

# *The Global Program Era: Contemporary International Fiction in the American Creative Economy*

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*What's next, shall we appoint elephants to teach zoology?*

—Jakobson, on the prospect of hiring a fiction writer to teach literature at Harvard

*"But why do we say nothing?" Ujunwa asked. She raised her voice and looked at the others. "Why do we always say nothing?"*

—Adichie, "Jumping Monkey Hill"

Over the last two decades, a curious literary phenomenon has been taking shape in the American university system. The international writer has found a stable institutional home in the American creative writing program. While the postwar creative writing program consolidated itself as a national endeavor,<sup>1</sup> the master of fine arts (MFA) program in the 2000s has nurtured cultural voices that supplement the standardized American MFA voice with a distinctly global perspective. A new writerly generation has routed itself through the American university, primarily as students but also as visiting writers, lecturers, and professors. Here is a brief catalog of some prominent international novelists who have passed through the winnowing process of the creative writing program in some influential way: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie received an MFA from Johns Hopkins University; Bilal Tanweer received an MFA from Columbia University; Daniyal Mueenuddin received his writing degree from University of Arizona; Mohsin Hamid received an undergraduate degree from Princeton University, but he attended a crucial fiction writing workshop with Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates, in which he drafted his first

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<sup>1</sup> The postwar GI Bill of 1952 influenced the aims of the creative writing program considerably. As both Mark McGurl and Eric Bennett note, early visionaries of the program imagined the workshop as a therapeutic endeavor where returning soldiers would work through their experiences of war abroad in a safe, domestic institutional space.

novel, *Moth Smoke*; Chris Abani received his PhD in creative writing from University of Southern California. Okey Ndibe received an MFA and PhD from University of Massachusetts Amherst, having immigrated to the United States at the behest of Chinua Achebe; Chigozi Obioma received an MFA at the University of Michigan and secured a faculty position in creative writing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Marlon James received an MFA from Wilkes University and currently teaches at Macalester College; Karan Mahajan received an MFA from the University of Texas Austin; Kiran Desai received an MFA from Columbia University.<sup>2</sup>

Yet there has been no sustained consideration or cultural interpretation of the predominance of global South writing in the American MFA program. The rise of the global anglophone novel and its successful displacement of something else called the “postcolonial novel” necessitate an appraisal of this phenomenon. Examining the last two authors in the above list, Mahajan and Desai—the former an emerging author and the latter an established voice—this article argues that the influence of the American MFA program has facilitated the successful renovation of what Graham Huggan calls the “postcolonial exotic” to evolve a new realist style, one that is deeply inflected by both global capitalism and programmatic writing.

The generic development of the global novel may seem like a natural process emerging from the canonization of postcolonial literature epitomized by writers like Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, and Arundhati Roy. To some extent, the institutionalization of postcolonial literature has arisen from what political theorist and economist Giovanni Arrighi (*Resurgence, Adam Smith*) describes as a late twentieth-century shift toward the Asian domination of cultural and economic value. However, postcolonial canonicity has hardly remained a stable phenomenon: it has accelerated the slow rise of the postcolonial writer toward the production of a global South writer who has now become an integral part of a financialized creative class.<sup>3</sup> While the global South novel has been critiqued at the level of market or prestige, little consideration has been given to the influence of the contemporary institutions involved in its continuing production. Conversely, any consideration of institutionalized writing has studiously ignored the prominence of global South novelists within American educational institutions.

At the end of a review of Mark McGurl’s influential study of the creative writing program, *The Program Era* (2009), Fredric Jameson inadvertently addresses the mutually exclusive analysis of postwar American letters, on one hand, and postcolonial literature on the other when he asks provocatively whether McGurl’s study is “limited to the United States” (“Dirty Little Secret” 280). McGurl’s work argues that the postwar American university emerges as a sanctuary for national literary

<sup>2</sup> The list of writers and their respective degrees has been compiled through a combination of book-jacket information and online encyclopedia articles.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term *global South* instead of “Third World,” “developing world,” or “lower middle-income countries” to distinguish between a North American anglophone reading public, on one hand, and a non-Western reading public on the other. More than geographic specificity, the invocation of the South accounts symbolically for histories of colonialism and exploitation that precipitate a brain drain toward a recognizably institutionalized North.

production. As “the most important patron of artistically ambitious literary practice in the United States, the *sine qua non* of countless careers” (McGurl 22), the postwar research university was a fount of both creative endeavor and ideological control in a tense Cold War atmosphere. While McGurl has addressed the global expansion of the creative writing program to countries like Britain and Australia, this article addresses a significant oversight: the place of the global South writer within the United States and the impact of institutionalization on global anglophone literature. Just as the postwar writing program nurtured a hegemonic middle-class voice as the stabilizing force of American letters, I show that the post-9/11 period builds on the historical legacy of the writing program to produce a globalizing middle-class voice as the bedrock of non-Western anglophone writing.<sup>4</sup>

My account displaces the conception of the global South novel as an entirely cosmopolitan product of transnational publishing and marketing. Instead, I turn to the American MFA program as an ideological site of global South literary production. Contemporary international novelists have often treated programmatic instruction as a necessary step toward publication. The international novelist certainly finds his or her “voice” in an American milieu that is hospitable to the advancement of “other” voices. But the professionalization of the international writer has never been an apolitical path to self-realization. Such hospitality is also accompanied by an induction into an American world-system of letters. This account argues that the MFA program is not merely a networking agent but a crucial training ground of American globalism in a post-Cold War literary world.

In the first section, I will show that the development of the international writer transpired from a Cold War consensus shaping the global South as a space of regenerative potential for American geopolitical power. International writers in the American university, sometimes only loosely affiliated with nascent writing programs, were a testament to the reach of American knowledge supremacy as well as a useful vehicle for the cultivation of domestic minority difference. In turn, international writers found an eager American audience for global fiction that, in turn, facilitated the procurement of regular teaching employment, as lecturers and creative-writing instructors, in the university system. The case of Bharati Mukherjee provides a compelling example of the American literary establishment’s coming to terms with the production of an ostensibly foreign novelist. While McGurl describes Mukherjee’s time at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, and her subsequent literary career, as a development in ethnic American writing, I depart from the categorization to query her case as an early example of what we now understand as global South MFA writing.

