

POSSIBLE INSTITUTIONS: LITERATURE FESTIVALS AND TALK-CULTURE IN  
INDIA

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

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This dissertation sets out to understand the proliferation of literature festivals in India since the mid-2000s. These festivals serve cultural, economic and political functions in a dynamic field characterized by varying degrees of competition and co-operation between different literary cultures in multiple languages, the uneven legitimation and reception of culture by different class formations, and the multiple locations where the humanities are practiced. Against this complex setting, I demonstrate that the literature festivals attempt to find unique ways to connect and in turn reimagine a fragmented and plural literary field in the public sphere. This work specifically turns to the producers, managers and the writer-curators of three festivals to understand what drives them and the festivals they curate to produce a network of legitimation for literature in India. The festivals I engage with are the “Jaipur Literature Festival,” the “Indian Languages Festival: Samanvay” and the “Almost Island Dialogues.” I claim that these festivals connect and reimagine the field via a mode of interaction that I call “talk-culture.” As a form of purposeful and conscious (re)turn to conjunctural networks of literary sociality and older forms of public communication, talk-culture is an intimate, face-to-face practice that is a combination of the literary and the critical. In other words, talk-culture is a type of connectivity and framework to reconstitute community.

Each chapter locates dispositions and attitudes that emerge out of interactions between writer-curators, the guest speakers, the topics of discussion, audience responses, interviews I conducted with writer-curators, and participant observation. At all three festivals, the possibility of change lies in performing different versions of literary histories and producing knowledges without objectifying or institutionalizing them. This I claim makes their practices ephemeral and engenders attitudes towards literature and literary culture that do not aim towards explicit rulemaking, objectivity and systemization, but at the same time offer a sense of community that performances simulate. That is why I call these events “possible institutions.”

The significance of this dissertation rests in the possibility of new academic and non-academic approaches to literature and literary cultures in India. In turning to practices on the ground, the project demonstrates that the often unrehearsed and unintentional practices of writers-curators and the festivals offer alternative ways to approach the complexities of a fragmented, plural, and multilingual literary field. Moreover, this work, attempts to learn from and at the same time support the knowledges that the writer-curators and the festivals produce in the public sphere. The specific literature festivals in this dissertation are spaces where new ways to practice an alternate relationship to literature and literary culture could emerge.

## **Dedication**

For Diya

## Acknowledgements

This dissertation would have been impossible without support, help, critique, and the discussions I have had with numerous individuals over the last seven years. In that sense, this work is a product of many minds and many instincts.

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The faculty and colleagues at Rutgers have been exceptional in allowing me to grow as a scholar, researcher, and teacher. Both Lynn Festa and Colin Jager carefully read sections of this project and taught me how to write for different audiences. So many of the ideas

emerged during discussions in and outside their writing workshops. I must thank Caroline Pirri, William Welty, Alex Leslie, Maria Vrcek, Melissa Parish, Emily Coyle, Kevin Sigerman, Danielle Allor, Tara Gildea, Elizabeth Greeniaus, Sean Hughes and Moyang Li. I have not seen a person with more initiative to organize than Bakary Diaby and the informal theory group he coordinated at Old Bay was incredible. Lech Harris has been a wonderful interlocutor and friend. The long one-hour lunches with Gabriele Lazzari at the Brower Faculty Lounge were always illuminating wanderings. None of this would have been possible without Cheryl Robinson and Courtney Borack. Both were always there to help, keep me on track and talk to whenever I was at Murray Hall.

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Finally, I am immensely grateful to my parents, Rama Sivaram and S. Sivaram for being patient with me through all my adventures, including this. I would like to thank Anup Paul for being a friend and an inspiration. The four days we spent at Jaipur are unforgettable. Last, but not the least, I dedicate this dissertation to Diya Paul, without whom I would have given up a long time ago.

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## Introduction

A number of literature festivals suddenly appeared and quickly proliferated in India in the mid 2000's.<sup>1</sup> Although festivals that engage literary production are not a new phenomenon globally, the way they were modified and localized for the Indian public caught the attention of the media and the literary establishment (Sahitya Akademi, University departments and writers).<sup>2</sup> Then, and sometimes even today, the festival was considered a *tamasha*, an Urdu-Hindi word that in its derogatory sense means a “farce” or a “sideshow.” More neutrally, the word can be translated as “entertainment,” “spectacle,” “pageant,” or simply a public performance. The response seemed like a specific attitude towards the reception and circulation of literature. According to these rebukes, the festival undermined the correct way to engage literature. Hence, the *tamasha* undercut the very seriousness of literature and its consumption. At the same time, the festivals were blamed for the commodification of the book and its author. Most damagingly this mode of experiencing literature made the whole enterprise look like a *mela* or fair which carried connotations of the way the general populace, or the *janta* experienced culture. Paradoxically, many of the festivals that began to proliferate were curated and produced by writers and translators (most often those who circulate regionally or nationally) themselves.

A classic example of this type of negative response towards the literature festival appeared in writer Amitav Ghosh's blog post called “Festivals and Freedom” in February 2012. The post, written under the pseudonym Chrestomather, rehearses an anxiety about

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<sup>1</sup> Indrajit Hazra, “Literary Festivals Flourish in India: India hosts 60-odd festivals every year with the next big one starting on January 17 in Jaipur.” *Aljazeera*, 16 Jan 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/01/literary-festivals-flourish-india-201411591459207956.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The Sahitya Akademi is India's National Academy of Letters.



reception and circulation caused by the emergence of literature festivals. Chrestomather writes:

I have never attended the Jaipur Literary Festival; nor does a visit loom in the foreseeable future. This is largely (but not wholly) because I have no taste for *tamashas*. Although unusual, this aversion is by no means unknown in the Indian subcontinent. I know of many writers and readers who share it, and I suspect that most of us were drawn to the world of books precisely because it provided an island of quiet within the din of *tamasha-stan*.<sup>3</sup>

I knew that somewhere deep down I agreed with Chrestomather because his lack of taste “for tamashas” ultimately found explanation in the common notion that books “were a refuge from a world that seemed to be at war with the very idea of an inner life.”<sup>4</sup> For a certain middle-class, liberal and bourgeois subject in India, the disembodied text-public has often been “an island of quiet” in a landscape (*stan* or place) marked by “din” and noise. But both Ghosh (who thinks his “aversion” is “unusual”) and I know that this class is a minority in the subcontinent. The literary belief system Ghosh endorses is based on a faith that “performances are secondary and inessential to a writer’s work” because what makes books “democratic and accessible” is the impersonal nature of circulation itself. The festivals, I felt, were portraying exactly the opposite belief system. They seemed to suggest that democratic access to literatures in India is only possible through a type of public performance and a sense of intimacy that face to face interaction engenders. This democratic impulse, I believe, is a consequence of an awareness among some of the festivals that the world of books in India has always been the purview of a certain class and caste.

Hence, as a researcher I was interested in how literature festivals were negotiating the complexity of the field of cultural production in India. I hoped to understand what

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<sup>3</sup> Amitav Ghosh, “Festivals and Freedom,” Amitav Ghosh (blog). WordPress. Feb 6 2012. <http://amitavghosh.com/blog/?p=2361>

<sup>4</sup> Amitav Ghosh, “Festivals and Freedom.”

motivated the various local writers and organizers of these festivals to approach a multi-regional and multilingual literature in this way. The *tamasha*, and the work that the organizers were engaged in seemed more complex and nuanced. The very sentiments that put Chrestomather off, attracted me to these *melas*. They were mobilizing large publics across class and caste boundaries, and staging debate about literature without care for what counted as literature, or who counted as a writer and reader. Many of the sessions I followed also did not care who pronounced judgement on literary production. At the same time, the festivals were creating networks between writers, artists, musicians, academics, intellectuals and a broad cross-section of the public from different regions and languages.

The complexities of India's literary histories and practices that I point to in the previous paragraph are well known. But the real paradox is that the whole, the notion of an Indian national literature keeps running up against its parts, or the plural literary histories and practices it must contend with. Hence, within a national framework, the literary landscape always ends up looking fragmented where each language and region have developed over time their own readings publics, modes of reception, and forms of circulation. Practices like Orientalism and Indology (premised on a philological nationalism) essentially tried to organize, reassemble and ultimately institute this imaginary institution of Indian literature.<sup>5</sup> It is easy to adapt Sudipta Kaviraj's phrase to describe the literary landscape. This is because it points to an unresolved contradiction between the parts and the whole which manifest itself in a struggle for autonomy for unique (linguistic and cultural) literary traditions, while an invisible demand for a national literature attempts to contain it. Hence, the crisis of

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<sup>5</sup> See Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India," in *Subaltern Studies VII: Writing on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1. For Kaviraj, India as an "objective reality of today's history" is essentially an invention instituted by a nationalist imagination in the nineteenth century and that is why it becomes possible "to speak about the contingency of its origins against the enormous and weighty mythology that has accumulated on its name."

management has always been that the academic disciplines and even popular national imaginaries must institute national literatures and cultures, but simultaneously account for plural practices. At another scale, conservative thinking pits this imagined national literary identity against the influence of the international, because the latter subsumes the former. This tension between regional, national and international literatures and literary traditions is further compounded by other kinds of differences like a multilingual field that mimics the organization of the national supra-community by neatly demarcating linguistic state boundaries. In other words, the national model of organizing literary belonging hides beneath it a complex and “fuzzy” sense that consists of overlapping cultural networks that were made up of, but not limited to, some mix of the *bhasha* (Indian languages), tribal, Sanskritic, Arabic, Persio-Turkic, Sino-Tibetan, the colonial European, British and American knowledge formations.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the problem in academic and non-academic realms in the subcontinent has always been about how to account for so much plurality.

Against this background, the claim this project makes is humble: I will demonstrate that the literature festivals I engage with attempt to find unique ways to connect and in turn reimagine a fragmented and plural literary field in the public sphere. This fragmentation is characterized by varying degrees of competition and co-operation between literary cultures in multiple languages, the uneven legitimation and reception of culture by different class formations, and staging together the multiple locations where the humanities are practiced.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Sudipta Kaviraj, “A Strange Love of the Land: Identity, Poetry and Politics in the (Un)Making of South Asia,” *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, no. 10 (December 25, 2014), 2, <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.3756>. His use of the term “fuzzy” is a way to denote a type of “pre-modern identity of graded connections” that emerge in practice and the artistic cultural sphere.

<sup>7</sup> By multiple locations of the humanities, I mean that humanities education and the reproduction of humanistic values through an engagement with culture is not limited to the university, or even to organizations like libraries and museums. The sources are more varied, may not register as secular, and can often be popular. Historically, informal meetings held in bazaars (market places) and *baithak-khanas/majlish* (place of sitting/living room), *maths* (monasteries), temples and events like the *musha'irah* (competitive poetic symposiums that also produced criticism), *kavi/sahityakari sammelan* (poetry and literature symposiums), *adda* (gather were free

What is at stake here is the possibility of a literary community premised on dissimilitude, but also one that can sense the structures of similarities that are still intelligible across regions, languages and institutions. The festivals connect and in turn reimagine a fragmented and plural literary field by staging debates about the cultural field itself.<sup>8</sup> I call this mode of interaction talk-culture that can be understood as an intimate and face-to-face practice that acts as a type of connectivity and framework to reconstitute community. Talk-culture is a purposeful and conscious (re)turn to conjunctural networks of literary sociality and older forms of public culture that are simultaneously textual and oral. Because of this self-reflexivity, talk-culture is often a combination of the literary and the critical.

I engage and collaborate with three festivals in India based on their size, the politics they identify with, and the publics they represent and reproduce. The “Jaipur Literature Festival” (JLF) is a large and popular festival that has been running annually since 2006 at Diggi Palace in Jaipur, India. The festival is curated by novelist Namita Gokhale and popular historian William Dalrymple and is produced by Sanjoy Roy and his arts management

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flowing conversation occurs) and the *mela* (fair) were locations of the humanities. Many of these sites continue to be in modified forms places where different forms of cultural, humanistic and religious engagement and instruction occur. The philosopher Sundar Sarukkai writes that the “primary engagement with humanities [in India] was not through the institutional structures of universities but through cultural organizations, activism and, public writing” (159). In this sense, the level of centralization for the production and circulation of humanistic knowledge has always been diffused. See Sundar Sarukkai, “Location of the Humanities,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2017): 151-161.

<sup>8</sup> I use the term “literary field” in this dissertation as a part of the broader cultural field. Both are meant in the same way as Pierre Bourdieu develops the concept of the field. Field theory is a way to account for the contexts and “objective relationship” that govern an agent’s action (6). Each field (economic, political, educational, cultural) is “defined as a structured space with its own laws of functioning and its own relations of force independent of those of politics and the economy, except, obviously in the case of the economic and political field” (6). Further, the structure of the field is dynamic and dependent on the positions that the agents occupy (6). Bourdieu’s field theory proposes that agents in the field “engage in competition for control of the interests and resources which are specific to the field in question” (7). Hence in the literary field, agents compete for “authority inherent in recognition, consecration and prestige” (8). Field theory is a useful starting point for this study. However, I am not only exploring how literary works register the context of their own conditions of production (especially in Chapter 4), but also suggesting that literature festivals are trying to change the nature of the field itself by producing new connections between agents in disparate constituencies. See Randal Johnson, “Editors’ Introduction: Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature and Culture,” in Pierre Bourdieu, *The Fields of Cultural Production*, (New York: Columbia, 1993), 6-7.

company Teamwork Arts. Over the last 13 years, the event claims that they have hosted over 2000 speakers and a million “book lovers from across India and the globe.”<sup>9</sup> The festival webpage also states that its purpose is to “serve as a democratic, non-aligned platform offering free and fair access” to literatures from India and the world.<sup>10</sup> Over the last few years the “Jaipur Literature Festival” has expanded its operations to multiple locations around the world and holds events in Adelaide, Belfast, London (The British Library), Colorado, Houston, New York, Toronto and Doha. I see this as the festival’s way of exporting a model of engaging the literary, that they perfected in India, to the rest of the world. What effect this model will have in these other locations is more difficult to ascertain. My work in this project is limited to the festival in Jaipur. The second festival I engage with is the “Indian Languages Festival: Samanvay” (“ILF: Samanvay”). This is a smaller festival that has been ongoing since 2011 in New Delhi. The festival is sponsored and hosted by the Indian Habitat Center, which is a “habitat” and a physical space that attempts to “serve as a catalyst for a synergetic relationship between individuals and institutions.”<sup>11</sup> However, the festival itself has been curated by a changing list of writers, translators and editors from different languages in India. This makes each edition a unique creation of the creative director, and at the same time ephemeral. Previous curators have included Satyanand Nirupam, editorial director at Hindi publishers Rajkamal Prakashan, Giriraj Kiradoo who is a Hindi writer and founder-editor of the bilingual journal *Pratilipi*, Rahul Soni, translator and now commissioning editor at Harper Collins, India, bi-lingual writer and translator Rizio Yohanan Raj, and Apoorvanand, professor in the Hindi department at the University of

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<sup>9</sup> “The Jaipur Literature Festival,” Jaipur Literature Festival, accessed December 22, 2019, <https://jaipurliteraturefestival.org/about>

<sup>10</sup> “The Jaipur Literature Festival.”

<sup>11</sup> “About IHC,” India Habitat Center, accessed December 22, 2019, <https://www.indiahabitat.org/page?view=aboutihc>

Delhi. The festival focuses on the *bhashas* (Indian languages) including English but has been wary of categories like the Global Anglophone and postcolonial novel in English. Its vision is a “call to rediscover the genius of Indian languages to interlink, and, thus, create a democratic cultural continuum...beyond verbal terms, and explores the transverbal possibilities of human expression and communication.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, the third festival I study is the “Almost Island Dialogue,” a very small New Delhi (and now Bengaluru) based “anti-festival” started in 2007 which maintains that it is “a space for literature that threatens, confronts, or bypasses the marketplace...[and] India is where it is based, and it is committed to the multiple inheritances alive here, and equally seeks that which is vital in literature anywhere in the world.”<sup>13</sup> The event, along with the online literary journal, *Almost Island*, was founded by author Sharmistha Mohanty and is curated by poet Vivek Narayanan, and translator and editor Rahul Soni. In addition to these events, I also turn to a specific session at the Urdu language festival “Jashn-E-Rekhta” to understand the Urdu/Hindi field and its staging of the *musha’irah*, a session at the “Bangalore Literature Festival,” that staged a conversation between four different festivals directors, and draw on a session at the “Karachi Literature Festival” in Karachi, Pakistan to show how the Anglophone Pakistani novel is received there.

When I started this research, something Partha Chatterjee wrote about not examining popular culture through a “fully formed scientific worldview [and] to immerse oneself in its forms” stuck with me.<sup>14</sup> Hence, my objective was to find out if the festivals

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<sup>12</sup> “Vision,” ILF: Samanvay, accessed December 22, 2019, <http://ilfsamanvay.org/vision/>. In the curatorial note for the 2015 edition of “ILF: Samanvay,” Rizio Yohannan Raj describes transverbal as those modes of expression beyond the verbal. These are the visual arts, philosophy, music, performance, and technology.

<sup>13</sup> “About Almost Island.” Almost Island, accessed December 22, 2019, <https://almostisland.com/about.html>

<sup>14</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “Critique of Popular Culture” in *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy*, (New York: Columbia University Press 2011), 171.

were organically driven by an ethos, or if the writer-curators produced a vocabulary (theoretical or otherwise) about their practices.<sup>15</sup> This was easier to examine in a smaller festival like the “Almost Island Dialogues.” With respect to “ILF: Samanvay,” I only examine sessions from 2015 and 2016. However, my conversation with writer-curator Rizio Yohannan Raj, Giriraj Kiradoo and Rahul Soni do provide a more general overview of the attitudes that drive their practices. I approached the extensiveness of JLF differently. Most of my conclusions about the attitudes that this event engenders is through my own observations and the conversations I had with Namita Gokhale and Sanjoy Roy. However, I do turn to the specific question of the Pakistani novel and its reception in Jaipur between 2008 and 2011. Here I draw conclusions about the festival based on sessions that only dealt with Pakistani writers or literatures. This allowed me to limit the scope of my conclusions.

In this context, I consider the writer-curators I spoke to as thinkers grappling with ways to negotiate and manage a multilingual and plural literary field. Therefore, in each chapter, I try to locate dispositions and attitudes that emerge out of interactions between writer-curators, the guest speakers, my own participation in the event, and audience responses to sessions. In all three cases, I realized that the possibility of change within the festivals lay in performing various versions of literary histories and producing knowledges without objectifying or institutionalizing them. This I suggest makes the practices ephemeral, while leaving conversations about literature and literary culture essentially open ended. At

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<sup>15</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I use the term “writer-curator” to describe the organizers of the three festivals I work with. For me, the writer-curator is like the artist-curator. The artist-curator as a figure in the art world only emerges in the 1960s as part of an anti-institutional ethos. Jeffery writes that artist-curators “can pose essential ‘interventions’ into collections and display methods considered contrived, jaded or outmoded by their historical (and, often, imperial) lineage of institutional cultures of curating. These instances of artists curating exhibitions are, in part, premised on the notion that the museum is inherently stratified and duplicitous, neither objective nor truthful, while the contemporary artist can offer an inquisitive, subjective, at times playful, and ultimately critical mediation” (10). See Celina Jeffery. *The Artist as Curator*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

the same time, this work also argues that the writer-curators and organizers do not look for solutions to the problem of fragmentation from within existing institutions but find alternative ways to engage and translate the plural field to a public. This I believe explains the first part of the title of this dissertation: possible institutions. By performing plurality through staging debate about it, these festivals show how precarious so-called stable institutions are. Traditional institutions emerge to “manage uncertainty and to protect ideas that societies and cultures value.”<sup>16</sup> In that sense, the festival is not at all like a traditional institution because none of the writer-curators I spoke to are invested in preserving its structures. That is why, “possible” here refers to attitudes that do not aim towards explicit rulemaking, objectivity and systemization, but at the same time offer a sense of community that a performance can simulate.<sup>17</sup>

I also embarked on this project because I wanted to find out what it means to do literary and cultural studies in an Indian context today. I was acutely aware of the crisis in literary and culture studies in India between the 1980s and 2000s when a number of scholars like Susie Tharu, Tejaswini Niranjana, Svati Joshi, Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan, Kumkum Sangari, G.N. Devy, Aijaz Ahmad, Harish Trivedi etc. mounted a powerful critique of the institution of literature and criticism, both in English and the regional languages, from

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<sup>16</sup> Mary Douglas, “Dealing with Uncertainty,” *Ethical Perspectives*, 8, no. 3 (2001): 148.

<sup>17</sup> I use performance to describe the sessions at the various festivals because I see the debates and the various other activities that go on at these events as cultural enactments. Symbolic systems like language and culture are presented to an audience in embodied forms. Further, when I say that plural practices are performed, I am drawing on the ability of performances to recall and change histories and older practices. In this context, Elin Diamond writes, “Every performance, if it is intelligible as such, embeds features of previous performances: gender conventions, racial histories, aesthetic traditions –political and cultural pressures that are consciously and unconsciously acknowledged. [. . .] Which is to say [. . .] it is impossible to write the pleasurable embodiments we call performance without tangling with the cultural stories, traditions, and political contestations that comprise our sense of history” (66). See Elin Diamond, “Performance and Cultural Politics” in *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance*, ed. Lizbeth Goodman and Jane de Gay (London: Routledge, 2002):66-69.



various theoretical and personal positions.<sup>18</sup> This critique of the institution emerged amid a powerful nexus of social and intellectual flashpoints like the growing feminist moment in India, the passing of the Mandal Commission (1990) that granted reservations (affirmative action) to the socially and educationally backward classes, the subsequent empowerment of Dalit identity and representation in the public sphere (including classrooms), the liberalization of the economy, the rise of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) and the Hindutva Right, the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, the collapse of the left internationally, the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the emergence and dominance of critical theory which led to an overemphasis on textual analysis, the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), and a renewed attention on literatures from postcolonial locations in the West.

As S.V. Srinivas put it aptly in a recent essay, “this was a period [1980-2000] when an entire generation of teachers and students *abandoned* English Literature to do other things.”<sup>19</sup> In the academic field, these “other things” was a turn to popular culture, film and politics as objects of study. This form of cultural studies viewed practice on the ground through the lenses of gender, power, knowledge, and identity that it freely borrowed from structuralism and post-structuralism. However, unlike the development of critical theory in the US which turned to linguistics and philosophy, cultural studies in India remained more eclectic, using

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<sup>18</sup> By the institution of literature and criticism in India, I mean the colonial invention of the idea of Indian literature via practices and disciplines like philology, Orientalism and Indology. These practices and disciplines in turn became the grounds for disciplines like literary studies and Comparative Literature. The instituting of an Indian literature was simultaneously an instituting of a nationalism into cultural production. Hence for Aamir Mufti, “the institution of ‘Indian literature,’ that is, the single event of its emergence and insertion into the space of world literature, was thus a deeply fraught event, leading to social and cultural cleavages whose effects are still with us today” (38). I trace this instituting and its demise in Chapter 2. See Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literature* (Harvard University Press, 2016). Kindle Edition.

<sup>19</sup> S. V. Srinivas, “After English: What Do We Teach When We Teach Literary and Cultural Studies?,” *Artha - Journal of Social Sciences* Vol. 18, No. 3 (July 1, 2019): 3, <https://doi.org/10.12724/ajss.50.1>.

qualitative methods like fieldwork and ethnography. At the same time, many of the scholars mentioned above realized that the university as a location of the humanities was too entrenched in its colonial legacy and therefore simply left. For example, G.N. Devy became a language activist and worked with tribal communities in Gujarat and Maharashtra, while Aijaz Ahmad wrote political commentary for popular magazines. Further, the critique of the institution mounted by these scholars moved the conversation away from issues of canon formation, literary history and the idea of an “Indian literature” to questions of equity and democracy in the popular realm. More generally, many of the writer-curators of the festivals emerged out of this moment when the academic humanities were just not a viable or vibrant location to do things with literature and culture. However, what has remained and become even stronger, is the idea of cultural nationalism in the public sphere. Hence, this is not a causal explanation, but simply the coordinates of the social conditions for both my own work in this dissertation and the proliferation of public events that engage with writing and culture in alternate ways.

More recently, current scholarship on literatures festivals in Europe and Australia approach the phenomenon through theories of cultural globalization, Jürgen Habermas’ critique of the public sphere and the model of communicative action, and Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory and competitive model of symbolic power.<sup>20</sup> In Australia, Wenche Ommundsen argues that festivals dispute ideas like cultural mapping, cultural heritage and exoticization of cultural production. While other festivals offer audiences the art object – the film, the painting and dance, literature festivals offer “by-products: interviews, round-tables, audience participation...[which] exist to create, or reaffirm, a cultural community whose interests are

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<sup>20</sup> Liana Giorgi and Monica Sassatelli, “Introduction,” in *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, ed. Liana Giorgi and Monica Sassatelli and Gerard Delanty (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 5.

not adequately served by the media (television in particular) as the dominant arenas for public debate.”<sup>21</sup> While the collection of essays edited by Liana Giorgi and Monica Sassatelli draw on critical approaches, especially Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology of culture, the Frankfurt School and British cultural studies, Ommundsen’s study is based on a cross-sectional survey of festival goers and her conclusions draw heavily on an analysis of quantitative data. In contrast, scholars like Beth Driscoll, Claire Squires and Millicent Weber integrate the two approaches and use qualitative methods like mining social media, surveys, participant observation, and long-form and semi-structured interviews with festival audiences.<sup>22</sup> All of these studies focus on literature festivals in the UK and Australia. Further, they attempt to understand the significance of this way of legitimating literary production mostly through reception theory. Broadly, the objective of research on literature festivals has been to understand how they influence taste, value and judgement. Further, scholars are asking how the relationship between live, print and digital forms effect circulation and reception. This raises more questions about active and passive forms of participation, affective engagement of audiences, and the unsettling effect of middlebrow cultural production. Finally, their research queries the relationship between festivals and the creative and cultural industries.

My work in this dissertation builds on both a cultural studies that emerged in India in the 1990s and current scholarship on literature festivals to offer an understanding of the

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<sup>21</sup> Wenche Ommundsen, “The Circus Is in Town: Literary Festivals and the Mapping of Cultural Heritage,” in *Australian Writing and the City, Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, ed. K. Stewart and F. de Groen, (2013): 178.

<sup>22</sup> See Beth Driscoll, “The Middlebrow Pleasures of Literary Festivals,” in *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 152- 193. and “Sentiment Analysis and the Literary Festival Audience,” *Continuum* 29, no. 6 (November 2, 2015): 861–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2015.1040729>; Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires, “Serious Fun: Gaming the Book Festival,” *Mémoires Du Livre* 9, no. 2 (May 31, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.7202/1046988ar>; Millicent Weber, *Literary Festivals and Contemporary Book Culture*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

phenomenon from the subcontinent. I set out to not only understand why these festivals have emerged in India, but also learn from their practices. I draw on a similar combination of critical approaches as scholars elsewhere (Pierre Bourdieu's work on culture and literature, the Frankfurt School, British cultural studies and postcolonial studies) and combine it with qualitative methods like participant observation, interviews with the organizers, ethnographic styles of composing, and a close reading of literary works that circulate within these events. I am less interested in reception and data generated from the audience. Instead I turn to the producers, managers and writer-curators of these festivals to understand what drives them to produce a network of legitimation for a multilingual and plural literary field in the subcontinent. This interest is heavily influenced by the specificities of the literary field and the power that the institution of literature and criticism has wielded on it. Hence, I assume a reflective and relational approach to literature festivals as they interact, compete, and cooperate with each other and the field they inhabit and rearticulate. I begin with the premise that their emergence and durability are intrinsically connected to the activities of other institutional locations of literature and criticism and the discourse they produce. At the same time, I do not take my own position within the discipline of academic criticism as a given. Rather, I propose that only by turning to practices in the field and questioning my own institutional habits and boundaries, I can arrive at a more situated and relevant understanding of my own work and the festivals. The academic humanities within universities, a potentially worthwhile (but not indispensable) pursuit in postcolonial contexts, can reflect on its own practice by engaging with both the good and bad aspects of these public event. The festivals, I believe, are a public rejoinder to the way literature and culture are legitimated by academic-bureaucratic spaces, the publishing industry and mass-media in the region. This is also what makes them extremely local while being implicated in the global.

Before I turn to the outline of my chapters, I wish to elaborate on why I think that the festivals should be understood within their local contexts, even if their emergence seems like a global trend. Like festivals in Europe or Australia, the ones in India serve the following functions: economic (promotion of authors, book sales), political (democratize and decentralize literary culture) and cultural (discovery, naming and debate).<sup>23</sup> However, the different structure of the literary field and the way the institution of literature and criticism have evolved give them a slightly different meaning in the subcontinent. I hope this section will further explain why there is a politics involved in attempting to find unique and public ways to connect and in turn reimagine a fragmented and plural literary field. This takes us back to Ghosh's blog post I started the introduction with because it implies that the *tamasha* and the *mela* as a way to frame the experience of literature in India can be a political act. The public form of some of the festivals and their need to reach as large an audience as possible continues to productively undercut the liberal bias of the academic humanities in India.

Historically, in the European context, the disintegration of the public sphere was the consequence of a culture industry that "intentionally integrates its consumers from above" and makes the masses an "object of calculation."<sup>24</sup> At least one consequence of this commodification was the emergence of professional criticism and the academic humanities. For Jürgen Habermas, the emergence of the institutionalized intellectual, or the specialist reader can be traced to the transformation and disintegration of the public sphere that culminates in the shift "from a culture-debating (*kulturrasonierend*) to a culture-consuming

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<sup>23</sup> Gisèle Sapiro, "The Metamorphosis of Modes of Consecration in the Literary Field: Academies, Literary Prizes, Festivals," *Poetics* 59 (April 2016): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2016.01.003>.

<sup>24</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Anson G. Rabinbach, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," *New German Critique*, no. 6 (1975): 12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/487650>.

public.”<sup>25</sup> Culture itself (rather than the material objects such as books, theater tickets, etc.) becomes a commodity. Thus, he writes, “book clubs administer their clientele directly as part of the business outside the public sphere in the world of letters. Conversely, the weakening of the role of criticism itself may be connected with this, a criticism in which at one time, when reviewers of the caliber of Schiller and Schlegel did not regard themselves as too good for voluminous incidental activity of this sort, the lay judgment of the private people with an interest in literature had been institutionalized.”<sup>26</sup> Consequently, a different constituency had to be developed from within which a critique of this lay judgment could be pronounced. This type of commodification and transformation was only partial in the subcontinent, and the emergence of literary criticism and various practices and disciplines like Orientalism, Indology and the study of English and Comparative Literature were less a response to the way the masses and the public engaged culture, and more a consequence of colonial preoccupations with ruling the masses and disciplining the field.<sup>27</sup> The consequent adoption and various adaptations of these disciplines and the internalization of their premises could be attributed to the power of strong institutions to reproduce themselves once they have been set into motion.

However, any kind of similarity between the current phenomenon of the literature festivals and the formation of the republic of letters and the disintegration of the public sphere in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England cannot be sustained beyond superficial and anachronistic explanations. Even if we consider the rapid growth of a multinational and domestic publishing industry, a growing reading public and competing

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<sup>25</sup> Jürgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), 159.

<sup>26</sup> Jürgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 167.

<sup>27</sup> See Gauri Viswanathan. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

definitions of literature in India today, the festivals are a return to embodied public performance and practice that is centered around a culture of face to face debate. There is something illiberal (and maybe more republican) in the way literature is being staged. Rather than leading to more fragmentation, these festivals and their organizers attempt to manage what seems like an already fragmented field. Further the “enlightened reading public,” that a scholar like Paul Keen identifies in his work on print-culture and the public sphere where “all rational individuals could have their say” and the “universality of literature...and the exclusions which this ideal helped to legitimate” has its corollary in the colonial invention of the institution of Indian literature and criticism at around the same time that the crisis of legitimation occurred in England and Europe.<sup>28</sup> The Oriental renaissance in fact led to the proliferation of institutional philology in Europe and ultimately returned to the colony as a method and practice. Hence the literature festival as a way to legitimate literary production in the subcontinent today is not a late arrival. The South Asian literary field is not emerging from the imaginary waiting-room of history. Rather, it is a way to address the further fragmentation (of an already multilingual and plural field) that philological nationalism, colonial modernity, the transnational expansion of a particular kind of European reading public, a bourgeoisie liberalism and its institutions brought with it. Literary and cultural criticism in India can be complicit in this global structure of the (English) republic of letters.<sup>29</sup> What the world republic of letters leaves out in India, and the literature festival

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Keen, *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>29</sup> See Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures*, (London: Verso, 2000), 15-16. For Ahmad, the incomplete bourgeoisie project breaks up an already plural field by introducing specific logics that produces a literary canon that aligns with the tastes and preferences of the bourgeois and upper-caste national elite, the emergence of classicism that is a combination of Brahminical and European interests in a “high” cultural past, the ongoing tension between regional literatures and the idea of an “Indian literature,” the compulsions to produce literary histories, the dominance of print culture which subsumes orality, and textuality as a way to understand lived histories.

addresses to some extent, is the question of the masses, the large populations that cannot “read,” but can still experience cultural production through other mediums, read only in particular languages, or have completely different notions of what cultural experience is.

In Chapter One, “Genealogy, Connecting Fragments and Talk-Culture” I ask what kind of backstory do festival directors, media, circulating texts, discussions, and the space of the festival signify? I track two parallel logics. The first is how the festival and its organizers produce a description of talk-culture by drawing on older public practices and at the same time articulate the various types of fragmentations that the literature festival attempts to reassemble. I show how the conflict between the notions of a liberal idea of the republic of letters is contested at an early morning session I attended at the “Jaipur Literature Festival” in 2018. The session is about the problems of interpretation. The speakers debate the difference between a rational and disembodied reading public and the unruly mob in a physical location that appears like a *mela*, and is defined by the *pandal* (tent), the *chainwallah* (tea seller), *rediwallah* (hawkers) and the *haat* (bazaars). These signify not only the improvised nature of the enterprise, but also a purposeful non-exclusivity associated with the *janta* (public) at JLF. I claim that this performance by the speakers in this specific location democratizes access. I then turn to my conversation with the writer-curators to show the eclectic genealogy they draw on as a way to describe what they do. JLF is equally representative of the *rasa*’s of Sanskrit poetics, the *Kumbh Mela* and Woodstock. But the repetitive motif in all these descriptions is an attempt to reconstitute something that is incongruent. These incongruences are class based, linguistic (Hindi-English/Hindi-Urdu), literary and cultural. I then analyze a recorded session of the “Bangalore Literature Festival” to show how five festival directors produce definitions of the literature festival as a genre by producing an ad-hoc network of citations, both textual and oral, from the Sangam period (c.



300 BCE to 300 CE.) in South India, to festivals at Kalyana in Northern Karnataka in the twelfth century, to the *musba'irah* (poetic symposium) and addas of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Finally, I turn to the *musba'irah* and the adda as examples of residual culture and its transformation from practice, to text (representation), and then back to performance. I do this through a reading of Farhatullah Baig Dehalvi's *Delhi ki Akhri Shama'*/*The Last Musba'irah of Delhi* (c.1930/1978) and a session at the "Jashn-E-Rekhta" to show how the practice moves from one form/medium to another while changing from high to popular culture. The session at the "Jashn-E-Rekhta" suggests that the popular and the pleasurable could be both political and pedagogical.

