In June 2015, acclaimed Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh toured various cities to promote the third novel of his Ibis trilogy, *Flood of Fire*. In Mumbai, at the event I attended, he spoke in the auditorium of the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA). The auditorium was quickly filled to capacity, and closed-circuit cameras broadcast the event to the upstairs gallery and even to the porch outside, swamped with premonsoon humidity. Ghosh was in his usual fine form. He spoke to the event’s host, Shobhaa Dé, about the extensive research he did for the three books, the hospitality he received during his travels in China, the Indian Ocean’s cosmopolitan past, and the relations between India and China in the nineteenth century. He spoke of the centrality of the opium trade to building the fortunes of the world’s wealthiest families. He spoke of the hours he spent poring over old documents in libraries and his interest in paleography, the science of deciphering handwriting on manuscripts. In answer to a question about why the trilogy is named after the ship the *Ibis*, he underlined the way communities are born on the ship itself, in the multiple crossings it makes over the course of the three novels. These answers met with enthusiastic response. Outside, the monsoon rains were about to begin. The air was heavy with impending turmoil. The traffic circle was full of cars, scooters, pedestrians, hawkers, and revelers, and Mumbai’s incessant honking was in the air. The city was moving at its usual frenetic pace. Inside, the air was conditioned, calmer, and more refined.

Then, breaking the spell, one audience member asked Ghosh what he thinks can be done to improve current India-China relations following the
historic visit of Xi Jinping to India the year before. Ghosh hesitated a bit, then said that very little can be done because both countries are thinking only about wealth. With this dismissal, the conversation mostly got back on track. But the unanswered question hung in the room, a flash of the contemporary in an atmosphere otherwise oriented toward the past.

Against Ghosh’s fascinating account of historical interconnections, the audience member’s question animated an alternative space, asking not a question that Ghosh could not answer but rather one that he would prefer not to, a question where the known space of postcolonial writing meets the more unsure time of the contemporary. For Ghosh, the past is a series of stories that can be woven together by the strength of an evocative metaphor: the shadow lines, the sea of poppies, the river of smoke. This past and the transactions of imperialism, the role of translation and transit in forging community, cultural hybridity, the modern art museum, and even the Colaba neighborhood of Mumbai in which the NGMA is located occupy a demarcated space of postcolonial legibility in which Ghosh perfectly fits, in part because he helped create it. But the unfinished questions of economic policy, territorial squabbles, and competing growth rates signify less literary concerns. More fitting for newspaper editorials or policy debates, these remain outside the purview of the litterateur.

What would happen to our understanding of today’s Indian literature if the doors to the NGMA were figuratively opened and the sea air, and the smells of the city outside, were allowed to pour in? If the hawkers selling pirated pulp novels, the snatch of a film song, the hum of millions of satellite dishes, the twenty-four-hour newscast, Twitter, and the smell of rupees exchanging hands—if those were allowed to enter and disrupt the quiet spaces sanctified by literature and cosmopolitan history? What kinds of texts would be discussed, and what kinds of questions would have to be answered? How would that compel us to think differently about literature’s relationship to the world outside? How would that compel us to think differently about literature more generally?

This book argues that over the last several decades, we have seen a gradual diminishing of the distance between the world and the text. On the one hand, this is a global phenomenon (Brouillette 2017, 281), brought on by the rise of social media, book releases, literary festivals, and other venues in which authors and practitioners are called on to engage with a range of issues of contemporary relevance more frequently than ever before. Moreover, the expansion of reality television, the Internet, blogs, and other user interfaces has increased a culture of participation in what we read and consume. But in India this shift is even more profound. The growth of the Indian publishing industry and of the reading middle class over the last two decades
means that there is an ever greater demand for accessible books, especially those that tell new, relevant stories (Mallya 2016). The recent popularity of homegrown pulp fiction from romance to mystery to fantasy fiction, as well as the phenomenon of commercial authors who publish one or even two novels a year, means that the temporal gap between stories and their reception is diminishing. Even Hindi cinema, known for its escapist plots, is telling more contemporary stories. The past seems less and less relevant to contemporary cultural production. The literature of authors like Amitav Ghosh, which deliberately resides in a space apart from the present, is increasingly the exception rather than the rule.

Some critics have lamented this change as the loss of India’s “modernist counterculture” (Mishra 2014) resulting from its turn toward capitalism and neoliberalism, which have commodified art and literature and shorn them of their critical edge. No longer skeptical of these changes, critics say, new literatures and cultural productions are entirely products of the new India and thus cannot reflect critically on them. Today, writes Pankaj Mishra, “neo-liberalism creates its own human subjectivity. So everyone—whether writers, cotton farmers or mere tweeters—is supposed to turn into an entrepreneur” (Mishra and Sethi 2015). To these commentators, the fact that popular authors aggressively market their works and write novels using Bollywood formulas has left little space for fostering art as political dissent. Literature is all about money now, they argue, rather than great ideas or great books. Moreover, this new obsession with the present has made us myopic. By ignoring the past, we are doomed to repeat it, as evident in the resurgence of Hindutva politics and the increasing encroachment of religion on private life.

