

Peripheral Realisms Now

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Joe Cleary's foreword to this issue in part tells the story of how the Cold War skewed the aesthetic valuation of twentieth-century non-Euro-American literatures: it masked their diversity by partitioning a liberal modernism from a socialist realism and thus inclining post-colonial critics based in metropolitan institutions toward modernist criteria. Yet political nonalignment for the Third World writer in fact entailed an agnostic stance, with both modernist and realist forms usable for anticolonial expression. In revisiting the question of peripheral realism, this special issue thus reasserts the aesthetic range of non-Euro-American literary practice beyond that of conformity to an international modernist style and its offshoots (fabulism, oral literature, metahistorical allegory, magical realism). It seeks to restore to view the agency of the Third World writer freed from the role of repeating forms pioneered elsewhere in earlier times. Indeed, if our present situation allows for reconsidering the lively fate of realism in the peripheries of the twentieth-century literary world-system—and with it the possible transcendence of the realism/modernism antinomy—then we are also once again forced to reckon with the obsolescence of the concept of the Third World today. Such a reckoning may broaden our historical perspective on what *was* Third World literature, but it also requires an appropriate caution about any replacement concept, including the notion of peripheral literature that organizes this special issue.

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After all, there has certainly been no shortage of successors to or proxies for “Third World literature”—postcolonial literature, minor literature, minority literature, and ethnic literature being the most prominent. As this range of terms suggests, Third Worldism as political discourse catalyzed both national independence movements in the colonial world and antiracism movements in the United States and Europe. The concept, a product of the Cold War division of the world, was an increasingly important telos of the revolutionary imagination after the socialist dream had faded. Though promoted by heads of state during the 1950s Bandung era, Third Worldism in the 1960s recast revolutionary possibility in culturalist terms. By the end of the 1960s the Sino-Soviet split and the myriad disappointments of anticolonial nationalism combined to turn various New Left movements away from state-oriented politics and toward projects of “cultural revolution.”¹ In the United States one consequence of global Maoism’s elevation of the student to a mass political actor was the establishment of departments of ethnic studies, which evolved from student demands for a Third World college at San Francisco State University and at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1968. At their most radical, such departments—new programs in women’s studies alongside them—were conceived as Trojan horses of epistemic decolonization in the universities that housed them, and through the 1990s they continued to play a contradictory role with regard to the traditional disciplines whose self-organization their very existence was meant to pressure.

As another inheritance of *la pensée soixante-huit*, the poststructuralist idiom of postcolonial studies that emerged in English departments after the publication of Edward W. Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) shared with ethnic studies an intimate cultural politics. Thus the critique of Eurocentrism and the critique of racism often appeared as parallel forces. The unequal distribution of cultural capital across English and ethnic studies departments notwithstanding, both postcolonial theory and ethnic studies in their institutional forms were predicated

¹ For an account of the global 1960s as a period strongly influenced by disseminations of the Chinese Cultural Revolution see Christopher Connery, “The World Sixties,” in *The Worlding Project: Doing Cultural Studies in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Rob Wilson and Christopher Leigh Connery (Santa Cruz, CA: New Pacific, 2007), 77–107.

on the historical failures of decolonization and anticolonial nationalism. For this reason they could dually represent the leading edge of 1980s skepticism toward revolutionary (and, in general, Hegelian dialectical) thought *and* cathect utopian longings that seemed at odds with New Historicist political pessimism: through the ferocity of their self-definitions against the universal purchase of class analysis, it was arguably postcolonial studies and ethnic studies that kept a form of class (identity) politics alive.² However, while postcolonial theory and ethnic studies both participated in postmodernism's critique of realist representation by evoking the alterities that eluded it, they often construed alterity in seemingly opposed ways: by indexing absence as opposed to conjuring presence, or by figuring supplementarity as opposed to referencing experience. This difference between postcolonial theory and ethnic studies is what made the latter seem at times an anachronistic preserve for "identity politics," though the persistence of cultural nationalism in that venue in fact indicates the greater historical liveliness (i.e., contradictoriness) of ethnic studies' ongoing reanimations of Third Worldism, long after its ebbing on the international political scene. Undoubtedly, the unfulfilled quest for racial justice in a domestic US context sustained the moral force of both ethnic studies and postcolonial theory in the US academy. Much as the New Social Movements were promoted in a post-Marxist idiom that indicted the failure of socialist democracy, the local situation for postcolonial studies and ethnic studies was the felt limits of liberal democracy in Ronald Reagan's America and Margaret Thatcher's England. This situation informed the Anglo-American literary academy's suspicion of representation *tout court* and helps explain why reading against realism—the genre classically associated with democracy and (from the early 1970s) increasingly associated with philosophical innocence and ideological deceptiveness³—was by the late Cold War years practiced on marginal objects and minority subjects in a strong form.

