

ONE

Introduction

*Today I went to the post office. Across the river. Bags and bags—
hundreds of canvas bags—all undelivered mail. By chance I looked down
and there on the floor I saw this letter addressed to you. So I am
enclosing it. I hope it's from someone you are longing for news of.*

—AGHA SHAHID ALI, “DEAR SHAHID”

THIS BOOK GROWS out of the question, What is South Asian American writing and what insights can it offer us about living in the world at this particular moment of tense geopolitics and interlinked economies? It is my conviction that reading this body of literature must be more than just an act of aesthetic or narrative pleasure. Rather, it must be a *just* act—doing justice to the contexts from which the writing emerges and challenging one’s imagination to encounter the texts with courage, humility, and daring. “The idea of America” in this book’s title signals not just an examination of South Asian American writing within the context of North America, but also a discussion of the global phenomena against which the idea of America emerges and that so richly infuse a great deal of South Asian American writing.

South Asia comprises the seven countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. “South Asian American” is a category that encompasses those individuals in the United States and Canada whose ancestral origins lie in one or more of these seven countries. For the purposes of this book, I limit the scope of the term “America” to the United States and Canada, although I am

fully cognizant of the mission of the Organization of American States (OAS) to expand the term to include Latin America and the Caribbean—so that “America” may be understood as the Americas. Quite apart from the need to work within a manageable framework, however, the decision to limit my study to South Asian American writers in North America is, I would propose, logical. The United States and Canada share a number of important traits that are relevant to this topic. Both countries occupy geographical regions that had large indigenous populations before the arrival of settlers from Europe. These settlers appeared in significant numbers at approximately the same time—the early seventeenth century—in both places, with similar attitudes toward the “wilderness” they encountered: it was theirs to claim.¹ Both the United States and Canada were populated through immigration, with the largest numbers of people in both countries coming initially from England (the French presence in Canada was largely concentrated in Quebec). Both nations adopted discriminatory immigration policies that restricted or excluded the entry of certain groups of people—Chinese, Japanese, and Indian, principally—and both nations either officially or unofficially adopted policies and passed legislation over the years that privileged those who were white-skinned. The immigration histories of South Asians are broadly similar in both countries.²

At the same time, there are critical differences between the two countries. There was no slavery in Canada. In the United States, up until the ethnic empowerment movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the various immigrant groups were encouraged to dissolve their specific characteristics in the melting pot of “American” identity; in Canada, the mosaic approach was more popular, and the diverse ethnic groups were encouraged to maintain their specific characteristics even as they lived side by side.³ Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the United States pursued a vigorous expansionist policy against Mexico and Spain, acquiring Texas, the Philippines, Hawai‘i, and Puerto Rico. In the twentieth century, the United States developed into a major military and economic power, and in the current historical moment, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc, is the unchallenged superpower.

The South Asian American experience is one of diaspora.⁴ One cannot discuss South Asian American literature without considering the numerous geographical locations this diaspora comprises—including the

countries of South, East, Southeast, and West Asia, the Americas, Australia, and Africa—as well as the labor migrations, geopolitics, global economics, and war and peace that have driven it. Stuart Hall, in speaking of the black experience and its particular histories, observes that blacks have used their “bodies as canvases of representation.”⁵ One might justifiably speak of South Asians using the metaphor of space as the canvas of their representation. South Asian American writing is marked by “ways of living at home abroad or abroad at home—ways of inhabiting multiple spaces at once, of being different beings simultaneously, of seeing the larger picture stereoscopically with the smaller.”⁶ This body of writing offers both the pleasures and the complications of enlarged visions. I don’t mean merely that South Asian American writing makes available to readers unfamiliar experiences and locations—although such an effect is a given, steeped as this literature is in evocations of the histories and geographies of many nations—but also that these texts at their best move the reader to consider why understanding the interconnect-edness among nations and peoples matters, and how such understanding can be transported from the realm of literature into the material realm of politics and civic behavior.

As I have discussed elsewhere, not everyone subscribes wholeheartedly to the category “South Asian,” thereby making the subcategory “South Asian American” a tenuous one to maintain.⁷ It offers a convenient label, however, to signify individuals living in North America who trace their ancestry to one or more of the seven countries that comprise the geopolitical region known as South Asia. (The term “Indian subcontinent” is occasionally used to refer to South Asia, but it is not the preferred designation as it privileges one country over others.) The heterogeneity of South Asia (and therefore of South Asian America) has few parallels anywhere: every major religion is represented in healthy numbers, and more than twenty languages flourish in everyday use; cultural practices vary, not just across countries, but within countries, where language, food, customs, and dress can differ dramatically every few hundred kilometers; religious affiliations may not translate into cultural solidarity—for example, the Bangladeshis, although Muslim like the majority of Pakistanis, have more in common culturally and share a language with the Hindu Bengalis of India. South Asia and South Asian America are a pastiche of contradictions, correspondences, and unexpected linkages.

