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Friction and Expansion: Comparative Literary Studies as Chimerical Form

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By generating friction with the concept of expansion, Aarthi Vadde's Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe, 1914–2016 *intervenes in debates shaping comparative literature studies today. Analyzing the work that friction performs in this book sends us beyond the provocative and nuanced readings contained within its pages and sets it in conversation with critical and literary writings it does not address. Miming the ethos and using the practices of* Chimeras of Form *by expanding its trajectory, I show what frictions and itineraries of inquiry might emerge from its theorization of literature in a global age.*

Not least of the many accomplishments *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe, 1914–2016* achieves is its reworking of concepts central to debates shaping comparative literature studies today. Indeed, the book's title is an apt gloss on the current state of a discipline that is chimerical in the sense that Aarthi Vadde finds certain forms of twentieth and twenty-first century literature to be: an "impure" force field of "undetermined expanse" in which "contradictions," "incongruities, and paradoxes" challenge rather than affirm institutional coherence and containment.[1] In the introduction to the 2017 American Comparative Literature Association's state of the discipline report, Ursula Heise summarizes the findings: comparative literature is disciplinarily diverse and methodologically diffuse and has been transformed by the shifting discourses of postcolonial, world literature, and modernist studies, fields Vadde's study engages.[2] Also pertinent to *Chimeras of Form*'s arguments is the manner in which the ACLA report structurally reflects the nominally singular but actually multiform discipline it describes. The product of multiple authors whose contributions originated in different media, span a variety of genres, and

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1 Aarthi Vadde, *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe, 1914–2016* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 6, 30. Hereafter cited in text.

2 Ursula K. Heise, "Introduction: Comparative Literature and the New Humanities," in *Futures of Comparative Literature: ACLA State of the Discipline Report*, ed. Ursula K. Heise, *et al.* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2017), 1–8.

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address a host of topics beyond "literature" narrowly conceived, this internally heterogeneous volume also demonstrates frictions among approaches that have arisen in response to the temporal and spatial expansion of comparative literature's objects of inquiry, the politics surrounding the circulation and transmission of languages and texts, and the supplanting of the national by the global as a primary scale of analysis. Considering all this, the synergies between *Chimeras of Form* and comparative literature as a discipline extend beyond the title's concise description of the latter. The book's organizing principles include expansion, circulation, and scale, and its chapters examine frictions among interpretative approaches as well as sociopolitical ontologies.

The term *friction* occasionally appears throughout Vadde's study, although it is not nearly as ubiquitous as the more recognizable keywords *cosmopolitanism, nationalism*, or *internationalism*. But even when the word *friction* does not appear, the concept often hovers in the margins. I propose that analyzing the work that friction performs in this book sends us beyond the provocative and nuanced readings contained within its pages and sets it in conversation with critical and literary writings it does not address. To organize my comments about friction, I focus on how they intersect with the concept of expansion; here, as in Vadde's study, however, this concept necessarily bleeds into others such as circulation and scale. Miming the ethos and using the practices of *Chimeras of Form* by expanding its trajectory, I hope to show what frictions and what itineraries of inquiry might emerge from its theorization of literature in a global age.

A central friction against which *Chimeras of Form* emerges is the expansion of modernist and world literature studies and contraction of postcolonial studies—or at least scholarship coded under that name. As the book's subtitle conveys, Vadde uses the framework of modernist internationalism to organize her analyses of works that exceed the boundaries of modernism codified during the 1950s. She builds upon scholarship in modernist studies, which has been expanding institutionally and broadening its analytical focus and subject matter since the 1990s. The introduction acknowledges the book's indebtedness to the work of critics such as Jahan Ramazani, who highlighted "the discrepancy between modernism's 'vaunted internationalism' and its critical history of circumscription, arguing for the traversal of disciplinary boundaries separating modernist and postcolonial studies."[3] It also reminds us of the importance of Susan Stanford Friedman's influential essay that emphasized how the exclusions of African, South American, and Asian writers resulted from the cordoning off of modernism as a discipline. It is worth pointing out that modernism has also played an important role in the constitution of contemporary world literature studies.[4] Modernist studies' expansion in step with that of world literature has generated new modes of comparing. It has encouraged critical discourses that were previously Anglo- and Eurocentric to attend to literatures from colonies and postcolonies. But it has also received criticisms for eclipsing or even replacing the intellectual and institutional purchase of other fields, including postcolonial studies. The book gestures toward this

3 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 15.

