

Postcolonial Archives and the Question of Justice

Jill Richards

In the last decade, some of the most influential accounts of the scope and status of world literature foreground what we might call questions of cultural production: language, translation, literary canon formation, and international publishing. For instance, Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (2007) takes up the production, circulation, and evaluation of literary texts in a global landscape, arguing that imperial inequalities can be mapped according to their reanimation in the cultural formation of a Eurocentric canon.¹ Emily Apter's *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013) focuses on the untranslatability named in its subtitle, centering words and concepts that do not easily transfer across languages to argue for a rethinking of the potentially homogenizing category, world literature, as a whole.² Aamir's Mufti's *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures* (2016) tracks the hegemonic rise of English as a global language, particularly through the work of Orientalist European translators and scholars, to argue that the cultural logic of Orientalism continues to shape the field that we call world literature today.³ In *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in the Age of World Literature* (2017), Rebecca Walkowitz offers an important theorization of the status of translation more generally at a moment when many of the contemporary genres that fall into the framework of world literature begin across or between multiple languages.⁴

In her extremely useful survey, "Against World Literature': The Debate in Retrospect," Gloria Fisk offers a much more thorough account of the polemical junctures between the aforementioned texts, which only begin to gesture toward a more populated conversation among comparative and postcolonial scholars.⁵ My rather brief skip through the world literature debates looks to make a more thematic point. Whether for or against the formulation of world literature, these scholars often begin with matters

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1 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

2 Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (New York: Verso, 2013).

3 Aamir Mufti, *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

4 Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

5 Gloria Fisk, "Against World Literature': The Debate in Retrospect," *The American Reader*. April 9, 2014. <http://theamericanreader.com/against-world-literature-the-debate-in-retrospect/>

of translation. What makes Aarthi Vadde's *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe, 1914–2016* particularly exciting is the way that it builds on these conversations, but foregrounds the question of international justice.

In so doing, Vadde pointedly uses the term *internationalism* to take up the perspective of the literary texts under discussion, in order to follow the ways that “idealized dreams of internationalism are staged and situated, restrained or wholeheartedly pursued, such that modernism’s chimeras of form reveal the analytical power embedded in aspirations—even, and perhaps especially, when those aspirations face accusations of fantasy, triviality, or misguided illusion.”⁶ Given this turn, Vadde’s closest cohort of interlocutors might not be the world literature debates as such, but a number of recent books that refigure internationalism as it was imagined by artists and theorists in the first half of the century. Here I think particularly of three field-changing books whose influence continues to reverberate: Brent Hayes Edwards’s *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003); Jessica Berman’s *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (2012); and Stephen S. Lee’s *The Ethnic Avant-Garde: Minority Cultures and World Revolution* (2015).⁷ In a similar fashion, Vadde’s work offers a foundation for new scholarly paths for the ways that it straddles two traditions that do not always engage with each other: modernist studies and postcolonial literature. Beginning with Tagore and moving into our contemporary moment, the texts under consideration in Vadde’s book stretch canonical accounts of both modernism and the postcolonialism, allowing us to see how the transnational imagination of justice crosses between them in unexpected ways. As Vadde writes, the book treats these fields as “analytical apertures onto the concurrent and unfinishable projects of modernity, decolonization and internationalism.”⁸

In this brief response, I want to engage with Vadde’s consideration of international justice, but bring my own commitments to this conversation regarding historical materialism, gender studies, and human rights critique. In so doing, I foreground what I see as a major historical break in the ways that possible worlds might be imagined, before and after the end of actually existing socialism. What is significant, in this context, is a rupture between a longing for revolution that might seem even distantly possible and a later historical moment when neoliberalism appears to be the natural endpoint of historical progress and human development. I situate this rupture partly in terms of a cultural imaginary, but more firmly through the practices of nongovernmental organizations oriented toward international justice. In anthropologist David Scott’s account of this later context, the institutional practices of transitional justice make a distinction between an earlier, illiberal regime and a new, liberalizing democratic order. For Scott, who focuses on the historical episode of the

6 Aarthi Vadde, *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe, 1914–2016* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 6.

7 Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Jessica Berman, *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Stephen S. Lee, *The Ethnic Avant-Garde: Minority Cultures and World Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

8 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 16.

