

J O S E P H D A R D A

## The Global Remaking of the American Political Novel

Caren Irr, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. viii + 264 pp. \$30.00.

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In a 1980 essay titled “The American Political Novel,” Robert Alter bemoaned the state of a form that, in his mind, had “reached a stage of nervously accelerated production and woefully diminishing returns.”<sup>1</sup> Contemporary political novelists were, for Alter, either too conventional (Allen Drury) or too adversarial (Robert Coover, E. L. Doctorow, Thomas Pynchon). While the former offered a hackneyed and overly rosy image of Washington, D.C., the latter—the real focus of Alter’s criticism—reduced everything to an angry farce. Discussing Coover’s *The Public Burning* (1977) and Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* (1971), Alter asked why these “gifted and serious novelists” had chosen to write “adolescent outbursts” that tended toward “facile and fantastic generalization” and baldly conveyed the authors’ own political attitudes. Instead, Alter argued, the political novel should depict “concretely and subtly what politics does to character, what character makes of politics” (27), revealing the political as personally and privately felt. Alter’s essay anticipates the late-twentieth-century decline of the political novel in the United States. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, literary fiction would increasingly turn toward the politics of the

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1. Robert Alter, “The American Political Novel,” *New York Times Book Review* 10 Aug. 1980: 3.

everyday and to personal reckonings with trauma. In the new millennium, however, as Caren Irr argues in *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century*, political fiction is being remade with an eye to the world beyond Washington.

Irr's study contributes to a growing body of work aiming to more fully globalize the "transnational turn" in American studies, analyzing culture in relation to global systems of commerce, communication, and governance.<sup>2</sup> For literary scholars, this has often meant asking whether and to what extent American literature is able to conceive of and contend with the world. Bruce Robbins has made the much-cited claim that the American novel has become not more worldly in the twenty-first century but only more disoriented and domesticated, while offering "mercifully short visits" to an outer world always marked by atrocity.<sup>3</sup> Irr counters Robbins, but she differentiates her account of global American fiction from his by theorizing what she calls the "geopolitical novel"—an emerging genre that recycles and reorganizes the formal elements of earlier political fiction in order to negotiate the world's fast-changing political environment. While all literature is arguably unconsciously political, Irr focuses her study on explicitly political literary works that address a range of issues, including neoliberalism, international aid agencies, social revolutionary movements, and international migrant labor. Over the course of the book's five chapters, she considers more than 125 novels, most written after the turn of the century. Unlike Robbins's more anecdotal evidence—tracing a self-congratulatory worldliness that nevertheless withdraws from global complexity in the fiction of Don DeLillo, Jeffrey Eugenides, and Jonathan Franzen—Irr conducts an occasionally unwieldy but compel-

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2. See, for example, Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, eds., *Globalizing American Studies* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010); Paul Giles, *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2011); Winfried Fluck, Donald E. Pease, and John Carlos Rowe, eds., *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College P, 2011); and Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2010).

3. Bruce Robbins, "The Worlding of the American Novel," *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Cassuto, Clare Virginia Eby, and Benjamin Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011) 1097–99. For another argument made contra Robbins, see Leerom Medovoi, "'Terminal Crisis?': From the Worlding of American Literature to World-System Literature," *American Literary History* 23.3 (2011): 643–59.

ling review of American fiction's engagement with world systems since 2000. Combining theory, socio-institutional analysis, and the sheer magnitude of a survey, she makes a convincing case that U.S. fiction is in fact becoming more worldly in the twenty-first century, and more political as well.

Irr is clearly aware of the baggage involved in discussing political fiction. Alter's annoyance with what he calls the "adversary political novel" (3) may be rare today, but similar attacks are regularly aimed at critics who are perceived to carry out "symptomatic readings" in which, *à la* Fredric Jameson, they "construe [elements present in the text] as symbolic of something latent or concealed," as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have put it.<sup>4</sup> While Irr's method is avowedly built on ideological criticism in the tradition of Jameson, she is careful to head off the hostility reserved for this variety of work by neoformalists. She emphasizes that ideological criticism is not about valuing literature that conforms to the critic's own views, nor about construing a work to reflect one's politics or to serve as a static enemy. Rather, Irr considers what contemporary novels might tell us about ideologies that are only beginning to emerge: "My understanding of ideology critique . . . is premised on attention to the formation of ideologies in the present rather than their imagined effects in the future" (15). Her book's revelatory analyses of twenty-first-century fiction demonstrate the value of this approach.

