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Jenni Ramone

Postcolonial Literatures in the Local Literary Marketplace

Located Reading
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About the Author

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ABBREVIATIONS

AME  GB 2904 AME National Antiracist Movement in Education (1985–2004) otherwise known as NAME
BFC  GB 2904 BFC International Book Fairs of Radical Black and Third World Books
CAM  GB 2904 CAM Caribbean Artists Movement
LRA  GB 2904 LRA Personal Papers of John La Rose
NAS  GB 2904 NASS National Association of Supplementary Schools

1 Archival references used in Chap. 3 (and briefly in Chap. 2) refer to the George Padmore Institute and their collections. The following abbreviations are used.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Located Reading—Postcolonial Literatures in the Local Literary Marketplace

Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* (1988) depicts the author’s childhood encounter with the history of slavery, and her awareness of Antigua as a place in the world—as a place that has a particular relationship with the rest of the world. Kincaid insists that Antigua should understand its local identity as a former British colony battling a corrupt postcolonial government and the effects of an aggressively pursued tourism industry in order to operate more effectively in global contexts:

might not knowing [...] why they live the way they live and in the place they live, why the things that happened to them happened, lead these people to a different relationship with the world, a more demanding relationship, a relationship in which they are not victims all the time of every bad idea that flits across the mind of the world? (Kincaid 1988, 56–7)

Grasping their place in the world, Kincaid suggests, would enable Antiguans to resist oppression and to demand justice. In the essay, it becomes clear that Kincaid is able to recognise Antigua’s relationship with the rest of the world and to resist what is held to be common sense as a result of her reading practices—an avid reader since childhood, she notices the economic and political significance of the Antiguan library’s resources and its later neglect and disrepair, which she perceives as deliberate, motivated to deter the Antiguan people from achieving in education and art since such knowledge is considered a route towards critical thinking about
the administrative system. Importantly, the marker of the library’s dereliction is its location:

Why is the old building that was damaged in the famous earthquake years ago [...] not repaired and the library put back in the place where it used to be? Or, why, years after The Earthquake damaged the old library building, has a new library not been built? [...] if you saw the old library, situated as it was, in a big, old wooden building [...] with its wide veranda, its big, always open windows, its rows and rows of shelves filled with books, its beautiful wooden tables and chairs for sitting and reading [...] you would see why my heart would break at the dung heap that now passes for a library in Antigua. The place where the library is now, above the dry-goods store, in the old run-down concrete building, is too small to hold all the books from the old building. (Kincaid 1988, 41–3)

Moving the library to a less-prestigious, less-accessible, less-functional location is evidence of the library’s significance and the perceived threat of an educated population.

Kincaid’s essay articulates a common preoccupation in postcolonial literatures and cultures worldwide, where books and reading take a central place and are of vital importance to the shape of postcolonial society and economies. Postcolonial Literatures in the Local Literary Marketplace: Located Reading began as a project to find out why postcolonial literature contains so many moments of reading, or instances of doing other things with books—holding them above to shelter from the rain, glancing at books unread on the bedside table, making use of their pages for writing materials, or when toilet paper is scarce. In postcolonial writing, such instances are more consistently found, and are more prevalent, than is generally the case. In an effort to understand why that is, Postcolonial Literatures in the Local Literary Marketplace: Located Reading analyses local literary communities by placing texts in their local literary marketplaces. I consider how texts are circulated through local publishing, book-selling, education, and events, in an effort to understand the place of reading in its location and to enable an analysis of market forces that inform the form and function of literature and reading in each context. Through this process, combined with close textual analysis of instances of reading in literary texts, this book asks, in four chapters, what reading means in its local literary marketplace. It asserts, through a comparative conclusion, the need to undertake located reading—that is, to read with an
understanding of local economic, political, and, relatedly, cultural factors—in order to perceive the impact and function of books and reading. The specific offers lessons for reinterpreting books and reading elsewhere, and for acknowledging their centrality to all aspects of collective and individual agency.