While recognizing the importance of these critiques, this book offers an alternative view: Although contemporary literature and popular culture in India might seem complacent, artless, and entirely the product of capitalism, their openness to the world outside allows them to offer significant insight into the experiences and sensibilities of contemporary India. But to receive this insight, we need to shift our understanding of what we mean by literature and what we imagine it to do. To understand today’s literature as a product of and reflection on the present, we need new tools, moving away from a valorization of counterculture and looking instead at the myriad microcultures that, while not always fully oppositional, nevertheless reflect boldly on the various questions of our time. Insofar as critics are accustomed to looking to literature and art as a bulwark against myopism, provincialism, and the market, we end up missing all the complex ways in which writers engage with the present and, often, imagine alternatives to it. Authors in India today write from within a capitalist system, much as their
counterparts do in the rest of the world. But that does not mean their works are simply a by-product of capitalism. Rather, these authors remain ambivalent with regard to the changes India has undergone in the last twenty-five years; they find some of them limiting and some of them enabling. They do not necessarily valorize the past as a refuge from the present but find faults and benefits in both. Their politics is eclectic because they are open to the contested landscapes of the present and the possibility that something new and not entirely known lies just around the bend. This openness allows them to reflect on crucial contemporary questions in a way that the earlier Indian English novel, with its inbuilt mistrust of the present, was never able to.

Thus, even without the liberalism, secularism, and cosmopolitanism that have characterized modern Indian writing (Sunder Rajan 2011, 204), recent texts across a range of media are innovatively considering a number of questions that concern India’s present: What is India’s future on a world stage? What is the fate of the poor in India’s big cities? What is the continuing role of caste and religion in public life? What does it mean to be a feminist? Where is there space for everyday life and for love and desire? What is the nature of freedom? These pressing, contemporary questions sometimes extend to offer political critique and at other times do not, remaining open and unanswered. From the perspective of literary criticism, today’s texts often seem unfinished or apolitical. But rather than lament this as the end of literature, we might see how these new texts compel us to rethink our conventional readerly paradigms. Rather than look for a coherent politics, we might read them as extending the space between the tentative expressions of aspiration and desire and the confidence of political certainty or ideology.

I use the term “the contemporary” to name both the time of the present and this new optic that recognizes and reads literature as of and for the world rather than as inhabiting a space apart from it. Insofar as the contemporary is merely another word for the present—or more specifically, “a condition in which the moment of cultural production and reception are identical” (Carroll 2015, 19)—there have been many contemporaries (T. Smith 2006, 696), in India and elsewhere, and many contemporary literatures. These include the fiction of the late nationalist period (1920–1940), the topic of my first book, which anticipated an independence that was not yet realized (U. Anjaria 2012). They include the sathottari poetry of 1960s Bombay, which “was trying to capture the fast-moving present of the lived experience by [offering] . . . an assault on literary, textual, and printing conventions all at once in the hopes of getting through to some other, inexpressible side of things” (Nerlekar 2016, 56). They include the “angry young man” films of the
1970s, which registered the profound uncertainty and disillusionment brought on by the declaration of the Emergency in 1975, as well as Dalit literature of the late twentieth century, “with [its] emphasis on the documentation of the violence, oppression, and structural inequality engendered by casteism” (Gajarawala 2013, 1–2). However, insofar as the contemporary is an optic, a mode of reading, a dissolution of literature’s distance from the everyday, and partially a product of a newly instituted market economy, I use the term specifically to refer to this moment, in the early 2000s, a moment that, in India, we might otherwise call post-postcolonial.

In this sense, the contemporary exists in contrast to the postcolonial, which, particularly in Anglophone theory, has been the dominant optic in the study of Indian literature and culture for the last several decades and, as we saw with Ghosh, a dominant attitude that approaches the present with skepticism. Postcolonial theory was field changing within literary criticism for drawing attention to power and to the role of language in consolidating epistemes, for shifting focus from nations to borders, and for modeling an account of literary history that was cosmopolitan, democratic, and secular. However, these very qualities make postcolonial criticism largely unable to account for the literature and cultural production in India today, with its setting in the present and its indifference toward the past, its representation of aspiration and desire, its pragmatic rather than idealist politics, its interest in the banal and the everyday, its investment in new political subjects beyond those based in caste and religion, its refusal of metaphor and allegory, its new demands on how we read, and its new conception of the role of the critic. From the postcolonial perspective, these traits most often appear as capitulations to capitalism or a decline of progressive thought rather than as literary, cultural, or epistemological positions in their own right.

This book argues that reading for the contemporary begins by recognizing the political and cultural contradictions of contemporary India, which is witnessing a right-wing resurgence and increasing communalization, wealth inequality, and consumerism but also housing new alternative cultures, queer spaces, publishing venues, readerships, and future imaginaries. We need to see these contradictions, even if we dislike them, as productive of the present. Reading for the contemporary means not coming to texts with an idealist sense of what would make the best society but attempting to understand the contradictory reality that actually constitutes society. It requires not reading with skepticism, working to expose the exclusions and silences of texts, but reading inductively to see how texts construct new imaginaries. In all these ways, and because it goes against the grain of dominant political and theoretical trends, I argue that the contemporary in India is counterintuitive and thus cannot merely be stated but must be actively
asserted. The contemporary offers us new and at times problematic formations; it is where the high and low meet, where conventional generic and formal categories break down, and where the sanctified literary dissolves. In this sense, the contemporary is necessarily impure—even, as Nietzsche called it, “untimely” (quoted in Erber 2013, 39)—exceeding the conventional classifications of literary criticism to register “the existence of mutually contradictory worlds” (C. Holmes 2013, 149).

