National Consciousness and Literary Cosmopolitics

Weihsin Gui

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Constellations, Critical Nationality, and Literary Cosmopolitics

Distance is not a safety-zone but a field of tension. It is manifested not in relaxing the claim of ideas to truth, but in delicacy and fragility of thinking.

—Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 127

This book is concerned with the conjunctions of national consciousness and literary cosmopolitics in a global moment rather than making a case for or against the nation from political, economic, or anthropological perspectives. Drawing on the aesthetic theory and negative dialectical thinking of Frankfurt School critic Theodor Adorno, I argue that postcolonial literary form and style negates the homogenizing and exclusionary impulse of a unitary national identity and helps us recognize nationalism as a critical constellation of political, economic, and cultural forces that make up a social formation. Even with the increase in flows of people, capital, and culture around the globe, nations have not withered away. This is nothing new; as the editor of a recent anthology on nationalism remarks rather tiredly, “by now it is practically axiomatic that obituaries of the nation are premature” (Burton 1). This book takes a different tack by arguing that, after the heyday of anticolonial independence in the Third World and the establishment of postcolonial literature and its academic corollary—postcolonial studies—as distinct fields of writing and research, literary texts and their authors in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries evince a critical national consciousness particular to their individual sociocultural contexts, and that in a global moment this national consciousness is dynamically engaged with both local cultural formations and transnational cultural flows. This engagement
with what lies beyond the nation’s symbolic and territorial boundaries is a literary cosmopolitics—the imagination and representation of sustained political engagement between local and translocal cultural particularities through fiction and poetry. In using the term *global moment* as opposed to globalization, I wish to connote a spatial and temporal conjunction rather than an existing economic process or condition. A moment is both a rotational force as well as an instant in time, and it is against the backdrop of a sweeping force field of narratives of cultural and economic globalization that we see the intersections of national consciousness and literary cosmopolitics rather than the establishment of a triumphantly postnational moment in literature, culture, and world politics. Narratives of cultural and economic globalization, or globalism, may reveal spaces of minority discourses and counternarratives and refigure the national imaginary as a complex weave of negotiations and multiple identifications, but they do not lead to a definitive repudiation of the nation either as a unit of analysis or as a social formation. The persistence of tropes and figures of national consciousness in literary texts, together with the loosening of the hyphen between nation and state in contemporary world politics, suggests that nationalism is a salient cultural and political movement and that the nation remains a contested space worth thinking, feeling, and writing about.

A cosmopolitical perspective on nationalism considers how “the tightness or laxity of the hyphen between nation and state is an important historical factor in the evaluation of the aims of nationalism and their compatibility with normative cosmopolitanism” (Cheah, “The Cosmopolitical—Today” 31). Thus, in contrast to the normative cosmopolitanism of radical, global culture espoused by proponents of globalism, cosmopolitics asks us “to turn our critical focus on the mutating global field of political, economic, and cultural forces in which nationalism and cosmopolitanism are invoked as practical discourses” (31). This critical focus on the mutual imbrication of national and transnational forces in a constantly changing global framework helps us recognize that while globalization is a useful concept with which to broaden interpretations of national and postcolonial literatures, it “doesn’t displace or replace existing institutions and practices once and for all; too much of the discourse on globalization has failed to remember the force and power of the residual at every moment of the dominant” (O’Brien and Szeman 609). By rethinking nationalism not as national identity but as political consciousness and cultural critique constituted through and inextricably bound with cosmopolitical engagement, postcolonial literature goes against the grain of celebratory narratives of cultural and economic globalization or globalism.
Globalism and Postnationalist Discourse

In the last two decades, scholars in the social sciences and humanities have argued against the nation as a framework for critical analysis and emphasized the priority of global cultural flows and their corresponding transnational intersections with social and cultural formations at the local or subnational level. I call such arguments that foreground the global in cultural and literary studies “globalism,” as distinct from social and economic theories of globalization that observe and analyze the workings of information technology, the movement of migrant and diasporic populations, and the flexible accumulation of finance capital across the borders of nation-states. I distinguish between these two strands of thinking about the global to more clearly delineate the specific focus of this book, which is an examination of national consciousness and literary cosmopolitics rather than a study of economic and demographic flows and movements.