This discussion of the literature, then, is an effort to “muddy the

waters” of our civic selves. You will not find here the linear logic of unimpassioned thought, the neat distinctions of cultural or national categories, or the precision of binaries. I offer these observations in the spirit of heteroglossia, seeking indulgence for the cacophony of analysis, narrative, remembrance, anger, and yearning that follow in these pages. The frame of my discussion is interdisciplinary, although I am always cognizant of the literary text and its function within this interdisciplinary architecture. It is not my intention that this architectural structure be symmetrical, that its various components be of similar proportions and of equal influence; in fact, at some level I hesitate to use the word “structure,” because it carries with it a suggestion of fixity, of permanence. The structure I envision can be easily dismantled and a new one erected in its place. In explaining the theory and method of articulation, Hall says that “articulation” is

the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. . . . The so called ‘unity’ of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary ‘belongingness’. The ‘unity’ which matters is a linkage between the articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected.⁸

I write at a time of aggressive deployment of U.S. military power (though, admittedly, the late nineteenth century also saw an equivalent display of U.S. military and imperialistic might) and equally aggressive pursuit of terrorists. On the domestic front, an alarming erosion of civil liberties continues; in the sphere of foreign policy, U.S. self-interest dominates, and all other nations are being asked to put their self-interest in the service of the United States. This situation is not likely to change. In such a moment, I see South Asian American literature as providing the means to pull back from a close-up view of the United States to reveal a wider landscape of other nations and other peoples. Such enlargement of perspective is a moral responsibility, particularly in the twenty-first century, when no nation is an island unto itself. Thus, an articulation that facilitates connections between discourse and material object and

between one type of discourse and another—in other words, that makes visible the ways in which we construct knowledge—is an appropriate mode for appreciating why we should care about the lives of others in our immediate communities and far away. I make no apologies for positioning a literary work as one text among many. I liken the interdisciplinary articulation I pursue here to the cosmopolitan consciousness of being at home abroad or abroad at home and of seeing the world “through kaleidoscope eyes.”⁹ Laura Kang’s “trenchant interdisciplinarity” is a useful reminder of the disruptive possibilities of working across disciplines. She argues that, “[i]n its implication of both keenness and marginality, the ‘trenchant’ qualifier of interdisciplinarity signals an agnostic but nevertheless situated relation to prevailing disciplinary forms of knowledge formation and reproduction and their historical intimacies with tactics of political domination and social control.”¹⁰

This book does not offer an exhaustive study of writing by South Asian authors in North America. It offers a very specific way of reading and thinking about the texts—as works of art that challenge rigid constructions of citizenship and overly narrow perspectives of location. My discussion seeks to examine the possibilities of a discourse that reconfigures emotional, ideological, political, and behavioral spaces so as to challenge prevailing trends of viewing the world within antipodal frameworks: national and transnational, individual and collective, insider and outsider. I use those literary texts that best illustrate my purpose; they include short fiction, novels, poetry, memoirs, essays, and plays. Writers as well known as Michael Ondaatje and Meena Alexander are discussed alongside newly published authors such as Sharbari Ahmed and Abha Dawesar. I omit certain writers altogether—the most noticeable being Rohinton Mistry—not because I don’t consider their work pertinent to my purpose, but because the application of my strategy of reading to their works might prove repetitive and overdetermined.

Center-Stage Visibility of South Asian American Writing

The remarkable visibility that South Asian American writing enjoys today is the result of the cumulative impact of a number of historical and sociocultural forces. In the nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson

and the Transcendentalists expressed a profound interest in Indian philosophy. In the years leading up to the overthrow of British colonialism in South Asia, Americans were keenly aware of the efforts of Indian independence leaders, and during the American Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other African American leaders were strongly influenced by the tactics of Mahatma Gandhi to oust the British from the Indian subcontinent. In the 1960s, the Beatles popularized and commercialized India as the site of their spiritual inspiration. India's role as the world's largest democracy and its early post-independence tilt to the USSR made the United States watchful of India's political and economic fortunes. Pakistan's strategic location between India and the USSR influenced U.S. foreign policy overtures to Pakistan during the Cold War. The emergence of Salman Rushdie in England as a formidable writer with his novel *Midnight's Children* (1980), with its vibrant and exuberant style of narration, placed writers of South Asian descent writing in English on the global literary map. The *fatwa* issued in 1989 by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini against Rushdie for his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) brought to the author more publicity than any person could care for. More recently, Arundhati Roy's spectacular success in winning the Booker Prize in 1997 for her first novel, *The God of Small Things*, reinforced the keen global interest in South Asian writers living in South Asia and in other nations of the South Asian diaspora (England, Canada, the Caribbean, and the United States, in particular; other locations of the South Asian diaspora include Fiji, Australia, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Nigeria, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong). Finally, one cannot underestimate the U.S. reading public's enormous interest in and appetite for consuming "exotic" cultures—evidenced in the stupendous popularity of such novels as Arthur S. Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997) or Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989).