The book’s subtitle, *Formations of the Contemporary*, encourages us to read the contemporary as heterogeneously constituted across the hundreds of new texts that have appeared in India in the last two decades in a variety of genres and media. The contemporary is not one thing but appears in multiple forms. What unites these texts is that they respond to, cathect, reflect, question, criticize, and assess the present to offer new accounts of it, along with new imaginations of the future. These works are not closed, “never . . . in the past tense” (R. Williams 2009, 129), but always potentially open, in process. As Rachel Carroll writes, the contemporary’s “richness resides in its status as crucible of the near but as yet unfixed future; in its analysis we can see the forces at work in the making of possible future histories, including forces implicated in inequalities of power” (2015, 19–20). Thus, we are called on not to lament the glimpse or the formation as a degraded consequence of capitalism or a digital age but to recognize it as a product of thinking across previously distinct lines of inquiry. Thus, we can see how recent Indian literature, films, nonfiction, and other cultural products imagine new geographies outside the first world–third world and urban-provincial binaries, new publics built on political alliances outside the traditional subaltern-elite dichotomy, new forms of representation, and new relationships between writers and critics. Neither progressive nor right wing, neither elite nor subaltern, these texts offer insight into the myriad open-ended questions that make up India’s present and, in doing so, generate tentative insights into new possible futures.

The following discussion highlights the major obstacles to a full account of the Indian contemporary. These include postcoloniality’s emphasis on the past and its concomitant skepticism of the postliberalization present, which have resulted in a lack of serious engagement with the literary and cultural products that are circulating in India today. The anticontemporary thrust of postcolonial theory is only strengthened by the implicit limitation, in global literary theory’s Western centrism more generally, on who gets to be contemporary and who and what count as the legitimate subjects of non-Western writing. Having framed the theoretical landscape in this way, the book then proceeds to reading for the contemporary in a range of new literatures and cultural products published since 2000.
The book’s three parts explore different characteristics of the Indian contemporary: the locations it imagines, the publics it engenders, and the forms of representation it makes possible. Reading for the contemporary requires grouping texts as generic, formal, and thematic constellations that frame new questions rather than along the older lines of language, medium, or genre. Thus, each part includes texts across these various categories. Part I, for instance, shows how recent commercial novels and nonfiction books offer a rethinking of place in India today, when villages and small towns are associated with India’s backwardness, and the cities with India’s emergence and futurity. The two chapters consider how these assumptions are reconfigured in recent writings, engendering a new geography of the Indian present. While postcolonial chronotopes have included borderlands, ocean crossings, and diasporas, contemporary fiction by authors such as Chetan Bhagat and Anuja Chauhan has shifted focus to India’s Tier-II cities and less fashionable regions, resulting in what I call, in Chapter 1, a “new provincialism” that reimagines the future as one in which young people realize their aspirations in India rather than only abroad. Chapter 2 examines what forms best represent the sprawling Indian megalopolis, often considered either entirely transformed by capitalism or as a dystopic example of urban decay. Because the very structure of narrative brings with it its own temporality, city writings make various attempts to reconfigure narrative itself to queer or otherwise call into question these simplistic narratives of India’s emergence and decline.

Part II identifies new, experimental political formations in the popular Hindi visual media. While these media are often criticized for their star culture, their epical and melodramatic stories, and their over-the-top sentimentality, recent texts use these modes of affective engagement to imagine new publics in a political context in which the old categories of religion, class, and caste might be ceding to new demographics whose characteristics are as yet unknown. Moreover, in the context of a middle class that is historically apathetic, these texts envision a new civil society enriched by libidinal attachments. While Chapter 3 shows how recent popular Hindi films pursue the elusive but imaginatively rich category of the “common man,” Chapter 4 shows how Aamir Khan’s new television talk show Satyamev Jayate mobilizes the charisma of the Bollywood superstar to construct new affective publics around issues of contemporary importance.

If Part II gestures toward the creation of new publics across class alliances, Part III approaches the contemporary from an epistemological angle and asks: What alternatives do we have to the postcolonial view of representation as an act of power and of reading as a means of exposing silences and exclusions? What is the role of the critic in the Indian contemporary? What
would it mean to read alongside, rather than only against, the grain of texts—even to read with “a loving eye” (“March on Women” 2016)? Chapter 5 focuses on a set of recent novels that transcend the themes and tropes of classical postcolonial fiction to ask what lies on the other side, so to speak, or beyond the pale of Indian English fiction as it has been globally received and celebrated. Chapter 6 offers a reading of the multimedia work of documentary filmmaker Paromita Vohra, whose insistent experimentation with form and genre allows her to ask new questions about feminism and everyday love and desire outside received categories such as “feminist” or “political.” Vohra’s critical writings advance a new model of reading born of intimacy rather than distance, which pushes us to consider how the contemporary is not only a literary project but also a critical one.

The book is not a comprehensive study of all contemporary literature and cultural production and certainly does not cover the range of languages in which people write and create in India today. But it does cross a number of genres and media in Hindi and English, ranging from “high” to “low” cultural forms and extending across fiction and nonfiction, film and television, documentary and melodrama, literature and journalism. All these texts offer formations of the contemporary in India through formal, generic, and epistemological innovations that might not be recognizable using the old critical lenses. Thus, the book is meant to be an outline, an incitement to further study, rather than a full assessment of the Indian contemporary. It tries to model what a renewed literary criticism might look like in a context in which representation is understood as experimental and receptive to the world around it, even at the cost of critics’ long-held beliefs regarding what counts as literary and what it means to be political. Thus, in each chapter I read for the fullest potential of the text rather than for its limitations. While my account does not intend to be naively celebratory of the present, it does dispute the dominant sense among many scholars that the literary and cultural sphere in India today is in grave crisis. Without underplaying the serious problems India continues to face, the book argues that the solution to these problems might not necessitate a complete dismissal of the literature and cultural products of the present. Rather, these new formations may also contain tools for alternative futures, not despite but precisely because of their imbrication in a new commodity culture—potentially offering new representational possibilities from within its midst.

