

## Modulating Modernist Form (On *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe, 1914–2016*)

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The texts and figures that populate *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism beyond Europe, 1914–2016* are awkward iconoclasts: instead of James Joyce, poster-figure for modernist cosmopolitanism, we encounter Joyce the grudging chronicler of postcolonial Ireland, alienated from both Irish nationalists and the “overweening pretensions of the ‘European family.’”<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore appears not as the Nobel Prize-winning sage of universal humanism but a beleaguered writer dogged by Indian nationalists for faulty politics and E. M. Forster for flawed style. The other writers gathered here (George Lamming, Claude McKay, Michael Ondaatje, and Zadie Smith) fare little better: McKay suffers the scorn of W. E. B. Du Bois, Ondaatje braves critiques of international dilettantism, and even Smith is admonished for espousing a liberalism that cannot see its way out of the predicaments it names.

Part of the appeal of Aarthi Vadde’s lucid, innovative account of modernism is her predilection for fashioning objects of study that have taken a few knocks. Teasing out reception histories that complicate attempts to situate writers or their works as stable political and cultural touchstones, *Chimeras of Form* attends to moments of unease. To borrow Vadde’s description of Tagore, the authors and works assembled in this book are “inconvenient figures” that refuse to be slot into nationalist collectives, cosmopolitan milieus, or international movements.<sup>2</sup>

Estranging authors and works from their comfortable perches in the annals of twentieth-century literature seems, at first glance, a counterintuitive move. As modernist studies have dilated in the past decade to consider artworks from around the world, its bent has been accretive. In *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, Mark Wollaeger describes such work as “decentered comparison,” a process that often involves finding biographical, formal, or political points of convergence between the existent canon of Anglo-European modernist works and texts from other corners of the globe or the century.<sup>3</sup> It will provoke no surprise to note that the resultant shifts in modernist studies produced sites of overlap as well as zones of contention between a newly expansive modernism, postcolonial studies, and comparative literature.

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1 Aarthi Vadde, *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism beyond Europe, 1914–2016* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 106.

2 Ibid., 72.

3 Mark Wollaeger, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, eds. Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): 3–24, esp. 6.

While acknowledging the debates that have shaped modernist studies in the past decade—the duration and geographic spread of modernism, the appropriate metrics for assessing formal innovation or political imagination—*Chimeras of Form* as a whole marks a departure from the periodization and geopolitical quandaries playing out in modernist studies and twentieth-century literature. This is not to say that its arguments are not deeply informed by such conversations: Bruce Robbins and Wai Chee Dimock's debates on the viability of oceanic or deep time, for example, figure centrally into a reading of Michael Ondaatje's archival practices, while Partha Chatterjee's critique of anticolonial movements' supposed autonomy and Rebecca Walkowitz's work on the anthology are both invoked to make a case for understanding Tagore's autotranslations as acts of selective assimilation to English literary and cultural norms. But the emphasis of *Chimeras of Form* lies elsewhere. In casting the central figures of this study as restless individualists, Vadde opens space for exploring how their works waver between disenchantment with the failed promises of international solidarity and frustration with the isolationism of postcolonial nationalisms. The worlds they depict are neither neatly carve-able into nation-states nor seamlessly connected through flows of global capital and cultural communication. What's more, Vadde refuses to valorize writers' skepticism of collectives as analytic acumen, opting instead to highlight how such resistance to belonging comes with its own risks. Specters of the Indian babu and Irish *shoneen* (cultural stereotypes of the colonial subject who parrots imperial mannerisms) hover over Tagore and Joyce, raising the possibility that their iconoclasm might be read as nothing more than an imitation of imperial manners.

Like the writers assembled in this study, the formal techniques identified as chimeras of form dwell in impasses. Ungainly cousins of literary modes and commitments that we might catalog as modernist commonplaces (autonomy, stream of consciousness narration, fragmentation, etc.), the chimeras of form identified here open into newly transnational and transhistorical directions, often to unsettling effect. Vadde's reading of *Ulysses* supplements Joycean parallax with "alternating asymmetry," or "strategies of uneven and disproportion comparison."<sup>4</sup> If parallax yokes characters together through the formal premise of overlapping experience, alternating asymmetry strips away any pretense of shared ground as it "treats the reader to abrupt and inane discrepancies of style."<sup>5</sup> In place of Virginia Woolf's "tunneling process," which Woolf described in her diary as a "remarkable" technique for "telling the past by installments" in ways that eventually connect characters to each other in the present, we encounter Zadie Smith's "root canals," a phrase that registers the violence of excavating the histories and geographies that inform the present.<sup>6</sup> I hesitate to draw upon touchstones of high European modernism here, largely because I so admire Vadde's implicit resistance to such comparative analysis, but I do so to mark the ways that the chimera betokens a transmogrification of modernist form. Where many accounts of modernism offset the potential solipsism of representing consciousness by

4 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 76.