The earliest South Asian American experience to receive literary treatment was that of the Indians (primarily Sikhs) who came to work on the farmlands of California's Imperial Valley in the early 1900s. Chitra Divakaruni's triptych of poems—"The Founding of Yuba City," "Yuba City Wedding," and "The Brides Come to Yuba City"—collected in *Leaving Yuba City* (1997) renders their hard labor as farmhands, captures their turbulent feelings as they married Mexican American women because immigration restrictions prevented them from bringing over brides from their villages in India, and portrays the

eventual arrival of Sikh “picture brides” once some of the immigration restrictions were lifted.

In *Blood into Ink: South Asian and Middle Eastern Women Write War* (1994), Miriam Cooke and Roshni Rustomji-Kerns collect some of the poems and protest songs of these Punjabi farmers and their wives, giving us a glimpse into the transnationalism that operated in the early years of the twentieth century. These men and women, some of whom came directly from India, and others from British Columbia in Canada, formed a diasporic Indian network that extended along the West Coast all the way from the plains of California to the lumber camps and farms of Vancouver. They were instrumental in energizing North American support for the cause of Indian independence from British rule. Jane Singh details these early efforts at fighting colonialism and uncovers the newsletter—*Ghadr*—that was published to rally the diasporic community.¹¹

Other pre-1965 South Asian diasporic experiences are recorded in memoirs by Dhan Gopal Mukerji, an early twentieth-century Indian American writer who gained visibility as a children’s book author and commentator on life in India and Eastern philosophy; Dalip Singh Saund, the first U.S. Congressman of Asian American descent; and Ved Mehta, who came to the United States at the age of fourteen to enter a school for the blind in Arkansas and then went on to become a writer for the *New Yorker*. Mukerji’s *Caste and Outcast*, first published in 1923, was reissued by Stanford University Press in 2002. Mukherji records the circumstances of his life in India before coming to the United States in the first part of his memoir, and, in the second, his varied experiences in California in the early decades of the 1900s as a student, farmhand, and factory worker. His memoir is a moving combination of exuberance and disillusionment. Saund’s *Congressman from India*, published in 1960, displays an optimism that sounds extraordinarily naive to a contemporary audience made skeptical about “universal” access to the American dream despite the Civil Rights and multiculturalism movements. In his memoir, Saund willingly embraces the rhetoric of a democratic and fully participatory American society. Similarly, in *Sound-Shadows of the New World* (1986), Mehta celebrates both his own extraordinary achievement at having overcome the handicap of blindness, and the United States as having made possible such a transformation. The uncritical acceptance of dominant-culture assumptions about the construction of selfhood in these memoirs may contribute to their

absence from ethnic studies discussions. (See Chapter 5 for a discussion of Saund's and Mehta's memoirs.)

Books of fiction, memoir, and poetry by South Asian American writers have proliferated in such quick succession from 1985 to the present that the overview provided here is by no means exhaustive. Five anthologies of South Asian American writing offer a wide array of writers and serve as good springboards into the literature: *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora* (1993); *Her Mother's Ashes and Other Stories by South Asian Women in Canada and the United States* (1994); *Her Mother's Ashes 2: More Stories by South Asian Women in Canada and the United States* (1998); *Living in America: Poetry and Fiction by South Asian American Writers* (1995); and the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award winner *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America* (1996), which features both first- and second-generation South Asian Americans.

Another relatively new and developing area is South Asian American theater. This genre is still in its very early stages, and its practitioners are negotiating the complex politics of securing performance space and making South Asian American bodies visible. There is, however, strong and vibrant work being written and performed, primarily by second-generation South Asian Americans. New York is a lively center of activity, and efforts are being made in Boston as well. Una Chaudhuri's point that playwrights and performers must "do representational justice to the complex realities of the diasporic experience, not only for . . . spectators but for . . . subjects," is well taken, and there is a growing sense in the South Asian American community that theater is a powerful medium in which to find a voice and use it.¹² Shishir Kurup's *Assimilation* (1994), Asif Mandavi's *Sakina's Restaurant* (1998), John Mathew's *Grave Affairs* (2001), Karthick Ramakrishnan and Jyoti Thottam's *Interrogations* (2002), and the steady stream of short South Asian American drama enacted at the Asian American Writers Workshop in New York City hold great promise for the future.