Postcolonial Time and the Problem of the Present

“I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country.” So wrote Salman Rushdie in 1981, in the
voice of Saleem Sinai, and in doing so inaugurated a new consciousness in the Indian novel in English. This sentiment and the novel that introduced it have shaped literature and literary criticism since 1981. Through this formulation, Rushdie registers the tie of both Saleem and the novel to history. From that point forward, the Indian novel’s primary role seemed to be to illuminate the myriad ways in which the past continues to shape the realities of the present (U. Anjaria 2015, 22).

Midnight’s Children marks the birth of what I call “postcolonial time.” Following its success, many of the Indian English novels that have elicited international fame have similarly described the overwhelming influence of history on the present: for example, Anita Desai’s Clear Light of Day (1980); Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines (1988), In an Antique Land (1992), and The Glass Palace (2000); Rohinton Mistry’s Such a Long Journey (1991) and A Fine Balance (1995); Vikram Seth’s A Suitable Boy (1993); Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things (1997); Kiran Desai’s The Inheritance of Loss (2006); and Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Lowland (2013). Whether it is capital-H History and the Love Laws (Roy), historical events such as the Partition (Ghosh, Seth) and the Emergency (Mistry, Rushdie), or other forms of state violence (Desai, Lahiri), these works collectively suggest that engagement with history is the primary role of the Indian novel (Tickell 2015; Sunder Rajan 2011, 203–204).

For many writers and critics, accounts of the past serve as an important corrective to the confident temporality of an emergent India (Kaur and Hansen 2016, 266). As Jyotsna Kapur writes, “We are told that India has no use for history because it is in the midst of reinventing itself as a global economic power” (2013, 3). The rhetoric of “emerging India” espoused by the state—especially the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government—the corporate media, and some economists (Bardhan 2013, 2), grew out of the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s, which gave rise to new social dynamics premised on consumerism and aspiration rather than the older Nehruvian ideals of restraint and deferral of desire. This rhetoric sees India’s high economic growth, buoyed by foreign investment, relaxed import restrictions, and an expanded consumer economy, as promising a new role for India on the world stage. It is supplemented by the increasing influence of a militaristic Hindu nationalism, which has consequences in a range of domains, from the ongoing occupation of Kashmir and parts of the northeast, to the threats to religious minorities and the increasing suppression of free speech. In such a context, calling attention to history—whether it is to cataclysmic events such as the Partition (Zamindar 2017) or to the philosophies of secularism and socialism that formed the Indian polity—seems an important rejoinder to a myopic presentism.
But turning away from the present for fear of implicitly condoning its violence has the consequence of overlooking the vast diversity of cultural production that has emerged in the last two decades, including films, television, graphic novels, chick lit, fantasy fiction, romance novels, and mysteries, in English and in the bhashas (Shobita Dhar 2014), in addition to myriad new translations from the bhashas to English (“Major Focus” 2018) and new forms and themes in literary fiction. This proliferation of new texts, spurred by the growth of international publishing houses in India and the increasing number of small presses (Mallya 2016), has changed the face of Indian literature. For instance, there are entire series of popular fiction, such as Penguin India’s Metro Reads, targeted to the commuting reader and priced around one hundred rupees (Pal 2012; Suman Gupta 2012, 52), as well as new serial novels in a landscape earlier occupied only by imported series from the United States and the United Kingdom. There are new kinds of films enabled by the growth of Indian multiplexes, which no longer need to rely solely on high-revenue blockbusters. These new forms live side by side with the new cultural productions that flood the Internet every day: interactive media, music, podcasts, webzines, stand-up comedy, spoken word, satire, journalism, blogs, web series, spoofs, remakes, and countless others. While these works are “a mixed bag” in terms of quality and approach (Suman Gupta 2012, 52), they nevertheless mark a flourishing of cultural production outside the erstwhile elite centers of artistic and literary value.

Yet critics’ alarmist sense that Indian counterculture is in decline often impedes their ability to read and understand these new forms as anything except expressions of that decline. The view, as Pankaj Mishra (2017b) wrote on the seventieth anniversary of India’s independence, that “India . . . seems to have missed its appointment with history” pervades the progressive public sphere, as well as academic writing. In an earlier article following Narendra Modi’s electoral victory in 2014, Mishra (2014) explicitly linked the current literary landscape to Modi’s “new India,” contrasting Vikram Seth’s 1993 novel *A Suitable Boy*, which for him marked the more innocent and optimistic side of Indian democracy, with today’s cultural production, characterized by a vacuous press, “a spate of corporate-sponsored literary festivals,” a “degenerated” popular cinema, and the demise of what used to be a rich “modernist counterculture.” In this view, contemporary literature is read only as proof of how bad things have become.

