Beyond Postmodernism
Beyond Postmodernism:
Onto the Postcontemporary

Edited by

Christopher K. Brooks

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INTRODUCTION

In the world of today, if an individual wishes to verify the emerging notoriety of a word or concept, one uses a search engine to verify how many “hits” or “searches” have been done for that term. The more widely used the term, the more clear the case for its importance and its study. Postmodernism, for example, yields hundreds of thousands of search results and too many pages to utilize in an academic year. Significantly, a search for the term “postcontemporary” results in a typical search engine asking if the word is actually two words or hyphenated, and sometimes asks “Do you mean . . . ?” some other term. Instructed to seek a single word, a search engine will yield as few as eight entries or as many as fifteen. A search to find the term in a book, monograph, journal essay, or dissertation abstract would prove virtually fruitless, but everyone knows that it takes months or even years for ideas to find their way into scholarly publications, which makes the internet so useful. But Fredric Jameson uses the term “postcontemporary” in multiple works in the series that he and Stanley Fish oversee from Duke University under the umbrella title Post-Contemporary Interventions. Note the hyphen, and pay special attention to the curious fact that not one work in the Duke series (and they are many) employs the term postcontemporary in a title or sub-title or, as much as I have read, a chapter title. But there the word is, undefined, bandied about, an occasional signifier that Jameson employs to describe the society in which we live as the postmodern period struggles to maintain utility. And, by golly, if Jameson and Fish associate their names with “postcontemporary interventions,” then that opens the door to significant dialogue that is seemingly not taking place in literary studies. Oh, but we postcontemporists are so few, while so many Postmodernists tout the reign of indecisiveness as the destiny of literary interpretation, that much of the early dialogue concerning the postcontemporary has been uttered in whispers. Even as I set up two consecutive national panels at major literary conferences to discuss the state of literary theory after postmodernism, a bevy of postmodernists came aboard to champion the eternal ubiquity of their school of thought. As I turned down many of the postmodern ilk as panelists, the conference area chairs restored them so that a “dialogue” between postmodernists and postcontemporists might take place. Argue as I did that postmodernism has been and continues to
be a filibustering monologue against “the impulse to change” (which I discuss later), the daily presentations ended with little movement from intellectual bases or exchange of contact information for further dialoging. Postmodernism is established and has many followers. Only a few of the presentations offered an out-and-out diatribe against the dominance of postmodernism. Most offered a treaty, citing that things have changed since 9/11 and asserting that postmodernism would change with the times. For that reason, this anthology offers only eight essays. We are few but determined to be heard.

And yet another reason arises for this collection appearing at this time. The term *postcontemporary* is already being used in the realm of art and agriculture—and has been for half a decade. I first read about it only five years ago in the program for an Agricultural Conference taking place in Albuquerque and which I cite in my chapter. What I have read in that program and since that time has alerted me that a significant change is afoot in a time where everything is upgraded, re-made, replaced, revised and/or re-thought on a daily basis. And I know with a fair amount of certainty that postmodernism is not the cause and cannot be the ideology appointed to describe that change. It is too busy, is always too busy, tracing its own heritage, assimilating the past into its own image, and re-formulating how it can remain relevant. It writes a history in which it is both player and a scribe, witness and a jury. Some thinkers consider that a conflict of interest. Such thinkers as the essayists in this collection seek to negotiate a type of critical vision in which postmodernism is either a minor player or an understudy. Some might describe this as “thinking outside the box,” but that would locate postmodernity as the box and situate postcontemporary thought—now called “poco” by some adherents—in a binary relationship with the very ideology it seeks to leave behind. There is no box. There is the future, change, opportunity, and optimism. There are individuals in communities within nations within the global population. All thought starts with those individuals within the context of quotidian experience. The Postcontemporary may be described as a movement that embraces ongoing and sudden change; it assumes the need and the justification for a forward-moving global society in all areas of human endeavor. As Jameson describes it, postcontemporary society is already here. We may now declare it ready for negotiation, as the writers of this collection are ready to display.

In her chapter, Clara Eisinger takes on Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* with an assertion that Rushdie’s narrative manipulations of the dialogue and of the reader preclude a postmodern interpretation. She writes,
Thus, however powerfully postmodern indeterminism appears to factor into the novel, one should never dare to take literally Rushdie’s notorious trickery and wordplay.\(^1\)

This is one of the critical gestures a postcontemporist must make: the warning that the interpretative and the literal relate in a way that requires a critical choice, a choice that may decide that “postmodern indeterminism” is a red herring, a simple literary device, like irony, that serves to entrap a reader, not empower that reader’s interpretation. Eisinger then goes on to recognize one of the buzzwords of postmodern closure, “hybrid.” She observes,

> “Many critical discussions of *The Satanic Verses* offer readings of the novel as hybrid, chaotic, discontinuous, intertextual, fragmented, postmodern, modern, or postcolonial: a sea of theories and opinions.”\(^2\)

As you will see in my short *Afterword*, the term “hybrid” has become a convenient term that by labeling a work also precludes its interpretation. One simply identifies the genres that have been merged and reads through multiple generic lenses. Finally, in citing David Punter, Eisinger offers the greatest sanction of postmodern inquiry when she maintains “the question of interpretation is suspended in favour of a radical admission of incomprehension.”\(^3\) It is easier to claim indeterminism than to pursue an exhaustive interpretation. Eisinger’s struggle to articulate the ludic meaning of Rushdie’s work is the struggle to elude postmodernity’s legacy of “openendedness.” That is the struggle all postcontemporists face: to complete the interpretive process. This is not to say that some literary works reach an indeterminate point of closure. But to too-readily “favour” that indeterminate description is to agree to disagree without exhausting the possibility of finding some agreed upon fixed meaning.