The significance of books and reading has been acknowledged in a number of local contexts, including Black British magazine publishing:

> It is impossible to over-estimate the influence that books have on the lives of us all. They inform us when we learn at school, as they inform teachers who teach us and the lecturers who taught them. They inform the journalists who prepare the television programmes we watch at night, or the newspaper we read in the morning. They are the reference source for politicians and pundits, for leaders and those who would overthrow. Between their covers are stored much of our knowledge, our culture and our very ways of thinking. (*Race Today* 1973, 301)

This anonymously authored article asserting the centrality of books to the way populations understand, and operate within, the world was uncovered in an archive copy of *Race Today* from 1973, by Bethan Evans, a postgraduate researcher working on the Black British short story under my supervision at NTU. The magazine’s function was to elicit change in policies and practices in the UK, eradicating racism through effecting change in education, the media, and local and national politics. Despite its local focus, the sense of a globally connected influence through books and reading is implied by the reference to “leaders and those who would overthrow”, this idea also accepting the necessity of revolution in some circumstances. In all postcolonial contexts books and reading take on further significance because they are often a vital method of overturning colonial attitudes about the location which were previously imposed through the circulation of colonial literature and other books, particularly in educational settings.

To date, Homi Bhabha’s essay “Signs Taken for Wonders” is the most prominent analysis of the appearance of the English book, the text, within colonial writing. Here, Bhabha argues that the appearance of literature “out of place” in colonial-period writing offers potential for undermining colonial power by strategic reading and misreading. Because of its prominence, there is merit in examining here the extent to which Bhabha’s proposal might apply to the presence of books and instances of reading in
postcolonial literature. Bhabha’s essay offers close analysis of Marlow’s discovery in the wilderness of a shipping manual in *Heart of Darkness*, and the impact this has on the way he perceives his role in the colonial enterprise. I discuss Bhabha in some detail in this introductory chapter, in part to demonstrate that this argument only goes a very short distance towards accounting for the multiple and varied instances of reading found so frequently in postcolonial fiction. My response to Bhabha’s argument also illustrates the timeliness of engaging with the material contexts surrounding bookselling, book marketing, and book production, in local literary contexts.

Homi Bhabha’s assertion of what the book means in the colonised location rests on the claim that the book is an exceptional presence in the literary text, that it announces its strangeness. Conversely, my research reveals a high frequency of instances of books and reading in postcolonial literature from all locations. In each chapter, particularly meaningful or exemplary instances are analysed in detail, while these are contextualised within a discussion of patterns emerging in texts and locations. In total, approximately 200 literary texts have been analysed, mostly from the four locations explored in chapters in this book, in the process of arriving at a theory of located reading which helps to uncover what reading means and how the function of reading is determined by its location. My analysis reveals that books and reading perform far more complex functions than Bhabha’s discussion would suggest, and that these functions are dependent on both the location’s local literary marketplace and its particular relationship with colonialism. Partly for this reason, each location addressed here has a different kind of postcolonial context, beginning with two large former British colonies, each of which was the subject of border change: India is considered up to and at the moment of independence; Nigeria is examined from the years immediately preceding independence and until the present day; in the UK a postcolonial diaspora context is the subject of enquiry; and in Cuba the neocolonial impact of global tourism is the focus of the analysis of post-Revolution-period literature in this former Spanish colony which has also been under economic imperial control by the USA in the years between Spanish imperialism and Revolution.

When I first began working on this project, I had simply observed a pattern of highly significant moments in postcolonial literature which focused on books and reading, and had no set ideas about which locations might offer the most fruitful fields for analysis, nor yet whether a
location-based structure was the best suited to the project. In an early
discussion with professors Gregory Woods and David Worrall, I was made
aware of the opportunity to engage undergraduate research assistants on
paid summer research internships at NTU. This, combined with my host-
ing of further students undertaking research assistant posts as part of
assessed work placement activities, enabled me to begin mapping the loca-
tions which manifested the most surprising, repeated, or frequent instances
of reading. I worked with nineteen student research assistants, each of
whom provided enthusiastic insight into the texts they read, some of
which are discussed in this book, while other texts were excluded on the
basis of the research assistants’ analysis. While this method enabled me to
move from an initial intention to address reading in postcolonial literature
with an attempt at completeness to a much more logical position of reduc-
ing my scope to four specific regions, all of these temporary research assis-
tants left the project with a new appreciation of postcolonial literature, of
reading practices, and of the function of research in the academy.

Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988) was one of the first
novels that made me pause and reflect on reading as a strategy in postco-
lonial literature. It may be anticipated that the postcolonial novel of edu-
cation would include references to reading, but in fact any predictable
patterns in this category are not observable. In *Annie John* (1985); *Nervous Conditions* (1988); *Crick Crack, Monkey* (1970); and *We Need
New Names* (2013), a young female protagonist responds to her colonial
education with varying levels of ambivalence, ranging from passivity in
NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* to outright rebellion when
Nyasha tears up her school books with her teeth in *Nervous Conditions*.

