



PROJECT MUSE®

World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth

J. Daniel Elam

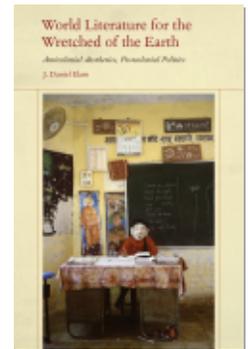
Published by Fordham University Press

Elam, J. Daniel.

World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth: Anticolonial Aesthetics, Postcolonial Politics.

Fordham University Press, 2020.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/78882.



➔ For additional information about this book
<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/78882>

Introduction: Impossible Subjects

Each generation must discover its mission in relative opacity, either to fulfill it or betray it.

—FRANTZ FANON, *WRETCHED OF THE EARTH*

On his deathbed in the United States—a “country of lynchers”—Frantz Fanon frantically dictated *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les Damnés de la Terre*) to his wife, Josie. He was dying rapidly from leukemia and had secretly flown to Bethesda, Maryland, for treatment under the name Omar Ibrahim. He lived long enough to proofread, with silent disappointment, Jean-Paul Sartre’s commissioned preface, but he never saw his book in print. The same day French police raided presses to halt the book’s circulation in Paris, on December 6, 1961, Fanon died in Bethesda. Fanon’s makeshift homeland, Algeria, gained independence in 1962. (Martinique, Fanon’s birthplace, is still under French rule.)¹

Sartre’s introduction, though certainly an important celebrity and political endorsement in 1961, has overshadowed subsequent analyses of Fanon’s text. In a philosophical maneuver that Fanon had described in *Black Skin, White Masks* (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952), Sartre understood white French men to be the book’s primary, if not exclusive, audience.² If Fanon was addressing the colonizer at all, it was because Fanon knew that the colonizer, having become monstrous, was eavesdropping anyway. For Fanon, the process of national independence requires concern for its means without knowing its ends (or worse: fearing that its ends will produce colonizers but with new faces). Sartre saw in Fanon’s cautious analysis a confident “dialectic” march toward “the history of man” (. . . *une autre histoire. Celle de l’homme*).³ Consequently, where Fanon’s concern with violence is analytic, tentative, and anxious, Sartre’s

is masochistically bloodthirsty. Where Fanon considered violence (in an abstract form) the treacherous means to an end, Alice Cherki writes, Sartre called for *actual* crime and murder.⁴ We rightly cringe, then, when Sartre proclaims, “Fanon speaks out loud and clear. We Europeans, we can hear him.”⁵

Almost but not quite. Certainly Sartre speaks so loudly and clearly in the first 20 pages of the book that Fanon is barely audible for the remaining 250. Hannah Arendt, writing in the context of U.S. student protests and Civil Rights movements, certainly couldn’t hear Fanon’s equivocation over Sartre’s bravado. Arendt’s attempt to rescue political action from “violence” does not align with Fanon’s anticolonial concerns, but it is certainly closer than the Fanon she presents—which she admits in a footnote while condemning Fanon as “irresponsible” and “grandiose” in the body of the text.⁶

It is too easy to condemn Sartre for poor reading comprehension.⁷ Instead, we might celebrate Fanon’s ability to speak to his fellow anticolonial comrades while remaining largely unintelligible to his colonizer. We can delineate a set of interlocking theories that Fanon’s anticolonial partial unintelligibility describes. First, *The Wretched of the Earth* is a document of *unknowing*. Fanon remains cautious about the politics of a postcolonial world to come. Second, it is also a document of *unknowability*. Even when it speaks in perfect French, the French cannot understand (another condition Fanon had diagnosed in *Black Skin, White Masks*). Third, by remaining unknowing and unknowable to colonial logics, it posits the basis of a collectivity on the condition of its unknowability.⁸ In the conclusion, Fanon demands that the “wretched” form the mass that will endeavor to “create a new man” on the basis of their wretchedness.

Anticolonialism is a mission in relative opacity. By offering us an anticolonial politics of unknowing, unintelligibility, and collective unrecognizability, Fanon makes it possible to imagine the reformulation of anticolonialism that, while in the full view of the colonizer, nevertheless remains entirely beyond its imaginative purview. This mission is not entirely opaque, but *relatively* so: It is still capacious enough to incorporate those who are willing to participate in its anonymous egalitarianism. To borrow a particularly moving description from Hannah Arendt, “If men [*sic*] wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must relinquish,” in favor of “infinite improbabilities.”⁹ Anticolonialism thrives not in seeking recognition or self-mastery in order to demonstrate sovereignty, but in relinquishing that possibility in favor of a radically (and likely impossible) democratic ethos of antiauthoritarianism.

Politics can only be “the art of the possible” for those whose lives are

secured by the state, or, in other words, only for those can confidently know that they will live to see the “possible” attained. Those whose lives are not guaranteed by the state, or those whose lives the state actively expects to end, cannot afford the luxury of such politics. The “wretched of the earth” require, instead, a politics of the impossible. This politics requires imagining and foregrounding, in the face of imminent or certain death, a politics not accountable to regimes of “success,” “sustainability,” or “attainability,” but rather to “the meantime”: the time being, the passing moment, and the present.

