Public Humanities (2025), 1, e121, 1–15
doi:10.1017/pub.2025.10041

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

Against Literary Activism

Dirk Wiemann[1] and Satish Kumar Poduval[2]

[1]Department of English and American Studies, University of Potsdam, Potsdam, Germany and [2]Department of Cultural Studies, The English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad, India
Corresponding author: Dirk Wiemann; Email: dwiemann@uni-potsdam.de

(Received 30 March 2025; revised 17 June 2025; accepted 27 June 2025)

Abstract

This article addresses the potentials and shortcomings of prominent current attempts to articulate platforms for public literary humanities. While the pressing polycrises of the twenty-first century call for a resurgence of committed literature—and, accordingly, a public-facing critical practice and ethics—a scenario for public literary humanities still remains to be scripted. We argue that the vagueness of the term "literary value" is one crucial obstacle in this context. It weakens the opposition to literature's commercialisation and in fact tends to lead to an unproductive reiteration of traditional, canon-bound conceptions of what "good" literature is. We perceive a similarly weak definition of "value" in the public humanities at large, but find in Judith Butler's encouragement to trust in extra-academic publics a promising perspective that we deem applicable to a budding public literary humanities as well. Drawing on historical (Bertolt Brecht) and current (Vinod Kumar Shukla) examples, we are able to show that such a literary and critical practice can only be conceived when the established notion of literature as private and solipsistic is overcome.

Keywords: commonism; literary activism; literary value

Truly I live in dark times! [...]
What times are these, when
To talk about trees is almost a crime
Because it entails a silence about so many misdeeds.
–Bertolt Brecht.

To what implicit question is the project of public literary humanities an answer? For many like us, it is an attempt to assert the relevance of literature (and the preoccupation with it) in "dark times" that call for tangible forms of activism. In this sense, it is meant to keep at bay all those real or perceived external and internal nagging voices that tend to haunt anyone who is seriously committed to literature but who is equally concerned with ecocide and the climate crisis, old and new wars and genocides, the rise of plutocracies, or the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth. How does such a person justify to themselves and the world that they spend much of their time and energy on reading, analysing, and writing (about) novels, poems, and plays while knowing that the house is on fire? To overcome this conundrum, the

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politically responsible literature lover can easily be lured into one or other of the easy ways out that are available from stock: for instance, to take flight to the fatalist resignation that "poetry makes nothing happen," or to its diametrical opposite number, the robust self-assurance that "poetry *can* stop bulldozers."[1] Both of these, we hold, are too simple. Moreover, they do not do justice to the complexities of the social life of literature. As a subset of the bourgeoning public humanities—of which more later—the public literary humanities will have to proceed from but also thrive on these complexities: first, that literature *is* essentially public, while literary studies mainly construct it as private; second, that both literature and literary studies are inextricably implicated in socially dominant power relations with their attendant exclusiveness and inequalities; and third, that it is only by reflecting on this implication that literature and literary studies can become publicly meaningful and hope to respond to the demands of the multi-crises of the twenty-first century. Before turning, in a spirit of critical solidarity, to some of the ways in which an emergent public literary humanities is articulating itself in our time, we would like to point out that none of this is unique to our times. Therefore, we would like to briefly revisit one historical antecedent among many, in the hope that this will help alleviate some of the awkwardness that necessarily accompanies any operation in the as-yet-unconfigured present.

As the epigraph to this article—taken from Bertolt Brecht's 1939 poem "*An die Nachgeborenen*" ("To Those Born After")—suggests, all these questions are not new. In Brecht's poem, talking about trees can be read as shorthand for contemplating beauty for pleasure, and how that contemplation becomes dubious when it implies turning a blind eye to the unfolding catastrophes of the time. Yet neither Brecht nor his poem condemns conversations about trees as such, but rather the conditions—the "dark times" of triumphant fascism and impending war—that make them suspect of escapism. Moreover, the poem culminates with the hope that "those born after" will live in more just and peaceful—more "friendly"—times, where the pleasures of the aesthetic can finally be enjoyed in good faith. Obviously, this hope has not been fulfilled; indeed, it has been perverted in a way that makes Brecht's poem seem somehow out of sync today. For isn't it precisely a conversation *not* about trees that is almost a crime these days because it entails a silence about so many pressing problems, from planet-wide deforestation to biopatenting, from greenhouse gas accumulation to large-scale ecocide?

However great the differences between Brecht's historical situation and our own, we believe that there is a sense of urgency common to both eras—a sense of a state of emergency that demands, among many other things, that the aesthetic be reclaimed as a political force. In this sense, Brecht's friend Walter Benjamin has urged to respond to fascism "by politicising art."[2] Around the same time, a host of Marxist literary theorists, critics, and writers were busy debating the criteria that a situationally adequate interventionist literature would have to meet. It is impossible to do justice to these debates in the space available here, but we would like to highlight at least one aspect that seems to us to resonate most strongly with the argument we wish to make in the main body of this article. This aspect is the controversy over the category of the "popular" that turns out to be at the heart of the so-called *Expressionismusdebatte* (debate over expressionism) that engaged numerous prominent antifascist exile intellectuals such as Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Anna Seghers, Klaus Mann, Béla Balázs, and Brecht himself in the late 1930s.[3] Except for Seghers's and Brecht's

[1] Auden [1939] 1976, 197; Kinsella 2021, 5.