Kevin Cryderman moves through numerous “post-” ideologies, and also moves from Woody Allen to *South Park*, as he reaches an assertion that all of these interpretive strategies are mere authority claims. He emphasizes near the center of his chapter that “all identity categories operate as cultures of belief/argument.”\(^4\) Postmodernity, then, is an “identity category” with more adherents than any other, which Cryderman intuits as he moves through post-identity and post-post identity to finally

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1 *Ex infra*, 2-3.
2 *Ex infra*, 5-6.
3 *Ex infra*, 7.
4 *Ex infra*, 23.
endorse *exhaustion theory* as an alternative way of categorizing that which all other ideologies seek to label. He explains,

“‘post post-identity’ discourse (a.k.a. ‘anti-identity,’ ‘post-ethnicity’ or ‘post-postmodern’) calls into question these assumptions of identity as a central organizing principle. Post post-identity is an incisive and valuable challenge to the primacy of socially ascribed identities or subject positions as operative terms.”

Cryderman cites Michael Millner as Millner “encapsulates the heart of a theoretical trend towards post-postmodernism, specifically on the question of identity,” offering a roster of sixteen identity strategies that emerged in the 1990s, including “in-process, provisional, hybrid, partial, fragmentary, fluid, transitional, transnational” and “cosmopolitan,” to name only some. How does a new millennial scholar interpret a Woody Allen movie or a *South Park* arc of episodes about ginger-colored hair—how does one construct the identity of fictional ironic characters for purposes of discussion—when the legacy of postmodernity is claimed by scores of heirs? If a break did occur after or because of 9/11, who claims the microphone in the ensuing era of flux? Said succinctly,

“theory of exhaustion tends to operate as a project of reclamation for earlier critical, philosophical and political frameworks that the recent academic orthodoxy of ‘theory’ had marginalized.”

What could be the most “orthodox theory” with the power to marginalize other ideologies? Jameson argues that many of the most promising of critical theories fell by the wayside of postmodernism because they were too narrow, being gender- or author- or reader- or class-oriented works. None were broad enough to take on postmodern discourse. Cryderman begs to differ, looking for a narrative of meaningfulness in the critical movements that postmodernism has declared wanting.

Kimberly Engber rescues from critical neglect Julia Ward Howe’s nineteenth-century unfinished narrative *The Hermaphrodite*. She does so by examining critical methods of interpreting Howe’s work to evaluate how they fare at that critical task, concluding that Howe’s work is *postcontemporary* because the language of established critical methods fails to cope with Howe’s multifaceted narrative. Establishing that *The

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5 *Ex infra*, 18.
6 *Ex infra*, 18-19.
7 *Ex infra*, 20.
“Hermaphrodite hovers between the nineteenth century when it was written and the twenty-first century when it was first published,” Engber asserts.

“neither formalism nor feminism nor historicism fully accounts for the ambiguous character and unfinished plot. Howe’s hermaphrodite is a postcontemporary work. This conclusion implies a position within the relatively new field of posthumanist studies. I consider posthumanism a reading practice rather than a point in time or a contemporary experience.”

An interested reader can connect the 2004 publication of Howe’s nineteenth-century work to that of Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex*, a 2002 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a “contemporary” hermaphrodite. Critics struggle with classifying and defining Eugenides’ work, typically calling it, once again, a “hybrid.” For the same reason that I would assign *Middlesex* the status of being a postcontemporary work—it defies the language of critical evaluation—Engber questions the interpretive efforts made involving Howe’s narrative. Her critique of Howe scholar Gary Williams’ evaluation represents a postcontemporary intervention:

“Williams’s ‘psychological androgyny’ gets closer to the reading experience, but Williams sounds squeamish. Why only psychological? While a psychological reading is in many ways persuasive, it limits our understanding of the hermaphrodite to what was thwarted within the social world of nineteenth-century America. Literary study has the great advantage of examining what it was possible to imagine.”

This crucial notion—that it is “possible to imagine” so much more than any given school of interpretation can offer—marks the authority that postcontemporary thought wishes to champion. Interpretation is not an institutional function, nor is it a closed set of beliefs. It begins with one reader and one text. This is already Jameson’s claim for postmodernism, but, as Engber implies, postmodernity offered nothing to accomplish the critical reclamation of Howe’s work, not for over one hundred years. It, too, was marginalized until a different kind of thought process allowed Engber to re-interview a work that now is being celebrated.

Jana Vizmuller-Zocco echoes a point made by Kimberly Engber. The state of contemporary criticism is seemingly futureless without something new to follow or replace postmodernism. She writes,

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8 *Ex infra*, 34.
9 *Ex infra*, 40.
“It is likely that musing about the post-humanist, postmodern, contemporary world leads into a dead end. It is much more urgent, albeit disturbing, for those who live and breathe verbal language together with one of its most significant products, literature, to cast their sights toward the future. It is necessarily an urgent voyage because language and literature, if they are indeed what is most human about humanity, can no longer claim their pre-eminence.”

