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Co-winner: “Nonaligned Comparisons: Peripheral Realisms and the Utopian Imagination” by Grega Ulen

Working across the political geographies of the Non-Aligned Movement, Cold War, and decolonization, Grega Ulen’s dissertation, “Nonaligned Comparisons: Peripheral Realisms and the Utopian Imagination” proposes an original framework for collocating Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkans, that in turn reshapes the conversation about national literatures, peripherality, and aesthetics. Ulen advances “peripheral realism” as a conceptual optic and intriguingly juxtaposes major African writers such as Ousmane Sembène and Bessie Head with the “minor socialist” debate about national consciousness in the former Yugoslavia—discerning a shared sensibility in their respective treatments of nationhood, sovereignty, and cultural creativity. The writers and thinkers he investigates produce aesthetic worlds theorizing new social forms through “roads not taken”: West African federalism, agricultural cooperatives in Botswana, communal self-management in socialist Yugoslavia, offering models of economic decentralization interested less in narrow nationalism than in internationalist projects of social transformation. Within this optic, realism emerges as an aesthetic of exigency that responds to both concrete hopes and imaginative border-crossings of a post-1945 global conjuncture, one in which the prospect of a universalism, shorn of its idealist trappings, on the one hand, and routed through peripheral aspirations for freedom, on the other, becomes legible. Expanding our categories and understanding of the *Ungleichzeitig* (nonsynchronous) destinies of capitalism and literature, Ulen’s dissertation is an exemplary instance of the encounter between literary comparatism and peripheral aesthetics.