However, the plural histories and descriptions that the festivals and their organizers draw from suggest that they all function with an implicit understanding of what the institution of literature (and criticism) is in the Indian context. This common understanding is an assemblage of spatially and temporally plural histories. However, by choosing to legitimate literature by staging talk-culture, the festivals are responding to older problems of the literary field in new ways. Chapter 2, "The Institution of Literature, Criticism and 'ILF: Samanvay' as Institution of Practice" locates the literature festivals and this dissertation within the social and historical conditions of the production of the institution of literature and criticism in the subcontinent. I begin with the philological revolution and the pressures of its norms and values in India through the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century through readings of K.T. Telang's response to Albrecht Weber in "Was the *Ramayana* Copied" (1872) and a twenty-part radio show, *Literatures in Modern Indian Languages: A Series of Broadcasts from All India Radio* (1954) edited by V.K. Gokak. I show how and why the paradox of a national whole and its plural parts has been a continued problem of methodology in the subcontinent. But it is not until the 1970s when a full-scale response to the methods and

practices of Orientalism and Indology begin to appear with Sujit Mukherjee's *Towards a Literary History of India* (1975). I show that this critique of the institution of literature and criticism reaches its peak in the 90s when the ideas of an Indian literature, literary history, and (English literary) criticism as organizing principles and methodologies are finally eschewed. I analyze and re-read the co-ordinates of this universe which consisted of scholars like Aijaz Ahmad, G.N. Devy, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, Svati Joshi and Susie Tharu. I show that the critique mounted on the institution of literature left a gap that made possible a re-inscription of the literary field by other means. In the second part of the chapter, I explore this "other means" by taking "ILF: Samanvay" as example of a festival that raises questions about linguistic and regional fragmentation and produces alternative ways and reasons to engage literature and cultural production. Through readings of a keynote address by a much older Aijaz Ahmad in 2015, the Vision Manifesto (2016) of "ILF: Samanvay," and my discussions with the curator of the event, Rizio Yohanan Raj, I show that to perform "cultural continuums" as an alternative to an older logic of "national integration," and to theorize the possibility of an institution that is premised on practices rather than objectivity and systemizations it to question and reassemble the social and historical conditions of the production of the literary field. I explore what Yohanan Raj means when she says that in this kind of possible institution, performances take the place of disciplining the field because performance embodies attitudes like uncertainty, ephemerality, surprise successions and coincidental conjunctions between the different parts of the Indian literary world.

If "ILF: Samanvay" activates access to continuums by producing pathways for a public who want to wander, the third chapter, "'Almost Island Dialogues' and Performing Literature-Worlds" argues that this small New Delhi based festival practices intimacy and engages in talk-culture that is built around careful curation, hospitality, ad-lib translations,

punctuated by silence, and injected with a productive incompleteness. This intimacy is not like the energy of the mob or crowd that the “Jaipur Literature Festival” embodies. Rather, it is an intimacy and a curation that resembles the relationship between a host (writer-curators) and a guest (writers, the works and the audience). The “Dialogues” are indicative of the practice of world literature that question models of legitimation based on representativeness, anthologizing, national origins and prestige. I make my argument through observations at the 2017 “Dialogues,” discussions with Sharmistha Mohanty, Vivek Narayanan and Rahul Soni, audio recordings, and content from the journal *Almost Island*. The writer-curators gently resist my terminologies and produce their own descriptions. My argument emerges out of this dialog between different approaches. I conclude that for the writer-curators, the act of observing and participating in talk-culture is a way to read and engage with the text more deeply. This is because the festival asks how one is to read multilingual regional and world literatures in a literary field. To observe and engage in a debate with the authors becomes a way to read more deeply, especially in languages one cannot understand. I argue that this is the festival's way to compensate for a weak translation infrastructure in India that is often dominated by English language translations from the British or American literary field. The “Almost Island Dialogues” models a practice that is based on hospitality and the intimacy of face-to-face interaction with the text, the writer and the translator. Finally, I ask what is the outcome of this intimacy? Based on my conversations at the festival and through a reading of poet Vahni Capildeo's essay, “Questions of Approach,” I show that intimacy is a way to effect “transformations” in thought that is embodied, rather than produce a body of knowledge. At the same time, talk-culture at the “Dialogues” is an “engagement” that evolves in the presence of the “other” in the room, is improvisational, and refuses to come to conclusions.

Finally, in “Commodifying the Postcolonial in India: The ‘Jaipur Literature Festival’ and the Pakistani Novel,” I return to Jaipur between 2008 and 2011 to argue that it attempts to institute the category of the Pakistani novel in India by importing an alterity industry. It produces a category like “Moonlight’s Children” as an “other” to an imagined Indian literature that is confused with a post–Salman Rushdie postcolonial and Global Anglophone canon. Within this context, I read Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) as an axiological deliberation on aesthetic value and its production and argue that the novel, as it circulates at JLF, asks who legitimates, for whom and in what location. Through a reading of the novel, I show that this critique is intensified when the novel is read aloud at JLF in Urdu–Hindi rather than English. The work claims that it is trapped between values that resemble global finance on the one hand, and affective ties like love on the other. I indicate a parallel here, between a festival like JLF and the novel because both seem to undermine the culture industry through (a desire for) intimacy. However, the reason JLF is compelled to value the Pakistani novel as the “other” to an Indian novel is because the festival itself emerges out of a competitive ethos against the regime of value and the canon of postcolonial literature that emerges in the West. Therefore, I claim that regional competitiveness follows an older logic of a philological nationalism that must institute national literatures, but simultaneously account for difference. An analysis of multiple sessions shows that importing alterity to produce an Indian or Pakistani literary identity is undermined by an attitude of disavowal towards the literary object, and towards categories like the Pakistani and Indian novel. This is not resistance, but a reluctance to arrive at a conclusion because to conclude is also to declare the existence of the “other” literary identity and history. At the festival, disavowal is an attitude to leave the conversation open and incomplete.

When I decided to embark on this project, I was driven by a need to find a way to do a more situated and contextual literary studies in the Indian context. For this, I felt that I had to locate the study in India and turn to practices and activities of different individuals and organizations on the ground. I could have turned to other institutional locations like the university itself or the national academy of letters. I could have also turned to set of more radical organizations like The Center for the Study of Culture and Society, Bengaluru (Tejaswini Niranjana), Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies (Susie J. Tharu), The Bhasha Research and Publication Center, and the Adivasi Academy (G.N. Devy) that emerged in the 90s as a way to practice a contextual and situated humanities outside the framework of the university. However, the literature festivals seemed less conscious about what their agenda was. This attracted me to it. Initially, I set out to critique the public and popular nature of the festivals, but the more I engaged with them, attended sessions, followed conversations, and spoke to the writer-curators, I felt that some of these events were more than just spectacles. I went in with one set of expectations and emerged with a more complex view of the literary field in India. Ultimately, I feel that by observing how individuals and organizations engage the public in a debate about literature and culture, I can learn to produce a more engaged humanities from within my own location in academia. At the same time, this work tries to collaborate with the writer-curators of the festivals to understand their practice in relation to the positions they occupy in the literary field. In that sense, I also hope that this project supports their work in the public sphere in productive ways.

## Chapter 1

### Genealogy, Connecting Fragments and Talk-Culture

I begin this dissertation by asking what kind of meanings writer-curators, festival directors, media, circulating texts, discussions, and the location of the festivals produce. I compliment this analysis with my own observations (both physical and virtual) at various festivals. In the first part of the chapter, I return to Amitav Ghosh's blogpost and its concerns that I refer to in the Introduction. I attempt to understand why the festival stages this anxiety about a specific kind of book and reading culture that is premised on the difference between a disembodied liberal bourgeois subject and an embodied, face to face interaction of the crowd. I analyze the tension between the liberal and the illiberal public in an early morning session I attended at the "Jaipur Literature Festival" in January 2018. These different attitudes towards culture and literature are both a genealogy and an indication of a class fragmentation in the Indian literary field. I argue that even though the "Jaipur Literature Festival" is immersed in the culture industry, it compensates for the commodification of culture and ideas through a performance of intimacy.

In the second section, I trace this democratizing impulse through conversations with the directors of the "Jaipur Literature Festival," and an analysis of a conversation between the directors of four different festivals (Bangalore, Jaipur, Kolkata and Chennai) which took place at the "Bangalore Literature Festival." Throughout this section, the descriptions that the directors produce repeatedly point to the festival as a medium to bring together different literary fields (English and the Indian languages for example) which until now were discreet with their own publics, modes of legitimation and forms of circulation.

As a way to describe the uniqueness of the mode of interaction at the festivals, I propose the term "talk-culture" that can be understood as a practice that acts as a type of

connectivity, or framework to reconstitute community. In other words, talk-culture is a way to manage the plural nature of the Indian literary field. Talk-culture is a purposeful and conscious (re)turn to conjunctural networks of literary sociality and older forms of public culture that were simultaneously textual and oral. This performance of intimacy draws on other practices, modes of public social communication, entertainment and debating cultures that occurred in places like the *mela* (fair) bazaars, *haats* (markets), *baithak-khanas* or the *majlis* (place of sitting, council), and at events like the *musha'irah* (poetic symposium), *kavi* and *sahityakari sammelan* (poetry and literature conventions) and addas.<sup>1</sup> Further, I suggest that talk-culture is often a combination of the literary and the critical. This combination is what I turn to in the last part of this chapter and reiterate in the following chapters.

Hence talk-culture is not these practices, but a conscious and iterative performance of residual cultures. The last section of this chapter turns to two residual practices, the adda (briefly) and the *musha'irah* (more extensively) and shows how a performance is first transformed into print culture, and then how print culture becomes performance again. Here I read Farhatullah Baig Dehalvi's fictional-historical account, *Delhi ki Akhri Shama/The Last Musha'irah of Delhi* as a text that mimics the culture of speech by framing the narrative within the structure of the *musha'irah*. Then I read a specific session at the Urdu language festival "Jashn-E-Rekhta" to show how it transforms the textual *musha'irah* back into performance. The subtext in this section is the Urdu/Hindi divide that forms a compliment to the

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<sup>1</sup> The OED defines adda as a "gathering where free-flowing, informal conversation takes place." "adda, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2017, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/273323](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/273323). Accessed 6 November 2017. Also see, Akhtar Qamber, "Introduction," in *The Last Musha'irah of Delhi* by Farhatullah Baig, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1978), 18. I use Qamber's orthography and description for the term and practice of the *musha'irah*. She describes the event as "a poetic symposium, a soirée at which poets of the day read their original works for pleasure." Over time, these events did take on a more public character and became "excellent forums for literary criticism, disputation and, sometimes, on-the-spot poetic compositions." I return to questions regarding the location of adda and Baig's text with regard to the literature festival later in the chapter.

Hindi/English (vernacular/cosmopolitan) divide that festival directors brought up in my conversations with them. Talk-culture then offers a framework to transform residual cultural practices into a living and moving phenomenon in the public sphere.

### **Literature in the Times of Mandal, *Mandir* and Market<sup>2</sup>**

Diggi Palace is at the end of a side street lined with apartments, hotels and standalone houses. Originally a *haveli* (mansion), it was built by Thakur Saheb Pratap Singh Ji Diggi in 1860, and today, it is one of many heritage hotels in Jaipur.<sup>3</sup> It has been the primary venue for the “Jaipur Literature Festival” (JLF) since its inception in 2006. It was a Friday, the second day of the festival, and I arrived at the venue a little after 10:00 am. It was the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 2018. As I walked down the alley, through the decorated front gates to the Bank of Baroda Front Lawn, I first heard Harvard University based literary critic Homi Bhabha’s voice, and then saw him invoking George Orwell as the “reigning deity” at Jaipur that morning.<sup>4</sup> The audience clapped as I walked around the back to find an empty chair. There weren’t many. I was listening to Bhabha convert the secular and dissident voice of a world writer from England into the sacred at a literature festival in India. The session was called “Whose Interpretation Is It Anyway?” and Bhabha’s introductory remarks were meant as a provocation to the debate that was to follow. Like many of the sessions at JLF, this one drew from current conversations surrounding “fake news” in the US, the sanctioned rise of

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<sup>2</sup> Politician and public intellectual Yogendra Yadav calls “Mandal, *Mandir* and Market” the third and ongoing phase in Indian democratic politics. For readers unfamiliar with this triad, B.P. Mandal was the chairman of the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission (SEBC) which recommended reservations (affirmative action) for OBC’s (Other Backward Classes). Reservations were implemented in the early 1990s by the V.P. Singh led Janata Dal government. “*Mandir*” or temple refers to the rise of BJP (Bhartiya Janata Party) supported Hindu fundamentalism that claims the prior existence of a Ram temple where the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya has stood at least since 1528. The culmination of this mobilization was the demolition of the mosque by BJP, VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad) and RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) members in December 1992. And “market” refers to the economic liberalization of India in 1991 by the then finance minister of the Congress Party, Dr. Manmohan Singh.

<sup>3</sup> “Diggi Palace,” last modified 2018, <https://www.hoteldiggipalace.com/the-place.html>

<sup>4</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, “Whose Interpretation is it Anyway,” Jaipur Literature Festival, 2018, YouTube Video, Published on February 1, 2018, 56.35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkmlOyZhHTc>



Hindutva chauvinism in India, historical negationism, and the proliferation of new media as a problem of interpretation.

The blurb for the session read: “we are in an age where miscomprehension, competing truths and fictions, contested histories and constructed scenarios play themselves out even as they polarize and tear apart the social fabric, in times when everyone has the right to interpret and misinterpret.”<sup>5</sup> It was in this context that Bhabha invoked the Orwellian connection between politics, language and ideology to claim that we live in an age of doublethink and Newspeak, and the only way to inhabit the political is to ask whose interpretation is it anyway. He paraphrased Orwell’s “unequivocal warning: when the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer, [and it] is a responsibility eminently suitable to us writers [to pay attention to language] as citizens of the JLF republic of letters.”<sup>6</sup> Bhabha went on to perform interpretation for the audience. He critiqued American President Donald Trump’s claim about Muslims “cavorting” in New Jersey after 9/11, Union Minister for Human Resources Development Satyapal Singh’s dismissal of Darwinian evolution, and BJP MLA Usha Thakur’s claim that Muslims should sacrifice their sons instead of goats (veiled as Hindutva compassion for animals and animal rights) on *Eid al-Adha*.

As I heard the introductory provocation and followed the debate between NDTV journalist Sreenivasan Jain, print journalist Sheela Reddy, literary scholar Homi Bhabha, sociologist Dipankar Gupta and historian Maya Jasanoff, I began to pay attention to the overt self-reflexivity in the conversation. The social fragmentation that the blurb referred to seemed deeper, older and more fraught than the more recent phenomenon of “fake news,” or the resurgence of communal discord in India. And the figurative mise en scène for this

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<sup>5</sup> Teamwork Arts, *The Jaipur Literature Festival: 24-29 January, 2018 Brochure*, (Jaipur: Teamwork Arts, 2018), 58.

<sup>6</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, “Whose Interpretation is it Anyway.”

performance about fragmentation was literature and the idea of the literary. Even though Jain ironically claimed that as a television anchor, his role would be to “lower the standard of discourse,” the general tenor of the session was an introspection on democratic participation, citizenship, the role of dissent in a plural society, the function of public debate, and the ethical prerogative underlying interpretation, or reading. As I think more deeply about my experience of sitting alongside 400 other people that Friday morning at Diggi Palace (was it really a public sphere?), I wondered what this self-reflexivity meant, and what was at stake for three scholars and two journalists to become public intellectuals at that moment? And why did they stage a debate for an audience about democratic representation and interpretation as a way to be in politics? Who was I in this debate about interpretation in India, and how would I translate my experience at JLF that morning to an audience? The literary, or an expanded notion of it framed this whole scene by the very fact that we were all at an event that called itself a literature festival and George Orwell was our temporary god that morning; *Nineteen Eighty-Four* our book.

I came with certain pre-conceived notions about JLF. I had been following the festival and other such yearly gatherings through videos posted online and had amassed a large archive of media coverage of the festival that spanned approximately ten years. I did not come to Jaipur as a sceptic of popular culture. I was simply curious and simultaneously critical of a phenomenon that I thought was finding unique ways to manage a highly plural literary field by engaging the public sphere in India. Further, I was inquisitive about the implications of the form of the “festival” as a possible and alternative space for the legitimization of literature through the production of ideas, knowledges, norms and values.

However, when I started to think about a liberal bourgeois public sphere in India, both historically and in the present moment (as a neoliberalism), I kept running up against

inconsistencies.<sup>7</sup> Historian C.A. Bayly does suggest that one can find cognates to a Habermas-like public sphere in precolonial and colonial India. He calls it the indigenous “information order” and the Indian ecumene that consisted of “communities of knowledge, styles of reasoned debate and patterns of social communication.”<sup>8</sup> The social class he refers to is an elite and middle rung of society, but it is not a Marxian socio-economic class that links liberalism to the bourgeoisie rigidly because liberalism was a minor movement in colonial India. What happened to this ecumene? Or did the new colonial regime radically change institutional structures to such an extent that older Indo-Persian and Arabic cultural networks suddenly became residual? Or did Empire reproduce a small section of the population as a type of liberal bourgeoisie subject, often English speaking and Westernized? This small population were essentially a consequence of the transnational expansion of Europe’s reading public. Most importantly, what can the notion of an ecumene offer today, to think about the practice and discourse that the literature festival draws on and perpetuates. Or is it even necessary that one speak about this phenomenon in these terms – of the ecumene and the liberal bourgeois public sphere? Moreover, the idea that I kept

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<sup>7</sup> I do not use liberal in its vernacular form that differentiates between liberal and conservative politics in the contemporary moment, but in terms of the theories of liberal political theory that says that individuals have a fundamental right to liberty and property. For an historical account of liberalism in India see C.A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Even though liberalism was a minor strand in the colonial context, Bayly argues that it still did have an important role in the emergence of political democracy in India. He traces a genealogy from Sir Dadabhai Naoroji Dordi, Krishna Mohan Banerjea, John Stuart Mill to Rammohan Roy. However, over the years, various ideological positions have berated this liberal lineage “as ‘mendicants’ (by the Swadeshi radicals); office-seeking collaborators (by the Cambridge School of the 1960s and 1970s); self-seeking bourgeois individualists (by some Marxist historians of the same period); inauthentic ‘mimic men’; or elitists delivering a ‘derivative discourse’ (by some, though not all, of the ‘postcolonial’ historians of the 1980s and 1990s) (343).” Even today an Indian version of liberalism in the form of a rights based discourse of the individual, reservations, social and economic equality, ownership of private property and an alliance with the West “has apparently outlasted socialist centralization, Gandhianism and even, thus far, Hindutva”(355).

<sup>8</sup> C.A. Bayly. *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 9.

running up against inconsistencies at JLF was further complicated by political scientist Francis Cody's hypothesis. He asks:

So, what would critical theories of the embodied public sphere that need not assume the hegemony of liberalism look like? What materials might one think through to develop such a framework? The beginnings of an answer to these questions can be found in strains of political thought that insist on thinking democracy from a context where those who enjoy the self-image of occupying the socially unmarked anonymity of abstract citizenship form a minority.<sup>9</sup>

At JLF, access to literature was not determined by the “socially unmarked anonymity of abstract citizenship;” rather, it was embodied, where all of us rubbed shoulders, and the *janta* or public suddenly seemed to occupy what were once restricted spaces. This is the divide, or fragmentation that I elaborate on in the first part of this chapter where it seems like the session that morning was performing the congruencies and incongruences between communities divided along binaries such as rational/irrational, conservative/progressive, English/vernacular, textual/non-textual, secular/non-secular and the urban/rural.

It is in this context that I feel that the theoretical analysis of the Habermasian public sphere has always been overdetermined by the modalities of print capitalism. This was only part of the puzzle that would explain why many of us had assembled on a Friday morning to listen to and participate in a public debate about interpretation. Bayly's “ecumene” gave me one way to think about the gathering. The ecumene is a reply to Habermas' public sphere that takes into account the non-textual nature of interaction in South Asia. Bayly constructs an image of social communication from fragmentary historical records. He writes,

I use the word ecumene to describe the form of cultural and political debate which was typical of north India before the emergence of the newspaper and public association, yet persisted in conjunction with the press and new forms of publicity into the age of nationalism. ...The theme of high-minded friendship animated the poets, scholars and officials who conversed along these networks [Indo-Persian] and

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<sup>9</sup> See Cody, F. “Populist Publics: Print Capitalism and Crowd Violence beyond Liberal Frameworks.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 35, no. 1, (Jan. 2015): 51. *Crossref*, doi:10.1215/1089201X-2876092

set the tone for them.... it was closer in spirit to the groupings of philosophers, urban notables and officials in the world of late antiquity – the Christian-Greek ecumene – than it was to Habermas’s modern public. His public sphere is more sharply separated from the world of intimate social relations; people’s judgement is represented through marketed print in an almost mechanical way.<sup>10</sup>

Bayly is not producing a teleology between the social facts of Europe and India even when the influence of Habermas’ work still infuses his argument. However, he is interested in recovering an existing information order that interacted with colonial knowledge. This in turn undermines the primacy of the latter in shaping subcontinental institutional reality. Second, the ecumene is a practice that co-exists with print culture and an earlier script-mercantilism.<sup>11</sup> Third, this culture of debating is based on affective elements like “high minded friendship” and intimacy rather than simply an economic (“mechanical,” calculation) or political impetus.

Here, the ecumene seems closer to the idea of a republicanism because of its emphasis on civic virtue and the common good, while Habermas’ republic of letters feels closer to liberalism because of laissez faire commerce (publishing industry for instance) that played a positive role, but ultimately corrupted the public sphere through commodification. JLF is immersed in the culture of books, publishers (print capitalism) and writers, while at the same time it propagates “intimate social relations” thus combining the impersonal nature of circulation of a text-public with the embodied nature of a republicanism. It seemed as if it was compensating the commodification of culture and ideas through a performance of intimacy. But this curious combination is a performance rather than a return to some ideal

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<sup>10</sup> Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, 182.

<sup>11</sup> See Sheldon Pollock, *Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Pre-Modern India*. (Berkley: University of California Press, 2006), 558. He writes, “the true watershed in the history of communicative media, in India at least, was the invention not of print-capitalism but of script-mercantilism of the sort found in both Sanskrit and vernacular cultures. This manuscript culture was enormously productive and efficient.”

ecumene. I understand recalling as laying a claim on the past, which implies knowing it, and therefore includes a process of recovering it for some purpose. Performing the past is to modify it, make it different, but at the same time acknowledging that something of history always permeates in the act of doing.

The whole session at Diggi Palace was a purposeful return to face-to-face interaction and intercommunication in an otherwise “dramatized society” that is saturated with technologies that disseminate impersonal mass media.<sup>12</sup> The space of this intercommunication also struck me as unique. Diggi Palace is not ordinarily a public space. Historically, it would have been feudal and elite, and today it is an exclusive hotel – in both cases a location that is out of bounds for the general public, or for any kind of mass politics. However, for five days every year, the private hotel transfigures into a public venue where technically anyone can come, listen and participate in the “JLF republic of letters.” The festival repurposes a location associated with passive consumption into a platform for active debate and discovery without necessarily critiquing the location itself. In this sense, the atmosphere of the sessions seems closer to the way *melas*, *jashn* and *utsavs* (which can be translated as fairs, celebration, a gathering, or meeting) function. The idea is to convert a space customarily associated with some other function, often exuding a disposition in opposition to the practice, and make it suitable for the ethos of the performance. The characteristics of the *pandal* (tent), the *chaimallah* (tea seller), *redimallah* (hawkers) and the *haat* (open air bazaars) are all ubiquitous at the event. The underlying principal connecting the tent, the tea-seller, the hawkers and the bazaar in the Indian context is a sense of precarity, the makeshift, improvisational and the transitory. At the same time, when literature from the

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<sup>12</sup> Raymond Williams, “Drama in a Dramatized Society,” in *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance*, ed. Lizbeth Goodman and Jane de Gay, (London: Routledge, 2002), 55.

world is placed within such signs of the local and transient, it signals many things: a need to localize the world, hospitality, a democratizing impulse, the notion of pleasure that is momentary rather than future oriented, and an indication that the literary and the intellectual too are part of a market place.

I want to reason that JLF (and other similarly large events) fall under the genre of the *mela* (fair), that is characterized by large crowds and performance.<sup>13</sup> At the same time it invokes more the spontaneity of a debate at a tea stall or a café, than, say the deliberate programming involved in television or radio. The festival is akin to an impromptu performance or travelling show.<sup>14</sup> It is not a literary salon because of the large numbers, in this case, almost 65,000 people every day for five days, open access (free of cost) and the purposeful non-exclusivity of the transformed space. One could also object to my comparison with theatre, because what is staged is not only the art object, the play, the song, or dance, but polemics and arguments about art, literature, culture and society.<sup>15</sup> It is criticism and critique that is performed in an unscripted way and in unpredictable settings. Often, the performance of the literary (the poem or the reading) and the act of criticism and critique are not two different operations. I want to call this combination of the literary and the critical “talk-culture.” I understand talk-culture to be a purposeful and conscious (re)turn to conjunctural networks of literary sociality and older forms of public culture.<sup>16</sup> This mode

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<sup>13</sup> In the European context see Alessandro Falassi, *Time out of Time: Essays on the Festival*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 7.

<sup>14</sup> See Bruno Latour and Weibel P, *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> See Wenche Ommundsen, “The Circus Is in Town: Literary Festivals and the Mapping of Cultural Heritage,” in *Australian Writing and the City, Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, ed. K. Stewart and F. de Groen, (2013): 178. CrossRef.

<sup>16</sup> See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South Asia, 1400-1750.” *Daedalus*, vol. 127, no. 3 (July 1998): 99-100, doi:10.2307/20027508. I first came across the term “conjunctural” in Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s essay “Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South Asia, 1400-1750.” There he uses it to describe modernity as a “global and conjunctural phenomenon” rather than a thing that travelled from Europe to the rest of the world (99-100). In my usage, I co-opt this term to mean that literary practices in South Asia always emerged out of “a meeting of circumstances or events” – to use the dictionary

of engagement draws on literary and critical practices that are simultaneously textual and oral, or draw on a sense of community from both text-publics and face-to-face interactions.

Here I have in mind practices and modes of public social communication and debate (an *ecumene*) that took place in bazaars, *haats* (markets), *baithak-kehanas* or the *majlish* (place of sitting, council), and at events like the *musha'irah* (poetic symposium), *kavi* and *sahityakari sammelan* (poetry and literature conventions) and *addas*. Historically, these would have been the location of the humanities.<sup>17</sup> But the literature festivals are not just a recreation of these other locations where the humanities flourished or continue to exist. The sessions consciously recall, and at the same time perform older models of social communication. This makes it a contemporary rather than a historical problem. The festival and talk-culture therefore draw on the ad hoc and the ephemeral, but as literary scholar Andrew Goldstone pointed out to me, it is also “punctual and iterated rather than continuously enduring.” Through my observation of various sessions at festivals, my discussions with curators, and interactions with literary scholar Stéphane Robolin, it seemed to me that talk-culture was also a framework within which plural literatures and literary culture was placed so that a transformation could be imagined. And the reason to do so was this well known, but capacious idea that the literary field in India was fragmented across linguistic, literary cultural and class lines.

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meaning of the term. For instance, the *musha'irah* was a meeting of Islamicate literary forms and local practices. The Urdu language similarly was at least a confluence of Arabic, Persian, Hindavi/Rekhta and Sanskrit. The novel was a meeting of local prose forms, literary practices and the European genre. Further, regional literary traditions have interacted with each other and cosmopolitan languages like Sanskrit. I also draw on the methodological application of the word where a conjunctural analysis takes into consideration complex cultural, social, ideological and economic forces that operate in a society at any given time. An approach like this should keep any essentialism about “true” Indian cultural practices in check. Finally, conjunctures also imply a crisis in the legitimation of literature in India which the literature festivals point or even responds to.

<sup>17</sup> Sundar Sarukkai, “Location of the Humanities,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 37, no. 1 (2017): 151–61.



To be sure, “Whose Interpretation Is It Anyway?,” the session I attended that morning at Diggi Palace pointed to a divided class of cultural consumers where it seemed, some could, or even had a right to interpret, while others could not or did not know how to. It was only in retrospect that I realized that the session was profoundly reflexive.<sup>18</sup> The only way to approach the problems of infinite mediation was to perform unmediated face-to-face interaction. Sreenivasan Jain’s first question essentially connected the problem of (literary) interpretation to the incomplete nature of an imagined bourgeoisie public sphere in India. The question assumed that this sphere consists only of abstract, rational subjects who reside amid a discourse that is mostly mediated by print. He asked, “those who are asserting these ...deliberate distortions [the protesting mob on the street] are not doing it on the well-appointed lawns of Diggi Palace but are doing it quite literally at the barrel of the gun. ...The Karni Sena is not having a round table discussion on their problems with *Padmaavat*. ... There is actual violence, so what then is the response of those of us who consider ourselves to be the arbiters of facts or truths...?”<sup>19</sup> This is a problem of stranger sociability in opposition to the “actual violence” of the mob.<sup>20</sup> While the former is an imagined

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<sup>18</sup> In writing this analysis I access the video recording of the session in addition to my fieldnotes. This freely available video is both an archival research and pedagogic tool as long as Teamwork Arts maintains its YouTube and Facebook page. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkmlmOyZhHTc>

<sup>19</sup>Jaipur Literature Festival, “Whose Interpretation is it Anyway.” The Sri Rajput Karni Sena is an organization that mobilizes the Rajput community using caste as a basis for reservations in India. The protests and ensuing violence were the result of the group insisting that Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s film *Padmaavat* misrepresents Rajput history. The film is a loose adaptation of a poem by Sufi *pir* (spiritual guide) Malik Muhammad Jayasi about the siege of Chittor by Alauddin Khalji. The Karni Sena had threatened to disrupt the 2018 “Jaipur Literature Festival” because Film Censor Board chief, Parsoon Joshi was a participant. Police and special forces were present at the festival on all days. For an analysis of the epic and the controversy surrounding Bhansali’s film see, Purshottam Agarwal, “Absurdity of Epic Proportions: Are People Aware of the Content in Jayasi’s *Padmaavat*?” *India Today*, November 24, 2017, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20171204-padmavati-karni-sena-malik-muhammad-jayasi-sanjay-bhansali-1092364-2017-11-24>

<sup>20</sup> For Benedict Anderson this stranger sociability is premised on print capitalism and nationalism where people never meet, and for Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere is produced only when social status and personal interest do not matter. However, the “stranger” is assumed to be mediated by a text-public which is dependent on either a dominant monolingualism (even though other languages may exist), or/and an a priori sense of national belonging. In a multilingual location like India this is easily rectified if one takes a multimodal mass media as a vehicle to imagine community.

community that is often rational and is premised on the very nature of the circulating text of Malik Muhammad Jayasi's epic poem *Padmavat* (CE 1540), the latter is identified with embodied acts of violence where the text itself is a more abstract category that consists of various media that produce fragmentation in the contemporary moment rather than community.

In a study of Tamil mass media and politics, Francis Cody suggests that scholars should "rethink the public sphere from an illiberal perspective. This would be one that assumes the libidinal, corporeal, and poetic ties of kin and community as a starting point in politics, not as a set of constraints on rational critical debate."<sup>21</sup> Cody's argument is that most metropolitan theories of the public sphere are overdetermined by a liberal logic that is marked by "self-abstraction and minoritization."<sup>22</sup> This is how he explains this overdetermination:

What thinkers like Jürgen Habermas, Fraser, and Warner have accomplished with their analyses of the ideology that allows some people to speak for humanity in general where indeterminacy of address intersects with a politics of disembodiment is important insofar as it represents an immanent critique of liberalism? But the liberal model has already overdetermined our understanding of alternatives. And it can do so precisely by creating the appearance of "almost inverted images" of itself through the figure of excessively embodied others.<sup>23</sup>

However, he still seeks out an alternative (trying to avoid a neo-orientalist inversion of theory to produce either a failed imitation of the classic public sphere, or a misrepresented alterity that produces an "excessively embodied other") and attempts to bring critical thought to terms with empirical evidence from populist mobilization in Tamil Nadu's political field. The way he does this is to turn to the entanglement of reading publics and crowds, ordinarily thought to be antithetical to one another within a liberal logic because of

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<sup>21</sup> Cody, "Populist Publics: Print Capitalism and Crowd Violence beyond Liberal Frameworks," 61.

<sup>22</sup> Cody, "Populist Publics: Print Capitalism and Crowd Violence beyond Liberal Frameworks," 50.

<sup>23</sup> Cody, "Populist Publics: Print Capitalism and Crowd Violence beyond Liberal Frameworks," 51.

the mob's association with passion, sensuousness and violence. He writes, "crowds, or 'mobs,' as they are oftentimes referred to in the press, stand as the opposite of the reading public made up of concerned but unmarked disembodied rational citizens."<sup>24</sup> But both groups of citizens are highly mediated by information technology because "modern ideals of self-determination are irrevocably enmeshed in the social infrastructures of mass communication," or what Cody calls "communicative technologies."<sup>25</sup> Hence, he wishes to rethink this opposition between the embodied and disembodied subjects of politics so that "we retain a commitment to popular sovereignty without holding on to the utopic dimensions of self-abstraction specific to liberal universalism...[and] search anew for a language of massification that does not presume a world of disembodied strangers."<sup>26</sup>

The "Jaipur Literature Festival" has very little to do with party politics in Tamil Nadu, or the Tamil public sphere. However, Cody's identification of "large scale intimacy" and "embodied publicity" in the actions of the crowd, usefully points to how face to face communication is interwoven with an anonymous public that emerges through the circulation of texts in the South Indian context.<sup>27</sup> Further, a "language of massification" that does not take "a world of disembodied strangers" for granted is a world that thinks outside the boundaries of liberalism, the bourgeoisie enterprise and the organizing principle of the nation-state and nationalism. At the same time, India is a good starting point for Cody's argument about an "illiberal" public because the disembodied liberal subject is an English-speaking minority (mostly upper class and Hindu) that is an "ideological domain most closely associated with older paternalist state elite that now finds itself railing against sectors

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<sup>24</sup> Cody, "Populist Publics: Print Capitalism and Crowd Violence beyond Liberal Frameworks," 52.

<sup>25</sup> Cody, Francis. "Publics and Politics." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, no. 1, (Oct. 2011): 47. CrossRef, doi:10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145626.

<sup>26</sup> Cody, "Populist Publics: Print Capitalism and Crowd Violence beyond Liberal Frameworks," 63.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics." *Public Culture*, 14, no. 1, (2002): 50.

of a state apparatus that they do not fully control.<sup>28</sup> This is not to claim that the new middle-class in the times of Mandal, *Mandir* and Market is illiberal, but that they are engaging and engendering a different way to participate in democratic politics. Hence Cody's case studies and Bayly's historical ecumene both orbit around a set of terms that recover alternate affects that constitute such a counter public - "libidinal," "corporeal," "poetic," "kin," "(high-minded) friendship" and "intimate." It is aspects of this affective language and practice that I find recurring in examples of talk-culture at the festival(s) because the efficacy of the performance seems to be situated mostly within the logic of face-to-face interaction. At the same time, by staging literature amid crowds, in the form of a *mela* (fair), JLF tries to bridge a gap between the reader and the crowd. It embraces the spirit of the crowd or the *janta* (a public) in the way it imagines literary and intellectual space. Hence it makes a statement about democratic access to literature in India. Relatedly, the festival also emerges in post-liberalization India during a time when the publishing industry is booming. So, talk culture is not in opposition to, or in competition with print. However, in a multilingual and multiregional literary field, print can be limiting and therefore JLF literally takes into consideration the dynamic nature of the middle-class consumer of culture and seeks out the *mela* as the appropriate medium for the dissemination of book culture. Talk-culture then acts as another type of connectivity, or framework to reconstitute community.

