

The Ghosts of War

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THE GHOSTS OF WAR

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This Thing Called the World by
Debjani Ganguly. Durham, NC:
Duke University Press, 2017.
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What distinguishes Debjani Ganguly's *This Thing Called the World* from much of the discourse on world literature is her relentless focus on the Global War on Terror. In a field often overwhelmed and diffused by its subject, Ganguly has chosen to make this phantom phenomenon the coordinate on her map through which she triangulates a study of "World," "War," and "Witness," or, in other words, the global networked novel and its ability to engage this hypermediated war and its attendant humanitarian crises.

Ganguly begins her study with a quote from Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, and she returns to this novel throughout her book. In McEwan's protagonist, Henry Perowne, Ganguly locates a British neurosurgeon who, in 2003, during the lead-up to the Iraq War, seems to be suffering "the condition of the time, this compulsion to hear how it stands with the world, and be joined to a generality, to a community of anxiety" (1). Perowne cannot decide whether to watch the news, and in his struggle to make a choice about checking in on the war, he may be the perfect stand-in for the reader of *This Thing Called the World*, for there is certainly an understandable tendency to turn away from the "transnational forms of violence that occur at the interface of conventional warfare between sovereign states, organized crime, and state-sponsored

violations of human rights through population displacement and genocide" (9). Fortunately, for such a reader, Ganguly's work offers the relief of a lyncean lens, a keen comparative frame of vision that analyzes the growth of the rhetoric of terror and the global novel in the context of eighteenth-century literature, the era in which, Ganguly argues, we find the seeds for our current "sentimental," "humanitarian," "panoptic," and "spectacular" imaginary (35).

This Thing Called the World does not suffer from the planetary proclivity to discount detail. Franco Moretti, elaborating on his theory of "distant reading," a world literature scholarship enabled by big data and hypermediated networks of image and information, wrote, "if the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, less is more."¹ The text does not disappear in Moretti's own writing, as Ganguly generously acknowledges, and it does not disappear in Ganguly's care. Although Ganguly disregards some of the more innovative critical voices in this field of discourse, such as Rebecca Walkowitz and Christian Moraru, she does not neglect the global novels she treats. She structures her work, as mentioned earlier, around three parts (World, War, and Witness) and nine chapters, each supported by close readings of a wide range of theory and primary texts. Her nuanced

treatment of McEwan, David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*, Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, Janette Turner Hospital's *Orpheus Lost*, Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, and Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* and *Maus* constantly grounds the ghostly phenomenon of global terror in characters who embody "the fear-saturated worlds of ordinary people" whose lives have become more than just entwined with the "brutal ravages of history" (226). In this entwining with the global war(s), the characters Ganguly chooses to highlight have become witnesses.

The "witness," like the "death-world," is a term Ganguly develops into a world all its own. *This Thing Called the World* engages "the world" and in so doing creates worlds, the macro's character scarring, marking, and quite often illuminating the micro. In a global war in which witnesses are often excepted, erased, and rendered bare (think Guantanamo Bay), Ganguly's text offers a compelling counternarrative in which the witness emerges from such underworlds and the rhetoric of exceptionality with a politics, an ethics, a phenomenology, a melancholy, a music, and a voice. Ultimately, it is through this evolved concept of witness that Ganguly is able to map her genealogy of the novel and engage what she calls the "Postliberal Imaginary" that "has lost faith in the capacity of the

state to restore order and that sees through the neoliberal rhetoric of “just war” (259). To engage such a mind-set is, of course, not the same as endorsing it or refuting it. But in marshaling the voices of Ganguly’s study toward this “Postliberal Imaginary,” *This Thing Called the World* itself bears powerful witness to a collective impasse and is itself a world, a map, and a territory, a voice that confronts the reader with the entwined and ever-present future, what Bakhtin calls our “living contact with the unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality” (3).

M. C. Armstrong embedded with JSOF in Al Anbar Province, Iraq. He published extensively on the Iraq War through the Winchester Star. He is the winner of a Pushcart Prize. His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in Esquire, the Missouri Review, the Gettysburg Review, Mayday, Monkeybicycle, Epiphany, the Literary Review, and other journals and anthologies. He lives in Greensboro, North Carolina, with Yorick, his corgi, whose interruptions to his writing are frequent but welcome.

NOTES

1. Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review*, January–February 2000, 57.