Imperfect Solidarities

Lahiri, Madhumita

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Conclusion

The solidarities forged through print internationalism may today appear hopelessly naive, but their strategies—and their optimism—may be more relevant than ever. All three of the great men featured in this book have experienced a curiously predictable trajectory in prestige over the last one hundred years. Our analysis began at the turn of the twentieth century, when Tagore, Gandhi, and Du Bois enjoyed great esteem both locally and globally, a status that persisted, with some minor variations, until around the end of the Second World War. During the Cold War, however, all three, whether living or dead, were reframed within its polarizing binaries. Tagore, who died in 1941, would have the singular distinction of becoming the posthumous author of two different national anthems—India’s in 1950 and, in 1971, that of the newly created Bangladesh—despite, as we saw, his trenchant opposition to nationalism itself. Gandhi became known as the father of the Indian nation, even though he was assassinated in 1948 for his alleged betrayal of it. And Du Bois would be increasingly isolated from African American politics and aggressively persecuted by the U.S. government, moving to Ghana in 1961, two years before his death.

In the post–Cold War moment—and now, in our age of the War on Terror—the forms of internationalism advanced by these three men have come into both popular and academic fashion. Gandhi, Tagore, and Du Bois have all benefited from this revival—each in his own way has been reinvented by scholarly and popular commentary in the last
quarter century as a sage figure warning us of the excesses of nationalism. The women featured in this monograph have fared rather worse. Of the three, only Jessie Redmon Fauset has gained from the changing priorities of our contemporary moment: she is increasingly recognized for her contributions to African American literature and culture, while Sister Nivedita and Sonja Schlesin feature peripherally, if at all, in either popular or scholarly awareness. Whereas the other historical figures in this volume can be, and are, celebrated as inspirations for young persons of Indian and African American heritage, I wonder when we will be able to celebrate Nivedita and Schlesin in similar terms: not in spite of their Whiteness, but because of what we can learn from it.

The discussions of this monograph’s chapters end in the convulsions of the Second World War, and I will conclude with an essay, “The Seeds of the Fascist International” (1945), that speculated on the forms of internationalism in relation to that brutal conflict. Writing in the wake of the attempted Nazi genocide of the Jewish people, the German Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906–75) warned that “modern anti-Semitism was never a mere matter of extremist nationalism” but, as her essay’s title declared, “a fascist international.” Its operating “textbook,” Arendt wrote, was the notorious Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a spurious document from nineteenth-century Russia that claimed to be the record of a widespread Jewish conspiracy. Instead of solely celebrating the defeat of Nazi Germany, Arendt finds in its demise the proof of fascism’s likely international resilience. The end of the Second World War may have led to widespread interrogation of the dangers of nationalism, but Arendt found in Hitler’s Germany a warning of the danger of internationalism, for “only when fascism is understood as an anti-national international movement does it become intelligible why the Nazis . . . allowed their land to be transformed into a shambles.” Despite the many decades since Arendt’s warning, we remain within the remit of her concern. Arendt feared that the fascist international’s malicious conspiracy-mongering would remain palatable to those “who vaguely sense our worldwide interdependence but are unable to penetrate into the actual working of this universal relationship.” This condition, for better or worse, characterizes so many of us in the twenty-first century, which, as Arendt bemoaned of her own century, is also “a time when full political information, necessarily worldwide in scope, is available only to the professional.” Perhaps the most surprising continuity with our contemporary political climate lies in the widespread enthusiasm for internationalism, which forms a curious point of convergence be-
tween the contemporary Left and the contemporary Right: the former deplores globalization; the latter detests globalists; yet both insist on terming their worldwide organizations “international.”

In the preceding chapters, I have sought new possibilities for the study of internationalism by describing its operations through the coining of new words. In doing so, I have coined a new term of my own: “print internationalism.” Print internationalism, in my theorization, names a strategy within the worldwide hegemony of the English language (signaled in the moniker of “the global Anglophone”) to create alternate geographies (such as “the Global South”) and to summon new collectivities (such as “people of color”) through the creation of new words. Reading Arendt’s essay, we can recognize the operations of print internationalism, complete with its own fictionalized history (Protocols of the Elders of Zion) and catalyzing neologism (Nazi). I have focused my study on the print internationalisms of highly celebrated historical figures—but it would not be difficult, I suspect, to extend the analysis to include many of those whom history has condemned.