Irr portrays the return and global remaking of political fiction as a broad-based movement, arising not from the university creative writing system but from a network of more marginal institutions: urban writing collectives, self-styled indie authors associated with McSweeney's and other small publishers, nonuniversity organizations such as those involved in international aid, and migrant writers who may have been educated in the United States but now live elsewhere or divide their time between countries. In this way she distances her account of the geopolitical novel from M.F.A. fiction and the crafted, insular "autopoetics" of what Mark McGurl has

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4. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *The Way We Read Now*, spec. issue of *Representations* 108.1 (2009): 3–4.

termed “the program era.”<sup>5</sup> Aligning herself with historicist literary scholars, McGurl included, who have made the institutions in which writing occurs integral to their research, Irr foregrounds the infrastructures that inform and often fund the body of literary works that she surveys. This methodology has long been employed by film critics, who can never ignore how market demands and production constraints drive or stunt the growth of particular genres. Thus Irr draws on film theory’s understanding of genre and Frankfurt School–influenced ideological criticism to examine today’s political novel and ask what it might say about the ideological struggles taking place within and among our cultural institutions.

Irr’s institutional rather than national emphasis leads her to define “U.S. fiction” broadly, as a category that includes any novel engaging with the United States and in some way addressing an American audience. This fiction often revises well-worn nationalist narratives. “I view internal evidence,” Irr writes, “such as voice, style, and narrative frame as more reliable indicators of a particular work’s having an American reference point than authorial biography” (11). So Mohsin Hamid, the Pakistani-born London resident, may be said to write U.S. fiction, as his novels tend to include American characters, locate the United States within a world system, often as a military power, and renovate American literary genres. In fact, Hamid’s best-known novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), is a representative work for Irr’s study. The narrator, like Hamid himself, is a Princeton-educated Pakistani whose story is told to an American in Lahore and reverses the customary narrative of immigrant success and assimilation within the United States. Hamid’s novel has often been discussed as a work of post-9/11 fiction, but Irr distinguishes the geopolitical novel from this category, which she considers to be a subgenre of national trauma writing, a turn inward rather than outward. Instead, she foregrounds the remaking of national narratives for a global age.

*Toward the Geopolitical Novel* devotes one chapter to each of five prevalent subgenres that Irr identifies: the digital migrant novel, the

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5. Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009) 49.

Peace Corps thriller, the neoliberal allegory, the apocalyptic novel of revolution, and the expatriate world novel. Each of these five groupings reorganizes an earlier genre from the twentieth century. Chapter 1 considers the way in which today's authors are renegotiating the migrant narrative through digital media systems, whether literally or figuratively. Citing James Clifford's memorable claim that the complexity of late-twentieth-century culture can be understood only by viewing migratory "routes" as constitutive of ancestral "roots," Irr suggests that over the last century, American migrant writing has transitioned from roots to routes to "routers."<sup>6</sup> Whereas the fiction of the 1980s and 1990s often dramatized transnational travel in the language of trauma—immigrant characters struggling to reconcile traumatic memory with an uninviting new reality—twenty-first-century migrant writers use the figure of digital media to locate their characters within a layered, multidirectional, and globalized world. In novels by Junot Díaz, Michael Chabon, and Edwidge Danticat, for example, the narrator serves as a router; "filtering and processing an overwhelming multisensory global system," he or she "is distributed across the system rather than looking inward or backward" (28). This shift from trauma to multimedia, from routes to routers, Irr argues, enables these authors to engage with issues of global mobility and move beyond the politics of the nation imagined as a closed circuit.

The second chapter takes on the Peace Corps novel, a large body of literature that has received virtually no attention from literary scholars. Since the agency was founded in 1961, more than one thousand returned Peace Corps volunteers (or RPCVs) have written books, the majority nonfictional, about their time as a volunteer. Irr looks at the dozens of novels produced. Highly formulaic, these novels almost always feature a young American man whose trust in government institutions and liberal ideology is undermined during his time abroad, leading to a crisis of identity for the hero, who must reconcile his new understanding with his idealism. Novels by RPCVs have historically drawn on the thriller genre to narrate this dissociative struggle. Without an anchoring ideology to guide him,

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6. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997) 4–6.

the hero must manage his new moral uncertainty and recenter himself in what is revealed to be a chaotic and irrational world. In the twenty-first century, Irr indicates, the protagonists of these novels are less idealistic than their Cold War-era predecessors and less shocked by bureaucratic deficiencies. But the stories still revolve around the identity crisis of a young American who, at book's end, remains unable to imagine alternatives to the liberal institutions that have failed him. To a greater degree than the other international fiction she discusses, the Peace Corps thriller is a subgenre still struggling to find its bearings in a globalized environment.