Grenada revolution, the scale and scope of transitional justice in the present moment is “inseparable from the larger story of the emergence of a world in which the socialist past can appear in the present *only* as a criminal one and in which liberal democracy parades as the single—and, if need be, militarily enforceable—direction of a worldwide political order.”⁹

My purpose is not to critique Vadde’s capacious range, from Tagore to the present, or what she calls an “unapologetic aesthetic line of inquiry.”¹⁰ Nor do I want to dismiss the ways that this perspective allows Vadde to sidestep many of the conceptual dead ends produced by what she aptly calls “the usual narratives of rupture around 1914 (the end of World War I and the beginning of colonialization) or 1989 (the end of the Cold War).”¹¹ Rather, I want to tip Vadde’s wide-ranging archive at a different angle, to see how renewed attention to its historical fissures allows for engagement across methodological orientations. What follows will focus on the question of justice in Vadde’s fourth chapter, “Archival Legends: National Myth and Transnational Memory in the Works of Michael Ondaatje,” then refract some of the chapter’s conceptual schema through the work of a surrealist writer particularly interested in the figuration of chimera, Leonora Carrington.

In “Archival Legends” Vadde situates the archive across two domains: as a site for the material collection of documents and as a site for human remains. In an extended consideration of *Anil’s Ghost*, Vadde reads across these two understandings of the archive, seeing in Ondaatje’s work an oscillation between the historical perspectives each might offer. Vadde arrives at this argument in part through a brilliant reading of the following passage, in which human rights worker and anthropologist Anil considers the bones of “Sailor,” a victim of the Sri Lankan civil war.

She loosened the swaddling plastic that covered Sailor. In her work Anil turned bodies into representatives of race and age and place, though for her the tenderest of all discoveries was the finding, some years earlier, of the tracks at Laetoli—almost-four-million-year-old footsteps of a pig, a hyena, a rhinoceros and a bird, this strange ensemble identified by a twentieth-century tracker. Four unrelated creatures that had walked hurriedly over a wet layer of volcanic ash. To get away from what? Historically more significant were other tracks in the vicinity, of a hominid assumed to be approximately five feet tall (one could tell by the pivoting heel impressions). But it was that quartet of animals walking from Laetoli four million years ago that she liked to think about.

The most precisely recorded moments of history lay adjacent to the extreme actions of nature or civilization. She knew that. Pompeii. Laetoli. Hiroshima. Vesuvius (whose fumes had asphyxiated poor Pliny while he recorded its “tumultuous behavior”). Tectonic slips and brutal human violence provided random time-capsules of unhistorical lives.¹²

9 David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 164.

10 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 3.

11 *Ibid.*, 22.

12 Michael Ondaatje, *Anil’s Ghost* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 55.

For Vadde, this more mythic account of history is held in tension with the forensic methods most commonly attributed to Anil's UN mission. In her reading of this passage, Vadde argues: "Anil is sentimentally attuned to what historical standards of significance leave out and to what they cannot answer—namely, how irregular collectives form in the midst of crisis and how the motivating circumstances of such relation ("To get away from what?") place the blind spots of forensic deduction into relief."¹³

As Vadde notes, *Anil's Ghost* is not just critical of forensic deduction per se, but also the human rights regimes to which they offer evidence, for their universalist norms and lack of real world efficacy. Anil spends most of the novel working to identify the bones of Sailor as concrete evidence of a human rights violation. Anil succeeds in the identification, but a panel of Sri Lankan officials do not ratify this evidence or act on Anil's findings. Ondaatje does not narrate forensic evidence, or the NGOs that might act on it, as having any real purchase on the longstanding violence of the Sri Lankan conflict, particularly given the brutalities committed by both factions throughout the duration of the civil war. For this reason, in Vadde's reading, *Anil's Ghost* ultimately oscillates between the mythic, deep historical perspective of the animal prints and a much more realist, culturally particular account of historical violence represented through the literal bones of Sailor, later identified as Ruwan Kumara. Oscillation exists because neither side proffers a solution to the question of international justice in the Sri Lankan context.

This seems absolutely right to me. It also seems interesting, in my eyes, however, to note that the condition of possibility for such an oscillation is itself deeply historical. That is to say, Ondaatje's sense that methods of transitional justice, like the UN forensic missions of which Anil is a part, emerge only after the 1950s and 1960s. As I noted earlier, through David Scott, the dominant liberal understandings of transitional justice entail the imagination of a break, between a violent, illiberal past and a liberalizing democratic future. These terms emerge, in part, through the work of Ruti Teitel, who situates legal acts as a site of transformation between a state's former, repressive order and its creation of a new one. In *Omens of Adversity*, Scott uses Teitel as one instance of the particular historical rupture cited previously, in that the teleological arc of progress, in this case, can only imagine a future political horizon as a liberal democracy achieved through legalist ends. In the 1990s, when Teitel was writing, legal political theorists argued primarily about the stages of this telos: whether law preceded political change or political change made the conditions available for new laws. As Scott notes, however, transitional justice "is declarative concerning what transition is a change *from*, what it is a change *to* seems less clear."¹⁴

In *Anil's Ghost*, the sense that there is no good position in which to stand, no innocent side in the Sri Lankan conflict, and thus no good recourse for intervention, comes in part, I believe, from this particularly historical juncture, when the best future political horizon that transitional justice might transition *to* is a neoliberal democratic order. This broaches a number of questions: Is Ondaatje's turn to the mythic and

13 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 167–68.