Many other critics share this sense. Recent cultural production is constantly criticized in reviews and scholarly accounts for being saturated with market values and for reflecting capitalist sensibilities such as ambition, pragmatism, and self-help. New phenomena such as literary festivals, the so-called Bollywoodization of the novel (Gopal 2015, 360), market-driven
publishing, and shallow, antiliterary prose are taken as further examples of this decline. As art historian Geeta Kapur writes, art today no longer has its “agonistic function” and is nothing more than the “reified . . . exchange of spectacular, consumer-driven signs” (2008, 32). Novelist and critic Anjum Hasan (2014) laments that the “potential diversity” of new Indian literature “has been straitjacketed by the idea of ‘genre.’ Genres are being created in assembly-line fashion, and are received as such by readers.” For novelist and critic Amit Chaudhuri (2006), “[today’s] Indian writing in English reflects [India’s growing prestige] and imperialist ambition. I would be happy with a writing that is more ambiguous about its own position and wish it would be less triumphant.” In another interview, Chaudhuri (2016) criticizes literary festivals as places where “there is celebration but you do not really find the literary.” His criticism hinges on a distinction between literariness and the market that has become an essential component to this new anticontemporary ethos. In a recent roundtable in the web-based Public Books, Anjum Hasan wrote:

The murmur of the market . . . has amplified in this time as the big publishing corporations have set up house [in India], and as the English-speaking middle class, increasingly cut off from the languages of their parents and the kinds of progressive literature that generation might have read, acquaints itself with a younger, often more functional, definitely less discomfiting writing in which they might recognize themselves. The market has certainly created one model of literary relevance, a model new to this country, and yet one we’ve embraced as ineluctable. (Quoted in S. Majumdar 2016)

In another piece, Hasan (2014) similarly avers, “Alongside the growing writerly concern about the market taking over is the rise of the writer as entrepreneur, for whom marketing and writing are not discrete activities at all, and the book more an isolated, potentially profit-making product rather than something belonging to a complex network of associations called literature.” This view is stated even more strongly by another critic:

If writing literature is an act of social responsibility, the new-breed writers display total disregard towards readers’ finer sensibilities. . . . These books are mindless narratives—like a TV serial, is the opinion of many who have grown reading “real” literature. . . . When books do not challenge, disturb and agitate the mind, when they stop questioning the reality, the norms, when they do not reflect social and personal conflicts, they sound the death-knell for the age of reason.
At best they offer entertainment, at worst, they promote escapism. (V. Shukla 2016)

And for novelist Aatish Taseer, the commercialization of literature is a reflection of Indian backwardness; when asked about the phenomenal success of best-selling novelist Chetan Bhagat, he responded, “He might just be a symptom of the fact that in English, India is basically a semi-literate country and Chetan Bhagat is the best it can do” (Tiwari 2015). This sense that today’s literature and cultural production mark a diminishment of an earlier literary sensibility because of the influence of the market is widespread and pervades literary criticism, commentaries, and book reviews. It is true that some commercial writers talk at length about marketing and publicity and move directly from authoring books to starting publishing houses, such as best-selling romance novelist Ravinder Singh’s Black Ink (S. Chakraborty 2015). Sometimes, as Chetan Bhagat is, they are proud that their works do not qualify as art (“I’m Battling” 2016). But when scholars criticize such practices, they implicitly valorize literature’s “independence from the mechanisms of cultural commodification” (D’Arcy and Nilges 2016, 4) and idealize, in the tradition of Western modernism and India’s own history of progressive writing, “the true artist [who] was noncommercial, struggling on the fringes of human existence, with neither society nor companions (and hardly any publishers), alone with his indomitable self” (Braudy 1999, 615). This nostalgic image of the writer uncorrupted by the market fails to acknowledge that artistic cultures change over time. Indeed, criticisms of contemporary writing and cultural production, although well-intentioned, are often advanced with such insistence that they start to resemble the “left melancholy” Wendy Brown describes among progressives worldwide as “not only a refusal to come to terms with the particular character of the present . . . [but also] a certain narcissism with regard to one’s past political attachments and identity” (1999, 20).

Moreover, when scholars read new texts, they do so through the old lenses. For instance, in a recent book in which two chapters were specifically devoted to contemporary postcolonial fiction, both presented historical analysis as the means to understand their contemporary texts, suggesting that the project of writing the contemporary in the postcolony is an impossible one because it comes up against “colonial residues” that it cannot wish away (Luckhurst and Marks 1999, 8). Alternatively, scholars focus on the exclusions and the “narrative marginalization” (Guttman 2017, 270) enacted by new texts rather than on what they do or the new worlds they imagine. Conferences, workshops, and journal special issues continue to ask the same questions, even when addressing new literatures. Across postcolonial
literary study, especially in the Indian context, critics concur that exhaus-
tively studied and documented themes such as the nation and its fragments,
exile, melancholy, memory, violence, and trauma are the best and most po-
litically astute optics for reading and interpreting Indian literature. The re-
sult is an overall uniformity of scholarship on Indian literature even in the
face of a massive diversity of political, formal, and epistemological view-
points. What is left out or dismissed in these approaches are the various new
themes broached by contemporary texts, themes such as aspiration, every-
day life, sexuality and desire, dreams for better selves, dreams for a better
India, provincialism, and new futures. While some of these bear the imprint
of capitalism or Hindu nationalism, none is entirely the product of these. In
fact, many writers and cultural producers use these themes to assess and
criticize current conditions, not out of an ascetic or progressive imaginary
that remains distantly critical of the present they describe but through their
intimate coexistence with that present.