This is an unsustainable and inconsequential politics. It is a radical politics of the present. *The Wretched of the Earth* was prophetic not in the sense that it predicted a world after colonialism. More often than not, Fanon concedes that there will likely never be a world “after colonialism.” National independence would only be a brief interruption of a majoritarian continuity, ceaselessly replicating the same colonial logics of hierarchy and oppression. The book’s conclusion is a call to abandon Europe, its mad rush toward total slaughter, the pressures of its Cold War dichotomies and binaries, and its demand that the “Third World” be interpellated on “First World” and “Second World” terms. It is perhaps a vision for a utopian future, but it is a future that Fanon, whose health was deteriorating rapidly, knew he would not live to see. Despair and nihilism are insufficient for an anticolonial politics, but they guard against the equally unsatisfactory politics of optimism and hope.¹⁰ Anticolonialism is, in this final instance, a project of locating fleeting moments of egalitarian politics in the relative opacity of an unguaranteed future.

Fanon’s is one of many forms of anticolonialism that demonstrate that the philosophical project of radical egalitarianism emerged not from within Europe, but as a response to the horrors of its oppressive rule around the world. Conscripted to participate in a world they had not chosen, anticolonial and exiled thinkers nevertheless endeavored to imagine that world otherwise. David Scott has shown how these future postcolonial worlds were both romantically emancipatory and mired in deep tragedy.¹¹ For Scott, postcolonial studies, as the benefactor of these anticolonial imagined futures, has erred toward the romantic; as a correction, Scott argues that postcolonial futures must recuperate tragedy as the genre of the anticolonial imagination.

A vision of a postcolonial future, both alluring *and* grievous, stands at the center of most anticolonial thought. But it was a future that many anticolonial thinkers knew they would never inhabit. Anticolonial thought was written in exile, on deathbeds, in abjection, or in the face of “declined experience.”¹² Anti-imperial thinkers did not simply write narratives of

romance or tragedy. They sought vocabulary that could properly capture both the grandiose utopianism and self-effacing acquiescence necessary to imagine a world that they would not live to see. They attempted to create a language sufficient to imagine political collectivities motivated by the very fact of their current impossibility. They invented aesthetic forms necessary to imagine a worldwide egalitarianism rooted in the unlikelihood of any future at all.¹³

Anticolonialism thus operates at a seemingly paradoxical nexus: the incertitude of its own fulfillment and the refusal to betray the mission of emancipatory politics. The project of antiauthoritarian anticolonial thought, as we will discuss in the following pages, is to operate in conditions of relative opacity in two senses. First, anticolonial thought propounds theories of action in relative opacity, sufficient to form collectivities, but without getting recognized by the colonial state. Second, anticolonialism is an attempt to articulate a world that has yet to exist, which will likely never exist, and to do so without knowing it in advance. The anticolonial thinkers in this book embrace this condition of unknowing and non-futurity. Instead of trying to seek recognition or authority, anticolonial thinkers foreground relative opacity by celebrating the impossibility of their task and practicing forms of relinquishment, disavowal, and non-productivity necessary for anti-imperial survival in the compromised present.

In order to recuperate the anticolonial aesthetic vision conducive for its postcolonial egalitarian practice, this book reconceives of anticolonial thought as not merely political philosophy or aesthetic experimentation, but as both: that is to say, as critique. Critique and criticism, too, are practices of authorial or authoritative relinquishment. The critic-reader in this long tradition is “the figure in the carpet” whose readerly egalitarianism stays rooted in a pluralistic ontology that is “multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed.”¹⁴

In this sense, I argue, the aesthetics of anticolonial thought are best illuminated by situating them in conversation with a practice occurring simultaneously on the fringes of or in exile from Europe: comparative philology. Although it is saddled with a reputation for being myopically pedantic, comparative philology in the 1920s and 1930s was experimenting with its methodology, its scope, and its political commitments. Philology, “the art of reading slowly” (or, literally, “the love of words”),¹⁵ had held a fairly central role in the humanities through the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Writing in exile or in secret, German Jewish philologists wrote for a literary world that might survive fascism, even if they would not. They imagined reading practices conducive for an egalitarian world, rid of its

murderous drive for purity, defined instead by hospitability, heterogeneity, and improvisational assemblage.

Though the two bodies of work appear at first glance to be unrelated, they share more than mere contemporaneity. The thinkers in this book drew on philological scholarship to craft their anticolonial theory. More importantly, comparative philology and anticolonial political thought were both committed to envisioning a new “world” in response to, and from underneath, the horrors of fascism and colonialism, that a future “literature” was to imagine, inherit, and create. By reading philological criticism and anticolonial thought together—and as texts that offer a conjoined aesthetic and political theory—I illuminate a shared concern for radical humanism, egalitarianism, and worldliness.

This book therefore demonstrates how an anti-authoritarian practice of close reading, and the concomitant disavowal of authorial mastery, reshapes and reconfigures our current debates around critique and practices of radical politics. In contrast to previous studies of anticolonial writing that have focused on revolutionary outcomes and therefore prize national independence, sovereignty, and authority, I argue that anticolonial writing offers a political aesthetics centered on a commitment to “inconsequence” as a way of refusing future mastery and expertise. Drawing on this unacknowledged strain of anticolonial philosophy, this book offers an alternative theory of literary and political critique that inherits and reshapes the double intellectual afterlife of comparativism and postcolonial studies. In this vein, I suggest we foreground comparative philology and anticolonial thinkers as impossible subjects: a perpetually un-masterable discipline in the first instance, and philosophers committed to perpetual disavowal and relinquishment in the second.

