Post45 Vs. The World

Literary Perspectives on the Global Contemporary

Editor

William G. Welty
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Series in Literary Studies

VERNON PRESS

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200,
Wilmington, Delaware 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Literary Studies

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022939921

ISBN: 978-1-64889-479-4

Cover design by Vernon Press.

For Beckett, Baxter, and Charley

"Strange. It seems that the most insightful pictures of America are done by Europeans or Blacks [….] I once leafed through a photo book about the West. I was struck by how the Whites figured in the center of the photos and drawings while Blacks were centrifugally distant [….] The blacks were usually, if it were an interior, standing in the doorway. Digging the center."

-Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*

Table of contents

Introduction: "America is bigger than all of us"

William G. Welty

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Abstract

This introductory essay highlights an (often unspoken) Americanist focus in Post45 studies. It also links this focus to ongoing conversations in World Literature and post-critique. In response, the essay traces a long history in American literature that conceives of "American-ness" as intertwined with global perspectives; that is, one cannot think American literature without world literature, and vice versa. This narrative in turn provides context for the essays contained in the rest of the collection.

Keywords: World Literature, American Literature, Post45, post-critique

***

Much of the work done on the Post45 literary field carries an implicitly Americanist perspective. Even the name of the field suggests a certain literary history, with certain assumptions and blind spots about national spaces, identities, and histories. But what would Post45 look like when considered from outside of the United States? How do the current contours of the field exclude certain voices, both in the United States and elsewhere in the world?[1] And, how would such new perspectives shift the beginning and possible endpoint of that literary period? What new narratives of the contemporary emerge if we begin

[1] In a recent issue of *Post45*, Song Hwee Lim poses a similar set of questions about global cinema. He concludes "these sketches reveal the arbitrariness of mapping, always rooted in geopolitics, often shrouded in the myth of the nation, and at once policed and porous. Cinema can both reinforce and question such mappings, not just through the stories it tells on-screen but also via the off-screen activities of making and watching films—often across borders." This collection, then, builds on his work to think of how literature can likewise "reinforce and question such mappings." See Song Hwee Lim, "Toward a Geopolitical Approach to the Study of Transnational Cinema," *Post45 (New Filmic Geographies)*, April 5, 2021, https://post45.org/2021/04/toward-a-geopolitical-approach-to-the-study-of-transnational-cinema/.

telling the story in a different year or from a different national or global perspective? The essays collected in this collection attempt to begin to answer these questions.

Indeed, a story of American literature after 1945 could be told by focusing on the ways texts themselves have created spaces that exist both inside and outside of national spaces. In other words, for contemporary texts, the global might index *both* the outside world, as books circulate within world capitalist markets, and also the "insides" of texts themselves, as the aesthetic features of a text and the experience of reading one can trouble, realign, or even deconstruct national boundaries.[2] To put it in the non-academic terms familiar to any avid bibliophile: reading can transport you to other worlds. Such a critical narrative about contemporary literature would connect the materialist accounts of World Literature scholars like Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova with the recent resurgence of interest in formalist accounts of texts in Post45 studies.[3] Furthermore, scholars working in the fields of postmodernism and critical race studies have long recognized the inherently international (or, perhaps, trans- or even contra-national) nature of literature in the contemporary. Recently, Amanda Anderson has argued that the so-called "method debates" fail to "capture the energies and commitments of the field, especially given new work on race and ethnicity, queer and trans theory, the environmental humanities, and disability studies."[4] This collection echoes her concern, and attempts to

---

[2] This story draws on Jeffrey Lawrence's account which carefully shows how contemporary American texts defined the non-American as "experience" that could be consumed by the writer from the United States. Conversely, non-American writers imagined the United States as something that could be accessed directly through reading, even if, as was the case for Roberto Bolaño, the writer himself never set foot in the country. See Jeffrey Lawrence, *Anxieties of Experience: The Literatures of the Americas from Whitman to Bolaño* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017).

[3] For example, a recent two-part issue of *Post45* was dedicated to formalism. The editors write "But having only recently regained respectability, formalism remains a method whose myriad possible applications have been largely untried. This special issue seeks to illuminate some of its untapped potential. Even with the new interest in questions devoted to understanding 'literariness,' we have yet to explain the difference this new work makes, in part because of the lingering association between formalism and the New Critics [....] What might a true departure from political criticism and its commitment to assessing all cultural forms in ideological terms look like? Might there be other means of asserting the value of form and aesthetic experience? Can form do other kinds of work or make contributions that are distinct from the task of advancing specific ideological aims?" See Timothy Aubry and Florence Dore, "Introduction: Formalism Unbound," *Post45* 5 (2020), https://post45.org/2020/12/aubry-dore-introduction/.