4 Two of the most influential studies that rely upon modernist works as key examples in their articulations of world literature are David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003) and Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. Malcolm DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

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criticism without citing it. Exploring it further brings into relief shifts in literary studies during the past decades and clarifies *Chimeras of Form*'s interventions within them.

Critics have tended to view the expansions and global turns of modernist and world literature studies as enforcing the corporatization of the university, whether by approaching globalization as a culturally progressive force or by ignoring their scholarship's participation in a market economy, or both. Skepticism about the expanding fields of studies and scales of analysis from region or nation to globe has been voiced by modernist, postcolonial, and comparativist scholars. In 2001, Jennifer Wicke argued that the "rebranding" of modernism under the guise of the "new" and its expansion beyond an Anglo-European canon constitutes a "speculative bubble" that disavows the field's market logic. Although she sees the "resurrecting and refurbishing of a brand in advanced moribundity" as ultimately salutary, she argues that modernists "cannot ignore …our own investments in modernism's speculative bubble. As revivers of its brand, a brand we cannot seem to do without, we re-brand ourselves as critics and theorists just as we rebrand modernist others."[5] One such other is postcolonial literature. Without identifying modernism specifically, Peter Hitchcock made the pointed critique in 2010 that a globalized literary study that privileges the cosmopolitical over the national in its approach to colonial and post-colonial literatures has allowed readers to "consume postcolonialism without that nasty taste of social struggle in which a reader's own cosmopolitanism may be at stake."[6] Decades earlier, Simon Gikandi alleged that the global turn in cultural studies elevated metropolitan narratives of migrancy, emphasized transnational connections while neglecting the importance of national struggles, and redeployed terms such as *hybridity* in ways that blunted postcolonial studies' critical edge.[7] More recently, Emily Apter's study *Against World Literature* targeted the "entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world's cultural resources," which she claims results in scholarship that "fall(s) prey to the tendency to zoom over the speed bumps of untranslatability in the rush to cover ground." In a counter-move, she invokes "untranslatability as a deflationary gesture toward the expansionism and gargantuan scale of word-literary endeavors."[8] While employing an alternative framework to Apter's deconstructive approach, Marxist scholars writing as the Warwick Research Collective also criticize "the pervasive" tendency in theories of world literature to minimize or overlook barriers to transmissibility and circulation, barriers which indicate a world system structured by "combined and uneven development." They take issue with the prevailing assumption that "the 'world' of world-literature is a 'level playing field,' a more or less free space in which texts from around the globe can circulate, intersect, and converse with one another."[9]

5 Jennifer Wicke, "Appreciation, Depreciation: Modernism's Speculative Bubble," *Modernism/Modernity* 8.3 (2001): 395.

6 Peter Hitchcock, *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 5.

7 Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness:Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

8 Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (New York and London: Verso, 2013), 3.

9 Warwick Research Collective (WReC), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 22.

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In the years since these arguments appeared—the most recent was published in 2015—modernism as a category has continued to expand even as scholars hold fast to many of its canonical figures as their models. Attention to metropolitan migrant fictions as forums for the dramatization of transnational connection and belonging has grown as world literature studies has expanded. The employment of cosmopolitanism as theoretical apparatus and a measure of ethically and politically progressive literature dominates the critical landscape. The drive to anthologize the world's literary production shows few signs of stopping. The enthusiasm for such compendiums could be read as a sign of readers' faith, or at least hope, in the power of translation to reveal commonalities among people that exist prior to and below the differences created by socio-linguistic codings and geopolitical formations. The embrace of literature that seems to cross borders with ease might also be read as a sign of the wish that despite all evidence to the contrary, we live in a world in which communicative exchange can happen even among the most polarized groups in what seem increasingly polarized climates. The political unconscious of world literature and world literature studies today could be the belief that the migration and welcoming of texts and languages, if not of people, is still a viable possibility in an era in which nationalist, racist, and xenophobic policies and rhetorics erect walls of all sorts.