Jamaica Kincaid’s coming-of-age novel *Annie John*, set in postcolonial
Antigua, has been discussed primarily in response to the complex, physi-
cally close relationships between protagonist Annie and a series of girls and
women, especially her mother (see Caton 1996; Murdoch 1990; Simmons
1998; Valens 2004). The mother-daughter relationship in particular is fre-
quently discussed as an example of the way maternal roles are disturbed by
the postcolonial condition. These female relationships are thoroughly
dependent upon education, especially reading fiction and history at school,
as well as reading library books, and also life-writing; a pivotal moment in
Annie’s life occurs when she is asked to write an autobiographical essay.
The subject of this essay is her relationship with her mother; Annie desires
to convey their flawless mutual affection to her teacher and classmates
despite the gradual deterioration of their trust and communication since
the beginning of Annie’s adolescence. Annie’s essay is received with emotion and admiration by her audience, and is the catalyst for the renegotiation of her relationships with her peers. However, this instance of writing fictionalised autobiography (Annie alters the text to suit her idealised version of her relationship with her mother) must be understood within the context of the significance of books and reading in Annie’s story.

The repeated image of “new books” (Kincaid 1997, 29, 34, 35) accompanies Annie’s anticipation and experience of starting school, the environment that is to change her ideas about her own identity and affect her relationship with her mother, and the place where she will stage the false public image of that relationship for her peers. For a time, books and reading are associated with pleasure for Annie: she uses her knowledge of literature to develop her friendships with other girls—Annie tells Gwen that she wishes she was called Enid after Enid Blyton (50) and spends time discussing the novels and poems she enjoys with her group of friends after having charmed them with her writing (79). She also tries to placate her mother with reading: “whenever I felt I was falling out of my mother’s good graces I would let her see me absorbed in these books” (55)—these particular ones are those she had been given, and had displayed on a small bookshelf. However, there are other books piled under her bed: Annie demonstrates a possessive devotion to books, saying she couldn’t “bear to part with” a book she had read, and would, as a result, feel compelled to “steal it” (55). Unlike Nila in Taslima Nasrin’s French Lover, whose comparable reliance upon books is enacted naively and candidly, Annie manipulates her love of books to influence the women around her. Having already, by this process, learned that books are associated unstraightforwardly with pleasure, it does not surprise Annie when she is first required to associate books with displeasure; her parents punish her for misdeeds at school by forbidding her from visiting the library on Saturday (81). Soon afterwards, her school punishments are also associated with reading: she is forced to copy out Books I and II of Paradise Lost (83) when her teacher discovers that she has defaced a picture of Christopher Columbus in a school history book. Writing in this book is represented as having been carried out without conscious intention: remembering her mother’s reaction to a letter informing her that Annie’s grandfather was unable to walk, Annie writes down her mother’s words—“The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go” (78)—under an image of Columbus in chains. The text suggests that Annie is only unconsciously aware of the similarity of the two patriarchs in terms of the control they have exercised over people and
territories and the fact that this was enacted through symbolism as much as actual power, as is conveyed by their eventual frailty. Since books encompass pleasure, displeasure, and the public and private exercise of patriarchal and imperial power, it is possible to reread Annie’s relationship with her mother by focusing on the attention paid to reading in the text with reference to personal trauma and its analogue in the postcolonial condition. To support this, it is necessary only to consider two moments in the text: the first reference to reading books, which is occasioned by the death of a girl of Annie’s age—“I remembered once standing behind her in a line to take out books at the library” (10)—and one of Annie’s earliest memories with her mother:

My mother had been a member of the library long before I was born. And since she took me everywhere with her when I was quite little, when she went to the library she took me along there, too. I would sit in her lap very quietly as she read books that she did not want to take home with her. I could not read the words yet, but just the way they looked on the page was interesting to me. (142–3)

Bringing these two moments together reveals the fear and frailty at the centre of their bond, and locates this within the sphere of reading, which accounts for Annie’s subsequent reliance on books and her insistence on keeping them close by for fear that she may lose something of herself once they are out of sight, as well as her fear of separation from her mother who she worries may die, like the little girl who is in her memory forever associated with the act of reading.

In Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions (1988) Nyasha, a teenage girl who spent her formative years growing up in the UK, reads DH Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover in her bedroom in Rhodesia, on the cusp of the country’s independence as Zimbabwe.