Irr advances her most intriguing and ambitious claim in the third chapter, theorizing what she calls the neoliberal allegory. Neoliberalism is not easily narrativized, and in many ways it embodies the challenges of portraying a world system through literature. The authors Irr discusses negotiate neoliberal economics by returning to and reworking the national allegory. Whereas the national allegory features a representative individual who resolves his struggle for selfhood by securing a private national home, the neoliberal allegory introduces two or more heroes who live in multifamily housing and face a collective crisis. Allegorically, then, the narrative conveys a sense of global interconnectedness as well as a widely felt economic emergency brought about by the neoliberal logic of anti-statist "self-help." However, as Irr underscores, these novels do not center on traumatic reckoning so much as on the search for a different order of sociality: it is "in the collective, commercial, vibrant spaces of compound dwellings that we find the flag of contemporary social life planted" (121). The multifamily home signals the socioeconomic fallout of neoliberalism, but it is also imagined as a site of struggle from which authors are redefining the idea of collectivity by fracturing an earlier national framework. Irr moves broadly across South Asian, Nigerian, Russian, and Peruvian literature, and it is these readings in aggregate that make a convincing case for the geopolitical novel's evolving effort to narrate neoliberalism.

The final two chapters of *Toward the Geopolitical Novel* chart the twenty-first-century rewriting of the novel of revolution and the expatriate novel, respectively. Most often conceived of as a subgenre of historical fiction, the twentieth-century novel of revolution tends

to begin in a previous time and build toward a revolutionary moment, creating a dialectic between then and now. This is the narrative style favored by Georg Lukács in his classic study *The Historical Novel* (1962). One shortcoming of this structure, as Irr notes, is that it can make these events seem “inevitable,” as the telos of history, even to the point of suggesting that transformative change is unachievable (144). More recently, authors of a new novel of revolution have revised these conventions by absorbing elements from postapocalyptic writing. These novels—the most familiar of which might be Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006)—do not assume history’s end but rather dramatize a postrevolutionary world wherein characters come to terms with radical change through the postnational aftereffects of that change. Unlike earlier forms of the novel of revolution, these works feature a social life that is built less around ideology than a shared bodily vulnerability: located “on a hillock overlooking the ruins of a past revolution but not yet high enough to foretell the end of time, their narrators review revolutionary failures . . . as they collect the materials needed for a post-catastrophe existence” (148). The remaking of the expatriate novel likewise involves a shift in narrative perspective. The modernist expatriate novel, though fundamentally transnational, is about self-cultivation and self-discovery, not the world at large. Like the Peace Corps novel, it is first and foremost about the internal life of a way-faring American. Well aware of this tradition, twenty-first-century writers are renovating the form by ironizing the narrow-mindedness of modernist classics, telling stories of foreigners in the United States, or charting a more stateless, nomadic way of traveling and engaging with the world. Embodied in works such as Chang-rae Lee’s *The Surrendered* (2010) and Aleksandar Hemon’s *Nowhere Man* (2004), the latter category is, according to Irr, the closest we have come to writing the world novel.

By offering a survey of twenty-first-century genres, Irr gestures to several emerging trends in the literary market. *Toward the Geopolitical Novel* covers a dizzying amount of ground while conveying just how much work remains to be done on the still-evolving global novel. After fading from the literary scene for a generation, political fiction, newly globalized, is once again on the rise. If by the end of the twentieth century “political novelist” had become a label worth

avoiding, that is clearly not the case now. In March 2013, commemorating Chinua Achebe's career, Hamid and English writer Jim Crace, two authors featured in Irr's study, discussed political fiction with the *Guardian* book review editors. When asked about his new novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), Hamid called it "overtly political" and "very conscious of its politics." Nor did Crace shy away from the label, citing his indebtedness to authors such as John Steinbeck, Robert Tressell, and George Orwell. But Hamid and Crace also underscored how they differ from their twentieth-century predecessors in aiming less to convert their readers than to galvanize them. "Fiction is there to catalyze a reader's reaction to something," Hamid contended. "What you want [as a reader]," Crace added, "is to be left with something in the air that has been not entirely mediated and answered by the writer but is requiring you to mediate."<sup>7</sup> Although Hamid is Pakistani and Crace British, their readers are often American, and their novels, Irr suggests, make use of and revise twentieth-century American narratives. The geopolitical novel, then, does not mark a radical break in literary style so much as a remaking of earlier styles, a remaking that is many-sided and unfinished. *Toward the Geopolitical Novel* diagrams what should be a field of critical scrutiny for some time to come. "Culture," Irr stresses, "as an active, ongoing process rather than a museum of rarified objects is under way in the twenty-first-century geopolitical novel" (22).

*University of Connecticut, Storrs*

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7. Mohsin Hamid and Jim Crace, "Political Fiction," interview, conducted by Claire Armitstead, *Guardian*, podcast audio, 5 Apr. 2013.