Although Vadde does not cite the specific arguments I've listed, they are on the horizon when she articulates a friction between an expansion and a "deprovincialization" of modernism. This friction manifests not an unwitting but rather self-aware rebranding of modernism's others that also rebrands modernism by tracking how anticolonial critique intersects with imaginations of communal forms irreducible to nation, region, race, or class. The book contends that "tracing the history of concepts like modernism and decolonizing them by exposing the power relationships embedded in their making is one way in which scholars of modernism and modernity can ensure they are deprovincializing them, as opposed to simply expanding them."[10] Keeping the deprovincialization and expansion of modernist internationalism in tension in her readings of writers and works that "stretch the usual parameters of canonical modernism,"[11] the study does not attempt to avoid the "nasty taste of social struggle" operative in colonial and postcolonial texts. On the contrary: it is precisely charges of indigestible and distasteful style critics have imputed to literatures of social struggle that Vadde reevaluates to challenge interpretive and political formations that couple beauty in aesthetic form with self-contained and determinable communal forms. *Chimeras of Form* does concentrate on migration narratives that denaturalize national and nativist modes of collectivity in favor of internationalist and contingent modes. But rather than propose a causal relationship between mobility or migration and social and cultural progress that Gikandi found problematic in earlier globalization studies, the book details how movement has been problematized and migrants surveilled, policed, and regulated as they improvise social formations and solidarities that exceed normative limits and definitions. The epilogue's discussion of Shailja Patel's *Migritude* is one case in point; another is the chapter discussing the works of George Lamming and Claude McKay. Although most of this book does focus on

10 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 18.
11 Ibid., 7.

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works written in English, one chapter foregrounds the ethics and politics of translation. Although it does not speak in the polemical terms that Apter does, it draws attention to how Rabindranath Tagore's autotranslations from Bengali to English "roughen"[12] the world's oneness by registering, rather than effacing, the historical conditions and itineraries that enable his texts' transmissions into Anglophone contexts. And although Vadde critiques the limitations of world-systems theory and refuses the origin story of a singular modernity to which the Warwick Research Collective subscribes, she illustrates how uneven the world is through her engagements of literary form with political theory and philosophies of migration and cosmopolitanism.

The orchestration of expansion as an act that emerges from and also generates friction with disciplinary conditions of containment extends beyond its meta-critical function as a methodological principle that links (canonical) modernist and colonial and postcolonial literatures. For Vadde, expansion serves as a type of immanent critique within the literary texts themselves. In the discussion of McKay's "plotless" novel *Banjo*, for example, *expansion* is another word for "open-ended" acts of energy expenditures—such as dancing and music—instances of "ecstasy" that expose and refuse the state's disciplining of "vagabond" subjects. Once again, however, expansion is not disclosed as a force that transcends or sublates differences and irrevocably eradicates uneven distributions of power; it results from these frictions and opens onto indeterminable, unknowable others. Although "ecstasy temporarily levels hierarchies" among subjects of various races, nations, and classes in *Banjo*, "it does not absorb interracial and international differences. It arises from their friction." It is because of this friction that new forms of internationalism can emerge, an expansion described as a "proliferation and sustenance of insubordinate difference" that [extends] and "invites a solidarity that goes beyond racial unity."[13] In another novel that suspends the momentum of plot, Lamming's *The Emigrants,* conditions of migrancy are registered through temporal dilations and spatial distortions in the metropolis that affectively and psychically expand the physical and geographic enclosures of Caribbean islands. These formal features enable an imagination of West Indian community that is neither sectarian nor island-based but open-ended and horizontal. In Michael Ondaatje's novels, usage of collage, scrapbooking, and legend pressure the deployment of the archive underwriting a nationalist mythos. These strategies serve the purpose of textual and ideological expansion: they give the works an "open-ended, unsynthesized, and shape-shifting quality" that immerses the construction of the nation "in a proliferation of new materials, contexts, and technologies of meaning-making that break down the very boundaries that nationalist myths shore up."[14]