Maiguru’s lips pursed into a tight, disapproving knot. “Oh dear”, she breathed, “that’s not very good. Nyasha, I don’t want you to read books like that.”

[...]

“But it’s meant to be good, Mum. You know D.H. Lawrence is meant to be good”, objected Nyasha.

“You mustn’t read books like that. They are no good for you”, Maiguru insisted.
“But, Mum, I get so bored. I’ve read everything in the house that you say I can and there’s not much of a library at school. What’s all the fuss about anyway? It’s only a book and I’m only reading it. (74–5)

This Rhodesian teenager chooses to read a book that had until this point been banned in the UK and in this way demonstrates the incongruity of the identity of the postcolonial subject who has experienced three cultural identities: the colonial subject, the migrant, and the returned migrant. By reading a book that was censored in the UK, she rejects British regulations and restrictions over her mind. Yet, at the same time, in reading English literature in her leisure time, she rejects Rhodesian definitions of propriety. That her act of reading is so self-conscious (she is only “apparently” engrossed, after all), reveals her fragility and her need to seek guidance from those who might be in a position to install a properly postcolonial education to replace the colonial attitudes conveyed in her textbooks. Instead of providing clarity, Nyasha’s mother simply tells her that though she is familiar with the author, this book is “not suitable” for her daughter without specifying the reason, and this impasse accelerates Nyasha’s descent into resistant reading as an attempt to undermine all dominant narratives. Studying, and then eventually tearing up and rejecting books, is a method of transferring the impact of colonial subjectivity on to what the text claims is a compelling factor in postcolonial identity: reading.

Similarly, in *Crick Crack, Monkey* by Merle Hodge, protagonist Tee reads in order to avoid the pressures exerted by three oppressive influences: Tantie and her other Trinidadian female relatives who use dialect and are comfortable with Caribbean culture and community; her grandmother who offers insight into her African heritage which, for Tee, remains obscure; and her Anglicised aunt Beatrice who is treated with hostility by Tantie. Reading, for Tee, shuts down possibility, ambiguity, and complexity, replacing it with her notion, as conveyed by her British colonial education, of what is normal:

Books transported you always into the familiar solidity of chimneys and apple trees, the enviable normality of real Girls and Boys who went a-sleighing and built snowmen, ate potatoes, not rice, went about in socks and shoes from morning until night and called things by their proper names, never saying “washicon” for plimsoll or “crapaud” when they meant a frog. Books transported you always into Reality and Rightness, which were to be found Abroad. (67)
Like Tambu’s brother Nhamo in *Nervous Conditions*, who refuses to speak Shona and does not value his family after having undertaken a colonial missionary education, Tee exhibits the alienating effects of colonial education that Fanon famously elaborated in *Black Skin, White Masks*. While Tee busily consumes schoolbooks about the “exotic” apple (27), going “a-sleighing” (67), and “Tim and Jim who did a jig on the mat for a fig” (28–9), her education is divorcing her from her location and cultural heritage. This is a function of reading that Merle Hodge has described as a worrying force for conservatism, and a function that she tries hard to undermine by writing fiction in a new voice, aiming to privilege Caribbean identity: “to strengthen our self-image, our resistance to foreign domination, our sense of the oneness of the Caribbean and our willingness to put our energies into the building of the Caribbean nation” (Hodge 1990, 206). Reading in *Crick Crack, Monkey* is generally confined to educational contexts, and only becomes uncomfortable after Tee starts to ask questions which run counter to this conservative function; having told her aunt Beatrice that she would like to see Tantie and in the process conveying to Anglophile Beatrice that she remains connected to her Caribbean identity, Tee watches her cousins Carol and Jessica reading. Their exaggeratedly relaxed postures while reading—they are “sprawled or sunk into armchairs” and simply (simultaneously) raise “one curious eyelid” before continuing reading—contrasts with Tee’s discomfort and uncertainty. While reading is conveyed as dangerous within the text, Hodge is aware of its positive power and writes as an activist, reaffirming in both of these ways the fundamental importance of reading in postcolonial contexts.