The forms of anticolonial and philological thought presented in this book argue for reading and communal criticism *not* in order to cultivate a form of mastery, but precisely to disavow mastery altogether. These thinkers urged readers to read for its own sake—that is, for inconsequence.¹⁷ Reading, in this formula, was a practice of egalitarian antiauthoritarianism precisely because it urged readers to refuse the calls of authorship, and, relatedly, authority. To remain a reader—and to remain a reader with others—was precisely the goal of this theory of reading. To become or remain a reader, and thus purposefully divest oneself of authorial claims, was to fundamentally challenge the logic of the British Empire and European fascism, which claimed to prize self-mastery as the alleged proof necessary for national independence.¹⁸

By foregrounding an anticolonialism not organized around the telos of its alleged realization, we recuperate an anti-nihilist non-futurity. These

thinkers did not languish in the easy rejection of a postcolonial future, and they were not convinced that any predictable future was necessarily secured. It is possible to call this body of thought, in its most humble form, “a politics of the meantime,” or a politics for those stuck in “the waiting room of history.”¹⁹ What anticolonial practices could take care of people whose anonymous deaths would certainly precede utopia? But in grander terms, this is a radical politics of the present, or what Kama Maclean has called a “politics of impatience”:²⁰ Unable to sit and wait for a formal revolution to occur, these thinkers imagined ways of enacting it in the present in minor, unintelligible, and illegible ways.

Framed by Fanon’s call to “create a new man” in the conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth* and Erich Auerbach’s call for a philology conducive for a new (but impossible) world, this book focuses primarily on South Asian anticolonial thought as a nexus of a global imagination available in the 1920s and 1930s. The figures presented in this book represent the wide range of anti-imperial critique between World War I and World War II.

World War I was the catalyst for the “crisis of the European Man” (so-named by Edmund Husserl in 1935) and the related demand, then, to rethink political and ethical possibilities around the world. Metaphysical and transcendental assurances could no longer be the basis of ethical and political claims. Stefanos Geroulanos has shown how the response to transcendental certitude produced new modes of non-humanist and illiberal philosophies.²¹ The proliferation of ethical and political writing, in the 1920s and early 1930s, represented an often desperate but also optimistic attempt to reimagine a new world and a new human (and, relatedly, new aesthetic forms). To be sure, political philosophy from this period spanned the political spectrum and included radically egalitarian utopianism (cooperative mutual aid) as well as nationalist socialism (fascism).

This “crisis,” however, was hardly endemic to Europe, even if its most notorious European forms now overshadow other, more minor contemporaneous offerings. In a new and shell-shocked world, writers promoted their own ideas about what was to be done, or what could now be done. On an emphatically global scale, philosophers and thinkers suggested ways of being with others in the world.

For a variety of reasons, it was in this brief period that it was possible to imagine a world without British rule, but not possible enough to begin sorting out the tedious details of the post-independent nation-state. It was possible, even, to imagine that the nation-state needn’t—and shouldn’t—be the only form of political collectivity.²² To the extent that these were reasons to be optimistic, they were also cause for pessimism.

The British might leave, but there were plenty of local leaders keen to take their exact place. A colonized territory might become independent, but there were plenty of nationalists eager to blindly replicate Europe's disastrously xenophobic forms: national borders, cultural homogeneity, and defensive sovereignty. Consequently, anticolonial thinkers in this period allowed themselves the freedom to imagine wildly implausible postcolonial worlds. For the thinkers here, I hope to demonstrate, the very concepts of anticolonialism, freedom, egalitarianism, and political belonging could be repeatedly rethought and reimaged.

Lala Har Dayal, B. R. Ambedkar, M. K. Gandhi, and Bhagat Singh are the primary subjects in the chapters that follow. They are, of course, only four of many anticolonial thinkers whose political experimentation included minor gestures and practices of antiauthoritarianism. Although I will argue that they are theorists of minor, untraceable, and ephemeral acts, they are themselves hardly minor figures. Lala Har Dayal was one of the founders of the California- and Punjab-based *Ghadr* Party, which advocated for armed mutiny against the British Raj in the 1910s. B. R. Ambedkar is a leading figure of Dalit (formerly "untouchable") and anti-caste activism in the twentieth century, and he remains widely celebrated across India. As the leading national and global face of the Indian independence movement from the 1920s until his death, M. K. Gandhi espoused theories of "non-violence" that have been taken up by multiple civil rights activists. Bhagat Singh was one of the central figures in the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army in Punjab and an anticolonial martyr whose hanging, at 23, made him a regional and national hero.