Drawing on the ideas of traveling cultures and routes of exchange developed in anthropology by James Clifford (1997), scholars both in the social sciences and in literary studies have challenged the authority of the nation-state and nationalism by emphasizing the decentralizing force of cultural fluidity through concepts such as diaspora, transnationalism, and postnationalism. These arguments often rely on a conceptualization of culture as everyday practice in the anthropological or sociological sense, thus eliding the significance of nationalism and national consciousness as a sociocultural concept that is continually contested and redefined. Proponents of globalism conceptualize culture as a set of everyday processes encompassing whole ways of life, and these quotidian processes and experiences are always already in opposition to and exceed the symbolic and territorial boundaries of the nation-state. For scholars of globalism, the terms diaspora, migration, and transnationalism not only denote population flows across inter- and intra-national borders but also connote social and symbolic exchanges and intermixings across such borders in defiance of the regulation of nation-states. Focusing on the hybridity and ambivalence of migrant and diasporic subjects in colonial and postcolonial societies, Homi Bhabha uses “the disjunctive temporality of the nation” resulting from the slippage between what he calls the pedagogical and performative aspects of nationalism to reread the monolithic nation-state as “the liminal figure of the nation-space” where “no political ideologies could claim transcendent or metaphysical authority for themselves” (299). Bhabha’s thinking deconstructs nationalism as an anticolonial project, whereby the différance of culture introduces a temporal slippage into and thus a deferral of nationalism’s “transcendent or metaphysical
authority” as a political ideology. But Bhabha’s case against nationalism as a political ideology is predicated on an opposition of the nation’s “historical certainty and settled nature” against “culture’s transnational dissemination” (292, 320). Bhabha’s redefinition of the homogenizing, totalizing project of the nation-state into a nation-space of contesting narratives may destabilize the hyphen between nation and state, but his argument misses the persistent and residual national connections that diasporic and postcolonial individuals or communities maintain, because it equates such figures with transnational culture or cultural practices that must always transcend or cross over the nation. Arjun Appadurai’s ethnography of border-crossing cultural flows also attempts to “think ourselves beyond the nation” (158). Arjun Appadurai coins the term “postnational” to describe a decentralized global system, and in this system “while nations might continue to exist, the steady erosion of the capabilities of the nation-state to monopolize loyalty will encourage the spread of national forms that are largely divorced from territorial states” (169). But Appadurai’s critique of nationalism in the form of the territorial state is premised upon a deterritorialized national consciousness; Appadurai, like Bhabha, challenges nationalism in the form of the nation-state but wants to retain the idea of nationalism as a nation-space, because he ultimately favors the “extraterritorial nationalism of populations who love America but are not necessarily attached to the United States” (171). While Appadurai opposes the dominant narrative of “monopatriotism,” he reinstates the United States as the privileged site of postnationalism because “America may yet construct another narrative of enduring significance,” and “in this narrative, bounded territories could give way to diasporic networks, nations to transnations, and patriotism itself could become plural, serial, contextual and mobile” (176).

Thus, despite his emphasis on the transformation of patriotism into a plural and mobile concept, Appadurai’s postnationalism is actually located and territorialized in the one remaining country that is also a superpower state. If, so the argument goes, we must transgress or bypass the nation-state, then it stands to reason that our next horizon of reading must now be the changing space of diaspora, migration, and trans- or postnationalism—in other words, the entire world or globe in its totality and fluidity.

The fluidity of transnational identities is emphasized by Stuart Hall, who uses the idea of diaspora to destabilize national and ethnic identities. Stuart Hall’s metaphorization of Caribbean hybridity into a cultural identity that exemplifies our globalized world assumes that the diasporic condition is an already accomplished fact and elides the nationalist sentiments of the diasporas he uses as his examples, notably that of the Palestinians. Hall’s anti-imperialist criticism is simultaneously anti-nationalist; he identifies “the people of
“Palestine” as a population defined by their flight from a geographical location that is rightly theirs (“Cultural Identity” 235). The competition for that territory and the Israeli population that currently governs it offers, by contrast, a “backward-looking conception of diaspora” as Israeli nationalism stands for the atavistic mode of patriotic nationalism that is complicit with “the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising” Western power (235). In place of the singular and statist concepts of ethnicity and nationalism, Hall offers diaspora as an “experience” of productive cultural identities “which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity” (235, original emphasis). But Hall misses the national consciousness of the Afro-Caribbean and Palestinian diasporic peoples by reframing identity in exclusively cultural terms, such that “the issue of cultural identity now constitutes one of the most serious global problems at the start of the twenty-first century” (“Negotiating” 25).

