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Chimeric World

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The term *postcolonial* may appear only once in the index of *Chimeras of Form*, but this doesn't mean that Aarthi Vadde's accomplished book cannot be taken as a sign of where postcolonial studies has gone. Slightly over ten years ago, the *PMLA* featured a roundtable with the headline "The End of Postcolonial Theory?" in which scholars were asked to meditate on the irony of the field's waning presence in the US academy at a time when the US empire was resurgent.[1] Things look different now. Postcolonial theory has become so successful as to have restructured the way canonical literary fields are studied. Modernism, for instance. Meanwhile, in the larger world, new empires are multiplying everywhere, and US empire is falling apart.

At least, this is the longer, dialectical view that we may wish to take when things are as evil and stupid as they are right now on the ground. I was invited by this journal to reflect on the contributions made by *Chimeras of Form* at a time when my daily news reading consisted of: the separation of migrant refugee children from their parents at the US border in violation of the Geneva Convention; the purging of the Polish judiciary by a newly elected right-wing government; Philippine president Duterte's removal of his judicial critics; Philippine president Duterte's misogynistic remarks; sexual harassment everywhere, from newsrooms to universities, and of course Hollywood and Catholic churches; inept enforcement of Title IX at universities placing victims in limbo; overzealous prosecution of Title IX at universities depriving the accused of their rights; AAUP reports of rampant faculty academic freedom violations by PR-minded university administrations; a police officer killing of Antwon Rose, an unarmed seventeen-year-old black high school student in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Betsy Devos's proposal that the Department of Education fund school purchases of guns; EPA chief Scott Pruitt's spending abuses; new acting EPA chief and former coal lobbyist Andrew Wheeler's climate-denying history; the Trump administration's rollback or relaxation of seventy-six environmental regulations; largest-ever fires in the history of California; Britain's hottest summer in four hundred years; wildfires killing ninety-eight people in Greece said to be the worst fire in a decade; the confirmed extinction of eight bird species; sharp increases in elephant poaching in Botswana; one of the worst floodings in Kerala, India, in a century, displacing thousands; Anthony Bourdain's suicide; rising suicide rates in the United States in general; beginnings of a US-China trade war; China's internment of more than a

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1 Patricia Yaeger, "Editor's Column: The End of Postcolonial Theory? A Roundtable with Sunil Agnani, Fernando Coronil, Gaurav Desai, Mamdou Diouf, Simon Gikandi, Susie Tharu, and Jennifer Wenzel," *PMLA* 122.3 (2007): 633–51.

million Uighurs in Xinjiang and "rectification" campaigns against Muslims; US withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council in protest of its frequent criticism of Israel's treatment of Palestinians; yet another US-backed Saudi coalition airstrike on a school bus in Yemen, killing fifty-four people, forty-four of whom were children; the exoneration by Maryland prosecutors of a police officer for killing a forty-one-year-old unarmed black man named Robert Lawrence White, who happened to be in the vicinity when the officer was responding to an unrelated 911 call; the US Supreme Court ruling upholding the constitutionality of Trump's travel ban on several mostly Muslim countries; the nomination of groomed conservative and accused sexual predator Brett Kavanaugh to replace Anthony Kennedy on the US Supreme Court; an Asian American antibias lawsuit against Harvard seeking to end affirmative action; testimonials on behalf of Brett Kavanaugh by his former, supposedly "liberal," Yale law professors Akhil Reed Amar and Amy Chua; Asian Americans challenging Harvard's affirmative action policies for racial bias; celebrations of the racial progress symbolized by *Crazy Rich Asians*; a New Zealand housing crisis fueled by property purchases by the world's rich techies preparing for the apocalypse; UN warnings of the potential for the "worst humanitarian catastrophe of the twenty-first century" over an impending Russian-assisted government assault on the Syrian rebel-held area of Idlib . . .[2]