This anxiety about the crowd or the *janta*, is played out in the content of the session too. When Homi Bhabha attempts to define the "Jaipur Literature Festival's" community, his descriptions waver. He says:

Each festival radiates its particular ambiance, with the remarkable Boston Book Festival, I feel like a Boston Brahmin, in Hay on Wye there is an allure of elegant arguments... at Diggi Palace I always feel at once that I am at home and in the world, the author's lounge is an intimate adda, the front lawn a public assembly, and

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<sup>28</sup> Cody, "Populist Publics: Print Capitalism and Crowd Violence beyond Liberal Frameworks," 51.

everywhere around you teeming audiences from all walks of life. The JLF, I believe, is a true republic of letters. When I am here, I feel I am a writer citizen, and you are speaker citizens, and we are all reader citizens, not necessarily national citizens or cosmopolitan citizens, but citizens of a long lineage of letters...<sup>29</sup>

When I heard Bhabha speak these words at Jaipur I thought I recognized allusions to his own 1992 essay “The World and the Home” and debates about world literature in the US academy in phrases like “a true republic of letters.”<sup>30</sup> However, at that moment, the phrase “at home and in the world” came across as simply representing the domestic and the international.<sup>31</sup> More importantly, the festival was described both in terms of embodied publicity and large scale intimacy (“adda,” “public assembly,” “teeming audiences”), and the disembodied text-public “of a long lineage of letters” (writer citizens, speaker citizens and reader citizens).

But, in response to the question, what journalists and academics should do about those who interpret and those who do not, Maya Jasanoff advocated (to repeated claps) “doing,” “acting” and “taking to the streets” as activist-academics and demonstrating citizens. Her rationale was that “in a war of words there is always going to be two sides, based on who can manipulate those words in different ways...I think the responsibility of

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<sup>29</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, “Whose Interpretation is it Anyway.”

<sup>30</sup> See Homi Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” *Social Text*, no. 31/32 (1992): 141–53. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/466222; Pascale Casanova. *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> See Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” 142–152. Reading Bhabha’s essay alongside this statement does open that phrase to more complex interpretations where “home” is the novel, or the literary more generally, and the “world” is the very materiality Bhabha finds himself in, speaking to an audience about the private and the public nature of the republic of letters. But I feel a reading like this is not necessarily the kind of work my chapter attempts to do because Bhabha’s essay “The World and the Home,” is an attempt to understand a relationship between material history and aesthetic representation in the (postcolonial) novel, where the unhomely “is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the home, the home-in-the-world”(141). This is about the modalities of collapsing the domestic into the public, and the entry of traumatic history, or the public “event” into the “house of fiction” (152). The aesthetic “obscures” history because that is the only way it can re-emerge as “another temporality in which to signify the ‘event’ of history” (144–143). At the same time, “literature haunts history’s more public face, forcing it to reflect itself in the displacing, even distorting the image of Art” (152). The reading of the postcolonial novel does not translate easily back to the stage at JLF.

academics, citizens, is to put ourselves out there to do the work, to make the alternate case, not just to say you are wrong...this interpretation isn't right..."<sup>32</sup> This claim can be read in many ways, but most obviously Jasanoff was asking her audience to, somewhat radically, replicate the Karni Sena's actions, but with evidence, researched narratives and non-violence. To this, Bhabha disagreed with Jasanoff and invoked J. L. Austin's speech act theory to suggest that "all we are objecting to [the violence of the Karni Sena, Singh's denial and Thakur's anti-Muslim sentiment] are all speech acts; it's not as if the other side is not verbal, or not linguistic..."<sup>33</sup> But the problem that Bhabha does not acknowledge is about the medium and content of mass media and plural interpretive communities rather than bare communication and use of language. For instance, the Karni Sena's access to Malik Muhammad Jayasi's epic poem is most probably mediated by communal myth, word of mouth stories and cinematic adaptations. Hence the common rebuke in such cases that the so-called illiberal public have not even read the text. Additionally, by emphasizing "doing," Jasanoff also suggested that speech-acts do not act on their own volition but are embedded in what people do or do not do.

In this context, Jain asked Dipankar Gupta, maybe too simplistically, if the "fundamental premise of democracy is that we all share a set of common beliefs...[and] what happens when you are essentially in a situation...when you are operating in different information silos?"<sup>34</sup> Gupta's answer turned the question on its head and he said "before we ask the question whose interpretation is it anyway, we should also ask the other question without getting into infinite regression: whose data is it anyway?"<sup>35</sup> Even though this claim is

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<sup>32</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, "Whose Interpretation is it Anyway."

<sup>33</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, "Whose Interpretation is it Anyway."

<sup>34</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, "Whose Interpretation is it Anyway."

<sup>35</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, "Whose Interpretation is it Anyway."

rhetorical, it points to a plurality of sources and the messiness of practice. Gupta goes on to say that “legitimate data” in citizenship is that “which is interpersonally valid, intersubjectivity. ... Citizenship is basically able to see the world from somebody else’s eyes...”<sup>36</sup> To this description of citizenship as social interaction and an understanding of the “other” (community as the basis of citizenship is present in the Indian constitution too), Jasanoff offers one final form of “acting” to the repertoire – “listening as an act, because I think, you [looking at Dipankar Gupta] are right, empathy is the foundation of any kind of effective democratic citizenship...”<sup>37</sup> Content and form intersect here because a debate about the problems of stranger sociability is couched within a performance of face-to-face interaction- the genre of the *mela* (fair) for the *janta* (a public) where the debate keeps revolving around producing a “repertoire of acting,” and “doing,” that referred, again and again, to embodied publics and their actions.<sup>38</sup> The “Jaipur Literature Festival” itself became a platform to practice and stage this intersubjectivity, asking how to be a citizen of the republic of letters (and in turn what kind of community this republic signifies), who is allowed, who is barred, and how to rebuild community in cultures where plurality is always the base state. More specifically, “Whose Interpretation is it Anyway” ended up being a session which did what its speakers argued for. At the beginning of the session, Homi Bhabha had claimed that the only way to inhabit the political is to ask whose interpretation is it anyway, but by the end, I wasn’t sure if that was the only way. Looking around at the teeming crowds, it felt like the solitary reader and the masses or the interior and exterior were sharing the same space.

### **Descriptions, Definitions and Genealogies**

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<sup>36</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, “Whose Interpretation is it Anyway.”

<sup>37</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, “Whose Interpretation is it Anyway.”

<sup>38</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, “Whose Interpretation is it Anyway.” This is Maya Jasanoff’s term.

I do not want to ask where the phenomenon of the literature festival comes from. Rather than seek out origins, I wish to focus on how different agents like the festival directors, writers, media, texts that circulate in specific sessions, the programming, discussions and the physical spaces produce descriptions of the festival. In other words, what kind of genealogy do they build and why?<sup>39</sup> These meanings are not consistent and do not point to any linear past. Rather, it is a cacophony of discourses, traditions, ideas, texts, events, stories and memories that come together in the thing's agents say and do. Meaning is in the process of being made at the festivals but never emerges as a finished object. At the same time, there must be a reason why these festivals have proliferated around the country in the last ten to fifteen years. Why is it that writers, artists, public intellectuals, academics and citizens have come together to produce a network of legitimation for literary production from the subcontinent and around the world? A relational approach to literature festivals and similar events is desirable. Their emergence and durability are intrinsically connected to the activities of other places and organizations (local and international) where literature and culture are legitimated. I turn to these other places and organizations in Chapter 2. But for now, we will consider how these festivals are symptoms of other mobilizations, statements, discourses and knowledges about the idea of literature, both in the present and in history. Problematically, they also indicate a lack, a public response to changes in the way literature and culture are legitimated by academic-bureaucratic spaces like the university, the publishing industry and mass media. Ultimately, recalling a heterogenous past, I want to

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<sup>39</sup> See Michael Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rainbow, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 82. There he writes that genealogy as method is not a search for "origins," rather, "it is an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within or from underneath... The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself."



suggest, is a way to organize and reorganize what literature could mean, while at the same time, it is also a way to recall fragmentation and reconstitute the literary field in new ways.

All performances draw from a heterogenous past. This recollection shows the conditional nature of the past and the present. But in the Indian context, an outright deferral of arriving at a notion of a plural history can also be counterproductive. For instance, the logics of culture-power that we have inherited in India is historically determined rather than universal. Therefore, a critical description and analysis of South Asia's past could be a way to particularize the intellectual traditions we work in. According to scholar Sheldon Pollock, the dominant paradigm of culture-power draws on evolutionism, social-scientific functionalism, civilizational models and nationalisms. But he also insists that there are other "historical possibilities," only if we know what those histories are.<sup>40</sup> And since we know so little or, to put it differently, we are finding out more all the time, any knowledge of the contemporary moment in India will always be contingent on what else we find out about the past. That is why scholars should repeatedly ask "whether standard explanations for the emergence of the culture-power complex today called nation are adequate to the evidence actually adduced...[and] it means determining whether in South Asia the kind of nation [or sense of community] brought into being in modernity took the specific form it did because of the specific histories of South Asia."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, 540.

<sup>41</sup> Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, 540. For Pollock, the "culture-power complex today called nation" is closely linked to questions of community and the questions of the emergence of vernacular languages in South Asia. European vernacular languages reflect biological descent and ethnology, which in turn constructed the notion of individual belonging and community in the form of the nation. Postcolonial India inherits this culture-power complex. The other "historical possibility" asks if the formation of community followed a similar path in South Asia. Pollock's answer is no. Vernacular languages in South Asia reflected place that "abstract them from the domain of the group and locate them in...ecospheres...far more often [it was] region that made a language (and a people) than the reverse" (474). "Ecospheres" are the regions, locality, milieu and the spaces where language, culture and literature come into being and find a niche because of social interactions and environmental conditions such as civic infrastructure, institutions and patronage.

Pollock is pointing to alternate genealogies, or non-western intellectual traditions and practices that effect the way modernity is shaped in contemporary India. But in the popular realm, it becomes very difficult to differentiate the conjunctural process that make up this modernity. And when multiple genealogies are deeply entangled, it is better to find methods and approaches that seek out productive outcomes in these entanglements. The emergence of the festival as a medium to manage literature and literary production is also shaped by diverse historical precedents that draw from multiple periods, literary histories and literary culture. With this background in mind, I wanted to find out how the directors themselves saw the festivals they were curating and producing.

So, I asked Namita Gokhale, the founder of the “Jaipur Literature Festival” to describe the event. She kept drawing on references from very old (Middle Kingdoms to the arrival of Islamic culture, or approximately 230 BCE to 1206 CE) subcontinental literary histories and practices. This recalling was positioned against what she referred to as “Eng-Lit,” or English Literature that is taught in colleges and universities. Eng-Lit can be thought of as the newest structural change in the institutional reception of literature in India. But the very old and the new seamlessly competed for legitimacy at Jaipur. The problem for her was that “we” were “looking at everything through the prism of Eng-Lit” at the cost of ignoring the traditions of literary criticism in the Indian languages.<sup>42</sup> Gokhale then invoked the *Natya Sashtra* (most likely finished sometime between c. 200 BCE to 200 CE), the Sanskrit text on the performing arts attributed to Bharata Muni. She told me, “JLF, if you want an easy definition, it is a celebration of the *navrasa* (nine aesthetic categories). Everything is there, from the *vibhast* (the gruesome and the gory), to the *marmick* (poignant), to the *sringar* (erotic/romantic), the high and low, if someone asks me, I would say *navrasa* is the heart of

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<sup>42</sup> Namita Gokhale, interview by author. December 28, 2017.

the Jaipur Festival.<sup>43</sup> Gokhale framed the juxtaposition of an abstract category like “traditions of literary criticism in Indian languages” with Eng-Lit as an alternative. But this alternative for her was essentially a “celebration” or a performance of a certain aesthetic sensibility that she referred to as a “vibe,” the contemporary equivalent of the *rasa*.<sup>44</sup> Then she began recalling the different names she had given the festival over the years. Once again, these references were not rigorous links to events, ideas or texts from the past, but casual analogies. She called these analogies metaphors. Gokhale told me that she has called the festival, “the Woodstock moment” of literature in India, “*sabitya ka sangam*,” or the confluence and meeting place of different literatures, “*bargad ka pedh*,” or the banyan tree that brings down roots and spawns new trees to form a dense interconnected network, “*katha sarit sagara*” or the Ocean of Story, a reference to the eleventh century collection of legends, fairy tales and folk stories from the subcontinent, and “*sabitya ka Kumbh mela*” of the Kumbh fair of literature which was a reference to one of the world’s largest congregation of pilgrims in one place.<sup>45</sup>

All these descriptions point to embodied publics and crowds (*Kumbh mela*, Woodstock) as a democratizing gesture, and face-to-face interaction that was premised on a “vibe” (*Natya Sashttra*, *the rasas*) which seemed similar to Francis Cody’s affective and illiberal public sphere, or Bayly’s early modern ecumene. Similarly, Sanjoy Roy, Managing Director of Teamwork Arts, the company that produces JLF, reiterated these very sentiments when I spoke to him in his office in Gurgaon, Haryana in January 2019. This is how he put it:

...what differentiates JLF is that there is this magic that you sense in the air, that comes from the collective emotion and energy that a large group of people with one focus bring...positive focus, and I am using positive focus very specifically as opposed to a mob which has its energy, but as a negative focus to destroy

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<sup>43</sup> Namita Gokhale, interview by author. December 28, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Namita Gokhale, interview by author. December 28, 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Namita Gokhale, interview by author. December 28, 2017.

things...this is to create, that collective energy is the magic...the reason why the average joe from across the country is happy to do a *tirth* (pilgrimage) to Jaipur in spite of all its problems, is to experience the *Kumbh* atmosphere.<sup>46</sup>

The “vibe,” or the *rasa*, in Roy’s description was “magic” which was communal and defined by a libidinal “energy” that created rather than destroyed. The “one focus” was literature, or the expanded notion of the literary as a thing to be experienced, not passively, but within the energy field of the crowd one was part of. The emphasis once again was on the *janta* or the people, expressed in the Americanism, “average joe.” The average joe made the pilgrimage to the festival for the “experience,” and the “atmosphere...in spite of all its problems.” Roy made reference to the “problems” because he knew that the way he was describing literature and its experience to me was troubling received notions about the reception of literature in India.

On the other hand, the analogies that Gokhale used to describe the festival also indicated the problem of managing multiplicities (multiple literary traditions and languages), meeting points and the spawning of multiple roots (Ocean of Stories, *sangam* and the banyan tree). The sense here is an attempt to reconstitute something that is incongruent. For Gokhale it meant bringing “two India’s together,” the India of *Angrezee walle* (English folk) and the *Hindi walle* (Hindi folk), because they had never been “platformed together” before.<sup>47</sup> Even though she spoke about English and Hindi specifically because it denotes the divide between an anglicized and vernacular India, she was sure to include all the other languages

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<sup>46</sup> Sanjoy Roy, interview by author. January 9, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Namita Gokhale, interview by author. December 28, 2017. This is how Gokhale put it during our conversation: “it was understood that *Angrezee walle tho Angrezee wale botai hain, aur Hindi walle tho Hindi walle botai hai* (the English folk remain in their own circles and the Hindi folks do the same); the *Hindi walle* were also bitter and nasty about the *Angrezi wallas* – so both were parochial in their own ways, because the cosmopolitans are the most parochial, because they think they know it all...I have an anger about it, this I can say with passion and anger, I hated it, when there were two writers equally good and one of them got a mention in *The New York Times*, he became the better writer...JLF is the first festival where different streams of India met...”

and their literatures. Over time, and with so many other festivals emerging around a similar ethos, this seems to be an unsaid principle – the bringing together of different literary fields.

A similar set of descriptions and definitions emerged when four festival directors were “platformed together” at the “Bangalore Literature Festival” in September 2013 to talk about “The Anatomy of the Literature Festival.”<sup>48</sup> I was still looking for descriptions so that I could understand how different agents produced definitions. At my desk, I watched the downloaded video of Vikram Sampath, Director of the “Bangalore Literature Festival” talk to William Dalrymple (“Jaipur Literature Festival”), Anjum Katyal (“Kolkata Literary Festival”), and Nirmala Lakshman (“Lit for Life Festival,” Chennai) for approximately an hour about the nature of literature festivals. I realized that the festival frenzy had gained enough critical mass by 2013 that the directors were contemplating their own productions at a festival. About 15 minutes into the discussion Sampath asked the other directors to speak about their curatorial experience. All answers were framed as symptoms of other mobilizations that included cultural, literary and print institutions, both local and international. Lakshman spoke about how “Lit for Life Festival” was conceived as a complimentary platform to the *Hindu Literary Review* during the publication’s twentieth anniversary celebration. She also claimed that the Carnatic music *sabhas* (association) were already existing models of (restricted) public culture in Chennai.<sup>49</sup> Katyal told the audience

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<sup>48</sup> A note on my digital methodology: I virtually followed actors, polemics and critical tropes at various festivals between 2008 to the present. Based on my conversations with the organizers, many of the earlier recordings haven’t been uploaded or do not exist. I accessed videos, blog posts on the festival webpage and coverage by traditional print and electronic media to understand the discourse. “Almost Island Dialogues” only records audio and I have access to some of their archives. I also accessed video recordings of sessions from a number of other festivals like the “Bangalore Literature Festival,” the “Jashn-E-Rekhta” and the “Karachi Literature Festival” because similar topics and themes were being discussed there. The work I am trying to do here is similar to the emergent field of “collaborative event ethnography” or CEE and “digital ethnography” that study (mega) events, large meetings, and conferences. See work by Kimberly R. Marion Sui-seeya and Dr. Laura Zanolli’s; Also see Lisa M. Campbell and J. Peter Brosiusa.

<sup>49</sup> The *sabhas*, or associations are public events and performances (anywhere between 1000-1500) within the field of Carnatic (classical) music. They take place in December and January across different venues in Chennai and include music, dance, theatre and lecture sessions. Carnatic music is an extremely closed system controlled

that even though Kolkata hosted Asia's largest books fair (*Kolkata Boi Mela*) and has a "received history" about its literary and cultural ecumene, it did not have "a literature festival qua literature festival."<sup>50</sup> She offered an impromptu definition for the festival she managed in Kolkata. She said that it had "come to be seen almost as a genre...where you gather together writers and thinkers and you put them into situations where they engage with each other, they engage with an audience, they are able to interact...on an ongoing basis over two or three days."<sup>51</sup>

William Dalrymple's genealogy of literature festivals began at the "Hay Festival of Literature and Arts" in Hay-on-Wye, Wales, where he had heard diasporic, Anglophone Indian authors speak.<sup>52</sup> But then, he also laid claim to a "rich tradition" in India "of performed public literature ...[that] dates from the Sangam period [c. 300 BCE to 300 CE.] in the South to the Mughal *musha'irah* in the North" (Bangalore 2013). Immediately, he produced a couple of dogeared pages and read from a transcript of a keynote address that scholar Sheldon Pollock had given at the 2011 "Jaipur Literature Festival." Dalrymple told the audience about Kalyana in Northern Karnataka in the twelfth century and how the town hosted a "literature festival" like this one in Bengaluru. Like Katyal and Laxman, Dalrymple was also producing a definition by indicating many precedents. 2013 in Bengaluru was like 2011 in Jaipur. And 2011 in Jaipur was like eighteenth and nineteenth century Delhi, and twelfth century Kalyana. Lakshman, Katyal and Dalrymple produced a heterogenous, multilingual and plural citational network to legitimize the trace, however faint or

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by upper caste Hindus. Although public access is probably not denied, it is restricted to those who understand the musical language of the Carnatic world.

<sup>50</sup> Bangalore Literature Festival, "Literati, Marginalia, et al. — The Anatomy of Literature Festivals," Bangalore Literature Festivals, 2013, YouTube Video, Published on Feb 16, 2014, 60.05, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIlbNo53KeY&index=34&list=PL6bDa\\_o3RVIEE0qg6mtrUN51Bd-JPRfd7](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIlbNo53KeY&index=34&list=PL6bDa_o3RVIEE0qg6mtrUN51Bd-JPRfd7).

<sup>51</sup> Bangalore Literature Festival, "Literati, Marginalia, et al. — The Anatomy of Literature Festivals."

<sup>52</sup> The "Hay Festival of Literature and Arts" was started by Peter, Norman and Rhoda Florence 1988.

incomplete, of earlier subcontinental and foreign public cultures within the “anatomy” of the “Bangalore Literature Festival.” These descriptions emerged within the framework of talk-culture. This space was unpredictable because it was unscripted. It is this placing “into situations” that was performed at this session by the festival directors who in turn ended up producing reflexive definitions that ultimately felt improvisational.

However, I decided to follow this citational network to find out what Sheldon Pollock had said in 2011. Afterall, Pollock too was engaged in description at the “Jaipur Literature Festival.” In the video, he asked the audience to partake in a “thought experiment” and travel with him to twelfth century Kalyana in Northern Karnataka. This is the section from Pollock’s talk that Dalrymple cited in Bengaluru:

The larger world of Indian literature I came to understand by studying this particular language [old Kannada]. The first thing I came to understand is a festival like the “Jaipur Literature Festival” is a very old institution in India. I’ll like you to just come with me seven centuries ago on a little thought experiment to the end of the twelfth century to a place called Kalyana in North Karnataka, there was a literary festival all the time. And this was a literary festival that was extraordinary in its representativeness, of the multiplicity of Indian literary creativity in Kalyana. At that literary festival you would have heard Sanskrit, Prakrit, Apabhramśa, Gujarati, Kannada, Madhya Desha (a form of Hindi), Bangla, and Oriya. It was an extraordinary array of amazing poetry on offer in a place like Kalyana. ... And the striking thing about Kalyana in the twelfth century is that it is not an exception.<sup>53</sup>

This is an instance where Jaipur became Kalyana of the Chalukya Empire for a few moments. In Pollock’s definition there was nothing new about the “Jaipur Literature Festival” because similar events have managed the “multiplicity of Indian literary creativity” at least since the twelfth century. However, the “large world of Indian literature,” rather than a world literature in India was comprehensible to him only through a study of “particular” languages probably because a unified notion of a South Asia was imagined differently then.

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<sup>53</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, “JLF 2011 Opening Ceremony, Dr. Karan Singh; Keynote Sheldon Pollock,” Jaipur Literature Festival, 2011, YouTube Video, Published on June 6, 2012, 60.05, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nP3\\_vhCcP-Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nP3_vhCcP-Y)

Further, by calling the old and new festivals “institutions,” Pollock also implied that it was a site of circulation of literary value, norms and judgements between literatures written in different language. In other words, the festival that Pollock speaks about is like the festival Namita Gokhale and William Dalrymple direct because both, separated by a little less than a thousand years, essentially “platformed together” plural traditions.

But William Dalrymple cited Pollock selectively in Bangalore. This is because the directors of the festivals approached literature differently from the scholar and academic. It also was an indicator of what all the institution of literature could mean in India today. But Pollock’s “thought experiment” also left me a little uneasy because it was so easy to imagine and endorse a connection between completely different epochs. As a member of the public who listened to Pollock’s address with great interest, I wondered, was the festival at Kalyana the only literary institution that legitimated value and judgement, or were there competing institutions and methods that competed and co-operated for meaning? What was the relationship between scholarship and literature at these venues? And what kind of attitudes did these events project? And what kind of anxieties permeated those performances? But I also knew I was projecting questions about the present onto the past. In contrast, in 2013 at Bangalore, Sampath, Katyal, Laxman and Dalrymple seemed extremely aware of the questions I ask above. They spoke repeatedly about the fact that the festivals pointed to an anxiety about the production and the reception of literature in India. For instance, Sampath asked, “are these [festivals] really necessary for a writer. Till now writers have always lived in anonymity [and] their books have been more important. ... Does the writer become larger than his work. ... [and face] the constant pressure of performance....”<sup>54</sup> This question was about the efficacy of the form of the festival. But it also betrayed an attitude that was built

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<sup>54</sup> Bangalore Literature Festival, “Literati, Marginalia, et al. — The Anatomy of Literature Festivals.”



on the infrastructures of the bourgeois public sphere and a disembodied publicity that informs our notion of literature and the writing world. Sampath's question indicated an underlying fear of the genre of the *mela* and what it signified in modern India. But all four participants unequivocally agreed that the contemporary festival was in the service of something greater: it provided democratic and public access to the literary objects of a fragmented field. Nirmala Laxman called the festival a "catalyst to be more inclusive."<sup>55</sup> Dalrymple suggested that the sessions cater to a very large middle class "who feel some nagging sense of guilt" because they do not "read a lot of Hindi literature...and that they should know more about this, and they certainly don't read Marwari or Tamil poetry if they are coming from Delhi, but they are interested to discover about it, so a lot of people will sit in and listen and sort of browse...and that is very exciting."<sup>56</sup> The problem that Sampath, Katyal, Laxman and Dalrymple address is the problem of access to literatures in different languages and from different literary traditions. The solution for them was public debate, listening and performance that is characterized by an intimacy (imagined and real). In addition, the festival also became a way to browse and discover literatures from the subcontinent and the world.

In other words, this approach to literature can be thought of as an itinerant mode of access to a multilingual and multiregional literary field where browsing and listening are ways for middle-class North Indians to discover Marwari writing from West India or Tamil poetry from South India and for a South Indian to explore Urdu poetry from North India, or Assamese literature from the East. Dalrymple is right that literatures in these languages are, and have been, discreet literary fields with their own publics, modes of legitimation and

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<sup>55</sup> Bangalore Literature Festival, "Literati, Marginalia, et al. — The Anatomy of Literature Festivals."

<sup>56</sup> Bangalore Literature Festival, "Literati, Marginalia, et al. — The Anatomy of Literature Festivals."

forms of circulation. Thinking literature in India, therefore has been a struggle for a method that has always been compromised by the field's plurality. This session in Bengaluru, offered another way in which this plurality could be accessed. However, none of the discussants wondered what is at stake in browsing and listening. To participate in talk-culture was simply to engage in the pleasures of conversation, a turn of phrase, an endearing example, lines from a poem, a pithy citation, or find reassurance that there is some kind of a history to what one is participating in. What was left out of the discussion at the "Bangalore Literature Festival" was for example, Sheldon Pollock's inconvenient truth that "India is on the verge of a potentially cataclysmic cultural ecocide where the capacity to read and understand the literary languages of the past may disappear."<sup>57</sup> There is an Orientalist impulse in this need to preserve the classical past, but Pollock's reason to invoke Kalyana was really to show that there exists a generative force in appealing to the past because "radically different visions of what it meant to be a human being" can be an "equipment for living" in our global present.<sup>58</sup> The impulse here is not very different from the alternate, non-western culture-power paradigms he traces in his academic research.

That is why, for Pollock, an engagement with language and literature demands sustained work, discipline and pedagogical innovation. These are the critical attitudes that India needs to develop if it does not want to lose access to its literary past. Hence at Jaipur, Pollock rhetorically asked the audience, "can there be an Indian Institute of Classical Studies" like the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and the Indian Institute of Management (IIM).<sup>59</sup> As opposed to this telos and the mind-boggling logistics involved in

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<sup>57</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, "JLF 2011 Opening Ceremony, Dr. Karan Singh; Keynote Sheldon Pollock." For a full version of this critique see Sheldon Pollock, "Crisis in the Classics." *Social Research*, 71, no.1 (Spring 2011): 21–48.

<sup>58</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, "JLF 2011 Opening Ceremony, Dr. Karan Singh; Keynote Sheldon Pollock."

<sup>59</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, "JLF 2011 Opening Ceremony, Dr. Karan Singh; Keynote Sheldon Pollock."

institution building, Dalrymple at the same inaugural ceremony (2011) claimed that the literature festival is a “counter movement...[to] create an intellectual nuclear fusion...we are not too serious, it’s fun...”<sup>60</sup> The attitudes that emerged in Dalrymple’s description had more to do with pleasure and leisure, while the infrastructure Pollock pointed to, at both the inaugural address in Jaipur and the session at Bangalore ignored, had more to do with the ethos of work. One is not better than the other. That is not the point. Talk-culture or the activities in the festival itself result in this contradiction. To follow through on Pollock’s suggestion sincerely, the value of the institution of literatures in India would have to be legitimized among the public by rationalizing the literary towards an aesthetic and economic future. In fact, the literature festivals do exactly that; they (re)produce the mythoi of literary values by performing conjunctural imaginaries of the “world of Indian literature” that is in reality permanently incomplete and always in the process of becoming something else. What consequences these performances will have in the future, or if the festival will become a durable institution in itself cannot be known. Until then, what I call talk-culture, a performance of conjunctural histories and literary cultures, allows for unpredictable juxtapositions through conversation and polemics. What if this unpredictability is the only way to approach and manage plural literary fields?

### **Talk-Culture or Performing the Residual, the *Adda* and *Musha’irah* as Examples**

What does it mean to say that talk-culture is a combination of the literary and the critical, or a conscious (re)turn to conjunctural networks of literary sociality and practices? It is to claim that sessions at festivals are not the thing itself, the residual practices and attitudes, but a conscious and iterative performances of those residual practices. For Raymond Williams the residual:

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<sup>60</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, “JLF 2011 Opening Ceremony, Dr. Karan Singh; Keynote Sheldon Pollock.”

...by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus, certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation.<sup>61</sup>

Although festival directors, writers, media etc. produce descriptions and definitions by drawing analogies to older literary and critical practices, the festivals themselves are not these events. In contrast, the Annual Shankar-Shad *Musha'irah* organized by DCM Shriram Industries Ltd. in Delhi since 1954 is not a performance of older models of literary sociality, but the thing itself. It is residual literary culture that continues to persist in minor ways in contemporary India. Similarly, talk-culture is not the colonial speech culture that postcolonial studies engages with, or an “intimate adda,” even if Homi Bhabha or Sanjoy Roy claimed that it is.<sup>62</sup>

Postcolonial Studies shows that public and semi-public speech, and orality are often ways to escape top-down social restructuring. Conversation escapes the policing and disciplinary effects of colonialism, capitalism and Enlightenment rationalism. Speech is framed within the language of resistance. A classic example of this way of reasoning is Partha Chatterjee's description of speech culture in colonial Bengal. He writes, “it [Reason] was an oppression that the middle-class minds often sought to escape...[through] the semantic richness and polyphony of ordinary, uncolonized speech.”<sup>63</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty expands on this logic when he writes about the Bengali adda in *Provincializing Europe*. For him, the practice does not correlate with the motivations of modern civil society because it is

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<sup>61</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 122.

<sup>62</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, “Whose Interpretation is it Anyway.”; Sanjoy Roy, interview by author. January 9, 2018. This is how Sanjoy Roy described the Jaipur Literature Festival: “I mean JLF is an adda, in every sense of the word...everybody comes together, you are doing the sharing, arguing and debating and criticizing and running off to court to file a court case, but that apart...”

<sup>63</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993): 55.

premised on pleasure and leisure as the antithesis of development and utilitarianism.<sup>64</sup> This is how he explains the position of adda in middle-class Bengali society:

They are mutually antithetical organizations of time and place. Civil society, in its ideal construction, builds into the very idea of human activity the telos of a result, a product and a purpose, and structures its use of time and place on that developmentalist and utilitarian logic (even when that logic is not simply linear). Conversations in an adda, on the other hand, are by definition opposed to the idea of achieving any definite outcome.<sup>65</sup>

However, Chakrabarty realizes the spectral nature of his own argument because the adda is not a part of any recorded archive as it anyway resisted “the idea of achieving any definite outcome.” It is available to us mostly as fragments in literary discourse and social memory. And this story is often a story of mourning that laments the passing away of a “familiar world” that was possibly “never real.”<sup>66</sup> That is why the value of the adda in the present moment is only symbolic. There are only literary records of fictional addas. Relatedly, I am cautious about proposing any oppositional characteristic to talk-culture in our contemporary moment. Yes, many of the motives for producing a network of legitimation for literature in the subcontinent are framed as a response to the West’s hegemony in the business of producing value, but it is also positioned as a way to democratize access to literature and bring fragmented publics into conversation with each other. I do not read this as resistance. Rather, it is a negotiation where festival directors, writers, thinkers and the public try to work with available resources and within the limitations of the field. I turn to a deeper analysis of this very negotiation in the last chapter of this dissertation where I analyze the instituting of the Pakistani novel at the “Jaipur Literature Festival” and follow the various sessions, writers

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<sup>64</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, Kindle Edition): 204.

<sup>65</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 204.

<sup>66</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 212-213.

and media reports that negotiate the process of producing a category like the Pakistani novel as an “other” to an Indian literature.

Talk-culture at the contemporary literature festival performs the discourse and symbolisms of the adda. They recognize the practice as residual culture that can only be made new through a reflexive critique of its public knowledge. This reflexivity as I have tried to suggest is often coincidental and occurs when groups of people talk, and, in the process, make different institutional attitudes interact. Put differently, staging the adda itself (something which the “Kolkata Literary Festival” attempted to do in 2015) fails because of the polemics and unpredictability that talk-culture engenders.<sup>67</sup> Performance prevents the cultural practice from being reproduced by keeping it unstable, debatable, malleable and essentially ephemeral. This is also because the residual itself was ephemeral, even if their histories circulate in quasi-mythical ways. Second, and more telling of a change in attitude is that the adda is no longer mourned. The symbolic practice is presented in the form of a celebration. Rather than a narrative of loss, celebration signifies an optimism. Can taking the literary not too seriously be a good thing? Third, and key to the story I am trying to tell is that if the adda did produce something like the modern Bengali reading public, then why does the contemporary literature festival return to and restage the ethos and attitudes (anti-teleological, anti-developmental, anti-utilitarian and ephemeral) of the adda and endorse the embodied pleasures associated with it? One possible reason would be that the culture of speech was never completely replaced by print-capitalism. Or another speculative opinion

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<sup>67</sup> See APEEJAY Kolkata Literary Festival, “My Bookshelf: A Literary Adda,” Oxford Bookstores. 2015, Youtube Video, 02:51, [https://www.kolkatalitfest.in/archive\\_2015.htm](https://www.kolkatalitfest.in/archive_2015.htm). This session ended up being a well-meaning but ironic banter about the institution itself rather than anybody’s bookshelf. In that sense, even though the participants rebuked the staging of a discussion and the presence of a moderator, the actual debate ended up being quite like an adda, without any definite outcome. Also see Ratnottama Sengupta, “Topic ‘Shelved’ as Panelists Enter Adda Zone,” *The Times of India*, January 19, 2015, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/156368D0A82DF708?p=AWNB>.

could be that talk-culture foreshadows the emergence of a new type of literary public that productively blurs the boundaries between textual and performative approaches to literary production. Further, the multilingual nature of the field, class and caste formations limit the circulation of texts, and literature loses its capacity to imagine community quickly. Talk-culture could be thought of as a way to compensate for this lacuna, which is often acknowledged in practice, but turns out to be more rigid in academic discourse. And as I have already shown, the literature festival as a popular medium attempt to imagine as large a public as possible.<sup>68</sup> In principal, this makes talk-culture a practice that opens up the field to the popular, rather than produce a rarified space with more rigid boundaries. Finally, talk-culture can also be thought of as a way to monetize speech, orality, performance and face-to-face interaction.

In this context, if we consider multilingualism as a necessary condition in the subcontinent and the popular as inherently more open and pluralistic, then which language to read, listen and write in, is a choice even today. This is also the reason why the subcontinental literary field has been intrinsically fragmented and tremendous energy has been put into thinking both the conjunctions and disjunctions between the whole and its parts. I turn to this in the second chapter. But in public spaces, the fragments intersect more easily than one would expect. Using multiple languages is strategic and more importantly, language is not strictly connected to cultural or religious identity. For instance, Sanjiv Saraf, an industrialist from Orissa, who hails from Rajasthan, decided to start “Jashn-E-Rekhta,” an

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<sup>68</sup> See T.S. Satyanath, “Mahābhāratas in Kannada: Texts and Contexts.” *Namma Janapadaru*, (2009), <http://indianfolklore.org/journals/index.php/Namma/article/view/39/41>. *Namma Janapadaru* is a bilingual academic journal that focuses on Kannada literature, culture and folklore and is published out of Department of Folklore and Tribal Studies, Dravidian University, Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh. For Satyanath, the development of the history of Kannada literature should be “perceived as a movement from ... singular to pluralistic epistemologies on the one hand and from scripto-centric court poetry to phono- and body-centric popular and folk performing traditions on the other.” Broadly, his argument is that folk traditions are more pluralistic, while co-called classical/dominant/imperial traditions tend to be more unitary.