By using diaspora as a metaphor for cultural identity and framing cultural identity within a global framework, Hall tries to portray nationalism as a restrictive and limited container of identity, because “instead of thinking of national cultures as unified, we should think of them as constituting a discursive device which represents difference as unity or identity. They are cross-cut by deep internal divisions and differences, and ‘unified’ only through the exercise of different forms of cultural power” (“The Question of Cultural Identity” 617, original emphasis). Hall’s insight that “Modern nations are all cultural hybrids” (617, original emphasis) is an argument against the unification of national identity through race or ethnicity performed by the suturing power of national culture. But the discursive nature of national culture, its power as “a discourse—a way of constructing meanings which influences and organizes our actions and our conceptions of ourselves” by “producing meanings about ‘the nation’ with which we can identify” (613, original emphasis)—suggests that national culture may not always serve a homogenizing national identity promulgated by the sovereign state. In the hands of postcolonial writers, national culture may even be used to envision or construct alternative meanings or definitions of the nation that interrogate, contradict, or deviate from the dominant national identity. Despite his contention that diaspora as a metaphor helps us to think of “identity as a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (“Cultural Identity” 222), Hall does not consider how the discursive and productive force of national culture may be in dialogue or tension rather than in lockstep with national identity and state power.

The transnational, postnational, and diasporic arguments put forward by Bhabha, Appadurai, and Hall all emphasize the potential of culture as lived experience and transnational flow to subvert nationalist discourse and
transgress national boundaries. Furthermore, the figure who embodies and represents these transgressions is the diasporic or migrant subject, a subject whose mobility and deterritorialized condition foregrounds a radical cultural identity that resists the homogenizing force of nationalism. But this strategic move that sets culture (represented by the ethnicized, diasporic subject) against the nation-state is itself inscribed within a larger, global framework that may contain or undermine culture’s radical heterogeneity. As Khachig Tölölyan observes, the increasing valorization of the term “diaspora” causes “a reduction of or an inattention to the complexity of the past and present of diasporic social formations [. . .] which occurs when the ideas of identity and subjectivity produced by a theory-inflected investigation of texts is projected upon the social text of diaspora life” (“Rethinking Diaspora(s)” 28–29, original emphasis). From a different angle, Slavoj Žižek and Rey Chow have trenchantly examined how deterritorialized cultural and ethnic identities that offer the possibility of agency and change may be complicit with the logic of global capital. Žižek draws disturbing parallels between nineteenth-century as well as present-day Western cultural imperialism and multiculturalism, emphasizing how multiculturalism can repeat a colonial form of “racism with a distance,” “a privileged universal position” that “respects the Other’s identity [. . .] as a self-enclosed ‘authentic’ community” (44). Chow considers how the dominant articulations of cultural, ethnic, and diasporic identities may be “already firmly inscribed with the economic and ideological workings of capitalism” such that the radical challenge put forward from these identity positions “constitutes the economically logical and socially viable vocation for them to assume” (Protestant Ethnic 48). In short, the valorization of diasporic and ethnic cultures against nation-states creates a dichotomy that aligns itself with the logic of global capital. It creates a culture effect that hypostasizes the dynamic plurality of cultures: the identities and positions resulting from such objectification have predetermined ends mapped out for them, or become ends in themselves instead of allowing for an active politics. Culture’s mobility, heterogeneity, and radicalism are encompassed by globalization and become symptoms of its administration.