Refusing to acknowledge the importance of aspiration in contemporary
India—which affects, for instance, everything from the books people read to
the leaders they vote for—might have significant costs for progressive criti-
cism. By dismissing aspiration as one of the biopolitical techniques of self-
making demanded by a neoliberal regime, critics simplify the nature of de-
sire and find inexplicable the language in which many Indians imagine their
lives and futures. Historian and cultural critic Vijay Prashad (2014) suggests
that the inability of left-wing parties to understand aspiration left them
largely unequipped to contest the right-wing BJP, perhaps contributing to
the latter’s historic win in 2014:

Why were the Communists not able to capitalise on their critique of
neoliberalism? Neoliberal policy not only drives inequality, it also
produces aspirations. Malls, filled with shining new commodities,
have been built in the large cities and small towns. Television shows
and films have produced a culture of goods—fancy houses, jobs that
pour money into their employees’ banks, which hand out credit
cards to buy anything in the malls. These neoliberal desires have over
the course of the past 20 years had a marked impact on the Indian
imagination. It is no longer a society formed on the values of the
anti-colonial movement or of the Nehruvian period of national de-
velopment. The core values of the present are personal consumption
and career advancement. . . . The left struggles to find a way to both
critique the inequality of neoliberalism and to appeal to the public
for an alternative future. This is the conundrum of the left around
Introduction

the world. The red flag has come to represent protest against the present. It does not yet indicate the pathway to the future.

Prashad’s diagnosis of the failure of the left to understand and channel people’s desires for better lives is applicable in literary criticism as well, where many recent writings and cultural forms are dismissed because they do not subscribe to a preexisting idea of what constitutes progressive politics. This is all the more important in the case of art, which, as Prashad has written elsewhere, “must be free to engage with contradictory consciousness without a predetermined end. . . . If a political line drives the process of elaboration, then we would know the answer to our question before we began our studies” (quoted in Nowak 2016). Taking contemporary writing seriously on its own terms, even when it seems apolitical or populist, is not a concession to the current right-wing shift but potentially its antidote.

Admittedly, focusing on literature and cultural production that centers on everyday life and aspiration will not in and of itself solve the major political crises of the twenty-first century. Likewise, it is not my aim to deny that there are many who contribute to Indian literature and cultural production from outside the world of consumerist aspirations—enriching the public sphere with the perspectives of the poor, the marginalized, and the subaltern. But dismissing texts from the outset because they might show us aspects of society that we would prefer not to acknowledge can be considered another form of elitism. Rather than seek out a literature or a subaltern voice uncorrupted by the market, we might read the impure contemporary to see what new possibilities it offers us. It might not resemble the literature we are used to; it might even mean, as Anjum Hasan (2016) writes, “a rejection of literature.” But if that is not a problem for so many readers, why does it continue to be one for us?

Whose Contemporary?

One of the biggest challenges to representing the Indian contemporary is that the contemporary is implicitly seen as a time inhabited by the West. This is evident in the term’s common usage without geographical specification (as in “the contemporary” or “contemporary literature”) when it is referring to Western texts and with a qualification (as in “contemporary Nigerian literature”) when it is used for non-Western contexts. Moreover, it is considered legitimate for books and articles to have titles such as “XXX in the Contemporary Novel” even when they include only Western texts. Even uses of the contemporary in fields such as art history end up conflating the Western experience of the present with a universal one. Thus, the term’s associa-
tions with postmodernism are emphasized, and the contemporary becomes another word for the artistic avant-garde (Ivanova 2009, 35). A text is contemporary if it is radically formally inventive or iconoclastic; rather than “explanatory totality,” this version of the contemporary offers us “proliferating differences” (T. Smith 2006, 704), and rather than “‘strong’ affective scenarios” in forms such as the painting or the novel, we have “less robust assemblages of life, affect, and form in their wake” (Vermeulen 2015, 3). As Peter Osborne writes, contemporaneity is “a coming together not simply ‘in’ time, but of times” (2013, 17). Language such as this reflects a very particular understanding of the contemporary, as a highly networked, late-capitalist, postindustrial time that is not experienced globally and indeed in probably very few economically and culturally advantaged pockets in the West. It privileges the contemporary as an aesthetic or philosophical concept rather than a time founded in the experience of everyday life. This very specific usage is belied by the term’s universalizing gesture.

Even when progressives critical of Western solipsism attempt to talk about the present in spaces outside the West, they often do so in terms that further displace these spaces’ contemporaneity. This was epitomized in the hashtag #firstworldproblems that trended on social media around 2011 and has become a common phrase since then. The hashtag, defined on Urban Dictionary as “problems from living in a wealthy, industrialized nation that third worlders would probably roll their eyes at,” was initiated to poke fun at privileged Westerners’ myopic complaints about their lives on social media, with the suggestion that they should put their problems in perspective. To make the point, “first world problems” were opposed to so-called real problems, such as, in a Louis C. K. skit, “where your life is amazing, so you just make shit up to be upset about. People in other countries have real problems. Like—‘Oh, shit. They’re cutting off all our heads, today!’ Things like that.” A Tumblr post similarly defined first world problems as “had to park far from door,” “too much goat cheese in salad,” and “your show isn’t in HD,” in contrast to “real problems”: “hunger,” “cholera,” “rape” (“First World Problems” 2011). The intention of the meme is to compel those in the West to realize how good they have it, but it does so at the cost of a complex sense of what life is actually like in the rest of the world. The repetition of this meme thus effaces the existence of the middle classes of the so-called third world, those who might also have “first world problems” but cannot be included in the category of first world. As it does poor people who live in the West, this construction leaves that group doubly overlooked: they are neither the first worlders with illegitimate problems nor the third worlders with real ones.