5 *Ibid.*, 72.

6 Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. II: 1920–24*, ed. Annie Oliver Bell (New York: Harcourt, 1980) 272; Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 182.

underscoring the formal techniques that hold collectives together, the chimera instead understands form to be that which creates disjuncture.

At the level of textual analysis, recognizing ideological restiveness allows for careful attention to forms that destabilize or estrange concrete affinities. At the level of disciplinary intervention, *Chimeras of Form* unknots zero-sum negotiations between nationalist and internationalist imaginaries and, by extension, unsettles the ways postcolonial studies' predilection for particularity and locality and modernism's embrace of cosmopolitanism and autonomy have been cordoned off from one another. In Vadde's succinct formulation, "the boundaries of collectivity are never as given as a cartographic outline would suggest."<sup>7</sup>

An epilogue follows this conclusion through to the mass displacement crises of the twenty-first century; Vadde makes an eloquent case for modernist internationalism's penchant for testing the limits of belonging as a model for grappling with forced migration in the age of global capital. We live in an increasingly connected world—and yet our knowledge has never felt so fragmentary or so ideologically inflected. This feels like the endpoint toward which the book's argumentative arc has been directed: modernist internationalism becomes, in Vadde's formulation, less a canon of texts than a critical mode of engagement. If "place-based models of belonging have begotten circulation-based models of expulsion," then international modernism's predilection for revealing the fissures in local, national, and global collectives alike becomes a necessary counter-balance to the increasingly aggressive isolationism of nationalist rhetoric today.<sup>8</sup>

The subtlety of Vadde's arguments is perhaps captured best by her willingness to linger with known terms, allowing them to modulate in new and incisive ways. This is, of course, an overt objective of the book: the introduction situates chimeras of form within modernist internationalism, a lived-in term that Vadde returns to despite (or because of) a proliferation of newer terms for codifying twentieth-century literature. As she argues, modernist internationalism is "a historically articulated category open to infiltration and rearticulation precisely because we maintain a record of its past associations."<sup>9</sup> Mobilizing the chimera as a figure that "brings newness out of the old, more familiar categories," Vadde makes a case for allowing debates about the Eurocentrism of modernist studies to remain embedded in the terms used for its categorization. But modulation is also a defining characteristic of the book's argumentative style. *Chimeras of Form* approaches repertoires of form, constellations of writers, and even language itself with an eye toward re-inflection. There is something at once uncomfortable and reparative in such an approach. Precisely because we understand modernity and decolonization to be uncompleted processes, Vadde argues, literary and cultural criticism should bring into view "the *working* of art."<sup>10</sup> The incisive close readings that populate *Chimera of Form* parse the difference between "comprehensibility and comprehensiveness" and question readers' predilection for a text that "solves rather than dissolves."<sup>11</sup> We have moved, Vadde remarks in passing, from

7 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 5.

8 *Ibid.*, 220.

9 *Ibid.*, 17.

10 *Ibid.*, 36.

11 *Ibid.*, 218, 175.

world war to “a world of wars”—a shift in the scale and scope of violence that will require us to radically redefine atrocity in order to account for the mass displacements, ecological destruction, and internecine warfare of the twenty-first century.<sup>12</sup> While unflinching in its assessment of failed collectives, foreclosed possibilities, or formal experiments that don’t quite cohere, the underlying structure of argumentation here seems to suggest that renewed attention, coupled with very slight modulations of perspective, might yield new modes of engagement.

In the spirit of lingering, then, I propose to think alongside the book’s fourth chimera, the “archival legend,” before gesturing to two ways it might reorient contemporary literary and cultural practice.<sup>13</sup> Vadde presents the archival legend as a figure that encapsulates both the mythical and the unhistorical—that is, a figure that rises above or slips below the representative capacities of the historical record. Because prevalent theories of the archive (specifically, those of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida) emphasize the circumscribing role of sovereign power in defining the archive and the narratives that emerge from it, the archival legend constitutes an intervention of sorts, making it possible to consider the roles emotion, memory, and imagination play in generating texts or contexts for narratives that fall outside the historical record.<sup>14</sup> In questioning the capacity of the archive to account for violences committed against persons the state or the international community has chosen to ignore, *Chimeras of Form* aligns with recent works such as Elizabeth Anker’s *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature*, Jasbir K. Puar’s *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*, and Debarati Sanyal’s work on European refugee camps, all of which emphasize the need to account for the transnational contexts in which states allocate or withhold citizenship, protection, and care.<sup>15</sup>