**Literature and the Nation:**

**Corporal, Discursive, and Spectral Theories**

The hypostatization of culture by global capital can be understood as a modern version of the mobilization of culture as national character in eighteenth-century European theories of literary nationalism. The concept of literature
as an expression of a unified and unique national character originates in European Romantic ideas of language and collective identity, and this organicist or corporeal form of literary nationalism has been contested by postcolonial critics who argue for a cultural discursive as well as a spectral linkage between literature and nation. In this corporeal aspect, literature written in the national language is a crucial element in the national Bildung as it both embodies and expresses the spirit of the Volk, or the people. Johann Gottfried Herder, in his Essay on the Origin of Language (1772), observes that if “a fiery people reveals its boldness in its metaphors” (150), then “no step can be taken, no new word can be invented, no new felicitous form can be put to use which does not carry the imprint of the human soul” (164–65). Three decades later, Johann Gottlieb Fichte extends Herder’s philosophy about language and national character in his Addresses to the German Nation (1807–8), exhorting his listeners “to mould the Germans into a corporate body, which shall be stimulated in all its individual members by the same interest” (15). The sinews of this corporate body are, in a Herderian fashion, formed out of a common language, such that anyone who speaks the German language “could consider himself as in a double sense a citizen, on the one hand, of the State where he was born and to whose care he was in the first instance commended, and, on the other hand, of the whole common fatherland of the German nation” (147). Language and literature, endowed with such organicist and corporeal powers, incorporates disparate individuals into a larger language-based identity; they also quicken and give voice to the national character that lies dormant in the collective body.

But concepts of linguistic and racial purity that seem to shape the modern nation in the eighteenth century are more closely bound to the biopolitical power of the state and its racialization of both individual bodies and the larger body politic. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there arose in European theories of nation and culture a slippage between nationalism defined as and through literary and cultural Bildung and nationalism as a social and political consciousness, and the latter formulation will be revisited by anti- and postcolonial critics in the second half of the twentieth century. In “Society Must Be Defended,” Foucault points out that “racism is born at the point when the theme of racial purity replaces that of race struggle” and in the shift “from the emancipatory project [of political struggle] to a concern with purity, sovereignty was able to invest and take over the discourse of race struggle and reutilize it for its own strategy. State sovereignty thus becomes the imperative to protect the race” and the State becomes “the protector of the integrity, the superiority, and the purity of the race” (81). Foucault analyzes the slippage between the State and the nation, the latter defined
by contemporary jurists and politicians in social and civic rather than sovereign and racial terms, such that “the nation, or rather ‘nations,’” are “collections, societies, groupings of individuals who share a status, mores, customs, and a certain particular law” understood as “regulatory statutes rather than Statist laws” (134). Even though the corporatist theories of literary nationalism become part of a discourse of state sovereignty premised on racial and cultural homogenization and the exclusion of what is other and nonidentical, there is still “something else that speaks in history and takes itself as the object of its own historical narrative,” which “is the sort of new entity known as the nation” (142).

The organicist relationship between literature and nation has been taken to task by critics who examine the social formation of postcolonial nations as cultural discourse rather than natural development. Instead of regarding literature as emanating out of an already existing national character or organic body, they focus on the narrative and discursive dimensions of culture in dynamic tension with the nation-state. Literature as cultural discourse is no longer isomorphic with the nation, but becomes part of a people’s collective lived experience and therefore does not have a specially defined mission to edify and corporatize the national body. Instead of articulating and performing a nation’s particular character through affective language and narrative structure, literature as cultural discourse informs and reforms the nation. Benedict Anderson discusses the connection between literature and nationalism in terms of print-capitalism out of which the nation emerges as an “imagined political community” (6) thanks to cultural media such as the novel and the newspaper. Anderson’s emphasis that the imagined nation is a political and not only a cultural community reminds us that the apparent fixity of the national body in ideas of racial, ethnic, and linguistic identity is not at all natural and is thus open to contestation. As he observes in terms that bring to mind Foucault’s analysis of biopolitics and the state, “the fact of the matter is that nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations: outside history” (Anderson 145). The novel and the newspaper are part of a larger cultural discourse that imagines the nation as a political community, and they reimage the nation’s destiny as political and social circumstances change over historical time. As Timothy Brennan argues, the nation is “a gestative political structure which the Third World artist is consciously building or suffering the lack of” (46–47), and rather than reinforcing a preexisting national character, the novels written by these artists “often attempt to assemble the fragments of national life and give them a final shape” (61). Following Ander-
son’s and Brennan’s thinking, the symbolic and cultural space of the nation marked out in its totality by the state is always cross-hatched and crossed over by literature’s textuality as a cultural discourse.