Urdu literature festival in New Delhi in 2015. In an interview in the *Hindustan Times*, he recalls, “Urdu is not my mother tongue nor were the places I grew up dominated by an Urdu culture. But my father was a keen follower of Urdu ghazals and *shayri* [poetry]. Listening to Mehdi Hasan, Begum Akhtar, Iqbal Bano and Farida Khanum on the radio and on vinyl records were an important part of my growing-up years.”<sup>69</sup> Saraf does not enter the literary world of Urdu via print. Rather it is through popular mediums like the radio, film and recorded music that he learns to appreciate Urdu poetry. This is also where the difference between Urdu, Hindi and Hindustani becomes tricky. Many of us can understand Urdu, the street version (also called Hindustani by the colonial administration), because of the overlap and co-constituted nature of Urdu and Hindi. But many of us cannot read it because it is written in the Perso-Arabic script. Further, the “purer” Urdu or Hindi are made out to be, by drawing on their Persian, Arabic or Sanskrit components respectively, the more difficult it is to understand. This kind of partial literacy in multiple languages is common in the popular realm.

To understand Sanjiv Saraf’s motivation to resuscitate a popular literary culture and its social milieu, call it Urdu, Hindi, Urdu-Hindi or Hindustani, one must situate it in two different stories about the Urdu-Hindi literary world. One is about its demise and the other about its transformations. This is how I understand this discourse in its academic and popular forms and in what follows, I will show how the language and its literary field transforms over time and appears as a performance of residual cultural formations through the twentieth and twenty-first century. I will follow this transformation through a reading of Farhatullah Baig Daharvi’s *Delhi ki Akhri Shama/The Last Musha’irah of Delhi*, a book

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<sup>69</sup> Paramita Ghosh, “Jashn-e-Rekhta: Meet the Man Whose Passion Project Is Now a Celebration of Urdu,” *Hindustan Times*, 7 Dec. 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/art-and-culture/jashn-e-rekhta-a-passion-project/story-XMWBKuBSofvGi5QGstXyYL.html>.



published in the 1930s or 1940s, and a 2015 session about the transformation of the *musha'irah* at the New Delhi festival, “Jashn-E-Rekhta.”

In academic discourse the divide between Hindi and Urdu is understood to be socially constructed, beginning in mid-nineteenth century by Hindi-Hindu nationalist ideology that in turn was based on a colonial logic of the national-linguistic model of community that invented the relationship between cultural production, language and religious groups.<sup>70</sup> As Alok Rai puts it:

once it became crucial for the emergent Hindi-Hindu *savarna* [caste Hindus] proto-élite, in the period after 1857, to make space for themselves in the colonial administration, the shared and overlapping linguistic space had to be divided and split up. Then, the name “Hindustani” could mean either that overlapping part of the continuum which was common to both Hindi and Urdu—which was no fun at all if one was thinking of making space for oneself in the zero-sum game of the colonial administration; or “Hindustani” could mean that part of the continuum which was *neither* Hindi nor Urdu—in which case it disappeared altogether...<sup>71</sup>

Even though Urdu-Hindi, or Hindustani disappears in official and nationalist discourse, it does not in popular mediums. What does change, is the social ecosystem that made Persian, Arabic and Urdu-Hindi flourish in North India and the Deccan in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.<sup>72</sup> One way this demise can be traced is through the recurring trope of the death of the *musha'irah* which was symbolic of a type of public literary culture in pre-colonial

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<sup>70</sup> See, Christopher King, *One Language, Two Scripts: the Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harishchandra and Nineteenth-Century Banaras*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); Alok Rai, *Hindi Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001); Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002; Francesca Orsini, ed. *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*, (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2010). A complimentary move based on the same logic explains why Pakistan makes Urdu its national language.

<sup>71</sup> Alok Rai, “The Persistence of Hindustani,” *Annual of Urdu Studies*, 20 (2005): 140.

<sup>72</sup> See Margrit Pernau and Muhammad I. Cugtaʾī. *The Delhi College: Traditional Elites, the Colonial State, and Education Before 1857*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006). Institutional change in Delhi College predates the activities at the College of Fort Williams in Calcutta. But both cases indicate how institutional change and patronage effect literary fields and cultures. What began as English patronage of traditional education at Delhi College in the guise of Oriental knowledge quickly changed over the first half of the nineteenth century to a policy that promoted English as the colonizers consolidated their power over the region and the country.

and colonial times. For all practical purposes, its slow “death” began with colonial rule and institutional changes that started to occur in the second half of the nineteenth century in North India.

According to C. M. Naim, the repeated death of the *musba'irah*, or more precisely the metaphor of a dying flame that burns brighter just before it is extinguished, is a figurative turn that appears in works such as Altaf Husain Hali's (1837-1914) biography of Mirza Ghalib, *Yadgar-e-Ghalib/Memorable Ghalib* (1897), Percival Spear's *Twilight of the Mughuls* (1949) and the Urdu fictional-historical narrative *Delhi ki Akhri Shama/The Last Musba'irah of Delhi* by Farhatullah Baig Daharvi (1884-1947; tr. into English by Akhtar Qamber in 1979) written sometime in the 1930s or 40s.<sup>73</sup> William Dalrymple's *The Last Mughal* (2006) follows in this lineage. This lament is for the end of the Mughal Empire, and in turn the end of a specific type of polity, institutional apparatus and literary culture around the time of the Indian Rebellion/Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. Soon after, English and European styled institutions and patronage started replacing earlier ones.<sup>74</sup> This notion of the death of the *musba'irah* and its milieu at the intersection of Urdu-Hindi and English (or European) worldviews can also be found in fictional works such as Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), Anita Desai's *In Custody* (1984), and most recently in Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's short story collection, *Savaar aur Doosre Afsane/The Sun that Rose from the Earth* [2001 (Urdu-Pakistan)/2003 (Urdu-India)/2014 (English-India)]. Writing in English, and the emergence of a small English language public

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<sup>73</sup> See C. M. Naim, “Ghalib's Delhi: A Shameless Revisionist Look at Two Popular Metaphors.” *The Annals of Urdu Studies*, 18 (2003): 3-24.

<sup>74</sup> See C.M. Naim, “Mughal and English Patronage of Urdu Poetry,” in *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992): 270-271. Print. He writes that while Bahadur Shah commissioned Ghalib to rewrite the history of the Mughals in elaborate Persian, “the English had hired in 1800 middling writers at the College of Fort Williams to rewrite in simplest Urdu many of the popular Persian books.” Similarly, a prize of 1000 rupees was instituted by Lieutenant-Governor Sir William Muir for useful literature in the vernaculars. This “made explicit the literary values of the new rulers: a literature was worthy of patronage if it offered social good as opposed to individual gratification.”

sphere, perpetuated the idea of the death of an Urdu-Hindi literary culture and language because it failed to see the presence and perpetuation of the form in other mediums like song and film. What had disappeared were Urdu's traditional locations that were often associated with high culture. At the same time, an official Hindi supported by the national-linguistic logic and its imagined connection to the Hindu community rose to dominance. The popular and co-constituted Urdu-Hindi ecosystem died and split into two separate fields, the Urdu and the Hindi. However, the cultural and literary contents of the milieu persisted in other forms.

For instance, Ahmed Ali and Anita Desai's novels negotiate the loss of an Urdu-Hindi literary and cultural field through English and the novel form. The narrative that these two authors construct is a tale of permanent loss –of poetry, of language and of a culture. Hence for Rashmi Sadana, "Urdu itself is a translated idea in Ali's text; we might sense the meaning of the language to his protagonists, but we never experience it for ourselves," while, for Desai, "a new kind of literary question, and perhaps conundrum, arises: How does one write Urdu poetry in English?"<sup>75</sup> While it may seem that English, along with the institutional changes it brought about after 1857 kills an Urdu-Hindi or Hindustani literary field in Ali and Desai's novels, its continued presence in other mediums proves otherwise. In the twentieth century, the Urdu-Hindi or Hindustani field slowly disappears from a certain type of Anglicized public space, in educational institutions that taught English and English Literature as standard ways to approach the literary, and in what one can call the machinery of bureaucratic modernity in India. It did not disappear in popular culture, in music, in theatre and in film. For instance, in post-independence India, cinema was an important sponsor and institutional location for Urdu-Hindi poets and writers like Sahir Ludhianvi,

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<sup>75</sup> Rashmi Sadana, *English Heart, Hindi Heartland*, 43.

Jaan Nisar Akhtar and Kaifi Azmi who made a living as lyricists.<sup>76</sup> Film emerged as a new medium and location for Urdu-Hindi poetry and lyrics in the twentieth century. Academic criticism in India probably do not acknowledge this shift until the 1990s when film studies gained popularity. Further, the emphasis on a classical past, Sanskrit poetics and the recovery of all kinds of forgotten traditions in the various languages left little space in academia for popular culture and its formation. This is the story of Urdu-Hindi's transformations.

However, Saraf does not arrive at Urdu-Hindi poetry via formal study, but through another location of the humanities. More specifically, he comes to Urdu through the popular realm of music and film.

But, before I return to the present moment and explain Sanjiv Saraf and the "Jashn-E-Rekhta's" motivation and show how the festival is implicated in this transformation, I want to remain in the space of the textual, and offer a reading of the translation of Farhatullah Baig Dehalvi's (1884-1947) fictional-historical account, *Delhi ki Akhri Shama/The Last Musha'irah of Delhi* to show how the form of the *musha'irah* moves from one genre to another, from one medium to another as a way to situate its transformation more historically.<sup>77</sup> I will try and trace the movement of the *musha'irah* from performance to text and back to performance. First, print culture transforms a performative culture into a textual form like Dehalvi's book and then a festival like the "Jashn-E-Rekhta" transforms the textual *musha'irah* into performance. This is very similar to what happens to the *adda* in the Bengali context. The social practice gets mythologized in the novel, belle letters and journalism in the twentieth century, and then returns as a practice in the form of talk-culture

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<sup>76</sup> Many of them also published books that only circulated among a limited audience who could read Urdu-Hindi.

<sup>77</sup> I am unable to find the exact date of publication of Farhatullah Baig Dehalvi's (1884-1947) *Delhi ki Akhri Shama/The Last Musha'irah of Delhi*. The English translation is by Akhtar Qamber and was published by Sujit Mukherjee of Orient Longman, India in 1979.

at the literature festivals in the twenty first. What I ultimately hope to show is that the “Jashn-E-Rekhta” participates in a type of transformative practice where it takes a residual phenomenon and makes it new.

Dehalvi’s textual account mimics the culture of speech by framing the narrative within the structure of the *musha’irah*.<sup>78</sup> In the process it attempts to “present the poets themselves as living and moving personalities.”<sup>79</sup> The account is celebratory, rather than a lament (or a nostalgia) for a culture that was quickly becoming residual. But what is important to my argument is the way older performances of literary sociality find new mediums in reflexive ways. I came across Dehalvi’s text by chance during the research process. While I was following the various sessions on the demise of the *musha’irah* at the “Indian Languages Festival: Samanvay,” a New Delhi event, I came across a 2011 session called “Death of the Mushaira,” that claimed that the modern *musha’irah* simply panders to populist rhetoric, hatred and nationalism. I then ended up at another New Delhi festival, the 2015, inaugural edition of the “Jashn-E-Rekhta.” It’s session on the *musha’irah* was more sympathetic to the practice – it was called “*Mushaira Ka Badalta Rang-Roop*” or “The Changing Face of the *Musha’irah*.” To recreate the simultaneity of such events, I browsed through other events. That is when I discovered a reference to Dehalvi’s *The Last Musha’irah of Delhi*, but in another form. It was a play called “*Lal Quile Ka Aakhri Mushaira*” or “The Red Fort’s Last *Mushaira*” by a Delhi based theatre company called A Pierrot’s Troupe Production. It is

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<sup>78</sup> See Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India*, (Raniketh: Permanent Black, 2009, Kindle Edition): 384. Orsini argues that print attempted to mimic cultures of speech as a way to convert an oral-literate class to a reading class in the nineteenth century. She writes, “commercial publishers met the challenge of ‘embodied pleasures’ in the persons of performers by offering a range of texts of pleasure. These texts sought to reproduce and multiply the pleasures offered by oral performers, thus infiltrating existing forms and patterns of leisure.”

<sup>79</sup> Farhatullah Baig Dehalvi, *The Last Musha’irah of Delhi*, trans. Akhtar Qamber, (New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 1979): 35.

only after I acquired a copy and read Dehalvi's account of the last *musha'irah*, did I realize why it lent itself so well to the theatrical form.

To quickly summarize, *The Last Musha'irah of Delhi* is a first-person narrative in the voice of Maulvi Karim-ud-Din Maghfoor who decides to organize a *musha'irah* in the neighborhood of Chandni Chowk, or present-day Old Delhi, in the year 1845. There is indication that the *musha'irah* has lost its respectability because of the proliferation of the ghazal form where everyone from "the king down to the beggar was smitten with the poetic craze."<sup>80</sup> The poet Momin Khan Momin laments, "nowadays the *musha'irah* of Delhi are not worthy of respectable people. ...none of them have any discernment in poetry, but they create such a foolish din with their empty compliments of 'Vah Vah!,' 'Subhan Allah,' 'Subhan Allah' that they leave the mind much disturbed and saddened. They do not understand the meaning of Saib's Persian couplet..."<sup>81</sup> The book begins with a "Preamble," and then proceeds to "The Plan" where Maghfoor personally visits all the poets and convinces them of his enterprise even though he himself is a *maulvi*, a scholar who has "never been enamored of poetry" because it's the pastime of the elite.<sup>82</sup> He represents the general position of the scholar in nineteenth century North India. The scholar earns a living through hard work vis-à-vis the poet who resides in the "extravagancies of fancy" and "can afford to engage in writing and reading poetry, and find in it diversion for the minds or give expression to their unfulfilled finer longings."<sup>83</sup> The next section is called "Preliminary Arrangements" which entails a detailed explanation of the various logistics involved in

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<sup>80</sup> Dehalvi, *The Last Musha'irah of Delhi*, 35.

<sup>81</sup> Dehalvi, *The Last Musha'irah of Delhi*, 54. Šā'eb Tabrizi was a Persian poet in the late Safavid period (mid seventeenth century) who travelled to the Mughal courts of India around 1624-25 because he felt that the patronage and the milieu would advance his literary career. See Paul E. Losensky, "Šā'eb Tabrizi," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Online Edition, 2003, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/saeb-tabrizi>.

<sup>82</sup> Dehalvi, *The Last Musha'irah of Delhi*, 40.

<sup>83</sup> Dehalvi, *The Last Musha'irah of Delhi*, 40.

holding an event of this kind. Seating is an artform in a *musha'irah*, and Maghfoor spends considerable time on the floor plan and the choice of the *tarah* or the formal element of the poetic style.<sup>84</sup> Both are sources of arrogance in poetic rivalries. Finally, the fourth section is the *musha'irah* itself, called “The *Musha'irah*.” It is narrated from Maghfoor’s point of view, where he attempts to paint a picture of the milieu, the personalities and the criticisms that each poet offers the other. This he intersperses with his own observations of the event. These sections move between fiction and a type of ethnography, between biography and a sociology of the literary scene in Chandni Chowk, between real and imaginary poets, between prose and poetry, and between the poem and criticism.

But Maghfoor’s motivation to organize the event is quite practical. He runs a printing press in Delhi that publishes translations of Arabic classics. The market is down. So, to capitalize on the “poetic craze” of the first half of the nineteenth century, he decides to organize a *musha'irah* “and create an opportunity to publish the lives and works of the poets.”<sup>85</sup> His hopes that publishing a *tazkirah* (anthology) would make his press “pick up somewhat.”<sup>86</sup> But what interests me most is how the “Preamble” to the *musha'irah* positions the account in its own times. The irony is that by the time Dehalvi decides to rewrite Maghfoor’s *Tabquat-ul-Sho'ra-e-Hind* (*Biography of the Poets of India*) as the *The Last Musha'irah of Delhi* sometime in the 1930s or 1940s, there is no “poetic craze,” or a scene in Old Delhi. Things have changed. The genre of *tazkirah* is irrelevant for a government officer from Hyderabad who makes a living in the colonial bureaucracy. But still, instead of a lament, Dehalvi reimagines the *tazkirah* in a form that presents the “poets themselves as living and moving personalities.” Second, he claims that “as a historian I could have written about the

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<sup>84</sup> Dehalvi, *The Last Musha'irah of Delhi*, 34; Dehalvi gives a schematic of the seating plan for the *musha'irah* here.

<sup>85</sup> Dehalvi, *The Last Musha'irah of Delhi*, 40.

<sup>86</sup> Dehalvi, *The Last Musha'irah of Delhi*, 40.

event of 1261 A.H. [1845] in such a way as to give the impression that I had witnessed them with my own eyes. I could have posed as the Mirza Sahib of those days but I could not bear the thought of appropriating to myself the laurels of success that rightly belonged to the late Karim-ud-Din Maghfoor.”<sup>87</sup> In the process Dehalvi’s account ends up being ethnographic and sociological. He makes Maghfoor move within the milieu, organize, effect and participate in the activities of his subjects. While Maghfoor wants to produce a *tazkirah*, a biography of the poets of Delhi, Dehalvi ends up producing a text that does not easily fall into fixed categories. This ambiguity is what allows him to write the story of the poets as “living and moving personalities,” rather than figures in a particular canon.

In the first instance, Dehalvi, it seems, is attempting to differentiate between what he thinks is a static “commentary” akin to a biography, an anthology and the more traditional *tazkirah*, versus a dynamic first-person narrative in the voice of Karim-ud-Din Maghfoor. By inhabiting Maghfoor’s first person perspective, Dehalvi too participates in the production of the *musha’irah*. But it is Maghfoor’s account that is real, and Dehalvi’s narrative that is fictional which produces both distance and figurative possibility to imagine the past rather than recreate it. In this sense, the work is unique because it does not represent authors and their works as emblematic but, instead, places the poets of Delhi in their milieu which consists of patrons, publishers, scholars, icons and the common folk. By including fictional characters and poets, the literary world is reproduced as a conjunctural network of sociality, intimacy, rivalry, pleasure and a space where different institutional attitudes collide and interact. This is what I think Dehalvi means when he says that he wants to “present the poets themselves as living and moving personalities.” Within this statement is a desire that

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<sup>87</sup> Dehalvi claims that his account is based on two books, one by Muhammad Husain Azad’s *Nairang-e-Khayal* (*The Wonder-World of Thought*) that recounts an imaginary *musha’irah*, and the second which is an account of an actual event in *Tabquat-ul-Sho’ra-e-Hind* (*Biography of the Poets of India*) by Karim-ud-Din Maghfoor (b.1821).



avoids memorializing the milieu, or the poets of Delhi even though Dehalvi writes that he gives his readers an “enlarged scope as to accommodate here nearly all the eminent poets of that time.”<sup>88</sup> Dehalvi’s *musha’irah* is representative because celebrities like Ghalib, Momin Khan Momin, Mohammad Ibrahim Zauq and Mufti Sadruddin Aazurda sit alongside poets from Allahabad, Lucknow, Secundrabad (Deccan), Madras, a French man from Delhi, a Christian from Uttar Pradesh who wrote ghazals about Christ, the prose poet, the satirist, the uneducated manual worker, the soldier, and singers of ghazals (a new trend in 1845 that old-timers like Ghalib, Momin and Zauq did not endorse) from the courts of Bahadur Shah Zafar. In other words, *The Last Musha’irah of Delhi* attempts to maintain the performative nature and interactivity of the field by staging the event within the text. Hence, the text itself can be read as a staging rather than a representation. This could be one reason why it is more often performed. At the same time, the “enlarged scope” and fictional characters at the event clearly indicate that Dehalvi does not want to conceal the fictional nature of his narrative, or the fact that this milieu of the last poets of Delhi is more fictional than real in his own times.

If the first claim is about the form of Dehalvi’s “enterprise,” the second is about writing a history of the Urdu poets and his own positionality. He assumes the position of Maghfoor and speaks through him in the first person throughout the account. The first person is an insider’s point of view, and it seems that this is the closest Dehalvi can come to narrating the literary milieu of Delhi in the first half of the nineteenth century. More specifically, Dehalvi’s own point of view is elegiac, infused with a sense of loss that acknowledges a contemporary amnesia because “a time was to come when there would be left not a soul to tell where the house of the late Momin stood, as now there is perhaps no

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<sup>88</sup> Dehalvi, *The Last Musha’irah of Delhi*, 37-38.

one, except myself, to point out Momin's tomb."<sup>89</sup> Through Karim-ud-Din Maghfoor, Dehalvi can rescind the elegiac and inhabit an imaginary past without "giving the impression that [he] had witnessed them[the poets] with [his] own eyes."<sup>90</sup> This produces the insider's point of view and a calculated distance simultaneously. On the one hand, I read this as a difficulty in methodology, or technique, that Dehalvi attempts to translate for the readers, and on the other, it is a way to concretely mark the space in which his own book circulates. By embodying Maghfoor's point of view he acknowledges that his own work is neither history (Dehalvi's point of view), nor fiction (Maghfoor's point of view). But it remains an innovation in the genre of the *tazkirah*, or biography of the poets. That is also why, at the end of the "Preamble," Dehalvi takes leave of the reader and presents himself, "before you [the reader] in the garb of Maulvi Karim-ud-Din."<sup>91</sup> He completely erases the presence of the author of the text, and appears in disguise by giving his labor as "an offering" to Karim-ud-Din Maghfoor.<sup>92</sup> Finally, he asks the readers to direct all good and bad "judgment" to "Maulvi Sahib," because it is he who narrates the performance. This kind of judgement is impossible, unless we accept Karim-ud-Din Magfoor as fictional and Baig's text poetic. Therefore, *The Last Musba'irah of Delhi/Delhi ki Akhri Shama'* is a narrative that allows the form of the *musba'irah* to inhabit it, rather than absorb the form of the *musba'irah* into itself like the novel form (which remains dominant) that Ahmed Ali or Anita Desai use to capture the dying milieu of Urdu-Hindi, or Hindustani.

Dehalvi's account is obviously not the *musba'irah*, nor is it a *tazkirah*. Rather it a performance in textual form of a practice that is quickly becoming residual in the twentieth

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<sup>89</sup> Dehalvi, *The Last Musba'irah of Delhi*, 36.

<sup>90</sup> Dehalvi, *The Last Musba'irah of Delhi*, 36.

<sup>91</sup> Dehalvi, *The Last Musba'irah of Delhi*, 38.

<sup>92</sup> Dehalvi, *The Last Musba'irah of Delhi*, 38.

century. The “Jashn-E-Rekhta,” or the festival too does something like this, but on its own terms. It absorbs the form of the *musha’irah*, its attitudes and practices into the form of the festival. Talk-culture, then, is a way to recirculate certain residual practices, but also to produce ecosystems where new forms of those practices emerge. Before I conclude, I wish to go back to the session at the “Jashn-E-Rekhta” that drew my attention to Farhatullah Baig Dehalvi’s *The Last Musha’irah of Delhi/Delhi ki Akhri Shama’* and illustrate how a session that is a polemic on the changing nature of the *musha’irah* ends up absorbing the form of the practice. The panel, “*Mushaira Ka Badalta Rang-Roop*” or “The Changing Face of the Mushaira,” was moderated by journalist Ravish Kumar who is executive editor at NDTV India, the Hindi news channel. The panel consisted of Urdu writer from Pakistan Ali Akbar Natiq, Urdu poet from India Munawwar Rana, and Indian-American writer and critic Satyapal Anand. Ravish Kumar’s opening jest pointed to the residual nature of the event, the lack of quality and patronage for Urdu literary culture. Further, he traces his knowledge about the *musha’irah* to the twentieth century film industry. He jokes, “the first time I saw a *musha’irah* was in *Mere Mehboob/My Beloved* (1963) and the last time in *Kabhi, Kabhi/Sometimes* (1976).”<sup>93</sup> The witticism indicates that there is a mismatch between the form and the immanent idea of what Urdu poetry and culture should be. Film cannot be a legitimate sponsor. But, like the founder of “Jashn-E-Rekhta,” Ravish Kumar too accesses Urdu-Hindi poetry through the popular, or an economy of pleasure that the Hindi film industry produces.

Munawwar Rana, on the other hand, suggests that pleasure and leisure are themselves pedagogical. So, there is really no contradiction. He claimed that the “*musha’irah*

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<sup>93</sup> Jashn-E-Rekhta, “*Musha’irah Ka Badalta Rang-Roop/The Changing Face of the Musha’irah*,” Rekhta, 2015, Youtube Video, Published on April 6, 2015, 60.18 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61rxkyX95nk>. (All translations of this conversation are mine).

was not a profession (*pesha*), or a way to pay obeisance” to a patron, but the event “was a dance that was performed around the temple,” rather than in it.<sup>94</sup> In other words, the practice entailed a level of freedom from institutional (temple) constraints. That is why it was not a *pesha*, a profession. The *musba’irah*, which he describes as a “dance,” inhabited a space outside or “around” the perimeter of disciplining institutions. He goes on to recount an anecdote from his own childhood. Rana says, “whenever a *musba’irah* was held in a town, in a neighborhood or a street, mothers used to be happy. This is because their children would be exposed to learning (*ilm*), politeness and refinement (*tahẓeeb*) without the need for a pen or a book.”<sup>95</sup> The “pen” and “book” seem to indicate a continuing discomfort with print culture and formal education, because leaning and refinement are a consequence of listening to and participating in a type of ecumene. Finally, this conversation about the *musba’irah* at the “Jashn-E-Rekhta” was unlike a panel discussion at a conference or other such events. As the discussion progressed it looked more and more like a *musba’irah*. Commentary and criticism were interspersed with poetry, where jokes and jabs (at good and bad poets, styles and attitudes) evoked continuous praise in the form of laughter and claps from the audience. The listeners also marked their presence via the traditional appreciative expression, “Wah! Wah!” whenever the speakers used wit or rendered a phrase in aesthetically pleasing ways. At least three type of patterns of expression co-mingled in the nature of this debate: the art object itself in the form of poems the poets recite (from memory); the commentary on the state of the field (the purpose of the session), and the presence of an audience who not only listened and responded through verbal cues (Q&A sessions), but also through non-verbal cues that signified appreciation and pleasure at both the literary and critical aspects of the

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<sup>94</sup> Jashn-E-Rekhta, “*Musba’irah* Ka Badalta Rang-Roop.”

<sup>95</sup> Jashn-E-Rekhta, “*Musba’irah* Ka Badalta Rang-Roop.”

performance. This co-mingling suggests that a festival like this blurs the boundaries between artist, critic and the audience. Like the session at the “Jaipur Literature Festival” that I begin this chapter with, this session too is a combination of the literary and critical where the speakers know that they are recalling and debating a residual culture. However, they end up transforming a session on the status of the field into something else altogether.

For Sanjiv Saraf, producing an ecosystem and a network of legitimation for Urdu-Hindi or Hindustani in what is called the Hindi belt of North India is both an aesthetic and political act. Alok Rai writes, “more realistically, however, I suggest that the yearning for Hindustani is a kind of symptom of our political condition, a revulsion against the purist, intolerant attitudes that inform the politics of the Hindu Right. Like a litmus paper, this recurrent yearning can, at best, *register* change, and perhaps the hope for change, but the transformation itself will have to happen in the real, material world.”<sup>96</sup> It is as if Saraf had read Rai’s mind because in an interview with Kalpana Sharma of the *Times of India*, he describes the “Jashn” thus:

...our most cherished memory is of the massive participation the festival enjoys by youth from diverse linguistic, religious, social and cultural backgrounds. By being free and open to all, the “Jashn” has ensured that the celebration of Urdu remains an inclusive project. Many among our audience have embraced Urdu as their own despite it not being their mother tongue, while others have expressed a deep inclination to learn it. We feel that the festival opens up a sensory experience to live and love the language, thereby strengthening its roots in the public consciousness.<sup>97</sup>

This strangely echoes the illiberal public sphere that Francis Cody identifies with libidinal, corporeal, and poetic ties, that emphasizes intimacy, the popular, the notion of the *janta* and the genre of the *mela*, or in this case the *jashn*. But this is also the only way to be progressive about the plural nature of the literary field. Throughout this chapter, all the examples I turn

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<sup>96</sup> Alok Rai, “The Persistence of Hindustani,” 143.

<sup>97</sup> Kalpana Sharma, “Urdu Is Not a Dying Art in India!” *Times of India, The (Mumbai, India)*, 15 Feb. 2017, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/1628E19B6E7280C0?p=AWNB>.

to suggest that the embodied, popular and the pleasurable are pedagogical, and they lead to creative transformations even if they are not easily legible.

At the same time, built into this recirculation of residual culture is a reflexive acknowledgement – another aspect of the literary and critical – that what is being circulated is the past, and in the larger scheme of things, it shows how ephemeral literary traditions, genres, literary practice and theories are in the postcolonial context. Things change. Things change radically. That is also probably why, a performance that keeps reinterpreting history, rather than a body of knowledge, better explains the emergence of these literature festivals in India. I am less interested in making a value judgement about the phenomena; rather, I feel that these festivals are drawing on certain attitudes and symbolic capital, both from the present and from history that point to a different way of managing literary plurality in South Asia. And this method is emerging amid the popular public rather than in more structured institutional location. The question is why? In this context, Saraf keeps reiterating the living nature of a language and literature and its life among the masses. Like Dehalvi in the *Last Musba'irah of Delhi*, Saraf and the “Jashn-E-Rekhta” (or Gokhale and the “Jaipur Literature Festival”) find ways to transform residual cultural practices into a “living and moving” phenomenon. The endpoint, at least for Saraf, it seems, is a heightened “sensory experience to live and love” together in a language that has always been engaged with “popular mobilization [,] affective communication” and the pleasurable.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Rai, “The Persistence of Hindustani,” 142.

## Chapter 2

### The Institution of Literature, Criticism and “ILF: Samanvay” as Institution of Practice

The various descriptions that the festivals, organizers, and writer-curators produce in Chapter 1 draw mostly from an eclectic range of popular representations and histories. At the same time, these descriptions suggest an understanding of what a fragmented Indian literary field looks like, and that somehow the disparate constituencies of this space need to be reconstituted. In other words, there is an implicit understanding that the institution of literature in the subcontinent is an assemblage of spatially and temporally plural histories. The literature festivals are part of the literary field in India but at the same time they are also in the process of legitimating literary production. In this sense, they are reshaping the literary field through their practice.<sup>1</sup> For sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the literary field is a “separate social universe having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and economy...as an autonomous universe endowed with specific principles of evaluation of practices and works.”<sup>2</sup> Although Bourdieu is mostly speaking of the writer’s position in the literary field here, the same logic can be applied to the writer-curators and organizers of the festivals who are reassembling the “specific principles of evaluation” by producing an

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<sup>1</sup> See Theodore R. Schatzki, “Introduction: Practice Theory,” in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina and Eike Von Savigny, (London: Routledge, 2001), 11. My use of the term “practice” stems from an understanding that human activity, knowledge, reason, meaning, power, language, historical change and institutions are all a part of a field of practice. More specifically, in the academic field, Schatzki writes that there is a consensus that “practices are embodied, materially mediated array of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding.” But there are two different operations occurring when I say that the festivals engage in practice and I employ a “practice approach” to understand festivals. In the first case, the festivals, quite independent of the “practice turn” in academia, are finding ways to perform different notions of Indian literature for a public in embodied, and materially mediated ways. They do this through what I have termed talk-culture. I turn to this mediation in the second half of the chapter when I examine the practices of the “Indian Languages Festival: Samanvay.” At the same time, I also begin to use a practice approach to understand the activity of the festivals. Schatzki calls this an “analysis that (1) develop an account of practices, either the field of practice or some sub domain thereof (e.g. science), or (2) treat the field of practice as the place to study the nature and transformation of their subject matter”(11).

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Fields of Cultural Production*, (New York: Columbia, 1993), 162-163.

alternate network of legitimation for “practices and works” in India. Further, if habitus is “a product of history, [that] produces individual and collective practices - more history - in accordance with the schemes generated by history,” then talk-culture as a purposeful and conscious (re)turn to conjunctural networks of literary sociality, and older forms of public culture, can be thought of as a staging of plural histories alongside each other for specific reasons.<sup>3</sup> This staging is not only a reproduction of class positions and its values, but also a disruption of some of the dominant norms of an existing literary field. This leads me to believe that the possibility of change within the festivals lies in performing various versions of history without objectifying or institutionalizing them. And as Bourdieu reminds us, this performance is often embodied and “depends on the state of the system of possibilities (conceptual, stylistic, etc.) inherited from history.”<sup>4</sup>

Hence, the problems the literature festivals appear to be a solution for, are not new. This is despite the various writer-curators and producers refusing to assign an interestedness or a desire to solve a problem; for them, the outcome [the sessions and the curation for example] is a consequence of chance happenings. The issues they confront and offer possible solutions to are a way to account for multilingual literary histories, to engage different types of publics, and bring together various locations of the humanities. When I asked Sanjoy Roy, one of the Directors of the “Jaipur Literature Festival” if there was a

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<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 53-54. Here Bourdieu describes habitus as, “the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Simply put, it’s a “feel for the game” that form part of one’s habits, skills and dispositions.

<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 206. It is in this section “Questions of Methods,” that Bourdieu clearly articulates the possibility of change through struggle, even if the struggles are not purposefully undertaken to bring about change.



method and a purpose to what they did, his answers proved that outcomes are a result of miscalculations rather than calculations. This is how he put it:

“much of it has been an accident in the making...first it’s not that we set out to manage “a” or “b” or “c” and that is certainly not our purpose...we are a platform...the accident in the making is what...here we are Teamwork Arts, an organization or institution, then there are individuals like William [Dalrymple], Namita [Gokhale] who are the curators. Each come with their own idiosyncrasies and beliefs...but they sit outside of this organization [Teamwork Arts]. And because they sit outside, and they think poles apart and each one of us do completely different things in completely different ways...we argue and in the process of the argument you get the creating.”<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, Roy points to the work of reassembling the disparate constituencies of the literary field when he tells me that the “amazing thing about India is the information it has across its national languages which is quite different from the information that is available in English. The crucible of knowledge about India lies in the hinterlands...what is it that we can do...we can create a platform where people think that wow, this too...the acceptability of the other.”<sup>6</sup> This understanding of the “other,” or the acknowledgement of the excluded in the literary field, I believe, is premised on an abstract and nebulous category of the institution of literature and criticism in India and the norms that govern it. Roy, it seems, is pointing to an elitism that has permeated both the institution of literature and criticism, especially in English. Roy himself is a product of this institution.

To be sure, this idea of an Indian literature and criticism, since its invention, has existed in a dialectical tension with arguments for and against its possibilities despite the institutionalization of national academies (Sahitya Akademi), and the proliferation of formal disciplines like Orientalism, Indology, English Literature and Comparative Literature. But the question that Roy’s statement points to is less about erecting a category like “Indian

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<sup>5</sup> Sanjoy Roy, interview by author. January 9, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Sanjoy Roy, interview by author. January 9, 2018.

literature;” rather, it is about how to account for all the other traditions (literary, popular etc.) in the various Indian languages, or to acknowledge and build on knowledge that circulates in the hinterlands. The solution for him is to literally place these different constituencies in conversation with each other, which more formal institutions like the Sahitya Akademi and university departments have failed to do. The festival, and what I call talk-culture is one way to link what the organizers think are disparate and fragmented parts of cultural production and reception.