Vadde’s case study for the latter half of the chapter is Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*. Set in Sri Lanka during the civil unrest of the 1980s and 1990s, *Anil’s Ghost* follows Anil Tissera, a forensic anthropologist attached to an international human rights organization, as she attempts to identify the remains of one of the thousands of unidentified victims of the Sri Lankan conflict. From the outset, Anil embraces international human rights work’s logic of exemplarity: without the time or resources to identify all those disappeared, injured, or killed in the wars that have engulfed Sri Lanka, Anil determines that identifying the skeleton she has nicknamed Sailor will do the work of bringing justice to the thousands whose losses remain publicly unmarked. As Vadde observes, however, “the novel’s politics . . . quickly veer away from the global law-and-order scenario of Anil’s imagination,” unfolding in its stead a layered account of local and transnational violences that complicate the notion of singular or effective remedy.<sup>16</sup>

12 Ibid., 168.

13 Ibid., 32.

14 See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998) and Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge: and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Random House, 2010).

15 See Elizabeth S. Anker, *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012); Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); and Debarati Sanyal, “Calais’s ‘Jungle’: Refugees, Biopolitics, and the Arts of Resistance,” *Representations* 139.1 (2017): 1–33.

16 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 164.

Vadde's understanding of what might constitute an archive in *Anil's Ghost* is deliberately capacious, encompassing textual fragments, artifacts, and personal and collective memories, all of which enter the text in a variety of ways. Two of the three archival modalities identified in the chapter are relatively straightforward: the first version of the archive is composed of characters' objects of study, including forensic artifacts, archaeological sites, and a reconstructed Buddhist statue. Alongside this archive exist the novel's own archival practice, a drawing together of documents and experiences unknown to or unremembered by characters. These fragments surface in the text as "material stored but not storied," demarcated from the rest of the narrative by italics that are never accounted for within the diegetic world of Anil and Sarath's investigation.<sup>17</sup> In addition to the artifactual or textual archives, however, Vadde posits a third category: the "not-always textual traces of memory that remain invisible within the discourses of history."<sup>18</sup>

If this version of the archive seems more alchemical than the two that precede it, it is with good reason. Memory traces include the deeply personal and the sweepingly transhistorical, the lost wife whose face resurfaces in an artist's modeling of Sailor's skull, and the litany of disasters that cascade through Anil's mind as she tries to grasp the violence engulfing Sri Lanka. While memories and associations do not comprise a visible or stable archive, they nonetheless saturate characters' interpretive frames, and thus, Vadde argues, intersect with the textual and cultural artifacts populating the novel-world.

As a case in point, Vadde analyzes how Chinese burial practices circa 500 BC spark conflicting interpretations from two of the novel's central characters, Anil and Sarah. When does an event become an atrocity? When is loss coded as violence, and when does it become enfolded into a larger fabric of cultural or historical relativism? Where Sarath, an archaeologist, sees the burial of twenty women at a cultural and historical remove, Anil reads a moral and ethical wrong. In their debate, as in the attempt to attach an identity to the skeleton nicknamed Sailor, Vadde finds that "Ondaatje allows the personal memories of a wandering consciousness to mingle with scientific investigation and reorder the value of its findings."<sup>19</sup>

Acknowledging the roles memory and imagination play in interpreting the archive situates character and reader alike in chimeric roles as gatherers of texts and contexts, interpreters, and conduits through which other, unaccounted for experiences pass. If italicized sections of the novel function as part of a "transhistorical and transnational network of memory loss," Vadde seems to suggest that characters' reserves of memory function as a secondary network by which transnational associations and intimate experiences graft onto archival practice.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the archive is both mobilized by memory and constituted by the residue that memory leaves behind.

Archival practice might be read, then, as the formal equivalent of Cathy Caruth's "unclaimed experience": as shards of text are sutured together over the course of the

17 Ibid., 177.

18 Ibid., 151.

19 Ibid., 167.

20 Ibid., 175.

novel, they yield insight into otherwise unaccounted for trauma, such as the excision of Mexico and Canada from the myth of the American West in Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* or the disappeared persons whose sufferings cannot be mapped onto Sailor's remains.<sup>21</sup> But, importantly, this is not an experience that molds itself around the biographical character or the "narrated life" understood to be central to mechanisms for international justice.<sup>22</sup> Animated as an interaction between fragments, memories, and readers, the archival practice theorized here begins to approximate Ariella Azoulay's description of photography as a dynamic contact between photographer, photographed subject, and spectator. This contact, Azoulay argues, cultivates a "borderless citizenship" that allows spectators to recognize "that the actual rule to which they are subject, in its concrete configuration, is always limited, always temporary, never final, even when there seems to be no exit from it."<sup>23</sup> Loosening the tie between the archive and sovereign power recalibrates the geographies and swaths of time the archive is able to assimilate, allowing texts to become transnational and transhistorical in ways that pose challenges to the logic of the nation-state and, perhaps, the notion of human rights as a regime secured by a narrative of international moral consensus.

