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Journal of War and Culture Studies

Global Approaches to the Body and World War II

INTRODUCTION

'Battling through the Bodies': The Human Body and Global Warfare

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> 'The flesh poured over her, the hot, nerve wired, now lit up, now dark as the grave physical body.'
>
> (Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 1941)

In Virginia Woolf's final novel *Between the Acts*, largely written in 1940 but set on the eve of World War II in the late 1930s, Isa Oliver narrates this extraordinary affective encounter with the 'physical body': a spilling, unruly mass of flesh and nerves, evoking the burning heat of the electric wire and the darkness of the grave in a syntactically disorienting medley. Building on the unsettling hints of corporeal violence here – the image of melted flesh that can be 'poured', the electrified or electrocuted human body, and the missing comma that melds 'the grave' and the 'physical body' into one – Woolf annexes the spectre of global warfare to this ostensibly domestic scene. While listening to the dying sounds of church bells in the aftermath of Miss La Trobe's English-village pageant, Isa pictures the vulnerable

congregation, 'assembled, on their knees' (2008: 186), powerless against the aeroplanes that have recently passed 'in perfect formation' above their heads (2008: 174). Noticing her husband Giles disappearing with Mrs Manresa, she experiences the injury of betrayal, 'the rusty fester of the poisoned dart' (2008: 187); her son approaches, 'battling through the bodies' that separate them, and she wonders if the others 'perceive the arrows about to strike them?' (2008: 187). The broad-ranging military metaphors here coalesce with the wider sense of violent collision to create a dense interlacing of interwar anxiety: the airplanes that have disrupted the village pageant and raise the threat of invasion in the spectators' minds, the fears for the Brooke family who have travelled to Italy 'in spite of everything', and the gramophone air that replaces the national anthem to sing of '*Unity – Dispersity* […] *Un… dis…*' (2008: 181). For Woolf, writing in the midst of World War II, the political assault on the private body manifests in a confusion of forms, as Isa feels the flesh—her own? someone else's? —pour over her. In this climactic erasure of corporeal boundaries, Mrs Manresa's repeated conviction that 'we're all flesh and blood under the skin' (2008: 36) becomes a queasy reminder of the porousness of the human body, and of its vulnerability to outside force.

Woolf's wartime prose finds an unexpected echo in the post-war autobiographical writing of Jean Améry, an Austrian-born, French-naturalized member of the Belgian Resistance who detailed his experience of torture at the hands of the Gestapo during World War II:

> The boundaries of my body are also the boundaries of my self. My skin surface shields me against the external world. If I am to have trust, I must feel on it only what I *want* to feel. At the first blow, however, this trust in the world breaks down. The other person […] forces his own corporeality on me with the first blow. (1980: 28, original emphasis).

We find here a remarkable coincidence of thought linking the literary conceptualising of World War II's impact across the work of two writers of different nationalities, different generations, and profoundly different wartime experiences. Both Améry and Woolf focus on the shock of the intercorporeal encounter, the skin figured as an inadequate boundary against the world and the flesh as the site of a terrifying collision. The failure of the body's agency, of its ability to shield itself from unwanted contact, becomes in both texts a parallel to a broader failure of political security in the context of the war, with its own invasions and collisions across boundary lines. Woolf and Améry bear out Sarah Cole's observation that 'it

will be the body that most palpably and irrevocably disrupts the sense of distinctiveness or boundary' in times of mass conflict (2009: 26).

