

**PART 3:  
WORLD ENOUGH, AND TIME:  
WORLD-MAKING AND  
LITERARY PRACTICE**



## 15. Introduction to Part 3

Stefan Helgesson

The contributions in this section of the book distinguish themselves by the attention they pay to a range of material, linguistic and formal practices that constitute the domain of literature and its capacity to intervene in the shaping of cosmopolitan and vernacular world imaginaries. A central assumption here is that “world” must not be taken as a transparent, self-evident backdrop to circulation or narrativisation, but rather as a relational mode between self and other, or between communities and external spaces or entities of varying scales. The “world as such” is never available to any individual consciousness, but is constantly being imagined, often in such pervasive and socially entrenched ways (news media or facebook, for example) that the notion is mistaken for the thing itself. This is where literary history presents us with a storehouse of world-making practices that, in Debjani Ganguly’s words, are “attuned to the actual work of language, narrative, form, and genre”, and thereby provide alternatives “to thinking the world purely as extension”.<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to Ganguly’s (and Pheng Cheah’s, for that matter) scepticism towards sociological modes of enquiry, however, we see the relationship between an immanent reading of literary world-making and an investigation of material and extratextual

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<sup>1</sup> Debjani Ganguly, *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 80.

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dimensions of literature as complementary, not as mutually exclusive. The word “practice” has a usefully wide referential scope which include narratological and stylistic aspects of the text, as well as extratextual practices such as editing, archiving or marketing. The material demands and possibilities of print technology in a given historical moment will contribute to shaping generic forms such as travel writing, little magazines or documentary modernist collage. These genres, in turn, participate in specific negotiations between language communities, and between cosmopolitan and vernacular world imaginaries, the theorisation of which can contribute to a more cogent understanding of how literature forges world-relations – be they existential, political, or aesthetic.

To establish a few of the terms of such theorisation, **Stefan Helgesson**’s chapter, “Literary World-Making under Apartheid”, begins by providing an overview of some world-conceptions, both in contemporary world literature debates and in the philosophy of Hannah Arendt. Using Eric Hayot’s distinction between two meanings of “world” as either a self-contained entity or as the totality of everything, Helgesson argues in favour of a multiple-level understanding of literary world-making. The literary work itself can be read as constructing an aesthetic world which intimates the world in a more totalising sense. At an extra-textual level, communities of writers, editors and readers also engage in world-making – with literature as a unifying element and by way of vehicular forms, such as the journal. Helgesson’s empirical case is the South African literary journal *Staffrider* (1978–1996). Normally read in an exclusively local, national and political context, Helgesson argues instead that *Staffrider*’s local and vernacular valence derives to no small degree from its commitment to “literature” as a putatively cosmopolitan and multilingual realm both exceeding and evading the repressive constraints of apartheid.

In “Documentary Modernism”, **Irina Rasmussen** looks at alternative genres of inter-war modernism, such as the anthology, the scrapbook and the photographic reportage. Her focus, too, is on collaborative endeavours rather than individual authorships, cases in point being Nancy Cunard’s *Negro: An*

*Anthology*, L. S. Gumby's *The Harlem Scrapbook* and James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. These interventionist works, typically using the assemblage as form and method, all intervene in the shaping of the global imaginary of their time. In Rasmussen's reading, documentary modernism can therefore be read not only as sharing a drive towards establishing a cosmopolitan, word-historical outlook, but also as establishing institutional practices with a cosmopolitical and emancipatory bent.

Moving back in time and into the inner workings of narrative, **Annika Mörte Alling's** chapter on French realism traces the characteristic trajectory of protagonists in Stendhal's, Balzac's and Flaubert's novels from the province to the cosmopolitan metropolis of Paris. Intriguingly, this movement is presented as having been prepared imaginatively already by reading. The desire for a larger world is, in other words, not a given, nor are the limits and extension of that world. Instead, they must be actively imagined. In this way, the novels themselves *stage* the capacity of fiction to open new dimensions and facets of the world. By demonstrating in this way how cosmopolitan desires are generated, they also ironise the cosmopolitan prestige and authority subsequently attached to the novels as canonical instances of "world literature".