[2] Benjamin [1936] 1968, 242.

[3] The most comprehensive edition of the contributions to the debate remains Hans-Jürgen Schmitt's *Die Expressionismusdebatte: Materialien zu einer marxistischen Realismuskonzeption.* We have not been able to locate an English translation of the controversy—surely a desiderate.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10041 Published online by Cambridge University Press

comments, which were published only post-fact, the debate was fought out in a series of articles, responses, and counter-responses in the literary exile journal *Das Wort*, published in German from Moscow. The *Expressionismusdebatte* of 1937–38 thus stands as an ideal enactment of public literary humanism: "ideal" not (only) because of the supreme standards of the contributions, nor even because of its impetus to establish a new understanding of the potentials of literature as a public force under the aegis of fascism; but most of all, because it was also a debate over the role of the critic as a facilitator of, or an obstructor to, the public life of literature *and* about the dialectics through which literary texts and their publics co-constitute each other—the very problems, then, that we assume fuel the impulse and yearning for a public literary humanities today.

Very simply put, the discussants were largely in agreement that in the late 1930s, modernist avant-gardism (as, e.g., expressionism) was unsuitable for, if not detrimental to, the defence of democracy. However, not all of them fully shared the hostility towards experimentalism that Lukács most eloquently articulated. He condemned modernism *tout court* as a deliberate detachment from what he invariably invoked as "the life of the people" (*das Volksleben*).[4] In spite, or perhaps because, of their anti-establishment iconoclasm, the modernist avant-garde was, in this estimation, deeply elitist and hence, *anti-popular*: an assessment that assumed and in fact constructed "the people" as instinctively conservative, at least in terms of their artistic tastes. It was therefore not only the sharp rejection of modernist experimentalism that divided the discussants into two opposing camps; more importantly, it was the question of what *the popular* exactly was, and what literary expression it would have to assume.[5] For Lukács, the task of literature was to instructively demonstrate the essential contradictions and potentials of the historical situation in its totality, and to do so in an accessible form that resonated with the "organic development of the people" itself.[6] Lukács thus grounds his highly sophisticated but also highly rigid concept of a publicly effective literature in a notion of "the people" as "organic" and traditional. It is, then, only consistent that he should advocate—indeed prescribe—a kind of writing that continues inherited forms, especially the legacy of the nineteenth-century realist novel in the line of Scott and Balzac, and condemn any departures from this tradition. As a consequence, his is a highly exclusive and prescriptive notion of what "popular" literature is: a literature that conspicuously overlaps with the established bourgeois canon ranging from Cervantes and Shakespeare to Thomas Mann, but that surprisingly (?) has no room for, say, working-class writing, genre fiction, or any form of literature that we are used to calling "popular" today. Bloch and Seghers both voiced their disagreement with Lukács's "classicism," but it was Brecht who turned out to be his most radical antagonist, even if he cunningly abstained for political reasons from publishing his rebuttals. Brecht's main critique rests on an entirely different idea of "the people," whom he, unlike Lukács, does not project as conservatively inclined recipients of authorial instruction but as the actual vanguard of political and cultural developments alike:

> Our concept of *the popular* refers to a people that not only fully participates in social and cultural developments, but that occupies, accelerates and determines them. We have in mind a people that makes its own history, that changes both the world and itself. And because we have in mind a people that is militant, our concept of *the popular* is also militant.[7]

[4] Lukács 1973 [1938], 220 passim.
[5] The German term used throughout the debate is the somewhat quaint *volkstümlich.*
[6] Lukács [1938] 1973, 224.
[7] Brecht 1973, 331, emphasis in original.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10041 Published online by Cambridge University Press

We do not assume for ourselves the stature of these precedents, but we would like to learn from that historical lesson by basing our argument for public literary humanities on a Brechtian notion of the popular as agonistic worldmaking, and a concomitant critique of the upholding of traditional canonicity and entrenched habits of writing and reading. The people have played a crucial role—both as a self-aware public agency and impatient demotic force—in the making of modern society. We would do well to work with a historicised notion of the "public" as a locomotive vehicle of the political—a locomotive that rides on the twin rails, even etymologically, of *populicus* (an eager and mobilised collective of people) and *pubic* (mature, an intellectually and politically adult entity); thus, as an enlightened public that engages with reason and courage to seek emancipation, or, at any rate, to exit the best it can from (self-)incurred immaturity/minority. From this vantage point, the popular is not a *populist* simplification of conceptual complexities but a set of socially connected networks articulating the aspirations, the convictions, and the non-negotiable critiques that come from the people—with the important proviso that "the people" is not to be understood as a given entity but a *potentiality*, a capacity to act and to actualise the promises of the fictive social contract that proclaims self-evident truths: it has to be constructed in the agonisms of ongoing processes of constant articulations and disarticulations.

