CONCLUSION

Nation, Narration, Negation

As the negation of practical life, [art] is itself praxis, and indeed not simply on the basis of its genesis and the fact that, like every artifact, it is the result of activity. Just as its content is dynamic in itself and does not remain self-identical, in the course of their history the objectivated artworks themselves once again become practical comportments and turn toward reality.

—Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 241

Like Adorno’s posthumously published Aesthetic Theory, the work of postcolonial nationalism is unfinished and, although seemingly dated, stands in need of reinterpretation for the global moment as a sociopolitical formation imagined through literature as aesthetic form and cultural discourse. In this conclusion I discuss literary criticism’s recent turn away from the nation and nationalism as both an intellectual topic and a conceptual framework in favor of analyses of state power and sovereignty, exemplified by a 2008 special issue of the leading journal Contemporary Literature. The editors of this special issue “refuse to see the state as a merely negative bugbear, purely affirmative category, or relic of bygone modernity” (Hart and Hansen 494), arguing that it is no longer the nation but the state that, though “weakened as analytic paradigm” by increasingly transnational forces, nonetheless “remains fundamental to political modernity” (497). In separating the state from the nation, however, they regard the latter as a distillation of “concepts of consanguinity and folk heritage” that attenuates “the political meaning of ‘nation’ as indicating a group of citizens organized under a single government” (505); furthermore, “these notions of ethnolinguistic consanguinity” are “of declining significance today, when the contingent tie between language, literature,
and nation is coming undone in the face of the global movement of peoples and books” (506). Hart and Hansen’s definition of nationalism as ethnic, linguistic, and consanguineous homogeneity is an identitarian gloss I hope this book has problematized and unpacked as but one mode of understanding what the nation is—and a rather limited mode at that. Hart and Hansen’s analysis of state sovereignty draws on Antonio Gramsci’s “dialectical vision” of class hegemony and coerced assent to “imagine other forms of governmentality, other forms of state power” (499); if they see any redeeming qualities in nationalism, it lies in their reading of Mohsin Hamid’s novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a text that shows how “national difference [. . .] risks becoming mere nostalgia” and must be countered by a nationalism that “is neither religious nor ethnopoetic” but distinctly “political” (510). Their argument that Gramsci’s vision offers a dialectical and political nationalism is similar to my own invocation of Theodor Adorno’s negative dialectics and aesthetic thinking to understand nationalism in postcolonial literature as critical and cosmopolitical rather than instrumental, as a national consciousness that refuses the allure of religious or ethnopoetic nostalgia that replicates and manipulates identitarian thinking for its own sake. My point is that we need not, as Hart and Hansen imply, define nationalism purely in ethnolinguisitic or consanguineous terms in order to step outside its apparent confines to discuss state sovereignty; we may do so from a position that is immanent to or within the logic of nationalism itself, for the very project of critical nationality assayed by the writers I have examined in these pages shows us that national consciousness actively engages with the vicissitudes of both authoritarian states and transnational capital and cultural flows.

While critics of contemporary literature might be eager to overlook the nation as they focus on the state, my argument for a reassessment of nationalism in postcolonial writing is consonant with the work of political scientists examining the fraught and shifting relationship between nation and state in the late twentieth century. With respect to South Asia, Tariq Amin-Khan maintains that national struggles in former European colonies have fallen short of their liberating goals not because nationalism is inherently flawed but because the colonial state “intensified the antagonisms between different colonized groups, laying the trajectory for a peculiar kind of national identity formulation—one that is rooted in conflict—and having an afterlife in the post-colonial state” (38). This problem was compounded by the uneven distribution of power and resources immediately after national independence, such that “most postcolonial states became multinational states led by a dominant nation,” resulting in a situation where “a centralized and authoritarian unitary state structure was entrenched” that did not represent or
recognize the varying needs of its citizens (109, original emphasis). Therefore, the current immiseration of many countries in the global South should not be attributed to a resurgence of virulent tribalism or ethnocentrism; it ought to be understood as a legacy of European colonialism that, in its neocolonial guise, has persistently hamstrung the postcolonial state’s ability to establish and maintain a viable, stable, and egalitarian social formation, which is exactly what a critical nationality strives toward. Similarly, Michael Keating’s study of national claims that do not involve statehood in Quebec, Catalonia, and Scotland shows us that political nationalism and self-determination need not always aspire to sovereign power, that “national identities are not always monolithic and exclusive” but can be “plural, contested, and shifting” (3, ix). Instead of understanding nationalism as a teleology that culminates in a sovereign and territorially bounded nation-state, Keating sees “nationality conflicts as a form of politics to be negotiated continually, rather than as a problem to be resolved once and for all”; instead of “a primordial view” of the nation as “a self-evident sociological category or an immanent community of fate,” it is more productive to regard it as a political entity, “historically constituted as a self-governing community” in which “its people see themselves as a nation and wish to determine their future as a collectivity” (3). Amin-Khan and Keating regard nationalism as a sociopolitical project imbricated in and negotiating with colonial and neocolonial state power and global capital and cultural flows; it need not always be construed as a primordial identity or ethnic absolutism that we must dismiss or transcend in order to examine the authority of the sovereign state or the uneven network of global power relations. My own argument about national consciousness and literary cosmopolitics interpreted through Theodor Adorno’s aesthetic theory and negative dialectics is in line with their contributions; whereas political scientists focus on juridical discourse and governmental systems, as a literary scholar, I have focused my objects of inquiry on fictional and poetic narratives and philosophical aesthetics. As Adorno reminds us in the epigraph, a literary text, as an artwork, is a “negation of practical life” that “does not remain self-identical” but through the history of its writing, circulation, and reception “become[s] practical comportments and turn[s] toward reality” without reducing or regimenting its formal complexity (Aesthetic Theory 241). Just as anticolonial national consciousness and postcolonial nationalism are always already cosmopolitical sociocultural formations rather than determinate identities at their very inception, so too the writing and reading of postcolonial literature is always already an intellectual and cultural activity that forms a constellation of local, national, and global practicalities and political realities.