France and cosmopolitanism loom large also in **Anna Ljunggren's** essay, although from a Russian vantage point. If Dostoevsky famously berated the Russian infatuation with western Europe and Parisian modernity in particular, several generations of Russian exile writers have made the transition to western cultures, with the notable cases Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Brodsky, Andreï Makine and Mikhail Shishkin being highlighted in this chapter. Of these, all except Shishkin have also shifted language, which complicate questions of belonging – both culturally and in terms of literary identity. Contrary to most contemporary debates on cosmopolitanism, which grapple with postcolonial inequities, Ljunggren points out that the Russian discourse on cosmopolitanism is based rather on a long-standing "inner dichotomy" in Russian culture between an openness towards the west, and a withdrawal into its cultural heartland. During the isolationism of the Soviet era, this produced a powerful conception of an

“imaginary West” and of exile as a heroic identity. Today, exile is no longer a central concern for writers like Makine and Shishkin – instead, Ljunggren argues, we are witnessing the emergence of a poetics of transculturalism.

Approaching Russia from the opposite direction – from the outside in – **Mattias Viktorin’s** chapter investigates the emergence, beginning in the late nineteenth century, of a transnational, multilingual corpus of works dealing with the Siberian prison island Sakhalin. This is world-making in an inverted sense: a cosmopolitan literary realm constructing a world out of a highly specific, “remote” location. Although this sub-genre of writing was initiated in Russian by writers such as Tolstoy and Chekhov, it proliferated elsewhere as well – including Britain, Finland, Norway and Sweden – confirming thereby the link between institutions of publishing and the construction of world imaginaries. Using an anthropological approach, Viktorin shows how the notions of exile and prison have merged in the “setting apart” of an existentially extreme world in these works which tend towards a form of fictionalised ethnography. The setting apart results, however, not only in an othering of Siberia, but also in explorations of how the world emerged in and through Siberia.

**Helena Bodin’s** chapter deals similarly with the construction of a specific and secluded world – the harems of Constantinople – by an external gaze, in this instance the Swedish writer Elsa Lindberg-Dovlette. Focusing on the textual mechanics of narration, Bodin shows how the characters’ varying access to direct speech and focalisation, as well as the narrative world’s degree of connectedness to other worlds can effectively be used to gauge the mode and substance of world-making in specific works of literature. In the case of Lindberg-Dovlette, who was married to a Persian diplomat, the harem becomes narrativised as an exclusively female space, clearly bounded but nonetheless transcultural. The paradox, as Bodin demonstrates, is that the women who belong to a harem are confined to it, separated from the outer world by walls and gates, yet women from the outside could always access the harem. Added to that, the harem as a cultural space in Lindberg-Dovlette’s fictions is distinctly hybrid,

combining Parisian fashion, European languages and Ottoman traditions. The governesses accessing the harem function in this way as cultural brokers.

The polar opposite of the chronotope of the harem would probably be the western fantasy of the South Sea paradise, a timeless haven replete with promises of leisure and sexual license. **Anette Nyqvist** unpacks this fantasy by way of a very specific case, namely the Swedish traveller Carl-Emil Pettersson, who eventually would serve as inspiration for Pippi Longstocking's father in Astrid Lindgren's famous stories from the 1940s. "Travel" is the operative term in Nyqvist's essay, in several respects: as an activity, as an element in the imaginative making of the world, as the elusive object of a genre of writing, and as the movement of narratives across places, languages and media. The "travelling story" of her title, therefore, refers therefore both to travel writing's capacity to make stories travel, and to the transposition of the figure of Pettersson from factual to fictional discourse, as well as from news media to books and television. In this extended chain of remediation, elements of racism and othering are likewise reproduced but also, eventually, challenged.

This carries over, finally, to **Per Ståhlberg's** discussion of the differentiated mediation of an "Indian" imaginary in different circuits of literary production and distribution. Two best-selling novels, both of them in English and both published in 2008, are shown here to speak to distinct audiences, producing thereby contrasting conceptions of contemporary India. Following Francesca Orsini's identification of international, national and regional literatures in (or of) India, Ståhlberg shows how Arvind Adiga's Booker Prize-winning *The White Tiger* incorporates a cosmopolitan mode of address in its narrative discourse, directing the story to outsiders, whereas Chetan Bhagat's *The Three Mistakes of My Life* not only directs its discourse to an insider but also cultivates a more congenial and quotidian image of India. The dark pessimism of *The White Tiger* places it a remove from the preferred national image of an upbeat high-tech player in the global economy. However, the neat distinction between national and international falls apart if one considers how *The Three Mistakes* circulates among an

Indian diaspora, and how *The White Tiger* is also read and recognised in India. Ståhlberg confirms in this way how the outcome of the cosmopolitan-vernacular dynamic is hard to predict and never uniform.

## **Bibliography**

Ganguly, Debjani. *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.