Like Woolf and Améry, the articles collected in this special issue emphasize the body's significance as a locus of political and aesthetic expression, a culturally-contingent formulation that can reveal much about the workings of history and power at a time of intense global dislocation. Recent war studies scholarship has salvaged narratives of individual and collective bodily experience from the wider ideological questions which have dominated the established histories of World War II. Such work counters what Petra Rau has astutely identified as the legacy of the 'politically expedient vanishing act' performed by Allied and Axis wartime institutions in their attempts to conceal the fact of bodies violated and destroyed by human-orchestrated conflict. Instead, we find a new emphasis on 'the ubiquity of corporeal suffering in visual and literary renditions of war' (2010: 1). Yet the sheer scope and multiple permutations of World War II—a conflict that 'reached further around the globe than any which had ever preceded it' (Weinberg 2005: 3) and repeatedly dismantled and redrew its boundary lines—poses an ongoing challenge to any scholarship that seeks to establish a neat narrative of universality. The seeming geographical totality implied by the terms 'Second World War' or 'World War II' belies an intense and prolonged fracturing and refracturing of national structures and international alliances. The long series of invasions, retreats, occupations, and annexations generated multiple new sites of global contact but, as Woolf's and Améry's writings illustrate, these new points of encounter were often experienced as profoundly anxiogenic, heralding disintegration and the loss of stable identity as much as they did new unity or alliance. The literature of the period bears testimony to a broad shift from what Marina MacKay has identified early modernism's 'internationalist outlook', the 'emphasis on cosmopolitanism, deracination, expatriation, and cultural exchange' in 1920s and 1930s literature and literary circles (2009: 1601) to the 'profound loss of orientation' and 'widespread contemporary experience of displacement' that Julie Bates has traced in subsequent years (2015: 176). The long aftermath of this seemingly borderless conflict continued this process of fragmentation, as the ensuing decades saw the collapse of several global imperial territories: the dissolution of British colonial rule in India, Sudan, Malaysia, Nigeria, and other parts of Africa reduced the British Empire's global population from 700 million to 5 million by 1960 (Brown and Louis, 1999: 330); the French second colonial empire struggled and fell to independence movements in Indochina, Algeria, Cameroon, Guinea and several other African colonies; the Empire of Japan was forcibly ended by US occupation and the decolonization of Taiwan, Korea, South Sakhalin,

the South Pacific Mandate, and Manchuko. As old global structures fell and new points of international contact multiplied across the war and post-war years, we find ourselves faced with what Margot Norris has recognized as the inability of either art or history to 'totalize war experience', producing as 'a model of complex fracture, a pattern of uneven and awkward breaks whose points of rupture, like those in a body, are sites of cultural pain' (2000: 22). In recovering the wider significance of corporeal representations, our contributors are not merely conscious of the internationally expansive character of the war itself, but also of the contractions and fragmentations it heralded, making a global approach to the question of physical precariousness especially apt.

As Robert S. Gordon warns, global chronologies of World War II 'can obscure local histories' (2009: 123). The essays in this issue aim to avoid the risks of the deceptive 'uniform narrative' that can elide points of pressure and nuance from view (Depner and Woodward, 2015: 19), by examining specific instances of junction between contested national and international structures of meaning. Within a global range of case studies, these essays examine the intersections between international identities and structures of thought: for example, through William Davies' focus on the Franco-Irish Samuel Beckett's palimpsest of Irish military history and World War II French experience; or the case of Dorset actor Maurice Evans, who staged *Hamlet*, a play set in Denmark by the most recognizable of English playwrights, for his fellow US troops in the Central Pacific, explored in this issue by Nicholas Utzig. Attention is paid to intra-national points of fissure as well, as in Diya Gupta's examination of the empathic trope of bodily hunger as it appears in letters between Indian soldiers at the front and starving civilians, and as fictionalized in the Bengali wartime novel *Ashani Sanket* (1944-46). Giovanni Miglianti explores the specifically Italian idea of *pudore* within the international horror of the Nazi extermination camps, and Leo Mellor's reading of Humphrey Jennings's British propaganda film *A Diary for Timothy* (1945) probes points of national vulnerability via the body of the child, which acts as a site of uneasy coalescence for the bodily and political vulnerabilities of citizens of 'Britain' broadly conceived.

Across the range of essays collected here, this issue attends to what Mark Rawlinson describes as 'the ethical imperatives to keep the body firmly before our gaze': an imperative that paradoxically requires us to 'recognize war as a discursive, as well as a material, activity' (2000: 19). There is certainly, as Rau contends, 'political significance in writing about the body-at-war' (2010: 4) since the reality of war's corporeal cost—'the spectacular waste of human life' (2010: 6) it entails—is often elided through the official rituals of remembrance, which transform the corpse of the soldier into an ethereal gift: a symbol that sustains the

nation as a whole. Rejecting such easy iconography, our contributors insistently foreground the body's physicality—whether it manifests in Beckett's use of scatological imagery or the famished bodies on the Indian Home Front—while also acknowledging the powerful urge to mask such horror rhetorically.