1. Quietist activists

No doubt, a yearning for literary activism is in the air, again. In the twenty-first century, it manifests in a variety of forms: in interventionist poetry; in alternative anti-capitalist book fairs that attempt to liberate the book from its commodity status; in collaborative copyright-defying publishing politics as exemplified by the Wu Ming collective; or in sophisticated theorisations of literature as a community-generating event or a pre-enactment of a "commonism" to come.[8] The spectacular success and immense popularity (among literary scholars and prominent writers alike) of the *Refugee Tales* project, which unabashedly enlists literature in the struggle against the United Kingdom's anti-immigration policies, is arguably indicative of precisely this widespread longing for viable modes of making literature tangibly useful for the betterment of a world in desperate need of such betterment. We emphatically welcome all these projects and trends, and we read them as timely indicators of a widely shared sense that the global polycrises of the twenty-first century demand hands-on responsible responses (also) from the arts, including literature.

Oddly enough, however, the very term "literary activism" has been embraced and even virtually claimed as a brand name by some of the most unlikely candidates, namely a loose affiliation of writers and critics around the novelist/essayist Amit Chaudhuri and the literary critic Derek Attridge, both of whom are prominent advocates of a strictly aestheticist approach to literature. In Chaudhuri's manifestos, "literary activism" figures as a shorthand for secession from the literary market and a return to the pristine domain of self-determined literary value that, ultimately, as Attridge reiterates, resides in the inexplicable and ineffable. The contributions to the collection programmatically titled *Literary Activism* and edited by Chaudhuri pivot around a scenario in which literature appears beleaguered by two hostile tendencies and forces: on the one hand, political activism (that tends to subsume literature to aims and objectives external to it); on the other, "market activism" that subordinates literary values to market-bound commercialism.[9] There is nothing original about this kind of alarmism; in fact, it can be read as just the latest iteration of an old fear

[8] Dockx and Gielen 2018, 56.
[9] Chaudhuri 2016a.

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with the growth and expansion of the reading public and its inherent intention towards aesthetic democracy. As Raymond Williams pointed out long ago, the rise of the literary public since the early modern period has always been accompanied by a discourse of an imminent decline in standards, either through the politicisation or the commercialisation of literature—hence the "essentially political anxiety" about the public impact of literary texts and the "courtly objection to the vulgarity of the book trade."[10] As a countermove to both these perceived threats—now renamed "political activism" and "market activism"—Chaudhuri, Attridge, and their companions advocate what they call *literary* activism: a mode of action that is committed to and informed by the "inexplicable" values of literature:

> There may well be in literary activism a strangeness that echoes the strangeness of the literary. Unlike market activism, whose effect on us depends on a certain randomness which reflects the randomness of the free market, literary activism may be desultory, in that its aims and value aren't immediately explicable.[11]

We wholeheartedly agree that strangeness is a hallmark of literature, but quite another sort of strangeness appears to characterise this mode of literary activism. While we subscribe to the notion that literary value lies, to some extent, in the non-instrumentality (the strangeness, if you wish) of literature, the task of literary criticism is a different one. We believe that criticism, unlike its object, literature, ought to be accountable, verifiable, and if possible "immediately explicable"—not so much to the state or the market, but to a community of readers who "invest" time and interpretive desire in expectation of the pleasures of clarity and recognition of the human condition/potential as an exchange value. It is this investment, and the "surplus" thus generated, that makes the literary field work. Consequently, one of the tasks of criticism is to theorise the value of literary "uselessness" and "disinterestedness" as essentially communal, or indeed "commonist," in that it enacts or instantiates a departure (an exit or even exodus) from the utilitarian, self-interested logic of the market. This is a very far cry from the quietist notion, promoted by the advocates of "literary activism," of inconsequential privacy as the locus of literary uselessness. In this version, literature "happens" only to the solipsistic reader, and it is furthermore impossible to share this experience because it defies communication, making-common, building bridges from the *vishesh* (special, exceptional, higher) to the *samanya* (general, common, shared). Such a notion not only stands in stark contrast to the claim that literature is connected to the world and that it speaks to the world—an understanding of literature that the "public critic" will promulgate—but also blatantly denies the fact that reading publics all over the world "use" literature as a common good rather than a medium of inconsequential privacy.[12]

Therefore, what makes this brand of self-proclaimed literary activism problematic is that it is premised on a horseshoe theory according to which sociopolitical demands on literature are at least as detrimental as commercial ones. As Peter McDonald, one of the contributors to the volume, puts it:

> It is the literary work that withdraws from evaluation because it seeks to affirm itself in isolation from all value; that is, from all established protocols of value, which too many guardians of the literary devote themselves to upholding, or, for that matter, any pre-given political values.[13]

[10] Williams 1961, 159.
[11] Chaudhuri 2016a,14.
[12] Berger [1955] 2017.
[13] McDonald 2016, 115.

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This understanding of literature as pristinely self-sufficient appears as the basic consensus among the "literary activists." We do not wish to critique this disguise of quietism as activism through lengthy close readings, but rather, in the spirit of reconstructive hermeneutics, to speculate on the underlying and silenced questions to which such a peculiar rhetoric of activism is rallied as an answer. Why in the first place do the contributors want to style themselves so starkly counterfactually as *activists*? True, the explicit resistance to "the market" seems to substantiate that claim, but the complete absence of any notion of literature's potential as a public force makes the project appear as an attempt to contain precisely what it purports to advocate: literary activism in the sense of a public-facing effort to intervene into social dynamics or processes. Interestingly, the main spokesmen of "literary activism" have shaped their critical sensibilities in non-Western contexts: Chaudhuri in India and Attridge in South Africa. Like many postcolonial and/or Global South formations, these are cultural systems in which the public dimension of literature is much more strongly pronounced than the intimate event of individual writing or reading that has been institutionalised as predominant in Western modernity.[14] For the South African context, Corinne Sandwith delineates a long and resilient tradition in which literary debates "tend to have both a more politicised and a more public or collective character than those of the academic mainstream"; likewise, (post)colonial Indian literatures, as well as literary theories, are invariably formulated and received within a communal horizon, most frequently but not necessarily that of the nation, or the nation-state.[15]