² Cf. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, introduction to *The Creolization of Theory*, ed. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 13.

³ Colin MacCabe's criticism that "classical realism" fixes "the subject in a point of view from which everything becomes obvious" is usually cited as an inaugural moment for postmodernism's dismissal of realism ("Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses," *Screen* 15, no. 2 [1974]: 16).

In the 1990s the collapse of the Soviet system and the liberalization of China's and India's economies evacuated Third World nationalism of its revolutionary tenor even more thoroughly than the persistence of neocolonialism had done before. The early years of the postnationalist turn provoked serious self-questioning throughout literary studies, which had long been organized along national lines. In the subfields of postcolonial and ethnic studies, the nation form presented both a problem and a solution that was difficult to think beyond. Where the internationalism of Third Worldism had proved no less elusive than the internationalism of the proletariat, however, global capitalism, invigorated by new markets, slackened many national borders, including the one between postcolonial studies and ethnic studies, whose subjects were no longer homologous and parallel but now continuous and connected. The Punjabi taxi driver in New York City could now equally belong to the study of, for example, South Asian American formation, the legacy of Indian partition, or the emergent routes of transregional diasporas. New continuities of subject matter have occasioned celebrations of intellectual glasnost. Substantively, they have also raised largely unresolved questions of politics and method: If the globe is now the appropriate scale with which to measure imagined communities, what project of freedom is appropriate, and does it any longer correlate with existing ethnically and territorially organized social forms? If the homologousness of race and nation is no longer an operating premise, what takes its place besides formal recognition of their variable historical relation and the pragmatic virtue of intersectional analysis? Part of the *raison d'être* for this special issue is to press the possible advantage of peripherality for thinking relationally across different kinds of subordinated positions on different scales. We have chosen to pursue this line specifically through the optic of realism as both a literary mode and a critical problematic because, as Fredric Jameson notes, "realism is essentially an epistemological category framed and staged in aesthetic terms" —even if, or precisely because, realism has so far rarely been put to work by projects of minor transnationalism.⁴

⁴ Fredric Jameson, "Afterword: A Note on Literary Realism," in *A Concise Companion to Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 279. On minor transnationalism see Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, "Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally," in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 11.

The preeminence of global capitalism in the 1990s may have transnationalized our fields of study, but it could not on its own revolutionize our critical habits. With the incorporation of new territories into the capitalist world-system (formerly of or in alliance with the Second World), the question of modernity returned to the fore, displacing postmodernism and its thesis of history's exhaustion. History once again seemed on the move. However, in the conduct of postcolonial studies, a dualism of postmodernity and its subalterns was replaced by a dualism of modernity and its alternative versions. There is much of value in this shift, which reflected a response to capital's greater integration of the world-system's elements and which seems to have generated positive descriptions of non-Western experience beyond its function as an epistemological limit point to Western history. But in the positing of equal but different claims on modernity, there was also a deflection away from modernity's uneven and unequal effects. Among other things, a concept of alternative modernities sidesteps the issue of global integration under an imperialist world-system.⁵ Our concern here is not with pitting political-economic analysis against cultural analysis but with remarking the types of cultural politics at play in the shift from a predominantly deconstructive use of difference to a predominantly consolationist one. During the 1990s the shift from postcoloniality (or the persistence of neocolonialism) to alternative modernities (or the vivacity and varieties of development) accorded many new powers to the former subaltern, except in the end the power to go beyond the intellectual significance of provincializing Europe. At the level of literary theory, the ascendance of the multiple-modernities model allowed for an expansion of the field of modernism, whose metropolitan example remains the definitive prism through which we recognize aesthetic innovation. This unequal aesthetic relation replicates and reflects, we think, the still-persisting impasse between racial/national particularisms and European universalism.⁶

⁵ See, e.g., Benita Parry, "Aspects of Peripheral Modernisms," *Ariel* 40, no. 1 (2009): 27–31. See also Harry Harootunian, "Some Thoughts on Comparability and the Space-Time Problem," *boundary 2* 32, no. 2 (2005): 35–36; and James Ferguson, "Decomposing Modernity: History and Hierarchy after Development," in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, ed. Ania Loomba et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 166–81.