The issue's attention to a variety of international instances of liminal bodily encounter parallels the diffuse and fragmented corpus of writing that emerged during and after World War II. Leo Mellor rightly observes that a new critical attentiveness to 'the pluralities within the term "war writing"' (2011: 2) has created the conditions for a more diverse understanding of the war's cultural landscape. It is not merely the bodies of active soldiers and combatants that these articles seek to recover, but also the bodies of civilians, children, prisoners, and survivors, as well as the textual forms that uneasily preserve them. World War II's key chroniclers were not only soldiers deployed abroad, but also resistance fighters like Ernest Hemingway, Marguerite Duras, and Samuel Beckett; spies and government officials like Graham Greene, Elizabeth Bowen, and John Buchan; civilians and non-combatants like Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay; journalists like Martha Gellhorn; and prisoners of concentration and extermination camps like Anne Frank, Primo Levi, Charlotte Delbo, Elie Wiesel, and Jorge Semprún. Accordingly, our contributors explore texts and other cultural sources across a range of narrative categories—drama, life-writing, experimental fiction, poetry, documentary—in order to account for the many kinds of creative engagement the war enabled, concerning individuals at both the centre and the peripheries of the fighting itself. The 'global' approach of this issue is therefore not solely related to geography but also to genre and form, mapping a broad set of discursive negotiations with a conflict that stretched in many directions.

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In this issue's first article, 'Bearing Hamlet like a Soldier to the Stage: Maurice Evans' *G.I. Hamlet'*, Nicholas Utzig traces the history of the British actor Maurice Evans' wartime production of *Hamlet* in Pearl Harbour, Hawaii. Radically condensing the original text into a running time of just over two hours, Evans attempted to make Shakespeare's Danish prince 'fit' for a solider-audience by subtly reshaping Hamlet into a 'model' military leader. As Utzig shows, this unique production—performed by a cast of soldiers for their peers—collapsed the distinction between performing and martial bodies, 'simultaneously representing the body *at* war and participating as a body *in* war'. In Utzig's analysis, the

wartime context frames a powerful coalescing of human and literary forms, with Evans' careful cuts and emendations highlighting the status of the play itself as a textual body: a malleable corpus that, like the conscripts in the audience, could be made fit for purpose. Arguing that Evans' 'mimetic task as an actor and editor is almost indistinguishable from his performance as an army officer', Utzig explores how this idiosyncratic rendering of *Hamlet* appropriately underscored questions of bodily courage and integrity, eliding the more frequently over-played theme of psychological prevarication. In this way, the body of the Dane—newly imagined as a comrade-in-arms—could be incorporated into a community of men quite literally placing their bodies on the line, 'challenging the boundaries between the theatre and the war' and providing the watching soldiers with a prototypical example of martial service, for which audiences at subsequent post-war productions of *G.I. Hamlet* would demonstrate patriotic gratitude.

Shifting attention from an Anglo-American wartime experience to that of a peripatetic Irishman, in his essay '"Crawling in the Flanders Mud": Samuel Beckett, War Writing, and Scatological Pacifism' William Davies considers the bleakly comic depictions of bodily function and failure in Beckett's post-war novel *Mercier and Camier* (1946). This text, Davies contends, offers 'a powerful indictment of war and its effects on the body' through an attention to the wounded human forms that are always, Scarry reminds us, 'the main purpose and outcome of war' (1985: 68). Building on recent work by Emilie Morin (2017) and James McNaughton (2018) which has sought to recover Beckett's close engagement with the currents of politics and history, Davies identifies the injured body in *Mercier and Camier* as the site of Beckett's 'serious appraisal of modernity's patterns of mass violence', from the Boer War to World War II. It is this longer, 'more perspicacious' view of corporeal suffering that Davies maps in *Mercier and Camier*: he considers the author's pacifist dissection of 'the ethics of duty and violence' with sustained reference to the poetry of Beckett's friend (and twice-wounded solider) Thomas MacGreevy, his compatriot W. B. Yeats, and popular 'war books' of the 1920s and 30s. These intertextual conversations stress the specificities of Irish experience in the conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while also revealing Beckett's startling use of the body as a mediating force in wider debates about soldierly duty and commitment.