This is a crucial tenet for this collection and this movement: postcontemporary thought is future-oriented and unwilling to accept an indeterminate conclusion until all interpretive motions have been made. And while Engber found inspiration in posthumanist studies, Vizmuller-Zocco turns to the new ideology of transhumanist studies. Indeed, one of the compelling aspects of her chapter involves biolinguistics, the science of developing a new and evolved language for both an enhanced and a future human population. As she introduces the section on future language needs, Vizmuller-Zocco declares,

“it is instructive to concisely analyze the language of transhumanists, in other words, the semantic underpinnings of this movement, frequently used key words or phrases and their meanings, and the effects these linguistic processes have on the increasing popularity of transhumanism.”

Much of her work sounds like and aligns with science-fiction and will become a remarkable critical tool for scholars working in that genre, but Vizmuller-Zocco is not writing in an imaginative mode. Transhumanism is already impacting medicine and health practices, among others. And while one of my claims for the transcending of the postmodern era is that critical idioms have reached a state of stasis, Vizmuller-Zocco’s essay is filled with the kind of neologisms that can only be associated with an entirely innovative critical language. That makes her work postcontemporary in very many ways.

Bob Samuels complements Vizmuller-Zocco’s thinking beautifully. Samuels tracks four distinct postmodern movements or practices, maintaining that the tracks are both misunderstood and yet participate in creating that misunderstanding. Technology and the desire by the human being to be completed by technology, even merged into machinery, is one of Samuels’ striking images. The classical opposition of flesh and machine is blurred, as many of the postmodern binary oppositions must be conflated for a new way of thinking to emerge. As Samuels puts it,

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10 Ex infra, 46.
11 Ex infra, 50.
Beyond Postmodernism: Onto the Postcontemporary

“This chapter argues that in order to understand what happens after postmodernity, we have to rethink many of the cultural oppositions that have shaped the Western tradition since the start of the modern era. To be precise, we can no longer base our analysis of culture, identity, and technology on the traditional conflicts between the public and the private, the subject and the object, and the human and the machine.”

Samuels is also pertinent to this collection in his examination of the postmodern use of the hybrid, though he does not use that exact wording:

“Some people have rightly claimed that our incessant recombining of diverse cultural representations does not necessarily help us to understand or encounter other cultural worlds. I would add that while this aesthetic version of postmodernity is probably the most prevalent, it is also the easiest to dismiss for its tendency to be superficial and short-lived.”

Recombining forms allows postmodernity to re-invent itself through its use of extant ideologies that can be “renewed” while precluding genuinely innovative thinking. And in a crucial statement for this study, Samuels, like others in this collection, decries the postmodern insistence on indeterminism, arguing that the emergence of many voices does not eliminate the possibility of reaching an interpretive accord:

“Thus, in recognizing the vital values and historical contributions of diverse social groups, multiculturalists have posited that there is no single, universal source for knowledge or truth. Unfortunately, this multicultural idea has often been confused with the extreme postmodernist notion that there are no truths or moral values since everything is relative to one’s own culture.”

In recognizing the four types of postmodernism and exposing the flawed oppositional theories that underline those ideologies, Samuels paves the way something new and different to usher in the era of the “postpostmodern.” I call what Samuels has accomplished yet another postcontemporary intervention.

Lissi Krikelis offers her critique of postmodernity by examining those situations wherein metafiction is simply and errantly conflated so completely with the ideology of postmodern discourse that metafiction loses its identity. If metafiction is indeed an independent form of

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12 Ex infra, 63.
13 Ex infra, 65.
14 Ex infra, 64.
discourse, how did this conflation take place, save perhaps for the assimilative process through which postmodernity refuels itself? Krikelis moves directly to her concern:

“Most metafictional novels breathe the postmodern air and produce artifacts that reflect its thought and its ideological norms. Metafiction and postmodern fiction are associated to the point of convergence, but it is important to underscore that although they may connote similar references, at times they may be completely dissociated. It is unquestionably established that the practice of metafiction predates postmodernism, with examples like Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1605/1615), Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759) or Diderot’s *Jacques the Fatalist* (1796). What has not become equally clear, however, is metafiction’s independence.”

This is another crucial aspect of the critique of postmodernism and a point of departure for the postcontemporist. Many emergent theories, creative practices, and shifting genres are simply “lumped” into postmodern discourse when some seek independence. Indeed, as Evan Gottlieb will argue in the ensuing chapter, some figures associated with postmodernism wish their alignment with that ideology to end, some claiming they have never adhered to postmodernism’s practices whatsoever. Krikelis investigates the link between modernism and postmodernism to find the point where a new departure from modernism might be claimed—one that would grant metafiction its liberty while also aiding postcontemporary thinking find its way:

“The conceptualization of postmodernism is contingent upon modernist tendencies, and any discussion of the former intuitively, and by necessity, entails a discussion of the latter. However, could it be that at the turn of the millennium the binary modern/postmodern should be transposed to a different binary: postmodern/its beyond?”

Postcontemporary thought would willingly slide onto the “vacant” side of the slash, if only to obliterate the slash in its new tenancy.

Evan Gottlieb offers another rebuttal of postmodernism through his analysis of Slavoj Zizek, a critical and cultural theorist who appears in a variety of “Who’s who in Postmodernism” rosters but who has throughout his writing career disavowed being a “postmodernist”:

\[15\] Ex infra, 92-3.

\[16\] Ex infra, 94.
“When he first began to receive sustained attention in the English-speaking world in the early 1990s, highbrow, non-academic media outlets like *The New York Times* and *The New Republic* regularly lumped Žižek in with those “postmodernists,” like Derrida and Michel Foucault, whose apparent lack of belief in stable meanings and Truth (with a capital “T”) was routinely frowned upon. Žižek, for his part, was clear from the start that he had no desire to be included in such company: significant portions of several of his texts from the 1990s and early 2000s are devoted to critiquing Derrida, Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and other theorists who, for better or worse, were associated with postmodernism.”