This tension between the centripetal and authoritarian power of the state, the symbolic and imagined contours of the nation, and the fluid, centrifugal cultural discourse of literature opens up a spectral or haunted reading of the nation. Pheng Cheah argues for a spectral nationality in literature from and about postcolonial societies, which involves “a mutual haunting of the popular organism and the state: the nation tries to reappropriate the state from authoritarian and global forces” (Spectral Nationality 11). This haunting of the state by the nation and vice versa is especially evident in literary narratives such as the postcolonial Bildungsroman, because, in Cheah’s terms, “such novels do not only reflect or thematize the nation’s Bildung. They are themselves intended to be part of it. They are meant to have an active causal role in the nation’s genesis as they supply the occasion and catalyst for their implied reader’s Bildung as a patriotic subject” (240). Spectral nationality marks a return to organicist theories of European Romantic literary nationalism, which Cheah considers a liberating and not totalizing project. But within the framework of late twentieth-century global capitalism, literary projects of “radical nationalist Bildung” fail more often than they succeed, and this failure to “organicize the foreign prosthesis of the neo-colonial state [. . .] points to a certain ghostliness within the living body” of the nation (246). Ghostliness as a productive dilemma and the uncanniness of the spectral nation is further developed by Vilashini Cooppan, who considers how literary narratives represent nations as “fantasmic objects knotted together by ambivalent forces of desire, identification, memory, and forgetting” (xvii). Cooppan stages an encounter between psychoanalysis, nationalism, and deconstruction, in which the nation itself becomes “a spectralized flow” rather than “a spirit of collective identity and zone of governmentality” because, “like ghosts, they keep coming back in the course of the still unfinished long twentieth century” (7, original emphasis). Like Cheah, who reads postcolonial literature as an incarnation of the mutual haunting of the nation and the state, Cooppan treats literature as a mode of interpellation, hailing melancholic national subjects who “live their nationalism in the mode of loss, for all must contend with the difficult process of identifying with something that is not entirely there, that exists in the present yet recedes into the deep past of national history” (32). In postcolonial and contemporary world literature, there is no escape from the specter of the nation, but at the same time subjects who are so haunted can “recognize [the nation] not as something to be worked through but as something we live after, and with, in the
hopes of another kind of future” in which “states do not terrorize citizens and nations do not act alone or constitute their polity as purity” (274). According to Cheah and Cooppan, literature in its ghostly guise does not narrate or constitute the nation but instead marks its shallow grave around which the imagined community tries, however unsuccessfully, to weep and mourn both its incompleteness and its passing.