⁶ To be sure, there have been serious efforts to advance cultural theory past the point of its difference/universalism impasse, notably *Contingency, Hegemony, Uni-*

During the 1990s the ordinary business of aesthetic periodization was also changing, so that the popular postmodern/postcolonial dyad, once used to map the territories of global literature according to a residual First/Third World logic, was itself fading. As the postmodern/postcolonial markers have lost their conceptual grip in literary studies, the result has too often been an unexamined expansion of modernism to fill the space of the contemporary and the global. Though postcoloniality and postmodernism have given way to alternative modernities and global modernisms, the tendency to read against realism has in fact traveled rather easily from one model to the other.⁷ Beginning in the late 1980s, the dominant approach to ethnic and postcolonial literatures turned on a recuperative historicism that fused cultural studies, ideology critique, and psychoanalytic/deconstructive reading. The consensus underlying this apparently eclectic set of interpretive practices—a consensus that perpetuated realism’s marginalization—has recently been thrown into retrospective relief by the debate over postsymptomatic reading.⁸ The symbiosis between recuperative historicism and modernist style was brilliantly anatomized at the moment of its greatest influence by Leo Bersani’s *Culture of Redemption* (1990). In ethnic and postcolonial studies the feedback loop between critical theory and artistic practice was enshrined in such classics as Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* and Salman Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands* (both 1992). It centered on the seeming reciprocity between artistic techniques of radical estrangement (the overcoding of both historical and social realities) and critical techniques of utopian transvaluation (in which the exclusionary logics of the past, properly historicized, could become the basis of the inclusionary logics of the future).⁹ And it pro-

versality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left (London: Verso, 2000), a triologue among Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek. See also Paul Gilroy’s argument on behalf of strategic universalism in *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁷ It has long been observed that for both modernism and poststructuralism, classical realism functions as a kind of transcended other. See, e.g., Michael McKeon, *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 733.

⁸ Christopher Nealon, “Reading on the Left,” in “The Way We Read Now,” ed. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, special issue, *Representations*, no. 108 (2009): 22–50.

duced literary genealogies still regnant in our classrooms: Morrison's debt to William Faulkner, Rushdie's to James Joyce, J. M. Coetzee's to Franz Kafka.

Meanwhile, the new modernist studies, beginning in the late 1990s, instituted a broadening of its database to truly global proportions.¹⁰ These days North American scholars of the contemporary period are quite busily producing interconnected atlases of alternative, late, and global modernisms. At the same time, the extension of modernist studies to a vast array of "late modernist" cultural products, and indeed the rediscovery (by Anglo-American scholars) of early modernisms in Mexico, China, and Persia, cannot fully shed the original and sedimented attachment to metropolitan avant-gardism. Nor can it account, we think, for other genealogies of the global novel stretching across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as the realist call to arms of Seán Ó Faoláin in the wake of Joyce or Naguib Mahfouz's insistence on the social novel after the peak influence of Egyptian surrealism.¹¹ The newly current realisms of writers like Pramodhya Ananta Toer and

⁹ The period in question saw not only the key canonical works of African American literary criticism, outlined by Stephen Best in his essay in this issue, but also a series of foundational essays in postcolonial studies (including, for example, Homi K. Bhabha's "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 [1985]: 144–65) and queer-theoretical classics such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994). The last two works also had specific and palpable investments in literary modernism.

¹⁰ Some leading studies are Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, eds., *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); and Mark Wollaeger with Matt Eatough, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Similarly telling works in the vein of global or transnational modernism include Simon Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); and Mary Ann Gillies, Helen Sword, and Steven Yao, eds., *Pacific Rim Modernisms* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

¹¹ To say nothing of more metropolitan realisms: in the anglophone novel canon, there is, for example, the resurgence of interest in neorealist and moral-realist fiction of the 1950s and 1960s—Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, Flannery O'Connor, and Richard Wright—as against late modernist darlings such as Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Doris Lessing, and Ralph Ellison.

Amitav Ghosh also throw into relief the realisms that were there all along underneath the crust of global modernist discourse: those of Saadat Hasan Manto, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Nadine Gordimer, Raja Rao, Maryse Condé, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Tayeb Salih, for example.

Our curricular and canon-making institutions have already begun to recognize new realist objects in the literary periphery, a process contemporaneous with recent methodological changes one might describe as a “new realist turn” in criticism. Such a term would designate a range of disparate projects that register the lapsing of the linguistic or cultural turn that had once installed literary studies in the hub of interdisciplinary influence. One tendency definitive of the new realisms is the rise of speculative realism in philosophy, evincing a new interest in ontology that exceeds questions of representation. Within literary studies we are tempted to see as a corollary to speculative realism such phenomena as the new cognitive studies, which is turning to linguistic processes grounded in the human mind for interpretive explanation.¹² A second tendency includes practices that Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus group under the label of “surface reading,” or an attention to what is “evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts . . . what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*.”¹³ Both tendencies—whether deferring to a determining biological reality beyond the text or focusing on the immediate reality of the text—might be traceable to the widespread influence of Bruno Latour.¹⁴ The receptivity to Latour in literary studies stems from professional anxiety owing to the staggering burden placed on textuality as a serviceable universal currency for interdisciplinary engagement. The

¹² For developments in speculative realism see Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, eds., *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011). There are champions of new cognitive studies who early on disputed the characterization of the field as reflecting a one-way traffic between scientific and literary modes of explanation. See Ellen Spolsky, “Cognitive Literary Historicism: A Response to Adler and Gross,” *Poetics Today* 24, no. 2 (2003): 161–83.