[4] Amanda Anderson, "Situating the Method Debates," *PMLA* 135, no. 5 (October 2020): 1002, https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.1002. For an international account

both build on the method debates about and within contemporary literary scholarship while simultaneously placing those debates in a more global context.[5] To echo the language of a recent issue of *Post45*, the essays that follow ask not only "How to be now?" but also "Where to be now?"[6]

Nevertheless, due to both the institutional and ideological makeup of Post45, "contemporary literature" as a field, more often than not, has either rejected these kinds of analyses or worked in separation from them.[7] Perhaps most famously, as attended to by several authors in this collection, Amy Hungerford articulates the critical stance of Post45 in her foundational "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary." Hungerford rejects the "cultural materialist accounts" (read: postmodernism) of scholars like Fredric Jameson in favor of a focus on the "specific sociological conditions of the production and consumption of literature" found in work by scholars like Mark McGurl.[8] Put in general terms, she rejects Theory in favor of Historicism.[9] McGurl himself echoes Hungerford in his influential *The Program Era*, writing, "One of the jobs of this book will be to illuminate and appreciate postwar American literature by placing it in this

---

of postmodernism, see François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

[5] Heather Love, herself a foundational figure in the post-critical method debates, recognizes "timeliness" as an essential yet often unachievable quality of scholarship in the contemporary. Due to that often unachievable demand to be timely, emerging as part of the material and existential threats to the university and to literary scholarship, she recognizes that "an expanded sense of the present matters," though she also concludes that the real problem is "raw injustice" rather than any particular methodological debate. Heather Love, "Response," *PMLA* 135, no. 5 (October 2020): 1016, 1019, https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.1016.

[6] See, in particular, Sarah Chihaya, Joshua Kotin, and Kinohi Nishikawa, "Introduction: How To Be Now." *Post45* 2 (2019), https://post45.org/2019/07/introduction-how-to-be-now/. In particular, this collection of essays was inspired by Chihaya's, Kotiin's, and Nishikawa's attempt to "invite playful reconfiguration" and an "open-armed, outward-looking orientation [that] creates and recreates conversations that connect the multitudes that define the now now."

[7] There are some notable exceptions to this. See, for example Paul K. Saint-Amour, "Counterfactual States of America: On Parallel Worlds and Longing for the Law," *Post45*, September 20, 2011, https://post45.org/2011/09/counterfactual-states-of-america-on-parallel-worlds-and-longing-for-the-law/.

[8] Amy Hungerford, "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary," *American Literary History* 20, no. 1/2 (Spring-Summer 2008): 413, https://doi.org10.1093/alh/ajm044.

[9] The renewed interest in formalist accounts of the contemporary in Post45 suggests that perhaps this rejection was made too hastily.

evolving market context," even if that means that "accounts of individual writers, institutions, and texts must necessarily be, at times, brutally simplified."[10] Since the United States dominates the global market, at least the literary one, it follows then that American literature will dominate the purview of Post45. However, the Post45 commitment to a certain type of scholarship cannot be divorced from the material conditions that generate that scholarship: specifically, its position within prestigious American universities. Hungerford notes that the type of sociological work she upholds as exemplary of Post45 is composed by "a collective of scholars mainly just finishing first books or in the middle of second books" and who were "born at or after the end of the 1960s."[11] Post45, then, is just as much a coterie as a methodology, and a coterie that now exerts significant institutional pressure on the kinds of work on contemporary literature that are seen as valuable.[12]

Other current conversations, loosely grouped under the rubric of "postcritique," also seem to struggle to name the contemporary and articulate how that contemporary relates to the material world around us. Pardis Dabashi insightfully notes, dwelling on the work of postcritical scholars like Rita Felski, Stephen Best, and Sharon Marcus, that "to write about a postcritical future of literary studies and to insufficiently address how grim the future looks to those of us who hold the future of literary studies in our hands seemed a worrisome oversight."[13] Dabashi's critique is twofold: postcritique both misrecognizes the present by focusing on an imagined future that may never arrive, and also fails to address the actual scholars who will someday constitute that future. For her, the issue isn't how we relate to texts themselves, but how we relate to the *world*: "I didn't want to talk differently about texts; I wanted to talk differently about how others were talking about texts."[14] In other words, for the contemporary

---

[10] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009), 15, x.

[11] Hungerford, "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary," 416.

[12] The ability of coteries to shape (and sometimes limit) contemporary conversations about literature extends beyond the Post45 group. For example, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus begin their introduction to the special issue of *Representations* on surface reading by noting that the contributors "constitute a relatively homogenous group of scholars." See Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 1, https:/doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.1. Randall Collins suggests that this type of intergenerational influence in fact structures academic discourse in the humanities more generally. See Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998).

[13] Pardis Dabashi, "Introduction to 'Cultures of Argument': The Loose Garments of Argument," *PMLA* 135, no. 5 (October 2020): 946, https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.946.

[14] Dabashi, "Introduction to 'Cultures of Argument,'" 947.

critic, our critical work is not so much about the text itself but the relationships that the text fosters with the other people who make up the world. Thus, a contemporary critique worthy of the name *must* strive after a global perspective, even if such a perspective is also deferred into the "grim future" imagined by Dabashi.

