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Cosmopolitan Dialectics and the World-Historical Imagination *Jason Eng Hun Lee*

Abstract: Studies on cosmopolitanism have long had to deal with its innate contradictions: its cleaving towards both universal and particular forms; its problematic relationship with the nation-state and its many antecedents; its fluctuation between collective and individual memory as markers of identity and belonging. Historically, the progressive agenda of many cosmopolitan projects have also followed what Walter D. Mignolo called ‘global designs’, those top-down directives that have created and ordered the world-system under the respective frames of coloniality, modernity and neoliberal capital. Given the dialectical twists and turns of cosmopolitan thinking today, how might these contradictions acquire critical focus through the medium of literature, and in particular, the globally-conscious Anglophone novel, which attempts to map and interrogate these capitalist forces across planetary space-time? While attempts to link the historical imaginary of these world-systems back to the cosmopolitan imagination has begun to be theorized in, for example, David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*, I argue that they can also be read in select millennial fictions by Ian McEwan, Jeanette Winterson, Don DeLillo and Jonathan Safran Foer. Taking my cue from Mignolo’s ground-breaking treatise on critical cosmopolitanism, I read the world-historical frame set up in these writers’ novels as an ongoing yet critically interpretative process, one that reflects the problematic dialectical nature of cosmopolitanism on the one hand, yet also signals in these writers’ works a transition to more historically-inflected modes of global-local writing, along with all their attendant challenges and opportunities, on the other.

About the speaker: Dr. Jason Eng Hun Lee is Lecturer in English and Comparative Literature at Hong Kong Baptist University, where he teaches courses on cosmopolitan and globalization studies, postcolonial and diasporic Asian writing, contemporary poetry, and Shakespeare. He holds a Ph.D. from The University of Hong Kong and a B.A. from The University of Leeds. He is currently preparing his monograph on critical cosmopolitanism in twenty-first century global literature.