Perhaps fittingly enough, *Chimeras of Form* is about how modernist literature's disjunctive, open-ended forms can help us retain some faith in internationalism in the face of global injustice and failed cosmopolitan institutions. What is the internationalism Vadde has in mind? The book's preference for the term *internationalist* over *cosmopolitan* or *planetary* might imply an unembarrassed return to Marxism. If so, then as compared to other recent books on modernist internationalism, such as Steven Lee's recovery of Comintern-era art, it is certainly of a post- or anti-party sort.[3] Vadde's authorial cases—even her Claude McKay—presuppose vagrancy from all party lines as the condition for modernist innovation. This comes across methodologically in Vadde's intuitive suspicion of systematic or structural thinking, which for her operate at too abstract a scale of conceptualization or afford too simplistic a means of explanation. Modernism's value is to be found in its dogged troubling of any totalization. So far, so Adorno. (Adorno argued that politics had migrated into the autonomous work of art and indeed had penetrated most deeply into works that presented themselves as politically inert.) But here is the twist. Vadde's version of modernism tarries more concretely with the positives that may be discovered just on the other side of negation. Modernist fiction, and specifically what she calls its "chimeras of form," are sites where "the line between possibility and impossibility is under dispute and capable of being redrawn."[4] The result is the "stretching of the sayable, the thinkable, within political, philosophical and cultural understandings of global imagination" that can be found in propositional discourse.[5] Here's a moment where Vadde almost sounds like a critical realist: "Rather than retool unachievable

2 The aforementioned list represents my blackout of Trump personal drama–related news.

3 Steven Lee, *The Ethnic Avant-Garde: Minority Cultures and World Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

4 Aarthi Vadde, *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe, 1914–2016* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 3.

5 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 2.

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internationalisms into achievable cosmopolitanism, I return to moments in modernist fiction when the line between the unachievable and the achievable is being actively discovered."[6] So, a bit more activist about the agency of the work of art than Adorno. But a lot less Lukácsian than Fredric Jameson, whose orientation to utopia and totality as the horizons of our collective desire is for Vadde less fruitful than turning our gaze to the concrete forms of impasses (i.e., literature) that are "immanent to modernity."[7] *Impasse* is a word that recurs frequently in *Chimeras of Form*, and it is a good word for our times.

As examples of what *should* be more sayable and thinkable Vadde has in mind: national sovereignty minus cultural organicism (Rabindranath Tagore); international solidarity built upon a critical comparativism (James Joyce); a black cosmopolitan tradition that makes deracination the basis of a collective bond rather than individual advancement (Claude McKay and George Lamming); coalitional thinking about collective memory (Michael Ondaatje); a commitment to seeking out the "whole story," which includes recognition of systems' effects on individual lives as well as the partiality of all knowledge (Zadie Smith). What's recognizably "postcolonial" about the book is its quest to adduce a political theory of internationalism out of places from "beyond Europe" that Marxism, not to mention liberalism, has needed. Decidedly non-Adornian is a big tent approach to what counts formally as modernism. The upside is that we get a literary critic of Vadde's caliber paying close formal attention to colonized and minority writers in a way we're more used to in books about Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf (Joyce being the exception). In Vadde's hands, Tagore, McKay, and Lamming especially become literarily more fascinating than they were previously (at least to this reader). There is a downside, though. It's that, unmoored from a historically specific critique of reification, Vadde's modernism is more abstracted than Adorno's—an inevitability perhaps of her democratic enlargement of modernism's places and times. Why should we believe her (on modernism's immanent criticality)? Why do we want so much to?

Vadde shows us writing that attempts to "bring shape and form to the 'formless' space of international politics."[8] She does not wish to be mistaken for saying anything as naive as that "poetic inventiveness can directly change the circumstances of political reality."[9] In place of utopian visions or revolutionary radicalism, Vadde resolutely offers us "weaker, less absolute figures of hope but more attached ones."[10] In today's intellectually unconducive climate, what strikes me is not Vadde's political caution, but her political romanticism. What strikes me is the belief that reading literature can help us make sense of the world, and perhaps somewhere down the line even make a better one. In the end, disputations with Jameson aside, what's still on offer here is a version of literature as cognitive mapping. Literature's epistemological usefulness is not, to be sure, in its represented content —though Vadde's chosen authors do happen to take up key aspects of global capitalism, including nationalism, colonialism, and racial inequality. The use is in the homology between authors' continual testing of the

6 Ibid., 4.
7 Ibid., 231.
8 Ibid., 12.
9 Ibid., 3.
10 Ibid., 231.

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wholeness of the work of art and a cultivated skepticism toward the wholeness of community and identity. Reading these writers, we benefit from what she calls literature's propaedeutic function and are potentially offered "preliminary instruction in discerning power dynamics . . . and categories for rethinking belonging and political obligation with feeling and force."[11]