But first, I want to locate both the literature festivals and the argument this dissertation makes about them, within the social and historical conditions of the colonial invention of the idea of Indian literature and criticism in the subcontinent. Put simply, I believe that this is a common habitus. Thus, I begin this chapter with the philological revolution and its effects in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and work my way across a contested landscape, all the way to the peak of a type of critique of the institution of literature and criticism in the 1980s and 1990s when the university, and notions of Indian literature, literary history, and literary criticism as organizing principles were finally discarded for other ways to engage literature and culture. The question that arises is, what happens when the idea of a “national literature” is abandoned because this model of community cannot simultaneously institute a stable identity while at the same time account for plural practices. Relatedly, which literature is a vehicle for which cultural tradition within plural practices? And how to account for contested and divided notions of culture and history, if culture and history are what literature translates and transfers? What purpose does literature serve then?

I want to suggest that the critique mounted against the institution of literature and criticism from inside and outside the Indian academy in the 1980s and 1990s left a lacuna

that has allowed for a re-inscription of the literary field by other means. I do not claim that literature festivals emerged as a direct consequence of these circumstances. However, it is against this backdrop and the dissatisfaction with the existing approaches to literature that alternative ways to manage and legitimate the Indian literary field have emerged. I turn to these other means in the last section of this chapter, where I turn my attention to the inaugural session at the 2015 “Indian Languages Festival” (“ILF: Samanvay”) and show how linguistic fragmentation remains an ever-present challenge for the festival and its organizers. I then analyze the festival manifesto that appeared in 2016. This document proposes the idea of “cultural continuums” as an alternative to the post-independence logic of “national integration.” The attitudes that “ILF: Samanvay” attempts to perform for its audience through its sessions and talk-culture, is again an itinerant mode that embraces uncertainty and allows the audience to maintain a sense of surprise towards languages and literatures.

To understand this notion of performing “cultural continuums,” and what it means to embrace uncertainty when we speak about our experience with language and literature, I turn to insights gained in my conversations with writer-curator Giriraj Kiradoo and Rizio Yohanan Raj. I conclude by elaborating on what Rizio Yohanan Raj and I call a “possible institution” of literature and criticism that does not aim towards objectivity and systemizations but remains flexible and open-ended. For Raj, the difference between objectivity and systemization, and flexibility and open-endedness are the difference between what she calls “preservation” and “conservation” of multiple languages, literary practices and literary histories. I interpret conservation as a refusal to preserve the paraphernalia of the institution of literature and criticism that South Asia has inherited. Hence, the idea of a possible institution was our way to look ahead and understand the potential festivals have, to provoke new ways to manage a plural, multicultural and fragmented literary field in India.

## The Invention of the Institution of Literature and Criticism

In his 2018 book *Forget English!*, a riposte to the concept of world literature in the US academy, Aamir Mufti argues that, “*a genealogy of world literature leads to Orientalism.*”<sup>7</sup> This is a fairly infallible claim because Orientalism was a form of philology, and the latter constitutes the metropolitan and postcolonial genealogy to the institution of literary criticism. Marc Nichanian said this powerfully in 2014 when he argued that the idea of literature and mourning it, in non-western locations, is itself the twin of philology because the philologist “will give language back to us...to restore a language philologically is, for us, who have arrived late, to establish and confirm the loss of it.”<sup>8</sup> The “us” here is the native, or the so-called indigenous that Orientalism produces. In colonial India, this native was most often Hindu, and belonged to the upper caste and class. In the 1970s, Sujit Mukherjee came to a similar conclusion when he wrote that the “philological preamble” has left an “indelible mark” on literary studies in India.<sup>9</sup> For him the preamble signified an “unilingual” assumption that literature is somehow the special possession of a single language and a single nation.<sup>10</sup> But the main thrust of Mufti’s argument is directed towards Comparative Literature within the US academy, reminding it that the re-emergence of world literature as a disciplinary problem is deeply implicated in that older cultural system of world mapping called Orientalism and colonialism. This is because the philological revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth century that engaged a non-West, literally invented the idea of cultural difference that consisted of unique literary expressions which could then be

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<sup>7</sup> Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literature*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016, Kindle Edition), 19, (Italics in the original).

<sup>8</sup> Marc Nichanian, *Mourning Philology: Art and Religion at the Margins of the Ottoman Empire*, tr. G. M. Goshgarian and Jeff Fort, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Sujit Mukherjee, “Towards a Literary History of India.” *New Literary History*, 8, no. 2 (Winter 1977): 227.

<sup>10</sup> Mukherjee, “Towards a Literary History of India,” 227–228.

compared, categorized and classified. For Mufti, Orientalism “functioned as a plane of equivalence, a set of categorical grids and networks that seek, first of all, to render legible as literature a vast and heterogenous range of practices of writing...”<sup>11</sup> In this sense, all talk about non-Western literature within the institutional boundaries of the academy can be traced to the philological revolution in Europe.

To be sure, the reason I can speak about literature in India unproblematically is because the “categorical grids” and “networks” that organize, legitimate and justify it are fairly universal today. These grids and networks often remain implicit, and the discipline of literary studies seemed natural and universal when I first encountered an ambiguously defined and heterogenous category like “Indian literature” in academic and non-academic locations in India. Ironically, the need to reveal the grids and networks for what they are, and to find other kinds of formations or alternatives, itself confirms a type of loss vis-à-vis my primary intellectual habitat which is Anglophonic and Euro-American. Hence, the rationale for this chapter is twofold. First, it can be seen as an attempt to (re)learn, or provincialize (in the way Dipesh Chakrabarty means it) what literature is and could be in India and to find alternate ways to engage with various types of expressions and aesthetic forms. This means turning to practices on the ground and developing not only methods, but also norms that redefine the institution of criticism. However, this alternative is also dependent on the flexibility of already existing educational and research institutions, or the agenda of new one. The second reason is more radical and it involves the possibility of a completely different way to engage with the various types of cultural production outside the academic study of literature because this academic study is still too entrenched in the norms and values that Orientalism invented and mapped. The literature festivals also emerge against the

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<sup>11</sup> Mufti, *Forget English!*, 10-11.

background of this colonial and postcolonial genealogy. As I have been showing and will show in the subsequent chapters, festival directors, writer-curators, public intellectuals and concerned citizens consciously and unconsciously continue to engage with these norms and models in the subcontinent. More generally, the work of resistance, reorganization and negotiation that academic humanities and the other locations of the humanities like the festivals do, is partially a consequence of and a response to processes like philology and Orientalism that invented an “Indian literature” by instituting the idea that the subcontinent had a unique civilization with a classical (Sanskrit and not as much Persian or Arabic) past that could define its own identity in the world order of nations and national literatures. Any kind of literary image that academic and (popular) public culture proposes to project must encounter (and possibly untangle itself from) this founding myth. However, what attracts me to the festivals is the public and open nature of its practice that is located outside the institutional constraints of nationalism and academia. I feel that the possibility of another way can emerge from the somewhat chaotic and improvised practices on the ground.

This instituting of “Indian literature” was “grounded in a notion of indigeneity as the condition of culture— a chronotope, properly speaking, of deep habitation in time...”<sup>12</sup> This also can be read as the founding moment of one type of cultural nationalism, a philological one, in the colonies where symbolic resources were instituted, and provided raw material for a sense of belonging to a supra-community for a specific class and caste.<sup>13</sup> At the other end

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<sup>12</sup> Mufti, *Forget English!*, 37.

<sup>13</sup> Asking questions like “did a variety of philology not exist before colonialism?”; or “did a sense of community only emerge with nationalism and print capitalism?” becomes problematic because it means that we engage in analogical thinking and look for comparative literary and political thought in pre-colonial South Asia. That means we always measure South Asia in terms of existing categories. Further, even if other philology’s existed- which they did, and other forms of community were imagined- which they were (caste is exemplar), there is little evidence to show that the Orientalist, or the subsequent development of institutional criticism drew from them? This is the subject of Sheldon Pollock’s last chapter, “Indigenism and Other Culture-Power Concepts of Modernity” in *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*. At the same time, even Pollock’s argument about alternative forms of culture-power in medieval and early modern South Asia is limiting because the conditions

of the spectrum, philological nationalism reinforced the already existing divisions in society by rearticulating and reiterating caste hierarchies, the difference between religious communities, and producing a discourse of the insider (caste Hindus) and the outsider (Muslim, Dalit, tribal etc.). Afterall, philology, closely associated with Romanticism, was more conservative than radical in terms of history and culture.<sup>14</sup> Hence philological nationalism offered a new form of access to history, language and a cultural essentialism. In this sense, right from its inception, what would become institutional disciplines like English Literature and Comparative Literature in India were always two sides of the same coin. The literature festivals inherit this idea of “Indian Literature” but engage with the problematic outside the limitations of the national and the bureaucratic-institutional study of literature. What this limitation is and what is outside will be the focus of this chapter. But first, I turn to Mufti’s second chapter in *Forget English!*, “Orientalism and the Institution of Indian Literature,” to try and establish what this thing called “Indian Literature” really is or is not. Mufti’s argument can only be a point of departure.

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of emergence of those forms are not the same today. Further, only if we consider the present as a part of an unfolding history that consists of a past and the future, can we glean lessons from the past to live in the present. This seems to be one of Pollock’s reasons to identify other culture-power concepts. However, if the past, the present and even the future are imagined as a part of a cultural continuum, then elements of those moments in time are always intermixed in the awareness of the present. Then the usefulness of the past becomes abstruse because the past is already there in the present moment in an infinitely modified form. Later in the chapter, I turn to “ILF: Samanvay” and show how the festival tries to imagine the past as a continuum that is always a part of the present moment.

<sup>14</sup> When I claim that philology was conservative, I am suggesting that it emerged during a specific period (the first half of the nineteenth century) in Europe when Romanticism and nationalism dovetailed to produce Romantic nationalism that in many ways still defines our understanding of the relationship between language, cultural history and nationalism. Joep Leerssen calls this moment an “entanglement” that “constitutes a specific historical singularity” and offers a definition. For him Romantic nationalism is “the celebration of the nation (defined in its language, history, and cultural character) as an inspiring ideal for artistic expression; and the instrumentalization of that expression in political consciousness-raising (28). Thus, philology was the science of uncovering a native authenticity that existed before the dilution of culture by foreign influences. The objective was to institute national specificity. Leerssen puts it nicely when he says, “that is what the *logos* in *philology* stands for: culture, in the philological view, was an act of national self-creation by self-articulation” (21). This is what makes it conservative. See Joep Leerssen, “Notes toward a Definition of Romantic Nationalism,” *Romantik: Journal for the Study of Romanticisms* 2, no. 1 (February 3, 2013): 9–35, <https://doi.org/10.7146/rom.v2i1.20191>.

In the second chapter of his book, Aamir Mufti reminds his readers of a well-trodden argument about interactions between a new philology in Europe and the Hindu elite in colonial India. This exchange produced an entity like “Indian literature.” To re-elaborate: the philological revolution was a consequence of a two-way imperial and colonial transfer, albeit unequally, between South Asia and Europe. People, experiences, ideas, texts and artifacts provincialized Europe, and at that same time, South Asia was Europeanized. In the first instance, agents of institutionalization like William Jones, Georg Forster, Johann Gottfried Herder, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the Schlegel brothers, and Novalis produced the idea of an “Indian literature” through the “chronotype” of the native, the process of translation and selective curation. They imagined Europe against an invented East, but also provided the tools for South Asians to imagine an India. They collaborated with upper caste and elite *pandits* and *maulvis* respectively who were often translators and sometimes even teachers to these early Orientalists.<sup>15</sup> In the second instance, this new institution of “Indian literature” circulated back to the upper class and caste intelligentsia in South Asia who found in it a different way to articulate questions of identity and belonging. Often, the espousal of Western knowledge was strategic because it benefited the ruling caste and class. This alternate conception produced a relationship, however untenable in a multilingual and multicultural polity between national identity, a country's people and its past and present cultural productions. By the middle of the nineteenth century, a change from an Orientalism that treated local knowledge systems benignly to a more chauvinistic Anglicism

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<sup>15</sup> Neither the Hindus nor the Muslims are a homogenous class and caste in South Asia. Also, it should not be assumed that Hindus translated Sanskrit texts and Muslims only worked with Arabic or Persian ones. Hindus were proficient in Arabic and Persian and there were Muslim *maulvis* who read various South Asian languages. But this transaction and the subsequent English education of South Asians was essentially an upper class and caste affair. See R. K. Kochhar, “English Education in India: Hindu Anamnesis versus Muslim Torpor,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 27, no. 48 (1992): 2609–2616.



based on a national-linguistic model of community literally instituted the relationship between cultural production, language, region and religious groups. Delhi College, the College of Fort Williams in Calcutta, the Baptist Mission in Serampore and the College of Fort St. George in Madras produced models of (literary) community through the materials they produced and circulated to manage what they probably thought was a highly fragmented field and public. The structures they erected were a Sanskrit and Hindi-Hindu based-Indic system that was further divided into the Aryan and Dravidian language complexes. Against this was erected the Urdu and Persian-based Islamic system. The linguistic division of post-independence Indian was equally based on the same premise that assumed a strict relationship between region, language and people in the form of a micro-nationalism that would somehow work as a union at the macro level of the nation-state. This project remains incomplete even today. Even though language and identity are not close-knit categories, there is an implicit knowledge (in literature and everyday practices) about the syncretic yet independent nature of languages, cultures, and identity in the subcontinent.

Hence, in *Forget English!*, Mufti warns against any kind of claim to autonomy or authenticity and asks for an unsentimental recognition of the structures under which any kind of future (for literature) can be imagined in Euro-American and postcolonial locations.<sup>16</sup> This structure is the institution of literature and criticism in India. However, Mufti does not pursue the second instance in this two-way colonial transfer – the circulating back of philology and Orientalism to South Asia, to its logical ends. Implicitly, his argument affirms the universality of Western styled academic criticism because it seems that the real future of the philological revolution matured in European and American institutions that produced commentary, critiques and oppositional claims, or modes of legitimation in

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<sup>16</sup> Mufti, *Forget English!*, 252.

disciplinary offshoots like, Indology, Comparative Literature, South Asian Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and most recently World Literature. All the above were and are couched as a cosmopolitan counterforce to the hegemony of national literatures – the same idea that philology gifted to the colonies. Further, Mufti focuses, as the name of the second chapter implies, on the institution of literature where literary production and the study of language, literature and culture are conflated. This conflation is a genuine problem because until criticism, or the systematic study of literature and culture gets institutionalized, both literature and commentary on it often plays a role in reproducing the mythoi of the literary and its value in the public sphere. The way I understand it in this context is that there was and has always been cultural production in the South Asia before philology appeared on the scene. There were other forms of criticism and theorizing about culture and aesthetics (Sanskrit poetics). But, as Mufti shows, the genealogy of the disciplines, or the institution of criticism, can be traced quite robustly to the philological revolution in Europe. Even though philology and its various actors in Europe and India instituted literature qua literature, negotiating the production of knowledge on the cultural production took different forms in the centers and peripheries. In the European case, non-Western literatures were used to defend a cosmopolitanism or assert dominance (hegemony), while in South Asia, early scholars scurried to recover lost traditions and practices that colonialism had altered. But the reason to recover traditions and practices still followed the principles of a philological nationalism. The texts and practices they drew from were often part of the everyday or persisted in different institutional locations and in different mediums (song, dance, theatre, religion, ritual, and later film). The problem for the South Asian critic lay in the need to synthesize disparate social and intellectual traditions, while at the same time circulate these comparisons and rebuttals in a discourse community. This community was mostly

European. Philology, and in turn, Orientalism instituted the norms of that discourse community that one had to speak to if one wanted to be legible. In this context, although ideas and texts moved freely, there was little dialog between thinkers in South Asia and the scholars of Europe, England or America. This geographical and political disadvantage, according to C.A. Bayly, prevented “a productive intellectual encounter with the distant and aloof European writers” but at the same time forced many to debate European scholars in absentia for a local audience.<sup>17</sup>

Illustrative of this uneven exchange and the control of the more dominant discourse community is K.T. Telang’s talk, “Was the *Ramayana* Copied from Homer.” Telang was judge at the Bombay High Court and an unaffiliated Indologist with an interest in Marathi and Sanskrit literatures. Although the author delivered it for a local audience at the Students’ Literary and Scientific Society in Bombay in September 1872, the text unequivocally reveals the pressure it feels to speak to the “scientific” norms of philology and Orientalism. An edited version was reprinted in the liberal organ of The Bombay Association, *Native Opinion*, in 1873.<sup>18</sup> The asynchrony of this interaction becomes evident in the disparate professional and institutional locations of the argument and its rebuttal.<sup>19</sup> Albrecht Weber was professor of philology at the University of Berlin, and his *Akademische Vorlesungen über Indische Litteraturgeschichte/ Academic Lectures about Indian Literary History* (1852) was one of many texts that helped institute a category like “India Literature” and, in turn, justify the disciplines of Orientalism and Indology. Weber’s argument claimed that the entire *Ramayana* emerged out

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<sup>17</sup> C.A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, Kindle Edition), 188.

<sup>18</sup> Kashinath T. Telang, *Selected Writings & Speeches*, (Bombay: K.R. Mitra, 1916), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Telang is not writing in a vacuum. For instance, the Appendix to the essay shows that he was in conversation with Indian philologists like Dr. Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandarkar, Dr. Bhau Daji and Babu Rajendralal Mitra while writing his response to Weber. Hence, he had European and more local models of philology at his disposal.

of Buddhist legends and that Valmiki could not have written before the beginning of the Christian Era and, hence, his work drew on the Homeric cycle. Telang's rebuttal offers some counterevidence, but it was primarily organized around identifying logical fallacies in Weber's arguments. As I read Telang, I cannot help but draw loose parallels between his rhetoric and Aijaz Ahmad's style almost a century later when the latter responded to Fredric Jameson's "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital."<sup>20</sup> Both were writing back to powerful institutional locations in Europe and America in the language of philology and literary criticism, respectively. These rebuttals are united by the underlying structure of the corrective to those bold and universal claims about the "Other" that emerged in metropolitan locations. However, Telang and Ahmad represent bookends, the two extremes to the problem of the institution of literature and criticism in India.

Telang begins within the personal (like Ahmad) and argues for an autonomous literary history that is authentic (unlike Ahmad) to an Indian identity. He writes:

...to be told that the *Ramayana* – that noble work with which so many of one's pleasing and exalting associations are bound up – that work which sings the superhuman exploits of a deified man...is the greatest favourite of the Hindus of this day – that work which has ingrained itself into the very life of the nation... – to be told that after all that work is nothing more than a Buddhist saga dovetailed to the Homeric story of the Trojan War, that causes a shock to one's notions under which not many will find it easy to be stoical. For myself, I am free to confess, that I did not bring to the study of the exposition of this new theory a mind that was very inclined to accept it.<sup>21</sup>

Telang's immediate concern is a type of scientific knowledge produced in Europe about India. However, the underlying premise for this defense of the *Ramayana* against this "scientific enquiry" is the consecration of a "noble" work which is deeply embedded in a

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<sup>20</sup> Telang and Ahmad cannot be more dissimilar in their politics as the former was an economically liberal and politically moderate thinker. Ahmad is a Marxist who continues to decry the Indian variety of liberalism and neoliberalism.

<sup>21</sup> Telang, *Selected Writings & Speeches*, 5.

homogenous Hindu community. Telang's argument is not necessarily communal in today's sense; rather, it comes across as anticolonial in the late 1800s. But in defending a national epic, he still ends up linking a specific community (Hindu), a specific religion (Hinduism) and an imaginative work to the spirit of the nation. This matrix is a consequence of philology's conservative subtext that Telang does not question. He is responding to the question of influence which according to him is simply the most recent problem for "orientalists and Indologists" who have floated other "opinions, by no means particularly definite or precise" about the two epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.<sup>22</sup> But the only way for him to respond to Albrecht Weber is to defend a literary and aesthetic past that is somehow equivalent to an Indian national identity, which in turn is a way to secure a place in the competitive field of civilizational "Others."

Telang's oppositional critique remains within the general logic of philology (and a philological nationalism) because its methods have already been established as a science of language, literature and culture by the late nineteenth century. He writes that

if the progress of scientific enquiry must needs knock off [sic] its splendid pedestal this idol like so many others which is had similarly treated, it is our bounden duty to bend under the stroke [sic], and adapt ourselves to the altered circumstances as best we may. And therefore, feeling what I do feel, I still hope to be able to preserve towards the new theory [Weber's thesis] that scientific attitude which is the only proper attitude in such an inquiry.<sup>23</sup>

One could read this section from "Was the *Ramayana* Copied from Homer," as a sign of a subversive mimicry that postcolonial scholars like Homi Bhabha theorize. Afterall, Telang is using the techniques of empire to argue against its imprecisions. But I want to read this response as the pressure institutional norms apply on agents and practices. The scientific nature of philological enquiry had already been institutionalized by the time Telang responds

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<sup>22</sup> Telang, *Selected Writings & Speeches*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Telang, *Selected Writings & Speeches*, 5.

to Weber. Therefore, even though it is Telang's "bounden duty" to rebut Weber's argument, the counterargument had to "adapt to altered circumstances" because it is the "only proper attitude."<sup>24</sup> This "altered circumstances" is the new science of philology and the "proper attitude" is a matter of not only rhetoric and style, but also a method for producing rational knowledge. Hence, for Telang, an autonomous literary history of India is possible, but only in the universal language of the academic disciplines.

For C.A. Bayly by the end of the nineteenth century, "Indians were authoring a version of the past which combined Rankean precision and philological expertise with an expanded form of benign sociology ...to place India more securely within the emerging international study of the character of civilisation."<sup>25</sup> In contrast, Aijaz Ahmad, who represents the other end of the spectrum in my argument, speaks of complicities because he questions the very alterity that Fredric Jameson's essay evokes. Jameson's argument is too philological, too Oriental in its underpinnings. Ahmad is suspicious of alterity and colonial difference (in this context) because he understands that "we [Ahmad and Jameson] are not each other's civilizational Others" but deeply entangled in the "irreconcilable struggle of capital and labour."<sup>26</sup> More specifically, Ahmad acknowledges the universal nature of Western styled criticism and its location in capitalistic modernity from within which both he and Jameson produce their critique. For Ahmad, almost a century later, the only way forward for literary studies in India should be an outrage towards the norms of philology and its future developments. This "transgression," he writes, "is in the most obvious and literal

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<sup>24</sup> If Weber, or Telang had instead turned to practices on the ground, folk traditions and tribal adaptations of the *Ramayana*, a very different discourse could have emerged. For works that rewrite the "classical" discourse see, Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>25</sup> Bayly, *Recovering Liberties*, 190.

<sup>26</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'". *Social Text*, no. 17 (Autumn 1987): 25.

senses, against ‘English’ and against ‘Literature’” itself.<sup>27</sup> I will return to Ahmad’s argument more fully at a later stage in this chapter.

In the meantime, philology and Orientalism produced the possibility of a universal set of norms and values to access almost every kind of text. These disciplines also offered a way for the local intelligentsia to investigate their own mythical and literary past in specific forms for specific purposes and in a type of competitive spirit to affirm civilization identity. This, in turn, created the difference between what was considered indigenous and the foreign. Literature is not literature without legitimation, and it is here that cultural theorist Marc Nichanian’s terms help me explain why I even ask the questions I ask. What are the compulsions to propagate a discipline like literary studies in India – a space I partially inhabit? As disciplines develop and move into respective futures in a postcolonial location, I feel one must repeatedly ask, what purpose academic criticism itself serves today. Maybe, there are other ways to manage, legitimate, experience and perform our relationship with the literary even within the overarching and inescapable structure of political nationalism and a cultural nation-thinking that philology inaugurated.

Therefore, I want to begin from another perspective. Orientalism was really the process by which the colonized (of a certain class and caste) learned and replicated the nature of the European gaze that was directed towards us, and by which it also produced the imagined space that Marc Nichanian calls the “ethnographic nation.”<sup>28</sup> This is not an entirely new insight, but it allows for a self-reflexivity that prevents me from slipping into an

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<sup>27</sup> Ahmad, *In Theory*, 281.

<sup>28</sup> Nichanian, *Mourning Philology*, 76.

essentialism about the possibility of Western or non-Western knowledge forms.<sup>29</sup> In

*Mourning Philology*, Nichanian writes that the native:

...is a figure: he is, when all is said and done philology's most remarkable invention...The real problem is that this advent of the native thanks to his becoming-an-object was also, necessarily, a becoming-subject, as with Foucault's madman or criminal as well. They had to become a subjected subject, as is obvious, but he was in reality (this is the crux of the matter) a self-subjected subject.<sup>30</sup>

An emancipatory anti-colonialism was an attempt to decolonize this "self-subjected subject."

Similarly, explanatory terms like mimicry and hybridity (Homi Bhabha) were

postcolonialism's way of giving back agency to the colonized subject. However, the object of

the gaze, or the native (thinker), internalizes institutional knowledge (Orientalism, the

various disciplines etc.) produced by colonialism and imperialism.<sup>31</sup> Since this is mostly

voluntary – a self-colonization, and automatic – a consequence of changing institutional

structures, resistance is always compromised because it is within the terms (norms,

conventions etc.) of the colonizer (and dominant institutional structures) that any

oppositional argument can be made.<sup>32</sup> That is why K.T. Telang's reply to Weber is in the

language of philology, or as he calls it, in the spirit of "scientific enquiry." Nichanian uses

Stathis Gourgouris' term to explain this self-subjection; he calls it "autosopic mimicry,"

because "the aim is to be 'like them' so as to become wholly ourselves. We, in postcolonial

locations have to 'imitate,' or continue to imitate, in order to be 'independent'."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 12. There he writes, "let us not forget that the most violent denunciation of the West produced by Frantz Fanon is written in the elegant style of a Jean-Paul Sartre. The West has not merely produced modern colonialism, it informs most interpretations of colonialism."

<sup>30</sup> Nichanian, *Mourning Philology*, 74.

<sup>31</sup> Nichanian, *Mourning Philology*, 73

<sup>32</sup> The development of scientific research and science education in independent India followed this path where the ethos was not resistance, but of learning from Russian, European and American scientific institutions and establishments.

<sup>33</sup> Nichanian, *Mourning Philology*, 74.



In contrast and less useful for my argument in this context is Edward Said's position. For him, Orientalism was a discursive representation (a "school of interpretation") of the East (peoples, localities, languages, literatures etc.) by institutions, scholars, travelers, traders, administrators and writers that carried knowledges about the Orient into Western learning, consciousness and empire.<sup>34</sup> The absence of the self-subjected subject in Said's scheme has been the target of many critiques. Nevertheless, Said's provocation is directed towards everyone who is an Orientalist or neo-Orientalist, especially those who continue to interpret the "other" – the East, the postcolony and the Global South. On the other hand, Nicheanian's insight (unlike Said's), I feel, forces the "self-subjected subject" to ask why she (or I) continue(s) to interpret, write historiographies and seek out genealogies, or search for identity (regional, national, nativist, Indian, postcolonial, diasporic etc.) in South Asia's pasts and present. It allows one to question academic criticism and the business of literature itself in postcolonial locations. This, I feel, is like the radical nature of indiscipline that Aijaz Ahmad proposes when he says that the "transgression" has to be against "English" and "Literature" itself. In other words, what he means is the dismantling and reassembling of the institution of literature and criticism. By the 1980s and 1990s scholars in India do exactly this and venture out into spaces that ask if other types of futures, institutions and critical imaginaries are still available. In this context, Edward Said's work also opens an avenue to question and rearticulate colonial structures through colonial discourse analysis. Hence, I feel that dismantling structures in India essentially involves reassembling institutions, practices, and subjectivities. It is not an attempt to reject an equivocal category like Western knowledge, or to produce an equally nebulous classification called non-western knowledge. The boundaries between such binaries have long vanished. Rather this dismantling and

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<sup>34</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (Vintage Books, 1979), 202-203.

reassembling is a way to build a more organic and socially connected infrastructure that serves and supports the needs, and learns from, different types of people and cultures on the ground. Simultaneously, it is this asynchrony between institutions, practices and subjectivities that is also the point of conflict in the study of literary culture and its efficacy in India today.

### **Literature and Criticism in Postcolonial India**

To further understand the development of the critical field in postcolonial India, and the tenacity of the ideas that philology introduced, I will begin in 1954. Almost seven years after independence and a hundred twenty years after William Bentinck's resolution on English education (1835), the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of the Government of India ran a national program called *Literatures in Modern Indian Languages: A Series of Broadcasts from All India Radio*. The series editor was Kannada writer and academic V.K. Gokak and the list of speakers consisted of well-known writers, government administrators and scholars conversant with ancient, medieval and modern periods of literatures. The talks were published in April 1957. As far as I can discern, this broadcast was the first attempt to narrate the form of a pan-Indian literary field (consisting of 14 official languages, including English) and its history to a newly constituted free public. The project was essentially framed in terms of an autoscopic mimicry, and the "self-subjected subject" is valorized. Susie Tharu in another context has called this "the arrangement of an alliance" between philology and subcontinental intelligentsia, where literary studies and the instituting of an "Indian literature" in the nineteenth century was bound up in an "often warm, sometimes embittered, but always intimate, and always dominative" relationship.<sup>35</sup> The alliance repeats itself here. In the introduction to the broadcasts, V. K. Gokak says:

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<sup>35</sup> Susie Tharu, "The Arrangement of an Alliance: English and the Making of Indian Literatures," in *Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language, History*, ed. Svati Joshi, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 162.

But the Western impact, which resulted in a temporary apotheosis of the West, also revealed to them [Indians] the grandeur of their own heritage and the integral significance of the ancient Indian view of life. The Indian Renaissance, as it advanced, was seen to be, not merely the child of an extraneous spell, but a revival and resurrection of the ancient spirit of the land. Sir William Jones...Goethe and Max Muller, who admired the Indian heritage and interpreted it to the West, made Indians realize the imperishable glory of their own inheritance...They [Indians] saw that what they admired as the priceless gift from the West was really a part of their own being, a temporarily paralysed limb of their own body.<sup>36</sup>

Gokak is speaking from within the dominant paradigm, or the accepted institutional structure that was predicated on Orientalist and Indological approaches, in the same way that in my own time, I tend to accept a critique of Eurocentrism and decoloniality as normative and progressive postures.<sup>37</sup>

To be sure, Gokak is not talking about the production of literature. Rather, the problem is about the means of legitimation in the form of literary criticism and a scientific temperament. The “temporarily paralysed limb” is not the appendage of literature, but a supposedly dormant critical attitude towards a “heritage” and “inheritance.” What is really at stake in Gokak’s radio broadcast is interpretation, and an “Indian personality” governed by reason and liberalism in the form of a “democratic cult of the individual.”<sup>38</sup> Hence, Gokak claims that, even though there is an “amazing wealth of creative expression,” there is a lack of “applied literature or the literature of knowledge” in the Indian languages.<sup>39</sup> The plurality of the literary field, an inherent handicap for any disciplinary initiative, forces all the position

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<sup>36</sup> V.K Gokak. “Introduction” in *Literatures in Modern Indian Languages: A Series of Broadcasts from All India Radio*, ed. V.K. Gokak, (The Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, April 1957), 31.

<sup>37</sup> See Peter Bürger. “The Institution of Art as a Category of the Sociology of Literature: Towards a Theory of the Historical Transformation of the Social Function of Literature,” in *The Institutions of Art*, tr. Loren Kruger (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1992), 4-5. Bürger’s definition of the institution of art refer to “epochal functional determinants of art within the bounds of society” where the “functional determinants” are simply the “notions about art...which are generally valid in a society (in individual classes or ranks)” at any given point in history (4-5).

<sup>38</sup> Gokak. “Introduction” in *Literatures in Modern Indian Languages*, 30-31.

<sup>39</sup> Gokak. “Introduction” in *Literatures in Modern Indian Languages*, 34.

pieces in this radio broadcast to continuously negotiate between the parts (plural languages and cultures) and the whole (national culture). Ironically, many of the talks pin the problem on pan-Indian language systems such as Sanskrit, Persian and English because of their hegemonic position (sociolinguistic) in the critical field. Ironically, the disciplining force of hegemonic language and cultural systems are seen as a challenge rather than a solution. However, the disciplining force of nationalism remains invisible. For instance, Gokak points his listeners to T.S. Avinashlingam Chettiar's (Education Minister of Madras Presidency, 1946-1949 and also one of the speakers on this All India Radio show) talk that elaborates on his efforts to impose Tamil as a medium of education in Tamil Nadu. Similarly, he draws on Swiss philologist Karl Vossler to argue for a linguistic regionalism because a literature without a science of literature only remains a dialect. While emphasizing a regionalism is a way to produce more critical knowledge in the Indian languages, the larger issue that remains unworked is the compatibility and comparability between these languages. Hence, Gokak and others keep using terms like "fusion" and "synthesis," under pressure from an organizing principle grounded in the idea of a national literature.

In the same broadcast, polymath Suniti Kumar Chatterji even goes so far as to call his piece "Indian Literature." He speaks about four kinds of "inspirations" that comprise the "matter" of Indian literature. The first is the matter of Medieval India in Sanskrit, and the "cycle of the provinces or linguistic area" which draw on Sanskrit and are "inter-provincial."<sup>40</sup> The second is the "matter of the Islamic World," the third is the development of early prose in the form of *Buranji* literature "under the Sino-Tibetan (Ahom) inspiration," and the fourth component to this assemblage is "contact with the European spirit though

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<sup>40</sup> Suniti Kumar Chatterji, "Indian Literature," *Literatures in Modern Indian Languages: A Series of Broadcasts from All India Radio*, ed. V.K. Gokak, (The Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, April 1957), 39.

English literature.”<sup>41</sup> The model here is the matter of France, Britain and Rome in Jean Bodel’s (c. 1165 – c. 1210) “La Chanson des Saisnes” (“Song of the Saxons”) that became the prototype for various literary nationalisms in Europe. However, Chatterji must explain this map of storytelling and mythmaking to accommodate multiple languages, traditions, religions, regions and geographies. That is why he claims that Indian literature was never “isolated” because:

a study of the original works in a particular language rather than of mere translations...led to a good deal of indirect influence. ...the works of a particular writer...passed from one area to another and the language was modified in the process [and] the original writer...came to be regarded as a writer belonging to the new linguistic area...Gorakh Nath, Vidyapati, Kabir, Mira Bai and others illustrate this. The vast plains of India were a most suitable field for this flow of literature and ideas without let or hindrance....<sup>42</sup>

Even in this early text, national imaginary had to be instituted on the idea of inclusions and flows, rather than exclusions and checks. What were the limits of Chatterji’s imaginary? Or were these just phantom boundaries? Indian literary history for him included almost the whole world: the Hindu and Sanskrit tradition, and its heterodoxies (Buddhist, Jain etc.), literary production in the regional languages or what came to be known as *bhasha* literature (Indian languages), the myths and legends of the Arabic and Persian traditions, the syncretic (Hindu and Islam) Sufi and Bhakti traditions, the Sino-Tibetan traditions and, of course, the matter of all of modern Europe and even ancient Greece.

But, in this naming of a type of “world literature,” that made up the parts of “India Literature,” a dissonance between practice and method emerges. The various interlocking strains that Chatterji describes is “Indian Literature” in practice but poses a monumental problem for methodology. At the same time, an invisible taxonomic and philological

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<sup>41</sup> Chatterji, “Indian Literature,” *Literatures in Modern Indian Languages*, 41, 42, 44.

