



Conflicting humanities

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In her feminist spatial analysis, Ranasinha consistently patterns her readings by contesting the separation of the urban and the rural, and the assumption of the urban as the privileged site of the political. Her final chapter, on the postcolonial city, argues subcontinental urban spaces are a “gendered space for political activism” (249). Through her readings of Lahiri’s Tollygunge, Shamsie’s Karachi and Peshawar, and Anam’s Dhaka she examines how global and local flows and practices intersect to shape the specificities of urban spaces that, in turn, exist in porous relation to rural surroundings. For instance, she emphasizes the rural beginnings of the Naxalite movement in *The Lowland*, a movement whose political and personal effects reverberate across generations and geographies. This reverberation extends from reclaimed suburban Tollygunge to Rhode Island and Lahiri’s more familiar, academic landscape. Simultaneously to the marsh and marine landscapes crucial to the novel, Ranasinha reads Lahiri’s “miniaturist prose” as increasingly performing complexities of postcolonial feminist and diasporic thought in its minute depictions of the life of a family in an apartment in a new land. Ranasinha also reads hierarchies as architecturally rendered in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*, where Biju, an undocumented labourer, lives and works in a basement in New York that “reveals Desai’s concern with the spatial interpenetration and integration of so-called First and Third Worlds” (76). She connects the metaphors of invisibility in Desai’s text to other subaltern experiences by invoking the similarities between *The Inheritance of Loss*’s depiction of invisibilized migrant labour with Malcolm X’s autobiography and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*: “These literary echoes remind us that such invisible citizens are not new. They map out a different racialization of urban space whilst reiterating that the long history

of race and black struggles remains central to understanding contemporary social formations” (79). It is another moment of resonance with Mirza’s analysis, which also connects subaltern South Asian experiences with African American tropes, though Ranasinha’s analyses are more persuasively integral to the argument she has been pursuing.

Reading both *Intimate Class Acts* and *Contemporary Diasporic South Asian Women’s Fiction* is to encounter the thoughtful gathering of themes and texts that invite further study; to read both is therefore also to be enlivened by the prospect of the work that will follow them and be enabled by them. For instance, an extension of Mirza’s study on friendship and desire could include same-sex relationships, a possibility indicated by Tabish Khair’s foreword to her study. A more extensive engagement with postcolonial feminism, in addition to her readings of second-wave Catharine MacKinnon and Angela Dworkin, would forward her analysis of gender and power in a South Asian context. Ranasinha’s study, by fulfilling her promise of breadth across subcontinental and diasporic locations, enables future work that can then situate more extensive thematic readings within the frame she establishes. Both studies advance feminist, postcolonial and literary studies through inclusion of postcolonial realism’s contributions to discussions of intimacy, form and space in South Asian women’s fiction.

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In April 2013, Utrecht University hosted the Edward Said Memorial Conference, commemorating the tenth anniversary of Said's passing. Papers presented at this occasion are now published in *Conflicting Humanities*, edited by Rosi Braidotti and Paul Gilroy. This volume features contributions by an impressive list of renowned scholars, including Étienne Balibar, Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Robert J. C. Young, who take Said's intellectual and political legacy as a point of departure to assess the history of European humanism, its definition of the human and of its inhumanity. The central question they address is how we might reinvent the humanities and how – or whether – scholarship can resist power both inside and outside the university while being conditioned by profit-oriented policies. The editors affirm in the introduction that, to this end, Said's proposition of democratic criticism in the humanities remains more urgent than ever, though it needs to be supplemented by gender, environmental, technological and anti-racist perspectives. These objectives are highly ambitious and wide ranging, and therefore an edited volume, comprising fourteen contributions by prominent scholars from various academic disciplines, indeed seems the ideal format to pursue these endeavours.

Readers can approach this book either as a collection of essays on Said's legacy or as an exploration of how to reinvent the humanities, yet each of these two readings might appreciate only a select number of contributions. For example, Young and Ariella Azoulay pointedly discuss Said's concerns regarding the representation and visibility of Palestine, but they do not consider the responsibility of humanistic enquiry and education. By contrast, Ankhi Mukherjee and Akeel Bilgrami critically question the potential of the humanities to instrumentalize the language of the

subaltern and to observe the ideas of the northern metropole from the perspective of the South; however, except for a few introductory or concluding remarks, they forbear any detailed reflection on Said's work. Nonetheless, several contributors do synthesize Said's interventions with recent conflicts in the humanities, therewith embracing several themes alluded to by other authors. In this respect, the essays by Spivak, Jamila Mascot and Aamir Mufti deserve special mention for their insightful and thought-provoking elaborations of Said's call for humanistic education, criticism and interference both inside and outside academia and for accentuating its urgency regarding contemporary conflicts. These essays in particular highlight the leitmotifs of this volume and clearly demonstrate the relevance of Said's legacy for the humanities of today and tomorrow.

Another strength of this volume is the diversity of disciplinary perspectives from which the authors consider Said's work. Notable, for example, is the relative prominence given to musical themes in Said's life, which are addressed most thoroughly by Stathis Gourgouris and Marina Warner, but also briefly recur throughout other contributions. In addition, some authors contextualize Said's intellectual and political views from a historical perspective, including Gilroy and Butler in their incisive evaluations of Said's humanism and his notion of bi-nationalism in Israel/Palestine, respectively; whereas Balibar and Engin Isin choose a more philosophically oriented approach by reading Said contrapuntally with Lyotard and Derrida to extrapolate critical insights into cultural difference and European identity. However, although in the introduction the editors underline the importance of supplementing Said's interventions with questions of gender, environmentalism, technology and anti-racism, these perspectives are, with the



exception of the contributions by Braidotti and Gilroy themselves, not strongly represented.

The shifting focus and disciplinary diversity of the essays do not necessarily distort this volume's unity, since these diverging approaches can best be read as complementary. What might be worth mentioning is that the unity of the book may have been further enhanced by polishing some of the formal features. Most notably, the length and structure of the chapters vary quite significantly and the style of referencing is not entirely consistent,

including the incidental mistake. Yet these formal issues do not in any way detract from the quality of the collection as a whole, which is highly rewarding both because of the number of thought-provoking contributions as well as for their inspiring combination.

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