By mis-classifying Žizek, those who labeled him a postmodernist created a situation in which his work were and have been misinterpreted, for theorists are decoded according to their ideological school:

“Removed from this clarifying and deepening intellectual context, his characteristically pugnacious, counter-intuitive arguments seem to at best to invite misreadings, and at worst to reinforce prejudices already nursed by a general public highly prone (at least in America) to anti-intellectualism.”

This is yet another of the tasks of the postcontemporist: the emancipation, not of a work of literature, not of a critical concept, and not of a literary movement, but of a major ideological figure who disdains classification and who declines membership in the dominant school of thought—an act which ensures his inclusion in the roster of postmodern thinkers. Of course, that inclusion can only be done by a member of the club whose company Žizek wishes to disdain. How many theoretical movements would share Žizek’s irritation if they could only speak?

The final essay of this collection is my own, wherein I argue that postmodernism has plotted a design that ensures it ongoing dominance in our culture. Fredric Jameson is my authority for such a claim, for he describes a nefarious formula of assimilation by which the dominant ideology remains in charge. That which represents change, Jameson writes, will simply be assimilated into the “authentically modern postmodern.” What was innovation is now the classical modern, the “new” having become the established way of seeing things for which postmodernity remains the ever-present, ever-renewing response. It is the reaction to any other intellectual action, and has been for perhaps sixty

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17 *Ex infra*, 130.
18 *Ex infra*, 125.
years, and proposes to stay viable for sixty more. My crucial claim is as follows:

“Postmodernism wishes to assert that the emergence of multiple discourses was merely an early chapter in the autobiography of postmodern discourse, all fruits from a single tree. What is needed is a new way of thinking in a society—a postcontemporary society—that realizes it has been the locus of nothing but new practices for fifty years, all of which have been assimilated and packaged for them under one singular heading.”

From there, I trace the emergence of the term postcontemporary through various disciplines which actually employ the word to argue that similar changes in literary criticism reflect “postcontemporary thought.” What I find in other disciplines and emerging in recent literary and critical works leads me to make this claim:

“Time, immediacy, the moment, the here and now mark the language of postcontemporary discourse. The past is simply an archive, a deleted email or erased DVR recording, in a world with immediate news coverage (think 9/11) and no privacy whatsoever. And we are just starting to realize this. In all recent works on the post 9-11 world that I have read, the authors suggest that not only postmodernity but the state of contemporary thought must be re-envisioned and assigned a new vocabulary.”

My work comes closest to a manifesto, calling for change because it is the pre-eminent force of our daily lives and so should inform our theory. I don’t believe that writing one’s ideas—sometimes fresh, startling, visionary ideas—only to see them eventually assimilated by the eminent domain of thought, or so I see it, is the way to encourage new critical thinking. It is time for penitent art to re-appear, for the well of postmodernity is running dry.

As the previous summaries of the essays in this collection have suggested, the creation of a new vocabulary—and a renewing for critical purposes of an established one—is taking place in the here and now. It occurs when writers such as those examined by my fellow essayists are interpreted and decoded through a new lens. It takes place when scholars raised in a theory-rich age begin to question the very tenets of their upbringing. And it occurs when readers such as those examining this collection find something to celebrate. No new ground is broken by those who toe the line.

19 Ex infra, 139.
20 Ex infra, 145.
The migrant experience, as expressed in postcolonial literature, is marked by chaos and an inability to make sense of the new world in which the migrant finds him or herself. In Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988), a range of spatio-temporal narrative experiments reveals the bewildering nature of ethnic migration in Great Britain specifically, as migrants struggle with ostracism, dislocation, difference, and the often-traumatic aftermath of national and personal histories. This displacement and disorientation occurs in a London where landmarks mutate and oscillate, appear suddenly and then vanish as if they had never existed. It is a London in which people may fall from the sky and in which characters may wake from an uneasy post-fall sleep to discover that they no longer have faces, as Saladin finds when he gazes into Rosa Diamond’s mirror and sees: “that old cherubic face staring out at him once again,” a reminder of a time when “he looked like a featureless jellyfish,” with no identity and no sense of belonging. He attempts to remind himself of his own reality as immigration police comb the beach searching for him, but he nevertheless fears that “the world did not exist beyond that beach down there…If he weren’t careful, if he rushed matters, he would fall off the edge, into clouds. Things had to be made.” Eventually, he does fall into a cloud—the Black Maria cloud of the police van, of the officers who signal “approaching doom”—a realm in which his watch has vanished, all clocks have disappeared, manticores offer him advice, and his only method of escape involves risking and subsequently undergoing a form of

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2 Rushdie, *Satanic Verses*, 139.
3 [Ibid.], 140.
4 [Ibid.], 140.
death, a retreat into a church in which various renditions of the same person stare back at him, hostile and unforgiving.