¹³ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” in Best and Marcus, “The Way We Read Now,” 9.

¹⁴ For a useful survey of these and related trends in the wake of Latour (and Pierre Bourdieu) see James English, “Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature after ‘the Sociology of Literature,’” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): v–xxiii.

more interdisciplinarity has become a normative expectation across disciplines, the more impossible the theoretical labor of mediation has seemed—specifically, the question of the dialectical relation between literature and history—which both of these tendencies resist, or at least temporarily suspend.¹⁵

A third, quite different tendency of the new realist turn is rooted in what appears to be an old-fashioned interest in literary realism proper as a historical tradition whose formal complexity has been largely overlooked and as a method of theorizing artistic mediation. For the contributors to a recent volume devoted to recovering Georg Lukács's theory of critical realism, Lukács is best appreciated for having located a text's realism in its aspiration to totality, with "totality" defined not as something out there but as the demand to consider interrelations and interactions between disparate phenomena.¹⁶ (Thus for Lukács naturalism fails to be a critical—that is, a true—realism precisely insofar as it seeks a photographic record of immediate reality rather than a depiction of historical forces in motion or the dynamics of society.) On this account, reality is by definition not what it seems, or else it could be comprehended by mere description; a realistic mode of representation is meant not to reproduce reality but to interrupt the quasi-natural perception of reality as a mere given.¹⁷ Among many ethnic, post-colonial, and feminist critics, whether they are working with or outside Lukács, realism has become a useful term again, marking a shared

¹⁵ Best and Marcus present "surface reading" as motivated by a desire for more accurate accounts of objects, which they see as the precondition for better critique (18).

¹⁶ Gail Day, "Realism, Totality, and the Militant *Citoyen*;" or, What Does Lukács Have to Do with Contemporary Art?," in *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence; Aesthetics, Politics, Literature*, ed. Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall (London: Continuum, 2011), 209.

¹⁷ Patrick Eiden-Offe, "Typing Class: Classification and Redemption in Lukács's Political and Literary Theory," in Bewes and Hall, 75. Along similar lines, Rachel Bowlby reminds us that realist works can "disturb or please or educate us by showing reality as not what we think we know, by showing realities we have never seen or dreamed, or by making speakable realities that might previously have seemed only idiosyncratic or incommunicable" (foreword to Beaumont, xxi). This socially imaginative function of realism aligns with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's answer to the question "How can I, as a reader of literature, supplement the social sciences?": "Literature cannot predict, but it may prefigure" (*Death of a Discipline* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2003], 37, 49).

investment in theorizing the referential function of the text even as it inspires extraordinarily flexible and active ways of reconceiving and transcoding social referents.¹⁸

The particular literary focus of this special issue places it within the ambit of the third tendency. It is, as far as we know, the first collection of its kind to thematize the topic of peripheral realisms and therefore the question of their relation to other realisms and modernisms.¹⁹ Given the unexpected transformations of realist problematics produced by

¹⁸ For new ethnic literature approaches oriented by the Marxism of Lukács and Theodor W. Adorno (as opposed to Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser) see Marcial González, *Chicano Novels and the Politics of Form: Race, Class, and Reification* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Jinqi Ling, *Across Meridians: History and Figuration in Karen Tei Yamashita's Transnational Novels* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); and Christopher Lee, *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012). Outside an identifiably Frankfurt School tradition, Ramón Saldivar argues that a “postrace aesthetic” in contemporary American fiction takes the shape of a “speculative realism,” which he defines as “a hybrid amalgam of realism, magical realism, metafiction, and genre fictions such as science fiction, graphic narrative, and fantasy proper” (“Speculative Realism and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary American Fiction,” in *A Companion to American Literary Studies*, ed. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine [Malden, MA: Wiley, 2011], 530). For Ulka Anjaria, the projective qualities of realism suggest that its primary indexical commitment is not always to the present (“Staging Realism and the Ambivalence of Nationalism in the Colonial Novel,” *Novel* 44, no. 2 [2011]: 188). The historical formalism of these critics’ approaches to ethnic and post-colonial realisms distinguishes them from the pragmatist tenor of the “post-positivist realism” of Satya P. Mohanty in an earlier moment. See Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-Garcia, eds., *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). On feminism’s recent engagement with both realism and the real in terms other than antagonism and parody see Helen Small, “Feminist Theory and the Return of the Real: ‘What We Really Want Most out of Realism . . .,’” in Beaumont, 254. Likewise Toril Moi argues that Ibsen’s marginalization in metropolitan literary studies indexed a much more comprehensive displacement of realism from the center of concerns in the discipline, a shift involving a reflexive attribution of conservatism to realism. Moi cites as an exception Diana Knight, who resists the tendency to assume that realism is, from the point of view of sexuality studies, for example, likely to be “politically reactionary and philosophically naïve” (*Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 24, 335). See also Knight, “S/Z, Realism, and Compulsory Heterosexuality,” in *Spectacles of Realism: Gender, Body, Genre*, ed. Margaret Cohen and Christopher Prendergast (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 120–36.

