

## SALA MLA Sessions 2012

### **SESSION 654: 8 JANUARY 2012, 8:30 AM-9:45, BALLARD, SHERATON**

“CONTINUOUS VOYAGE ORDERS’: FROM KOMAGATA MARU TO THE AFTERMATH OF 9/11”

Moderator: **John C. Hawley**, Santa Clara University

#### **(1) “Recovering the History of South Asian Immigration to the Pacific Northwest”**

Nalini Iyer, Seattle University

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Much of contemporary South Asian literature in the United States emphasizes the experiences of those who migrated to the US since 1965. However, South Asian immigration to North America has a history on the West Coast that encompasses major events like the Komagata Maru incident, the riots in Bellingham, and the formation of the Gadar party. My paper uses writings by different pre-World War Two immigrants to demonstrate that South Asian immigrant history to the Northwest was important in the shaping of citizenship and immigration debates prior to World War Two. I do so by assembling archival material and interpreting a variety of writings by South Asians to show how South Asian migration prior to World War Two was heterogenous in terms of class and the ethnic identity of the migrants and closely examine how particular individuals shaped the discourse on immigration and citizenship. In this paper, I will examine diverse writings including a Master’s thesis (1913) by Jogesh Misrow on the immigration debates, on a narrative by Satyadeva Parivrajak about his visit to the Alaska Yukon Pacific Exhibition held in Seattle in 1909, and memoirs of Kartar Dhillon about growing up in Oregon as the child of Sikh immigrants to the region to explore how the South Asian immigrants understood the politics of immigration and nationalism and reframed the British Raj and American government’s construction of their identities as aliens and/or terrorists. This paper draws upon a book length project on the cultural history of South Asians to the Pacific Northwest that is co-authored by Nalini Iyer and Amy Bhatt is forthcoming from the University of Washington Press.

#### **(2) “Post 9/11 Negotiations: Identity and distortion in H. M. Naqvi’s *Home Boy*”**

Mayuri Deka, The College of the Bahamas

We’d become Japs, Jews, Niggers. We weren’t before. We fancied ourselves boulevards, raconteurs, renaissance men, AC, Jimbo, and me. We were mostly

self-invented and self-made and certain we had our fingers on the pulse of the great global dialect.

- H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*, 1.

Presenting an age where constantly fluid patterns of immigration are generating novel forms of socio-cultural identities, H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* critically assesses the concept of 'identity' to aim for a radical, transcultural citizenry. This process of re-imagination involves, as Keith Gilyard points out in 'Literacy, Identity, Imagination, Flight,' "maximizing various epistemologies, searching for transcultural understandings, opening up spaces for imaginative wanderings" (97). Especially pertinent in the post 9/11 United States, Naqvi's "metroستاني" protagonists show how identities now must be structured around the reappraisal of the contextual frameworks, destroying the binary between the unequivocal conceptualizations of the Self identity/unity, and the ethnic Other.

Therefore, situating themselves within an "un-hyphenated" ethos, the protagonists, Chuck, AC and Jimbo, create and present a "new immigrant" tradition. Through a process of discovery and re-memory based on disrupting the cultural statements and hierarchical claims to the inherent purity of cultural, and spatial ideologies they ensure, through their agency, that meanings and symbols have no fixed unity or fixity.

### **(3) "Asking the Hard Questions and Saying the Harsh Things': Indian Responses to Terror and 9/11"**

**Harveen Mann**, Loyola University Chicago

Pondering "what response to offer in the face of the impossibility of response" following the 9/11 terror attacks on the US, Gayatri Spivak concluded that "to respond means to resonate with the other . . . . Response pre-figures change" (87). Taking its cue from Spivak's astute observation above, my paper will examine the response, not by mainstream American authors, but by both India-based and diasporic Indian commentators aiming to foreground the perspective of the Other in their representations of terrorism and terrorists in key post-9/11 essays, non-fiction, and scholarly works. Beginning with Arundhati Roy's "The Algebra of Infinite Justice," written in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and considering selections from Amartya Sen's *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2006) and Arjun Appadurai's *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (2006), before proceeding to Ashis Nandy's and Pankaj Mishra's 2007 essays "Narcissism and Despair" and "The End of Innocence," respectively, I will explore the authors' analysis of the following issues: the links between the long, centuries-old history of terror and twenty-first century terror; the parallels between Self and Other, between the perpetrators and targets of terror; the political, sociological, and economic causes of global unrest and terrorism; the (unlikely) links between global migration and the "cellular" model of global capitalism on the one hand (the term is Appadurai's) and nationalism and fundamentalism on the other hand. Along the way, I will also raise corresponding questions and offer brief answers