The present moment is a high point for South Asian American literature. Sohrab Homi Fracis's collection of short stories, *Ticket to Minto: Stories of India and America* (2001) won the 2001 Iowa Short Fiction Award. Akhil Sharma's novel *An Obedient Father* (2000) won the 2001 Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), won the 2000 Pulitzer

Prize for fiction. Earlier “mainstream” endorsements of South Asian American writers include the National Book Critics Circle award for Bharati Mukherjee’s collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), *Time* magazine’s selection of Abraham Verghese’s memoir *My Own Country: A Doctor’s Story of a Town and Its People in the Age of AIDS* as one of its top four books for 1994, the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award for Chitra Divakaruni’s short fiction collection *Arranged Marriage* (1995), the Barnard New Women Poets Prize for Reetika Vazirani’s collection *White Elephants* (1996), and the Ainsfeld-Wolf Award for her poetry collection *World Hotel* (2002). I list these books and the awards they have won not to prove the “quality” of South Asian American writing, but rather to note that this recognition will likely boost sales of these books and consequently increase readership; therefore, it becomes imperative that this expanded readership engage with the multiple contexts within which South Asian American writing emerges. In what follows, I will attempt to provide an overview of these contexts.

*On Literary Ground in South Asian America:
The Realities and Possibilities*

In his poem “Not Much Art,” Sri Lankan American author Indran Amirthanayagam writes about the bombing of Jaffna, the stronghold of the Tamil rebels engaged in a fierce civil war with the government forces in Sri Lanka. But it is only the opening twelve lines of the poem that address themselves directly with images of the bombing. The rest of the poem (forty-seven lines) upbraids the United States for not caring enough about occurrences in Jaffna. The Americans see only a CNN report aired “in the post-midnight hour, / the scrambly witchy time / when Americans learn / the darkneses of dark lands.” “[T]here isn’t much art / in the bombing of Jaffna,” but there also isn’t much art in the indifference and self-indulgent, mind-numbing rituals with which Americans lead their lives, the poem suggests: “There isn’t much art / in pill-taking / or the whiskey toothbrush // or 500 laps on one foot / to tire it out before working / the other foot to tire that out.”¹³ Amirthanayagam’s accusation is echoed in the writings of other South Asian American authors, such as Amitav Ghosh, Meena Alexander, and Amitava Kumar, who write of the peril of our ignoring, as residents of

the United States, the connectedness we share with inhabitants of other lands. These writers direct their efforts toward encouraging the creation and development of a reticulate consciousness—an awareness of oneself as part of an extensive network of the globe’s inhabitants.

Vinay Dharwadker reminds us that this vision of oneself as part of a global community of fellow beings—a vision he equates with cosmopolitanism—was formulated in ancient society by the Buddhists (c. 500 B.C.) and the Stoics (330 B.C. to A.D. 200):

As invented by the Buddhists and the Stoics, cosmopolitanism in antiquity is already a validation of inclusive, egalitarian heterogeneity, of the toleration of difference and otherness, of the equitable (re)distribution of resources and privileges, of the recognition of others’ freedoms, of (comm)unity in diversity, or very simply, of the unqualified practice of fairness, kindness, and generosity. Instances like these suggest that for almost 2,500 years cosmopolitanism has continuously—though variably—aligned itself with what we now call universal human rights, equal opportunity, nondiscrimination, and social justice.¹⁴

Kwame Anthony Appiah offers a further dimension of cosmopolitanism, declaring that “while cosmopolitanism is indeed about seeing yourself as belonging to a world of fellows, the cosmopolitan’s fellows are living lives in their own style, and the cosmopolitan rejoices in the fact that ‘their’ styles need not be ‘ours.’ Cosmopolitanism is, to reach a formula, universalism plus difference. . . . [I]t thinks nothing human alien, *but not because it imagines all humanity in its own image.*”¹⁵

Amitav Ghosh’s observation that “[t]o be different in a world of differences is irrevocably to belong” captures eloquently the condition of interdependent differences that characterizes the world.¹⁶ Of the South Asian American writers featured in this study, Ghosh is perhaps the most attuned to the interconnected histories of nations. However, such a sensibility is present to some degree in almost all South Asian American writers—even those of the second generation, born and raised in the United States. It may be fair to say, therefore, that South Asian American writers’ not insignificant contribution to American literature and to the American imagination is the delineation of narratives and spaces that

enable the conception of a nation as simultaneously discrete *and* entwined within the fold of other nations.