14 Scott, *Omens*, 137. See also Rudi G. Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

trans-historical nature of legend itself a response to a certain historical impasse? Does this turn to a mythic past, deep history, or what Bruce Robbins has called a “planetary metanarrative,” articulate a historical formation specific to the post-1970s world order?

I ask these questions in part to extend Vadde’s double theorization of the chimera. In the first case, the chimera of literary form refers to a textual combination that challenges our traditional notions of legibility and comprehensibility in language; in the second case, the chimera is a type of fantasy that in which “the line between the possible and impossible is in dispute and capable of being redrawn.” In Vadde’s readings, this second type of chimera allows for a more utopian consideration of international justice, extending our sense of the possible beyond its present-day epistemological limits.

As a partial response, I want to consider a work written by a modernist just as this sense of possible futures was shifting. The text is Leonora Carrington’s novella, *The Stone Door*.¹⁵ I choose Carrington in part because she is particularly known for her chimeric paintings, of bird-women and horse-headed men, which are traditionally seen as part of the wider surrealist avant-garde. In the heydays of surrealism, between the world wars, such recombinations signaled mystical dream-world or uninhibited sexual freedom. Carrington was very much a part of these currents. Born in England, she moved to France in the 1930s, alongside the German surrealist artist Max Ernst, who became her lover. In 1939, Ernest was arrested and sent to a prisoner of war camp. Carrington fled France for Spain, went mad, was hospitalized, received shock treatment, and immigrated to Mexico City, where she would live for the next twenty-five years.¹⁶

Written in the mid-1940s, in Mexico City, *The Stone Door* reanimates the collage techniques of surrealist fantasy as a story of forced exile. The novella unfolds as a series of embedded narratives, as a story within a story within a dream where a character recounts another story, which leads to another dream, and so on. Following a wandering Jew, dreamed up, in part, through a succession of other figures, Carrington records an exodus across eastern Europe as a *mélange* of nonpersons and things:

A constant stream of beings passed by all bent on the same destination. Their appearance was confused and some were transparent. There were animals, vegetables, men and women. Some of them had an individual outline but others were joined like Siamese twins in two’s or three’s or in greater numbers, forming geometrical shapes and objects such as five-, six-, eight-, nine-, or twelve-sided polygons, triangles, squares, circles, or kitchen utensils and articles of furniture. I saw a five-legged table composed of two fox-terriers, a field of daffodils and three middle-aged women in an embrace. Flapping over them was the carcass of a sea lion.¹⁷

15 *The Stone Door* was written in the 1940s, published in French translation in 1976 as *La Porte de pierre*, then in English in 1977. See Anna Watz, “‘A Language Buried at the Back of Time’: *The Stone Door* and Poststructuralist Feminism,” in *Leonora Carrington and the International Avant-Garde*, eds. Jonathan P. Eburne and Catriona McAra (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2017): 90–104.

16 See Joanna Moorhead, *The Surreal Life of Leonora Carrington* (New York: Virago, 2017).

17 Leonora Carrington, *The Stone Door* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977), 24.

Individual outline yields to joined figures, “animals, vegetables, men and woman.” Forms embrace each other, and yet so many of these beings are already dead. Reanimated in what Carrington calls her “love letter to a nightmare,” into hermaphrodites masked with carcasses of dead animals, these figures obscure the boundaries between categories of human and inhuman, person and thing. And yet this blending does not create a freedom, of getting to be this, that, or the other. For Carrington as well, the chimeric figure stretches our imagination of the limits of the possible and impossible demarcations of international justice. In this case, however, the stretching imagines newly horrible possibilities, of what might have been unthought or unthinkable in an earlier period. Carrington’s nightmare chimeras signal a historical moment in which law and justice become severed. This is a state of exile in which no amount of law will remedy past injustice, in part because any idea of what society might transition to is cast into doubt. For this reason, I believe, Carrington’s chimeric forms can’t summon the mystery or freedom of the high modernist period. What is at the limits of our imagination, in this case, are entirely new forms of atrocity.

I think there are still beautiful and utopian elements in Carrington’s novella, which I am not able to treat with any kind of depth in this short response. But the nightmarish quality of Carrington’s chimeras, as persons deformed by their exile, does broach a number of questions pertinent to our present moment as well: How does historical necessity also extend our understanding of the possible in terms of injustice? How might the range of the possible, in terms of international justice, shift and respond to this extension of imaginable atrocity?