

ASHWIN DESAI and GOOLAM VAHED. *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire*. South Asia in Motion. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. Pp. 343. \$24.95 (paper). doi: 10.1017/jbr.2017.217

A half-century or more of scholarly and popular writing on Gandhi has bequeathed to us an enduringly iconic figure—the saintly moral warrior who originated the idea of *satyagraha* (“soul-force” or “truth-force”), a form of nonviolent resistance to colonial power that came to be seen as a global model for postwar political struggle. For several decades, even the twenty-one years that he spent in South Africa before returning to India tended to be read—when they received any significant attention, that is—as leading inevitably to the making of the *mahatma*, or great soul. In such a narrative, Gandhi was seen as a Moses leading a long-suffering yet quiescent South African Indian population out of its political nonage and functioning as its one unquestioned leader. Some of these conclusions were the unsurprising result of an over-reliance on Gandhi’s own utterances, including his autobiographical texts. Texts that emerged in the wake of Maureen Swan’s *Gandhi: The South African Experience* (1985), on the other hand, have tended to produce a more complexly shaded portrait of a leader whose relationship with Indian merchant elites, Indian indentured labor and working-class men and women, Africans of all backgrounds, white liberals, the South African government, and the British Empire is not necessarily amenable to inspirational moral diagramming.

In *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire*, Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed take it upon themselves to strip away some of the pious mythologies that have accreted around the figure of Gandhi, not only in the Indian subcontinent, but also in an anti-apartheid South Africa eager to draw him into a narrative of anti-colonial racial solidarity. Drawing upon Natal-based newspapers and Gandhi’s *Collected Works* in addition to the Pietermaritzburg archives, Desai and Vahed focus on four of his key campaigns—the South African (or Anglo-Boer) war, the Bhambatha rebellion, the campaigns in the Transvaal against the 1906 “Black Act” mandating the fingerprinting of all Indians, and the strike in 1913 for the repeal of the three-pound tax and the recognition of Muslim and Hindu marriages.

Desai and Vahed’s scrupulous examination underscores the depth and extent of Gandhi’s incrementalist and loyalist commitments. For several decades, and despite repeated disappointments, he held fast to a notion of the British Empire as a benevolent institution, committed to guaranteeing the equality of its white and non-white subjects as promised in Queen Victoria’s 1858 proclamation. Hence, he relied repeatedly upon the tactics of petition and demonstrations of loyalty to induce the imperial government to defend the rights of well-to-do Indian subjects against the opposition of white settlers in South Africa. Most distressingly, given his strongly avowed commitment to nonviolence and the manifest brutality of the winning side in both the Anglo-Boer War and the Bhambatha Rebellion, he offered his services, in the first case to the imperial government and in the second to the South African one, as a measure of his loyalty. Disallowed the exercise of arms, he ended up in both instances mobilizing a volunteer ambulance corps of free Indians and indentured laborers to assist the war effort, though his loyalty was not rewarded with any increase in rights. Hence the acerbic subtitle of Desai and Vahed’s monograph. His nonviolence, they suggest, was limited and opportunistic; it could always be made to yield to the militaristic aims of empire, especially (but not exclusively) in the South African years.

Even more devastatingly, Gandhi’s advocacy of the rights of privileged Indians in South Africa took the form of deploying a rhetoric of racial hierarchy that insisted on a notional (though not political) equality with whites that was predicated on a jointly shared Aryan heritage. In a colonial “divide and conquer” context that often pitted Africans and Indians against each other, he insisted repeatedly on a civilizational gulf that separated Africans and Indians, and remained wary of any endeavor to conflate Indians with “natives” he saw as primitive and degraded. Though he partnered with the Chinese community in some of his campaigns against discriminatory laws, he refused to make common cause with Africans, whom he saw

as unprepared for the moral demands of satyagraha. His white associates Henry Polak and Joseph Doke, liberal with respect to Indians, shared his prejudices against Africans.

Even with respect to indentured and working-class Indians, Gandhi's sympathies were mobilized very late, and in response to their own initiative in launching a mass strike in Natal. To those of his biographers, such as Ramachandra Guha, who suggest that the politics of the colonized could assume only finite and accommodationist forms at this historical juncture, Desai and Vahed point to the more capacious political and moral imagination of other contemporaneous critics—in South Africa, Britain, and India—of empire and of racism.

Desai and Vahed are to be commended for showing up the hagiographical limits of a good deal of the thinking on Gandhi. They are also adept at underlining the limits of his political imagination in his South African years, and his unwillingness to learn from his failures. But they tend to mar the effect of their findings both by adopting a tone of intemperate abrasiveness and by reducing all moral complexity to a diagnosis of racism (and, in some instances, sexism and casteism). In every instance that offers the possibility of moral complexity, they choose the more ungenerous reading, which is also the less interesting one. Though they describe Gandhi as “carefully ambiguous” (272) about caste, they read him as effectively a defender of that institution. This is a significant distortion of his positions. Gandhi's relationship to war is another case in point. His writings are (perhaps surprisingly) suffused with the language of war-making and soldiering. He admires soldiers for their fearlessness, which is manifested for him in the willingness to sacrifice oneself rather than to kill, and he commends this as a virtue the practitioner of satyagraha should cultivate. While one should not deny evidence of his moral compromises, his attitudes to war and soldiering are not invariably manifestations of hypocrisy or servility to imperial ends, as the authors would have us believe. Nor does it seem entirely reasonable to read Gandhi's account in his *Autobiography* of his compassion for the suffering of the Zulu victims of white brutality as a retrospective whitewashing of his own complicity; surely it is also evidence of a change of heart, however limited? In refusing to take on the challenge of these complexities—complexities that give us evidence of an historical figure simultaneously flawed and capable of moral transformation—Desai and Vahed produce a text that is considerably less compelling than it might have been.

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MELISSA DINSMAN. *Modernism at the Microphone: Radio, Propaganda, and Literary Aesthetics during World War II*. Historicizing Modernism. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. Pp. 247. \$89.99 (cloth).
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Melissa Dinsman's *Modernism at the Microphone: Radio, Propaganda, and Literary Aesthetics during World War II* valuably contributes to the burgeoning field of what one might call literary radio studies. It is often a difficult proposition to publish at the end of a first academic wave, when a field or subfield has been staked out as significant, yet before a robust methodology has emerged; such is the position of Dinsman's book, which builds on the contributions of Todd Avery's *Radio Modernism* (2006) and subsequent essay collections to reemphasize the salience of literary contributions to broadcasting. Surveying a host of writers who contributed to Second World War propaganda efforts—including George Orwell, Louis MacNeice, Dorothy Sayers, Ezra Pound, Archibald MacLeish, and Thomas Mann—Dinsman argues