After historicizing the international writer in the postwar American university, I uncover a decisive shift in style from a previous generation of postcolonial writing toward what one might call “vernacular anglophone realism.” The term *vernacular realism* was first used by Subramaniam Shankar to denote “a realism *aspiring to*

<sup>4</sup> As James F. English and I ascertained in a conversation, most of the authors listed here have one or two books with what is considered respectable publishing print runs for literary fiction. However, much of their success emerges from prestige economies tied to university systems that help the creative class stay afloat.

reproduce the local in all its specificity and drawing substantially, though not exclusively, from vernacular literary and theatrical traditions" (11). While Shankar points to Tamil literature as a rejoinder to the postcolonial Anglophone tradition, my turn to a "vernacular anglophone" theorizes new ways in which global South authors subsume the vernacular as an atmospheric effect for English writing. Shankar argues for a return to regional language literature to account for its neglect and rehabilitate the full spectrum of postcolonial non-Anglophone representation. In contrast, I am interested in the presence of the vernacular within anglophone realist writing as a modifier, rather than a displacement, of existing postcolonial paradigms. Examining the effects of vernacular traditions on global South MFA writing allows us to track the strategic reification of linguistic difference toward ultimately strengthening a global, English language–dominated market position.<sup>5</sup> The development accounts for a break from the broad consumer category of ethnic fiction as well as from Huggan's "postcolonial exotic." Reading two cases of global South writing, Karan Mahajan's *The Association of Small Bombs* (2016) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), I show that vernacular anglophone realism deflects the exoticism of the postcolonial touristic gaze and instead turns to the conceit of a globalized middle class. For the sake of clarity, I limit the examples of international MFA writing here to the South Asian novel in English, particularly because an earlier generation of nonsystematized novelists has been invoked by scholars time and again to understand the rise of English as a "global vernacular" (Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers* 59).<sup>6</sup> The contemporary nature of the texts examined here is also an invitation to interrogate the ongoing evolution of global South literature.

The concluding section considers the structural production and implications of vernacular realist style in global anglophone fiction as a literary genre. I claim that the global novel replaces the compromised but revolutionary concerns of postcolonial writing with market-driven, consumable fiction. Despite global South authors' vocal criticism of the market and their self-conscious refusal to pander to the rhetoric of cultural difference, they find themselves entrenched in the systematic production of literary professionalism in a global program era.

### The American University, Creative Writing, and the Cold War

McGurl's magisterial study makes a strong case for the primacy of the creative writing program in shaping postwar American letters and in giving writers credibility as serious artists. The tenets of the MFA program—imperatives like "Write

<sup>5</sup> In other words, I am not suggesting that global South MFA writing is turning to a new "vernacular realism." The stylistic turn that I am tracking instrumentalizes the vernacular in the service of the anglophone.

<sup>6</sup> At the same time, one could apply the conceptual apparatus of vernacular anglophone realism to Caribbean and West African writers, like Marlon James and Chigozie Obioma, winner and finalist, respectively, of the 2015 Man Booker Prize. Both writers exhibit a strong tendency to voice the local for the consumption of both American and non-Western readers. They present members of a marginalized underclass as subjects of literary fiction, relying heavily on the diction and rhythm of Jamaica and Nigeria to depict their characters' inner lives.

what you know” and “Show, don’t tell”—shepherded the almost exclusively white postwar writer into a more homogeneous, professionalized formation of American writing. Even as authors like Raymond Carver and John Updike were critical of middle-class conformity, the open spaces of creative freedom morphed into an “office on campus” (McGurl 326). The institutionalized setup inspired a form of bourgeois discussion—“therapeutic educational enterprise” (16)—that encouraged pride in the professionalism of writing and nurtured fiction as a vehicle for upward mobility. In fact, McGurl attributes much of the writing program’s success to its ability to provide what literary studies could not: it offered a form of touristic self-expression without becoming a form of work. Yet it also provided the safety net of an educational enterprise before an induction into the world of work. The “sociality” of the writing program nurtured an environment that created “a small-scale ‘pathological public sphere,’” with an emphasis on “(typically) autobiographical fiction” (96–97). Despite the writing program’s *laissez-faire* pedagogy (in comparison with traditional English departments), the postwar structure of group workshops and writing exercises streamlined a distinctly bourgeois, professionalized consciousness.

While the writing program emerges in the 1950s and 1960s, McGurl goes on to describe the rise of the American writer of color and “‘high cultural pluralism’” (32) in the 1970s, showing how the dialectic of national and ethnic citizenship converges to produce the ethnic writer.<sup>7</sup> Devoting chapters to authors such as Mukherjee, Morrison, and Sandra Cisneros, he shows us that the imperative to “find your voice” was directed at the American writer of color. Institutional tutelage allowed for an expansion of a liberal-democratic but nationalist consciousness. The structuring agent of the voice allowed the program to instruct young ethnic writers to express their group identity in strongly individualist, middle-class terms of literary performance. The imperative of voice, McGurl notes, became particularly “corporeal,” manifesting the ethnic writer as “a racialized and gendered body with ‘blood-lines’ or ‘roots’ in an organic community or culture with its own repository of storytelling tradition” (236). If minimalism allowed white writers to think of their writing as craft, maximalism urged ethnic writers to think about their writing as ventriloquism.

While the emphasis on voice was precipitated by gains in domestic civil rights legislation, McGurl does not delve into the internationalization of the research university, particularly in foreign language and English departments. Scholarship on Latin American mid-century writing provides a much clearer portrait of the international artist in the American university. Deborah N. Cohn shows that Latin American writers and US universities entered mutually beneficial arrangements that allowed writers to gain guaranteed jobs and universities to offer sustained courses on new regions. Latin American authors gained prominence with the advent of the “boom” period, with writers like Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Ortega, Octavio Paz, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Carlos Fuentes taking up visiting lecturer positions or fellowships in language and literature departments at both state and

<sup>7</sup> McGurl defines high cultural pluralism as “a body of fiction that joins the high literary values of modernism with a fascination with the experience of cultural difference and the authenticity of the ethnic voice” (32).

private universities (Cohn 98–99). Simultaneously, the Soviet European gentleman Vladimir Nabokov procured a brief teaching position in the Cornell English department that was over by 1960. In fact, Nabokov went on to consider himself a quintessentially American writer after his emigration.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Achebe procured a teaching position at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 1972 as a rising figure of African literature.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the ideologically repurposed international writer was a favorite ploy of governmental initiatives such as the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom, the State Department's Foreign Leaders program, and the Fulbright initiative as well as of private entities like the Rockefeller Foundation.<sup>10</sup>

Thus while the writing program encouraged a form of ethnic ventriloquism post-1970, the Cold War American university writ large was honing a form of global ventriloquism. These moments of professional harmony between American universities and international writing communities were also punctuated by ideological discomfort. Latin American writers, particularly Fuentes and Julio Cortázar, periodically registered their discontent with racist policies like the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. On more than one occasion, they refused to accept visiting assistant professorships at New York University and Columbia University as political statements against American imperialism in North Vietnam as well as in Central and South America. Cortázar notes succinctly that his presence in the United States would take on "a symbolic value in Latin America, a negative one . . . [I]t would represent a new triumph for the reactionary and imperialist forces in their 'brain drain' technique" (qtd. in Cohn 101). Latin American writers of the boom period balanced their literary capital as established voices from non-American regions with their political convictions, resisting a total absorption into an American cultural economy. Though none of these writers were products of the creative writing program, their cases help establish that the Cold War American university setting was not merely a conduit to professionalism but also a contentious political arena.

*The Program Era* certainly hints at the dilemma of the global South writer in the evolution of the creative writing program. McGurl confines himself to the project of American multiculturalism in the writing program, concentrating on writers absorbed into the structure of American citizenship. But in the concluding chapters of his study, McGurl turns to the case of South Asian writer Mukherjee, who entered the Iowa Writers Workshop in 1977. While noting her difficulties in establishing herself as an authoritative voice in an American literary landscape, McGurl observes that her case allows us

<sup>8</sup> For a full account of Nabokov's famously reluctant teaching employment, see McGurl's introduction to *The Program Era* and Brian Boyd's *Nabokov, Perversely*.