This collection attempts to tell such a story. Specifically, the essays collected here attempt to re-frame the discussions in post45 studies by engaging with non-American writers, texts, and perspectives. Additionally, productive conversations emerge by attempting to think of canonical American writers like Mark Twain and Ishmael Reed from other national and global perspectives. The authors consider both the ways texts themselves as well as their reception histories approach and challenge our understandings of the contemporary. Ultimately, the collection interrogates prevailing narratives of history, culture, identity, and space within the post45 field. In so doing, it re-considers the historical periodization of the field, which currently covers close to 80 years of literary history. While no single collection of essays could ever articulate a truly global perspective, the essays here work towards a new, intertwined narrative about what defines the contemporary and how national and global literatures fit into this moment of world history.

*****

The aim of this collection—to imagine a more global contemporary literary criticism—emerges out of a longstanding concern in American literary texts more generally. Indeed, twentieth-century literary conceptions of America *already* exist as an unstable set of relationships between inside/outside and part/whole. The very linguistic slippage of America for the United States reflects this (I thus use "America," instead of "United States," throughout the introduction to recognize this instability). These "American" texts both invoke spaces *outside* of the nation in order to define America against or from that outsider perspective, and also invoke spaces that are somehow within the nation, but also exist as separate from it. These spatial synecdoches, like the sewer in *Invisible Man*, the amusement park in *Strangers on a Train*, or the movie theater at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, bear a unique relationship to the national space while maintaining a feeling of separateness. These extra-national spaces may exist within the space of America or outside of it; they may be represented directly in the text or exist as a sort of "phantom space," only represented in memory or "off-stage." By tracing a history of these spaces across a wide range of writers—from James to Nabokov, from Toomer to Hurston, from Morrison to Coetzee—this introduction indexes the various competing narratives, perspectives, and synecdoches that, through their very incompatibility, reveal America for the disparate collection of spaces, texts, and

identities that it is. In so doing, it makes the case that Post45 must be understood within a global context.

Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* both provides an important pivot point between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel, and is also a foundational text for thinking about how the twentieth-century novel in America conceives of its relationship to the outside of the nation, as well as to "insides" like subjectivity, memory, and knowledge (our inner mental spaces). National spaces and personal relationships are not only thematically related here—as the Prince's name "Amerigo'' suggests—but are both only understandable through the same literary *style*. As James comments on *The Golden Bowl* in the preface to the New York edition, "What perhaps most stands out for me is the still marked inveteracy of *a certain indirect and oblique view* of my present action."[15] While this clearly describes James's style, it also provides a connection between his theory of knowledge and his concept of national space: the space of the Other's consciousness, or of a national imaginary, can only be observed through an "indirect and oblique view." Indeed, America itself is only ever present in the novel in such an indirect and oblique way.

This Jamesian perspective necessarily intermixes concepts of inside and outside. The second volume of the novel "The Princess" begins: "It wasn't till many days had passed that the Princess began to accept the idea of having done, a little, something she was not always doing, or indeed that of having listened to any *inward* voice that spoke in a new tone" (327, emphasis mine). The situation this "inner voice" is commenting on is immediately represented as outer space: "the garden of her life" with "some strange tall tower of ivory, or perhaps rather some wonderfully beautiful but outlandish pagoda" (327). What this inner voice is speaking about is Maggie's desire to enter that Pagoda, whereas before, she had been content to merely walk around it. The pagoda represents Maggie's dawning realization that the mental spaces of others—their secret thoughts, knowledge, desires—not only occupy a prominent position in the "garden of her life," but that the *inside* of such a pagoda is only accessible through a "certain indirect and oblique view." The issue here is not what is hidden on the inside of the pagoda—the knowledge of the Prince's affair with Charlotte—but is instead the existence of such an inaccessible inside to begin with. Here, Maggie's traumatic realization is that other people have their own stories and narratives; indeed, the pagoda scene comes immediately after the first volume of the novel, entitled "The Prince." That volume is the textual

[15] Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (London: Penguin, 2009), 3, emphasis mine. All additional citations will be given in parentheses.

inside of the pagoda, but is inaccessible to Maggie from within her own volume of the novel.

At its most basic level, *The Golden Bowl* stages a confrontation between Europeans like the Prince, who are associated with experience and the knowledge of another's mental space, and Americans like Maggie, who are naïve and *don't know* that others know things that are inaccessible. To put it simply, there seems to be a direct relationship between space/origin and epistemological status: between inner, mental spaces and outer, national ones. Inaccessible spaces, both mental and physical, are intimately connected to the two turning points of the novel. The first is already described above. The second is Maggie's decision to convince her father and Charlotte to return to American City (another inaccessible, phantom place) without Maggie revealing her knowledge of the affair to either of them. Thus, if the pagoda represents the inaccessibility of the Prince's inner space, then American City represents that space for Maggie, since it enables her to maintain her own secret knowledge. Significantly, this phantom space, which is never directly represented in the novel, is paradoxically associated not with an oblique, Jamesian perception but with direct sight. As Maggie and the Prince watch the other couple leave, the Prince says to her, "See? I see nothing but *you*" (595, emphasis in original). The novel moves from thoughts of London in its opening pages to thoughts of American City on its final page, and likewise moves from "indirect and oblique" perception to direct perception. But this direct perception is one that involves not seeing as well as seeing. It encompasses the unrepresented space of American City and the present spaces of England, through a form of sight that is doubly qualified, first as a question—"See?"—and second as perception that must first see "nothing" before it can reach its desired object. American City thus enables the kind of perception necessary for "seeing" the space of America itself: perception that both sees and doesn't see; that moves between shifting borders of inside and outside, known and unknown.