Leo Mellor's essay, '"Or are you going to make the world a better place? You and the other babies": Humphrey Jennings's *A Diary for Timothy* and the Potential of the Body', is similarly attentive to the place of the vulnerable body in the aesthetic and ideological

paradigms of World War II. Mellor uses the vision of the child's body in Jennings's propaganda film as a focal point from which to explore the child's body as a vehicle for post-war anxieties in cultural production in the period more broadly, a figure combining corporeal vulnerability with potential hope for the future. Mellor explores how the body of the baby Timothy merges with the collage of other war-damaged, vulnerable, and absent bodies in the film. This, then, is a propaganda film that places a value 'on potentiality, on preserving future possibilities' while also remaining 'unstinting about the human cost' of war and the challenges of reconstructing post-war Britain.

Next, in his article 'Italian Holocaust Literature and the Paradox of Affect', Giovanni Miglianti examines the affective mode of *pudore* in Italian survivor narratives, focusing on the work of former chemist and Auschwitz detainee Primo Levi. Acknowledging the difficulty of settling on a corresponding concept in English, Miglianti translates *pudore* as a 'sense of modesty broadly pertaining to an individual's exposure in a socially charged context', linking it to related categories of 'restraint', 'reserve', 'discretion' and 'decency'. It is the violation of *pudore* ('*offesa al pudore*') that Miglianti discovers at 'liminal moments' in these survivor accounts, often centring on the initial stripping and hostile revelation of the prisoners' bodies at the entrance to the concentration camp. As both an affect grounded in a sense of physical modesty and a narrative technique bound up in notions of restraint, *pudore* plays a critical role in Levi's body of work, 'ranging from tropes of reticence, euphemism, understatement, and irony, to the often-stressed intention to bear witness by proxy'. Such a reading of *pudore*, Miglianti argues, opens up an embodied dimension to Levi's writing that has been traditionally overlooked. Moreover, it supplies a valuable affective framework for recovering the neglected testimonies of other Italian Holocaust survivors, including political prisoner Lidia Beccaria Rolfi. *Pudore*, then, emerges as both 'an affect that we can trace in the survivors' texts at the bodily, rhetorical, and cultural level' and also as a mode of engagement in 'the reception of Holocaust testimony', shaping what is elided and silenced as well as reluctantly given voice.

In the final article of this issue, 'Bodies in Hunger: Literary Representations of the Indian Home-Front during World War II', Diya Gupta looks to the wartime experiences of Indian soldiers and civilians. Focusing on the 1943 Bengal Famine, which claimed at least three million lives on the Indian subcontinent, Gupta reads the letters of sepoys and their relatives, intercepted and translated by colonial censors, as a 'montage of fragments'

indexing the physical records of starvation. Noting that the famine was deeply rooted in British colonial policy—making hunger itself 'a worldwide wartime colonial export'—Gupta examines the ways in which 'hunger and its contexts influence [literary] form', creating both 'communities of knowledge' and 'bonds of feeling' between the Indian soldiers deployed in the Middle East and their correspondents in Bengal. Turning from these letters to Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's serialized novel *Ashani Sanket* (*The Intimations of Thunder*, 1944-46), this article traces the famine's fictional and historical contours, showing how the emaciated bodies populating *Ashani Sanket* come to signal 'the rapaciousness of war', as well as the interrelated forms of damage caused by colonialism, misogyny, and the Hindu caste system. Closing this special issue, Gupta's essay is also a signal reminder of the bodies that cannot be recovered by the war's historians and cultural commentators. From Bandyopadhyay's unfinished novel to the lost and censored letters in the India Office Records, this article catalogues forms of textual and corporeal incompleteness, commemorating too the 'wandering minstrels or *bauls*, village artists and painters' who died in rural Bengal: victims of a wartime famine they alone might have been able to record.