These theorists wrote extensively about anticolonialism *as* antiauthoritarianism and global egalitarianism (rather than anticolonial figures working in more nationalist or xenophobic idioms). All four thinkers documented—extensively if not exhaustively—their various political and aesthetic experimentations, one of which was serious engagement with reading and critique as an anticolonial practice. These thinkers were self-consciously in conversation with many other people who were likely theorizing similar practices, whose voices appear in their theories. I regret that there are many activists whose voices do not appear in these pages, especially the women whom these men considered colleagues, adversaries, and friends.²³

Yet it is precisely because these four men figure so prominently and "heroically" in postcolonial discussions of anticolonial activism—in both academic scholarship as well as in popular discourse—that they make especially rich theorists of their own antiauthoritarian insignificance. More so than other anticolonial figures, these men are considered experts of

political and social theory, masters of various philosophical traditions, and authoritative leaders for an independent Indian nation. Alternatively, they are heroic assassins, brave bomb throwers, and daring fasters. To be sure, these are fair descriptions. But they fail to account for the ways in which these four figures were theorizing other acts of anticolonialism that have since been relegated to the dustbin of acts deemed improperly political (reading, moving-going), unrecognizably resistant (studying, eating), and insufficiently heroic (fumbling, failing).

These thinkers, very much aware of the *possible* consequences of their *recognizably* political actions, attempted to imagine, simultaneously, *impossibility* and *inconsequentiality* as rubrics for antiauthoritarian projects. Despite their significant disagreements, the thinkers presented here share a common theoretical belief: that the true practice of anticolonialism must be uninhibited by the telos of its realization. In Bhagat Singh's Bolshevik-inspired terms, this was permanent revolution. In M. K. Gandhi's renunciatory terms, this was infinite relinquishment. Lala Har Dayal imagined a revolution that was propelled forward as it looked backward at the horrors of history. B. R. Ambedkar took his intellectual inheritance of sociology and philology and pushed them to their breaking point in order to realize a human subject that would be fundamentally incapable of caste.

Departing from a clean history of ideas, and on behalf of an anti-canon of literary thought, our discussion in the pages that follow will trace disorderly histories, promiscuous modes of thought, impossible transformations, and improvisational adjacencies.²⁴ These are the methods, we will find, necessary to imagine a world "haunted by its own incertitude";²⁵ to act on behalf of "inconstructable questions";²⁶ and to remain "immune to the inducements of either hegemony or canonicity."²⁷ In the first instance, the reading practices discussed here are practices that seek to *evade* recognition rather than demand it. The goals of these collective practices are, variously: unrecognizability, indecipherability, unintelligibility, untraceability, and untranslatability in the face of an authority or an authorial/authorizing institution. In the second instance, these practices are attempts at "irrelevance," "inconsequence," "insufficiency," or the foregrounding of one's own in-expertise, anti-sovereignty, and unknowing. Leela Gandhi has dubbed similar practices trials in "moral imperfectionism" and non-renunciatory asceticism.²⁸ We will be interested instead in theories of collective practices invested in the fleeting moment, rather than practices of self-cultivation. In other words, what are the possibilities of a "self" relinquished to total unknowability and infinite risk? Aesthetically speaking, that is to say, a certain strain of anticolonialism has imag-

ined the possibility of no “self” at all, but an anonymous, interpenetrating, multitudinous collectivity.

Scholars who dismiss anticolonial thought often do so along the lines that it allegedly produces dull practicality motivated by half-baked utopianism (or vice versa). Those who have engaged anticolonial thought more seriously but patronizingly have found it to be “improperly political,” too fraught with ethical and moral prerogatives to be of use.²⁹ More vibrantly, though not without some defensiveness, scholars have argued that anticolonial thinkers provide us with robust and mature theories of violence, mastery, asceticism, equality, unconditionality, solidarity, utopianism, liberalism, modernity, freedom, democracy, cosmopolitanism, decolonization, and universalism.³⁰ Fewer scholars have overtly celebrated the aesthetics of anticolonial thought, but we often fall prey to justifying its canonicity by rendering it roughly equivalent to European forms.

In other words, in response to assertions that anticolonialism was too aesthetic to be political or too political to be aesthetic, we have retreated to two unappealing dead-ends: on the one hand, sacrificing the aesthetics of anticolonialism to the “joylessness of a utilitarian dispensation,”³¹ or, on the other, replicating the very aesthetic hierarchies, canons, and authorities—even if with new faces—anticolonial thought had attempted to undermine. Some anticolonial thinkers have finally been allowed to produce political philosophy; the occasional anticolonial writer has finally been granted the status of “literary,” or at least having written well. Nearly absent altogether, however, is the acknowledgment that many anticolonial thinkers unequivocally *refused* to think politics and aesthetics as separate. This suggests, to my mind, a disconcerting indifference to the fairly unambiguous claims of the writers themselves, especially those foregrounded in this book.³² To this end, they prefigure contemporary attempts to think the human beyond the unit of the “individual.” This is what Kandice Chuh has beautifully described as “illiberal humanisms,” which foreground “relationality and entanglement rather than individuality and autochthony.”³³ Let us take anticolonial critics at their word. To recuperate anticolonial theory in its fullest sense requires us to consider anticolonial thought as *critique*.