Moving forward into the postwar period, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* likewise interrogates the relationship between outside and inside and between Europe and the United States.[16] Furthermore, Nabokov also suggests there is an intimate connection between knowing (epistemological, perceptual, and sexual) and national space. But compared to James, the one-to-one associations of space and theme are less clear. After James re-frames what perception and knowledge

[16] McGurl begins his introduction to *The Program Era* by reading *Lolita* in terms of Nabokov's position within the American Academy, where the "powerful fantasy" is not so much Humbert's "pathologically narcissistic love for Lolita," but rather "one of ideal working conditions, a release from the prison of the classroom into the richly reflexive freedom of artistic expression." See McGurl, *The Program Era*, 2.

are at the end of *The Golden Bowl* and locates that shift to a specifically American space, *Lolita* picks up those ideas and plays out their implications in that American national space.[17] While *The Golden Bowl* represents a confrontation between American naiveté and European knowledge, *Lolita* depicts the aftermath of the deconstruction of those binaries, where knowledge and innocence, European-ness and American-ness, inside and outside all exist as an unstable system within the national space of the United States. As Humbert and Lolita are concluding their first cross-country roadtrip, Humbert reflects:

> We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only *defiled* with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, *was no more to us than a collection* of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep.[18]

Like James, Nabokov here intermixes topography and perception, so that "being" and "seeing" are related but not completely compatible states. Additionally, Humbert's "We had really seen *nothing*" echoes the Prince's "See? I see *nothing* but you," so that, in both cases, a form of indirect perception is demanded by a particular national space. This sight, in turn, results in "defilement," a breakdown of the clean barriers between inside and outside, innocence and experience, knowledge and ignorance. After such a defilement, both subjectivity and nationality no longer seem whole and can only be represented metaphorically as collections of parts. Damaged representations of space ("dog-eared maps, ruined tour books") substitute for an understanding of the national space itself. And instead of the precise language of James, the metaphorical substitutes for Lolita's interiority are her wordless sobs.

Like *The Golden Bowl* and *Lolita*, Jean Toomer's *Cane* also wrestles with how perception frames national identity and space, but Toomer also explicitly tracks how race affects the ways subjects inhabit spaces and perspectives. *Cane* portrays the United States as a collection of disparate parts and places (not only

---

[17] The difference in Nabokov's treatment of America compared to James's can partially be accounted for by the former's feelings about the latter. In a letter to Edmund Wilson, Nabokov refers to a book by James as "miserable stuff, a complete fake" and suggests "you ought to debunk that pale porpoise and his plush vulgarities some day." See Emily Temple, "The Meanest Things Vladimir Nabokov Said About Other Writers," *Literary Hub*, April 20, 2018, https://lithub.com/the-meanest-things-vladimir-nabokov-said-about-other-writers/.

[18] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 175-176, my emphases. Additional citations in parentheses.

in terms of space, but also in terms of textuality) by blurring the lines between a novel and a *collection* of stories or poems. *Cane* is animated by movement between different spaces, from the American South to the American North, and back again. But unlike the other two texts, where the protagonists are free to move about at will, *Cane* instead questions which subjects are able to inhabit which spaces, specifically with regard to race and gender. The first division in the text, between South and North, is marked by a half circle, and the second division between North and South by an incomplete semi-circle. Thus, as the text moves between different regions, it also seems to approach completion without achieving it, or to move full circle without ever quite finishing its circuit. The third section, occupied entirely by the "Kabnis" story, depicts the conflict resulting from the inability of certain racialized subjects to inhabit certain regional spaces: specifically, the problems faced by the Black Northerner Kabnis living in a small Southern town. Kabnis's inability to fully take part in the life of his Southern town dramatizes the text's refusal to "complete the circle," to return to its beginnings in the South and inhabit that space. That is, there is a misfit between subject and space, symbolized by the gaps in the circles that separate the different sections of the book. There is also a misfit between subjects and texts. "Kabnis" begins with the titular character's inability to read, and concludes with another failure of text: "th sin th white folks 'mitted when they made th Bible lie."[19] Like *Lolita*, which suggests an affinity between damaged texts (maps and tourbooks), space, and subjectivity, *Cane* demonstrates the failure of space to under-*write* identity. In so doing, *Cane* shows that within the collection of parts that make up the nation, there is also the "part of no part," to borrow a phrase from Jacques Rancière.[20] An affinity with a certain national space might enable certain kinds of subjectivity and perception, but at the cost of stifling others. Indeed, "Kabnis" recognizes relationships between space and subjectivity, but frames them as oppressive. For example, "Through Ramsay, the whole white South weighs down upon him. The pressure is terrific" (100). Here, Ramsay symbolically stands in for the entire South, not as a legible text, but as a crushing weight.

While recognizing these difficulties, *Cane* still attempts a similar gesture as those found in James and Nabokov: to re-define the relationship between subject, space, and perception. If the incomplete circles that divide the text don't return to their origin and complete their circuit, this allows for a different conclusion, rather than a repetition of the same oppressive history. Instead of a return to the same, the incomplete circle generates new (re)productive

---

[19] Jean Toomer, *Cane* (New York: Liveright, 1993), 115. All additional citations in parentheses.