<sup>9</sup> However, Achebe was hardly a pliant professor. He was a trenchant critic of the West's conception of Africa. In February 1975, he delivered a scathing Chancellor's lecture titled "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." See "Chinua Achebe."

<sup>10</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, Christina Klein, Cohn, and Andrew Rubin all testify to the cultural reach of the State Department through a variety of literary archives.

to take the measure of the “house style” of the creative writing program as it begins to interact with the pluralist values of cultural diversity. In this context, Mukherjee’s “middling” position is useful as a literary historical marker, telling us something about “white” minimalism and “ethnic” maximalism alike. To the extent that any writer can be thought of as a product of his or her schooling, Mukherjee was a product of Iowa, living in the environs of the Workshop from a tender age and staying well beyond the two years needed to acquire an M.F.A. And yet, as a dark-skinned woman who had come of age in a culture utterly unfamiliar to Iowans, she was inevitably understood in classically Orientalist terms as an exotic presence there. (375)

In other words, Mukherjee’s experience at Iowa is invaluable because it spotlights her deviation from a homogenized ethnic American writer. The universalizing vision of creative writing stalwarts like Paul Engle and Wallace Stegner is interrupted by Mukherjee’s enrollment as a postcolonial student, serving as an uncomfortable reminder of the program era’s inherent nationalism. In McGurl’s estimation, Mukherjee’s dilemma was that she was too anxious to “arrive” as an American writer (375). Nonetheless, even as Mukherjee’s work is an important precursor to the ascension of transnational and postcolonial writing in the MFA system, McGurl analyzes her in the professional framework of an *American* writer of color. The absence of a sustained consideration of global South writing in McGurl’s work suggests the difficulty of Mukherjee’s “middling” position. She cannot be read as a postcolonial writer because the institutional stamp of the MFA demands the legibility of her work as diasporic writer. Her training in the MFA environment offers not only a necessary literary passport for an international writer but also an imperative to participate in a *national* culture.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, Mukherjee’s enrollment was followed by a steady stream of global South novelists in American writing programs. In the 1980s and 1990s, a small crop of South Asian writers—Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Amitava Kumar, Kamila Shamsie, and Vikram Chandra—found their individual voices after stints in North American writing programs or English departments. While McGurl signals the onset of a “world pluribus of letters” (329), noting that the writing program is “troublingly American” (368), he remains silent, in his role as impartial literary historian, on the ideological effects of the program era. Instead, his meditation on the global expansion of the writing program model attends to the institutional replication of the writing program in other parts of the world, like Britain and Australia.

My contention is that this assemblage—the ethnic ventriloquism of post-1970s writing programs, the larger role of the international writer in generating Cold War consensus, and the gradual incubation of the global novelist—has contributed to the professional and stylistic development of contemporary global South MFA writing. It is not so much that contemporary international authors are producing

<sup>11</sup> Eric Bennett puts it bluntly in *Workshops of Empire* (2015) that “Cold War-era writers who laid the ground for a future nation of Master of Fine Arts programs pursued their ambitions with a deep knowledge of the Western canon and a hungry consciousness of world events. They faced down the philosophical dilemmas of the geopolitical mess. They lived fully and passionately in their times, read the news with anxious vigilance, traveled widely, cared deeply about the Pax Americana, and built up their writing programs informed by that concern” (6).

work for an American audience by violating tenets of cultural authenticity but that they are, in fact, *not* problematizing the model of cultural authenticity encouraged by institutional tutelage. The bourgeois maximalist voice that nurtured ethnic writing now encourages the global writer to ventriloquize not just an ethnic demographic but entire non-American regions. Instead of pushing back against the soft-power expectations of the MFA program, activated by “ethnic maximalism” or by the inevitably raced imperative of “find your voice,” global writers have developed a bourgeois metropolitan subject by aligning with the logic of minimalism as realist craft. In other words, global writers have borrowed from ethnic maximalism as content only to arrive at a metropolitanism similar to McGurl’s schematic minimalist writer.

One must also pay attention to the timing of McGurl’s study, on the heels of the 2007 recession; humanities departments, including writing programs, were certainly affected by the crisis. McGurl does not contend with the rise of the global novel as a major literary genre; by 2009, several works, like Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), had broken major ground as exciting new international voices. McGurl (and others after him) have not considered the extent to which the global South writer has passed through the MFA program.<sup>12</sup> While writers and scholars have begun to question the program era’s commitment to ethnicity, the global writer has been an object of inquiry only as a product of transnational market forces and not of American institutionalization. Such neglect of the global South writer is perhaps compounded by critiques of the writing program’s real diversity problems, critiques that, so far, have only been undertaken in terms of race and gender and not in terms of nationality.<sup>13</sup> There is little or no investment in questioning the production of the global novel as bourgeois sociolect.

I suggest that the MFA program has been influential in shaping the global novel through the very mechanisms that solidified its centrality to American letters. The global novel privileges a realist bourgeois narrative mode that compounds U.S. “high cultural pluralism.” In the following section, I contend that the political difference of postcoloniality is cannily instrumentalized into a generic category. The parameters of postcolonial difference shift from the collective experience of peripheralism to a bourgeois metropolitanism. While this might seem like the preamble to a send-up of the writing program, I would instead like to consider the curious tensions that the non-American anglophone writer must confront and how he or she negotiates the question of cultural difference in the American creative economy.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the most recent evaluation of McGurl’s study, Loren Glass’s edited collection *After the Program Era* (2017), does not include any consideration of the global South novelist. One contributor, Donal Harris, evaluates the impact of Jed Esty and Colleen Lye’s influential thesis on “peripheral realism” but only as a foil to the rise of American realism in mainstream authors like Jonathan Franzen and Chad Harris. D. Harris observes that realism has a significant hold over not just postcolonial literary writing but, equally, postwar American writing (222).

<sup>13</sup> American writers of color like Junot Díaz have argued that creative writing programs churn out inequities of gender, race, and class. Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young contend that creative writing programs reproduce the structural inequity of the “mainly white room,” where audiences for readings of poets and writers, regardless of the artists’ ethnicity, have been stubbornly homogeneous.



### Vernacular Anglophone Realism

Recent theorizations of the MFA program have emphasized the creative writing industry's predilection for networks and its reliance on professional-managerial discourse. Rick Moody suggests that the workshop model offers a depersonalized, managerial style of writing that has borrowed heavily from "organizational or corporate theories of the 1950s." Lorin Stein notes the successful financialization of writing in a special issue of the *Paris Review* called "The Unprofessionals." He laments the death of writerly work, pointing to "less close reading, less real criticism, lower standards, and less regard for artistic, as opposed to commercial, success" (x). The result is that writers are often "encouraged to think of themselves as *professionals*: to write long and network hard" (x). Others, like Richard Jean So and Andrew Piper, suggest that we have been too preoccupied with the impact of MFA programs and trace a statistical pattern that disproves the correlation between successful writing and the MFA program (see So and Piper). In their computational analysis of *New York Times* bestsellers, they find no discernable difference between the MFA novel and the non-MFA novel. They conclude that the MFA program merely provides a network of editors and publicists and has no influence on the actual writing.