In this tumultuous time of competing and conflicting memories, aspirations, and motivations, the writer's role is of undeniable importance. I would argue that we experience the world discursively, the force of visual images and the ubiquity of the media notwithstanding. The writer's delineation of the world, for better or for worse, conveys to us what we know, should know, can know, and cannot know. Walter Benjamin reminds us of the dangerous lure of the visual against which we must guard ourselves and implores us to turn to the written word to experience the world in its rich ambiguity and textured density.¹⁷ In a system of global interdependencies and mass dissemination of visual images, an understanding of how language is deployed is critical to citizenship today. Language both introduces us to what we can know and demarcates for us what we cannot know. The spectacle of the visual gives us the false impression of knowing, but language reveals to us what cannot be known, by suggesting what lies outside the frame of the visual.

What we cannot know is equally important as what we should know. In knowing what we cannot know, we are perhaps made aware of the complexity of what we seek to know, and thus are reminded that we must approach it with necessary humility and a commitment to sustained engagement. Iain Chambers's remarks on art apply with undiminished force to literature. Talking about the special quality of art that makes it the ideal mode for the elaboration of "identity, subjectivity, and citizenship," Chambers notes "the necessary and disquieting alterity" of art:

The aesthetics (and ethics) of disturbance that reveals a gap, an interval in the world, that signals a limit and establishes a transit, a passage elsewhere. In this space, which we could name with such a term as the sublime or the uncanny, the pedagogical languages of institutional identity, busily seeking to legitimate the narration of nation, citizenship, and cultural subjectivity, are interrupted by what refuses to make sense or speak in that prescribed way. . . . The art of the interruption, art as interruption, brings to light our prescribed state—its limits in time and space—while also opening the possibility of revisiting, reciting (in the sense of reworking), and resiting (in the sense of transporting) languages elsewhere. The prescribed is

overtaken by the inscription, by the event, artistic and ontological, that exceeds the grammar of expectancy and the semantics of institutional verdicts.¹⁸

The most satisfying South Asian American writing seeks to escape “the grammar of expectancy,” both by presenting the reader with a complex landscape of indeterminate unpredictability and by challenging the reader to withhold summary explanation. For example, Amitava Kumar’s exploration of the “text” of the passport sheds light on the ways in which it is possible to go beyond “the semantics of institutional verdicts.” Kumar approaches the passport—one’s badge of identity in a global world, one’s proof of existence—as a kind of book. Two very different types of readers pour over this book, says Kumar: the immigrant and the immigration officer “seated at his desk with a gleaming badge on his uniform.”¹⁹ The officer does not, will not, permit himself the luxury of reading this passport imaginatively to plumb the anxieties and expectations of the immigrant who stands before him. He reads the passport strictly within the framework of institutional semantics and is therefore unable to fill the gaps in his knowledge of the complexity of the immigrant. He cannot know, for instance, that the immigrant may have spent his entire life savings to acquire this passport, or that he may have traveled many hundreds of kilometers from his village or town to the city where the U.S. consulate is located in the country of his birth. As long as the officer persists in restraining his imagination and adhering strictly to the dictates of prescribed language, the passport will yield no more than a mere surface glimpse of the man who waits patiently for the officer’s dispensation. Kumar writes:

The immigrant’s reading of that book refers to an outside world that is more real. The officer is paid to make a connection only between the book and the person standing in front of him.

The immigrant has a scar on his forehead at the very place his passport says that he does. For the officer this probably means that the man is not a fraud. For the immigrant, that scar is a reminder of his childhood friend in the village, the one whose younger sister he married last May. . . .

The officer reads the name of the arrival’s place of birth. He has never heard of it. The immigrant has spent all of the thirty-one years of his life in that village.²⁰

In a 1988 essay, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes that we read the world as text even when it is not immediately apparent that we do so. At the Riyadh University Center for Girls, where Spivak delivered a lecture titled “Literature and Life,” she was asked by a student: “It’s all very well to try to live like a book; but what if no one else is prepared to read? What if you are dismissed as an irresponsible dreamer?” Spivak gives the following answer:

Everyone reads life and the world like a book. Even the so-called “illiterate.” But especially the “leaders” of our society, the most “responsible” nondreamers: the politicians, the businessmen, the ones who make plans. Without the reading of the world as a book, there is no prediction, no planning, no taxes, no laws, no welfare, no war. . . . The world actually writes itself with the many-leveled unfixable intricacy and openness of a work of literature. If, through our study of literature, we can ourselves learn and teach others to read the world in the “proper” risky way, and to act upon that lesson, perhaps we literary people would not forever be such helpless victims.²¹

Spivak realizes, even as she insists on teaching others to read the world in the proper risky way, the difficulty of proposing such an attitude to women in Saudi Arabia, given the patriarchal repressiveness of its leaders. But her essay asserts the usefulness of literature as a mode of learning to engage with and force change in the world. Kumar notes, for instance, that the immigrant is reviled in language, but it is also in language—even a broken language—that the immigrant tells his story, and it is through “the swaggering banditry of language” that the immigrant can resist and threaten a mainstream America that denies him his humanity.²²

Yet, one must balance the claim for language as an entryway into the deep crevices of experience with an acknowledgment of the limitations of a worldview that privileges the discursive. Pheng Cheah’s scathing attack of Homi Bhabha for his exclusive immersion in the discursive space is worth keeping in mind. Criticizing the priority of the linguistic mode posited in Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, Cheah remarks:

The social is not coextensive with, or exhausted by, its symbolic dimensions.