If one version of international consciousness arrives in *Anil's Ghost* via Anil's human rights rubric, as articulated in her declaration that identifying Sailor will bring justice to all of the disappeared, another is routed through memory. The transnationalism of Anil's and Sarath's associations and experiences produces an alternative awareness of what Vadde characterizes as a "global disaster circuit."<sup>24</sup> What's more, in a masterful reversal, Vadde arrives at a surprising rationale for international human rights work: the sorts of deep time theorized by Wai Chee Dimock make it possible to see that all cultures have suffered catastrophes. If appeals to a (perhaps illusory) common moral consensus prove capricious, recognition of the vulnerability recorded in deep time can reframe the concept of rights. Such an approach accords with Judith Butler's recent work on failing infrastructures and the politics of protest: "vulnerability," she argues, "indicates a broader condition of dependency and interdependency that challenges the dominant ontological understanding of the embodied subject."<sup>25</sup>

Interdependency requires an affective engagement that is more capacious but also more diffuse than the sympathetic imagination, which poses a problem for the narrative structures on which human rights appeals are often based. In literary study, Joseph Slaughter's influential *Human Rights, Inc.* makes a case for reading human rights and the *Bildungsroman* as syncretic narrative structures that share a common goal of incorporating the individual into a "universal sociality . . . that is naturally inclined to express itself through the social media of the nation-state and

21 See Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

22 Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 29.

23 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone, 2012), 26.

24 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 168.

25 Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, eds. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 12–27, esp. 21.



citizenship.”<sup>26</sup> *Bildungsromane* are generically predisposed toward rendering the individual subject legible, even if, as Slaughter argues, the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* infinitely defers such ends. Against the biographical impulse that drives the *Bildungsroman*’s plot, however, Vadde’s archival legend diffuses and ruptures narrative attention, exchanging the fantasy of incorporation for one of attenuated correlation. To be clear, this is not a critique of Slaughter’s argument, which has been central to both Vadde’s work and my own, but rather an attempt to account for a proliferation of aesthetic works that overtly engage the impasses in human rights logic and law via archival practices. Ariel Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden* threads a Schubert symphony through recorded and handwritten testimony produced during an impromptu kidnapping-turned-truth commission in Chile; Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* stages interactions between a fictional biographer, documentary traces of anti-apartheid activists in South Africa, and archival records of Saartjie Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus,” to tell a story of post-apartheid violence; Ishtiyag Shukri’s *I See You* narrates an extraordinary rendition by suturing together “public” records of emails and radio and television transcripts around its absent protagonist; and Valeria Luiselli’s *Tell Me How It Ends* adopts the formal structure of US Immigration and Naturalization Service intake forms to expose the ways migrants’ stories are structurally precluded from appearing in the scene of the immigration hearing.<sup>27</sup> Each text arcs across centuries and spans geographies as it explores the gaps between documentation and legal or political representation. Vadde’s elaboration of the novel’s archival practice provides a timely and erudite intervention into the ways literary criticism and theories of the archive can convene at the site of these contemporary aesthetic works.

Although Vadde marks a divergence from the ways Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida’s framing of the archive as a site that authorizes and delimits the scope of the historical record, I would venture yet another supplement: for both Foucault and Derrida, the challenge of the archive lies in the problem of ordering, or how to transverse documents, and the problem of translation—how to make the document legible in its own contexts and also in ours. The conundrum is that of the scholar, limited in her time, care, and attention, confronting a seemingly endless profusion of material. This construction of the archive is alluring, as far as it goes, but also, at this juncture, deeply utopian.

Instead, many of the works referenced previously consider the consequences of newly interlinked architectures for surveillance and population control. Biometric and electronic surveillance and their accompanying data allow border infrastructures to metastasize in unpredictable directions, simultaneously amplifying and confounding the boundaries of the nation-states they’re designed to secure. These archives, however, remains either proprietary—culled by businesses to determine how to shape us as consumers—or classified—gathered by a securitized state to monitor the moment

26 Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 93.

27 Ariel Dorfman, *Death and the Maiden* (New York: Penguin, 1994); Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2017); Ishtiyag Shukri, *I See You* (Johannesburg, South Africa: Jacana Media, 2014); Zoë Wicomb, *David’s Story* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2000).

when its citizens will tip over into becoming its suspects. It is here that Vadde's theorization of the archival legend is prescient in its ability to consider literature's intervention in the neoliberal, securitized state. Against a horizon of political surveillance and corporate data mining, the archival legend makes it possible to grapple with how being documented but not recognized by the nation-state can authorize new scales of violence.