While this might be true of American writing, I would argue that a consideration of international fiction produces different results. American creative writing programs produce international writers who are often compelled to identify themselves as allies to the concept of "world literature."<sup>14</sup> This is hardly surprising, as disciplinary turns within literary criticism have made it abundantly clear that global proficiency fuels the engine of knowledge and capital production. Twenty-two years ago, Arif Dirlik gestured toward a nascent field called postcolonial studies and argued in no uncertain terms that even as postcolonial intellectuals challenged Eurocentric assumptions about the world, both continuing Said's legacy of orientalism and newly freed from the spatial fixity of Third Worldism, the production of the subject position of postcolonial intellectual was really a product of global capitalism. In other words, Dirlik suggested that the radicalism of postcolonial intellectuals was the product of an academic market that pined for an alternative. Similarly, Aijaz Ahmad and Simon Gikandi, respectively, have called attention to the close relationship between postcolonialism and capitalism. Citing American militarism in the Middle East in the nineties and thereafter, Neil Lazarus critiques postcolonial studies as being "premised on a distinctive and conjuncturally determined set of assumptions, concepts, theories, and methods that have not only *not* been adequate to their putative object . . . but have served fairly systematically to mystify it" (Lazarus 17).

Adding to these report cards of disappointment, Sarah Brouillette (*Postcolonial Writers*) and Huggan, respectively, note that postcolonial intellectuals as well as writers have been happy to don a compromised political role in the West that opts

<sup>14</sup> The editors at *n+1* theorized in a heated polemic in their fall 2013 issue that the category of world fiction is perhaps merely global fiction, whereas a truly world literature has yet to be written ("World Lite"). They ascribe equal parts praise and blame to the American university, which has emerged as a major player in the production of the contemporary novelist.

for either strategic or commoditized interpretations of the legacy of anti-imperialism. James F. English examines symbols and cultural artifacts to delineate the importance of the “subnational” to suggest that economies of prestige, developed through international prizes like the Man Booker and the Pulitzer, smooth over the consumerist-global through the promise of the local.<sup>15</sup> For all these critics, minority culture offers a renaissance of market and symbolic potential on multiple, complementary fronts: the rise of postcolonial studies within the academy, the transnational media corporation takeover of the publishing industry, and the prestige of prize-culture industries.

While Huggan suggests that postcolonial fiction turns on the translation of local regions into metropolitan speak, MFA writing in the 2000s has increasingly encouraged the reverse. Instead of relying entirely on what Huggan calls “the exoticist/tourist gaze” (313), an increasing number of international MFA novelists have developed an inward voice that strategically deploys the vernacular within anglophone realism. The strategy gestures toward the tonal presence of a mother tongue that simultaneously reckons with the imposition of a second, often colonial, language. The instructional emphasis on voice among nonwhite writers has exhorted global South writers to develop a sense of natality *without* losing their linguistic security as well as market power in the English language. The turn to the vernacular also indexes McGurl’s assessment of ethnic MFA writing as often requiring “the deployment of a hybrid of dialect and Standard English, the ‘organic’ voice and the ‘machine-made’ voice” (259). Additionally, it is not inconceivable that the structure of the workshop model encourages the aestheticization of the vernacular, where not only the voices but also the myriad languages of the non-West are held up for scrutiny in the programmatic milieu of the classroom.<sup>16</sup>

While it is impossible to ascertain just how much the workshop model influences the global writer, it is important to note that the model does provide valuable feedback about the reception of their works as authentic representations of non-Western worlds. In other words, the writing program offers a steady microcosm of reception in a way that is not immediately possible in the context of the publishing industry’s reliance on large data sets offered by Nielsen BookScan. The workshop

<sup>15</sup> Much of the rise of the global program era has been encouraged by the allure of prize culture. As English notes in *The Economy of Prestige*, the prize-culture industry has created the means to circumvent national institutions and feed the local into the global. English emphasizes that “[t]here is no evading the social and political freight of a global award at a time when global markets determine more and more the fate of local symbolic economies” (298). It is no coincidence that the existing popularity of the creative writing program within the American nation is turning outward at the same time as international prize culture has become a thriving part of multiple creative economies. The “globalization of cultural prestige” (309) begins with the MFA program’s influence in the transformation of the international writer-aspirant into a marketable global writer.

<sup>16</sup> The traditional workshop model is based on the author’s complete silence as the various members of the workshop critique his or her work. This model is supposed to help the author understand a work’s reception on its own merit, without any outside intervention. However, Moody finds that the intent behind this exercise is “about sales and marketing. It is about pitching your story or poem or essay to the audience in such a way that the response will be predictable, measurable, and easily understood.”

model's emphasis on voice, coupled with a deep immersion in the discourse of a bourgeois American sociolect, are strong indicators of how global South writing has been influenced by American institutionalization. While the postwar American university was invested in shielding writers from the travails of the market, the contemporary program has clarified the stakes of entering the marketplace. The MFA program provides the tools by which writers have become more aware of creative work as professional products; for international writers, this has often meant emphasizing their difference through a legible literary realism that evokes the vernacular. While global South writers have been using non-English words in the anglophone novel since at least the mid-twentieth century,<sup>17</sup> the difference with new MFA writing is that the vernacular emerges as a stylistic device that surpasses the idiomatic representation of a non-Western language.

The invocation of the realist tradition is just as important as the vernacular, especially because it breaks decisively from McGurl's metropolitan modernism. In the case of South Asian MFA writing, the saturation of magical realism has precipitated a return to the Hindi-Urdu dominance of social realist writers like Munshi Premchand, Ismat Chughtai, or Saadat Hasan Manto and even to nineteenth-century Russian writers like Anton Chekhov. Vernacular anglophone realism relies on the refusal to translate cultural difference to Western metropolitan audiences, instead evoking the tenor of vernacular language as well as untranslated localism in English to assert its difference from the postcolonial exotic. If postcolonial exoticism revels in the presentation of beautiful saris and wonderfully ripe mangoes, then vernacular anglophone realism is interested in the daily, geopolitical lives of its fictive denizens, thereby reconfiguring a maximalist vision of the global South toward clinical, realist representation.

International MFA writing minimizes the market-driven strategy of explaining the non-West to a Western metropolitan audience, refraining from translating the idiomatic usage of non-English words—say Hindi, Urdu, or Bengali—into the globalspeak of English writing. Instead, it uses the vernacular as a tonal presentation of everyday speech, often without comment or explanation of non-English idiom. The usage of non-English or hybridized vocabulary is hardly a new phenomenon, inaugurated by Rushdie's "chutnified" Indian English in *Midnight's Children* (1980). But vernacular anglophone realism reduces the distance between the so-called local, non-Western, nonbourgeois subjects and the discourse framing them. If Rushdie introduced non-English speech as a postmodern playfulness that chafed against the "Orientalism-Anglicism" (Mufti 149) of canonical English writing, South Asian MFA production uses the vernacular for realist or mimetic purposes.<sup>18</sup> Eschewing modernist innovation, vernacular anglophone realism relies on

<sup>17</sup> Canonical examples include Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), R. K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* (1935), G. V. Desani's *All About H. Hatterr* (1948), and Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961).