*N*o*V*iolet Bulawayo’s *W*e *N*eed *N*ew *N*ames (2013) is conspicuous for its singular instance of reading, a throwaway reference to the canonical English literary text in a novel that follows a common pattern of the teenage girl’s migration to the USA in the postcolonial female bildungsroman. The USA, a “country-country”, the “big baboon of the world” (49) as opposed to the “rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka” (49) occupies a mythical place in Darling’s mind before she undertakes the journey alone, largely for economic reasons. Darling is a schoolgirl when she migrates from Zimbabwe to the USA, to Detroit, to live with her aunt Fostalina’s family, and the text conveys her gradually developing consciousness of her disconnection from her Zimbabwean community and culture, by focusing attention on her attendance at an American school and her friendships. She develops a sense of cultural awareness as a migrant there as a result of conversations
outside the classroom. While both Darling and her Nigerian friend Marina value being able to speak in Standard (British or American) English, Kristal defends her use of Ebonics as a legitimate and empowering Black form of speech to avoid “trynna front”, “trynna sound like stupid white folk” (222). This question of language and cultural identity takes place in Marina’s mother’s car which the girls have taken without permission, on their way to the mall where they park near, and enter, Borders bookshop. This contrasts with the more common focus in many texts, especially those published in previous generations of the forms of knowledge the protagonist is forced to negotiate as a result of the reading undertaken at school (just a handful of examples include Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*, Caryl Phillips’s *Cambridge*, Simi Bedford’s *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*).

The single instance of reading in *We Need New Names* is in fact a compound example which involves being in a bookshop and, triggered by the smell of books that she is not there to buy, remembering reading *Jane Eyre* for a school report. The bookshop is a conduit in to and out of the mall—it is mentioned only when they enter and when they leave, when they “tear through Borders” (232) to the passage. Despite being the only reference to literary reading in the novel, it is intriguing because the protagonist reflects on her lack of a meaningful encounter with the books there:

> The smell of new books is all around us but we don’t stop to look at anything even though I kind of want to because I don’t hate books. I haven’t read any interesting ones in a while, though, since I’m always busy with the computer and the TV. The last book I read was that *Jane Eyre* one, where the long, meandering sentences just bored me and that Jane just kept irritating me with her stupid decisions and the whole lame story just made me want to throw the book away. I had to force myself to keep reading because I had to write a report for English class. (225–6)

These apparently dismissive encounters with both the bookshop and with *Jane Eyre* reveal a number of ideas about reading books, all characterised by ambivalence: firstly, Darling’s dismissive response to *Jane Eyre*, one of the most significant canonical English texts, is not obviously politicised. Darling reveals herself to be a capable, educated reader confident to make a critical response to the text, appropriate to her age and educational level: both the plot with Jane’s “stupid decisions” and the language with its “meandering sentences” are described as irrelevant by Darling. Unlike
Nyasha and Annie John, though, who demonstrate sophisticated and (to different degrees) violent reactions to the texts that clearly demonstrate attempts to colonise their minds, her response to the text is unremarkable and resembles any high school student’s private analysis of a novel that is separated from her experience by period, location, and subject matter.

By extension, her education and her engagement with literary culture are presented as ambivalent. However, the text does not associate this ambivalence surrounding literature and reading with her later awareness of her disconnection from Zimbabwe. Instead, it is her female friendships that instigate questions surrounding her identity. Darling’s two friends convey different versions of Black empowerment that inform their linguistic choices: while Marina excels in school and attributes this in part to her superior command of Standard American English and to playing by the rules, Kristal adopts a strategic “black” dialect in order to reject the requirement to conform to a white standard. Darling observes both perspectives without adopting either, while she avoids confronting her migrant status and believes her stay in America to be temporary and entirely separate from her Zimbabwean identity. When Darling speaks on the telephone with her friend Chipo in Zimbabwe, she is forced to admit the impact of migration: “Why did you run off to America, Darling Nonkululeko Nkala, huh? Why did you just leave? If it’s your country, you have to love it to live in it and not leave it. You have to fight for it no matter what, to make it right” (286). In *We Need New Names*, the bookshop is important to Darling as location, but the meaning of the text is not. The nature of this bookshop, its vastness, and its commercial focus; the wealth and leisure conveyed by its unending choices; and the coffee shop inside that the girls visit, is an important aspect of its significance. The acts of reading and book-buying are understood as thoroughly determined by American capitalism, inviting above all attention to the literary marketplaces in which these texts circulate.