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INTRODUCTION

'Battling through the Bodies': The Human Body and Global Warfare

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(Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 1941)

In Virginia Woolf's final novel *Between the Acts*, largely written in 1940 but set on the eve of World War II in the late 1930s, Isa Oliver narrates this extraordinary affective encounter with the 'physical body': a spilling, unruly mass of flesh and nerves, evoking the burning heat of the electric wire and the darkness of the grave in a syntactically disorienting medley. Building on the unsettling hints of corporeal violence here – the image of melted flesh that can be 'poured', the electrified or electrocuted human body, and the missing comma that melds 'the grave' and the 'physical body' into one – Woolf annexes the spectre of global warfare to this ostensibly domestic scene. While listening to the dying sounds of church bells in the aftermath of Miss La Trobe's English-village pageant, Isa pictures the vulnerable congregation, 'assembled, on their knees' (2008: 186), powerless against the aeroplanes that have recently passed 'in perfect formation' above their heads (2008: 174). Noticing her husband Giles disappearing with Mrs Manresa, she experiences the injury of betrayal, 'the rusty fester of the poisoned dart' (2008: 187); her son approaches, 'battling through the bodies' that separate them, and she wonders if the others 'perceive the arrows about to strike them?' (2008: 187). The broad-ranging military metaphors here coalesce with the wider sense of violent collision to create a dense interlacing of interwar anxiety: the airplanes that have disrupted the village pageant and raise the threat of invasion in the spectators' minds, the fears for the Brooke family who have travelled to Italy 'in spite of everything', and the gramophone air that replaces the national anthem to sing of '*Unity – Dispersity* […] *Un… dis…*' (2008: 181). For Woolf, writing in the midst of World War II, the political assault on the private body manifests in a confusion of forms, as Isa feels the flesh—her own? someone else's? —pour over her. In this climactic erasure of corporeal boundaries, Mrs Manresa's repeated conviction that 'we're all flesh and blood under the skin' (2008: 36) becomes a

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In this issue's first article, 'Bearing Hamlet like a Soldier to the Stage: Maurice Evans' *G.I. Hamlet'*, Nicholas Utzig traces the history of the British actor Maurice Evans' wartime production of *Hamlet* in Pearl Harbour, Hawaii. Radically condensing the original text into a running time of just over two hours, Evans attempted to make Shakespeare's Danish prince 'fit' for a solider-audience by subtly reshaping Hamlet into a 'model' military leader. As Utzig shows, this unique production—performed by a cast of soldiers for their peers—collapsed the distinction between performing and martial bodies, 'simultaneously representing the body *at* war and participating as a body *in* war'. In Utzig's analysis, the wartime context frames a powerful coalescing of human and literary forms, with Evans' careful cuts and emendations highlighting the status of the play itself as a textual body: a malleable corpus that, like the conscripts in the audience, could be made fit for purpose. Arguing that Evans' 'mimetic task as an actor and editor is almost indistinguishable from his performance as an army officer', Utzig explores how this idiosyncratic rendering of *Hamlet* appropriately underscored questions of bodily courage and integrity, eliding the more frequently over-played theme of psychological prevarication. In this way, the body of the Dane—newly imagined as a comrade-in-arms—could be incorporated into a community of men quite literally placing their bodies on the line, 'challenging the boundaries between the theatre and the war' and providing the watching soldiers with a prototypical example of martial service, for which audiences at subsequent post-war productions of *G.I. Hamlet* would demonstrate patriotic gratitude.

Shifting attention from an Anglo-American wartime experience to that of a peripatetic Irishman, in his essay '"Crawling in the Flanders Mud": Samuel Beckett, War Writing, and Scatological Pacifism' William Davies considers the bleakly comic depictions of bodily

function and failure in Beckett's post-war novel *Mercier and Camier* (1946). This text, Davies contends, offers 'a powerful indictment of war and its effects on the body' through an attention to the wounded human forms that are always, Scarry reminds us, 'the main purpose and outcome of war' (1985: 68). Building on recent work by Emilie Morin (2017) and James McNaughton (2018) which has sought to recover Beckett's close engagement with the currents of politics and history, Davies identifies the injured body in *Mercier and Camier* as the site of Beckett's 'serious appraisal of modernity's patterns of mass violence', from the Boer War to World War II. It is this longer, 'more perspicacious' view of corporeal suffering that Davies maps in *Mercier and Camier*: he considers the author's pacifist dissection of 'the ethics of duty and violence' with sustained reference to the poetry of Beckett's friend (and twice-wounded solider) Thomas MacGreevy, his compatriot W. B. Yeats, and popular 'war books' of the 1920s and 30s. These intertextual conversations stress the specificities of Irish experience in the conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while also revealing Beckett's startling use of the body as a mediating force in wider debates about soldierly duty and commitment.