¹⁹ For the notion of “peripheral modernisms” see Parry.

the extension of realism beyond a classical Euro-American provenance, we think that this issue has something to say as well about the prognoses for literary criticism implied by the first and second tendencies of today's realist turn. Questioning the epistemic capacity of literature to describe global effects on a wide range of emergent or historically submerged subjects may facilitate reimagining avenues for literary critique, whose powers Latour profoundly queried in his 2004 essay "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?"²⁰ Bruce Robbins—objecting as far back as 1993 to the routine dismissal of "naïve realism," which he saw as a mode of disciplinary self-defense against scientific positivism at a time when the literary profession was already under threat—championed literature as a vehicle of information, a "transmission of cultural history that students might not get from elsewhere."²¹ It certainly makes sense, as Robbins argued, not to reinforce a science/literature binary, especially on losing terms. At the same time, the fundamentally unequal availability of the disciplines to marketization means that preserving the humanities in today's neoliberalized university depends on recognizing and developing their autochthonous value, which need not and probably should not be pitted against instrumental applications.²² Turning to realism might bring new research attention to fundamental questions about literature's qualitatively distinct, socially useful value, among them how its union of cognitive and imaginative faculties fosters critical thinking and why this is presently necessary.²³

With these institutional and intellectual histories in view, it is clear that any reconsideration of peripheral realisms now has to situate itself within a genealogy of ethnic and postcolonial studies and within an expanded field of literary practice not solely organized by the historical

²⁰ Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48.

²¹ Bruce Robbins, "Modernism and Literary Realism: A Response," in *Realism and Representation: Essays on the Problem of Realism in Relation to Science, Literature, and Culture*, ed. George Levine (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 227.

²² See Paul Jay and Gerald Graff, "Fear of Being Useful," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 5, 2012, www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/01/05/essay-new-approach-defend-value-humanities#ixzz1jGzjMNw1.

²³ See, e.g., Wendy Brown, "The End of Educated Democracy," in "The Humanities and the Crisis of the Public University," ed. Colleen Lye, Christopher Newfield, and James Vernon, special issue, *Representations*, no. 116 (2011): 19–41.

referent of the nineteenth-century European nation-state. The genealogical framework for the realist turn anticipates a number of overarching and overlapping themes emergent in the nine essays that follow. These include revived attention to novelistic practice outside the libidinal horizon of the middle-class subject; the remapping of the world-system as a positive, if partial and mediated, object of representation; the problem of gendered, migrant, and caste labor in transnational space; and the possibility that peripheral standpoints themselves afford distinctive epistemic advantages in descriptions of global capitalism in the post–Cold War period.

In our review of the effects of macrohistorical and institutional change on the volatile semantic field of realism/modernism, we have implied the benefits of a course correction to the prevailing critical habit of reading against realism. Certainly we cannot wish away the determinate critical history of the last several decades, in which twentieth-century realisms have been separated from, and often superannuated by, the modernisms that have been said to transcend them. But a dyadic approach to these terms yields inert conceptual results: we do not need a new realist antimodernism to overcome the blind spots of a recent modernist antirealism. If there has been a realist turn in our current critical temper or a return to realism among high-profile writers in the periphery, it is surely part of a wider remapping of the literary world-system now, entailing a rehistoricization of the known lineages of the contemporary itself. For example, Sharae Deckard measures the distance from 1960s Latin American Boom fiction to the contemporary realism of Roberto Bolaño, while Petrus Liu finds Taiwanese literature of the late 1970s and early 1980s better understood within a model of peripheral realism than of diasporic modernism. Likewise Susan Z. Andrade proposes to rehistoricize the 1960s, transposing the transformative energies of radical student movements and high poststructuralism into an African 1968. From that vantage point, novels like Yambo Ouologuem's *Le devoir de violence* and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances* shed their modernist critical casings and return to us as realist chronicles of the global transition sometimes described as structural realignment.²⁴