The postcolonial writer might, as Homi Bhabha’s “Signs Taken for Wonders” indicates, employ instances of reading in literary texts to undermine colonialism and to interrogate the assumed cultural value of colonial literature in postcolonial contexts. In his essay, Bhabha remarks upon the repeated scene in cultural writings by English colonisers in India, Africa, and the Caribbean, of the “sudden, fortuitous discovery of the English book” (Bhabha 1985, 145). The book is always received, he writes, as an emblem of colonial authority, and as evidence of colonial discipline, as indicated by its contrast with the apparent wilderness and disorder
surrounding it. The book signifies more than discipline and authority, though: interestingly, it also signifies a desire for the nineteenth-century colonial representatives—the kind of ambivalent colonial desire that Robert Young describes, a repressed desire for the other that reveals itself in the overly developed fear of racial mixing through reproduction. The book seems too solid an object, something too complete and self-contained, to bring with it the risk of hybridity, until, as Bhabha explains, once discovered in the colony it is “repeated, translated, misread, displaced” (Bhabha 1985, 146). The discovered book at first reinforces the arguments to which colonialism clings desperately: “the word of God, truth, art creates the conditions for a beginning, a practice of history and narrative” (Bhabha 1985, 149). However, at the same moment that the inception of a colonial narrative justified by God is reinforced by this book, its incongruity to its surroundings undoes that colonial certitude and initiates “a process of displacement, distortion, dislocation, repetition” (Bhabha 1985, 149). For Marlow, the English book sustains English cultural authority (Bhabha 1985, 150), but Bhabha notes the accompanying ambivalence that the text produces: “it is in-between the edict of Englishness and the assault of the dark unruly spaces of the earth, through an act of repetition, that the colonial text emerges uncertainly” (Bhabha 1985, 153). The text is, ultimately, “a sign of difference” (Bhabha 1985, 154), the text discovered in the wilderness itself only meaningful because of its displacement from its more usual housing in the English library.

Because it occurs out of place, the moment of encountering a book—which, in Bhabha’s analysis is an English text in colonial-period writing—is a moment that “disturbs the visibility of the colonial power and makes the recognition of its authority problematic” (Bhabha 1985, 159). We might expect this pattern of questioning colonial authority due to the hybrid nature of colonial contact to be repeated in later postcolonial texts where canonical European literary texts are read or otherwise encountered. Indeed, there are examples where this, to an extent, plausibly accounts for the act of reading in the text. However, the undoing of colonial authority is only one of a multitude of functions performed by the instance of reading in postcolonial literature. In an attempt to apply Bhabha’s argument to a number of postcolonial texts where reading is associated with estrangement (Taslima Nasrin’s French Lover (2001), Aisha (1983) by Ahdaf Soueif, and Aravind Adiga’s The White Tiger (2008)), I uncover a preponderance on literary markets, and on public places where books can be sold, borrowed, or touched.
Taslima Nasrin’s 2001 novel *French Lover*, translated into English in 2002 by Sreejata Guha, is notable for its high number of references to books and reading (fifty-four instances, some instances including multiple actions associated with books) even though the theme of the text is not directly related to education or to working with books. Taslima Nasrin is better known for her first novel, *Shame* (*Lajja*), a novel which brings together reportage and narrative to chart communal violence in Bangladesh in 1992, in response to the destruction of the Babri Masjid. Because of the book’s representation of communal violence and its perceived anti-Muslim perspective, Nasrin was subjected to violence and exiled from Bangladesh. *French Lover* deals with themes of displacement but avoids violent political contexts and instead conveys the story of Nila’s migration from Bangladesh to marry in Paris, her domestic solitude, and the relationships she forms once she begins to leave her apartment, mostly in pursuit of books. From a postcolonial perspective, the text is a straightforward narrative of migration, placing particular emphasis on female heterosexual desire and on female friendships. The role of books in the text is of interest because all of Nila’s pivotal moments of emotion or self-discovery are triggered by books and reading.