relating to the (comparative) audibility of Indian over Middle Eastern voices in US-based discussions of terror, such that an Arundhati Roy, positing an unnamed “us” as opposed to the named “American” (liberal individualist?) “them” can claim somewhat brashly, “[I]t will be a pity if, instead of using this as an opportunity to try to understand why September 11 happened, Americans use it as an opportunity to usurp the whole world's sorrow to mourn and avenge only their own. Because then it falls to the rest of us to ask the hard questions and say the harsh things” (“The Algebra of Infinite Justice”). And I will conclude briefly with an assessment of the contribution of these “hard questions” and “harsh things” to that constructive future change that Spivak calls for.

#### **(4) “Reconstructing an Alternative Genealogy of South Asian Presence in Recent South Asian American Literature”**

Rajender Kaur, William Paterson University, NJ

While recent work by Vijay Parshad, Karen Leonard, and Rajni Srikanth, Sandhya Shukla, and Monisha Dasgupta, among others, has done much to foreground the little known history of early South Asians in North America, cultural amnesia about the working class history of the earliest pioneers in the lumber mills and farms along the Pacific Northwest coast in British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and California continues to persist. The huge influx of the predominantly professional classes of doctors, engineers, academics, and the like in the wake of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, along with the self-conscious embrace of the model minority myth that is pervasive in American culture about Asian Americans, and especially South Asian Americans, has further fostered this cultural amnesia. Bhira Backhaus's *Under the Lemon Tree* (2009) and Sadhu Singh Dhama's autobiographical novel, *Maluka*, published in 1978, but only now gaining critical attention, on the other hand, present an alternative genealogy of the South Asian presence in focusing on the experiences, aspirations, and conflicts within the largely Sikh immigrant community in California and British Columbia in the early decades of the Twentieth Century.

While Backhaus draws attention to the “ethnic choice” immigrant Punjabi Sikh farmers had to make regarding issues of love, marriage, and survival given the severe paucity of compatriot women in the 1930 and 1940s, Dhama's *Maluka* foregrounds, not just the nationalistic engagement of the immigrants and their involvement in the Ghadr Party, but also the primacy of class issues as these impact their lives as lumber yard workers in the immigrant economy. More interestingly, to my mind, the texts also seem to advocate an interethnic class solidarity that transcends the racial divide and the discrimination that early South Asian immigrants suffered in the face of xenophobia about “the Hindu Invasion” and the “Tide of Turbans”. With the recent publication of Biju Matthew's *Taxi* (2005), and the growing activism and visibility of community groups like Sakhi that highlight working class and gender issues in the South Asian community, these texts remind us of a neglected discourse and political sensibility that is only now receiving well-deserved attention in the wake of 9/11.

**SESSION 331: 3:30-4:45 P.M., 06-JAN-12 IN WILLOW B, SHERATON**

LITERARY CITY IN SOUTH ASIA

**Moderator: Rashmi Dube Bhatnagar**, University of Pittsburgh

**(1) "A city that has multiple aliases': Suketu Mehta's Re-vision of Bombay"**

Sarah Harrison, University of Wisconsin—Madison

If, as James Donald argues, cities can be understood as complex “imagined environment[s],” the recent emergence of a “new urbanism” (Amin & Thrift) characterized by a tendency towards openness, dynamism and transnational “flows” (Smith) can be seen to pose a particular problem for the creation of stable “urban imaginaries” (Çinar & Bender). In both scale and substance, Bombay, South Asia’s preeminent mega-city, is at the forefront of this challenge. My paper examines a text that grapples with the dilemma of representing this multiplicitous city through generic experimentation and the creation of a distinctive ethnographic gaze.