It may well be that Chaudhuri and Attridge's recasting of activism as a retreat into the private is, to some extent, a polemical rejection of the ways in which literature is framed as political in their respective postcolonial contexts of origin. The emphasis on what Attridge has elsewhere termed "idioculture" could then be seen as a defiant response to the claims of the public, since "idioculture" is Attridge's term for the "embodiment in a single individual of widespread cultural norms" in a "unique configuration" that cannot be shared.[16] Due to this strict uniqueness, "idioculture" obviously poses insurmountable limits on what can be held in common. Attridge's work (including his contribution to *Literary Activism*) is thus most emphatically interested in constructing the literary event as ineffable—a supremely intimate instance, then, of precisely that "inconsequential privacy" which other contributors to the volume try to distance themselves from (while all the same confirming it). *Literary Activism* thus appears as one vast concerted effort to contain the possibility of reclaiming literature as a public force. Containment strategies are, of course, themselves indicators of perceived and/or real threats to established norms, and thus signs of the relative strength of the tendencies and forces they set out to contain in the first place. In this light, the very fact that these quietists style themselves as activists may be read as a token that the appeal of activism is so strong in these "dark times" that it can only be addressed through the forced adoption of its code. This jumping on the activist bandwagon by the passivists may thus indicate the relative strength of the urge to act today, but it does not mean that the deeply ingrained notion of literature as purely autopragmatic and self-sufficient has been superseded. On the contrary, it points us back to a series of important questions that proper literary activism will have to address.

And yet, the *Against* in our title ought not to be understood only as mere and total opposition to everything Chaudhuri et al. propose. Rather, we offer it in the spirit of true-enough-but-then-again, or repetition-with-a-difference. The German root *gegen* (lodged within the

[14] Jameson 1986, esp. 336.
[15] Sandwith 2014, 260; Cf., e.g., Anand 2000, 12; Trivedi 2022, 44.
[16] Attridge 2004, 21.

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English "against") allows us the necessary room for such manoeuvring: we would move "towards" Chaudhuri's concerns in some ways but might need to confront him "head-on" in others. Like Chaudhuri, we believe that literature matters, and we agree that a clear and even partisan commitment in defending the value of "literariness"—against the "monetarist" (or cultural industrialist) seductions and appeals of the market—is needed. However, we differ with Chaudhuri's assumption that the best way to confront the utilitarian logic of the market is through remembering, and fondly hoping to revive, some prelapsarian "humanist" Elysium of the ineffable and the timeless. We differ from his estimation that the only significant development of the past few decades has been the clever and profitable marketing of ethnic writings as world literature. We also differ with his narrative of the complete submission and dumbing-down of the literary by market forces—a narrative that takes no note of, or hope from, the deepening and augmenting of the literary by forces of democracy. "Black Lives Matter": so too new writing and the new conception of the literary which opens up space (in our minds and societies) for a broader conviction that the "Lives of Others" matter; that responding to the experiences and hopes of the minor is "good" for *achieving* our humanity. The ongoing phenomenon of a Dalit reader in India rediscovering the power of the literary through the works of Toni Morrison (in the original English or a Malayalam translation), or a Japanese feminist sensing her world anew through reading Ajay Navaria (and so forth), may also be attributed to the operations of the market, but without necessarily being "reducible" to its plans or profits.[17] Neither market activism as described by Chaudhuri nor literary activism as conjured by him provides us with an adequate sense of the new and different claims that have been staked over the literary, and that have reshaped its purpose and power. To be sure, not all or even most of the new writing is "great"—but then, the pursuit of greatness (howsoever defined) has never been the only aim or achievement of the literary. The literary, like the political, offers us maps of existing and potential worlds. And it remains the function of criticism to scrutinise and render usable these maps and projections, in the service of contemporary readers: those reading today moving towards those to come.

2. (Not) vexed with value

It is not surprising, then, that the term "value" (though used very frequently) remains conspicuously nebulous throughout Chaudhuri's volume. This significantly weakens the whole project: it is, after all, the self-appointed mission of "literary activism" "to recover some genuine literary values in this market-driven environment."[18] At no point in the volume does this exasperated anti-commercialism arrive at a coherent systemic critique—in the vein of, say, the *Expressionismusdebatte* or Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the culture industry. Instead, it fuels a resentful disdain for contemporary theory-driven literary scholarship and, more aggressively, for all the "new voices" that the market, with its indiscriminate appetite, has allowed into the literary system. Therefore, Chaudhuri is lashing out not only at corporate publishing but even more at professional/academic criticism when he complains that:

> publishers robustly adopted the language of value—to do with the "masterpiece" and "classic" and "great writer"—that had fallen out of use in its old location [professional

[17] Malayalam translations have been published of Morrison's *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* (sold out), while the English originals of her work continue to move off the shelves in most stores in Kerala; Navaria's Hindi stories are available in English, German, and Japanese translations. An insightful fictional account of a Dalit writer's experience of caste and gendered modernity in Tokyo is available in Navaria's "The Contagion" (Navaria 2021).