I mean “critique” here in the sense of its more capacious German genealogy (*Kritik*), therefore more or less synonymous with “criticism,” and certainly indebted here to Walter Benjamin’s lifelong cultivation of the term. Recall that Benjamin attempted to develop a form of aesthetic criticism suitable for political action in the present. Benjamin’s sense of criticism was the product of an idiosyncratic alchemy: Kant tempered by Schegel and Goethe; Schegel and Goethe catalyzed by Marx; Marx

pushed to crisis by Brecht.³⁴ In short, Benjaminian criticism is a recalcitrance against Enlightenment assurance (Kant's *Aufklärung*) in favor of enchantment and wonder (Weber's *Entzauberung der Welt*), but nevertheless compelled (contra Goethe and Schegel) by the emergency of the worldly political present (Schmitt's *Ausnahmezustand*). It is not a practice, therefore, of Kantian critical "maturity" but one of experience (*Erlebnis*) and encounter, too fleeting and ephemeral to "mature" at all. A re-enchanted, immature critique relies on imagination ("to read what has never been written") to imagine radical, pessimistic but utopian, politics ("a revolutionary chance to fight for the oppressed past"), which is fleeting (a memory that "flashes up at a moment of danger").³⁵ It is, additionally, a practice of self-erasure and of enabling "the masses" to cultivate, *as masses*, a form of aesthetic-political critique. Correctly so, Philip Weinstein has described this as "unknowing."³⁶ Benjamin's practice of criticism is, if not impossible, infeasible; that Benjamin continued to hone his techniques attests less to a practice of mastery and more to a practice of in-expertise: an attempt to become *even more* immature, *even more* enchanted, *even more* utopian, often to the embarrassment of his colleagues.

Benjamin began his graduate work in philology but switched to philosophy, and then attempted to combine both in his work on German tragedy. In an essay on "The Theory of Criticism," Benjamin wrote that philosophy aspires for unity, but philology aspires to be awed.³⁷ In response to Adorno's criticism that his work was too naïve, Benjamin begins to trace the contours of a philological critical orientation: "a 'wide-eyed presentation of the facts'" characterizes "the true philological attitude." Philology "magically fixates the reader" on a text, "whose exorcism is reserved for philosophy."³⁸ In an earlier essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin asserts the need for a critique that "stops short, however—as if in awe of the work, but equally from respect for the truth."³⁹ Where the critic stops, regimes of mastery continue. For Benjamin, critique grasps beauty in "the impossibility of unveiling," rather than the alleged benefits of discovering what is "underneath."⁴⁰ In contrast, recall the brutality with which the French demanded an "Algeria unveiled," in Fanon's detailed account.⁴¹ Where the critic revels in unknowing, the expert is driven murderously mad by the alleged "secret" being withheld from him. The expert defines unknown and anonymous others by the his inability to "possess" (and to penetrate) them. The critic, in contrast, stops in naïve awe before unknown and unpossessable others. Stopping short, in awe: These are the prerequisites for an immature critique, necessary for an inexperienced project.

Erich Auerbach's monumental *Mimesis*, written in Istanbul and in exile from Nazi Germany, is the most famous example of naïve philological

awe. A fragmentary collection of close readings, from Homer to Virginia Woolf, *Mimesis* stages multiple attempts to grasp “the representation of reality in Western literature.” This subtitle alone should alert us to the impossibility of Auerbach’s task.

In his introduction to the fiftieth anniversary of the English edition of *Mimesis*, Edward Said notes that “A great part of Auerbach’s charm as a critic is that, far from seeming heavy-handed and pedantic, he exudes a sense of searching and discovery, the joys and uncertainties of which he shares unassumingly with his reader.”⁴² In other words, *Mimesis* is a fragmentary and partial text whose authorial presence and expertise is displaced in favor of a readerly sensibility. The book’s methodology, as well as its aesthetic and political commitments, were implicit and often experimental. By foregrounding imperfection and insufficiency as the necessary critical sensibility, Auerbach wrote aesthetic theory for a world defined by its impossibility.

Let us imagine then that critique and criticism, properly reconceived, are methods of reading that remain relatively opaque. In “a paper read at a school,” Virginia Woolf offers a question—how should one read a book?—which she refuses to answer. For Woolf, there is no correct way to read a book except to allow the text to impress upon you—that is, to experience no other sensation than momentary immersion and ecstasy.⁴³ “To read is to be elsewhere,” Michel de Certeau reminds us; Roland Barthes finds himself being cruised in a poorly lit park (by both the text and the police). Upon reading, Marcel Proust finds himself thrown into his childhood, “beside the fire in the dining-room, in my bedroom, in the depths of the armchair with its crocheted head-rest, or on fine afternoons, beneath the nut bushes and hawthorns in the park, where every breath from the boundless fields came from so far off to play silently at my side, holding mutely out to my distracted nostrils the scent of the clover and the sainfoin to which my weary eyes would sometimes be raised,” an incommunicable experience at the heart of uncounted, inconsequential afternoons.⁴⁴

“We must remain readers,” Woolf urges her audience. Walter Benjamin recalls the “fragile threads of a net in which I had once become tangled when learning to read” in his Berlin childhood.⁴⁵ Reading is not only to enter into a pact with the text, but to become entangled with an anonymous collectivity of others.⁴⁶ Criticism, in Pascale Casanova’s reading of Henry James, “is to be sought not above and beyond the carpet itself, but by looking at it from another point of view.”⁴⁷ To read is to become impure with the impression of others, in Adam Zachary Newton’s deeply moving account: to find that *je est un autre*.⁴⁸ Critique as unknowing anonymity

safeguards the experience of anonymous collective textual encounter by rendering enigmatic the very thing it claims to render intelligible. Critique as “open secret” announces and circumscribes the unintelligibility of this readerly collectivity.⁴⁹