<sup>42</sup> Chatterji, “Indian Literature,” *Literatures in Modern Indian Languages*, 43.

pressure still demands to know what “Indian Literature” is. World literature is not a corrective for national traditions. World literature is Indian literature. The radio program performs this dissonance because even though it repeatedly speaks of “fusions,” “synthesis,” inclusions and flows, it is still compelled to offer descriptions of fourteen fairly unique literary traditions that align with notions of linguistic regionalisms.<sup>43</sup> All Gokak can say about this is veiled in abstractions. He claims that the “trends of modern Indian literature serve to illustrate its opulent and integral nature...[that] may even seem to be ...in conflict with each other...[and] to see them in their confluence is to be aware of the complexity of the new movement and also its all-embracing unity.”<sup>44</sup> This ambiguity, coupled with the state sponsored medium (All India Radio) through which this message was delivered, only betrays the necessity for imagining a national literature by returning again and again to the now trite slogan, unity in diversity.

Twenty years later in 1975, Sujit Mukherjee identified this very abstraction coupled with a need to repeatedly describe the richness of the subcontinent’s literary past as the real problem of historiography in India. While V.K. Gokak and Suniti Kumar Chatterji’s survey embraces an autoscopic mimicry, Mukherjee in *Towards a Literary History of India* declares Orientalism and Indology unsuitable methods. He argues that those “pioneering” works are “descriptive accounts” rather than “critical evaluations,” more interested in the languages of ancient and medieval India than the living cultures of the day.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, he also criticizes the dominant paradigm in Indian criticism that argues that an “Indian Literature” is a summation (“confluence” for Gokak, “inter-provincial” for Chatterji) of literatures in various Indian languages. Mukherjee proposes a critical and comparative exercise between

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<sup>43</sup> This radio broadcast appeared two years before the 1956 State Reorganization Act.

<sup>44</sup> Gokak, “Introduction” in *Literatures in Modern Indian Languages*, 33

<sup>45</sup> Mukherjee, “Towards a Literary History of India,” 226.

different regional literatures – an “Indian literature” as comparative literature. His approach seems decolonial on two fronts: first, he recognizes the insufficiency of “the tools and measures of literary assessment as evolved in the Western world,” and second, he acknowledges that a neat alignment between language, literature and nation launched by philology is a disadvantage when linguistic histories and the history of the nation-state do not coincide.<sup>46</sup> Even so, the models he turns to, derives its logic from pre and post-war developments in the humanities in America where European norms found a continuity, and America’s linguistic history was pressured into falling in line with the dominant history of the nation-state. The reason for this is not just biographical or sociological; rather, I think that Mukherjee felt that India could learn something from the American academy’s defiance against the same philology that had left an “indelible mark” on the Indian subcontinent.<sup>47</sup>

Mukherjee’s hypothesis is that there *is* something like “Indian literature” because writing a literary history “needs a regulative concept which will substantiate or defeat itself in the process of elaboration.”<sup>48</sup> This is the moment of re-instituting a category, because he rejects an older set of philological practices and proposes that scholars develop new structures that should not only describe, but also assess value comparatively. This, in turn, should ideally produce an enduring order. However, the argument struggles under the pressure of its own hypothesis. Mukherjee is drawn to the early and mid-twentieth century American scene (New Humanism and New Criticism) because it manifests itself as a reaction to the orthodoxies of philology.<sup>49</sup> He is further drawn to heterodoxies like Comparative Literature that developed in Europe and the US to mitigate the parochialism of

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<sup>46</sup> Mukherjee, “Towards a Literary History of India,” 228-229.

<sup>47</sup> Mukherjee received his Doctoral degree in English from the University of Pennsylvania in 1963.

<sup>48</sup> Mukherjee, “Towards a Literary History of India,” 227. (*Italics in the original.*)

<sup>49</sup> René Wellek, “American Literary Scholarship,” in *Concepts of Criticism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 309.

national literatures. In the Indian subcontinent, this teleological development seemed obscure because the effects of the philological revolution in South Asia were different from the way a type of German philology was adopted in the US. America (excluding the Native American and African American epistemologies that emerged in response to the dominant paradigm) inherited the European intellectual tradition based on civilizational, racial, and cultural affinities unproblematically. Contrarily, post-Independence India, needed to (re)invent the idea of a national literature based on what philology argued it has lost, and, at the same time, produce a counterargument for it. These were two separate processes that had to be executed at the same time. The counterargument in the Indian context was not a reaction to an inchoate national tradition; rather, it was a necessity that multilingualism and plural practices on the ground provoked. The impossibility of a national literature, and the difficulty in finding a method to study it, were a consequence of the inherent plurality of the field. Mukherjee's regulative concept contained a paradox within it.

Hence, in Mukherjee's reading, the New Humanism of Irving Babbitt and Norman Foerster could be combined (unproblematically) with René Wellek's criticism of national literatures (as competitive space for symbolic capital) and a more formalist New Criticism. This juxtaposition offered a way to situate a people within a nation-state and "to determine the special conditions of development of India's literary culture and locate the special tendencies arising from these conditions, both aimed at transcending the requirement of mere nationality in literature."<sup>50</sup> But what were the "special conditions of development of India's literary culture?" What did it mean to look for something unique or universal in a plural state of affairs and then ask it to transcend the idea of national literature? And following New Humanism's relatively conservative project, what kind of tradition or

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<sup>50</sup> Mukherjee, "Towards a Literary History of India," 229.



“classical” past could literary history in India resurrect? Would it not have to consider Suniti Kumar Chatterji’s capacious mapping of the field, unlike disciplinary America that turned to a European tradition spontaneously because the agents were not the “natives,” and the self-subjected subjects of philology.

American academia and literary studies spoke from a different subject position vis-à-vis philology. Regardless, Mukherjee negotiates the multiple influences and a multilingualism within the Indian context by claiming that one way to tackle this problem is to seek out those ideas, genres, tropes and other formal elements that endured influence. Therefore, the literary historian in India should “look for these continuing strands of our literary culture that have survived the rough passage from ancient to medieval, then from medieval to modern.”<sup>51</sup> At the same time, Mukherjee also acknowledges the material absence, or confirms the loss of a historical archive. The only way to write a literary history and reconstruct the conditions of production of literature is via the literary text itself. He suggests a “neo-New Criticism” that reads “far more deeply than... [the way that texts] were read in the deepest South in America.”<sup>52</sup> In the Indian context, the adaptation of heterodox American models come dangerously close to becoming a search for an essence. The lack of an archive and cultural amnesia are double edged tools— on one side it is a way out of essentialisms, and on the other, it is a license to create new mythologies. I will turn to this notion in the next section when I engage with G.N. Devy’s arguments about memory and loss. But in the meantime, Mukherjee paradoxically (and maybe correctly) affirms that literary history “will have to be carried out in a spirit of bold and imaginative speculation,

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<sup>51</sup> Mukherjee, “Towards a Literary History of India,” 229.

<sup>52</sup> Mukherjee, “Towards a Literary History of India,” 230-231.

whereby intuitive grasp rather than analytic rigor may lead to valid formulation.”<sup>53</sup> He thus attempted to make the whole project creative, rather than rational.

### **Critique of the Institution of Literature and Criticism: 1980s and 1990s**

In the years that followed, much effort was spent in the academic humanities to either substantiate or defeat the regulative principle which Sujit Mukherjee proposed in 1975 — that there *is* an “Indian literature.” At the same time, an American-styled close reading, coupled with a predominantly British canon, became standard practice and pedagogy at universities. This is what scholars and academics reacted against in the 1980s and 1990s. In retrospect this could be thought of as a watershed because it was a moment of self-questioning. A single section cannot do justice to the varied approaches the critiques took, and even though many of them were in conversation with each other, their efforts did not translate to re-instituting a professional field of study like literary criticism. The study of literature still remains fragmented, sustained by exceptions rather than a regularity associated with robust institutions. But, for the purpose of this chapter, the coordinates of the group of the 80s and 90s included scholars and public intellectuals like Aijaz Ahmad who wrote back to the US academy in *In Theory* (1992); G.N. Devy who refused to write back in *After Amnesia* (1992); Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan and Swati Joshi, both professors of English Literature, who organized two conferences, one at the University of Delhi (1988) and the other at Miranda House (1991) respectively; and a special issue of the “Journal of English and Foreign Language” edited by Susie Tharu and Lalita Eapen in 1991.<sup>54</sup> A critical attitude gathered momentum and the efficacy of literary studies (especially in English), and the hegemony of

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<sup>53</sup> Mukherjee, “Towards a Literary History of India,” 232.

<sup>54</sup> The conference proceedings and the special issue were subsequently released as edited collections. See Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, ed., *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992); Swati Joshi, ed., *Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language, History*, (New Delhi: Trianka, 1991) and Susie Tharu (ed.). *Subject to Change: Teaching Literature in the Nineties*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1998).

the American academy (especially the influence of New Criticism, continental theory and Edward Said's *Orientalism*) were not only put under scrutiny, but also modified and adapted. The legitimacy of the critical enterprise was questioned alongside more traditional logics like colonialism, nationalism, language, gender and caste. In contrast, the only organization that continued to institute the category of "Indian literature" unbothered, as a loose synthesis of regional literatures, was the National Academy of Letters or the Sahitya Akademy. Sisir Kumar Das' "quaintly Great-Victorian" effort, *History of Indian Literature: 1800-1910 (Western Impact: Indian Response)* which was published in 1991, was representative of this effort.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, I believe that the sceptics defeated Mukherjee's regulative principle and inaugurated a type of cultural studies that drew from British Cultural Studies. This in turn produced fields like women's studies and film studies as ways to engage with popular cultural practices within Indian society. Disillusioned with the rigidities of a bureaucratic state university system and lack of funding for humanities research, many either chose to work outside the university, or continue their scholarship in European and American universities, where a version of the problem was rearticulated as postcolonial literature to limit both colonial discourse and a relatively more stable (and hegemonic) category like English or American literature.

For the first time after Sujit Mukherjee, this cluster of mostly young scholars asked important questions about the institution of literature and criticism in the subcontinent. This is how I understand the contours of this watershed moment, which I believe are also the structural underpinnings of the literary field as it exists today. The critique of the institution of literature and criticism can be divided into three approaches. The first approach tried to

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<sup>55</sup> Harish Trivedi, "Theorizing the Nation: Constructions of 'India' and Indian 'Literature.'" *Indian Literature*, 37. no. 2, (March-April, 1994): 44. Originally the Sahitya Akademi proposed a ten-volume history, but Das only completed three before his death in 2003.

regenerate a critical attitude within and towards literature in the regional languages (including English) or *bhasha* literature (Indian languages) because these, some of them claimed, were the only continuously living literary cultures in the subcontinent. The impulse itself wasn't new. V.K. Gokak and Sujit Mukherjee had made similar claims, albeit from different theoretical positions and with a sense of national euphoria in a newly formed nation-state. It was a way to return to Indian languages (*bhasha*) and its cultural ecosystems by dismantling the philological and Oriental presumptions that focused on a so called "classical" past overdetermined by Sanskrit as the master language for aesthetic theory.<sup>56</sup> The second approach was a manifestation of a postcolonial anxiety about "influence" in a re-globalizing world. The object of critique and dismissal was the dominant American system, a type of neo-imperialism, in the form of New Criticism (close reading), continental theory and the newly emergent postcolonial studies that had quickly intermixed with earlier approaches. This critique was also about the textual nature of literary studies which did not grasp the complexity of the Indian field that scholars claimed was inherently multimodal. And finally, the third approach acknowledged the power of the norms of an academic criticism that is globally applicable and chose to work within its structures and change it from the inside. The American interpretations of continental theory, Edward Said's *Orientalism* and a global feminist approach were simultaneously embraced and tested. In this case geographical location seemed less important because it was the institutional site that determined one's practice and participation in academic discourse. The emergence of postcolonial studies and

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<sup>56</sup> The dialogue between the scholars listed above and other locations of the humanities is very selective. Hence it is difficult to visualize what debates Sanskrit colleges (Calcutta and Madras for example), *madrasas*, *maths* (monasteries), temples and cultural organizations engaged in during the same period. Caste enters the public sphere with renewed force in the late 80s and 90s after the Mandal Commission proposes reservations for the Schedule Tribes (ST), Schedule Castes (SC) and the Other Backward Classes (OBC). Dr. Kumud Pawde's powerful essay "The Story of my Sanskrit" in Tharu's edited volume *Subject to Change: Teaching Literature in the Nineties* is an early example of the "English-Literature" establishment interacting with issues in other institutional locations.

literature in India and metropolitan locations was one manifestation of this position.

Broadly, this last approach – a middle path really – was no different from Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to provincialize Europe (in historiography) and pragmatically accept European thought's ("everybody's heritage") indispensability and inadequacy in negotiating political, cultural and disciplinary modernity in South Asia. This third position asks how global modernity "may be renewed from and for the margins."<sup>57</sup>

It is amid these critical formations that the language of crisis emerges for the first time in G.N. Devy's *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism* (1992) and "*Of Many Heroes*": *An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography* (1997). I read both books as stages in Devy's intellectual development rather than theoretical arguments that accept or deny positions like nativism, or a radical emphasis on indigenous traditions. Depending on the context, the latter is not necessarily bad, and regarding the former, I see no evidence of ethnonationalism in Devy's work. The crux of his argument is to decolonize (he never uses this term) criticism in India from what he considers two dominant epistemes – Sanskrit poetics and Western literary (and critical) theory. To this end, he suggests that scholars turn to "nativist history," by which he means that they turn to the practice of literatures and literary cultures in the various Indian languages.<sup>58</sup> This is because criticism for him should engage community and its problems and offer explanations from the ground up. At one level, this is simply a type of cultural studies that tries to engage with living languages and their cultural production in the subcontinent. For him, "colonialism creates a cultural demoralization [and] ...a false sense of shame in the minds of the colonized about their own history and tradition" whereby a rejection of the past, or a veneration of tradition becomes a

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<sup>57</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 16.

<sup>58</sup> G. N. Devy, *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism* in *The G.N. Devy Reader*, (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009), 134.

passage into modernity.<sup>59</sup> Hence, Devy's diagnosis is that the critical field in India is fragmented into "three different *ragas* [pattern of notes in music form India] – the *marg* [Sanskrit], the *deshi* [vernaculars] and the colonial [Western]."<sup>60</sup> Not only is the critic's song unsynchronised, but more profoundly, the two dominant and often intersecting streams of thought, the *marg* [Sanskrit] and the colonial, overdetermine the *deshi* [vernaculars]. Hence the remedy is to turn to the local, living milieu rather than deify tradition and history. This is where I think Devy diverges from Sujit Mukherjee's need to identify common essences and finds a resonance to his own position in Marathi novelist Bhalchandra Nemade's essay "Marathi Novel-1950—75" that he himself translated in 1986. There Nemade writes that "culture is not a hot house, but a soil bound process; literature is not a theoretical construct, but a living phenomenon."<sup>61</sup> Nemade's nativism stipulates a type of social realism in both fiction and criticism because the novelist and the critic have a "moral responsibility towards the Marathi society."<sup>62</sup> It is in this context that *After Amnesia* asks why criticism in the *bhasha*'s (Indian languages, especially Gujarati, Marathi) and in English have not kept pace with the prolificacy of creative literatures in those languages. The answer, for Devy, lies in a type of "cultural amnesia" about the value and valuing of *bhasha* literature (Indian languages).

The psychological notion of "cultural amnesia," according to Devy, is a kind of "non-subjective and collective memory of a society" that "exists as a 'real' entity."<sup>63</sup> This is not a rigorously argued thesis, but a speculation that draws on the works of Ananda Coomaraswamy, Ashis Nandy, Sudhir Kakar and Sigmund Freud intermittently. At its crux,

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<sup>59</sup> Devy, *After Amnesia*, 10; 57.

<sup>60</sup> Devy, *After Amnesia*, 134.

<sup>61</sup> Devy, *After Amnesia*, 130.

<sup>62</sup> Devy, *After Amnesia*, 132.

<sup>63</sup> Devy, *After Amnesia*, 133. In this newest edition Devy adds a section called "The Post-Memory Imagination" where he reflects on his original argument. He also claims that this understanding of "memory" and "amnesia" had been challenged by the time the book was published in 1992.

Devy's position can be compared to Frantz Fanon's critique of the Manichean logic where "superior modes of production, efficiency in military organization, and the material success" of the colonizer embarrass the colonized about their own "immediate past".<sup>64</sup> Hence it is from within this embarrassment that colonized cultures (likened to an infant) have to respond to the paternalism of the colonizer. This response takes the form of imitation. In this Oedipal regime, (cultural) memory is unconsciously and violently repressed and history becomes selfsame with fantasy.<sup>65</sup> For Devy, then, the critic and the institution of literature in India are engaged with fantasy rather than an engagement with on-the-ground reality. That is why Devy seems to think an exhaustive historiography of the *bhashas* (Indian languages) is the only way forward. This is exactly what Sujit Mukherjee recommended in his own work, except that, for him, literary historiography was a Western project that scholars in India should adapt. Devy approaches the problem of historiography from the insights he gleanes in his first book, *After Amnesia*, and seeks out alternative genealogies in the *bhasha* (Indian languages) traditions to historiography itself.

Devy's second book, "*Of Many Heroes*," attempts to find evidence of indigenous forms of literary historiography in vernacular traditions because he believes that "the result of not exploring the native conventions of literary history is the failure to understand the native processes of canon formation and, therefore, the aesthetics of literature."<sup>66</sup> But in the

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<sup>64</sup> G.N. Devy, *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism*, (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2017), 56.

<sup>65</sup> One sees the influence of Ashis Nandy in G.N. Devy. Nandy in *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (1983) critiques the "second form of colonialism" that "generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds" (11). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's position in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986) is also a turn from the material to the psychological when he writes that "the bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (9). Devy does not cite Ngũgĩ, but his argument and intellectual posture are very similar. By the end of the 1990s Devy stops writing criticism in English and quits academia to engage in language activism.

<sup>66</sup> G. N. Devy, "*Of Many Heroes*": *An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography* in *The G.N. Devy Reader*, (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009), 16.

process of searching for alternative lineages, Devy ends up producing a critique of the institution of Indian literature and criticism itself: he asks, why should one do literary history at all, and where does this need arise from?<sup>67</sup> He is never completely certain about this question and the essays in the collection vacillate between a need for historiography and its futility. For him, writing more and more literary history is simply a myth making exercise that is linked to the regeneration of a nation-state, and the need for a culture to recognize itself as an autonomous entity. The appearance of literature as an institutional discipline coincides with the desire to reproduce this myth about collective or oppositional identity.<sup>68</sup> While, for Sujit Mukherjee, historiography in India is a creative process because of the lack of material sources, Devy's position is closer to Hayden White's, where writing history is itself poetic and rhetorical that serves normative and ideological purposes.

But Devy does not question norms and values or look for the poetic in historical discourse. Rather, he offers an explanation that relies once again on psychology. He calls literary history a "phenomenological strategy... felt by communities engaged in consolidating their newly formed or perceived identities by creating a system of totems and taboos."<sup>69</sup> Ironically "*Of Many Heroes*" sets out to rewrite parts of that very mythic historiography only to realize in the last few essays that this is an impossible task. The plurality and intermixed nature of the literary field which consists of "many heroes" is just unmanageable. There are too many parallel and intersecting strands. For Devy, the heterogenous present (and past) is made up of too many histories and too "many heroes" as the title of the collection suggests. For him the strategy to consolidate identities would ultimately benefit only the dominant

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<sup>67</sup> Devy, *Of Many Heroes*, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Devy, *Of Many Heroes*, 173.

<sup>69</sup> Devy, *Of Many Heroes*, 174.



subgroup and reproduce cultural imperialism in other ways.<sup>70</sup> The plurality is simply not manageable because “just as too little history makes historiography unnecessary, too much of it too makes historiography helpless.”<sup>71</sup> Devy realizes that the problem is not the methodological intractability, but the institutional pressure (most often invisible) to write a literary history at all. For him, this project “will give rise to a thousand ‘Once upon a times’ but will not admit a definite conclusion. Every conclusion in it must stay perpetually tentative... .”<sup>72</sup> Devy’s standpoint is both rhetorical and performative. He eschews the norms of academic criticism for language activism amid the oral traditions of tribal and marginalized non-tribal communities.

Devy’s approach is and remains eclectic. I read and listen to him as a public intellectual and a language activist. I do not read him as an academic even though his first book was written when he was a teacher of English Literature at M.S. University, Baroda. In the foreword to *The G.N. Devy Reader* (2009) Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan acknowledges Devy’s outsider status to academic criticism, but still desires that he comply with its norms. She writes, “it is easy to see that the strength of his ideas would emerge most forcefully in spoken form. Devy prefers to offer a series of quick illuminations in his lectures by way of aphorisms, provocations, essentialist formulations, throwaway ideas and speculative thought, rather than undertake the more tedious tasks of elaboration, argument, qualification, and documentation that are the conventions of academic writing.”<sup>73</sup> Rajan’s wish strangely echoes the uneven exchange between K.T. Telang and Albrecht Weber in the first part of

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<sup>70</sup> See Devy, *Of Many Heroes*, 142;148. His term for cultural material that has been excluded from the “Indian” canon is “para-literature.” Here he is speaking of cultural production (not limited to the written text) by women, children and Dalit communities, regional literary traditions, tribal and minority languages, and folk traditions. Hence “para-literature” is to dominant Indian traditions in “Sanskrit, Pali, Persian, Hindi or English,” what a homogenous “Indian/postcolonial literature” is to the European and Anglo-American canon.

<sup>71</sup> Devy, “*Of Many Heroes*,” 180-181.

<sup>72</sup> Devy, “*Of Many Heroes*,” 181.

<sup>73</sup> Devy, “*Of Many Heroes*,” xv.

this chapter, where the former adopts the scientific methods of philology because it is the norm. But Sundar Rajan is acutely aware of her own position in this crisis because she was part of it. Unlike Devy, she chose a different route out of English studies in India. I will turn to the intricacies of this third approach at the end of this section which mounts a critique of the institution of literature and criticism from within by trying to provincializing it. But, as early as *After Amnesia* (1992), Devy too anticipates the universality of literary criticism and the arguments like those made by Marc Nichanian and Aamir Mufti. He realizes that criticism in India can define itself only in terms of its global history that begins in disciplinary formations like Orientalism and Indology which were “not an isolated development” but an “integral part of a global programme of literary ordering congenial to Western imperialism.”<sup>74</sup> Devy refuses to write back to this universally applicable approach to literature because he sees the Anglo-American academy as a continuation of the “global programme.” But it is in the eclecticism of his approach and language activism that he ends up producing a critique of the academic-bureaucratic.

Devy does not claim ideological allegiances, but his approach to language, culture and what he still calls oddly “literary criticism” in 2017 emerges from a “commitment to diversity, to marginal voices and through activist practice.”<sup>75</sup> I believe that this emphasis on equity, activism and practice links Devy to Marxist thinker Aijaz Ahmad in the most unlikely fashion. For the latter, the development of literary studies in India, its institutionalization, and the categories and methods produced in metropolitan locations are all deeply implicated in the imperial nature of capitalistic modernity. While Devy refuses to engage with the development of literary and cultural studies in the Euro-American academy or speak to the

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<sup>74</sup> Devy, *After Amnesia*, 116.

<sup>75</sup> Devy, *After Amnesia*, 159.

problems of globalization, Ahmad engages with metropolitan categories and approaches them head-on because capitalism and modernity have already transformed all parts of the world. Ahmad's argument is not civilizational or culturalist; rather it is ideological. Hence, for him, "socialism is the determinate name for this negation of capitalism's fundamental, systematic contradictions and cruelties, and the necessity of this negation will remain...."<sup>76</sup> It is for these reasons Ahmad feels that American cultural production on matters of colonialism and empire are not Marxist enough. This is because Marxism is "subordinated to a prior theoretical position, of a nationalist and/or poststructuralist kind."<sup>77</sup> More specifically, it is the activist practice of socialism and historical materialism that US-based literary studies has eschewed for "*reading* as an appropriate form of politics."<sup>78</sup> An overemphasis on the "text" produces two blind spots for Ahmad: one, the lack of emphasis on the mediators that connect cultural production to other kinds of formations and political processes, and two, the lack of self-reflexivity in analyzing the institutional sites, or the "material coordinates" that produce scholarship and theory in the form of "actual class practices and concrete social locations, in systems of power and powerlessness, of the agents who produce it; the circuits through which it circulates and the class fractions who endow it with whatever power it gains."<sup>79</sup> This essentially represents a Marxist and materialist corrective to Edward Said's overemphasis on representation and interpretation. Ultimately, Ahmad's criticism is a critique of imperialism and its key driver, global capital. That is why, for him, nationalism is not "the determinate, dialectical opposite of imperialism; that dialectical status accrues only to socialism."<sup>80</sup> Ahmad's critiques of nationalism too emerge

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<sup>76</sup> Ahmad, *In Theory*, 316.

<sup>77</sup> Ahmad, *In Theory*, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Ahmad, *In Theory*, 5. (Ahmad's italics)

<sup>79</sup> Ahmad, *In Theory*, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Ahmad, *In Theory*, 11

from within a specific socialist project that is not really against the former, because he realizes that there are good and bad nationalisms. However, since socialism is an unfinished or failed project, the third world remains colonized by global capital. This position is what informs his diatribe against categorizing Indian literature as national allegory for instance.

These are the reasons why Ahmad, I feel, is characteristic of the second critique to the problem of the institution of “Indian literature” and criticism. In “‘Indian Literature’: Notes towards a Definition of a Category,” he comes to the following conclusions:

The difficulty in thinking of an ‘Indian’ literature, therefore, is not that it is spread over many languages, with histories of very uneven development, nor that the state boundaries which have historically contained these literary productions have been shifting through all the centuries we know of. *The difficulty lies, rather, in the very premises that have often governed the narrativization of that history*, which has (1) privileged High Textuality of a Brahminical kind to posit the unification of this literary history; or (2) assembled the history of the main texts of particular languages (in a very uneven way) to obtain this unity through the aggregative principle; or (3) attempted to reconstruct the cross-fertilization of genres and themes in several languages, but with highly idealistic emphasis and with the canonizing procedures of the ‘great books’ variety, with scant attempt to locate literary history within other sorts of histories in any consistent fashion.<sup>81</sup>

A number of problems that we have already encountered stand out in this lengthy quote.

The first is the high textuality of Sanskrit poetics and its collusion with a philological preference for a “classical” corpus. This is not very different from G.N. Devy’s position.

The second incorrect premise is, like Sujit Mukherjee’s critique of V.K. Gokak, assuming that the whole is an aggregate of the parts. The third issue is a problem of canon formation which is often a reflection of the tastes of dominant classes and castes. For Ahmad, the solution to the problem of narrating a history of literature in India lies in a type of “Historical and Cultural Studies” because the optimum way to grasp the complexity of the field is “across disciplinary boundaries and through undertakings which submit ‘literary

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<sup>81</sup> Ahmad, *In Theory*, 244-245. (My italics).

criticism’ to a whole range of the expressive arts and the human sciences.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, Ahmed simply says that the structural features of the literary field, both historically and in the present moment, do not correspond with disciplinary boundaries and their practices. The real issue is in the way institutions legitimizes literary and cultural practice, both present and past. The crux of the problem is the “narrativization of that history.” That is why the transgression must be against the very institution of literature and a methodological monolingualism (English). In some ways, this is a radical solution to the problem because it asks us to imagine a completely different relationship to literary and cultural practice by dismantling the existing structural coordinates of the discipline. This second approach remains subjunctive, a possibility, in the same way that a decolonization is yet to come.

The third position combined the idea of a transdisciplinary cultural studies with the possibilities Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Gayatri Spivak’s “feminist-deconstruction-psychoanalytical tools,” and the “Marxist-deconstructionist methodology” of the subaltern historians offered.<sup>83</sup> An early 1987 essay by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan will allow me to show how the genesis of a cultural studies approach that ultimately got institutionalized in the US academy as a type of postcolonial studies began (one of many) with a critique of the institution of literature and criticism in India. There are parallels between this use of Edward Said in the 80s and 90s as a radical alternative, and Sujit Mukherjee’s use of New Humanism, New Criticism and Comparative Literature as radical projects against philology in the 1960s. In both cases a critique of disciplinary formations in the American academy are seen as viable and progressive tools to engage the crisis in the Indian academy. The difference is that Mukherjee’s *raison d’être* was to produce a critical history of Indian literature, while Rajan’s

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<sup>82</sup> Ahmad, *In Theory*, 254; 282.

<sup>83</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, “After ‘Orientalism’: Colonialism and English Literary Studies in India,” *Social Scientist* 14, no. 7 (July 1986): 32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3517248>.

justification to turn to Said, colonial discourse and continental theory is to historicize and in turn overturn the universality of the western text in India. *Orientalism* offers another way to do literary history in the subcontinent. Rajan's "After 'Orientalism': Colonialism and English Literary Studies in India" is out-and-out reflexive. Rajan writes, "if we were to consciously enter into a discursive relationship with the western text, we might be able to achieve an alienation from it that will enable us to treat it as the text of an alien culture, with behavior patterns, literary traits, conventions and linguistic usage that require demystification and, at the very least, problematization."<sup>84</sup> The project here is twofold, to de-Orientalize literary studies and to decolonize the postcolonial intellectual in India.<sup>85</sup>

However, if we accept an argument that Said's *Orientalism* is not really about the non-West, but a critique of the Euro-American academy and its power/knowledge complex, then, the usefulness of Said in India is based on the already universal nature of the Euro-American academy. This universality is ultimately a consequence of the colonial formations of disciplines, and its genealogy can be traced back to the philological revolution. From this position, geography and local contexts become less important. Institutional locations form an interpretive community that instantly understand each other, even if arguments are oppositional or localized. Hence, even if the study of English literature was completely transformed in India in the 1980s and 1990s because scholars abandoned it for "multiple other sites of culture, indigenous, popular and contemporary," the new cultural studies and

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<sup>84</sup> Rajan, "After 'Orientalism,' 31.

<sup>85</sup> See Kumkum Sangari, "Marquez and the Politics of the Possible." *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, no. 10-11 (Jan-June 1985): 57. She comes to a very similar conclusion when she writes, "the cultural projects of both the 'west' and the 'non-west' are implicated in a larger history. If the crisis of meaning in Euro-American academies is seen as the product of a historical conjuncture, then perhaps the refusal either to export it or to import it may be a meaningful gesture, at least until we can replace the stifling monologues of self and other (which, however disordered and decentered, remain the orderly discourse of a bourgeois subject) with a genuinely dialogic and dialectical history that can account for the formation of different selves and the constructions of different epistemologies."

postcolonial studies still remained beholden to optics like representation, textual interpretation and colonial discourse.<sup>86</sup> The alienation that postcolonial studies or cultural studies hoped to assuage was only compounded by the introduction of various types of poststructuralisms in Indian academia.<sup>87</sup> The paradox was that this new cultural studies did not, or was not fully able to question the discipline itself and its position in the immediate social world of the much more egalitarian public that is engaged. In this sense colonial discourse analysis, poststructuralism, subaltern studies and cultural studies remained a solution to the problem within the (global) institution of literature and criticism, but not in its interface with a heterogeneous public.<sup>88</sup> Ironically, the institution only became more closed as it defined itself through the complexities of high theory. This was also the reason why many opted to work outside bureaucratic-institutional setups in India which often seemed less hostile to change and could engage community more fully.<sup>89</sup> At the same time, I feel that a lacuna developed because getting rid of hegemonic aspects of the discipline like the canon, the writing of literary histories and the idea of national literatures negated (in positives ways) the limited influence that the academic humanities (especially in English) had on the public sphere.

### **“ILF: Samanvay” and Responding by Other Means**

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<sup>86</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, “English Literary Studies, Women’s Studies and Feminism in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, (Oct 25, 2008): 69.

<sup>87</sup> See Susie Tharu, “Government, Binding and Unbinding: Alienation and the Teaching of Literature,” in *Subject to Change: Teaching Literature in the Nineties*, ed. Susie J. Tharu (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1998), 28. She argues that alienation is a consequence of the power relations that structure the discipline of literary studies, curriculum and classroom practices in relation to the other locations of cultural consumption. However, “alienation is therefore-and that is its magic rub- also a means of wedging open, interrogating and engaging with these power relations.” How far this has worked is still a moot question.

<sup>88</sup> Aijaz Ahmad’s protest against “the imperialism of the present,” or the possibility of the US as an economic and cultural imperial force was a reaction to this very formation.

<sup>89</sup> The Center for the Study of Culture and Society, Bengaluru (Tejaswini Niranjana), Anveshi Research Centre for Women’s Studies (Susie J. Tharu), The Bhasha Research and Publication Center, and the Adivasi Academy (G.N. Devy) were some of the first alternative organizations to emerged out of the watershed moment that questioned the institution of literature and criticism in India. They all engage in transdisciplinary work that respond to ground realities.

What I hope to show in this last section is that the literature festivals emerge against the complex and multifaceted paradox I outline in the previous two sections of the chapter. The festivals also try to find alternate ways to engage plural literary traditions, while still functioning under the material reality of a national imaginary. Many of the writer-curators, writers, academics, and organizers emerge out of the institutional contexts I have charted above. That is also probably why many of the same concerns appear to motivate the discussions and thematic at the festivals. At the same times, I think it is impossible to assign any causal relationship between knowledge that is produced in and disseminated by the university without a more empirical study of that institution. Hence, my description and analysis of the problems that afflict the Indian literary field is one backdrop among many that I feel the festivals respond to. The genealogy that I trace in the previous sections is also the background to this dissertation. My argument is a way to explore a situated, or grounded cultural and literary studies in India. It is amid these circumstances that I approached the literary festivals, not so much as an object of study, but as a way to understand the motivations of specific sessions and the people behind them. If the broad problems that affect the literary field in India are still unresolved, then how and why do these festivals engage with the issues differently? What is there to learn from public practice? And why do they project an ethos that is popular, ephemeral and embodied? Hence, I first turn to a keynote address delivered by a much older Aijaz Ahmad at the 2015 “Indian Languages Festival: Samanvay” (“ILF: Samanvay”). Then I read the festival’s manifesto that appeared in 2016. I also draw upon an interview with writer-curator Giriraj Kiradoo who directed the first three editions of “ILF: Samanvay” and a lengthy conversation with writer-curator Rizio Yohanan Raj, who was the creative director the festival between 2014-2017.



The theme of the 2015 “ILF: Samanvay” was *Insider/ Outsider: Writing India's Dreams & Realities*. The “curatorial note” by Rizio Yohanan Raj begins with a clear statement about fragmentation that she draws on from the collection *New Indian Writing* edited by poet Adil Jussawalla. In the introduction to the volume, Jussawalla writes about the “dissociated sensibility” of the Indian writer who has to “synthesize” elements... more various and further apart from one another than any within the national experience of a contemporary Westerner.<sup>90</sup> This “dissociated sensibility,” the curator claims became the mandate for the festival since its inception in 2011. For instance, the first edition of “ILF: Samanvay” took up the question of the institution of “Indian literature” by staging debates about the master signifier “Indian.” In my conversation with Giriraj Kiradoo, he told me that the only way he could address this theme of the master signifier was by placing writers from different languages and regions in the same panel to create a space “in such a way that they would be together for three days, ...[to allow for] a lot of interaction ...off the stage as well.”<sup>91</sup> In turn, I think, he unwittingly produced ways to connect previously dissociated linguistic and literary publics, that consist of writers and their readers and listeners in embodied ways. What is even more amazing is that nothing like this had been done at such a scale before. In this context, Adil Jussawalla’s edited anthology that Rizio Yohanan Raj refers to in 2015 does represent a multilingual and plural field in print, but that kind of textual interaction serves a very different purpose. It gives an impression of a collective that cannot account for the interaction or lack of it between the representative member in the anthology. In general, anthologies offer the reader, individual writers, and their work in the form of a survey. They do not give a sense of the social interactions between the individuals, or an indication of the

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<sup>90</sup> Adil Jussawalla, ed., *New Indian Writing*, (New Delhi: Penguin, 1974), 33.