Yet while deprovincialization checks a precritical expansion of the name modernism to colonial and postcolonial literatures, the definition of *modernism* Vadde offers arguably maintains values associated with institutionalized definitions of it. Proceeding from these values enables a comparative approach that crosses temporal and spatial boundaries, but it also limits the kinds of writers to well-known if not

12 Ibid., 57.
13 Ibid., 131.
14 Ibid., 151.

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canonical examples of modernist and postcolonial fiction. Such fiction is metropolitan and experimental, and its narrative "difficulties" have separated it from so-called conventional works typically designated by the terms *realism, naturalism*, or *romance*.[15] In its perhaps most direct definition of *modernism*, *Chimeras of Form* contends that although not all the writings examined in its pages have been categorized as modernist, they nevertheless are "accurately called modernist because they do not look to literature to overcome the real illegibilities, distortions, and affective conflicts that pervade attempts to think through collectivity or cosmopolitical critique. Rather, they allow those irregularities room to flourish, and reveal surprising arenas in which anticolonial and global thought converge."[16] The way they allow irregularities to flourish is through their formal strategies. Examples of the chimerical forms that anchor the study include "autotranslations," "alternating symmetries," "stories without plots," and "root canals," tactics that "challenge aesthetic and communal categories of success denoted by organic wholeness and self-sufficiency"[17] that Vadde shows have been undervalued by some readers. Modernism has long been both praised and indicted for illegibilities and distortions created by formal departures from generic expectations or stylistic regularities. It is also true, however, that despite—or because of—these departures, the writers selected here have been critically embraced in academic circles and by prestige-bestowing bodies such as international prize committees for charting new territory in literature, even as they have come under scrutiny or attack for their writing in other arenas. They help the institutional brands of modernist, world literature, and postcolonial studies expand, change, and rebrand. But to what extent might these expansions, changes, and rebrandings remain contained, or become reproductions of the same, if they rely upon literary objects that fit within their frameworks and value systems rather than introducing frictions into them?

The book's concentration here on the *experimental* rather than the *conventional*—words that apply both to literary and social forms—accomplishes crucial comparative work. It also invites further questions about future expansions and deprovincializations of terms such as *modernism* and *world literature*. *Chimeras of Form*'s focus on experimentation constellates writers such as George Lamming and Zadie Smith with James Joyce without positing the canonical European colonial modernist as the origin point or influence upon the postcolonial writers. It also makes an exceedingly strong case that unconventional tactics reveal antinomies as well as alliances among anticolonial and global thought. But a definition of *modernism* that hierarchizes experiment over convention might also constrain comparisons that would expand modernist studies into lighter tread territories of colonial and postcolonial literary production where the struggle to imagine the anticolonial and global together, whether successful or not, can be occluded by works' apparent formal conventionalities or neat rehearsal of a particular genre identified with the interpellation of national or regional community and belonging. To argue this is not to "fault" this book for its choice of literary objects. Any critical process of selection must exclude in order to do justice to what it

15 On the politics of difficulty in Lamming and Caribbean migrant fiction, see J. Dillon Brown, "Exile and Cunning: The Tactical Difficulties of George Lamming," *Contemporary Literature* 47.4 (2006): 669–94.
16 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 7.
17 Ibid., 8.

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includes. In fact, selection is another concept in friction with expansion that Vadde considers throughout, such as when she draws upon Tagore's arguments in *Nationalism* to make the point that "those who do not see the processes of selection out of which both national identities and world books emerge become …less selective themselves[,] …indiscriminate consumers who 'are afraid of leaving out something valuable and efficacious by not swallowing the husk with the kernel.'"[18] Keeping this in mind, we might argue that what this study leaves out in its process of selecting world books can become the occasion for redirections and deprovincializations of its arguments as they encounter processes of worlding enacted by other kinds of works.