[18] Parks 2016, 160.

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> literary criticism], fashioning it in their own terms. And these were terms that academics essentially accepted. They critiqued literary value in their own domain, but they were unopposed to it when it was transferred to the marketplace.[19]

In this scenario, "the market" has fully subsumed literature under its own logic of commodification, redefining "literary value" as profane exchange value, and this transformation was only possible because the notion of literary value had long since been abandoned by literary theorists and critics. Chaudhuri thus offers a treason-of-the-clerks narrative that gets seconded by numerous contributors to the volume. Attridge, for instance, distinguishes between dominant literary scholarship and beleaguered literary criticism, with only the latter crucially concerned with and about value. More than that, only criticism engages "with works of literature *as literature*," whereas scholarship (mis)treats them "as historical documents, biographical evidence, or material objects."[20] As a result of the dominance of scholarship and the denigration of criticism, then, the pivotal category of literary value has been systematically marginalised in professional literary studies. In the ensuant vacuum, market activism could easily hijack the discarded rhetoric of literary value for its own purposes, with the result that value itself was devalued. This devaluation then opens the floodgates to a general lowering of standards and the concomitant admission of ever more diverse (but, the implication goes, undeserving) voices. Yet, instead of welcoming this (perceived) inclusiveness as a viable enrichment and as a more democratic, less exclusive regulation of the literary field, the literary activists around Chaudhuri find faults exactly with the new pluralism:

> The egalitarianism and openness of the new literary market was underlined by the discovery of "new voices" from different parts of the world, each "new voice" a contributor to the emergence of a global literature that would overcome the old condescensions and omissions of the European and American cultural elites.[21]

In this vein, the discourse of literary activism is eloquent, even persuasive, in warning us against forms of Market Activism which, in the guise of promoting or popularising new literature, offers a losing proposition: converting literary value into the value of lucre. Nevertheless, what insinuates itself into Chaudhuri's Literary Activism seems to be a warning, even hostility, against what might be counter-posed as other forms of activism within and outside the academy—new social movements and political critiques that have challenged and moved past the axioms of Arnoldian humanism or the unexamined verities of Leavisite mistration for consecrating a purportedly "great" tradition. Here, Saikat Majumdar's contribution to the debate, through the figure of the "amateur humanist" in Europe as well as in the colony/postcolony, offers a suggestive mapping of the public life of the ineffable. Through the examples of Nirad C. Chaudhuri, who went from being an unknown to a fairly well-known Indian during the twentieth century, and the fictional character Apu in the iconic Bengali novel/film *Aparajito*, Majumdar presents us a compelling account of how the "infuriating anomalies" of colonial modernity produced figures who invested "most of their time reading on their own, in an earnest but patchy way, sometimes trying to impose structure but failing more often than not, floating in a scholarly flânerie that stares in a kind of childlike defiance at the curricular grids of college education."[22] Yet his claim that the amateur humanist "is the best bet for the university's contribution to any

[19] Chaudhuri 2016b, 236.
[20] Attridge 2016, 60.
[21] Cook 2016, 316.
[22] Majumdar 2016, 127–28.

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activism that might enhance the importance of literature in the public sphere" strikes us as overstated.[23] The exemplary figures from the colonial Bengali middle class discussed by Majumdar need to be supplemented, closer to our own time and from a different subjective location: for instance, through the tragic/heroic figure of the promising twenty-six-year-old Dalit-Marxist student-activist Rohith Vemula who ended his life at the University of Hyderabad following peremptory suspension from the hostel in 2016. Rohith's widely discussed suicide note did not blame anybody else for his decision: "My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past." Discussing this event and its aftermath in an essay subtitled "How May We Imagine the Public University in India," G. Arunima explores the intersections and fissures between state policy and student politics, underlining what made Rohith's presence in—and his expulsion from—the university significant:

> Many friends who were interviewed after his death spoke of his intelligence, warmth, friendship, militancy and the fact that he was easily provoked and did not back off from arguments and fights. Some mentioned, rather poignantly, that what set him apart was his anglophony. For them, he was the one who could break their language-based isolation and articulate Dalit politics within a larger public political arena.[24]

One might argue that if Chaudhuri and Apu exemplified a sort of humanist aspiration for the "provincial" middle-class Indians in the twentieth century, Vemula signified something similar for a broader swathe of first-generation subaltern students entering the public university in twenty-first-century India and struggling to deal with the indifference or hostility from their peers and superiors. From the perspective of public humanities, we need to reckon with the "poignant" blend of ingenuity and isolation that the lives of Chaudhuri, Apu, *and* Rohith reveal. We need a new reckoning of how desire overreaches and sometimes overachieves—yet persistently gets thwarted by the "ineffable" infelicities of society and its self-isolated subject.