<sup>18</sup> Rushdie notoriously dismissed regional language literatures as being unimportant and tired representations of South Asian life (qtd. in Shankar 1–2). Subramaniam Shankar calls upon this moment of dismissal as evidence for a more direct, nonanglophone exploration of "vernacular postcolonialism" (20).

the presence of non-English vocabulary within English writing as a supplementary form rather than an interruption. When global South writers slip into an inside voice, or when characters exclaim in peripheral languages, they often render a totalized world that symptomatically evades reflecting on the hegemony of global English.

However, the importance of a globalized middle class, firmly entrenched in the market values and class structures of Western capitalism, is beyond dispute. Transnational publishing industries are invested in the market potential of South Asia, particularly India. Nielsen BookScan launched its database collection services for the Indian publishing industry in 2010. In the “India Book Report” of 2015, the company assessed that 55 percent of all published books in India are in English (Roy). In the same vein, Akshay Pathak notes that the Indian book market caters to “550 million people below the age of 30.” He is also quick to note the impact of “a significant and consumerist middle class” that could see “book sales . . . surpass all expectations.” The surge in interest is also evidenced by real estate industry-sponsored events, like the Jaipur Literature Festival, that capitalize on the financial potential of literary culture.<sup>19</sup> Brouillette notes that the Western publishing industry has found a profitable product in the translation of vernacular literature into English, in which “[a] celebrated and romanticised localism is just as marketable as an ostensibly delocalised cosmopolitan English-language writing” (“South Asian Literature” 37). The observation is equally applicable to the self-vernacularization of a new crop of South Asian writing in English that relies on realist “localism.”

These observations are made not to rehash the old modernism-realism debate that periodically rears its head in moments of crises around the anglophone novel. Rather—as Jed Esty and Colleen Lye note in their special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly*, titled “Peripheral Realisms Now”—the turn to realism recenters, and perhaps conjures, the continuing legacy of social realism in the contemporary South Asian novel. But while postcolonial writing worried about the distance between a framing voice and the inevitably nonbourgeois subjects populating a postcolonial narrative world, vernacular anglophone realism, influenced by American institutionalization, elides that representation gap by offering a smooth transition to a nonreflexive bourgeois voice.<sup>20</sup> It is this nonreflexivity—the idea that ethnicity can be unproblematically ventriloquized—that joins together a disparate group of South Asian writers from different geographies. While the MFA program’s workshop model is disparate and differently employed by program instructors, a commonality

<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the uneasy nexus between literature and development has given rise to the Britain-centric phenomenon of what Brouillette terms the “writer-consultant,” in which literary authors are marshaled into service by realty companies to record neighborhood and community histories just as the companies prepare to gentrify their properties. Analyzing the contemporary British novel, Brouillette shows how corporate rhetoric has learned to make a virtue of ethnic writing (*Literature and the Creative Economy*).

<sup>20</sup> Ulka Anjaria demonstrates with great acuity that the twentieth-century Indian novel developed a nuanced understanding of “realism in the colony,” one that balances the desire for mimetic representation with an exploration of the limits of realist representation (*Realism*). While realism has been criticized by postcolonial scholars as being complicit with the nation-state, Anjaria shows that Indian novelists developed modes of realism that were more ambivalent and often disruptive about realism’s capacity to capture reality.

is the creation of an implicit aesthetic bias that demands a regime of authenticity. Peter Kalliney has argued that West Indian writers from the 1950s used the BBC's susceptibility to local color to create a robust critique of metropolitanism from within. In the post-9/11 period, the MFA program's desire for authenticity has led to the reverse: canonized international voices are beholden to the dominance of an Americanized bourgeois sociolect.

To demonstrate the intricacies of a vernacular anglophone realist style, let us consider as one sustained example the work of Karan Mahajan, a young novelist steadily gaining acclaim. Mahajan received his MFA from the University of Texas at Austin. He is a diasporic writer of American nationality but, having grown up in New Delhi, he self-identifies as an Indian writer. He inhabits both worlds—that of India and Asian America—with equal ease. His work remains concerned with the minutia of daily life in India; this is true of his first novel, *Family Planning* (2008), as well as his second, *The Association of Small Bombs* (2016), which was shortlisted for the National Book Award in the United States. *Association* tells the story of a 1996 bomb blast in Delhi's Lajpat Nagar bazaar and its rhizomic ramifications—from a young Muslim survivor to a bereft Hindu family to the terrorists themselves. While the novel opens with various iterations of the expected exoticism of an Orientalized bazaar, with descriptions that evoke an everyday sublime—like the “beautiful” dispersal of sand from a construction truck—it also attempts to be more than another iteration of touristic literature. The novel refrains from explaining the intricacies of local language and products by relying on description that manifests the voice of an insider:

*The Khuranas were cut-and-dried secularists and liberals. They took the left-wing position on everything. They read the Hindu, the Asian Age, and the Hindustan Times; subscribed to Outlook rather than the saffronized India Today; were among the special coterie of urbanites who counted the crusading P. Sainath as their favorite journalist; were partisans of DD-2's The News Tonight under NDTV, which they felt had been better in its hour-long avatar as The World This Week; were opposed to globalization and the monstrous coming of McDonald's and KFC. . . . [;]were against the BJP, which had sprung to power for thirteen days right before the boys had died, the government lasting only long enough to encompass the blast. And of course, they had a few token Muslim friends, like the Ahmads, of whom they were inordinately proud—whom they had cultivated partly (though not entirely) to give ballast to their secular credentials. (Association 72–73)*

The paragraph brims with post-1990s liberalization references through newspapers, magazines, television shows, and political shockwaves and charts a movement, through the Khuranas' liberal tendencies, toward the corporatization of a once welfare-oriented sociopolitical landscape. As with *Family Planning's* satirical portrayal of the politically elite Ahujas, *Association* critiques the small hypocrisies of the Indian middle class through the Punjabi Hindu family of the Khuranas (as well as the Muslim family of the Ahmads) by deploying forms of parody and satire that are firmly entrenched in realist description. The narrative conjures specific references, like *The Asian Age* and the famed journalist P. Sainath, without worrying

that it could alienate an often Western audience.<sup>21</sup> Mahajan acknowledges the shift as a strategically disorienting choice: “[N]uances [of tone and reference] obviously aren’t available to a US reader,” he claims, “[b]ut I like the idea of an American reader coming upon it almost as a work in translation. Part of the appeal of such books (such as Bolaño’s novels) is that they seem *addressed* to another audience. I don’t try to explain proper nouns” (“Karan Mahajan”).