Many critics read this novel as exemplary of postmodernism because of story-arcs such as this one, which appears to present readers with an infinite state of flux and play in which people possess blank faces, clocks do not exist, spaces cease to make sense (for instance, when Saladin savages the Argentinian bedsheets on an English bed, as if these two countries had somehow merged into one another), and characters themselves often comment on the nature of their lives as an apparent patchwork or stitched canvas of hybrid elements: infinite, intangible, immeasurable. When confronted by a Saladin who fears her exploitation at the hands of Billy Battuta, Mimi Mamoulian scoffs, “I have read *Finnegans Wake* and am conversant with postmodernist critiques of the West, e.g. that we have here a society capable only of pastiche: a ‘flattened’ world. When I become the voice of a bottle of bubble-bath, I am entering Flatland knowingly.”" Saladin despairs at these words, realizing, “I am a man…who does not know the score, living in an amoral, survivalist, get-away-with-it world.” He feels empty, disillusioned by this knowledge, reaching the pinnacle of his existential frustration when he discovers that Gibreel has lied to a film magazine, claiming that he never boarded the crashed *Bostan*. Railing against Gibreel, who clearly knows “the score,” Saladin resembles, “at last…the very devil whose image he had become.” Yet this is also the point at which his forehead swellings—his horns—begin to diminish, making him seem less a devil than before, even at the moment at which he most appears to be one.

Saladin gains back his human form by rejecting false versions of reality and false narratives of the past and asserting the moral desirability of truth over deception. Not long afterward, Mimi and Billy are finally arrested for their financial scams/schemes and Mimi’s declaration of a postmodern world appears foolish—after all, with her arrest, the ‘score’ is settled in favor of honesty and legal justice, thus punishing her for her outlook. Not all behaviors and worldviews are acceptable. Some histories and events do not possess unlimited interpretative space: their effects and outcomes are undeniable, irrefutable. Mimi actually did steal money and Gibreel actually did board the plane. History, whether national or personal, cannot be rewritten either indiscriminately or ignorantly: one must be careful in one’s historical accounts in a way which Mimi is not. Thus, however powerfully postmodern indeterminism appears to factor into the

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Clara Eisinger

novel, one should never dare to take literally Rushdie’s notorious trickery and wordplay. Though readers have no choice but to assume that Gibreel is a quasi-angel while Saladin turns into a real goat—that some realities are flexible and forever mutable while others cannot change so easily—postmodernism is only one perspective which the novel offers.

Rushdie, for all of his postmodernist feints and allusions, constructs his epic as a specifically modernist portrayal of the dislocation of massive groups of people. This form of modernism functions as what Michael Levenson terms a “social practice”8 rather than a solid, immutable type of aesthetic movement, and is applicable to various locations and areas of study. In the Cambridge Companion to Modernism, Levenson writes,

“If…social cataclysms left traces on Modernist art, so did that art inform and to an extent form the conception of social life within historical crises.”9

Modernism, Levenson asserts, is a method of orientation by which artists make sense of quandaries which are otherwise unsolvable and baffling, without dismissing those quandaries as utterly impenetrable. It is a method which is formed in its very exposure to crisis, enabling people to better articulate and devise solutions to their disorientation.

Modernism always surpasses any one meaning or ideological commitment. It is contextual, dialogical, and contestatory. Levenson explains, “Any encounter with an artwork occurs within a social world, a world vastly larger than a momentary contemplation […] [Modernism] has offered not one value but a region of commitments.”10 This region of commitments is dedicated, wherever it appears, to exploring both the limits of language and the ranges of expressible human experience. Rushdie’s novel deals with these linguistic and experiential limits by yoking the concept of sublimity to that of the diaspora. Specifically, the sublimity that appears is characteristic of the experience of diaspora in its resistance to words and its challenging of thought. Its un-representable nature ultimately delineates the edges of an apocalypse which enables personal change, growth, and a sense of un-limiting possibility through contact with difference. Arising through this contact, the novel’s aesthetic distortions further develop it and recast English social issues from a more global perspective, represented by Indian migrants. Art in this context only functions to the extent that Rushdie dares the very edge of the abyss and

10 Levenson, Modernism, 9.
then tips over into its darkness, falling into a world with no alphabet, no
dictionary, and very little direct capacity for translation.

**Migration and the Problems of Representation**

This surreal gesture of a world is one which the UK, with its large
etnic populations, has courted since the mid-20th century. In Europe,
guest workers, Indian, and Pakistani immigrants form a significant part of
the vast masses of the unwanted. Great Britain in particular has always
prided itself upon racial purity and its native British “stock.”11 In spite of
Britain’s desire to keep out the “blacks,” however, many said “blacks”
have found their way to British sea and airports by dint of their status as
British Commonwealth subjects. Paul notes, “over the course of the decade
[1950-1960], colonial immigration to Britain increased incrementally
…climbing to 3,000 in 1953; 10,000…in 1954, 42,000 in 1955, [and] 46,000
in 1956.”12 In 1961, the number of incoming people hit a high of
136,000. For British government officials, such numbers presented a
danger to society—an overwhelming crowd of blacks, ready to drown out
British purity with their supposed habitual laziness and conflict-prone
natures.13 Therefore, the government took measures to limit immigration,
including issuing multiple classes of vouchers, the first two of which often
went to whites from countries such as Canada, the latter of which typically
went to darker-skinned migrants such as Indians and Pakistanis, whose
projected wait times could exceed fifty years.14

Unsurprisingly, then, so-called “black” immigrants to Great Britain
faced challenges the likes of which many of their white counterparts could
not imagine. Jamaicans entering the country encountered hostility and
resistance, “[reminding] them of unfriendliness and unfamiliarity.”15 (Paul
120). Indians and Pakistanis were not welcome either. Though they could
attempt to become British, they would never fit the model for proper
“British stock,” and returning home was not always a desirable option,
since Indian and Pakistani immigrants often considered themselves
members of the British Empire who deserved to experience its center and
not merely its peripheries—a center often unachievable not only for them,
but in fact for many others, including long-naturalized citizens such as