“Reading” thus names a revived genealogy of critique and criticism that foregrounds its own authoritative limits and insists instead on its own incompleteness, in-expertise, and often its own implausibility.⁵⁰ This model of criticism works along minor networks: It is rooted in gestures, experiments, fragments, and practices that think at the boundaries of illegibility and unintelligibility. Configured this way, this practice of critique, imbued with minoritarian urgency, will certainly push us past the confines of self-satisfied critical authority that has “run out of steam,” in Bruno Latour’s words.⁵¹

This mode of criticism aligns with the scholarly practices of comparative philology occurring in response to the increasing force of fascism in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Foregrounding practices of impurity, anti-mastery, and the formulation of heteronomous critical practices stood in direct opposition to fascism, totalitarianism, and Nazism, which sought to produce collectivities on the bases of purity, mastery, domination, and homogeneity. In response, comparative philologists reveled in impurity (translation, commensurability), anti-mastery (the perpetual insufficiency of one’s knowledge), and heterogeneity (comparison).⁵² This required thinking (to borrow terms from more recent critics) equivalence *without* substitutability, equivalence *because of* inequality, “equivalences which do not unify,”⁵³ and “comparison that is common but not unified.”⁵⁴

Early twentieth-century philology theorized practices of reading as ways of retaining heterogeneity, perpetual inexpertise, and impurity in the face of fascist national homogenization and cultural purification. By foregrounding the philologist critic as perpetually insufficient—there were always more books to read, more languages to learn—philology envisioned a community of interdependent readers. In direct contrast to the goals of European fascism, these scholarly practices were necessary for retaining a commitment to other readers and critics, as well as a deference to those readers and critics, even when their lives were not assured.

The name of his scholarly endeavor—comparative philology—not only augers an unachievable task, but barricades against the temptations of scholarly expertise and mastery. Comparative philology (or, later, comparative literature), by way of a grammatical impossibility, names not an object of study but rather a method of study, an orientation toward reading, and an orientation toward authority.⁵⁵ Despite occasional halfhearted

suggestions that comparative literature become a project of scholarly collaboration, most early theorists of comparativism asserted instead a celebratory resignation: The sum total of individual scholarship would never come close to comparing *all* literature—or even defining what “literature” is. Philology, in this sense, names an orientation toward reading and critique rather than a method. The critic would need to read with what Edward Said would later call “worldliness”: a historical situatedness that moved slowly, appreciatively, and expansively across a perpetually unfinished reading list.⁵⁶ (We will discuss many perpetually unfinished reading lists in this book.) As an orientation toward authority, comparativism signals a deferential practice: not simply to the authors it heralds as “literary,” but also to fellow critics. Literary criticism in this mode is a drive toward irrelevance and in-expertise.⁵⁷

Comparativism requires a particular type of critic. Marcel Detienne calls this critic “a singular-plural being” who self-consciously chooses, experiments, and takes risks when they identify “the comparable.”⁵⁸ The comparativists’ goal is not to produce their subjects (texts, people, histories, and practices) as necessarily discrete, but rather perpetually intertwined and intertwining. We might therefore say that, following Detienne, assembling the comparable is an act of egalitarian illiberal critique: It is a struggle, even if inconsequential, against the forces of isolation, autonomy, insuperable difference, and incommensurability. It is therefore a “microconfiguration of politics” and an attempt to “engender other kinds of equality.”⁵⁹ These stakes were especially high for thinkers like Auerbach who wrote about reading for his “friends”: friends who were likely dead, friends who could not be known in advance, and friends whose “love” of reading might produce a fleeting moment of community otherwise destroyed by hate.⁶⁰

Edward Said was the most imaginative benefactor of this conjoined genealogy of anticolonial thought and philological scholarship.⁶¹ “True philological reading is active,” Said writes, and it is “in search of freedom, enlightenment, more agency, and certainly not their opposites.” The process of philological close reading was “a lifelong attentiveness to the words and rhetorics by which language is used by human beings who exist in history,” not by authorial presences divined to live beyond it.⁶² In other words, Said envisioned his commitment to reading and becoming a reader as fundamental practice of democratic and humanistic criticism, itself an intimately political practice: “all of it occurring in the world, on the ground of daily life and history and hopes, and the search for knowledge and justice, and then perhaps also for liberation.”⁶³ To “live one’s life philologically,” in Sheldon Pollock’s re-formulation, is to cultivate a

properly egalitarian political and ethical critique.⁶⁴ This philology-as-a-way-of-life is an orientation toward a perpetually incomplete knowledge of a perpetually unknowable world.⁶⁵ Comparative philology thus heralds a critically imaginative, intersubjective, cohabitation with others in the world.