Specifically, my paper analyzes what Henri Lefebvre terms the “representational space” forged by Suketu Mehta in *Maximum City* (2004), his kaleidoscopic account of contemporary Bombay. Part personal memoir, part urban ethnography, this narrative troubles the intersection between urban reality and imaginary cities by pointing to their constant interaction in the growing metropolis. In particular, I focus on Mehta’s engagement with the cinematic Bombay of both Indian film and literature, highlighting how Mehta contests and qualifies these imaginary versions of the city. Although the recycling of stock Bollywood characters and plotlines in contemporary Indian literature has been criticized by some (Belliappa), Mehta encounters many marginalized urban residents—gangsters, slum-dwellers, sex workers—who turn to these imaginary models in order to make sense of their own lives. A unique participant-observer, Mehta calls for a renewed understanding of urban culture that is attentive to both its “real” and “fictional” aspects. Unlike the static versions of Bombay prescribed by politicians, urban planners and privileged residents, I argue that Mehta’s ambivalent urban ethnography exposes the endless dynamism of the city’s culture.

**(2) "Twilight and Enlightenment in Delhi: Urdu, English, Sexuality, Modernity"**

**Sonam Singh**, Cornell University

I propose to read two texts in juxtaposition: Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* and the recent decision by the Delhi High Court overturning Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalized "unnatural offences." I am interested in drawing out the resonances between the 1940 novel written in English that mourns the loss of a Muslim Urdu culture at the hands of the British imperial power and the 2009 court ruling written in English and relying often on primarily Anglophone international law (and sidestepping arguments about historical Indian customs and beliefs) that undoes one of the many inequities of British rule. There is no easy or obvious lesson here, but I hope to examine the image of a city and culture made spectral in Ali's novel in light of the Enlightenment rhetoric of freedom and liberty in which the defenders of gay rights understand their victory. I will argue that these scenes of the English language shading light or giving it say less about English itself and point more to a larger cultural dilemma of secular modernity in which cultural production becomes a sometimes melancholic, sometimes euphoric recycling of the material of the past. As that quintessential modernist Baudelaire says in "The Swan" (*The Flowers of Evil* itself first published the year of the Indian Rebellion), "the form of a city changes faster, alas, than the heart of a mortal." Delhi—a palimpsest of many faded cities and cultures—provides a central case for thinking through such relations.

### (3) **Gautam Premnath**

University of California, Berkeley

"Urban *Dérive* and Muslim Identity in Altaf Tyrewala's *No God in Sight*"

Thirty-two pages into *No God in Sight* (2005), Altaf Tyrewala's novel undertakes an uncharacteristically dramatic formal turn. By this point Tyrewala has already established an inventive and pleasurable formula for the book, serving up a series of brief and elegantly crafted first-person narratives, each loosely connected to the one preceding it, that together chart a sinuous, unpredictable pathway through the Bombay localities of Byculla and Colaba. Throughout Tyrewala sustains an unvaryingly wry and detached narratorial voice, that serves to smooth and level out the differences between petty travails and high tragedy in the lives of his middle-class Muslim characters. Yet as the seventh of these episodes nears its end, Tyrewala allows a different tonal register to irrupt into the narrative. As Amin-bhai, owner of a small Colaba shoeshop, anticipates his impending emigration to the United States, the laconic speaking style he shares with the other narrators gives way to an impassioned litany of regret and recrimination. Listing a series of assaults upon Muslims and other religious minorities by Hindu fundamentalist zealots, Amin-bhai concludes his bitter leavetaking of his country by stating, "Let them have their Hindustan for Hindus." Tyrewala then institutes a formal break, marked by a blank page and a section heading entitled "The Very Beginning." When the chain of first-person narratives resumes the scene has shifted to a small Gujarati village whose residents are being harangued by a mahant into violence against unspecified "outsiders." Tyrewala has retrieved his studied equanimity, and the novel's treatment of the state-

sanctioned pogroms in 2002 Gujarat are rendered with a remarkable lightness of touch. Before long the chain of narrative has returned to Bombay (following two young people displaced by the pogroms), and the novel has reverted to its earlier guise of urban *dérive*. But the detour through Gujarat has crucially redirected this earlier imperative. My paper will analyze how the novel's ambitions as urban exploration are conditioned and inflected by its concern to reflect upon the question of contemporary Indian Muslim identity.