. . . [T]he formation and deformation of group loyalty also involves political-organizational and economic forces such as law enforcement, the provision of welfare and other services by the state, and the establishment of a framework for the distribution and regulation of economic resources and capabilities to satisfy human needs. . . . [T]o be materially effective, emancipatory consciousness cannot subsist on linguistic dynamism or cultural-symbolic flux alone.²³

Similarly, Elaine Scarry reminds us of the inadequacies of literary representation for “solving real-world problems.”²⁴ Scarry’s prognosis for the human imagination is bleak: “The human capacity to injure other people has always been much greater than its ability to imagine other people. Or perhaps we should say, *the human capacity to injure other people is very great precisely because our capacity to imagine other people is very small.*”²⁵ Although she grants authors a heightened capacity to represent the unfamiliar, she believes that the instances of literature’s having effected noticeable change are painfully few: the two examples she provides are Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924). The former enabled the white population of the United States to imagine the “weight, solidity, [and] injurability” of the black population; the latter, “according to Stephen Spender, enabled the British population to begin to imagine India’s population as independent.”²⁶

I was given convincing evidence of the disparity between a discursive interest in the condition of migrancy and the material reality of that condition in a conversation I had with a young Indian man (let us call him Ramesh) working in Kuwait. Ramesh is an employee of a South Asian airline with active traffic to Kuwait. He described the long working hours of his daily life and the lack of social outlets in a country that has a strict code of behavior regulating interaction between the sexes. Listening to him, I wondered how much worse, how much more constrained, the lives of migrant laborers (carpenters, plumbers, and welders, for example) and domestic servants from South Asia and other countries (the Philippines, primarily) were and asked him if he encountered these workers in his daily activities. The stories he told were heart-wrenching: young women pleading to be flown out of Kuwait because they couldn’t take the conditions of their employment; the impossibility of their saving sufficient funds to cover their flight home; the sacrifice they com-

mitted for the sake of those back home. From time to time, one hears about maids raped by their male employers. (This abuse of domestic help is not specific to the Middle East; Indonesian maids in Malaysia are also subject to discrimination and abuse, and such cases are not uncommon in New York.) Human rights agencies may get involved in the more sensational cases of abuse, but there is no extended narrative of the lives of these migrant domestic workers and the day-to-day indignities they endure—seemingly trivial indignities, which as they accumulate gradually take on the psychological burden of a grievous iniquity.

I encouraged Ramesh to keep a journal recording the details of his life in Kuwait. He responded that he has no time to keep a journal. “It’s late when I come back; then I have to cook for myself and I’m too tired to think of writing.” The discursive, the symbolic, the narrative, could not emerge under the oppressive repetition of labor. And so, of course, one has to wonder to what extent globalism and transnationalism as themes in writing are inscribed by those who do not live the rhythms and realities of the less glamorous underside of such phenomena.

Yet, we cannot allow an admission of the limits of literature and language to become an excuse for civic despair and isolation. Taking on the rather formidable task of explaining literary interest and its value to civic life, Steven Knapp guides us through a carefully crafted argument that focuses specifically on literary texts. I quote him at some length so as to preserve the structure of his logical framework:

[T]he moral benefit of literary interest lies not in any capacity to tell us which values are the right ones, but far more modestly, in the way it helps us find out what our evaluative dispositions *are*. Perhaps a complex [textual] scenario sets up a kind of experiment in which we test not the moral worth of one scenario against another one . . . , but the relative strengths of our own responses to the alternate scenarios. . . .

A person who discovers, by reading literature, the conflicts, inconsistencies, and overdeterminations among her own dispositions is a person who can read herself as an instance of descriptive representation. She therefore encounters in herself an analogue of the predicament . . . in a descriptively representative legislature: how to choose a course of action without suppressing competing interests that all have a right to be registered in the same representational

space. . . . Here, . . . the Lockean account of free agency is especially illuminating. . . . Locke defines freedom solely in terms of the mind's capacity to suspend its decisions until it has had time to consider all its competing desires and their objects.²⁷

There is no guarantee that every reader will bring to engagement with a text the kind of thoughtfulness and care that Knapp suggests is necessary to create in the reader's mind the capacity "to suspend its decisions until it has had time to consider all its competing desires and objects." But Knapp is interested in the *potential* of literature and language and, like Spivak, he urges us to consider the ways in which reading literature increases our self-consciousness about our own inconsistencies, and thus leads us to a critical reading of ourselves and our role in the world.