I suggest we recuperate a comparativist model of criticism conducive for the world it ideally seeks to bring into view: a world of radical equivalence marked by the impossibility of its total knowability. It is an impossible subject, finding affinities and affiliations between texts in mere relative opacity, still open to the errantry of contact and not yet foreclosed by the knowability of a world in its totality.⁶⁶

These projects are, simply, impossible. Certainly, these projects are unsustainable; none of the projects here produced, even in their most practical forms, any satisfactory results. This is precisely the point. These anticolonial practices are interested in envisioning a nonteleological egalitarianism: one that might be tentatively staged in the present; one that might occur in a future that will not be reached; one that might occur fleetingly, ephemerally, unremarkably. To be unknown and unknowable, to abstain and be inconsequential, to relinquish and to disavow: Such projects demand that we reconsider our impulse toward evaluation on the grounds of political “recognition,” “success” (or “failure”), “sustainability,” and “consequentiality.” These are precisely the imperious prescripts of liberal colonial rule, which promised national independence in return for the proof of liberal “maturity,” properly demonstrated in the form of autonomous, self-knowing individuals.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, it is historically inaccurate and theoretically inadequate to suggest that anticolonial thought was either “for” or “against” liberalism.⁶⁸ While remaining firmly against liberalism’s imperial effects, anticolonial thought posited liberalism as a still open question. Allow me to put this slightly differently, in two ways that will appear in the pages that follow. First, as Ambedkar and Gandhi will ask: How might liberalism be rendered impossible? Or, second, as Har Dayal and Bhagat Singh will ask: How might liberalism be put in the service of an impossible politics?

It should be clear that, to the extent that this book is about critique as a reading practice, it is not interested in attending to any demonstrable act of reading *per se*. In my analysis of anti-imperial critique, “reading” names the critical practice of both unknowability and unknowing. Critique imagines what reading *should* be, not what it is. Those interested in the elucidation of reading practices in the early twentieth century should consult outstanding resources elsewhere. This project does not concern

itself with the concomitant concerns of reading as an empirical practice, though it has benefited greatly from projects that do. Questions of literacy, concerns about translation, the history of reading, debates about English versus South Asian “vernaculars,” and descriptions of institutions (libraries, schools, and so on), are beyond the scope of this book.⁶⁹

The “reader” is most notably absent precisely because the anticolonial thought explicated in the following pages has, in my analysis, theorized that subject position as necessarily unintelligible, unrecognizable, and unanswerable to the colonial desire to render its subjects identifiable and knowable. “Actual” readers and reading are not only irrelevant to this book but run counter to the anticolonial logics that I am attempting to follow over the course of the next chapters. The importance of reading in the analyses here, however, is that it is more invested in the political possibilities (and impossibilities) of an act that “leaves no traces.”⁷⁰ This was not merely a celebration of the ephemeral and non-authorial, but often a matter of survival.

At first glance, it might seem impossible to reconcile my theoretical claim of anticolonial inconsequentiality with the historical fact that anticolonial thinkers themselves were quite busy making demands on, or against, the British Raj; throwing bombs; and imagining a postcolonial nation.⁷¹ To my mind, these acts are not incompatible. It is possible to make demands on the state while attending to, with equal commitment, the finite lives of friends. To think consequence and inconsequence together, to imagine a future and to imagine no future at once, or to demand recognition and to value secrecy: These are not paradoxical practices for people whose lives have been deemed irrelevant.

To think these as “paradoxical” is to reproduce a pernicious logic whereby “politics” connotes action, masculinity, asceticism, and mastery, and “aesthetics” connotes inaction, effeminacy, indulgence, and diletantism. Current defenses of the humanities rely on these binaries: Proper reading is “good for us” because it will make us better citizens or cosmopolitan subjects, even if it is unpleasant; improper reading is “bad” because it is useless, or even indulgent and insufficiently ascetic.⁷² This defense of the humanities additionally relies on consequential values to-be-accrued, the imperious demand that criticism be instrumentalizable, and that subjects render themselves recognizable.

In response, this book foregrounds the pleasures of critique. It follows anticolonial thinkers for whom “reading” described enjoyable practices, abundant personal libraries, frivolous demands, and expansive sociality. These practices cherish inconsequentiality and “minor gestures” over

“grand historical noise.”⁷³ To the extent that these theorized practices are ascetic, they are far from the extra-worldly, self-denying, and pious practices that are generally associated with asceticism.

Anticolonialism and philology, in the 1920s and 1930s, understood their object of transformation to be nothing less than the *world*. Bhagat Singh, in conversation with leftist radicals in the United States and Europe, imagined a “universal brotherhood.”⁷⁴ Ambedkar believed that universal contaminated contaminability—heralded alternatively as “fraternity” or “fellowship” (*maitra*)—was a necessarily worldwide mission. Har Dayal settled for no utopia smaller than a “World-State” of friendship. Gandhi sought to rebuild the world from its minor philosophies—aestheticism, vegetarianism, Theosophy—even if in a makeshift vocabulary.⁷⁵ Benjamin’s critic could not rest until all the dead had been rescued from the enemy.⁷⁶ Fanon demanded the *end* of the world. Auerbach theorized a worldly philology conducive for *Weltliteratur*—not simply “world literature,” but rather a worldly literature, a literature worthy of worldliness—whose “philological home is earth.”⁷⁷

The only certainty that any of these thinkers possessed about this “world,” however, was that it was uncertain and, moreover, likely impossible. Bhagat Singh’s “universal brotherhood” demanded “chaos” and assured death. Ambedkar’s “fellowship” was produced by a commitment to shared suffering, which necessarily stalls abandoning the world as it is. Gandhi’s philosophies were rooted in perpetual failure and loss. The citizens of Har Dayal’s “World-State” were the descendants of the present, but they inherited an impossible past. Fanon offered the world an invitation to be his “comrades,” knowing that his invitation would be misunderstood. The actualization of a true “world literature,” Auerbach wrote, would mark the end of the world.