These examples suggest that even in an age when knowledge travels more than before, there are still some parts of the world whose narratives get
defined by others and whose claim to contemporaneity must always contend with the power of those definitions. Even though people know in theory that there exists a range of socioeconomic classes in every country, images of the non-West remain largely static and one-dimensional. Thus, someone who wants to represent the contemporary from these locations always has to explain herself. A recent article on African architectural innovations had to apologize at the outset for talking about architecture “when so much development still needs to happen on the continent” (Chutel 2017). Nicole Amarteifio (2014), whose YouTube-based television series An African City focuses on five women who navigate friendship and romance in contemporary Accra, has to constantly defend her show against the claim that it is not “African ‘enough’” because its protagonists are middle class (Karimi 2016). Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina (2011) is even more blunt, defending his choice to leave politics largely out of his memoir, One Day I Will Write about This Place, by cutting through liberal platitudes: “I was just trying to have sex in South Africa at eighteen . . . as was everyone who was eighteen in South Africa. They were not sitting down beating their chests about the fall of apartheid” (“Guardian Books” 2011). In these examples, authors have to legitimate their claim for everyday life in Africa in a context in which there seems to be simply no room for other representations aside from abjection or political assertion.

So how do writers, artists, and cultural producers reclaim a contemporary that is continually denied to them? It involves regaining control of their own representations, which in turn requires refusing the dominant idea of what is significant and important and what counts as a legitimate position for non-Western literature to take. It means embracing contradiction and at times refusing to choose what aspect of life—the personal or the political—is most important. As Toral Gajarawala writes of contemporary Dalit writer Ajay Navaria, “Beyond the question of the landlord and the peasant, upper-caste atrocity and village exodus, in Navaria’s writings, there is the office space, the birthday party, urban anomie and existential reverie” (2015, 374). This juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous realities asserts a range of experiences, some abject and some merely banal, as an antidote to the pervasive idea of lower-caste life completely overrun by violence. It not only rejects global assumptions of what life in India is like but also refuses to be simplistically narrated or understood; it claims to be all those things at once and does not ask for permission to move between them. It portrays life as diverse and irreducible—the opposite of #firstworldproblems. And it is that restlessness around fixed definitions that becomes the marker of the contemporary.

In Gajarawala’s seemingly simple description of Navaria’s writings lies a radically different form of representation from what has come to be expected
Introduction

in Indian writing and cultural production. It is born in daily life, it is not always spectacular (although sometimes it is), it is often banal, it is at times affected by history and at other times free of it, it is partially complicit with capitalism, it is contradictory and heterogeneous—it is, in a way, just like contemporaneity everywhere. But like the African cases described previously, the Indian contemporary always has to prove itself and render itself legitimate; it is inflected by its own inevitable difference even while what it asserts is unspectacular similarity. Thus, the Indian contemporary is never self-evident but must be actively claimed, in writing, in cultural production, even in literary theory, against sedimented forms of thought that continually deny its existence. In the process of these assertions, we see the birth of new forms, new political sensibilities, and new relationships between text and world. This is evident across media and genre: attempts to represent the Indian contemporary even while knowing that it cannot be accommodated without some form of epistemic battle. “It takes imagination and courage to picture what would happen to the West . . . if its temporal fortress were suddenly invaded by the Time of its Other” wrote anthropologist Johannes Fabian (1983, 35), and indeed, representing the contemporary requires both. This is in part the reason that contemporary texts are so formally innovative, finding inspiration from unlikely genres such as self-help books and journalism; are generically transgressive; and are incessantly questioning what it means to read and understand literature at all. This restlessness around pre-existing categories and writerly sensibilities, this seeming need to represent something else entirely, is the consequence of a contemporary that is experienced and understood in practice even while it is incessantly denied in theory.

The ability to clear some space for everyday life, momentarily free of the past or of a predetermined idea of what counts as political, is one of the characteristics of a theory of the contemporary that is truly global rather than a purely theoretical idea of the contemporary as “a kind of incessant incipience, of the kind theorized by Jacques Derrida as à venir—perpetual advent” (T. Smith 2008, 9). This is true not only for India and Africa but also for those within the first world whose narratives continue to be partially controlled by others. For instance, in recent African American popular culture we see a similar desire to represent a middle-class life that is not always handcuffed to history alongside the continuing effort to recognize and memorialize black history and culture. This is evident in the recent proliferation of television shows featuring African American characters in which political issues sometimes surface and sometimes do not, much as in Navaria’s writings. While these shows can be criticized for not being political enough or for not taking race and the legacies of racism seriously enough,
these are reductive critiques that overlook the contemporaneity of these shows as precisely their intervention.

For instance, in the successful television series *Black-ish* (Barris 2014) and *Insecure* (Rae 2016), we see across the episodes a productive oscillation between regular life and political critique. Issa Rae, the creator of HBO’s *Insecure*, is quoted as saying that “in spite of her personal allegiances—[she] had no desire to make an overtly political show. She never wanted Insecure to be, as she says with a generous eye-roll, a story about ‘the struggle’ or ‘the dramatic burdens of being black’” (Mulkerrins 2017). Of course race surfaces at times, but at other times the show is about other things: romance, sex, friendship, work (Wanzo 2016, 50–51). ABC’s *Black-ish* similarly demonstrates how middle-class African Americans must constantly negotiate between the unspectacular routines of everyday life and the historical significance of being black in America (Moore 2014). Rather than choose one or the other, the show foregrounds the process of living with both: of trying to go on with everyday life in the context of increasing racial strife in the nation at large. The show reflects the contradictory desires elicited by culture and community, on the one hand, and the routines of an unmarked middle-class life, which are now available to the Johnson family, on the other. Both *Black-ish* and *Insecure* alternate between representing political issues and just depicting people living their lives, and it is that alternation that is so freeing, offering an alternative to our current “moment [in which] the relation between the aesthetic and the political can often feel restrictive and claustrophobic” (Lee 2017, 263). These shows neither assert race as a consistent defiance of white American norms nor conform to a melting-pot multiculturalism. Or, we might say, they subvert dominant norms precisely because they represent the contemporary, showing black life as it is lived rather than as it is imagined from the outside, as either abject or explicitly and always political.24