<sup>91</sup> Giriraj Kiradoo, interview with author. December 28, 2017.

literary field within which those writing emerge. Most often, the introduction functions as a text that produces the frame of reference. This, I think, is the difference between a disembodied representation and embodied practice that explains the way literature festivals use talk-culture as a framework to manage a fragmented literary field. I found that the same logic permeated the subsequent editions of the festival.<sup>92</sup> The 2015 edition of “ILF: Samanvay” continued this enquiry with “liminality” as the theme because the “Indian writer is still faced with the same predicament of being a critical insider and a creative outsider to his milieu.”<sup>93</sup> It is in this context that the festival found it suitable to invite Aijaz Ahmad as the keynote speaker.

Ahmad’s address, “Languages of the Union,” once again brought up key terms and imaginaries that indicated that he saw the festival as an attempt to reassemble a fragmented literary field. He rearticulated the problems that the previous section of this chapter presented as the structuring elements of the literary field. In my mind this felt like the old guard addressing a possible alternative from within an alternative space. Thus, when Ahmad caught on to Yohanan Raj’s use of the term “transnational matrix” in her introductory remarks, it seemed like he was treading on familiar grounds in unfamiliar settings. He said:

The word “matrix” is a very complex word, and I am not sure what is meant by it in this particular context. But the idea that India has a certain kind of transnationality inscribed within it is undoubtedly intriguing. This, I think, is very good to remember; unlike Britain or France, India is not in any Euro-American sense a nation-state. And unlike the United States, India is not only a federal republic. We have in fact given ourselves a rather different name, the Indian union, which originally meant a union of nationalities, linguistic nationalities.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *Boli, Baani, Bhasha: Gaon, Kasha, Shehar* (2012) (Dialect, Speech & Language: Village, Town, City), *Jodti Zubanein, Jodti Zubanein: The Language Connections* (2013), and *Bhashantar, Deshantar: Translation/Transnation* (2014).

<sup>93</sup> ILF: Samanvay 2015, “Curatorial Note: Insider/Outsider: Writing India’s Dreams & Realities,” accessed December 12, 2019. <http://ilfsamanvay.org/2015/curatorial-note/>

<sup>94</sup> ILF: Samanvay, “Lecture by Aijaz Ahmad: The Languages of a Union,” Indian Writers Forum, 2015, YouTube Video, Published on March 2, 2016, 44:02, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufgKZouNWK8>

The “transnational matrix” appears as a new term for an older problem which once again coincides with an attitude that eschews any conception of a national literature. Ahmad reminded the audience that the frame never fit the picture; the nation-state cannot delimit the literary field when the history of the nation-state and the history of literary production do not overlap. At the same time, Ahmad also recognized a generative possibility that a festival like “ILF: Samanvay” holds. The embodied, performative, and interactive mode in which the festival engages the multimodal nature of literature in India appears to be a solution for his grievance about “*reading* as an appropriate form of politics.” Hence, he told the audience that the form of a festival of languages has the potential to “recapture that relation among aesthetic forms [text, song, recitation, dramatization, painting and sculpture] perhaps far better...than classroom pedagogy.”<sup>95</sup> In fact, when I asked Rizio Yohannan Raj about the status of textuality and how it can be a hinderance to the circulation of literature in a multilingual field, her answer was categorical. An event in the form of a festival or performance is the “only way to approach a text and unravel the multidimensionality” of it.<sup>96</sup> Ahmad did not go any further and left the audience with a few scattered thoughts on an “indigenous Indian cosmopolitanism” as an alternative to Indian literature as comparative literature and concluded by returning to the idea of practice and language. He asked the audience to take “language also as forms of social action” and celebrate the fierce embrace of the social and the aesthetic.<sup>97</sup> Most interesting to my argument here is that this reflection becomes the theme for the following year’s festival. The writer-curators and organizers of the festival take this abstract idea of “language as a form of social action” and transform it

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<sup>95</sup> ILF: Samanvay, “Lecture by Aijaz Ahmad: The Languages of a Union.”

<sup>96</sup> Rizio Yohannan Raj, interview with author. January 19, 2018.

<sup>97</sup> ILF: Samanvay, “Lecture by Aijaz Ahmad: The Languages of a Union.”

into something concrete. The prerogative, I thought was that the audience should witness this idea through a specific kind of participation that is embodied and experiential.

So, I asked Rizio Yohannan Raj, the curator of the event, what significance this movement from idea to practice held for her, and how the individual sessions and the festival projected it to the public. She described it to me as a way to transform and “translate” an idea that she called an abstract *bidu* (point) into an epistemic form that starts to spread among people.<sup>98</sup> This itself seemed abstract to me. It was as if Raj was trying to describe a process where an inchoate idea starts to take form as in the process of writing a poem. But the writing of a poem is a supremely individual activity. So that is not what Raj could have meant. What appeared to kick in at the moment of transformation, or “translation” was much more than the epistemic – something that can be known and transferred. Even if the idea originated in an individual, by time it becomes a session, the epistemic form that is being enacted no longer belongs to the individual. Thus, for Raj, “the epistemic form is only the first stage of this translation...and then you come to this event, it is not the epistemic that is making the event, there are a lot of factors coming between the event and the epistemic – that process is what really interested me as a curator...as somebody who is engaging with the public.”<sup>99</sup> The “lot of factors” is a type of feel for the game.<sup>100</sup>

This approach also finds material form in a humanities-based online platform that Raj co-ordinates, the LILA Foundation for Translocal Initiatives. *Lila* roughly translates to

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<sup>98</sup> Rizio Yohannan Raj, interview with author. January 19, 2018.

<sup>99</sup> Rizio Yohannan Raj, interview with author. January 19, 2018.

<sup>100</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Tr. Richard Nice, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1980), 66. For him the feel for the game is a “practical sense is a quasi-bodily involvement in the world which presupposes no representation either of the body or of the world, still less of their relationship. It is an immanence in the world through which the world imposes its imminence, things to be done or said, which directly govern speech and action.”

“play,” and the way she described this “play” to me was through the game of football (soccer) where the player must anticipate the unprecedented, even with all the training she has. I was still trying to wrap my head around what she meant by the space between the sessions and the epistemic. What were these factors? I think for Raj, the factors included all the other members of the team, the material environment, the unpredictability of the conversation between different speakers, and the audience’s reaction. The game of football is after all a highly social activity. The analogy suggested that this space was where “decisions are taken at that particular point which is almost in-sync with her [players] actions, it is almost simultaneously taken, the decision and the act itself, this is the performative moment...which does not negate the need for training.”<sup>101</sup> The players here are Raj herself, but also all the others who make the session possible. This way of understanding the sessions within the festival comes very close to how “practice” is thought of within academia. For instance, sociologist Barry Barnes writes that practice “should be treated as involving thought and action together” and it is not “know-how at the expense of know-that, ... [or] skill and competence at the expense of information and representation.”<sup>102</sup> Barnes uses the example of riding horses in formation to explain the “collectivist view of practice.” I think this is what Raj also means, in her own way, when she described curation to me. Barnes writes, “What is required to understand a practice of this kind [riding in formation] is not individuals oriented primarily by their own habits, nor is it individuals oriented by the same collective object; rather it is human beings oriented to *each other*.”<sup>103</sup> The success of riding in formation, or playing soccer, or curating “ILF: Samanvay” is dependent

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<sup>101</sup> Rizio Yohanan Raj, interview with author. January 19, 2018.

<sup>102</sup> Barry Barnes, “Practice as Collective Action,” in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina and Eike Von Savigny, (London: Routledge, 2001), 29.

<sup>103</sup> Barnes, “Practice as Collective Action,” 32.

on how the various people involved in the activity modify their learned and habitual responses when they interact with each other.

To be sure, in 2016, “Language as Public Action” was both thought and action in the form of a Vision Manifesto, a mascot, the programming of themes and the staging of a group of writers, musicians, artists and public intellectuals (who spoke and thought in different languages) alongside each other.<sup>104</sup> The word “manifesto” is to “make public,” and the document offered a vision, or the possibility of a vision for the literary field. The manifesto declared India as a “veritable theatre of cultures” that expresses itself “through thousands of indigenous nationalities, intertwined traditions and translated forms of expressions” and a “techno-intensive age has not been able to offer the people of this land, any sure means to fully comprehend or effectively deal with the questions of ‘nation’ and ‘identity’.”<sup>105</sup> This “techno-intensive age” can be read as any number of symptoms of modernity, from enumeration of populations, languages and identities, to scientific rationalism, to data mining. The document also claimed that India’s “much touted plurality” has made it “a breeding ground for internal rivalries” and appealed for a “cultural movement” that “can connect the diversities embedded in its transnational matrix.”<sup>106</sup> We return to that term that Ahmad picked up on in 2015. In 2016 the festival proposes that it will perform this “transnational matrix” by staging debate, upholding democracy and celebrating friendship amid the “layered space of Indian languages.”<sup>107</sup> In this context, the

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<sup>104</sup> The monk looking mascot called HIR, wears a red kaftan and a red stole with a rainbow color border. HIR is described as “the androgynous, itinerant, revolutionary storyteller.” “Hir” in Hindi means a diamond, a thunderbolt, or an essence, pith, energy and vigor.

<sup>105</sup> ILF: Samanvay 2016, “Brochure - Language as Public Action,” ILF: Samanvay, 6, Accessed November 15, 2017. <http://ilfsamanvay.org/brochure/>

<sup>106</sup> ILF: Samanvay 2016, “Brochure - Language as Public Action,” 6.

<sup>107</sup> ILF: Samanvay 2016, “Brochure - Language as Public Action,” 6.

transnational matrix (playing on the origin of the word “matrix” as “womb”) is a multilingual structure or framework, within which a transnationality will emerge.

While Ahmad was not very sure what the “matrix” meant, the way the curators define the second half of the name of the festival, “Samanvay” gives a clue as to what it could be. This is an example of taking a term with various meanings in Sanskrit and other languages like Marathi and attributing other senses to it. So “Samanvay” becomes:

a nuanced sense of cultural coordination in the country, as different from the standardised processes of national integration...through various types of sequencing, shuffling, synchronizing, churning and harmonising processes, while allowing room for surprise successions and coincidental conjunctions. ...[It] privileges the vital principles of co-ordination that allows us to live, work and remember together—co-existence, co-operation, commemoration... [that] assumes the philosophical disposition of a cultural continuum, and goes beyond the logistics of a mere event in time.<sup>108</sup>

This description produces a very specific type of identity that asks the reader to negotiate the literary field as an itinerant (like HIR the raconteur) whose experience is contingent on “...sequencing, shuffling, synchronizing, churning and harmonizing.” The upshot is “surprise successions and coincidental conjunctions.” This itinerant mode of being in the literary is replicated in the form of the festival itself – multiple sessions occur simultaneously. To participate in such festivals is a way to encounter spatial and temporal juxtapositions where heterogeneous locations, linguistic worlds, epochs, themes, histories, and institutional attitudes interact. At the same time, I think, a multilingualism acts as a limit for arrogance that thinks it can discipline the field under categories and classifications. The fraying utility of the post-independence logic of “national integration” is rejected in favor of a “cultural continuum.” Integration assumes that we mix up different subparts that form a whole (unit, identity, being), where the larger categories (nation, caste, class, religion etc.) develop

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<sup>108</sup> ILF: Samanvay 2016, “Brochure - Language as Public Action,” 6.

properties, tools and a mythology that, in turn, discipline the subparts. On the other hand, continuums do not have a whole because the properties of individual elements interweave with each other to such an extent that the point of contact between the elements disappear. If we can imagine a “cultural continuum,” it would consist of disparate elements from a *longue durée* that endlessly pass in and out of each other. The interweave of a continuum are always present in artifacts, practices and cultural spaces, but is often invisible because one does not have the means to access the overlap. A festival like “ILF: Samanvay” activates this access by producing the pathways for those who want to wander. The itinerant circulates, refusing the permanent.<sup>109</sup>

This analysis of the manifesto shows that “ILF: Samanvay” tries to offer another way to experience language and literature. In other words, the festival demonstrates a need to disrupt the dominant norms of an existing literary field via ideas like the itinerant, circulation and refusing the permanent. At the same time, a manifesto is prescriptive. How does one square these opposing logics? When I asked Rizio Yohanan Raj if “ILF: Samanvay” is placing the idea of literature under erasure, she responded by saying that the festival is actually “revealing what it is.”<sup>110</sup> This implied two things: one that there was another idea of literature that was somehow hidden by our normative point of views, or two, that the idea of literature is in what people do with the literary in both public and private spaces. It seemed like our discussion was moving towards the second position. I understood this as a position to be made where different versions of legitimating literature competed. Some became

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<sup>109</sup> See Kumkum Sangari, “Aesthetics of Circulation: Thinking Between Regions,” *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature*, XLVX (2013-2014): 9-10. The way the festival articulates circulation can be compared to Sangari’s “critical aesthetic of circulation” and co-constitution that allows us to “step out of usual questions of influence, comparability, commensurability, and set aside hierarchies based on centres/peripheries or the metropolitan/global market presence of art and literature.” The underlying logic here is that circulation and co-constitution as opposed to radical alterity and difference are less susceptible to appropriation.

<sup>110</sup> Rizio Yohanan Raj, interview with author. January 19, 2018.



durable, others disappeared. This durability was mostly linked to the power the institution and the norms it reproduced. As anthropologist Mary Douglas writes, “institutions emerge to manage uncertainty and protect ideas that societies and cultures value.”<sup>111</sup> The attitude that the manifesto projected seemed like exactly the opposite. But Douglas also writes that “certainty is a cheat and bully” because it censures what does not fit and terminates debate.<sup>112</sup> The paradox that emerges here is if one can imagine institutions that does not censure, while at the same time embraces uncertainty. This proposition is neither universal nor utopian. I am only speaking about a particular approach to the literary field that comes to the fore in the activities of “ILF: Samanvay.”

Raj would agree with Douglas. For her, the festival “allows you to see what an institution actually is in its practice, so it’s a true institution in that way. ... but if you don’t keep yourself on the edge, the border space where you can jump off, at the end of the festival, ...so that you can make your entry into another, you cannot fall back on the same thing...”<sup>113</sup> She does not reject institutions outright but seeks out a “true” one that does not attempt to preserve, classify, or remember. This is because she finds the security (or certainty) of institutional structures ephemeral and self-indulgent.<sup>114</sup> She told me that normally “knowledge emanating from within structures is thought to be objective and the person who is evolving her practice seems self-indulgent...It’s the other way because it’s a very indulgent thing to be embedded in the institution...; it is very self-negating if you are constantly in practice.”<sup>115</sup> We ended up calling this other kind of practice a “possible institution” rather than a “true” institution because a type of performance replaced the act of

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<sup>111</sup> Mary Douglas, “Dealing with Uncertainty,” *Ethical Perspectives*, 8, no. 3 (2001): 148.

<sup>112</sup> Douglas, “Dealing with Uncertainty,” 152.

<sup>113</sup> Rizio Yohanan Raj, interview with author. January 19, 2018.

<sup>114</sup> Rizio Yohanan Raj, interview with author. January 19, 2018.

<sup>115</sup> Rizio Yohanan Raj, interview with author. January 19, 2018.

disciplining.<sup>116</sup> “Possible” here referred to attitudes that did not aim towards objectivity and systemization, but at the same time offered a sense of community that institutions can simulate.

“Cultural continuums,” a “transnational matrix” and “possible institutions” allow for a re-inscription of the literary field by other means at “ILF: Samanvay.” But this re-inscription is possible only when a certain notion of the institution of literature and criticism are refused, or at the least reassembled as something else. Raymond Williams calls institutions “one of several examples of a noun of action or process which became, at a certain stage, a general and abstract noun describing something apparently objective and systematic.”<sup>117</sup> The process of becoming “objective and systematic” is a result of human agency, a consequence of language, and a choice. In this case, “ILF: Samanvay,” its organizers and Rizio Yohanan Raj not only attempt to imagine an alternative strategy to manage a plural, multicultural and fragmented literary field in India, but also show that it is possible to put into practice attitudes like uncertainty, ephemerality, “surprise successions” and “coincidental conjunctions.” Further Raj repeatedly used two other terms, “preservation” and “conservation,” that I felt revealed the difference between more traditional institutions and possible institutions. According to her, the “distinction between preservation and conservation” is that the former (preservation) tries to suspend things in time regardless of “the larger universe” wanting it or not.<sup>118</sup> Preservation is formal and

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<sup>116</sup> See Ann Swidler, “What Anchors Cultural Practice,” in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina and Eike Von Savigny, (London: Routledge, 2001), 92. Through a critical reading of Elizabeth Armstrong’s *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994* (2002), Swidler argues “it is the practice itself that anchors, and in some sense reproduces, the constative rule it embodies.”

<sup>117</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 168.

<sup>118</sup> Rizio Yohanan Raj, interview with author. January 19, 2018.

suspending literature (or literary culture) in time suggest fixity to cultural production. It is this formality that one forgets when we “try to preserve the paraphernalia of the institution because it is just so perishable...you tend to completely forget this... to build a structure which seems secure, while this whole sense of security is a very ephemeral notion, it has no value beyond that particular moment.”<sup>119</sup> There is something very specific about this way of thinking, because I feel that it can only emerge from within the precarity and uncertainty of postcolonial literary fields where one can witness the instability of institutions across cultural continuums. At the same time, when Raj mentioned the “paraphernalia of the institution,” I could not but wonder if what she meant was that by imagining and putting into practice a possible institution that is flexible and open-ended, we are also refusing “to preserve” our common habitus, or the institution of literature and criticism that South Asia inherited.

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<sup>119</sup> Rizio Yohanan Raj, interview with author. January 19, 2018. Also see Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 98. There she writes the “the high triumph of institutional thinking is to make institutions completely invisible.”

### Chapter 3

#### “Almost Island Dialogues” and Performing Literature Worlds

Earlier in Chapter 1, I claimed that even though the “Jaipur Literature Festival” is immersed in the culture industry, it engages in face-to-face interaction and a specific type of intimacy generated by crowds and large gatherings to counteract the commodification of culture. A festival like the “Almost Island Dialogues” claims that it positions itself against the commodification of culture in the subcontinent more directly. But it too engages in a variety of intimacy to offset commodification. As early as 2011, the “Dialogues” were positioned “as an alternative to the frenzy, distraction and commercialism of the conventional ‘literary festival’ format,” and proclaimed that audience members could “expect four days of intense, intimate, open-ended and searching discussions during the day, and substantial readings and performances by night.”<sup>1</sup> This is also why the organizers sometimes call the “Dialogues” an anti-festival. If the “Jaipur Literature Festival” invokes the idea of a *mela*, the intensity and intimacy of the “Dialogues” is small enough for members of the audience to introduce themselves by name, and engage in talk-culture that is built around ad-lib translation, punctuated by silence and injected with a productive incompleteness reflected in the name of the festival and the length of time that writers and readers spend together. However, it is not just the size that makes this festival different from the others I engage with in this dissertation. What makes it different are the modes of interaction that characterize it. Hence “Almost Island Dialogues” lets me approach talk-culture from another point of view.

In this sense, the “Dialogues” is also a possible institution that engages with and practices a different version of intimacy to manage and uniquely engage with a multilingual

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<sup>1</sup>Almost Island: Dialogues 5, March 10-13, 2011, Press Release, Email message to author, September 22, 2016.

literary field. As I showed in the earlier chapters, the “Indian Languages Festival: Samanvay” activates continuums and pathways through simultaneous sessions for audiences to wander, while what at first seems like a chaotic “Jaipur Literature Festival,” confounds sixty-five thousand visitors every day for five days. If “ILF: Samanvay” is interested in giving space to underrepresented regional literary cultures from India and the world, Jaipur embraces the ubiquitous. JLF also creates a microcosm of the Indian literary field where audiences jostle with Instagram poet Rupi Kaur, hear Michael Ondaatje argue about the future of the postcolonial novel, and watch Dalit writer Manoranjan Byapari harangue about jail time and Naxalbari. In contrast, the “Dialogues” appear more exclusive and attracts a smaller group of attendees that include college students, aspiring writers, New Delhi intellectuals, artists and the common person who is interested in non-English literatures from around the world. The festival consciously seeks out translated works in minor languages rather than select authors and books that circulate easily in India. This is a result of careful curation and more importantly (literary) friendship that also reflects in the way sessions are held and the audiences are treated.

Since there was little background information or media coverage on the “Almost Island Dialogues,” the only way I could understand its practices was by attending the festival, talking to the writer-curators and reading the writers they published in the online journal *Almost Island*. I engage in similar research methods with the JLF and “ILF: Samanvay,” but the scale of those festivals did not permit the same kind of interaction that the “Dialogues” allowed. Hence, I realized that I was both inside and outside the world that the “Dialogues” created. The hospitality and intimacy I experienced, changed me because I made friends. At the same time, I knew that I had to find a suitable way to write about the “Dialogues,” and acknowledged the nature of our interactions. Rather than simply report or critically analyze

the practices, I wanted to learn from it, respond to the way the sessions articulated their purpose, and ask how the writer-curators viewed the Indian literary field and their place in it. I found that the ethnographic voice allowed me to record and respond to the intimacy that the “Dialogues” produced most effectively. Even though the earlier chapters consist of sections that are ethnographic, especially when I report on my own participation in a session, or during my conversations with organizers, this chapter is an attempt to exploit that voice to the fullest in the hope that the intimacy and the various attitudes that the writer-curators project emerge more fully. I locate and find support for my stylistic choice in the work of anthropologists João Biehl and Peter Locke.

Thus, I begin this chapter by thinking about how to write about the intimacy that the “Dialogues” produce. I reflect on my ethnographic voice. As I try to understand the attitudes and theories that the writer-curators put forth, I articulate my claim that this festival (like the others) is engaged in a world-making for the writers and the audience members. Even though my earlier description of the “Dialogues” suggests that it is in competition with the other festivals in India, I push back against the competitiveness of the Bourdieusian “field” without necessarily rejecting its usefulness for this dissertation. I briefly contrast the Bourdieusian “field” with the way American sociologist Howard Becker articulates the idea of “art worlds” and find that his notion of the “world” is more suitable to the ethnographic lens I use in this chapter. That is why I claim that the “Dialogues” perform literature worlds in the title. Hence, the intimacy and non-competitiveness of the “Almost Island Dialogues” is also reflected in the way I approach writing about this festival. I then turn to the act of curation as a creative practice and show how the “Dialogues” claim to reject organizing literatures based on an anthology, embassy and prize model. Rather, the aim is to take care of (hospitality) the writers, their writing and the audience which is similar to how Rizio

Yohanan Raj (in Chapter 2) describes the practices of a possible institution that conserves (rather than preserves).

Drawing on my experience at the festival, I then elaborator what talk-culture felt like at the 2017 edition of the “Dialogues.” I conclude that talk-culture is still a type of connectivity, or framework to reconstitute community that draws from older social and literary practices. However, in the case of the “Dialogues,” it is also a way to return to the text and approach the work of literature with new insights that face-to-face interactions can provoke. Further, the multilingual nature of the sessions indicate that talk-culture is a way to access literatures in languages one cannot read because the knowledges that the writer, translator and the audience bring become essential components of the listening and reading practice. For the writer-curators, the act of observing and participating in talk-culture is a way to read more deeply. It is at this point that I feel that talk-culture once again emerges as a combination of the literary and critical. Therefore, in the last section, I ask what kind of knowledge about literature does the festival produce. In other words, I ask what is the outcome of the kind of intimacy and world-making that the “Dialogues” practice? Drawing on my conversations with the writer-curators and through a reading of poet, Vahni Capildeo’s essay, “Questions of Approach,” I describe how the “Dialogues” engage with literature in two ways. First, it is a way to effect “transformations” in thought that is embodied, rather than produce a body of knowledge. And second, it is an “engagement” that evolves in the presence of the other in the room, is improvisational, does not come to conclusions, or take literature and ideas apart. Instead, the “Dialogues” reassemble, by bringing people and literatures together.

### **How to Write about Intimacy?**

The “Almost Island Dialogues” brings together a small, eclectic literary community every year in New Delhi, India. Founded in 2006 and curated by writer, poet and translator Sharmistha Mohanty, the collective also includes poet and translator Vivek Narayanan and translator Rahul Soni. The festival assembles ten to twelve writers, academics and intellectuals, and places them in curated spaces to discuss everything from literary style to the politics of language in globalization. The sessions are free and open to the public. Since 2007 the “Dialogues” has been accompanied by *Almost Island*, an English language journal of world literature that heavily emphasizes translation. This is what makes the collective and the sessions unique. It is both a physical event and a digital text, or performance of talk-culture and an online publication, that reciprocally interact with each other.

I first met Vivek Narayanan in Chennai in 2006, at another event, the Prakriti Poetry Festival, where we shared our contact information. After a few years, I started receiving emails from *Almost Island* with access to their literary journal. My relationship to the literary world in India then was as an aspiring writer trying to get a foothold in the poetry scene. In that milieu, *Almost Island* was a unique English language literary magazine that endorsed a multilingualism by heavily relying on translations, was unabashedly non-commercial, polycentric and performative in its editorial and curatorial choices.<sup>2</sup> The esoteric nature of the contents page was often enough reason to click on the links on their webpage. Since the “Almost Island Dialogues” was a New Delhi based festival that did not publicize their work nationally, I was unaware of it. Until recently, there was little to no press coverage of the festival too. So, when time came to write about the “Dialogues,” the artistic practice of this

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<sup>2</sup> Others multilingual literary magazines at the beginning of the 2000s were *Kritya* edited by Rati Saxena, *The Little Magazine* edited by Antara Dev Sen and *Pratilipi* edited by Rahul Soni and Giriraj Kiradoo. *Kritya* is also an annual festival now. Soni and Kiradoo went on to curate the first few editions of the “Indian Languages Festival: Samanvay.”



group of writers, thinkers and audience members from an academic point of view, I was not sure how to approach the task. I did not wish to study the journal and the members of the literary community from a position of academic specialization because I was simultaneously an insider and outside. As a writer, I had published with *Almost Island*, and developed a friendship with Vivek Narayanan and Rahul Soni. But now I had to approach it as a researcher. Therefore, I decided to attend the festival and participate in the discussions; talk to Mohanty, Narayanan and Soni formally and informally; and read the writers (Claudio Magris, Bei Dao, Sergio Chejfec, Vahni Capildeo, Joy Goswami, Udayan Vajpeyi, Li Tuo etc.) they curated. I felt this imitated the intimacy that the writer-curators themselves attempted to cultivate.

But it was during my conversations with Rahul Soni at his Defense Colony *barsati* (rooftop apartment with a balcony) that I realized why the project I was undertaking made the boundaries between researcher and the objects and subjects of study tricky. I would have to account for friendship. We were discussing the place of “Almost Island Dialogues” in India. I explained Pierre Bourdieu’s diagram of the nineteenth-century French literary field to him as well as I could and asked if the “Almost Island Dialogues” was a patron, or a nexus for an idea like art for art’s sake?<sup>3</sup> I was querying about how the “Dialogues” had found a unique way to manage a specific part of a multilingual field in comparison to other institutional locations like publishing, festivals, Sahitya Akademi and university departments of English and regional languages and literatures.<sup>4</sup> I wondered if Soni saw the work he did as an alternate model to these other institutions and organizations. He said he did, because it was a model (he hesitated to call it one) he had not encountered before. He would not make

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<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 48.

<sup>4</sup> Rahul Soni is also a commissioning editor at Harper Collins, India.

grander claims. The form of the “Dialogues” has “spoiled” him and he had “no patience” for things like panels and conference presentations where individuals discussed topics for a few minutes or read papers.<sup>5</sup> Rather than use the word “unique,” he thought the model was “special.”<sup>6</sup> This is when I realized that I could not analyze or critique the practice as if it were a social text, data or an archive. I was dealing with “real” people, co-authors, thinkers and friends rather than fictional representations of life-worlds, or bits of information. The study of literature as simply a collection of books suddenly felt a little impersonal and mediated. I wanted to try and enter their world and inhabit the place these writers and translators were making for themselves, knowing very well that I was not completely part of their world. I was part of a different institutional setup, the US academy, at this moment at least. As all three writer-curators put it, even the name of the event, “Almost Island Dialogues” tried to capture the “almostness” or the “not quite” of texts they read, the knowledges they produce and the conversations they have.<sup>7</sup> How was I to capture this almostness? I began to think of Mohanty, Narayanan and Soni not only as writers, poets and translators, but also as writer-curators, thinkers and practitioners of “possible institutions.” This was the same idea that emerged in my conversation with Rizio Yohanan Raj where performance displaced discipline, conservation pushed preservation to the background, and the objectivity and certainty of knowledge about the literary was being replaced by different logics. “Almost Island Dialogues” and *Almost Island*, the physical event and the digital journal, the material space, and the ideas were after all a way to conceptualize alternate engagements with literature by creatively responding to the limitations of the literary field in India.

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<sup>5</sup> Rahul Soni, interview with author. January 7, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Rahul Soni, interview with author. January 7, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Rahul Soni, interview with author. January 7, 2018.

When I attended the festivals and during research process, it was self-evident that an ethnographic impulse informed my approach.<sup>8</sup> The act of observing writers, poets, writer-curators, thinkers and citizens debate topics, read from their works and interviewing them seemed both ethically tricky and intellectually uncomfortable. It felt like unfamiliar research activities. I could not read the festivals like a novel or a poem. Placing the practice in an historical context turned out to be difficult because of their fluid nature. More so, context or background in the contemporary moment can potentially encompass everything and anything. All the time I knew I was in the presence of authors, and it felt uncomfortable to resurrect the author function that poststructuralism, Russian Formalism and New Criticism had all killed. At the same time, it became clear that the “Dialogues” was uniquely resisting the death of the author in their own practice. Or maybe, the writer-curators just did not care for those kinds of truths. Unlike the explanatory power of a theory, the certainty (more often than not constructed) of a corpus, or the finished nature of an archive (even if objects in it are always incomplete), observing and discussing the idea of the festival or the anti-festival, Indian literature, and the nature of literary criticism on the lawns of the India International Center, or the cafeteria at the India Habitat Center always felt incomplete.<sup>9</sup> There were no conclusions in our conversations, only phrases like “I don’t know,” or “it’s intuitive,” or “it may be.” I will turn to another version of this incompleteness, a more formal disavowal

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<sup>8</sup>See Francesca Orsini and Katherine B. Schofield, *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*, (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2015), 16,17; In the introduction to this volume, Orsini and Schofield suggest that contemporary ethnographies by ethnomusicologists and scholars of performance traditions in South Asia can be of value to textual and historically oriented scholars of early modern India because the former consistently show the combination of oral, textual and expository methods. My own position on this matter is that the contemporary literary and cultural field in India is composed of much more than just texts - it’s an assemblage of books, writers, writer-curators, corporations, citizens, patrons, performances and conversations. More practically, my decision to conduct fieldwork was also driven by the lack of any information about the “Almost Island Dialogues.”

<sup>9</sup> The “Dialogues” take place at the India International Center (IIC). India Habitat Center (IHC) is a similar cultural institution close by. Both campuses were built in 1958 and 1993 respectively by American architect Joseph Stein as institutions to uphold the values of liberal humanism.

performed at the “Jaipur Literature Festival” in the last chapter of this dissertation. In retrospect, it seemed that the “Dialogues” produced attitudes that were similar to the ones I identified in my earlier case studies like the “Indian Languages Festival.” Everything about the festival resisted a utilitarianism. The “Dialogues,” it seemed were designed to surprise. Throughout my conversations with the writer-curators, I noticed that each one of them gently resisted my terminologies. They found it too complete and told me often that I speak as if I know things about literature and literary culture with some certainty. I understood this as a marker of the academic discourse community I occupied. In turn, they produced their own descriptions, metaphors and found alternate ways to describe their practice.

In *Unfinished: The Anthropology of Becoming*, João Biehl and Peter Locke propose an “anthropology to come” that takes into consideration “the plasticity and unfinishedness of human subjects and lifeworlds.”<sup>10</sup> Drawing on French philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s (and collaborator Félix Guattari) work on “becoming,” they place an anthropology of becoming in opposition to historicization, contextualization and the social-scientific penchant for proposing models, finding patterns and categorizing aggregates.<sup>11</sup> In other words, they ask how can we grasp the fluid, ad hoc and uncertain nature of contemporary social practices and their relationship to objects, institutions and structures that elude compartmentalization. The anthropology of becoming, therefore, operates on three intersecting planes for these authors. First, it assumes that people are flexible in their relationship with other people and things. They always belong to multiple structures and systems, which themselves are a consequence of how people act in their interactions with others, different objects and systems. This relationship is interactive or “entangled” and the power of human agency to

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<sup>10</sup> João Biehl and Peter Locke, “Foreword,” *Unfinished: The Anthropology of Becoming*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, Kindle Edition).

<sup>11</sup> Biehl and Peter Locke, *Unfinished*, ix-xiii.

adapt or change is always variable.<sup>12</sup> Second, Biehl and Locke claim that people do not live according to clock time. Instead “becoming” is how individuals and communities occupy “multiple temporalities at once” which is a “dynamic interpretation of past and future, actual and virtual.”<sup>13</sup> Third, becoming seeks an “attentiveness to the unknown” in people, material worlds and in the work of the researcher as a way to create moments of surprise and wonder.<sup>14</sup> But, this alternative to narrating life-worlds is a specific correction to the field of anthropology and ethnography. Both authors make repeated references to literature and art as the desired horizon for ethnographic writing. For example, they claim that “unfinishedness is a feature as generative to art and knowledge production as it is to living” and argue that ethnography which takes into account “becoming” attempts to capture the ambiguous and open-ended (Deleuze’s terms are “ill-formed” and “incomplete”) nature of literature.<sup>15</sup> Here, writing in the social science attempts to become like writing literature.

This displacement of one type of academic discourse on to an idealized notion of what literature and art are and how they function is easier in a discipline that does not often take literature and literary systems itself as an object of study. The mystery about the literary remains intact. Still, how to approach contemporary literary culture and write about it as not simply an object of study or a series of texts? How can literary scholars capture the “becoming” of vibrant literary practices? Here is where the methodological corrections that Biehl and Locke propose to anthropology can offer productive ways to “generate empowering social and political critique with our subjects rather than about them...”<sup>16</sup> I

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<sup>12</sup> Biehl and Peter Locke, *Unfinished*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Biehl and Peter Locke, *Unfinished*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Biehl and Peter Locke, *Unfinished*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Biehl and Peter Locke, *Unfinished*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Biehl and Peter Locke, *Unfinished*, 9; This possibility assumes that critical writing on contemporary literature engages with more than just the object or thing (the physical book).

draw on my understanding of the “anthropology of becoming” as a way to write about the “Dialogues.” But more importantly, I attempt to learn from the festival and the participants themselves. The sessions I attended and my conversations with Mohanty, Narayanan and Soni seemed to embody the ambiguous and open-ended space of “becoming.” Hence, the question that I kept asking was if I can learn something about managing a multilingual literary field from their practice? To do that I had to follow the ambiguous and open-ended space of “becoming” as closely as I could.