²⁴ Andrade's essential point thus recalls Gabriel García Márquez's notoriously puckish pronouncement that his Euro-American readers, delighting in his brand of

Recoding peripheral modernisms as realist is a retrospective critical operation, and it raises the possibility of touching base with the collective protagonists of subaltern political desire across the global South without stopping at the way station of bourgeois consciousness or middle-class domesticity. So, for example, Simon Gikandi traces the genealogy of African realism to the generations before Achebe, recovering the romance elements of Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*. From the point of view of an early romance-novel hybrid like *Chaka*, we can see peripheral realism less as a historical residue, persisting along with its mimetic offshoots (dystopic naturalism or aestheticist modernism), than as a coded language for modernizing utopian or liberationist anti-colonialisms in southern Africa. Along similar lines, Toral Jatin Gajjarawala describes a contemporary Dalit realism in India that bypasses the language of bourgeois sympathy and consciousness-raising on the way to imagining collective social action. Gajjarawala runs her genealogical lines back to the pre-World War II era of colonial writing, tracking the influence of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* on the long-standing problem of Dalit *chetna* or consciousness. Where Anand's modernist-era realism metaphorizes the Dalit protagonist as the subject of an interiorized and humanist narrative of universal uplift, present-day Dalit writing tends to particularize and localize the laboring body. In this way the peripheral realism of Dalit short fiction describes the systemic and general—but not universal—conditions of a collective subject whose gradual transformation is delineated through pragmatic modes of social mobility rather than through metanarratives of emancipation. These stories prismatically reveal both caste and class dimensions of Dalit experience, not to mention gendered and regional dimensions. But experience is not thereby or instantly globalized; specific liter-

so-called magical realism, consistently failed to appreciate that his novels were in fact more real than magical. Joseph R. Slaughter, too, reads Oulouguem's novel against the grain of its canonical assimilation to late modernist primitivism in the moment of 1968-ist revolutionary consciousness ("‘It's Good to Be Primitive’: African Allusion and the Modernist Fetish of Authenticity," in *Modernism and Copyright*, ed. Paul K. Saint-Amour [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 275–301). See also Madhu Dubey's unexpected turn to Samuel Delaney for an idea of the real that, in Dubey's words, "eschews both organicism and technological fetishism, innocent mimesis and textual inflation" (*Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003], 11).

ary techniques center on embedded, daily acts of labor instead of on heroicized laborers or abstract proletarian consciousness.

Such techniques, perhaps, become the starting point not just for stylistic or generic debates over realism but for our wider effort to represent and to read labor without giving way to the gravitational pull of that older polarity between biopolitical or subalternist analysis and Marxian class analysis. As Jameson remarks in his afterword, new fictional or critical devices traverse the distance from national-popular liberation (mid-twentieth-century) to collective social movements (late twentieth-century) to some newer, twenty-first-century concept of the subject of freedom. In that spirit, the study of peripheral realisms now may provide an exit from the besetting impasse between radicalized (cultural) difference and universalized (acultural) concepts of labor alienation.

The critics in our canvassing of peripheral realisms take stock of literary implications born of the displacement of a universalized subject of labor by the gendered, casualized, and far-flung forms of post-Fordist production that challenge classical realism's signature allegorizing of individual subject and nation form. As Deckard notes, for example, the maquiladora industry at the center of Bolaño's *2666* defines a neoliberal (or NAFTA) space whose narco-economy underwrites Bolaño's stronger realist commitments, in distinction to the national-political frame of the dictator novel, which had shaped the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez. Both Deckard's analysis of a millennial, and feminized, precariat on the US-Mexico border and Clair Wills's study of the more recognizable, and recognizably masculine, midcentury proletariat of migrant Irish laborers in England show how the representational disturbance of transnational labor has long been a key problematic of peripheral realism. Given the canonical force of postwar British terms and tools of working-class description (neorealism, kitchen sink drama, documentary fiction and film, mass observation and popular sociology, Birmingham school cultural studies), Wills finds it a bracing challenge to carve out the specific density of a homosocial migrant Irish working-class life inside Britain. For Wills's key texts, whether technically fictional or nonfictional, "peripheral realism" means both marginal to dominant models of realism (Irish farm and family conventions; English documentary) and realist in relation

to customary narrative methods of describing laboring life according to either an ethnographic outside (the Irish viewed by the English) or a sociological inside (the Irish viewed by the Irish). Resisting all these forms of conceptual closure—and resisting as well the ultimately sentimental tropes of English working-class life (the nuclear family romance and the plot of upward mobility)—Wills’s texts describe a fifty-year-old realist practice that refuses to subordinate working-class experience to the ultimately harmonic trope of national reintegration.