[20] See Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010).

possibilities. Indeed, "Kabnis" ends with repeated imagery of new birth juxtaposed with an intermingling of inside and outside: "*Within its soft circle*, the figures of Carrie and Father John. *Outside,* the sun arises from its cradle" (116, emphases mine). The incomplete circle that separates this story from section two reappears here, but, instead of signaling failure, it frames a new couple. And its very incompleteness is what allows for new birth, suggesting a transition from the couple on the inside to the sun on the outside, which sings a "birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town" (116). The last two words of the text gesture both at a specific place and at the larger region of the South as a unit of national space. Rather than signalling an absent extra-national space, this text concludes by aligning a present space with rebirth, though an ambivalent one.

Toomer and other writers of color like Hurston, Baldwin, Wright, Himes, and Ellison, present a counter-narrative to that of James and Nabokov, expressing both desire for and anxiety about the American "melting pot" narrative.[21] For example, *Invisible Man* returns full circle at the end to the underground space from where it began, repeating *Cane's* desire to imagine the subject from outside to inside, while also inverting the text's final movement from inside to outside. Also like *Cane*, *Invisible Man* concludes by uneasily dwelling on the possibility of the country as a disparate collection or collectivity, so that the "lower frequencies" where "I speak for you" represent both a collective voice and the eclipse of certain voices by others.[22] In an analogous way to Toomer's re-imagining of inside/outside, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* re-imagines the extra-national, bringing together a skepticism of the melting pot narrative and a combination of perspectives from both inter-, intra-, and extra-national spaces in order to compose a portrait of America.

Reed turns to extra-national spaces in order to account for alternative histories that are obscured by a limited national or spatial perspective. Instead of imagining from the outside to the inside, Reed imagines the outside *into* the inside by tracing the spread of "Jes' Grew" across America. "Jes' Grew," a global pandemic associated with joy and dancing, also brings with it a text of alternative history, "The Work," that originates in Egypt and circulates the globe before finally making its way to America. Through the movements of "Jes' Grew," America itself becomes extra-national, able to contain real history and the alternative history of The Work within the intermixed spaces of Egypt, the

---

[21] For an early critique of other pastoral imaginaries about American culture, see Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1964). Marx, however, is largely silent on issues of race.

[22] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 581. Additional citations in parentheses.

US, and Haiti. In the epilogue to the novel, Reed's protagonist reflects on the type of perception necessary to portray such an odd, extra-national space:

> Strange. It seems that the most insightful pictures of America are done by Europeans or Blacks [….] I once leafed through a photo book about the West. I was struck by how the Whites figured in the center of the photos and drawings while Blacks were centrifugally distant [….] The blacks were usually, if it were an interior, standing in the doorway. Digging the center.[23]

This is not an essentialist claim about non-Americans knowing America better, or a banal claim about the truer sight of the outsider's gaze. If that were true, there would be no significant difference between the perspective of the writers the narrator names—"Wright, Baldwin, Himes"—and the "outsider" émigré writers who were "actually" American—Hemingway, Miller, and so on. Instead, this is a structural claim, suggesting that historically "Europeans or Blacks" were able to (or forced to) occupy a position allowing them to "[dig] the center" without claiming that gaze is inherent to that type of subject. Indeed, the "picture" painted by Reed here is empty of content, instead only concerned with deixis: "West," "center," "distant," "interior," "doorway," "center." With this in mind, the "most insightful picture" of America becomes a *picture without content*, a pure image or a pure phantom space. But at the same time, such a structure can accommodate any content, and does so in Reed's novel: America can include Reed's pastiche of multiple genres and styles, Haiti and Egypt, the texts of history cited at the end alongside the alternative history of The Work, and photo and text.

With the US reframed as a picture without content, contemporary writers *turn back to history* with a strong desire to describe the real and account for the subjects who have been the victims of reframing, excluded from the picture of American-ness altogether: Sebald's photographs in *The Emigrants*, Morrison's "60 million and more" that begins *Beloved*, or Bolaño's forensic accounting of violence against women in *2666*, to name just a few prominent examples. In J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*, Eugene Dawn, a researcher working on something called "The Vietnam Project," reflects specifically on how America gets imagined: "This is because she [his wife] has a false conception of America. She cannot believe that America is big enough to contain its deviants. But America is bigger than all of us […] America will swallow me, digest me, dissolve me in the tides of its blood."[24] Like Reed's expansive portrait of America, Coetzee's novel can structurally accommodate various world spaces within the text,

---

[23] Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 209-210.

