responding to these.

For over a decade at least, the journal’s conscious broadening in scope has taken place in relation to a shifting understanding of the valences of “empire”, and the political as well as intellectual concerns of our field and times. The new name of *Literature, Critique, and Empire Today* signifies a quiet revolution in the journal’s mission and purpose. Taken together, the titular terms reflect a commitment to inclusivity, critical enquiry, and the exploration of literature’s profound connections to our contemporary global reality. The journal’s header invites scholars and readers to grapple with the tessellation of literature, critique, and empire in the present day.

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