One of the more exciting prospects floated in this issue as a whole is that of departing from the familiar pattern in which national realisms compete on unfavorable terms with international modernisms. As we have begun to suggest, and as several essays demonstrate, it is possible to recover realisms of the Cold War and post-Cold War epochs in which a peripheral vantage point discloses a local instance of world-system effects without triggering a dizzying contemplation of an ungraspable global object and, furthermore, without domesticating those effects in a naturalized scheme of national reality. Thus for twenty-first-century readers and students, texts like Andrade’s 1968 African novels may no longer strike the imagination with the force of their revolutionary style but with their power to recognize once-dazzling forms of technological, financial, and political abstraction as familiar, even quotidian, aspects of the world-system encoded into the African social novel. Along similar lines, Liu challenges an ossified view of contemporary Chinese fiction as divided into a residually socialist realism associated with the People’s Republic of China and a progressive, diasporic modernism associated with Taiwan (or Hong Kong). Liu thus recovers the realist dimensions of an early 1980s Taiwanese novel, Xiao Sa’s *Song of Dreams*, by situating its Bovaryste narrative of feminized consumption and social entrepreneurship in the context of a US-dominated commodity zone and a volatile Pacific territory riven by the competing claims of two Chinas. Xiao’s novel, in this reading, converts the traditional realist languages of property acquisition and sexual success into indices of a much wider plot beyond the nation and refracts at the level of social mobility the regional discourse of “miraculous” Asian Tiger economies.

Once recovered into critical visibility, the peripheral realisms described by our contributors, staggered across the decades from the

1950s to the 1970s to the first years of the 2000s, immediately raise the question of whether the work featured here attaches special epistemological privilege to peripheral subjects, artists, and texts. Do we, for example, wish to extend the Lukácsian argument about the proletarian universal subject of history—taken as the proper basis of a twentieth-century critical realism—to the raced, casteized, gendered, or otherwise minoritized?²⁵ The Lukácsian premise embedded in the question animates a number of essays in this issue. For example, Yoon Sun Lee approaches canonical Asian American writing, even at its most modernist, as realist in its persistent aspiration to totality. That aspiration—and manifestly not any simple mimetic function with regard to external context or the given features of ethnic identity—allows Lee to argue for a formal similarity between Jade Snow Wong and Maxine Hong Kingston, authors whose association has been often evoked but little explained in literary terms. Reactivating the Lukácsian language of type, Lee inflects the ethical-aesthetic category of typicality with the quantitative force of probability and statistics, blazing a new trail from the general to the particular and, in the process, providing an original take on realist method. She executes a subtle turn on the problem of totalization as a matter of fictional technique, noting crucially that where the modernist mode “oscillates between the particular and the transcendent,” the realist mode mediates and fills the space in between with connective tissue.

Such modal distinctions point to our collective interest in reexamining the habit of reading against realism, which tended to select for works that stylize global capitalism rather than describe its effects. To aspire to totality in the sense implied by Lee is not to imagine global capitalism as graspable extensively in terms of its vast particularities or even intensively in the sum of its layered and mediated operations. But it is to take seriously the possibility, as Deckard’s Bolaño does, of

²⁵ Thus the concept of peripheral realisms is intended in part to query the conduciveness of our present situation to a rapprochement between class- and New Social Movement–based projects of emancipation on the basis of the theories of literary realism produced and demanded by them. For a critical review of Jameson’s conflation of the distinction between imputed consciousness and empirically given identity in his own attempt at an “alliance politics” between Lukács and feminist and ethnic standpoint epistemologies, see Neil Larsen, “Lukács *sans* Proletariat, or Can *History and Class Consciousness* Be Rehistoricized?,” in Bewes and Hall, 81–100.

representing the world-system rather than thematizing its unrepresentability. What new aesthetic or political conditions allow for this scandalously naive-sounding possibility? The question shifts attention to the third term in our essay's title: now. We have proposed a strong rereading of an institutionalized version of postcolonial and ethnic studies at the opening of the post-Cold War era, the moment indexed by the high aesthetic and critical prestige of figures like Rushdie and Morrison. From our vantage point in 2012, the symbiosis of recuperative-historicist reading and late modernist writing that we take as definitive of that late 1980s or early 1990s moment can itself be historicized. Now, perhaps, as the new order of post-Cold War reality comes to seem more real, that is, more concrete, the artistic and critical zeitgeist seems to be reorienting itself to the question of what can, rather than what cannot, be represented in global capitalism.