[24] J. M. Coetzee, *Dusklands* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 9.

specifically Vietnam, America, and South Africa. At the same time, in response to this structure that can accommodate any content, Coetzee turns to history to take account of real trauma and violence; indeed, the two narratives of the text demonstrate that it is the same structural violence at the foundation of imperialism in South Africa and in the US involvement in Vietnam. Thus, Coetzee shows how the structural emptiness of America can become an imperialist gesture, so that the entire world is subsumed by the United States, but he also shows how that desire turns against itself, inwards, so that becoming "American" means getting swallowed up and digested. Both Reed and Coetzee invoke history to account for the violence produced by a concept of America as an unstable and shifting collection of insides and outsides. These writers also show how the picture of America can accommodate new kinds of writing and authorial subjects. And this desire to account for history in turn places a demand on literary criticism: to continue to understand the shifting spaces of inside and outside, and to work towards understanding not only the novel in America, but the American novel in the world.

*****

The collection is divided into three parts. Part I, entitled "How Soon Is Now?" dwells on the temporal nature of Post45. The authors debate whether the contemporary has any definiable qualities as a historical moment, or whether the contemporary is simply whatever moment we happen to find ourselves in. Amanda Lagji's essay develops the former position through a reading of Ishtiyaq Shukri's *The Silent Minaret,* whereas Michael Maguire-Khan develops the latter position through an engagement with the work of Adorno and others. Dan Malinowski likewise attempts to develop a sense of the specific qualities of the contemporary, but does so through a critique of the Post45 group and a return to the work of Marx and Hegel. Each essay attempts to answer the question: is the contemporary always just "now"? And if not, when is it?

Part II tackles the spatial aspect of post45 Studies. The authors build on the debates of Part I in order to strive towards more global perspectives on texts from the Soviet Union, Nigeria, the Dominican Republic, and the United States. Daria Goncharova focuses on a Soviet-era film adaptation of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* tracing how the film reimagines its source material to focus on an anti-capitalist critique of the United States and its treatment of African Americans. Cathryn Piwinski focuses on the various paratexts of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz in order to suggest that the novel itself mounts a potential critique of globalized literary culture. And Pritika Pradhan reads Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* as reimagining the contemporary global migrant narrative, but then struggling to live up to the premise of its own reimaginings.

Of course, a short collection of essays can never truly capture a global perspective, and the final section of this collection wrestles with that very problem. In chapter seven, Sushil Sivaram discusses Indian literature and attempts to work out what sort of *practice* might best situate us as literary scholars to inhabit the world and the contemporary, whatever their complicated relationship is. In other words, to borrow his own language, he dwells on what it might mean to take post45 itself as an object of study. The collection ends with a brief coda which locates these debates and lines of inquiry in the post-Trumpian moment of the United States.

The essays collected here thus emerge out of a long and ongoing, yet often unremarked upon, conversation within literary texts themselves. However, these essays also emerge out of a very specific set of contemporary social and political conversations: conversations that mirror the relationship between the novel in America and contemporary global literature more generally. Many of the pieces collected here began with a panel at the 2019 NeMLA Conference, appropriately held in Washington D. C. That same weekend, Robert Mueller had concluded his report on Donald Trump's potential collusion with Russia in the 2016 election and William Barr had released his summary of the review. Washington D. C. was abuzz with talk about the report, and indeed, that political conversation mirrored and refracted our literary conversations throughout the whole weekend. On the one hand, the Mueller report emphasized the United States' connection to the world at large, and specifically to Russia. On the other, it also recognized that those connections were often obscure and hard to parse, though the report was also extremely clear that it did *not* exonerate Trump. In the years since that conference, Trump's actions, particularly regarding the COVID pandemic, continued that trend; the Trump presidency and its aftermath has simultaneously de-centered, re-emphasized, and deconstructed the relationship of the United States to the rest of the world. Thus, the essays in this collection speak to that ongoing and urgent political conversation: about the place of the United States in the World, and the fraught and shifting nature of that relationship.

Works cited

Anderson, Amanda. "Situating the Method Debates." *PMLA* 135, no. 5 (October 2020): 1002-1008. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.1002.

Aubry, Timothy, and Florence Dore. "Introduction: Formalism Unbound."*Post45* 5 (2020). https://post45.org/2020/12/aubry-dore-introduction/.

Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.1.

Chihaya, Sarah, Joshua Kotin, and Kinohi Nishikawa. "Introduction: How To Be Now." *Post45* 2 (2019). https://post45.org/2019/07/introduction-how-to-be-now.

Coetzee, J. M. *Dusklands*. New York: Penguin, 1982.

Collins, Randall. *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998.

Cusset, François. *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*. Translated by Jeff Fort. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Dabashi, Pardis. "Introduction to 'Cultures of Argument': The Loose Garments of Argument." *PMLA* 135, no. 5 (October 2020): 946-955. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.946.

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage, 1995.

Hungerford, Amy. "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary." *American Literary History* 20, no. 1/2 (Spring-Summer 2008): 410-419. https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajm044.

James, Henry. *The Golden Bowl*. London: Penguin, 2009.

Lawrence, Jeffrey. *Anxieties of Experience: The Literatures of the Americas from Whitman to Bolaño*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017.

Lim, Song Hwee. "Toward a Geopolitical Approach to the Study of Transnational Cinema." *Post45 (New Filmic Geographies)*, April 5, 2021. https://post45.org/2021/04/toward-a-geopolitical-approach-to-the-study-of-transnational-cinema/.

Love, Heather. "Response." *PMLA* 135, no. 5 (October 2020): 1016-1020. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.1016.

Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1964.

McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York: Vintage, 1997.

Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. London: Continuum, 2010.

Reed, Ishmael. *Mumbo Jumbo*. New York: Scribner, 1996.

Saint-Amour, Paul K. "Counterfactual States of America: On Parallel Worlds and Longing for the Law." *Post45*, September 20, 2011. https://post45.org/2011/09/counterfactual-states-of-america-on-parallel-worlds-and-longing-for-the-law/.

Temple, Emily. "The Meanest Things Vladimir Nabokov Said About Other Writers." *Literary Hub*, April 20, 2018. https://lithub.com/the-meanest-things-vladimir-nabokov-said-about-other-writers/.

Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. New York: Liveright, 1993.

Section I.
“How Soon Is Now?”

Chapter 1

Contemporaneity is a chronological, not a qualitative category

Michael Maguire-Khan

Penn State University

Abstract

This essay argues against recent attempts to invest "the contemporary" with qualitative content, arguing instead for a purely chronological, deictic definition of contemporary literature. First, I articulate certain impasses in the study of contemporary literature as a result of its prior identifications with historical, chronological, and aesthetic periods (post-World War II, twentieth-century, postmodernism). Second, I demonstrate that any qualitative definition of contemporary literature will necessarily periodize the field and unnecessarily narrow its focus. Finally, I propose a chronological understanding of contemporary literature as a means of leveraging those aspects of contemporary literature that complicate or do not conform with the methodological norms of earlier periods.

Keywords: Contemporary Literature, Chronology, Aesthetics, Historicism

***

Although something by the name of "contemporary literature" has been taught and studied in the American university for over sixty years, there exists no commonly accepted theory, history, or even definition of the field as an institutional discipline or object of scholarship. Nor, still, has there been any sustained effort to produce such a theory, history, or definition; indeed, it is only within the last few years that a handful of scholars have begun such work. This lack of disciplinary self-consciousness has become a particularly significant problem in recent decades. Literary scholarship has since the 1980s favored historicist modes of reading that, in practice, place a premium on what is regarded as sufficient chronological distance between the researcher and the object of study; in other words, the dominant mode of literary scholarship presupposes non-contemporaneity. There are several reasons for this partiality

to chronological distance, many of which were long used to justify the exclusion of contemporary literature from university study. In the case of the scholarship dominant today, this distance is crucial to certain forms of historicism in which the scholar, usually drawing on historical research from other fields (history, sociology, economics, etc.), retrospectively articulates a cultural matrix in which literary text and social context determine and overdetermine each other.

Of course, contemporary works can still be (and are) attached to an ongoing metanarrative, such as that of the neoliberal stage of capital or the historical "rupture" represented by 9/11, but the historical proximity mitigates the authority of both the metanarrative and the literary object. As a consequence of literary scholarship's structural predisposition to historical distance, contemporary literature studies, which constitutively lacks a fixed chronological scope (let alone a stable "period" as its object) stands at a methodological disadvantage relative to period-fields like nineteenth-century literature studies and modernist studies, at least insofar as it remains beholden to normative methodological and professional practices. The failure of contemporary literature studies to recognize its difference, or at least fully articulate the implications of this difference, is the principal impetus for this essay.

In addition to the underlying problems the field of contemporary literature studies has struggled to resolve since the rise of historicism in the 1980s, the turn of the twenty-first century entailed a more immediately visible crisis within the field. Between the felt and actual decline of postmodernism as a periodizing concept (that is, as a historical concept organizing literary production since the late 1960s) and the necessary dis-identification of "late twentieth-century literature" with "contemporary literature" after 2000, scholars were forced to inquire about the relationship between such terms as "postwar literature," "late-twentieth-century literature," "postmodern literature," "twenty-first-century literature," and "contemporary literature."[1] Another way to put this is that scholars were compelled to recognize that "contemporary literature" is not a period-field in the same way that "nineteenth-century literature" is. "Contemporary" is a deictic term, necessarily dependent on the scholar's temporal circumstances; thus, the object of contemporary literature studies is always mutable, always on the move.

[1] See, for instance, two twenty-first-century special issues of *Twentieth-Century Literature*—a journal whose eponymous object was at the point of its founding only half-complete, but is now cut off from the present: *After Postmodernism* 53, no. 3 (Fall 2007) and *Postmodernism, Then* 57, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2011).

In the last 15 or so years, contemporary literature studies has made important strides toward recognizing, theorizing, and promoting itself as a distinctive field. In 2006, a group of junior scholars formed Post45, a collective that has since founded an annual conference and, in 2010, an online peer-reviewed journal of the same name. Around the same time, a separate group of scholars began to form the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present (ASAP), which has hosted its own conferences and symposia since 2009 and introduced *ASAP/Journal* in 2016. Additionally, a number of presses have launched book series in recent years dedicated to the study of contemporary literature broadly understood: Stanford University Press' *Post45* (edited by the titular collective), Columbia University Press' *Literature Now*, and the University of Iowa Press' *The New American Canon*.[2]