Instead of relying on explanation, Mahajan breaks away from cosmopolitan English; he describes the novel as having “[t]he slightly curdled, direct, almost-cynical tone” of Delhi Hindi (“Interview,” *Electric Literature*). Toward the last third of the novel, the omniscient narrator calls attention to the shift away from cosmopolitan Indian writing in English by self-consciously referencing Hindi literature in free indirect discourse: “[Ayub] was reminded, watching the farmers in the field, of the opening of his favorite novel, *Raag Darbari*, the first novel he’d read about *his* type of town, in which a man dressed in khadi hitches a ride on a truck on the way back to town and is mistaken for a CBI agent” (*Association* 195). This spectator, a young student disillusioned with elite Delhi politics and university life, conjures Shrilal Shukla’s *Raag Darbari* (1968), a novel that documents the growing dissolution of Nehruvian values in post-Independence India through the eyes of a university student. Shukla’s novel subsequently won the Sahitya Akademi Award, the highest national honor in Indian arts and letters. Mahajan returns to the theme of the disillusioned student, setting up a parallel between *Raag Darbari* and his novel. The parallelism exhibits a strong interest in the noncosmopolitan hinterland of Indian sociopolitical life. By citing Shukla’s novel, Mahajan channels the energies of vernacular literature and offers up a portrait of forgotten towns and localities. Furthermore, the premise of the 1996 blast offers a return to microevents and micronarratives that do not get the same attention as global events. This is evidenced most centrally through comparisons of scale between 9/11 and smaller terrorist attacks, a running preoccupation for many of the characters’ inner lives. The comparison allows the novel to move its hyper-local settings—the crowded, bustling bazaars of Delhi that another central character Vikram records for his documentary—into the domain of the global.

South Asian writers like Mahajan as well as Kiran Desai, Daniyal Mueenuddin, and Bilal Tanweer rely on forms of realist writing that re-create a sense of the local-as-vernacular rooted in regionalism that may be known only peripherally to a Western metropolitan market. These novelists return to the scene of the local not merely as a touristic device—a charge leveled against Indian writing in English by many Indian regional writers like Nirmal Verma—but as a way of writing from within the nation.<sup>22</sup> While rarely allegorical in the Jamesonian register condemned

<sup>21</sup> The novel, published by Viking, is blurbed breathlessly on Amazon and other venues by a host of North American publishers and media houses, from *Publishers Weekly* to the *New Yorker*. Interestingly, Mahajan, unlike many other diasporic writers, considers himself an Indian writer and insists on the appellation as a useful category given his professional interests.

<sup>22</sup> Brouillette’s “South Asian Literature and Global Publishing” accounts for Indian regional writers’ disdain for the anglophone novel as an inauthentic form that panders to a Western touristic gaze.

by Ahmad and others, South Asian novelists restage their distance from the geopolitical framework of the nation by turning to local histories represented through realism: Kalimpong and North East insurgency in India, with Desai; Pakistan's landed elite and their continued oppression of marginalized communities, with Mueenuddin; Kerala's elephant poaching industry with Indian American writer Tania James; or terrorism at large in the Indian subcontinent with Tanweer and Mahajan.<sup>23</sup> In these examples, the MFA program's framing of bourgeois life coupled with the primacy of the voice for the nonwhite and non-American writer manifests itself through a turn to the vernacular. It offers a subtle sorting mechanism that differentiates non-American writing from its American counterpart by accentuating (as well as accenting) its disinterest in cosmopolitan realities.

But why would this be a problematic development? In fact, could it not present a distinctly evolutionary moment where global South writing breaks free of the suffocating grip of metropolitan modernism? Could it not affirm the need for Shankar's "vernacular realism" (11) that breaks free from the hegemony of the postcolonial anglophone? In one way, the move away from the centrality of Western readership is a welcome development, one that, as with Ulka Anjaria ("Realist Impulse") and Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, results in narratives of postcolonial return. However, a close scrutiny of the politics behind vernacular anglophone realism reveals the continued presence of a globalized elite, albeit now of the non-Western kind. In *The Association of Small Bombs*, Mahajan calls attention to the alienation of the middle class from a mass population that is often teeming with portraits of "sloping beggars" (3) or melancholic terrorists. While vernacular anglophone realism certainly breaks free of the compromised formation of postcolonial literature, it also leads to some unintended consequences. In Mahajan's novel, the Indian underclass assumes the status of a reified *mise-en-scène*, performing the work of providing local depth. Consider this early description of a few "urchins" in the vicinity of a Hindu funeral pyre:

*Mr. Khurana noticed that outside the ring of burning flesh and wood, little snotty children ran naked playing with upright rubber tires. Behind them a cow was dreadlocked in ropes and eating ash and the wild village children kicked it in the gut. He shouldn't have, but in the middle of the final prayers Mr. Khurana stepped out and shouted, shooing, the entire funeral party dropping back from the wavy black carpet of fire shadow. The children, not his, just looked at him and with beautiful synchronicity dove headfirst into the water, the rubber tires bobbing behind them, but the cow eyed him with muckraking glee and put its long wet tongue into the earth. (6-7)*

Writers like Mahajan occasionally default to the standard register of postcolonial exoticism. But this must not be mistaken for a return to Huggan's formulation. The target is no longer just the Western bourgeois subject but a significant displacement toward the *non-Western* bourgeois subject. While there is certainly sharp criticism and calls for self-reflection directed at middle-class life, Mahajan's novel is hard-

<sup>23</sup> While Tania James is considered an ethnic American writer, her novel *The Tusk That Did the Damage* could also be considered an example of vernacular anglophone realist style.

pressed to find an exit from structures of elite domination.<sup>24</sup> The contrasting classes—a struggling but rising elite and a discontented underclass—in these local scenes are merely minor actors, acceding to the central tale of a rising middle class. The novel's ultimate trick in the closing pages is to reveal to us that the title is not a reference to the underclass of terrorists organizing various attacks around India but, instead, the literal name of a survivors' group affected by small-scale terrorist acts. The novel's presiding irony is that the "illogic" (223–24) of terrorism pales in comparison to the hold of the middle class and its bureaucratic logic of associations.

The difference between an older brand of postcolonial writer and the current batch of international/diasporic writers is that the latter elide the compromised formation of postcoloniality by turning to what one might call a new sincerity. Anjaria finds this new "realist impulse" to be a radical departure from bourgeois realism. While Anjaria is certainly right that the Indian writer Chetan Bhagat, for example, presents a challenge to the elitism of postcolonial literature, one must also pay attention to the disparate realisms he employs against his American-educated counterparts. The popularity of Bhagat's writing is enabled by his economical prose, in which the use of the vernacular is less literary and more in line with pulp fiction. This is not to deem Bhagat less worthy of attention but to assert that his writing provides the perfect foil to the more self-conscious realist writing of global South writers trained in the American academy. Bhagat's break from global anglophone literature is best elucidated in his defiance of a bourgeois literary audience in favor of a mass-market audience.