One of my concerns in this book is the act of *partial* reading, and I mean that in both senses of the word—as the biases with which we read, and as the ways in which those biases contribute to gaps in our understanding. Such gaps cause us to read texts only partially—that is, insufficiently, ignoring telling details in them. My discussion of South Asian American writing draws attention to some of the forces—political, economic, social, and cultural—contributing to such partial readings. I seek to uncover the possible reasons for partial readings and to suggest ways of recognizing, resisting, and perhaps overcoming them by engaging South Asian American writing within a web of interlocking events, phenomena, and attitudes that span a number of locations and historical periods. I do not wish to make grandiose claims for South Asian American writing. Rather, I wish to make clear the ways in which it is imperative for us to read these works with keen attention to the complexity and nuances of the South Asian American experience.

The First Caution: When Summary Judgment Becomes Bipolar Thinking

Amartya Sen, in an eloquent address given at the World Newspaper Congress in Belgium, May 26–29, 2002, argues with great dexterity against Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" model and its atten-

dant bipolar division of the world into an enlightened and scientific West versus a religious and traditional East. Evoking both the religious tolerance of rulers such as the emperor Ashoka in the third century B.C. in India and the Mughal emperor Akbar (the latter's espousal of religious freedom was contemporaneous with the Inquisitions in Europe) and the impressive achievements in mathematics and science by medieval scholars in China, India, Persia, and the Arab world (contributions such as the concept of "algorithm," the technology for printing, and the understanding of the properties of the magnet), Sen objects on two fronts to the limited vision of Huntington's model:

The deficiency of the clash thesis, I would argue, begins well before we get to the point of asking whether the disparate civilisations must clash. The problem begins with an impoverished vision of a singularly categorised world, divided into little boxes. . . .

Second, civilisational categories are far from clear-cut, and the simulated history that goes with the thesis of clashing civilisations construct[s] a make-belief [*sic*] world of thoroughly hardened contrasts (partly by ignoring the heterogeneities within each culture) and also ignor[ing] historical interactions between them.²⁸

Such a vision, Sen declares, makes it very easy for extremists in both camps to perpetuate and reinforce the supposed barriers between them. In the West, "[o]ften-repeated public rhetoric on the contrast between 'Western science' and 'non-Western cultures,' as well as crude civilisational classifications have tended to put science and mathematics well inside the basket of 'Western civilisation,' leaving other civilisations to mine their pride only in religious depths." Once the divisions are drawn in such a way, it becomes "very easy for the anti-Western activists, including religious fundamentalists and cultural militants, to secure leadership roles through focusing on those issues that separate the non-Western world from the West (such as religious beliefs, local customs and cultural specificities), rather than on those things that reflect positive global interactions running through history (including science, mathematics, literature, and so on)."²⁹

Sen's call for a recognition and celebration of positive global interactions rather than "a dialectics of confrontation" comes at a critical moment in global geopolitics. His critique of bipolar thinking draws

attention both to the convenience (and specious comfort) offered by such a model and the deprivations and diminishments that are likely to ensue if one adopts it. Keeping in mind Sen's impassioned call for an appreciation of the heterogeneity *within* supposedly discrete cultures and nations can help prepare us for a productive and fruitful engagement with South Asian American writing.

In 1995, *Amerasia Journal* published a special double issue that focused on theoretical models for Asian American studies. Of the many articles that examine the relative merit of different models (race and ethnic studies, postcolonialism, border theory, diaspora versus immigration), only one considers seriously theoretical models that are based in Asian philosophies. In "Asiacentrism and Asian American Studies," Paul Wong, Meera Manvi, and Takeo Hirota Wong call on Asian American scholars to tap into "[t]he immense theoretical and practical potential of the fusion between Eastern and Western theories and methods for the advancement of knowledge . . . recognized in such fields as comparative studies of spirituality, psychotherapy, medicine and some branches of science."³⁰ They point to the field of Afrocentrism, which turns to African ideologies to explain the black experience in America.

