This book argues that contemporary world literature is defined by peripheral internationalism. Over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a range of aesthetic forms beyond the metropolitan West – fiction, memoir, cinema, theater – came to resist cultural nationalism and promote the struggles of subaltern groups. Peripheral internationalism pitted intellectuals and writers not only against the ex-imperial West but also against their burgeoning national elites. In a sense, these writers marginalized the West and placed the non-Western peripheries in a new center. Through a grounded yet sweeping survey of Bengali, English, and other texts, the book connects India to the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, Latin America, and the United States. Chapters focus on Rabindranath Tagore, M.N. Roy, Mrinal Sen, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, and Aravind Adiga. Unlike the Anglo-American emphasis on a post-national globalization, Insurgent Imaginations argues for humanism and revolutionary internationalism as the determinate bases of world literature.

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INSURGENT IMAGINATIONS

World Literature and the Periphery

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For my mother, Jayanti Majumder
What was interesting was that the details of the [Nairobi literature] debate were the same: all sides were agreed on the need to include African, European, and other literatures. But what would be the center? And what would be the periphery, so to speak? How would the center relate to the periphery? Thus the question of the base of the take-off, the whole question of perspective and relevance, altered the weight and relationship of the various parts and details to each other.

Nguĩ wa Thiong’o, “The Quest for Relevance,”

*Decolonizing the Mind*
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Preface

Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery contends that peripheral internationalism provides a radical new perspective on world literature. A non-Western humanist and internationalist imagination vigorously negotiated the struggles of subaltern groups in the periphery. A wide range of aesthetic forms came to resist cultural nationalism: I trace the notion of peripheral internationalism across a range of cultural forms – fiction, cinema, theater, memoir, and essay – through a situated study of Anglophone and Bengali texts. The book’s chapters focus on well-known and relatively marginal figures such as Rabindranath Tagore, Manabendra Nath (M.N.) Roy, Mrinal Sen, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, and Aravind Adiga.

Insurgent Imaginations connects India to 1920s and 1930s Mexico and the Soviet Union; 1960s and 1970s Vietnam, Cuba, and the Congo; and present-day China and the United States. I discuss how literary texts came to highlight marginalized groups across national boundaries, provincialize dominant histories, and articulate the distinctive yet interconnected problematic of peripheral literature. These interactions shaped – and transformed – indigenous aesthetic traditions: this meant in turn that not only individual authors but also cultural forms such as vernacular and Anglophone fiction, film, and drama evolved globally in dialogue with one another. What is significant here is that an understudied constellation of writers outside the “West” was drawing more on one another than on the imperial center when it came to their aesthetic sensibilities. This is vital for correcting the assumption that the colonized were always responding, or writing back, to their former masters. In a sense, these writers were marginalizing the center and placing the periphery in a new center.

Peripheral internationalism is also very different from what is now called “world literature.” Unlike the latter’s emphasis on a “post-national” globalization, the former insists on national sovereignty and self-determination. Internationalism pitted intellectuals and writers not only
against the ex-imperial center but also against their own national elites. In our own moment, such an imperative assumes enormous ethical and creative urgency. The categories of modernism and realism, too, were far from being matters of individual artistic choice, taste, or fashion. Rather, these notions were intimately tied to powerful ideological currents and major social conflicts, locally as well as globally. Their negotiation of a vernacular internationalism, I reckon, problematizes Anglophone understandings of the global and the cosmopolitan. Indeed, by highlighting culture as a site of emancipatory struggle in the periphery, one returns to a central debate in the theoretical humanities today—what it means to be human. Mediating against critical theory’s valorization of the post- and the non-human, artistic and political movements in the majority world continue to push the boundaries of humanist emancipation. The “insurgent imagination,” while not beholden to the liberal-Enlightenment notion of a coherent self, testifies to the possibility of progressive social change. This pushes back against pessimistic ideas of a posthuman present where there is no scope for human agency.

In addition, the book brings attention to peripheral modernism and realism in an indigenous source language, Bengali (the second language after Hindi in South Asia and the seventh globally in terms of numbers of native speakers) as well as its complicated influence on Anglophone production. Bengali occupies an anomalous position in Anglo-American cultural studies that my book seeks to address: on the one hand, leading postcolonial scholars such as Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee, and others draw on nineteenth-century Bengal to make their case for colonial discourse; on the other hand, the rich history of twentieth-century Bengali internationalism and the diverse influence of Russian, Chinese, and “third-world” anticolonial currents, manifested most prominently in literature, are almost entirely unknown to Anglo-American readers. By focusing on internationalist literature (Mahasweta Devi, Samaresh Basu, Manik Bandopadhyay, and many others) and its relationship to theater and cinema (Bijan Bhattacharya, Utpal Dutt, and Mrinal Sen et al.), I illuminate important conjunctures of aesthetic development in South Asia that resonated with parallel currents in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere in the peripheral world.