With global South MFA writing, political difference is cannily instrumentalized into a generic category, one that allows the global novel to expand from the reflexive aestheticism of earlier postcolonial writing to a professionalized model of vernacularized writing. While Huggan and others have talked about this development without any reference to the MFA program, it must be noted that the influence of programmatic writing facilitates the narrowing of postcolonial difference from the collective experience of peripheralism to a bourgeois-dominated, non-Western metropolitanism. While the postcolonial has been consistently theorized as an often "compromised" attempt at representing so-called subaltern subjectivities, the generic category of the global novel overwrites the struggle with the arbitrated nature of postcolonial representation. Vernacular anglophone realism bypasses the self-reflexivity of postcolonial writing by creating a market-driven mode that routes nonreflexive local representations toward a global audience. In other words, global writers have refashioned the geopolitical anxieties of postcolonial writing in favor of an easily digestible and far less contested concept of the global.

Let us turn to one more example. Kiran Desai received an MFA from Columbia University. She was born in India but at the age of fourteen moved to England and then the United States. She is the daughter of Anita Desai, another established global South writer who taught creative writing at various American universities, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Barnard College. Both

<sup>24</sup> Hilary Plum recently presented the first real critique of the novel, in which she suggests that the novel's main failing is its adherence to a tired conception of character.



Desais are considered Indian writers, despite technically belonging to the diaspora, because their subject matter remains rooted in the Indian subcontinent. Kiran Desai's first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), is set in a small town in Punjab in a postliberalization economy and received the Betty Trask Award. It narrates the literal and metaphorical ascent of a middle-class man into a guava tree, from where he achieves the status of a clairvoyant guru, faintly recalling R. K. Narayan's famous post-Independence work *The Guide* (1958). Her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), won the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award. Much like her first novel, *Inheritance* relies on an intensely localized world, but it articulates a more forthright relationship between the local and the global than her first novel.

Set in the remote, mountainous town of Cho Oyu, Kalimpong, in India's north-eastern region, *Inheritance* tells the story of local retired judge Jemubhai Patel and his orphaned granddaughter Sai against the backdrop of separationist agitation. Set in 1986, the novel moves between Jemubhai's difficult pre-Independence English tutelage, Sai's adolescent restlessness in the small town, and the immigrant experiences of their cook's son, Biju, as an undocumented, low-wage worker in America. Thereby Desai calls upon three different spatiotemporal trajectories of Indian lives—a nostalgic colonial past in England, a tense revolutionary present in India, and an uncertain immigrant future in America. The novel holds these complex strands together through the framing device of young Sai, whose youthful innocence allows her to access both her grandfather's middle-class world and the lives of the town's underclass. But she also remains alienated from both worlds and temporarily escapes the oppressiveness of Cho Oyu by perusing old issues of the *National Geographic*. The photographs transport her into an abstracted world that in turn changes the stakes of her local experiences. The talismanic presence of the magazine certainly gestures toward the hold of a colonial past that cannot be recovered. But it also offers a transformative filter that renovates the local by introducing the vocabulary of the global. The arrival of the "*National Geographic Inflatable Globe*," a kitschy materialization of the magazine's representative drive, literally changes perspective for both Sai and the cook:

*[The globe] arrived along with a certificate congratulating them for being adventure-loving members pushing the frontiers of human knowledge and daring for almost a full century. . . . Rarely was there something unexpected in the mail and never anything beautiful. They looked at the deserts, the mountains, the fresh spring colors of green and yellow, the snow at the poles; somewhere on this glorious orb was Biju. They searched out New York, and Sai attempted to explain to the cook why it was night there when it was day here, just as Sister Alice had demonstrated in St. Augustine's with an orange and a flashlight. The cook found it strange that India went first with the day, a funny back-to-front fact that didn't seem mirrored by any other circumstance involving the two nations. (18)*

Both Sai and the cook remain fascinated with the novelty of grasping as well as reading the world without ever leaving Cho Oyu. However, Sai's access to various kinds of antiquated reading—a painful task for her friendly guardian, the cook—

consistently signals the “urge for something beyond the ordinary” (69). The globalized middle class is framed as the inheritors of knowledge that allows them to transcend the local toward an abstracted global. Thus at the end of the novel, Sai can conjure “all the *National Geographics* and books she had read. Of the judge’s journey, of the cook’s journey, of Biju’s” and state decisively that “[s]he must leave” (323). In contrast, the cook’s son Biju, who sets out to find work as an undocumented immigrant in New York at the beginning of the novel, returns to Kalimpong in a state of destitution.

Vernacular anglophone realism consistently highlights the centrality of bourgeois life, and this mode of realism neither disrupts nor disturbs the status quo of global South societies. In the name of an authentic voice that ventriloquizes the global South, MFA international writing symptomatizes what Arjun Appadurai calls “the fetishism of the consumer” (42)—that is, the increasing abstraction of the consumer as a “sign” and less as a real audience. This trick, bolstered by “global advertising” (42), happens through obscuring the connection of the local to the transnational forces framing its production: “Production has itself become a fetish, obscuring not social relations as such but the relations of production, which are increasingly transnational. The locality (both in the sense of the local factory or site of production and in the extended sense of the nation-state) becomes a fetish that disguises the globally dispersed forces that actually drive the production process” (42). In the context of the MFA program, the first step in the absorption of the international writer into the stream of global literary production, the local becomes a fetish to inoculate a given narrative against the effects of the global creative industry. Professionalized writing has often led to what Zadie Smith famously diagnosed as “lyrical Realism,” where a bourgeois subject searches for authenticity that is inevitably housed in a racialized or classed subject. In the instance of the international MFA writer, the local momentarily suspends the obsession with a Western audience but also obscures the centrality of the non-Western bourgeois subject.

Whereas postcolonial exoticism as literary style relies on innate difference, conveyed through a commodified anthropological inquiry, vernacular anglophone realism relies on the market discourse of the global South’s exponentially growing middle class to renegotiate the non-Western anglophone novel’s tussle with translation—the translation of multiple languages and realities into the singular discourse of anglophone modernity. The background representation of the underclass produces what Roland Barthes has famously called a “reality effect,” in which its marginalization makes up the descriptive matrix for a knowing middle-class voice. If the older style of magical realism emphasizes how certain geopolitical, cultural realities exceed modernity, then vernacular anglophone realism suggests that the chasm between tradition and modernity is elastic. Rather than a sensational convergence of tradition and modernity, the local and the global, vernacular anglophone realism relies on the juxtaposition of local and global as simultaneous, complementary realities, where the local can merge with the global by relying on the mobility of the rising middle class.

Global South MFA fiction in the 2000s has doubled down on anthropological inquiry, the result being that the class dominance of the bourgeois/middle class has—despite sincere efforts by authors to critique existing structural inequities—

become a firmly established feature of international MFA writing. In other words, MFA programs reproduce the ideological singularity of a globalized middle class through the influence of institutional tutelage. The evocation of a globalized middle class, however precarious, offers a comforting formula within an increasingly financialized creative class. The rise of the vernacular in anglophone writing allows writers to defy postcolonial exoticism, all the while nestling closer to the hearth of transnational capital formation.