Meanwhile, to return to Chaudhuri et al., the concept of "literary value" itself remains undertheorised all through. This vagueness, to be sure, is not necessarily a weakness; as we will see in a minute, the whole field of the public humanities is vexed with this question. The problem with "Literary Activism" is precisely that it is *not* vexed with value but, on the contrary, deploys this category as a positive given and as a consensual term. It is of course neither of these. Throughout Chaudhuri's volume, the Literary Activism group seems to be in complete agreement about what value is and what texts are valuable or not; yet, at no point do they explain or make transparent what criteria define value. In this way, "value" becomes a cypher, one that gets mobilised time and again as an antidote against the dual threat of literature's commodification and democratisation. That threat, at closer inspection, boils down to the danger of the social life of literature—of a *public literary humanities*—and it is the containment of that ultimate threat that the Literary Activism group appears to pursue, by reproducing as non-negotiable that the literary event can only occur in the inconsequential privacy of detached "idiocultural" separatism:

> There is a kind of sociability about market activism that invites us to join, to subscribe, to turn up, to attend. Reading groups and festivals are two obvious manifestations of this affable, rivalrous behaviour that makes literature into the occasion for a gathering.

[23] *Ibid.*, 142.

[24] Arunima 2017, 178.

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> But there is another possibility, that this sometimes pleasurable, sometimes enforced sociability threatens to overwhelm a special solitude or separation that is a condition for the writing and reading of literature.[25]

This essentially anti-public position resonates then with Attridge's endorsement of the ineffable as the core of the literary, with Chaudhuri's appreciation of literature's essential "strangeness," and with McDonald's affirmation of literature "in isolation from all value": determinations all that reduce the literary (and its value) to some *je ne sais quoi.* The result is that Literary Activists style themselves as if in possession of a clarity about literary value that, conveniently, defies definition and communication.

In this respect, they differ widely from the main body of work that has been produced in the bourgeoning field of the public humanities, where the question of value is also a crucial leitmotif—necessarily so, given the programmatic claim of the public humanities to "bridge the divide between research and practice, positioning experts from academy and community at the centre of public narratives around the value of the humanities in society."[26] Given the internal pluralism of the field of the public humanities, however, these values vary quite substantially. Thus, for example, Matthew Frye Jacobson observes, in many mission statements of public humanities departments across the United States, a "strangely traditional" outlook and indeed the "promise to help return the American university to its core mission and founding values":

> These are the core values of Public Humanities, and it is our conviction that such programs represent an opportunity for their home institutions to deliver on their most idealistic founding ideas, in a world where overspecialization, disciplinary siloes, a politics of scarcity, anti-intellectualism, and often fraught town/gown relations have worked to diminish the American university's most far-reaching public charge as a community resource and as incubator, catalyst, and democratic steward of the society's intellectual resources.[27]

According to this assessment, the public humanities mark a return to the values of a university devoted to democratically and socially responsible practice. Yet, if Jacobsen dubs this self-positioning as "strangely traditional," then he is clearly involving himself in the rhetorical combat in which the public humanities operate. He does so by claiming the prestige and legitimising authority of tradition for the progressive ethics of the public humanities that, ironically, its many conservative detractors have decried as so many iconoclastic anti-traditionalist assaults on the universal appreciation of the timeless "values and core truths embedded in arts and literature."[28] Yet the well-nigh idyllic days of such old-school culture wars are clearly over. It is no longer the struggle of canon defenders versus reformists; it is now the attempt to get out of the stranglehold of corporate administrators that make entrepreneurial prowess a prerequisite for departmental survival. Clearly, these *are* values—but values that are determined primarily according to economistic metrics. Against this neoliberal value system, public humanists like Susan Smulyan have invoked "the true value of the humanities" by asserting that, and how, "the humanities can be valuable beyond the campus."[29] To some extent this appears to resonate with Chaudhuri's

[25] Cook 2016, 320.
[26] Burton and Fisher 2021.
[27] Jacobsen 2021, 170.
[28] Schroeder 2021, 7.
[29] Smulyan 2022, 133.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10041 Published online by Cambridge University Press

critique of "market activism": after all, this, too, may be translated as an attempt to eschew the neoliberal reduction of the humanities to their financially quantifiable accountability, their exchange value, in favour of a reclamation of their use value; but importantly, the latter is here not, as in "Literary Activism," located in the "isolation from all value" but in the invention of a humanities in the service of the common good. What soon becomes apparent, however, is the strangely subservient role that the humanities have to play in such scenarios where they achieve their legitimacy as service rather than scholarship.

To overcome this impasse, Judith Butler delineates that the future potentials of the public humanities lie neither in the submission to economistic logics and metrics nor in the acceptance of some instrumental function, not even as a facilitator of social harmonisation if not appeasement.