We see an even more extended presentation of contemporaneity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel *Americanah* (2013).25 *Americanah* marks a contrast to the more classically postcolonial aesthetics of Adichie’s earlier novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), which is set in the past and unfolds under the shadow of history, in a nation-state still haunted by the specters of colonialism. *Americanah* is set in the present and is largely lacking the spectacular instances of poverty and violence that have come to define Nigeria in the global novel. The novel centers on Ifemelu, a young woman who moves to the United States from Nigeria and writes a blog on her experiences with race there. At the end of the novel she returns to Lagos to reunite with her lover and to continue her writing. There are two aspects of the novel in particular that register its contemporaneity as a break from preformed assumptions
about what constitutes African literature: first, Ifemelu’s blog on race in the United States and, second, her return to Lagos at the end. The blog, which appears in snippets throughout the text, puts pressure on the literary aesthetics of the global novel, particularly, as we saw in regard to Ghosh, its tendency to reside at a distance from the vagaries of daily life. The blog is a casual, colloquial, open form, which even while discussing historical issues such as race, has an unfinished aspect to it that is perennially subject to revision and modification, in the form of editing, follow-up posts, reposts, and readers’ comments. The blog’s contemporaneity is emphasized because what it describes is the unresolved question of the meaning of race in the United States today, along with the vexed relationship between African American and African perspectives on race. The difficulty of finding the language to represent this contemporary landscape is legible in the blog’s self-consciously bulky title: “Raceteenth or Various Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black,” which is in marked contrast to the pithy summative metaphor that has long defined the postcolonial novel. This purposeful resistance to ideological or sociological analysis contrasts dramatically with the pathos-infused writing of *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Likewise, Ifemelu’s move back to Lagos at the end of the novel offers a new mapping of migratory geographies from those usually on offer in the postcolonial novel. Such a move requires the representation of Lagos as a livable space in the present rather than the dystopic site it is usually considered. In this way, Ifemelu’s return makes Lagos into a site of futurity rather than only an exit point for emigration—the site of the resolution of the romantic plot and the restoration of her mental health. The inscription of “Afropolitan” spaces (Y. Goyal 2014, xv)—Ifemelu’s heritage house in Ikoyi; the office of the women’s magazine where she works; and Jazzhole, Lagos’s top café bookstore—contests the representation of Lagos in global crisis literature such as Mike Davis’s *Planet of Slums*: “Tragically,” Davis writes, by 2020, West Africa “probably will . . . be the biggest single footprint of urban poverty on earth” (2006, 6). The representation of everyday spaces, unmarked by abjection—the “non-Afro-pessimist representation . . . of Africa” (Y. Goyal 2014, xiv)—might thus be redescribed as an epistemologically “revolutionary” act (Mohutsiwa 2016).26

*Americanah*’s contemporaneity is born of these disruptive qualities that operate at the level of both style and plot. Its refusal of the acceptable aesthetics of the global novel is evinced in Janet Maslin’s *New York Times* review in 2013, which contrasts its “less authoritative” register with the “gravitas” of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Maslin ends the generally critical review by noting that “the plot ultimately feels like an excuse for the venting of
opinions—and the opinions carry far more conviction than the storytelling does.” Another reviewer similarly commented that Adichie’s “blog posts . . . have a deliberately preachy flavour, more parable than anecdote”; and later, “The story often feels like a vehicle for the discussion” (Lowdon 2013). In expressing their discomfort around the lack of formal cohesiveness in the novel and the casual venting of the blog posts, these reviewers reveal unstated expectations of what postcolonial literature should look like—the very expectations that Adichie is trying to refute. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is more accessible to a Western reader precisely because its time is not contemporary. Failed states, sexual violence, war, and disillusionment keep Nigeria safely in another time. *Americanah*, in contrast, erupts into its readers’ world: through the blog, through its commentary on U.S. race relations, and by mapping Lagos through bookstores and offices rather than slums and refugee camps.

What unites this range of texts is their representation of characters doing everyday things and living unspectacular lives in contexts where readers have come to expect images of abjection or political revolt. All these texts refuse to conform to a preexisting idea of what it means to write political literature or to have a progressive politics, which often means representing the postcolonial (or African American) present as always and continually under the shadow of a violent and traumatic past. But this idea is increasingly being questioned. As popular Indian author Chetan Bhagat (2014a) writes:

> My simple stories are set in contemporary India and reflect society as it is today. And that may be one reason why the West is not so interested in me. I write the actual reality of India, versus the exotic India Westerners would rather read about. My characters are looking for jobs while falling in love. They are career-oriented, ambitious and have modern values. Who wants to read about such Indians—those who work in multinational banks and shop in malls?

> The India that has sold abroad is typically India with lotus ponds and simple villagers. Those who ride elephants and climb up coconut trees and that is all they want to do in life. You won’t find them in my books. If there is a villager in my book, chances are he will be visiting a cyber café, checking his phone or trying to get ahead in life. Don’t know if the West is ready for or interested in that India.

In refusing a static image of what constitutes the legitimate subject of the global novel, many contemporary authors create new epistemic and political possibilities. By reading the texts for these new possibilities rather than for
what they do not represent or leave out, we can begin to see the outlines of a truly global contemporary.