With such institution building has come increased scholarly attention to contemporary literature studies as a distinct discipline. The last few years have featured a number of edited collections—in addition to this one—which, to varying degrees, interrogate the composition and meaning of contemporary literature as a field of study. The collection *Postmodern/Postwar—And After* (2016), for instance, contains a compelling "dialogue on the field" in which a number of scholars mull recent developments in the discipline. Concerning the rise of post-1945 literature's institutional visibility, Matthew Hart posits three possible causes: 1) the passing of time, which makes possible "new sorts of scholarship, whether historicist or not" and "the sort of work that gets recognized and rewarded by our colleagues, most of whom assume such focal distance as a matter of course;" 2) market pressures, which make the popularity of contemporary texts with students more valuable; and, 3) the rise of modernist studies, which has "given us institutional structures to imitate and react against."[3] Speaking as editor of *The New American Canon* series, Samuel Cohen worries that the "accelerated expansion" of the field has reinforced an "inclination so many of us share to obsess about periodization, movements, and moments," and that the desires "to have a new name for everything, to build schema in which the difference of now from then can be charted . . . can also breed a predictability and, perhaps, more important, can restrict the ways

[2] For recent commentaries on the field's institutional growth, see David J. Alworth, "Hip to Post45," *Contemporary Literature* 54, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 622-633, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43297925; and Theodore Martin, "Contemporary Inc.," *Representations* 142 (Spring 2018): 124-144, https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2018.142.1.124.

[3] Andrew Hoberek et al., "Postmodern, Postwar, Contemporary: A Dialogue on the Field," in *Postmodern/Postwar—and After: Rethinking American Literature*, ed. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 29.

PAGES MISSING

FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

About the contributors

Michael Maguire-Khan has published articles in *American Literature, Criticism, Post45,* and *Critique*. He teaches high school English in Miami.

Amanda Lagji is Assistant Professor of English and World Literature at Pitzer College. Her research interests include postcolonial literature, critical time studies, and terrorism and literature. She publishes widely on postcolonial literature, including recent chapters in *Transnational Africana Women's Fictions* (2021), *Women Writing Diaspora: Transnational Perspectives in the 21st Century* (2021), *The Oxford Handbook of Transnational Law* (2021), and *Timescapes of Waiting: Spaces of Stasis, Delay and Deferral* (2019). Her book, *Postcolonial Fiction and Colonial Time: Waiting for Now* is forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press.

Dan Malinowski is a PhD candidate at Rutgers University. His dissertation considers how experimental poets react to financialization and the end of the media, specifically at the end of the twentieth century.

Daria Goncharova is a PhD candidate in English at the University of Kentucky, with a background in Linguistics and Cultural Studies. She received her Bachelor's degree in Linguistics from the Southern Federal University, Russia in 2015 and her Master's degree in English from the University of Kentucky in 2018. Her research interests include twentieth-century American literature and film, gender and women's studies, citizenship studies, and critical studies of whiteness. Her dissertation, *Spaces of Citizenship*, explores the role that suburbia played in the cultural negotiation of American citizenship in film and literature of the early Cold War.

Cathryn Piwinski is a current PhD candidate in the English Department at Rutgers University, where she works on twentieth- and twenty-first-century US fiction, book history, and reception theory. She has published with the University of Leiden's *TXT Magazine* and has a co-written book chapter on science fiction TV fan communities forthcoming from Routledge. She is the current Vice President of the James Joyce Society.

Pritika Pradhan received her PhD at the Department of Literatures in English at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, in 2019. Her research interests include nineteenth-century British literature, art history, and aesthetic philosophy, and their reincarnations in contemporary literature and culture. She is the recipient of a Raritan Fellowship and Mellon Summer Research Awards from Rutgers University and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Her

article on the details of John Ruskin's Gothic aesthetics is forthcoming in *English Literary History* (ELH), and her essay on A. S. Byatt's novel Possession has been accepted for the forthcoming *The Palgrave Handbook of Neo-Victorianism*.

Sushil Sivaram currently lives in Dilijan, Armenia where he is exploring the Caucasus, and working on independent academic and creative writing projects. His scholarly work has appeared in *Comparative Literature*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, and *Post45*. His creative work has appeared in *Almost Island, Retort Magazine, Lantern Review: A Journal of Asian American Poetry,* and *REAL- Regarding Arts and Letters*, among others. He holds an MFA in poetry from Oklahoma State University and a PhD in Literature from Rutgers University.

William G. Welty earned his PhD in English at Rutgers University in 2020. His writing has appeared in *Politics/Letters, Textual Practice, Hypercultura*, and *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Society*. He has also contributed chapters to *The Encyclopedia of the Black Arts Movement, Trump Fiction*, and *Creoles, Diasporas, and Cosmopolitanisms*. He lives in New Jersey with his wife, son, and dog.

A collection like this always has more contributors than just the ones mentioned above. Special thanks to all of them, especially the following: the audience members at NeMLA who heard many of these essays in their initial presentation form; the anonymous peer reviewer, for their kind and insightful comments; the staff at Vernon, who believed in this project from the beginning; and Valerie Park-Welty, who believed in both the book and the editor struggling to put it together.

Index

H

I

J

L

M

N

O

P

R

S

T

U

W

Z