Leo Mellor's essay, '"Or are you going to make the world a better place? You and the other babies": Humphrey Jennings's *A Diary for Timothy* and the Potential of the Body', is similarly attentive to the place of the vulnerable body in the aesthetic and ideological paradigms of World War II. Mellor uses the vision of the child's body in Jennings's propaganda film as a focal point from which to explore the child's body as a vehicle for post-war anxieties in cultural production in the period more broadly, a figure combining corporeal vulnerability with potential hope for the future. Mellor explores how the body of the baby Timothy merges with the collage of other war-damaged, vulnerable, and absent bodies in the film. This, then, is a propaganda film that places a value 'on potentiality, on preserving future possibilities' while also remaining 'unstinting about the human cost' of war and the challenges of reconstructing post-war Britain.

Next, in his article 'Italian Holocaust Literature and the Paradox of Affect', Giovanni Miglianti examines the affective mode of *pudore* in Italian survivor narratives, focusing on the work of former chemist and Auschwitz detainee Primo Levi. Acknowledging the difficulty of settling on a corresponding concept in English, Miglianti translates *pudore* as a 'sense of modesty broadly pertaining to an individual's exposure in a socially charged context', linking it to related categories of 'restraint', 'reserve', 'discretion' and 'decency'. It

is the violation of *pudore* (‘*offesa al pudore*’) that Miglianti discovers at ‘liminal moments’ in these survivor accounts, often centring on the initial stripping and hostile revelation of the prisoners’ bodies at the entrance to the concentration camp. As both an affect grounded in a sense of physical modesty and a narrative technique bound up in notions of restraint, *pudore* plays a critical role in Levi’s body of work, ‘ranging from tropes of reticence, euphemism, understatement, and irony, to the often-stressed intention to bear witness by proxy’. Such a reading of *pudore*, Miglianti argues, opens up an embodied dimension to Levi’s writing that has been traditionally overlooked. Moreover, it supplies a valuable affective framework for recovering the neglected testimonies of other Italian Holocaust survivors, including political prisoner Lidia Beccaria Rolfi. *Pudore*, then, emerges as both ‘an affect that we can trace in the survivors’ texts at the bodily, rhetorical, and cultural level’ and also as a mode of engagement in ‘the reception of Holocaust testimony’, shaping what is elided and silenced as well as reluctantly given voice.

In the final article of this issue, ‘Bodies in Hunger: Literary Representations of the Indian Home-Front during World War II’, Diya Gupta looks to the wartime experiences of Indian soldiers and civilians. Focusing on the 1943 Bengal Famine, which claimed at least three million lives on the Indian subcontinent, Gupta reads the letters of sepoys and their relatives, intercepted and translated by colonial censors, as a ‘montage of fragments’ indexing the physical records of starvation. Noting that the famine was deeply rooted in British colonial policy—making hunger itself ‘a worldwide wartime colonial export’—Gupta examines the ways in which ‘hunger and its contexts influence [literary] form’, creating both ‘communities of knowledge’ and ‘bonds of feeling’ between the Indian soldiers deployed in the Middle East and their correspondents in Bengal. Turning from these letters to Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s serialized novel *Ashani Sanket* (*The Intimations of Thunder*, 1944-46), this article traces the famine’s fictional and historical contours, showing how the emaciated bodies populating *Ashani Sanket* come to signal ‘the rapaciousness of war’, as well as the interrelated forms of damage caused by colonialism, misogyny, and the Hindu caste system. Closing this special issue, Gupta’s essay is also a signal reminder of the bodies that cannot be recovered by the war’s historians and cultural commentators. From Bandyopadhyay’s unfinished novel to the lost and censored letters in the India Office Records, this article catalogues forms of textual and corporeal incompleteness, commemorating too the ‘wandering minstrels or *bauls*, village artists and painters’ who died in rural Bengal: victims of a wartime famine they alone might have been able to record.

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