**Adorno and the Negative Dialectics of Literature and Nation**

In contrast to these organic, cultural, discursive, and spectral theories of literary nationalism, the critical theory of Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno offers an alternative framework to analyze the relationship between literature and nation in the context of postcolonial societies grappling with transnational flows in a global moment. The importance of Adorno and other Frankfurt School critics for thinking about postcolonial cultural politics, discourses of subjectivity, and acts of dissent has been discussed at length by other critics (Lazarus, Varadharajan, Spencer). My focus lies instead on the ways Adorno’s thought helps us explicate the relationship between the cultural object of literature and the sociopolitical concept of nationalism as one of negative dialectics. Whereas dialectical thought as described by, say, Hegel and Marx tends toward a synthesis that resolves contradictory socio-political and intellectual forces, Adorno insists on the necessity of dwelling on the negative moments in dialectics between the concept of knowledge or the subject who knows and the object that is being recognized and apprehended. The tense but reciprocal and transformative dynamic between concept-subject and object is for Adorno inherent in the form and structure of works of art, including literature. Nationalism as a concept that defines the collective subject of a postcolonial people can be opened up to nonidentical objects or the multiplicities of objective reality through a rational critique of art and literature. In contrast to corporeal theories in which literature is either an emanation or an imitation of national character, Adorno argues that “rather than imitating reality, artworks demonstrate this displacement to reality” (*Aesthetic Theory* 132). Artworks displace not only elements of objective reality but also components of concepts into their own formal structure rather than identifying them with one another or aligning them with or around a pre-given essence or primordial attribute. Within artworks, “truth content presents itself in art as a multiplicity, not as a concept that abstractly subordinates artworks” (131), and new, forgotten, or elided rela-
tionships between concepts and objects emerge: “the fact that artworks exist signals the possibility of the nonexisting. [. . .] The object of art’s longing, the reality of what is not, is metamorphosed in art as remembrance” (132). Adorno’s comments here recall the ideas of critics who discuss literature’s relationship to nationalism as cultural discourse and spectral haunting: the truth content that artworks make visible is one of multiplicity rather than of isomorphism between culture and the nation-state; conceptual order and objective reality undergo a metamorphosis in artworks and become filled with longing and remembrance, haunted by the undeath and incompletion of nationalism. However, radical culture and spectral haunting are not the culmination of Adorno’s thinking. Adorno’s aesthetic theory allows us to connect the cultural discursive and spectral critiques of literary nationalism, and this connection is “strictly negative. Artworks say what is more than the existing, and they do this exclusively by making a constellation of how it is” (133). What Adorno means by constellation is “a juxtaposed rather than integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle” (Jay, Adorno 14–15). Literary texts, as artworks, form a constellation out of the objective reality of cultural life, the conceptual elements of nationalism, the discourse of radical culture, and the spectral afterlife of the nation. Literature becomes part of an intellectual and artistic project of critical rationality motivated by a national consciousness that reveals, resists, and reconceptualizes the hypothesizing effects of instrumental rationality expressed through the determinate constructions of national identities. Literature, in summary terms, evinces a critical nationality open to what is nonidentical to it as it becomes imbricated with cosmopolitical and transnational cultural forms, in contrast to an instrumental nationality that insists on identifying an exclusively determined and extensively defended territory and population. In chapter 1, I explain these terms—critical nationality and instrumental nationality—through a further discussion of how Adorno’s negative dialectics allows us to consider anew the role of national consciousness in anticolonial and postcolonial criticism; in the remainder of this introduction, I focus on comparisons and contrasts between Adorno’s discussions of aesthetics and literature and the corporeal, cultural discursive, and spectral theories of literary nationalism.