Chapter 1 advances a redefinition of world literature with specific focus on the periphery. Annotating a politically charged terrain of intellectual history, I maintain first that the humanist imagination emerged as a key topic of debates since the early twentieth century and, second, that anti-imperial currents emphasized the role of the imagination in envisioning an
alternative conception of the world. As part of this internationalist constellation, the chapter discusses the intertwining histories of Rabindranath Tagore’s pioneering lecture on “World Literature” (1907) and Mao Zedong’s Yenan lectures on art and literature (1942). Such a constellation sheds new light on Fredric Jameson’s much-debated notion of “third world literature as national allegory” (1986), going beyond extant critiques. It further complicates, I argue, the conventional separation between twentieth-century anticolonial, postcolonial, and contemporary globalization-era literatures.

Chapter 2 highlights the understudied literary genre of the memoir. I focus on the writings of the peripatetic activist-intellectual Manabendra Nath (M. N.) Roy. Exploring his diverse engagements with early twentieth-century Black radicalism in the United States and anticolonialism in Mexico, the Soviet Union, China, and Germany, my reading of Memoirs (1964) illuminates how literary form negotiates the politics of anticolonial internationalism. Roy contributed to the debates of the Communist International, famously differing with Vladimir Lenin on the “National and Colonial Questions.” Roy also posited the imbrication of race and caste through his critique of cultural nationalism in India. An icon of the interwar era, Roy presented formulations in India in Transition (1922) that complicate both Euro-American universalism and the influential paradigm of decoloniality that favors postcolonial nationalism in terms of its cultural difference from the West.

Chapter 3 explores non-Bollywood, regional Indian cinema. I take up the depiction of urban struggles in Mrinal Sen’s Calcutta 71 (1972). Sen’s “city films,” as these are called, are trailblazing experiments in stylistic form and anticolonial theory. They explicitly draw from Latin American Cinema Novo, particularly “Imperfect Cinema” and “Third Cinema” popularized by the Cuban Julio García Espinosa and the Argentinians Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, respectively. On the other hand, Sen is equally indebted to Bengali literature on the city, which includes the work of the poet Jibanananda Das and the prose writers Manik Bandopadhyay and Samaresh Basu among others. Sen’s cinema sets in motion a conceptually daring relationship between film, literature, and politics. He authors what I call a “lumpen-aesthetics,” which turns a pejorative term for the dissident poor (the lumpen) into an objective assessment of peripheral society. It is a cinema that is adequate to the task of representing the city and articulating its peculiarly peripheral fractures.

Chapter 4 examines representations of tribal or adivasi movements by two of India’s best-known writers, Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy.
Roy’s creative nonfiction essay “Walking with the Comrades” (2011) created a stir in India for its sympathetic portrayal of rebellious tribal activists. I maintain that Roy’s key inspiration is the earlier short story by Mahasweta Devi, “Draupadi” (1978). Describing a tribal woman leader Dopdi Mejhen, Devi’s story, translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is a widely anthologized text in postcolonial literature. However, the text’s global career fails to capture its complex history: this includes the Cold War and the contest between the Soviet- and American-led blocs for regional hegemony in South Asia; the impact of antiwar people’s theater of the 1960s, including plays on Vietnam and the Black Panthers; and the tradition of progressive Bengali women’s fiction within which Devi is properly located. The chapter surveys the relationship between Devi’s Bengali-language story and Roy’s English-language essay through a host of little-known (to the Anglophone world) intermediaries. In doing so, it demonstrates how various grassroots movements for the rights of adivasi and ethnic minorities continue to influence creative nonfiction in the contemporary era.

Chapter 5 discovers an unlikely source of caste and class politics in Aravind Adiga’s Anglophone novel of individual ambition The White Tiger (2008). I propose that the novel recodes, through a series of parodies and formal allusions, rural lower-caste militants, who regularly appear at the margins of the plot and whose contrapuntal significance the majority of commentators have overlooked. The chapter re-illuminates the complex maze of subterranean flows that undercuts the novel’s surface narrative of a new India. I hold that traditions of the protest novel, epistolary narrative, and modernist and indigenous satirical genres are at work in the novel: these gesture to suppressed narratives of peripheral internationalism. My reading of the novel elaborates the evolving significance of internationalism in twenty-first century India, where the rural and the subaltern have been all but banished from cultural discourse.

Chapter 6, a concluding section, annotates the contributions of this book to contemporary scholarship on non-Western world literature and intellectual history. It provides a critical assessment of humanism and literary form and makes suggestions for realignment and expansion. I locate twentieth-century modernity as an interlinked and asymmetrical relationship between the metropolitan core and the global periphery. This is a relation that continues to structure the twenty-first century world and the struggle for liberation in interesting and unforeseen ways.
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Acknowledgments