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15 *Ibid.*, 120.
Salman Rushdie, a member of India’s Muslim minority whose parents moved to Karachi before he began attending Cambridge University. As Homi Bhabha has noted in an excerpt from The New Statesman, Rushdie’s magnum opus represents his “painful and problematic encounter with the most intractable and intimate area of his imaginative life…a life lived precariously on the cultural and political margins of modern [British] society.” In an interview with The Observer, Rushdie admitted, “I’m not who I was supposed to be…I stepped out of that world, rather like Gibreel. I have had the sense of having frequently to reconstruct my life.” For Rushdie, the past represented a temporal break with the present, and the man he has become is not a natural, continuous extension of his personality in boyhood and adolescence. Life is fragmented, fragile. It breaks and ruptures, and Rushdie appears to recognize this in his own experiences as well as in those of his characters. He also recognizes Britain’s tendency to catalyze this rupture with its trademark insistence upon a racial purity which, once delineated, casts too many people as its antithesis, leading to fear and despair. Rushdie’s novel seeks a solution which may create a positive line of identity and cultural affiliation, but which is not closed down, “pure,” or constructed only from certain “stocks.” It finds this solution in global modernism, which, though, originally crafted by artists of British/European stock, nevertheless lends itself to a postcolonial context with its explorations of the sublime, the diaspora, the opening of experience, and the discovery of a self that is certain but uncertain, knowable yet constantly surprising.

The Constitution of the Diaspora and Contemporary Critical Approaches to The Satanic Verses: An Overview

Many critical discussions of The Satanic Verses offer readings of the novel as hybrid, chaotic, discontinuous, intertextual, fragmented, postmodern,

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17 This has been collected in The Rushdie File.
18 Appignanesi and Maitland, Rushdie File, 114.
19 Ibid., 8.
20 For more information on Rushdie’s works, background, personal life, and the controversy surrounding the Verses, see The Rushdie File and Imaginary Homelands, the essay collection compiled during Rushdie’s time in hiding (New York: Penguin, 1991). Also see Joseph Anton, Rushdie’s 2012 memoir (New York: Random House), a lively personal account of the “Rushdie affair” during the years leading up to and following Khomeini’s fatwa.
modern, or postcolonial: a sea of theories and opinions. I will align myself with those critics who do not perceive modernism as a period label necessarily contradicting postcolonialism. Though students and scholars may readily conceive of modernism as a set of dates beginning somewhere around 1900 and ending soon after 1940, inevitably consisting of Bloomsbury Group ‘greats’ such as James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, the reality is far less secure. Modernism is a route as much as it is a destination. In *New World Modernisms*, Charles Pollard is concerned with the constant opposition of modernism and postcolonialism to one another. Some critics, Pollard notes, are more comfortable pitting modernism against its descendant than acknowledging its enduring usefulness, its inability to end with the 20th century.

Yet Pollard belongs to a class of critics who see modernism as helpful in the development of frameworks which allow people to usefully describe their experiences of alienation and disjunction: in other words, their *postcolonial* experiences. Writing of T.S. Eliot, Pollard notes:

> The complementarity of…modernism tends to get lost in all but the most subtle of contemporary readings […]. Eliot conceives of tradition, not as a struggle between the past and the present, between the community and the individual…but as a collocation of the past and present, of the community and the individual…in a new contingent whole. He knows that these new wholes are only conventions, that they can never be fully grasped from a single perspective, and that they always remain open to change, but he believes that they remain important as the means by which we shape perceptions of reality into meaningful patterns.

For Pollard, modernism is a grounding force which develops perceived wholes that may not actually exist, but which nevertheless facilitate human perception and understanding, like a mnemonic device that is simply constructed yet enables people to remember and to grasp structures of great complexity. I will use modernism in this mnemonic sense in my own study to explore how certain experimentally-warped time and spatial constructs lead to the overcoming or challenging of linear time and stable spatial or national identities in Rushdie’s novel. All of these constructs enact an apocalyptic view of the diaspora through the kind of temporary and contingent wholeness which Pollard describes.

However, if modernism offers a method of reaching toward apocalypse through sublimity, so too does postmodernism, which has positioned itself as a rival arbiter of the sublime. In the essay, “What is Postmodernism,”

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Jean-François Lyotard defines the postmodern as an early, “nascent” element or impulse within the modern. He writes, “modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure.” The modern, Lyotard insists, is comforting, stable, and ultimately untenable because its aesthetic consistency does “not constitute the real sublime sentiment.” The sublime, he asserts, is “that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste...to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable”—in other words, to reach beyond specific aesthetic experiments and focal points into a realm in which utter flux and inconsistency are all that a reader will encounter. This process results in utter confusion, but also the sublime in its supposedly “pure” form, devoid of aesthetic snobbery or over-determination. Yet flux and inconsistency are themselves a form of consistency, closed down and, as David Punter observes, distrusting of newness. He notes, “For the postmodern, the new is always surprising and often catastrophic; the question of interpretation is suspended in favour of a radical admission of incomprehension.” Incomprehension becomes itself an “answer” and another mode of comprehension: one which, for migrants, creates more problems than it solves.