Thus far, however, the accepted theoretical paradigms in Asian American studies have their sources in France, Russia, and Germany, and now, with cultural studies, England. The many theoretical influences that have come to bear on Asian American studies in particular, and on ethnic and postcolonial studies in general, have had much to offer to a field of study that is rapidly becoming more textured, nuanced, and complicated in its positions. I have benefited from all these perspectives in my own work. But one "model" has proved surprisingly useful to me. I have been late to realize its value, supportive as I was of the determination of Asian Americanists to establish the field of Asian American studies as distinct from "area studies," which focused on countries in Asia, and to declare Asian American studies as an enterprise rooted in the *American* body politic by eschewing all association with "exotic" Asian philosophies. This model that I now embrace is suggested by a mythical story that has long fascinated me for its epistemological implications. The story appears to critique the limits and shortsightedness of a bipolar perspective and to imply that power lies in being able to think outside the either-or framework. I offer this mythical fragment with no small con-

flict, primarily on account of its Hindu identification, and particularly because I am not an actively practicing Hindu.³¹ South Asia is home to Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, and Jews, in addition to Hindus, so in turning to a story from Hindu mythology, I don't wish to minimize the influence of multiple religions on my thinking. Perhaps the story has stayed with me because it seems so unmoored from any particular religion and portable across all boundaries.

This is how it goes: A certain demon wanted unlimited powers and so decided to pray long and hard to God. The sincerity of his worship so impressed God that He decided to grant the demon any wish that he desired. The demon asked for immortality, but God told him that immortality was reserved only for the divine and could not be granted to a human. Believing himself to be shrewd and capable of outsmarting God, the demon then rephrased his request as a set of conditions, thinking that by so doing he had anticipated and rendered void all the circumstances under which he could conceivably lose his life. "I wish to die neither on earth nor in heaven, neither indoors nor outdoors, neither in daylight nor in darkness, and to meet my death neither at the hands of man nor beast." God granted the demon his wish. Complacent in his supposed immortality, the demon renewed with increased vigor his campaign of terror and killing, bringing destruction upon those around him. One day, when he was warned by his God-fearing son that he would invite the wrath of God upon himself, the demon dismissed the power of God and flaunted the protection offered by the wish he had been granted. It was the hour of twilight, and at that instant, there emerged from a pillar in his palace, a creature that was half-human half-lion, who proceeded to lift the demon and carry him to the threshold of his home. There, between the indoors and outdoors, in the twilight (neither daylight nor darkness), the creature who was neither wholly human nor wholly beast lifted the demon off the ground and, holding him in the air (so that he was neither on earth nor in the heavens), tore the life out of him. Thus the demon authored his own death sentence, even as he arrogantly believed that he had envisioned and neutralized all possible scenarios that could defeat him. His bipolar thinking effectively put the chains on his imagination and led him to delineate a restricted reality based on the limited constructs of his consciousness.

*The Second Caution:
Learning to Appreciate What Cannot Be Known*

I turn now to a poem by Agha Shahid Ali, “Dear Shahid,” an excerpt of which provides the epigraph to this chapter. The poem frames two narratives—an outer and an inner one. One possible way to read the poem is to note that it refuses to reveal its inner narrative, the center of the poem that presumably holds its most coveted missive. The poem’s speaker, who lives in the war-torn land of Kashmir, records an intensely personal moment: on the floor of what looks like an abandoned or at least a nonfunctioning post office where hundreds of bags of mail lie undelivered, s/he discovers a letter addressed to a friend. In a gesture filled with hope and empathy, the speaker retrieves the letter and encloses it in a letter that s/he writes to the original addressee, the “Shahid” of the poem’s title (the poet was known to his friends as Shahid). In this letter-within-a-letter format, we know what the first or outer framing letter—the poem itself—says, but it is the unopened enclosed letter that haunts us. The poem (the “outer” letter) tells of the violence in the speaker’s homeland, from which Shahid is far removed. We read of the longing with which people wait for Shahid’s return. But we are not permitted to read the enclosed letter—as if it holds a message too dear for strangers’ eyes, too filled with significance for rapid consumption. Confronted by a barrier to the contents of the “inner” letter, the reader is challenged on the one hand to imagine what the contents of the letter *might* be (not *are*, because “are” is too definitive and does not admit of alternative explanations), and on the other to accept that there are some things that cannot be known, regardless of one’s desire to know.

Rebecca Saunders notes that the Western tradition of hermeneutics “consistently depicts error, uncertainty, or absence of understanding as foreignness and treats that foreignness as a problem to be solved, a deviation to be disciplined.”³² Our strategies of reading and analysis also proceed from the notion that to be unable fully to explicate is somehow to be imperfect. When we read, therefore, we aim to render comprehensible, to bring into the realm of what is familiar, that which hitherto was unfamiliar and foreign. But if we are to read and study literatures of which we have inadequate knowledge of relevant social, historical, and political contexts—and cannot presume to come by such knowledge other than through sustained immersion either in the literature or in the