(4) Kanika Batra, Texas Tech University, Respondent.

## **SESSION 475: 12: 00 NOON-1:15 P.M., 07-JAN-12 IN WILLOW B, SHERATON**

### LITERATURE AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN SOUTH ASIA

Moderator: **Kanika Batra**, Texas Tech University

#### **(1) “Performance and Social Activism in a Globalized Economy”**

Nimanthi Rajasingham, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Neoliberalism has produced globalized systems in Economic Processing Zones. This paper looks at theater productions by workers in an economic processing zone in Sri Lanka. Most workers in these ‘zones of exception’ are young women who have migrated from rural villages to these suburban spaces. Many live in shanty-town like agglomerates for approximately five years, and work in export oriented garment factories. These zones are exempt from labor laws that apply to workers in the rest of the country. The plays written and directed by workers in the zone of Katunayake reveal workers’ perceptions of economic, gendered, and cultural exploitation. Often they are testimonial in nature and capture the struggles of these young women, but they also enable critiques that may surprise because they destabilize expectations of socialist and leftist thinking regarding the efficacy of collective organization. The choices workers explore to remedy the material and social conditions of their lives are not always about unionizing, collective bargaining, or striking. These unexpected choices ask us to reexamine what we think we know about gendered labor, factories, resistance, organization, violence, and social justice within neoliberalism.

Non-individualized spaces produce texts and scripts that are multi-lingual and collective. This paper will look at performance as a means by which workers express their consciousness. I will use selected plays and my own field-based work in the zones to explore how performance studies allows social activism and provides space for workers to explore more equitable futures for themselves.

## **(2) “Midnight’s Children and the Disabled Subaltern”**

Christopher Krentz, University of Virginia

This talk will discuss Salman Rushdie’s 1981 classic *Midnight’s Children* in relation to physical difference. From Saleem’s cracking body, outsized nose, and other bodily anomalies to the freakish forms and abilities of the magical midnight’s children, the novel seems to uphold the value of disabled people even as it presents the ostracism and suffering of beggars and others with disabilities in modern India. Rushdie’s novel implicitly critiques ableist views that enforce normalcy, pointing to disability as a basic element of humanity and the need for more progressive disability activism in India and elsewhere.

## **(3) “The Poor Remain: Rethinking Literary Humanitarianism in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*”**

Jennifer Ricket, Rice University

Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* rethinks disability and questions humanitarian rhetoric that promises to rescue the poor. Through a reading of the novel, I argue that narrating politically situated events as humanitarian concerns dislocates suffering from its source rather than disrupting the transnational power structures that allow for harmful material conditions, government policies, and business practices. The novel’s narrator is part of the underclass of Khaufpur, a fictional city modeled after Bhopal where the 1984 Union Carbide spill is still killing people and where Sinha’s efforts as an activist are focused. Because of a spinal deformation from exposure to poisonous chemicals, the narrator walks on all fours and identifies as “Animal.” He spurns foreign journalists who cast him and his fellow Khaufpuris as suffering, subaltern victims. And, he is critical of a publishing industry that surveys the carnage of political battlefields for stories of suffering and reinforces an uneven power dynamic between a privileged reader and a victim turned storyteller. Animal insists justice in Khaufpur should not be dependent on narrating himself or other Khaufpuris as innocent victims within a humanitarian drama. He asserts that telling this story does not metaphorically release poor Khaufpuris from their toxic conditions; he represents them not to signify their worthiness of humanitarian aid but to demand legal accountability and corrective action. Ultimately, Animal decouples what it means to be human from its normative discursive framing and embraces his animality not as a metaphor for human deprivation but to think disability and justice in another way.