Postmodernism is ideal for battering down stability in a context in which a firmly-moored identity and clear affiliation is always already presumed. It is the strategy of a Western world attempting to deconstruct its sureties; as Rushdie notes of travel, “adventuring is, these days...a movement that originates in the rich parts of the planet and heads for the poor.” A literary corollary of the wealthy man’s travels, postmodernism uses purposeful nonsense to displace characters from their cozy clubs, bevies of native servants, and tea-time chatter. Where D.H. Lawrence’s Rupert Birkin asserts, “One should never have a home,” Thomas Pynchon achieves a new level of uncertain absurdity with his Californian characters’ search for an underground postal service. Yet such meaning-

22 Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota UP, 1979), 81.
23 Lyotard, Postmodern Condition, 81.
24 Ibid., 81.
destructive tactics—attempts to up-root the false confidences of security—are not helpful to populations whose identities already are unstable: for instance, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, and Indians living in Britain, or Turkish guest workers in Germany, or Allie Cone’s Jewish parents living wherever they will not encounter persecution. Such people cannot be ethically told that they have no place in the world, no room left in the inn: that they must be forced to stay into the same un-rooted state in which they have always already dwelled.

Rushdie himself, after post-fatwa security issues left him constantly searching for the next home-base, the next-rental house, the next set of friends upon which to place his trust and support, became acutely demoralized and depressed, searching for the type of grounding which he had previously given his character Saladin Chamcha. Barred from India both emotionally and physically—but never intellectually—he writes of himself in the third-person: “Was it possible to be—to become good at being—not rootless, but multiply rooted? Not to suffer from a loss of roots but to benefit from an excess of them?...He needed to make an act of reclamation of the Indian identity he had lost.” 28 Instead of choosing to stand unrooted, unconnected in a land of confusion, Rushdie decides during his early writing career and post-fatwa years alike to reconnoiter with his Indian self, embracing his heritage of a critical Islamic culture while remaining wary of narrow-minded evangelism. He adheres also to the “multiply-rooted” tradition of reasonable skepticism—earning him great censure from more singly-rooted Iranian clerics, vehemently fundamentalist British Muslims, and Labour Party members eager to mollify their Rushdie-lambasting constituencies. Rushdie, though ever-admiring of postmodernists such as Thomas Pynchon 29 —desperate, even not to fall asleep during a post-dinner conversation with him!—never quite joined their ranks either. When faced with the need for protection, for constant flight and hiding, barred from living in one permanent home, one permanent place—the migrant condition magnified past the brink of absurdity—Rushdie himself sought meaning, fought for sense and a home, as so many immigrants do (see Mishra below).

His position is illustrative of the pitfalls of postmodernity, especially its oft-alluded to homelessness, lack of stability/security and purposeful attempts at befuddlement. More useful than postmodernism for those with a migratory outlook, Melba Cuddy-Keane asserts, is a modernist

29 Rushdie, Joseph Anton, 362.
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understanding of the self as a form of “global consciousness,” a synonym for Rushdie’s “multiple-rootedness.” By grasping one’s own identity as always-already related to the identities of others rather than incomprehensible in relationship to others, Cuddy-Keane insists that a “transformative [possibility]” arises, one in which “the self is resituated out in the world of global flows,” or the self “itself” becomes diasporic. From the flux and flow of an apparently postmodern world, one can nevertheless assume a particular identity, however many taproots it has grown. This identity is plural and postcolonial rather than confused and subsumed: a definitive individual identity and flexible, migratory, subject to change.

What Migrants Want: Spivak’s “Location of Migrancy,” Absent Endings, and the Intertextuality of the New Modernism

The modern is not senile. It has not yet died, petrified, or become brittle. As Pollard notes of Walcott and Brathwaite’s writing, “Attributes …such as contingency of identity, the emphasis on cultural absence, and making language visible, could fairly be characterized as postmodern, but the general thrust of their work is best described as modernist because it still aspires to create a provisional sense of cultural order or wholeness out of a multiplicity of cultural sources.” A kind of “provisional” wholeness appears out of what would otherwise be jumbled, tangled disorder. This “wholeness” does not deny the presence of the sublime, which it will not try to represent, and neither does it presume to dictate what that sublime might be. Again, one must return to the figuration of modernism as a mnemonic device. The sublime is for modernism a vehicle to an endpoint, Pollard implies. This endpoint is provisional and apocalyptic in character because it stops where the unknown or “cultural absence” begins and ceases to answer the most perplexing of inquiries, only providing a road down which one can travel to reach the answers—if indeed answers there are.

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31 Cuddy-Keane, Modernism, 545.
32 Ibid., 545-546.
33 Pollard, Modernisms, 39.
Certainly, the answers towards which Rushdie hints are not always comforting. The *Verses* does not answer Saladin’s question of why his father smiles at death. Nor does it solve readers’ potential questions about what happens to Saladin after he walks away from his home with Zeeny. However, Saladin himself appears not to require this knowledge, taking comfort from his mere presence at his father’s deathbed and his reunion with Zeeny, drawing strength from the certainty of his love for these two people, no matter where he has been in the past and no matter where he will travel in the future. He enters a small cell of friendships and loves.34 Though Saladin’s experiences of sublimity are apocalyptic because they are associated with an unknowable ending, with absence and with apparent doubt, they nevertheless open him up to a future of self-confidence and companionship—a “multiply-rooted” home—of understanding and an acceptance of his Indian nationality. This understanding is projected backwards through a firmer grasp of his past and present circumstances, ushering in a new comprehension which arises because of his initial confusion.