Adorno’s analyses of specific literary forms and genres foreground a critical, reflective rationality and an aesthetics of literary style as a way of thinking through and against the instrumental rationality of modern life, which helps us better understand the dynamic tension between nationalism and postcolonial literature. Instead of reading both nations and literary texts as artifacts that embody or reflect the particularities of various cultures, Adorno
suggests that literature analyzes the conditions of possibility and the limitations of national identity through a rational critique. This critique is performed through an aesthetic revision and reversal of key tropes and cultural symbols associated with a particular national culture in order to distinguish between a national identity constructed by the postcolonial state as a racial, linguistic, or religious mode of collective belonging, and a national consciousness connected to the people as a social collective and a mode of political resistance and empowerment. By foregrounding literature as an artwork through his aesthetic and political theory, Adorno turns us away from a reading of the nation as a specter and of literature as melancholia toward an understanding of literature as a rational critique of instrumentalized national identity. Literature as artwork may be thought of as enacting the negative dialectic between national consciousness, given culture, and “the mutating global field of political, economic, and cultural forces” that is the cosmopolitical (Cheah, “The Cosmopolitical—Today” 31) rather than as affirming either a unified national identity or a transcendent cosmopolitan subjectivity. Cheah’s description of the cosmopolitical as a global field in which “neither cosmopolitanism nor nationalism can be seen as the teleologically necessary and desired normative outcome of past and present globalizing processes” (31) is consonant with Adorno’s explication of the artwork as “a process essentially in the relation of its whole and parts” that is not “reducible to one side or the other” and “is not a structure that integrates the sum of its parts” (Aesthetic Theory 178); the artwork is “an immanent, crystallized process at a standstill” (Aesthetic Theory 180). Different literary genres evince this nonreductive and nonintegrative crystallized process through their specific style and formal organization. In his reflections on the essay as a literary form, Adorno points out that “since the airtight order of concepts is not identical with existence, the essay does not strive for closed, deductive or inductive, construction” (“The Essay as Form” 98). The essay’s openness and free-flowing structure, which might at first glance appear to be “fragmentary and random” (99), is actually the result of “the reciprocal interaction of its concepts in the process of intellectual experience. In the essay, concepts do not build a continuum of operations, thought does not advance in a single direction, rather the aspects of the argument interweave as in a carpet” (101). What is important here is that the essay structures the conceptual, intellectual experience of objective reality as “a constellation” (105) rather than as a subordinated or teleological relationship of cause and effect, or concept over object. Because “the essay is determined by the unity of its object, together with that of theory and experience which have migrated into the object” (105), it is the particulars of the object that have precedence in the essay and that shape and define its
conceptual arguments and overall literary form. But lest we assume that the object’s specificities have the final say in the interpretation of a literary text, Adorno reminds us that these specificities are always interwoven with an existing set of ideas and concepts and with social forces that make the object possible to begin with. In a lecture on lyric poetry Adorno argues that this most individualistic and subjectively expressive of poetic forms paradoxically highlights with great clarity the imbrication of the personal with the social, the objective or individual with the conceptual or the general, because “the descent into individuality raises the lyric poem to the realm of the general by virtue of its bringing to light things undistorted, ungrasped, things not yet subsumed” (“Lyric Poetry and Society” 156). The lyric poem, like the essay, organizes and galvanizes the specificities of objective reality and individual expression, and since “a poem’s indigenous material, its patterns and ideas, cannot be exhausted through mere static contemplation,” therefore “they ask to be thought through, and a thought once set into motion by a poem cannot be cut off at the poem’s behest” (156). If the essay interweaves concepts and objects into its form like a carpet, then the lyric poem enables a similar reciprocal interaction: it motivates conceptual thought through the indigenous, objective material arranged in a pattern by the lyric, and this thought in turn reflects upon and revises the objective material since it cannot be cut off by the textual limitations of the poem. This reciprocity allows “the historical relation of subject to object, of individual to society within the realm of subjective spirit” to be “precipitated” and “crystallized involuntarily from within the poem” (160). In the context of the connection between literature and nationalism, the literary form of the lyric poem reveals the historical relationship between the nation-state and the individuals who make up its body politic, between national identity and the various cultures that are assimilated into it. Since, as Adorno argues in Aesthetic Theory, “history in artworks is not something made,” and “truth content is not external to history but rather its crystallization in the works” (133), artworks resist the instrumentalization of history and truth as conceptual buttresses for national identity. Furthermore, as the “artwork is nothing fixed and definitive in itself, but something in motion,” and “its immanent temporality is communicated to its parts and whole in such a fashion that their relation develops in time” (178), the relationship between nationalism, culture, and the global force field of literary cosmopolitics is open to revision and redefinition as social and political circumstances change over time, and these revisions can be represented and apprehended through literature.

The implicit and explicit connections between Adorno’s thought and postcolonial criticism is the topic of chapter 1, which examines how negative
dialectics helps us understand how Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak interrogate colonialism and imperialism in their specific ways while advocating a critical national consciousness. Chapter 2 discusses the fiction of British writer Kazuo Ishiguro and his critique of both a coercive mimeticism that instrumentalizes ethnic identity and a patriotic nostalgia revived by the booming heritage industry in late twentieth-century Britain. Chapter 3 looks at Derek Walcott’s essays, lyric poems, and longer verse and argues that the Nobel Laureate’s transnational travels and poetic imagination are interwoven with a national consciousness connected locally to his home country of Saint Lucia and regionally to the Caribbean islands. Chapter 4 further explores this negative dialectic between diaspora and nation in the literary criticism, poetry, and fiction of Shirley Geok-lin Lim, who moves between the United States, Malaysia, and Singapore. Lim’s writing offers a feminist negation of patriotic nationalism’s heroic masculinity and imagines an alternative social bond between women within the nation. Chapter 5 focuses on the politics of literary and cultural nationalism in contemporary Malaysia and examines how Preeta Samarasan and Twan Eng Tan combine ethnography and historical realism in their novels to challenge the anthropological exotic inherent in both the global literary marketplace for postcolonial writing and the Malaysian state’s official multicultural policies. Finally, I conclude with an assessment of recent scholarship calling for a greater focus on state power and sovereignty instead of nationalism and the nation; I argue that this turn toward state sovereignty need not rely on a narrow and identitarian definition of nationalism because the critical nationality and literary cosmopolitics I explore in this book can offer equally salient, if not more productive, analyses of state power in a global moment.