Philology and anticolonialism offer these utopian projects by theorizing ways of “reading” that favor the novice over the expert and the untraceable over the recognizable. With the “world” as its demand, reading names an impossible political theory determined to, in Barbara Johnson’s evocative phrase, “encounter unexpected otherness.”⁷⁸

“Reading,” theorized in this way, is an egalitarian affective relationship (*philia*, friendship) in relative opacity.⁷⁹ It is dependent, deferential, impure, and fleeting. This, in turn, requires that we speak in the name of collectivities defined by their unknowability, limitlessness, discontinuity, and heterogeneity (and certainly not their opposites). To remain a reader with anonymous others is to speak as a “we” with deference rather than presumption. To speak as “we” is to speak as a totality while “willingly renouncing any claims to sum it up or to possess it.”⁸⁰ To speak

as a “we” is an invitation to commit to this worldly, potentially infinite, relation.⁸¹ To accept or to offer this invitation is a risk: We cannot know who else has offered or accepted, or who might offer or accept without our knowledge (or our existence). This is an antiauthoritarian political act, but it is also a “fiction” that demands our imaginative—political and aesthetic—commitment.⁸²

“Reading” names the practices of collective unknowing and unknowability that anticolonialism and philology theorize for an antiauthoritarian and egalitarian world. What we will discuss in this book, therefore, are theories of “world literature” in their most necessary and impossible forms. Thinking “world literature” this way restores the aesthetic and political claims implicit in the agglutinative neologism, *Weltliteratur*. B. Venkat Mani’s succinct definition of *Weltliteratur* offers a crucial insight to conceiving the importance of the agglutinative neologism: It is the name that makes possible critical claims to literature as self-consciously “historically conditioned, culturally determined, and politically charged.”⁸³ In this sense, “world literature” does not name a list of texts, but rather a critical orientation toward a political and aesthetic world that may never be known in its totality. Framed differently, to borrow Aniket Jaaware’s formulation: Instead of thinking “world literature” as an *institution*, we might recuperate a “world literature” of *destitution* (and of *de-institution*): a world literature for the wretched of the earth.⁸⁴

“World literature,” as only a utilizable and institutionalizable program (or a list of texts), not only produces an unsatisfactory object of analysis but also reproduces the very logic of imperial control that an antiauthoritarian “world literature” would presumably want to avoid.⁸⁵ Auerbach identified this paradox: If a literary world were to be completely known and entirely mastered, “the idea of world literature would simultaneously be realized and destroyed.”⁸⁶ In response, he proposed philological critique of inexpert “beginnings”—starting points (*Ansatzpunkte*), points of departure (*Ausgangspunkte*), or starting moments (*Ansatzphänomen*)—rather than ends or conclusions. These starting points “urgently” hinted at grand synthetic literary analyses that were unfinishable, and reveled in their perpetual insufficiency.⁸⁷

This emphasis on the ineluctable contingency of beginnings, and on the refusal to predicate analyses on the possibility of their conclusion, is necessary for utopian projects. If the future egalitarian utopia we imagine is built only from our expertise in the knowable present, then we will assure the continuity of domination. If we decide, instead, that we may depart from the present for an unknowable future, without knowing how we might get there, we might finally find ourselves with others in an

egalitarian, and likely fleeting, utopia.⁸⁸ Put differently: We must begin a mission in relative opacity, without guarantee of fulfilling it: Such are the conjoined utopian politics of philology and anticolonialism.

The anticolonial aesthetics under analysis here were (and are) intended for a postcolonial politics in the immediate present, without regard to its sustainability or its consequentiality. Anticolonialism imagined a future *after* colonialism, too, to be sure; but we might recuperate the experiments of a minor anticolonial practice to rupture, if only for a moment, the continuous colonial present. To imagine this, to borrow Didier Eribon's formulation, is to tentatively assert:

the idea of an "us" that is at once impossible and inevitable, and which breaks up as it forms; of a life of "rupture" and "discontinuity" within a majoritarian world formed by the "continuous"; of a morality [and politics] as aesthetic—that is to say, common self-creation and reorganization, always reformulating, for which it would be vain to want to eventually make whole, closed, or complete.⁸⁹

The results of such a minor politics "may not be spectacular . . . perhaps they are limited to modest contributions through books, partial or unfinished gestures, barely perceptible movements. But the effects are profound."⁹⁰

Taken together, comparative philology and anticolonial thought offer us a model of "nonemphatic revelatory" critique in the service of a world we will not live to see.⁹¹ In the meantime, we require emancipatory commitments that operate in "the indeterminate and the contingent . . . between what has passed and what lies ahead."⁹² Both nihilism and hope are insufficient responses to tragic times, and they foreclose commitment to politics in the immediate present. We might endeavor, as Auerbach implores us at the end of *Mimesis*, "to emphasize the random occurrence, to exploit it not in the service of a planned continuity of action, but rather in and of itself."⁹³ It is a modest politics presented as aesthetic critique. To only connect, one might as well begin.