Home and understanding can thus be recovered by the bending of time itself. Vijay Mishra, in *Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, identifies the diaspora as a temporally redemptive movement. He asserts that when a desirable future is projected onto the present rather than the past, thus privileging the now, time is “turned back against itself in order that alternative readings, alternative histories may be released.”35 Oftentimes, migrants do not, Mishra suggests, consider their present circumstances, for the past, with its dangling turnip of cultural unity, is too compelling, and the future, with its promises of a return to an Edenic state, is too distracting to be of much help. Saladin, however, discovers and unleashes alternative readings of his own past, becoming a man of whom his father can be proud, a man who is faithful to his Indian girlfriend instead of desiring the emotionally distant and cloistered Pamela—a man who joins the liberal/liberated Bombay Human Chain and finds within himself discontinuities which he can finally, with great relief, accept and approve, though they initially make him uncomfortable.

Views of time as unstable and malleable, able to be changed or redeemed in the most empowering of ways, can make migrant communities nervous. What these want most of all, Mishra notes, is stability, continuity, and firm identity, a “wish to cling to ‘millenarian’

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34 Michael Levenson indicates that many modernist poets and writers did the same (*Companion*, 6).
narratives of self-empowerment in which only the untranslated can recapture a lost harmony.36 Such a desire for “untranslated-ness,” when denied, drives people and ethnic groups to the edge of a conceptual precipice: even if a leader commands the act, nobody wants to be the first to jump off, to abandon unified and homogenous notions of identity, though these latter may prove beneficial. For instance, in the beginning of his narrative, Saladin believes that stability, safety on the correct side of the cliff, is what he wants as well: a teleological journey from Indian brat to well-bred Englishman, no kinks and no distractions along the way. However, Mishra asserts that Rushdie’s representation of a spatiotemporal discontinuity which is continuously reclaimable, though kinky and strange, is more effective than straightforward continuity (if less immediately desirable) for the purposes of enabling immigrants to understand the conditions in which they live. After all, they are always and forever translated, their identities constructed as if from a dream (or a nightmare), never pure or singular. Eventually, Mishra notes, Saladin realizes this one truth: “It is…Saladin who is reborn and who accepts the need for change.”37 In the process, he learns to stop living a lie that denies the strangeness, brokenness, asymmetry, and intertextuality of existence and instead attempts to craft all of these realities into a new coherence—a coherence not initially visible, but nevertheless present.

The Verses itself, like its hero Saladin, is deeply intertextual in its desire to push beyond the boundaries of a single work and to incorporate38 many works into its own body, to make discontinuity and its attendant novelty its very substance even as it seeks out some form of stability. Gayatri Spivak writes that, “once you have finished the phantasmagoric book, the global slowly settles into the peculiar locale of migrancy.”39 What this location of migrancy is, Spivak believes, can only be discovered when a migrant turns away from the dream of finding agency in one nation,40 instead accepting the notion that one never belongs to a singular nation or group, uncomplicatedly—and even if one does, one must still

36 Mishra, Indian Diaspora, 223.
37 Mishra, Indian Diaspora, 225.
38 “Incorporation” here does not imply assimilation, or conformism. Also, though I do not discuss in detail here the works which Rushdie incorporates, these are numerous and include Milton’s Paradise Lost, Joyce’s Ulysses and Portrait of the Artist, Goethe’s Faust, The Arabian Nights, and many other, less immediately significant texts.
40 Spivak, Reading, 94.
critique that odd space, which appears to be de-centered even when it is not.\textsuperscript{41} Again, the idea of the “multiply-rooted” life reappears.\textsuperscript{42}

Also, and more concretely, the location of migrancy is not only discovered via a particular method, but is a substantial notion in its own right, plural and conjoined. Spivak writes, “Literature is transactional. The point is not the correct description of a book, but the construction of readerships.”\textsuperscript{43} The most important aspect of a novel, Spivak asserts, is its ability to build readerships and enable its readers to learn. Sometimes, this process of learning enters strange terrain where people must explore cultural transactions and intertextual conjunctions at the points at which they cease to make sense, fail altogether, or require new terminology.

Simon Gikandi similarly attempts to construct a theory of the migrant experience which is locally but globally contextualized through aporias and Schröedinger’s cat-like absences. He describes England as a place of “unclarified beginnings”\textsuperscript{44} and emphasizes the gaps present in Rushdie’s narratives, some of which derive from the tautologies inevitable in Rushdie’s work. Gikandi does not believe that Rushdie can ever escape “the very normativities—nation and empire—that [he] seeks to negate.”\textsuperscript{45} Specifically, he notes that, “While the novel seems to destabilize such properties as modern temporality, the space of the nation, and the foundational moments of culture, its power of critique….also seems to be dependent on such categories.”\textsuperscript{46} Though Rushdie subverts and attacks colonialism, satirizing English fears concerning black immigrants and metamorphosing his characters into awkward shapes, this very attack of colonialism stems from a direct acknowledgement of its power.

Rushdie, according to Gikandi, grapples vigorously with his antagonizing force. Gikandi writes, “the whole momentum of the novel, at least until its moment of closure, is toward the transcendence of such categories [as empire, nation, etc.].”\textsuperscript{47} While Gikandi insists that Rushdie cannot actually transcend them, he does note that the “aporic moments and

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 84.
\textsuperscript{42} Importantly, there is a location of migrancy, as Spivak and Gikandi together suggest. Where postmodern theory would posit that the location of migrancy is a fallacy, nonexistent, they implicitly argue that it does exist, even if its position changes and its exact whereabouts are often unknown.
\textsuperscript{43} Spivak, Reading, 87.
\textsuperscript{44} Simon Gikandi, Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 205.
\textsuperscript{45} Gikandi, Englishness, 208.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 209-210.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 210.