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Debjani Ganguly. *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form*. Duke UP, 2016.

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Abstract

Review of Debjani Ganguly. *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form*. Duke University Press, 2016. 300 pp.

Keywords

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“Keiner streitet mehr über die Literatur” (‘No one fights over literature anymore,’) was a matter-of-fact comment made by my German colleague Christian Liedtke at his public talk on the early twentieth-century creation and desecration of Heinrich Heine memorials. (Heine was a Jewish-German exile in the early 1800s, as well as the author of the famous “Lorelei” poem.) No one in the twenty-first century appears to be creating new memorials to early nineteenth-century German literature, Liedtke implied, nor would they bother much with desecrating that which had little meaning to anyone anymore. The comment was flippant and nevertheless rang true; the intellectual public now fights about football player behavior during the American national anthem, the cast composition of popular TV shows, inflammatory campus speakers, and friends’ reshared posts.

Rare is it that one fights over literature anymore, regardless of how polemical it is or once was. Yet literature continues to tug at the strings of the present. In her latest monograph *This Thing Called The World*, Debjani Ganguly demands that we seek the emotional and philosophical depths of the contemporary novel while also acknowledging that “there is no real transcendence of the human from inhuman post-cold war circuits of violence, only a retreat into a hyper-mediated sensibility that can but endlessly reflect on its incapacity to bring some semblance of order to the world” (300). Indeed, this struggle to convey to a global literary public both accurate representations and the ambiguities of mediated representation itself is found at the very center of the novels and other pieces Ganguly discusses: Martin Amis’s “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta,” Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*, David Mitchell’s *Ghostwritten*, Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown*, Dom DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*, and Janette Turner Hospital’s *Orpheus Lost*, among others. After 1989—and certainly after September 11, 2001—Ganguly argues that authors of the modern novel have turned toward the daily mediation of global sites of suffering, as well as the incorporation of troubling visuals into these novels’ form and content. Nine short chapters and a coda in *This Thing Called the World* demonstrate how the novels of the last two decades participate in—and run up against the grain of—dominant modes of framing current events, mind-numbing spectacle, human atrocity, and invisible systems of power and coercion that manage us all.

The strength of this monograph is undoubtedly the rich, largely unpretentious description of so many contemporary works, which many would aspire to read and few actually do. “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta,” for example, grapples with the overwhelming data found in the 9/11 report on Atta, the leader of the terrorist attacks. In Amis’s piece, Ganguly sees the “sheer pressure on

the novelist to reckon with . . . worldviews and habitations of staggering incommensurability” as “indelibly linked to our digitally enabled connectivity on a global scale” (48). The pattern she identifies in this and other “world novels” is that the “melancholic and humanitarian inscriptions . . . envision the ravages of our contemporary world order in ways that radically challenge and unsettle both mediatized and militarized regimes of visibility” (66). The postcolonial perspective of the book is no less breathtaking than its indictments of modern visual media: Ganguly, like the authors she studies, confronts centuries of imperial logics and racialized exploitation through the symptoms of the present: behavioral tics, automated weapon systems, the terror of 9/11 victims, court cases, and so forth. The linchpins of global connectivity, a perpetual state of American-initiated warfare, and increased humanitarian awareness of others’ plight certainly promise to hold the book together.

Where the book stumbles is in the way it frames the Cold War: the “kairos of 1989” (6) as the pivot on which our contemporary moment hinges. In this, the book unintentionally deposits itself right in the shadow of Francis Fukuyama’s seductive “end of history” thesis during the introductory chapter (8) with 1989 marking a palpable caesura, only to then double back on continuities from the Cold War that persist in the present (e.g., CIA logics 154-56). It is worth mentioning that historians such as Bernd Stoeber, Gregg Brazinsky, Daniel Immerwahr, Frank Boesch, and Tony Judt have notably re-visited the global economic, political, and military conflicts that fall under the title “Cold War” (with Boesch arguing that it is 1979, not 1989, that marked the shift toward our contemporary state of affairs). Literary scholars such as Ganguly who already are thinking across different nationalities, political contexts, and ethnic/racial identities would do well also to think across disciplines, especially when it comes to core assumptions concerning a zeitgeist or a world system. The book is a truly remarkable first attempt at capturing the complexity of our times through novels. Nevertheless, a humanities search for “ethical depth” (182) in our modern media climate benefits from a broader historicization of such “ethics,” as one might otherwise unwittingly valorize the metanarratives that justified earlier imperialism and centuries of systems of exploitation and interdependence. Ganguly certainly understands this in the present, and so it would be of interest to see it applied to the frameworks of the recent past on which she heavily relies for an epistemological break. Could then Ian MacEwan be writing in dialogue with William Faulkner, or Dom DeLillo be writing in concert with Alejo Carpentier? Opening up the whole world and its past as topoi of literary study also means troubling the national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries that tend to close the world off from itself. Those readers interested in both the form and content of the contemporary novel, especially colleagues in English and Comparative Literature, will find much to think about as they pore over Ganguly’s book. Books engage the headline news, but then also reach beyond them

to the human substance lurking behind their commercial spectacle. Then again, perhaps we all *do* still fight about literature after all.

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