The works I have in mind depart in significant ways from immigrant fictions that trace routes between colonies or postcolonies and metropoles and make use of the scales of the cities such as Dublin and London to question the politics of how to manage responsibilities of thinking at different scales, or as Vadde writes, to "[direct] attention to small islands and (for metropolitan readers) faraway wars."[19] I am thinking here of writings that are often categorized as working class, realist, and naturalist, those set in rural spaces or outposts, or in cities not considered global but provincial, and whose formal anomalies are less intentional and systematic—therefore less noticeable—than those practiced by authors *Chimeras of Form* discusses. Although they might have once been read and reasonably well known in particular sectors of postcolonial studies, these are books that do not typically circulate in anthologies of world literature or global modernism. Two writers of such books make a brief appearance in the pages of Vadde's book. They are Sam Selvon and Victor Stafford Reid. Mentioning them in passing as counterpoints to Lamming's experimental immigrant fiction, Vadde at the same time invites us to question Lamming's characterization of their work as "peasant writing." For Lamming, Vadde argues, being a peasant is not "simply a condition of birth; it is marked by imperviousness to rupture," and this condition manifests in writing as "emotional sedentariness," "organic similes,"[20] and conventional narrative forms. She claims that Lamming's point is that in "failing to allow migration to alter the novel's structures of feeling, it misses the opportunity to challenge island provincialism."[21] But she also leaves room to disagree with Lamming's assessment of these West Indian writers. Elsewhere I have offered a counter-reading of Reid's work, one that sees its formal maneuvers as attempts to imagine anticolonial and global collectivity and solidarities without denying the force of national and regional aspirations and commitments.[22] To further interrogate Lamming's contention—a contention I wonder if *Chimeras of Form*'s choice of case studies underwrites—that migration serves as a key, if not the key condition for ruptures that challenges provincial, identitarian, and contained imaginations of community, I would ask: Are chimerical forms absent from texts seemingly "sedentary" or peasant in their plot, settings, and atmospheres? Such texts would include not only the works of writers such as Reid but also novels and short fiction

18 Ibid., 50.
19 Ibid., 222.
20 Ibid., 136.
21 Ibid.
22 See Nicole Rizzuto, *Insurgent Testimonies: Witnessing Colonial Trauma in Modern and Anglophone Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 153–77.

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centered on village and rural life by writers like Bessie Head, whose own personal trajectory was not from colony or postcolony to European city but from apartheid-era South Africa to rural Botswana, where she lived as an outsider and stateless person for years. Although one of Head's novels is highly experimental (*A Question of Power*), her others do not read this way to most critics. Yet close attention to the syntax, diction, and tonal disruptions in these seemingly conventional texts suggests that they grapple with how to manage pressures of globalization by staging what literally seems most "rooted"—plants, fruits, vegetables, trees, bushes—as sources of deformations of naturalist and realist grammars. Perhaps we might think of writing that centers on rural ecologies of sedentary as well as nomadic people throughout the world as fertile ground for the eruption of chimerical forms?

In the spirit of *Chimeras of Form*, I'd like to conclude in an open-ended way by offering questions I hope expand discussion of its interventions. Are conventional literary forms, when they emerge in colonial and postcolonial contexts, necessarily conventional in their political investments, and if so, are they not accurately called modernist? What is at stake in rebranding modernist Others as chimerical modernism? Can we expand and deprovincialize the term *chimerical forms*? Can the ab-use of the term *modernism* to describe what looks like realism, or naturalism, or romance authorize a reading strategy that understands chimerical forms to exist within, on micro-levels, the very work that appears organically whole, aesthetically complete? To what extent is the definition of *chimerical modernism* based upon formal features inherent in a work, and to what extent might it be understood as the effect of a process of reading? In the introduction, Vadde indicates that she attributes the interventions discussed in her book to the literary works, not her interpretations of them. She writes that "in attributing to literary works the capability of, if not exactly arguments, their own forms of analytical intervention into global thought, I am hybridizing the 'trained sensibilities' of the literary critic with the 'analytical skills' of the philosopher."[23] To attribute the interventions to the literature under discussion seems appropriate but also humble, for *Chimeras of Form* treats its readers to a collection of extraordinarily detailed readings that attend with the same care to the minute and large scales of narrative composition. Vadde gives the same close attention to a work's footnotes and subordinate clauses as she does to its overarching generic protocols. If we can think of chimerical form as emerging from the interactions—even the frictions—among readers and texts, we might find more of these forms in places we are less primed to expect them.

23 Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*, 25.

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