We might be tempted in this vein to venture a new schematic built on the old decking, as follows: where classical realism maps national space as a working social totality, and where modernism (including the late modernisms of minority and postcolonial magical realist writing) stylizes, even heroicizes, its baked-in failure to map the global system (projecting the latter as abysmal antimatter to literary description itself), peripheral realisms approach the world-system as partially, potentially describable in its concrete reality. But, recognizing the historicity of both subjects (their own style as part of an enduring literary modality) and objects (global capitalism as a moving target of representation), they invite their publics to grasp the world-system, via its local appearances or epiphenomenal effects, and not to imagine it as a foreclosed or fully narrativized entity.

One formula for peripheral realism now—of totalizing procedures strongly checked by the taboo on totality—appears in Sanjay Krishnan's against-the-grain recuperation of V. S. Naipaul. In Naipaul, Krishnan discerns the dialectical quality of a specifically peripheral realism, for him an autocritical mimesis whose special force is derived from the colonial subject's awareness of capitalism's own historicity and that therefore undercuts any easy approach to either a sociological or a historiographical totality. Deriving his model of "derangement" from the semiperipheral intellectual tradition of Antônio Cândido and Roberto Schwarz, Krishnan situates Naipaul in the broken bridges of

the world-system. Unlike the Brazilian artists analyzed by Cândido and Schwarz, however, Naipaul cannot span the metropole-colony divide, even in the language of caprice, irony, or negation. Krishnan questions Naipaul's grudging status as an officially important realist sidelined by his infamous colonial self-loathing. His Naipaul is a fierce witness to the living disjunction between metropolitan and colonial capitalisms. Not only does Krishnan not wish to extend the epistemic privilege of proletarian consciousness outward to peripheral writers such as Naipaul, but his reading in fact suggests that Naipaul's problematic status in postcolonial studies and, indeed, within the academic Left more generally is a symptom of an unacknowledged neo-Lukácsianism. Naipaul's historical realism insists on the irreducible structural problem of peripheral historicity: the forces and transitions of world history cannot be grasped without the epistemic privilege (however falsely arrogated) of imperial or metropolitan power. Peripheral even to the periphery, Naipaul's viewpoint causes him to mount a realism of derangement and blocked epistemic force.

Likewise Best ventures a reading of Morrison's latest novel, *A Mercy*, as evincing a new brand of historical realism that eschews the recuperative or redemptive logic of her late 1980s blockbuster *Beloved*. Best's essay recalls Morrison as a central figure in the structuring of African American literary studies around the slave past and as a sponsoring as well as sponsored figure in recuperative historicism. And if historicism's recuperative dimensions are now in question, it is perhaps no accident that Morrison's own career seems to be shifting from the elastic modernist fabulism of *Beloved* to a more obviously realist historical fiction in *A Mercy*. On Best's account, by depicting an early colonial moment before slavery acquires its legacy in the New World, *A Mercy* detaches slavery from its overweening determination by race. Best's queer orphaning of our slave past paradoxically restores our perception of our racial present to fuller historicity, offering a stronger riposte to conservative postracial objectivism than does the ethical insistence on racial hauntologies.²⁶

²⁶ For an example of postracial objectivist discourse see Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012).

As critics trained in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, we take this special issue as an opportunity to begin to submit our own understanding of key period-style terms (realism, modernism, postmodernism) and key social categories (ethnic, postcolonial, minor, marginal, peripheral) — and of the relationship between those sets of terms— to the pressure of history now. One outcome, we hope, will be the beginning of what Cleary calls a new atlas of twentieth-century realisms, which will require both empirical and critical research in different, overlapping zones, motivated by a sense of the historically dynamic quality of all spatial arrangements. We imagine the study of peripheral realisms as a remapping of the variegated terrain of a world-system as it attempts to fill in rather than leapfrog the space between the local and the global. The notion of the peripheral subject testifies to the converging trajectories of postcolonial and ethnic studies in the last ten years. Yet what marks the present moment is a widening cognizance of the untenable inequality within what used to be the global North, where the social ravages wrought by neoliberal governmentality forebode a repeat of the global South's financial disciplining even as they create opportunities for coalitional movements that disturb the twinned notions of the uniquely underprivileged minority subject and the assumed whiteness of the now-precarious middle class. Thus the essays to follow collectively show how the literary mimesis of the past and present involves no simple reproduction of the already known and existing but always contains a future open to dynamic change. In breathing new life into the critical and aesthetic project of apprehending the real, they directly question global capitalism's status as a permanent fact. To that extent, they suggest that totalization is not the same as universalization but its contemporary negation.

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