In choosing to call this phenomenon “print internationalism,” I have intentionally echoed Benedict Anderson’s “print nationalism,” and I have reinforced that association by developing specific parallels. I have argued that print internationalism creates an interpretive community, rather than the imagined community of Anderson’s model, and I have emphasized the centrality of the periodical and the fictionalized history as the genres of print internationalism, in contrast to Anderson’s emphasis on the newspaper and the novel. By offering a vision of community formation through print media that diverges distinctly from Anderson’s model, I have proposed a new avenue for literary and cultural studies that attends the differences between the national and the international. This new model can help us understand, for instance, Arendt’s description of Nazism as “an anti-national international movement” that nonetheless appears to be extreme nationalism. The radical nationalist parties of many European nations, for instance, have found a curious internationalist solidarity in their mutual contempt: they will loudly decry each other’s nations and, at the same time, support each other’s national chauvinisms.

In developing these new possibilities for literary studies, I have proposed a dialectical reading practice that reads from two places at once—and, specifically, from the sites that a given text may render only as metaphor. Thus, we read Tagore’s China through the interweaving of text and preface; Gandhi’s South Africa through a literalization of
parables; and Du Bois’s India through the interplay of content and annotation. In developing this oscillating reading practice, I demonstrate a dialectical method for postcolonial reading that can hold multiple possibilities in suspension, reading at once through and from the figural portions of a text. Rather than resolving these contradictions, as in the political unconscious of Fredric Jameson’s reading method, the reading method that I propose generates a divided consciousness: one that resides, as I have shown, in the relations among differently subjugated peoples.

This method is quite different from the reading modes foundational to postcolonial studies. In reading print internationalism, after all, we are not reading for the traces of British imperialism buried in nineteenth-century British fiction, or for the evidence of ordinary Indians’ contributions to India’s decolonization, or for the restoration of Africans’ essential humanity. I am fortunate to build on these works, and to assume readers who are, at the least, sympathetic to postcolonial critical practices. In reading print internationalism, we read, rather, for the relations among and across different colonial and semicolonial regions: to take the primary examples of this book, between India, China, South Africa, and African America. In writing *Imperfect Solidarities*, I have operated from the suspicion that the field has been ill-served by extending the methods developed for the study of relations between the colonizer and the colonized to that of relations among the colonized. Consequently, instead of the normative tone that such reading methods can enable, I offer a perhaps less definitive—one might say, imperfect—appraisal.

In deliberately constructing anachronistic applications for contemporary terms like “the global Anglophone,” “people of color,” and “the Global South,” I aim to show that these unifying concepts have longer histories. The newness of the neologism is important precisely because that newness is manufactured: the coinage centralizes a latent meaning and puts it into newly effective circulation. A nonce word is truly new: it has no prior unarticulated meaning in cultural discourse and, partly as a consequence, it disappears after its immediate context of usage, never to be heard again. A neologism, by contrast, is a new coinage with a future—precisely because it also has a past, which enables it to outlast the immediate circumstances that led to its articulation. Much as the global Anglophone, in my theorization, exists before its explicit naming, so too did the concept of “people of color” exist before it is so named: it is the motivation behind Gandhi’s initial South African concerns, as
we saw in chapter 2, and it is the dream enshrined in Du Bois’s brownie, as we saw in chapter 3. This preexistence, however, is not unlimited. Although the countries central to Gandhi’s activism are both part of the Global South, that concept is not present in Gandhi’s own work. The term “Global South” emphasizes the unequal worldwide distribution of material prosperity and industrialization, concerns that are fundamentally dissonant from Gandhi’s own antimodernizing impulses. Instead, I argue, the Global South surfaces clearly in the work of Du Bois. As I demonstrated in chapter 3, Du Bois’s reliance on a magical figure for childhood, the brownie, enables a suturing of divergent regions of the world in a manner that does not resolve their differences but instead reproduces them (quite literally). The brownie compresses differences across a worldwide gambit that we can recognize as “the Global South,” while its magical quality means that it is not primarily indicative of actual “people of color.”

Today’s internationalisms are more likely to publish their insights on digital media platforms than in the print formats—the periodical, the pamphlet, and the codex—that were central to the internationalisms presented here. Yet their fundamental operating principles may well have much in common: then, as now, aspiring internationalists seek to create interpretive communities by generating new words. The internet abounds with neologisms coined within the global Anglophone, which likewise serve to create new geographies and summon new collectivities. It is my hope that the methods forged here for the study of print internationalism will help us to apprehend the neologisms of our own time, as we read among and across these interpretive communities to generate imperfect solidarities of our own.