The fifty-four instances of reading in the text include references to reading canonical French literature and other classic texts; reading Indian literature and poetry; undefined reading as a pleasurable activity; fewer instances of reading newspapers, magazines, cookery books, or maps; and discussions of writing book reviews or other activity involving reading or writing. There are also a number of examples of looking at bookshelves in various domestic spaces, and of visiting bookshops. The trips to bookshops are among the most emotionally potent scenes in the text. Nila’s first walk in Paris with her new husband Kishan includes a trip to a bookshop that renders the rest of her experience in the city meaningless: her new marriage and the condition of migrancy fade and she can no longer hear Kishan calling her name when she enters what is described as a “sea of books” in which she willingly drowns “without trace” (36–7). The same titles that Nila had read in Bengali translation make her feel “strange” in their original French—strange, especially in the French language, referring, of course, to the stranger or foreigner that Nila has become on migration, but in this moment suggesting a kind of celebration, discovery, and willing abandonment to the new environment: “In a trance, Nila handled the books one by one, smelt them, hugged them to her heart” (36–7).
Books are also a refuge for Aisha in Ahdaf Soueif’s novel of the same name (1983). Libraries are prominent locations in the text and provide two main functions: escape from school when Aisha is a child, and later, a location from which she can watch the man who will become her lover. In the twenty-seven instances of reading and books in Aisha, seven occur in libraries. Of the remaining, two are notable for their discussion of canonical English literature: Catherine Earnshaw becomes Aisha’s imaginary ally in the cold school library, but Wuthering Heights drifts out of Aisha’s consciousness to be replaced by a projected image of her adult self “aged thirty, a seductress complete with slinky black dress and long cigarette holder with a score of tall, square-jawed men at my feet” (33–4). The book also becomes antagonistic when Aisha’s parents equate Lockwood’s sleepy visions of Cathy tapping at the window with Aisha’s belief in communication with demons enabled by religious experience, believing both to be fictional and refusing to listen to her need for some genuine form of communication (169). Like French Lover, books in Aisha are substitutes for meaningful relationships, but they largely belong to the world of childhood and their power diminishes from early enchantment and hunger when Aisha first learns to read, through to distraction from unpleasant encounters with her peers at school as a teenager, finally becoming objects with which her parents deride her and exclude her from the world of adult disclosure.

In French Lover, books provide Nila with a justification for asking her husband for money and for her trips out alone. They also initiate her relationships: her friendships with Sunil and Danielle, who she lives with after leaving her husband, and her attempt to strike up a friendship with a French girl of Indian origin, begin with conversations about books: about Shakespeare and Co bookshop opposite the Notre-Dame where Ulysses was first published (74), about Danielle’s reviews of books written by women (80), and about Tagore’s poetry (196). They also mark the disintegration of her relationships: both Kishan and Danielle tire of Nila’s disengagement from them and from polite social practices when she chooses to lie reading books rather than taking part in dinner party conversation or doing things they consider more appropriate, such as cooking. However, Nila’s literary knowledge attracts Benoir, her French lover; meeting him and walking around Paris together, Nila finds the location where Hemingway wrote The Sun Also Rises. Their literary tastes do not match, and this is emblematic in the text of their incompatibility: Benoir reads Tom Clancy, Stephen King, Ed McBain, and Elmore Leonard while Nila
reads Baudelaire obsessively. Nila begins to structure her relationship with Benoir, and the amount of power she is able to exercise within it, through books. When Benoir throws *Fleurs Du Mal* to the ground, Nila asks him twice to pick it up, saying “I feel like reading a poem and it’s urgent” (245). This urgency describes Nila’s need to regain control after being dominated in marriage and after being raped by Sunil. Even though she was attacked by Sunil after he asked her to read a poem aloud (199), books remain a source of comfort for Nila. After an argument with Benoir, he sends her Baudelaire’s poetry collection as an apology (249). However, when Benoir eventually understands that Nila is more interested in the books than in him, he tears up her books and throws them out of the window (290). Bhabha’s approach only seems to begin to uncover the functions performed by the moments of reading in these texts. And it barely begins to account for the representation of books and reading in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008). *The White Tiger* is structured as a series of email communications, an unevenly matched attempt at dialogue between Balram Halwai, a driver who has rejected his caste origins as a sweet-seller, and the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, who is due to visit India. The text concludes when Balram kills his employer in an act that he hopes will lead to change in terms of caste, hierarchy, and access to wealth. In this context, neocolonial questions of trade and wealth distribution dominate the narrative and the instances of reading found within it. Authority in this text is financial, and wealth is predicated on the prevalence of caste-based hierarchies.