Is Butler, then, an unexpected ally of the "Literary Activists"? Not quite. Even if she dismisses the notion of the humanities as community service, she does not use that critique for an anti-public argument. On the contrary, she insists that the humanities must legitimise themselves *publicly* by pointing to their value in their own rights: "The question of the future of the humanities is tied to the question of the value of the humanities and the general task of making public what that value is."[30] What, then, is that value? For Butler, the humanities are literally invaluable precisely because they defy the logic of evaluability itself. This, again, resonates to some extent with the Literary Activist endorsement of literature's "isolation from all value"—only that Butler does not stop short at that endorsement but calls for the dissemination, the making-public, of that non-evaluability. For her, the task is to demonstrate "the distinctive contribution that the humanities can make to all fields of knowledge by keeping alive fields of value that are irreducible to instrumentality and profitability."[31] The price to pay for this is high but inevitable: "The humanities are underfunded precisely because they represent values that challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism and its market metrics."[32] The parallels to the Literary Activists are obvious: where they envisage literature proper in its incommensurable "strangeness" beyond all value, Butler's humanities are useless in terms of "instrumentality and profitability." But where the Literary Activists call for a strictly private engagement with, and exposure to, the literary event, Butler's humanities tend to go public to spread their apparent uselessness—their refusal to act in the service of whatever—in a struggle for the establishment of alternate values, dissident values, and situationally transcendent values. This is not at all an argument for retreat or quietism. On the contrary, it is a call to reaffirm the specific contribution that the humanities, both within and without academia, can make to the imagining and co-creating of new, more convivial, and more sustainable social worlds: "If we can imagine beyond the fiscal realism of the present, then we are already practitioners of the humanities."[33] Note the "if": the conditional here admits the possibility that we are not (yet) capable of practising a humanities that imagines beyond the reality established by capitalism. Whereas the Literary Activists constantly claim to be in possession of the truth of literary value, Butler simply points to the potentiality of a to-come.

3. In conclusion: A new heading

The proximity and distance between "Literary Activism" and Butler's notion of public humanities leads us back, finally, to the dispute between Lukács and Brecht, which we briefly recalled at the opening—a dispute that we read as an antecedent dissensus over the

[30] Butler 2022, 42.
[31] *Ibid.*, 44.
[32] *Ibid.*, 49.
[33] *Ibid.*, 49.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10041 Published online by Cambridge University Press

shape an urgently needed public literary humanities might take, and more precisely, who shapes it. Brecht, we recall, voices a fundamental trust in the popular as the actual harbinger of proper literary events. It is a trust that is based not in some romantic projection of "the people" as benign organic substratum but in the actual experience of intense, conflictual, and fruitful collaboration with lay people, many of them from the working class, in numerous theatre and film projects:

> The workers know how question the means according to the end. They judge everything by its truth value, they welcome every artistic innovation as long as it helps to truthfully demonstrate the actual workings of the social machine, and they reject everything that is merely playful and for its own sake. [...] They have no fear to teach us, and they have no fear to learn from us in return.[34]

Hence, his bid for a non-prescriptive aesthetics, and hence his stiff disapproval of Lukács's rigid formalism with its privileging of the dead idiom of the nineteenth-century realist novel. Literary value in this perspective is "use value." It is contingent on whether or not a text, a performance, or a song helps to clarify or to mystify matters. In short: value is not so much the linear passing on of heritage and tradition (as in Lukács), always implying the critic's task to preserve some precious inheritance; it is rather a more spatial sense in which there arises a most urgent need for value when there is a clash, when there is a lack of clarity, and therefore a task of clarifying what is productive and valuable for the present and perhaps the future. This requires that a historicisation of the literary text/event has "implicitly to produce two historical situations": both the moment of production/writing and the moment of reading. This operation does not have to be iconoclastic or principally hostile to the more tradition-bound temporal understanding of value. It definitely does not imply that one is against works from past periods, or works that have been canonised; it only means that one reads and values those texts that have a relevance for one's own historical positionality, and that can be productively related to the struggles into which one is involved. Thus, in a postcolonial setting, this does not mean that one discards everything that came from Europe—whether it be English departments, world literature, postcolonial theory from the West, or Marxism. Rather, it means that one appropriates these resources to the extent that they enable you in your everyday or long-term struggles. Here, the value of the literary may be the establishing of a public of its own that inhabits a different, more "epic," and heterogeneous temporality—one that constellates discrepant moments that triumphalist presentism may easily submerge. Where the present says, "You have lost," the temporal palimpsest that is literature says, "Yes, we have lost but we have won earlier and may therefore win again." If we thus conceive of literature as a force that may make the past a vibrant presence in the present, it should be obvious that our understanding of the past, including the body of past literary works, cannot be antiquarian—neither in the sense of a prescriptive poetics like the one we met in Lukács's doctrine of realism, nor in the rigid upholding of a strictly privatised notion of literature that "literary activism" sets out to re-entrench.

Meanwhile an echo of Brecht's trust in the popular fuels Butler's scenario of a public humanities to come. For in spite of all culture-war assaults and blatant underfunding, the humanities in Butler's analysis have far more friends than they are aware of *outside* academia among all "those who require the humanities to live a more illuminated life."[35] So, as in Brecht's understanding of the popular, there is not only a strong public demand that practitioners of the academic humanities should share what they do; more importantly, it

[34] Brecht 1973, 334.
[35] Butler 2022, 52.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10041 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is the academic humanities that are desperately in need of the invigoration they would receive if they were to "answer this call to life" that comes from outside:

> The case for the humanities can only be made if we start with the love for the humanities that exists outside the university, in the various publics who depend on art and literature to live and flourish, and then rebuild our institutions to respond to that love, that life call, to foster a critical imagination that helps us rethink the settled version of reality.[36]

Interestingly, Butler's example of such an invigoration by going public is taken from the field of literary studies, more precisely, the engagement with Palestinian poetry.