In the end, I want to believe Vadde because as an academic literary critic I'd like to think that reading, teaching, and thinking with literature is a prophylactic against the temptations of giving up on trying to make sense of the news or seeking a too-simple explanation for news that doesn't make sense. No matter that I think, Vadde is wrong to dismiss world-system theories or marxist theories of global capitalism for being too reductive as if they were just a hair's breadth away from the singularity of conspiracy thinking, or what Jameson once called "a poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age."[12] Emphasizing literature's propaedeutic incitement to our reconsideration of the "facts, values and frames associated with imagined community, good citizenship, international solidarity, and political agency"[13] is more believable than Martha Nussbaum's empathy-based defense of literature's political relevance. Or at least, it makes for more rigorous and richer textual readings, altogether apart from the fact that we might prefer Vadde's internationalist anticolonial affinities to Nussbaum's liberal civics. Boiled down to a defense of literature for cultivating critical thinking, the argument is not exactly new. But the devil is in the details of how we theorize literature's critical function, and Vadde's are superbly drawn. Overall, as a professionally responsible stance, I find Vadde's doubling down on literary critique rather more preferable to some other (e.g., postcritical) alternatives on offer right now.

Still, Vadde is swimming against the current of not just some contemporary antipolitical tendencies that are symptomatic reactions to our profession's diminished institutional status. She's also swimming against some pessimistic assessments of contemporary literature and literary study issuing from politically left-identified critics.

I'm thinking of Mark Greif's *The Age of the Crisis of Man* (2015), which shares with Vadde's book the twin goals of taking literature seriously as intellectual discourse and of distinguishing literature's formal and social properties from intellectual discourse. Greif argues that the US novel of the 1940s and 1950s inherited an intellectual discourse (in this case, a universalist discourse of "the crisis of man") and, by having had to translate it concretely into fiction, anticipated the critiques of difference that were to become dominant after the watershed movements of the 1960s. Sweeping aside as premature 1920s and 1940s announcements of the death of the novel, Greif is unabashed in claiming for the novel a cultural and intellectual authority as a means to truth (in the eyes of readers at a certain time). He's also extremely convincing in his treatment of Bellow, Ellison, and O' Connor on how this could have been so. Because Greif has taken such pains to show us how the novel managed to achieved such a "high water mark" in the postwar period, we're also wont to agree with him that the

11 Ibid., 230–31.
12 Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 356.
13 Ibid., 3.

novel today no longer holds the cultural authority it once did, "except tinctured with nostalgia."[14]

I'm thinking also of Juliana Spahr's *Du Bois's Telegram* (2018), which shares with Vadde the concern that literature bears so close a relationship to nationalism; as Spahr puts it, paraphrasing Benedict Anderson, literature carries that relationship "in the very materials of its composition."[15] This presents a problem for the internationalist critic, which both Vadde and Spahr are. How Vadde and Spahr go about responding to problem, however, could not be more different. Vadde searches out textual counterexamples that can be read as serving a formal riposte to nationalism's "fortress state" in that "they take apart, with language, those walls and fences that are intended to detain racialized migrant bodies and to secure borders that always, somehow or another, end up being crossed."[16] Spahr examines the structural conditioning of literary production, distribution, and reception by the US government and their private foundation partners, and comes to the conclusion that this has done much to limit the reach of political, especially anticolonial and antiracist, literary works and may even explain the present-day isolation of political literature from actual resistance movements. Although Vadde would almost certainly find Spahr's approach to the question of the relationship between literature and politics reductive—and Spahr is frank about not having attended much to "the literature itself nor its content nor aesthetic concerns"[17]—it's difficult not to think that the reception contexts for literary ripostes must matter. At a time when more fiction and books are being published than before, Spahr observes, even as literary reading rates have declined and its aging audience has come to resemble that of the opera, the literary academy is "free and easy with . . . [an Audre] Lorde-esque rhetoric" of literature as resistance or sanctuary.[18]

Is it possible to agree with Greif and Spahr that literature—writing it, reading it, writing about it—represents a feeble, even illusory, form of political engagement today, *and* to experience the propaedeutic effect of reading Vadde's book amid all the terrible and hard to cognize news of 2018? I'd still like to think so. But maybe it's only because deep down I am still attached to the idea—despite everything—of the university as an intellectual sanctuary that I cannot but respect ongoing efforts to make our profession relevant.

14 Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933–1973* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 104.
15 Juliana Spahr, *Du Bois's Telegram: Literary Resistance and State Containment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 12.
16 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 221.
17 Ibid., 180.
18 Ibid., 186.

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