English Books are multitudinous in *The White Tiger*, not a rare discovery. On the three occasions on which books or reading are described in the text, books are always present in vast quantities, and on two of those occasions, so are their readers. The first encounter with English books is when Balram approaches a bookstall arranged in a market in such a fashion that he describes it as a “giant pile”, a “big square” of books (204). The proprietor sits in the centre on a stack of magazines “like a priest in charge of this mandala of print”. Neither Balram nor the bookseller has any real access to the massive pile of books: the bookseller does not read English (though he announces that all his books are written in English) and Balram has no means to buy the books. Despite his distance from books—he recalls owning “a book once” as a child—Balram wants to feel something that he attributes to the books’ power, and claims that: “Standing around books, even books in a foreign language, you feel a kind of electricity buzzing up towards you. […] It just happens, the way you get erect
around girls wearing tight jeans. Except here what happens is that your brain starts to hum” (204). The books are very clearly commodities in this example: they are being sold, not read, and they are referred to as “print”, a term more associated with production than engagement. In addition, their primary marketing means—their covers—are significant, and so is the highly present publisher who altered a cover at one point so that the Hitler cover resembled Harry Potter; as a result, “life was hell for a week” (204) for the bookseller who relies on the covers to differentiate the books.

The same relationships between the books and their meaningful contexts can be observed in the other example of bookselling in the novel. This time, Balram visits an even bigger bookselling outlet: “the great second hand book market of Darya Ganj” (252) in Delhi. This is a vast market where books are sold from the pavements on Sunday afternoons. Balram is similarly hovering at the edge of this encounter with books, pretending “to be one of the buyers” (252) by flipping the pages. Here, busy crowds of buyers jostle for bargain books which Balram describes in some detail—not, though, in the kind of detail that a reader or anyone invested in the enjoyment or use value of literature might offer: Balram dwells on the physical condition of the books in the manner of someone who might value them (or, by extension, their readers and their context) on this basis. Balram states that there are tens of thousands of “dirty, rotting, blackened books”, and “some books are so old that they crumble when you touch them; some have silverfish feasting on them—some look like they were retrieved from a flood, or from a fire” (252). The books exist in these two examples within the sphere of production, marketing, publishers’ power, and bookselling. Their literary value is determined according to their market value, which is dependent on their physical state. Their impact on Balram is his drive towards entrepreneurship; they give him the confidence to undertake his own sales enterprise, selling whisky. The “electricity” that he feels after encountering books ultimately leads to his act of revolution: in a bloody and hasty act he kills his employer as a means to disrupt the hierarchy that dominates neocolonial India. He makes his transition from obedience to violent rebellion in part because of his ability to play a role: at Darya Ganj the bookseller believed in his pretended role of customer and shouted: “You going to buy it or read it for free?” (252).

An example of mass reading occurs after Balram, disillusioned with his employer after he is revealed to be weak, and politicians after they are revealed to be corrupt, drives around the city at night. He sees hundreds
of men “alone or in clusters”, “under trees, shrines, intersections, on benches, squinting at newspapers, holy books, journals, Communist Party pamphlets” (221). He understands reading to be something powerful, if only as a crutch, a distraction from the daily corruptions and disappointments that he and others suffer. He asks, “What were they reading about?” before answering his own question: “the end of the world”—or, perhaps, its upheaval by small and fractured acts of violence. None of the books read in these examples refer to colonial power, and though they are frequently English books, they are not directly presented as symbolising colonial authority, ambivalent or otherwise, corrupted or not. It is possible to see hybridity as a result of the postcolonial encounter in the prevalence of English language books in India, of course, and to associate their decay with the undoing of colonial power, but this seems a dissatisfying and limited reading in the context of a book structured through the uneven (one way) digital conversation between an Indian driver and the Chinese Premier, or, between the two emerging global financial superpowers and the two biggest countries in the world in terms of population. Instead, these references to buying or reading books speak of the neocolonial financial markets that India has taken part in and of the way in which reading and selling books functions as part of the day-to-day trade that supports India’s financial status.

In *French Lover* and *Aisha*, much of the reading takes place in libraries and bookshops, and books are encountered on bookshelves. Balram Halwai visits bookstalls in two of his three encounters with books. In all of these examples and many more, the local literary marketplaces and markers of the place of literature in culture such as libraries shout for attention and insist on being read through the framework of postcolonial literary economies, readerships, local literary marketplaces, and bookselling and publishing contexts. The local literary marketplace should be understood in my usage as operating in contrast with the global literary marketplace. The locations explored here—Nigeria, Cuba, India, and the UK—would be considered national rather than local in studies restricted to these locations; describing Cuba as local does not make sense from within Cuba Studies. Yet, a distinct literary marketplace operates in each of these national economies. While these may contact the global literary marketplace in discreet circumstances, they are certainly not bound by its operations. In the end, “local” indicates that the marketplaces operate distinctly from a global literary marketplace and should be considered on their own terms in order to better understand them, and their literatures.