As a result, global anglophone MFA fiction performs a realignment that faintly recalls the “regionalism” (Werner Sollors qtd. in McGurl 59) of the southern writer in the postwar period toward a proclamation of an American liberal-democratic nationalist order.<sup>25</sup> In the years leading to and following the end of the Cold War, the contemporary international MFA writer has become more worldly and less political, seldom registering such overt gestures of protest that jeopardize the security of a professional position as member of the creative class within the American university. The professionalization of the MFA program has emerged as the first step in developing the market potential of the international writer through access to editors and writers who have already learned the ropes of the interdependency between local cultural value and global prestige markets. The twenty-first century has seen a canny approach, with a generation of writers gaining prominence by highlighting their distance from the American nation. These writers have found a succinct form of what McGurl calls “transcendent institutionality” (385), but one that breaks free of American national boundaries to produce the international programmatic writer. Reproducing its successes in the inauguration of postwar (mostly white) middle-class writers and post-1970s multiethnic writers, the MFA program has begun expanding its influence in unforeseen ways. The global program era testifies to the continuance of American cultural expansion in the creative writing industry.

#### International Writer, Global Professional

Nonetheless, writers and critics have engaged in heated debates about the authenticity of exiled voices and their imagined interlocutors. For example, in a February 2000 *Boston Review* article, “The Cult of Authenticity,” Chandra reacted sharply to the accusation made by Indian academic Meenakshi Mukherjee that Indian writing in English caters to an entirely Western audience. Chandra’s polemic, which denounces the desire for authenticity as deeply cynical and narrow-minded, ends with an encomium to the profession of writing. A reluctant product of writing programs in the late eighties, Chandra perfects the pitch of the creative writer and makes the world his stage, exhorting the Indian writer in English to be unafraid of the “mystical India” as well as other kinds of Indias. He invokes Gandhi and asks the Indian writer community to “[r]emember that Gandhi’s audience was not just Indian, but also everyone else; that all his actions, the spectacle of his revolution and the revolution of his self, were performed simultaneously before a local audience

<sup>25</sup> Global anglophone fiction also allows for a depoliticization of the global and has become instrumental in inaugurating the dismantling of postcolonial studies as a discipline.

and a global one. He spoke to us, to those he loved, but in speaking to us he was also speaking to all the world, and in speaking to the world he wanted nothing less than to change all of it." After invoking this much-desired form of the "universal," Chandra repeatedly invokes the idea of a "job done well," converting the writer from a politically attuned artist to a professional expert, with the "job" being what allows the artist to continue her or his work. The invocation of this professional writer has a potentially lasting relevance not just for South Asian writing in English but also for non-Western writing in English in general. Since creative writing has been a deeply and insularly American enterprise, the contemporary longevity of the international MFA writer has harnessed the American economic formation of the professional writer by stabilizing the link between writing and bourgeois subjectivity. The MFA program channels the work ethic of Euro-American systematicity in the production of the global South writer. The professional writer is now the champion of a work ethic that naturalizes the writer's relationship to the spirit of capital formation as an intrinsically white-collar "job" that displaces the older, ecumenical form of the professional.<sup>26</sup>

My account of the new global novel suggests that there is a decisive shift from the revolutionary but often compromised postcolonial novel to a professionalized and market-driven global novel. While postcoloniality articulates a condition of exigency, the global novel has emerged as an assimilationist category that relies on economizing and balancing the political difference inaugurated by postcoloniality with the demands of a global creative economy. In the framework of the MFA program, the global anglophone novel does not encourage the realization of a radical interconnectivity of non-Western anglophone centers but the redistribution of those former European colonies into an Americanized creative economy. In other words, the professionalization of writing has seen the rise not just of the American professional writer or of the diasporic American writer but of the global professional writer.<sup>27</sup>

Rather than displace the model of the institutional author entirely—one example of such displacement embodied by Tom McCarthy and his counterinstitutional, semifictional group, the International Necronautical Society—global South authors are calling attention to the oppressive politics of institutionalization from *within*. Writers like Adichie, Mahajan, and Kiran Desai default to a critique of the middle class, one that is often hamstrung by the double burden of cultural representation and professionalism within the creative economy. For the global South writer, the American MFA program's desire for "institutionalizing individuality" (McGurl

<sup>26</sup> Jameson's review of McGurl's study observes that the program era is busy producing writers who are groomed foremost to be not full-time writers but full-time teachers in the university ("Dirty Little Secret").

<sup>27</sup> Tellingly, the professionalization of writing is attracting a new brand of global professionals who have turned to the financially strenuous task of fiction making. In the case of debut novelist Zia Haider Rahman, the influence of his various careers—as a consultant and human rights lawyer—on his writing is evident in his novel about finance and developmentalism. Similarly, Taiye Selasi did not receive formal training, but her writing attests to her experiences as the peripatetic child of development officials. Writers like Mohsin Hamid and Adaobi Nwaubani continue to work as consultants.

366) formulates a bourgeois subjectivity that turns inward, mimicking to some extent the American novel's inward turn with the 9/11 novel. The MFA program sets up an enabling fiction, sometimes "negatively enabling" (337), of bourgeois subjectivity. And while theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have repeatedly emphasized that "the subaltern cannot speak," it is also necessary to ask *how* the so-called subaltern is being ventriloquized. The global emerges as a category that is equally comfortable in a local, possibly peripheral, setting and in an economic metropole, both as glib capitalist rhetoric and as deeply contentious problematic. The commonality between these disparate international fictions is that they are based on the universality of the "world" as a category for analysis, a sleight of hand that obscures an omniscient American-transnational market presence.

In the post-9/11 period, these programs have brought together the "systematic creativity" (McGurl 46) of the MFA and the mobility of the global South writer toward creating seemingly transparent anglophonic worlds under the aegis of the writing program. By voicing nonanglophone worlds, the contemporary MFA program increasingly repurposes the non-Western writer for a global audience that is almost always a synonym for an *Americanized* audience—that is, an audience that is not necessarily American but that identifies with the tenets of American globalism. Programmatic university writing expands the reach of national institutions through the conversion engine of globalization, reaffirming the economic and cultural supremacy of North American market power. MFA programs have transformed the institutionalized international writer into politically agnostic, white-collar workers, naturalizing their place within a financialized creative class. It is difficult to say whether this new trend will continue to influence the international writer in the current toxic right-wing environment, especially if some writers choose to avoid the United States altogether in the coming years.<sup>28</sup> Since universities across America have continued to champion liberal democratic values in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, it might also be time for institutional introspection about how educational institutions can ensure continued patronage to international writers without the attendant apparatus of American globalism. However, for the past two decades, whether through postcolonial exoticism or vernacular anglophone realism, the American university has been the fulcrum that pivots the global South writer toward an international publishing market. The renewed internationalism of the 2000s is a testament to the sheer reach of American cultural power in repurposing the local as a subset of the global.

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<sup>28</sup> The *New York Times* article "Is It Safe? Foreign Students Consider College in Donald Trump's U.S." (Najar and Saul) suggests that international students are anxious about their social and educational prospects as foreigners in Trump's America. In February 2017, sixty-five international writers and artists along with PEN America expressed a strong critique of closing borders in an open letter to the administration, urging a repeal of the entry ban applied to seven majority-Muslim countries since it would inhibit "freedom of movement and the global exchange of arts and ideas" (qtd. in Donadio). The so-called Muslim ban has since been backed in full measure by the Supreme Court in June 2018, drawing comparisons with *Korematsu v. United States* by dissenting Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

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