Drawing on Brecht and Butler, we hold that a future public literary humanities has to rely on the experience of a popular "love for the humanities" and an unlearning of the entrenched assumptions of literature as a means of privative self-discovery: an understanding that, as in Literary Activism, ushers us back into a familiar tent populated by solipsistic "beautiful souls" emancipated from the burdens of the social. This commitment to *bildung* has a peculiar temporality—transient in its ineffable now-ness, timeless in its ahistorical verities. A conscript to this cause is inevitably some blithe spirit high and exalted on a cloud, or ventriloquacious from a castle of privilege, or in any case detached from the agonisms of dark times that either forbid or mandate conversations about trees. In place of this temporality of *bildung*, we prefer the spatiality of critique: bi-focal acts of reading the word and the world in their enmeshings, engaging with literature equipped with maps that disclose the longitudes (of entrenched hierarchies) and latitudes (or creative intimacies) that help us navigate our worlds better. This would enable us to embark on what Derrida termed "an Other heading": reimagining the humanities in a public mode requires of us a *democratic* commitment, democracy understood not as a regulative idea but as "something that remains to be thought [and] must have the structure of a promise—*and thus the memory of that which carries the future, the to-come, here and now.*"[37] At least two moves are involved in this: to begin with, or to head off in the necessary direction. First, to shift emphasis from the public imagined in terms of the *sarkari* (the governing apparatus, or statist policy) to the *sarvjanik* (concerning everybody, or the politics of the governed). Second, to shift emphasis from value imagined in terms of the *vishesh* (singular, special, standalone) to the *samanya* (common, shared, universal).

Vinod Kumar Shukla's short poem gives us a sense of what this involves and why this matters in these dark times:

> A man sat down, despondent.
>
> I did not know him,
> But I knew the despondence,
> So I went close to him,
> And stretched out my hand.
>
> Holding my hand, he got up.
> He did not know me,
> But he knew the outstretched hand.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] Derrida 1992, 78, emphasis in original.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10041 Published online by Cambridge University Press

And we walked on together.
We did not know each other,
But we knew the walking together.[38]

4. Coda

It is quite likely that a twenty-first-century gentle (or genteel) reader has recently taken flight—not metaphorically with a favoured author, but literally on an Air India Express domestic aeroplane. Settling down, she might have been confronted with a miniature plaque on the seat ahead, bearing the curious bilingual text: "Literature Only/*Keval Pathan-Samagri.*" Realisation would have quickly ensued that this sign referred to the folded tray (designed for stowing magazines, brochures, and the like), yet prompted her to mull over the peculiarity of the wording. Setting aside the fact that *keval* in Hindi does mean the restrictive "only" but could also connote the dismissive "merely," she would muse on the accurate yet mundane (and uncommon) rendering of "Literature" as *pathan-samagri*: reading-material, things-for-reading. Soon enough, she would perhaps remember a distant day when a Hindu friend or relative had spoken of having to buy *pooja-samagri*: ritual-material, things required for the conduct of a ceremonial prayer. These would be a set of mundane items which, when assembled and subjected to a liturgical consecration, enabled (or at least promised) transcendental reward and satisfaction. Does Literature as *pathan-samagri* repeat-with-a-difference a secular version of this routine, involving reward and satisfaction, profit and pleasure, *utile et dulce*? How does one "mind the gap" between Literature as mere *pathan-samagri* and Literature in its grander sense of *Sahitya*: remember that the latter etymologically (in most "Indian" languages) points towards a *sahit* or a "together-ness" at work in making sense of the words-that-illumine-the-world. Aesthetic conventions in the Indian subcontinent often conceptualise the reader (spectator) as a *sa-hridaya*: someone capable of sensitive response, someone who is one-at-heart with the author or performer, in the joyful creation of pleasure, meaning, significance—to the extent of being a co-creator or even a spect-actor. All this might enable her to regard the profit-and-pleasure of the literary not merely through a solipsistic and self-isolating frame of the *cogito* and the *Sein*, but rather through a notion of *Sahitya*—and a public humanities to come—framed in the spirit of *Mit-Sein.*

Dirk Wiemann is Professor of English Literature at the University of Potsdam, Germany. In numerous collaborative research projects funded by the DFG, DAAD and the UGC, he has extensively collaborated with partners in Indian universities, and has spent three years as a visiting lecturer at universities in Hyderabad and Delhi. He is the author of Anglophone Verse Novels as Gutter Texts: Postcolonial Literature and the Politics of Gaps (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), Genres of Modernity: Contemporary Indian Novels in English (Brill 2008), and the co-editor of European Contexts for English Republicanism (Routledge 2013) and Perspectives on English Revolutionary Republicanism (Routledge 2014), among others. He is spokesperson of the Research Unit Collaborations: Assemblages, Articulations, Alliances funded by the German research Association (DFG).

Satish Poduval is Professor of Cultural Studies at the English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad, India. His research interests include film and media studies as well as critical theory. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Potsdam, where he is also currently Mercator Professor in the Research Unit Collaborations: Assemblages, Articulations, Alliances. He has edited Re-Figuring Culture: History, Theory and the Aesthetic in Contemporary India, and is part of the editorial team of maidaanam.org and indiancine.ma

Author contribution. Conceptualization: S.K.P., D.W.

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Cite this article: Wiemann, Dirk, and Satish Kumar Poduval. 2025. "Against Literary Activism." *Public Humanities,* 1, e121, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10041

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10041 Published online by Cambridge University Press