For the writer-curators of “Almost Island Dialogues,” the sessions are a venue of possibilities that at least in part mimic how they think literature should be received, consumed and evaluated. At the same time, for the participants of this community, the “Dialogues” is a “source of sustenance” that, in turn, feeds the literature they produce or do not produce.<sup>17</sup> This is not a Wildean axiom about life imitating art (or vice versa), but a way to create a literary community that attempts to “pull people together and...make [the island] a place, a place where you are almost building a little environment for yourself.”<sup>18</sup> This “little environment for yourself” is the way “Almost Island Dialogues” distinguishing itself from the other festivals in India. Hence, the language that the writer-curators use to describe this difference makes me think of the practice as an exercise in world making. In this context, even though I use the Bourdieusian term “field” to broadly describe the literary scene in India, in this case, I feel that the sheer non-competitiveness and the intimacy of the “Almost Island Dialogues” seems more like Howard S. Becker’s description of art worlds.<sup>19</sup> I push

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<sup>17</sup> Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> See Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), x. Becker’s art worlds “denotes the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for.” Also see Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 1-2. Thornton’s distinction between markets and worlds usefully outlines the stakeholders who participate in different types of literature worlds. She writes, “the market refers to the people who buy and sell works (that is dealers, collectors, auction houses), but many art

back against the competitive nature of Bourdieu's model in this and the next chapter without rejecting his understanding of "fields" outright. I feel that his theoretical model of literary structures offers a starting point for a study like this. My own approach, as I dwell deeper, is more tentative, contingent and descriptive because the contemporary literature festivals I engage with are both co-operative and competitive. The "Almost Island Dialogues" repeatedly affirms the former.<sup>20</sup> That is why, I see this festival as an attempt to assert its values about literature and literary production in India. At the same time, I claim that there is something to learn from the writer-curators and their practices. In other words, what I hope to show in this chapter is that I approached the "Dialogues" with one set of ideas about festivals, curation, reading practices, knowledge production, critique and an understanding of a competitive field of cultural production, but emerged with alternate interpretations.

### **Curation as Creative Practice**

The Latin root of the word "curate" means to care for.<sup>21</sup> To curate something in contemporary usage often connotes an activity that includes selection, management, organization and taking care of something for private or public appreciation and use. The above activities are performed by individuals and institutions in the cultural (symbolic) and

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world players (the critics, curators and artists themselves) are not directly involved in this commercial activity on a regular basis. The art world is a sphere where many people do not just work but reside full time. It's a "symbolic economy" where people swap thoughts and where cultural worth is debated rather than determined by brute wealth." For example, Rahul Soni straddles the market for literature, and the non-economic literature world he helps create.

<sup>20</sup> See Howard S. Becker and Alain Pessin, "A Dialogue on the Ideas of 'World' and 'Field,'" *Sociological Forum*, 21, no. 2, (2006): 286. This difference between Bourdieu and Becker is captured well by Alain Pessin: "A sociology of situations [Becker] as opposed to a sociology of structures [Bourdieu], process versus habitus, career versus disposition, openness versus closure, choice versus determination...shows very clearly that the idea of a world is in no way a 'soft version' of the theory of fields. ...These are two ways of thinking that are opposed in their intentions and, necessarily, in their results: the philosophico-sociological approach that searches for the essence of the social, which leads to the theory of the field, and the sociologico-ethnographic approach that tries to make explicit the circumstances in which social situations create links between actors, which is the idea of the world"(286).

<sup>21</sup> "curate, n." OED Online. December 2018. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/view/Entry/45953?rskey=BU9crr&result=1> (accessed July 20, 2018).

economic realm. In the field of literature, curation can be characterized as the actions of literary agents, magazine editors and publishers who are the preliminary gatekeepers of literary production and circulation. Reviewers, archivists and librarians, prize committees, the national academies, academia and educators further curate and evaluate the preexisting corpus for the sake of an interested public. Writers also curate when they reinterpret past works, translate or compile anthologies and collected works. Ultimately, curating or re-curating produces canons, counter-canons, archives and a body of knowledge that are the building blocks of the institution of literature itself. When we begin to think of curation as a practice, then it is also a way to produce ephemeral associations and transient spaces (textual and non-textual) where different agents and institutions interact. Hence it is an activity that allows for the circulation of literature either by artists themselves or through specialized intermediaries who manage and organize available works based on the social, epistemic, aesthetic and economic value of texts and their authors. Curation is often political because it is tied closely with representation of plural literatures, cultures and identities.

When I asked Vivek Narayanan to speak about the collective's approach to curation, he called it a "a very slow process...that happens in ones and twos, and not on a mass level."<sup>22</sup> While Mohanty and Narayanan struggled to articulate a method and kept calling the process "organic," both writers were sure about what they were not doing.<sup>23</sup> The "Dialogues" were not interested in browsing. Even though they were open to the idea of an itinerant mode to access multiple literatures and cultures, the ethos was vehemently anti-touristic. Their aim was not to create a "united nations of poetry" where different types of representational categories (nation, gender, race etc.) act as levers for organizing content.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Sharmistha Mohanty, interview with author. December 18, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017.



When asked about the anthology model like the ones compiled by mainstream publishers, both Narayanan and Mohanty thought it was undesirable because it seemed pedagogic, very national and indiscriminate after a certain point. The organizers also rejected an embassy model wherein writers and literatures become place holders for national literary traditions and international public relations. Prestige, prizes and consecration seemed irrelevant to them. For Mohanty, these were “just an accessory.”<sup>25</sup> The “Dialogues,” it seemed was bringing together friends and co-collaborators, while the world of prizes was made up of experts and committees who claimed to objectively judge works. Mohanty and Narayanan kept using the word “kindred” to describe the writers and the audience members and I interpreted this as a hesitation to overvalue the notion of “experts” and “objectivity” while placing a larger emphasis on kinship and fellowship. Often (but not always) the expertise and objectivity are the unintended basis for the smooth functioning of the literary marketplace. While both “ILF: Samanvay” and the “Jaipur Literature Festival” have instituted prizes for writing from India and the world, “Almost Island Dialogues” once again seemed to be differentiating itself from more mainstream festivals.

However, even a cursory look at the list of invitees suggests well established authors and artists.<sup>26</sup> They may all not be prize winners, and many have never been consecrated by national or international literary organizations, but all of them are established writers in their own right. Hence, for Narayanan, this selection comes down to identifying an

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<sup>25</sup> Sharmistha Mohanty, interview with author. December 18, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> The following have been part of The “Almost Island Dialogues” over the last ten years: Mohammed Bennis, Sergio Chejfec, Raul Zurita, László Krasznahorkai, Bei Dao, Ouyang Jianghe, Xi Chuan, Li Tuo, Lydia Liu, Ge Fei, Xi Chuan, Han Shaogong, Renee Gladman, Forrest Gander, Anne Waldman, George Szirtes, Vahni Capildeo, Tomaž Šalamun, Eliot Weinberger, Xi Xi, Claudio Magris, Kutti Revathy, Joy Goswami, K. Satchidanandan, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Adil Jussawalla, Allan Sealy, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Ashis Nandy, Giriraj Kiradoo, Charu Nivedita, Cybermohalla Collective (writing group from the Delhi slums), Anita Agnihotri, Kunwar Narayan, Vinod Kumar Shukla, Udayan Vajpeyi, Manglesh Dabral, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Parvati Baul (Baul singer), and Mani Kaul (film director).

“independent visionary.” The cultural milieu, national context and institutional location of the writer is important, but equally interesting is “how they kind of transform that vision [of their locations and milieu] so that they act as independent voices.”<sup>27</sup> Narayanan is purposely ambiguous because he knows there is no formal set of criteria to identify such visionaries. It is subjective. However, as we spoke, it became clearer that curating for the group meant reading complete works (published and unpublished), spending time with translators, building personal connections and forging friendships. The “Dialogues” project an ethos that is non-representational (based on embodied interactions), personal, democratic and anti-capitalist. The editorial of the inaugural issue of *Almost Island* (2007) gives its readers a good indication of this attitude. Mohanty writes that the journal “will seek work which either threatens, confronts or bypasses the marketplace by its depth and seriousness and form. This market is not one where the seller faces the buyer, both having walked miles, a once a week give and take of goods, honour, and guile. This market has a lot to learn.”<sup>28</sup>

In this context, even though “ILF: Samanvay,” the “Almost Island Dialogues” and the “Jaipur Literature Festival” are differently entangled with the publishing scene and the culture industry, the attitudes they project are less interested in only economic gain. They lean towards the representation of marginal (cultural and linguistic) voices and the elaboration of social, epistemic and aesthetic attitudes. Drawing on the institutional theory of art and my assertion that festivals are spaces where discourse is actively being produced (though talk-culture), I understand aesthetics here as “an activity rather than a body of doctrine.”<sup>29</sup> But, each festival still views the work the other does differently. For example,

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<sup>27</sup> Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> “Editorial,” *Almost Island*, Monsoon 2007, accessed August, 20 2017, [http://www.almostisland.com/monsoon\\_2007/editorial.html](http://www.almostisland.com/monsoon_2007/editorial.html)

<sup>29</sup> Becker, *Artworlds*, 131.

organizers of “ILF: Samanvay” and the “Almost Island Dialogue” believe that the “Jaipur Literature Festival” promotes a neoliberal approach to literature because it produces only a simulacrum of community while essentially retooling individual gain and commodity fetishisms for new publics. But as I showed in earlier chapters and will show more fully in the next, even the value systems that the “Jaipur Literature Festival” projects cannot be pigeonholed into neat categories. By positioning itself in opposition to the “frenzy, distraction and commercialism” of other events, “Almost Island Dialogues” projects an alternate attitude towards the literary, but for this very reason, it remains a part of the festival frenzy that has gripped the region. Giriraj Kiradoo, editor of the journal *Pratilipi* and writer-curator of early editions of “ILF: Samanvay,” captures this opposition perfectly when he told me that the “Jaipur Literature Festival” and the “Almost Island Dialogues” “are two extremes and both have their own values... for every Jaipur we need at least ten Almost Islands...”<sup>30</sup> Kiradoo, I believe is not speaking about the difference between markets and symbolic capital (power that emerges out of prestige, recognition, affiliation etc.) because the “Jaipur Literature Festival” is not a space to only buy and sell literature. Rather, he is pointing to the attitudes about literature that these festivals project.

Kiradoo is also not speaking about a competitive field. His statement points to an emergence of a polemical scene where active debate on what literature is in India is being staged and re-staged for the public. Further all three festivals are managed and organized by writer-curators rather than publishing houses, distributors or event management companies. The former are mostly concerned with social, epistemic and aesthetic value. The emergence of these three festivals and many others like it, also indicate that writers, academics and public intellectuals are responding to their own dissatisfaction with the way literature is being

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<sup>30</sup>Giriraj Kiradoo, interview with author. December 28, 2017.

“cared for” in the subcontinent. That is why they produce their own networks of legitimation in the form of talk-culture. In the related field of art history, Claire Bishop writes about the social “return” of participatory art and argues that the most striking projects that constitute the history of participatory art unseat all of the polarities on which this discourse is founded (individual/collective, author/spectator, active/passive, real life/art) but not with the goals of collapsing them...they hold artistic and social critiques in tension.”<sup>31</sup> Literature festivals in India are not exactly participatory art projects, but as I have been arguing (like Bishop does for art), these festivals project utopian possibilities that rethink literature’s “relationship to the social and of its political potential – manifested in a reconsideration of the ways in which art is produced, consumed and debated.”<sup>32</sup> More radically, and drawing on how art worlds function, we could consider the festival and talk-culture as extensions of the writer-curator’s artistic practice and repertoire. Then, the sessions, the choices writer-curators make, the themes, the unexpected directions that the discussions take, and even the way individual sessions are staged become part of a narrative and performance that reevaluates the relationship between the literary and the social. To understand the world of the literature festival in this way makes curation a creative practice.

To be sure, all three festivals curate not only writers and their works, but also produce spaces and experiences for connections and disconnections. Therefore, curation as a creative practice is also the process of producing affects in an audience and staging desirable and imaginable (and antithetical) modes of engaging with the literary. In Chapter 2, I argued that “ILF: Samanvay” produces an itinerant mode of imagining cultural and literary space. This allows, if one wishes, an encounter with spatial and temporal juxtapositions

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<sup>31</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. (London: Verso Books, 2012), 277-278.

<sup>32</sup> Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 3

where heterogenous locations, linguistic worlds, epochs, themes, histories and institutional attitudes interact. I also suggested that it resists hubris by refusing permanence. This is the critical mediation that the writer-critic produces. Relatedly, in Chapter 1, I pointed out that Vikram Sampath, William Dalrymple, Anjum Katyal and Nirmala Lakshman speak about how “browsing” is a possible way to provide “inclusive” access to a fragmented, multilingual literary field. In both these cases, the desired effect on the public is the result of curatorial choices. The “Almost Island Dialogues” stages its own version of the desirable and imaginable by asking how it can perform depth rather than give access to horizontal wanderings. The objective is to read literature more carefully by engaging with the writers and cultural milieus in which the works are produced.

Art critic, historian and avant-garde curator, Hans-Ulrich Obrist makes a similar claim about his own practice. He writes:

the role of the curator is to create free space, not occupy existing space.... the curator has to bridge gaps and build bridges between artists, the public, institutions and other types of communities. The crux of this work is to build temporary communities, by connecting different people and practices, and creating the conditions for triggering sparks between them.<sup>33</sup>

At the “Almost Island Dialogues,” it is a certain kind of writer-curator who takes the initiative to “build temporary communities,” or “a place...a little environment” which is also an extension of their artistic practices and philosophies.<sup>34</sup> Or, to put it differently, this certain kind of writer-curator is concerned for the world within her text and the world her text circulates in.<sup>35</sup>

### **To Listen to Talk-Culture**

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<sup>33</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Ways of Curating*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014, Kindle Edition), 154.

<sup>34</sup> Obrist, *Ways of Curating*, 154; Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> See Leah Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). Within the U.S. academia there seems to be a division of labor between the inside and outside of the book as seen in distinct fields like literary studies and book history.

I attended the “Dialogues” for the first time in the winter of 2017. It was Saturday, December 16th. My only interaction with the writer-curators before this was through email and as editors of my own creative work. When I arrived at the Indian International Center Annex (IIC), I was anxious because I felt like an outsider amid the group of people who seemed to know each other. I stood alone for a while and thought about the annex itself and how it seemed contiguous with the main building’s modernist aesthetic. I observed how Sharmistha Mohanty, Vivek Narayanan and Rahul Soni produced an experience of intimacy that lent itself easily to participation. Curation felt like hospitality, a taking care of not only texts, but also the writers and readers of texts. The small auditorium at the IIC was dimly lit, - “only yellow concealed lights”- someone called out to the person in charge. In the right corner, under a table lamp, Soni was meticulously arranging and rearranging the books published by Almost Island Books, the new publishing arm, on a narrow wooden table. Everybody was chatting with each other; Narayanan introduced me to Sharmistha Mohanty who asked me to join them for dinner after the event. I was introduced to Bengali poet Joy Goswami who held my hands for a long time and smiled. We did not really talk. Mohanty asked me and other audience members to move multiple times to preserve the ideal distance between each person and chair.

This intimacy presented the space as highly egalitarian. For instance, when Sergio Chejfec and translator Margaret Carson read from *Baroni: A Journey*, I looked around and felt a paradoxical sense of democracy within the room.<sup>36</sup> It was paradoxical because it was conflicted. Everyone could, in principle, contribute to the discussions; there were no podiums, vast distances between writers and readers, between personalities and nobodies.

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<sup>36</sup>*Baroni: A Journey* by Sergio Chejfec is the first Latin American novel (in translation) to be published by a publishing house based in India. However, it is a book that was not translated with an Indian reading public as the target audience. I turn to this problem of domestic inscriptions in translation later in the chapter.

Even language did not create a divide because the sessions were thoroughly multilingual. The readings and the conversations were in English, Spanish and Arabic. And it was open to the public. However, the sessions remained small-scale and came across as exclusive - almost like a coterie. I wondered if it was the inaccessible nature of the works being read and discussed, or the venue that carried connotations of elite, high culture? It was a combination of both. The public that one associates with a teeming democracy in India was missing. On the other hand, when I shouldered my way from one session to another at the “Jaipur Literature Festival,” it seemed impersonal, yet it offered me an unprecedented way to experience the literary. I could feel the distance between writer and reader more sharply, the speakers were on high podiums, audience questions were perfunctory, and some writers were treated like celebrities. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the event, the presence of the press, publishing executives and writers walking around Diggi Palace amid 65,000 people every day looked like democratic access to literature. The difference was that I had come to expect the kind of literary sociality and exclusiveness that the “Almost Island Dialogues” projected; Jaipur’s openness, on the other hand, took me by surprise.

That evening at the “Dialogue,” poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra sat in front of me. Poet Bei Dao seemed contemplative on my left. Academic and political psychologist Ashish Nandy’s phone buzzed annoyingly behind me. Novelist Allan Sealy sat behind Nandy, and Joy Goswamy huddled like a *fakir*-poet, wrapped in a woolen shawl a few seats away. Later on, Mohanty explained to me that at “Almost Island,” “no one should be towering above anyone else...I don’t wish to invite people who are arrogant, who will take all the attention because the idea is to come to the table as equals to have a conversation...the respect has to come from inside, not because somebody is a diva...”<sup>37</sup> The room was small enough to

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<sup>37</sup> Sharmistha Mohanty, interview with author. December 18, 2017.

break down boundaries between readers, writers and audiences because it felt as if we were part of the performance, part of talk-culture, rather than passive spectators. There were no divas or superstars, or at least it seemed so. In this sense, the “Dialogues” that December evening was a deliberate attempt to cancel an intellectual and artistic class-divide so that the moments before canonization were kept active and alive. But, in comparison to the “Jaipur Literature Festival,” the “Dialogues” still seemed exclusive.

The next day, December 17, all the writers and many of the same audience members who were present the previous night congregated in Conference Room 1 of the Indian International Center to talk about “Language in the Age of Globalization.” Like the session from the “Jaipur Literature Festival,” or the one from the “Jashn-e-Rekhta” that I analyzed in Chapter 1, this session at the “Dialogues” was a combination of the literary and the critical.<sup>38</sup> This combination is one aspect of talk-culture. The textual was always present, but the oral, the visual and the sensual were equally important. The readings and the discussions were always in multiple languages: Arabic, Spanish, Chinese, Hindi-Urdu, Bengali, English and Sanskrit. The translations into each language were ad lib and imperfect. The focus was never on the ease of conversation; rather every moment was dragged out, as if reminding one about the complex nature of communication, translation and mistranslation. The information that circulated in the room was always partial because there were no assertions, only negotiations. Approximately 20 to 25 of us sat on either side of a 20-foot table and in chairs lined along the wood paneled room. The group occupied seats randomly. Others were just interested members of the public, some of whom looked like college students. The room

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<sup>38</sup> See Obrist, *Ways of Curating*, 157; 159; 160. Non-artists, writers, academics, philosophers and scientists have taken on the role of curators where they attempt to convert texts into multimedia. See Jean-François Lyotard’s *Les Immatériaux* (1985), Jacques Derrida’s *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (1990–91), Julia Kristeva’s *Visions Capitales* (1998) and Bruno Latour’s *Iconoclasm* (2002) and *Making Things Public* (2005). All the events listed here took place in traditional institutional spaces like museums and galleries.



filled-up quickly. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra in blue jeans and white flowing beard sat opposite me. Next to him, Sergio Chejfec. Margaret Carson was situated opposite him. Mohammed Bennis was next to Chejfec, then academic Emily Sun and Allan Sealy next to her. Academic Jared Stark sat next to Rahul Soni at one end of the table. And on my side, next to Margaret Carson was one Alice from China, then Joy Goswami, Bei Dao, Sharmistha Mohanty, Vivek Narayanan and artist Kabir Mohanty. Sharmistha Mohanty moderated the three-hour session.

The topic on language and globalization seemed apt. The pre-circulated discussion prompt read:

To go deeper into one's language, the histories and geographies that form it, the language's formal registers, the common speech - this is to go deeper into difference, into what marks each language as separate from another. A language is a world view and even in this age of globalization, these differences are sharp, they matter, and they need to be celebrated. How do writers navigate the apparent homogeneity of globalization to go further into their own languages and cultures?"<sup>39</sup>

Mohanty began prophetically - "there is something happening [in Indian literature]" - she said and went on to contextualize the theme for the discussion. At the same time, she insisted on the open-ended nature of the conversation and cautioned the audience against any kind of closure. The "Dialogues" have been recorded over the years, and some of the recordings are potentially a very useful archive for a different kind of study. But to comment on my experience that morning, I thought, if English is the language of modernity, globalization, homogeneity and efficiency in India, then each one of the participants performed the "sharp" difference of multiple languages and "world views." The conversation was far from efficient. It produced a harsh critique of the publishing industry and kept reverting to "other forms - place, architecture, theater..." that have escaped

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<sup>39</sup> 2017 Almost Island Dialogues brochure, personal copy.

homogeneity and “stand as a context against globalization.”<sup>40</sup> Not knowing Chinese, Arabic or Spanish, I heard many important things said, but only grasped the seriousness of the utterances by observing the speaker’s expressions closely. The translations that followed were always partial. The translators, also participants, struggled to grasp the complexity of the original, and it took an effort on my part to not fear the untranslatable, or incompletely transmitted at every moment. Towards the end we were all weary, but that Alice from China poignantly asked, “what are the sources of belief and tolerance” in today’s world, and can we begin to identify them? Later, in my hotel room, I thought that the “Dialogues” themselves seemed like one kind of source, a possible institution of practice that performed difficult and slow conversations among heterogeneities.

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<sup>40</sup>The quoted words were spoken by Sharmistha Mohanty. Allan Sealy defended the “form” of the book by saying that he has come to view it as a “physical production.” Sealy was specifically referring to the making of his new collection of poems *Zelaldinus: A Masque* (2017) that figuratively stages a dramatic entertainment that the narrator Irv observes and presents to a reader. But the idea of the book as a “physical production” goes back even further to a session at the “Dialogues” on the relationship between seeing and reading in 2008. Poet George Szirtes, who was present at the “Dialogues” in 2008, captures Sealy’s desire to write such a book in his blog about the event. He writes, “Allan Sealy begins by telling us about his experience of the Arctic and the Aurora Borealis and his desire to write about the deserted red-stone city of Fatehpur Sikri, the ancient Mughal stronghold that he visited some three years ago, without first filling his head with knowledge. He wants to distinguish between first-hand experience and book-learning.” Here, Sealy captures the complexity of text and extra-textuality in his idea of a book as a “physical production” which involves a type of empiricism and fieldwork. For Szirtes the boundaries between experience and representation is less distinct. He writes, “my own line is that there are clearly some differences between seeing-as-fact and reading-as-interpretation - that there is a difference between seeing the Aurora Borealis and reading about it, or seeing pictures of it - but that: a) We experience reading too; b) We do not go naked before objects, nor did Allan see the Aurora Borealis with a naked, innocent eye; c) The imagination is also a fact. We cannot put aside what we know, we can only delay its impact by an act of the will. The second-hand can act on us much as the first-hand can. The writer needs to hold knowledge at bay only to the extent that it follows half a step behind. It has to follow, or nothing gets done. If it doesn't follow at all we are lying to ourselves.” This combination of the literary and the critical that began as a discussion between two writers at the “Dialogues” peaks when the emphasis shifts from the nature of truth, or the correct solution to the problem, to the process, the becoming that João Biehl also asks us to pay attention to. Szirtes writes, “Are we merely personal interpretation and no fact? Certainly not. We have a responsibility to each other because the one thing we do know is that our arguments are not perfect, even our arguments about interpretation. And beyond the failure of the artistic enterprise to convince us that the world has substance and form, is comprehensible, and is, in fact, out there, beyond language, beyond, as [Claudio] Magris had it, ‘the shipwreck of knowledge,’ there remains the fact of the voyage itself, and there remain our fellow voyagers.” George Szirtes’ “blog post” about his trip to Delhi can be found at the “Almost Island Dialogues” webpage. [http://www.almostisland.com/news\\_8.html](http://www.almostisland.com/news_8.html)

In a short piece called “Infinite Conversations,” Swiss art curator and historian, Hans Ulrich Obrist writes that he came to understand conversations as a medium.<sup>41</sup> He has video recorded almost 2000 exchanges in informal settings like coffee shops and taxis.<sup>42</sup> He thinks that “memory is not a simple record of events but a dynamic process that always transforms what it dredges up from its depths, and the conversation has become [his] way to instigate such a process.”<sup>43</sup> For Obrist, conversations are friendly provocations that are also generative and transformative. He writes, “almost everything I had done was born out of conversations, of which I had no trace, despite their being the core of all my activity. And so, I decided to start systematically making recordings.”<sup>44</sup> There is an underlying logic in Obrist’s practice. The structure of conversations is often chaotic as opposed to well-thought-out, or self-aware. In other words, conversations are unpredictable, and recording conversations are a way to archive this unpredictability. This is exactly the type of engagement with speaking that Sharmistha Mohanty thinks the West no longer values. Moreover, even though the “Dialogues” are recorded, Mohanty seems more interested in the process rather than the archive. She uses the term “orality,” but for her, it is a very specific mode of engagement between interlocutors. Hence, reading a paper at a conference, a panel discussion, or reading poetry at sessions that allow for 10-15-minute presentations are not necessarily oral. On that account, she also thinks that most literature festivals are also not oral. She is very careful to clarify that even though orality found preeminence in certain South Asian traditions, it was “not because like in many other places writing doesn’t have importance, writing has great

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<sup>41</sup> Obrist, *Ways of Curating*, 55. I interpret “medium” to be both artwork and materials here. In other words, a conversation between two or more individuals can be thought of as art, or the words, ideas, and performance can be raw material for other creative output. But, “medium” is definitely not media which is closer to information transfer that is not intersubjective.

<sup>42</sup> Obrist, *Ways of Curating*, 56.

<sup>43</sup> Obrist, *Ways of Curating*, 57.

<sup>44</sup> Obrist, *Ways of Curating*, 55.

importance, we have great texts...religion is involved with writing...but somewhere the performative and the oral have always taken precedence over the written because we have chosen to do so.”<sup>45</sup>

It is not possible to know if orality was always a conscious choice for literature in India, but there is enough evidence to show that it has remained a way to experience literary forms even after the emergence of writing and print capitalism as a mode to disperse cultural information.<sup>46</sup> Mohanty articulates that the kind of orality she has in mind is similar to the way Dhrupad, a type of Hindustani vocal music, is taught even today.<sup>47</sup> This is how she explained the connection between her experience as a student of Dhrupad and the kind of orality that “Almost Island Dialogues” practices:

...as you know those traditions are completely oral. I don’t have any notes; I don’t have any papers; I am taught; I am told things; a note is described to me and I sing it – that’s what it is.... And so when we started with the journal, I immediately thought, well, an online dialogue is just not enough, why don’t we just get poets and writers here and talk to each other because that will create something that no reading experience alone can create.<sup>48</sup>

Even though Mohanty draws from a very different cultural history and practice, the way she thinks of “orality” is similar to Obrist’s motive to record conversations. She seeks value in its unpredictability, its dynamism and in the transformations that it provokes. She also sees a different type of intimacy that an interaction with only the text cannot fulfill. She told me

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<sup>45</sup>Sharmistha Mohanty, interview with author. December 18, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Mohanty’s view is not very different from Sheldon Pollock’s argument that the real media revolution in pre-modern South Asia was a burgeoning manuscript culture (rather than colonial print-capitalism) that he calls “script-mercantilism.” However, orality as a characteristic of the Vedic sphere and its role in popular culture continues to affect the way literary culture is circulated in the subcontinent even today. See, Sheldon Pollock, “Literary Culture and Manuscript Culture in Precolonial India”, in *Literary Cultures and the Material Book*. ed. by Simon Eliot, Andrew Nash, and Ian Willison (London: British Library, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> See Richard Widdess, “Festivals of Dhrupad in Northern India: New Contexts for an Ancient Art,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 3 No. 1 (1994): 93. In my conversations with Mohanty she only made comparisons with Dhrupad’s pedagogic methods and not its ideology. Nevertheless, Dhrupad is a musical genre that attempts to bypass communication with an audience and “is essentially a form of private contemplation, best performed for oneself alone or for an intimate circle of connoisseurs, and not for monetary gain in the public arena.”

<sup>48</sup> Sharmistha Mohanty, interview with author. December 18, 2017.

that her “deepest learning from people has often come from just spending time with them and talking to them.”<sup>49</sup> In this context, the momentary and ever shifting nature of conversations yields a desirable outcome - an ability to read and experience the unpredictability, dynamism and the transformative possibility of combination of the literary and critical.

### **Talk-Culture is a way to Read Closely**

Although it need not be, close reading is a scrupulously textual activity. The progression of the field from Russian Formalism and New Criticism to Marxist criticism, from Deconstruction to New Historicism and from even Speech Act theory to Reader Response theories have all been carried out by ardent textualists.<sup>50</sup> This, I feel, has shaped the dominant fields and approaches within the literary discipline. Studies in postcolonial literatures also tend to privilege the textual. This is primarily because they focus almost exclusively on the book, especially the novel. More recently, debates about world literature in the US academy too have remained textual.<sup>51</sup> This continued correspondence between literary studies and different types of textual formalisms are mostly due to institutional and pedagogical limitations. As I have been trying to show, literature and literature worlds in India are complex assemblages that consist of both textual and extra-textual elements. T.S. Satyanath comes to a similar conclusion and coins the term “pluralistic epistemologies” to describe a multimodal production and circulation of the Mahabharata in medieval Karnataka.

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<sup>49</sup> Sharmistha Mohanty, interview with author. December 18, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> See Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, (London; New York: Methuen, 1982), 153-167.

<sup>51</sup> See Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 30; 46. Even when Rebecca Walkowitz propose an expansion of approaches to literary scholarship beyond the text (“close reading at a distance”) because the objects of study are changing constantly (“not a product but a process”), she still hesitates to move beyond an expanded notion of the textual. She writes, “...instead of proposing that born-translated works negate close reading or make it obsolete, I suggest that they direct close reading towards multiple editions of the work, larger units of *texts*, and units of *texts* that are also units of the *book*” (my emphasis).

He writes that “the merging of distinctions between the written, oral and performance texts – or to put it the other way, lack of distinctions between scripto-centric and phono-centric texts, on the one hand, and the crucial role of body-centric performing traditions in shaping and determining the performing texts, on the other – have played an important role, both at conceptual and performing levels, eventually shaping the construction, composition, maintenance and transmission of textual, oral and performing traditions of Karnataka.”<sup>52</sup>

Rather than inherit the limit placed by the text on methodology, my suggestion is that literary scholarship in India should approach the contemporary field as a zone of complex activity where writers and writer-curators perform multiple roles, engage in different pursuits and extend their performance into their work, and vice versa, to disseminate ideas through diverse mediums.<sup>53</sup>

Hence, my account of the practices of the “Almost Island Dialogues” is not an anachronism to the way institutional and academic literary criticism has developed in the West and in India. Nor do I position oral practices in opposition to textuality. Rather, the relationship is symbiotic. Each medium easily feeds into the other in complimentary ways. Further, this is not a question of finding similarities, difference or direct correlations between the “Almost Island Dialogues,” the journal and the literary output of the writer-curators and the participants. That expectation is too pat. Instead, the “Dialogues” act as

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<sup>52</sup> See T.S. Satyanath, “Mahābhāratas in Kannada: Texts and Contexts.” Satyanath is speaking of Kannada literature in the early modern context.

<sup>53</sup> See Craig Epplin, “The Book as Performance” in *Late Book Culture in Argentina*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014). There he explores Estación Pringles, a literary community in the Argentinian pampas that shares similar attitudes towards performance, orality and the text as the “Almost Island Dialogues.” Epplin writes that “the relationship between Estación Pringles and the medium of the book is not one of negation...the project does not draw a sharp dividing line between different media...the long-distance conversation of print and the immediacy of face-to-face encounters extends the scale of gradations, not a sharp boundary. ...At the heart of this notion is the idea of the book as an interface of performance. The book becomes a stage - or at least is conceived as one. It registers encounters” (77).

“sustenance” whereby the practices, performance and experiences of the participants discursively affect literary (and non-literary) output and vice versa.

In my conversations with the writer-curators of the “Almost Island Dialogues,” I noticed that they were all aware of the debates about world literature, postcolonial literatures, South Asian studies, translation studies and the ascendancy of the Global Anglophone novel in the US academy. They seemed less aware of the workings of the Indian academy. But at the same time, they maintained a distance from both and did their own thing. Their curatorial decisions were propelled by contexts and intuitions rather than norms and institutions. For Vivek Narayanan and others, one way to overcome the “challenges of being a journal that is interested in world literature based in India” was to “feel [their] way [though] this whole thing.”<sup>54</sup> This “feeling” was a value judgement too, but what differed was the way they came to that judgement. Since curation for the “Dialogues” and the journal depends so heavily on reading closely, I wondered what challenges did multilingualism really pose for this vague and exploratory process of curating content? Additionally, the writer-curators claimed that they willfully bypassed an Anglophone corpus that was overdetermined by the global publishing and prestige industry. The reason for this was that the collective took multilingualism as intrinsic not only to their own practice, but also to the way literatures exist (or have existed) in India. The essence of the problem therefore was to find better (if often less efficient) methods to access, read and interpret specific works and authors in language they did not read or understand. This sounds paradoxical, but is this not the crux of the problem in any multilingual literature world? Translation turned out to be problematic, even though translated texts were the only kind of access the writer-curators had to most foreign and regional literatures. In this context, Narayanan told me that they “had been reading

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<sup>54</sup> Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017.

Chinese poet Bei Dao for a while because he was well translated into English, but there is a kind of distance with which you read it.”<sup>55</sup>

This anxiety that Narayanan enunciates is a consequence of a weak translating infrastructure in India. For instance, Chinese, Hungarian, Slovenian, Chilean or Argentinian authors are not actively translated for an Indian or South Asian multilingual reading public. Further, the problem of no single target language is severe because potentially each book can be translated into all the 22 official languages in the country, including an English that is inflected with a type of local usage. The mind-boggling complexity of such a task, and the problems of supply and demand, make the idea of equal flows between all the literatures of India and the world utopian, or simply impossible. The idea of a target language is unfortunately premised on the existence of a single national language that is both representative and dominant. What happens when a single language is not representative? The implications of a lack of translation for reading publics in specific languages is serious if one agrees that translation is always inflected with the unique markers of the destination culture. Thus, most of the international works and their translators that circulate at the “Almost Island Dialogues” are translated for either a European or American home audience and market. As translators themselves, Mohanty, Narayanan and Soni draw on that social network to access the writers who they wish to invite. Hence Bei Dao is linked to his translator Eliot Weinberger, László Krasznahorkai to George Szirtes, Tomaž Šalamun to Michael Biggins, Raul Zurita to Anna Deeny Morales, and Sergio Chejfec to Margaret Carson. Therefore, even though the “Dialogues” claim to bypass the hegemony of the Anglophone world, they indirectly circulate in the domestic US and British context because of the lack of material conditions that make translated literatures available for circulation in

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<sup>55</sup> Vivek Narayanan interview with author. December 17, 2017.



India. At the same time, this limitation is also a strength, because the translations remain truly detached from any specific national context. There is no effort to domesticate or nationalize it at least at the translation stage within India.

Translation is never a transparent process devoid of the influence of domestic literary styles and audience expectations. This influence, according to Itamar Even-Zohar, is dependent on the position of translated literature in specific cultural contexts or polysystems.<sup>56</sup> If translation holds a central position in a country, then the translator will potentially take more risks and challenge conventions. The translator does not necessarily “look for ready-made models in his home repertoire into which the source texts will be transferable.”<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, in a polysystem where translation is peripheral, the situation is the opposite. In the case of the Anglo-American system, translation is peripheral as compared to British and American literatures in the English language.<sup>58</sup> This, of course, does not mean that all translators look for domestic models for foreign literatures. Gisèle Sapiro argues that large-scale production of and circulation in the US is still predominantly English and tends towards homogenization, but small-scale publishers endorse translations to increase diversity within the nation-state and combat (“strategy of resistance”) the hegemonic effect of English and globalization.<sup>59</sup> Almost all these translations are into English because of “the historical link between literature, language and nation.”<sup>60</sup> However,

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<sup>56</sup> Itamar Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory,” *Poetics Today* 11 no. 1 (1990): 12. In the structural (and scientific) world of Even-Zohar, cultural contexts are components of a polysystem whose “purpose is to make explicit the conception of a system as dynamic and heterogeneous in opposition to the synchronistic [static] approach. It thus emphasizes the multiplicity of intersections and hence the greater complexity of structuredness involved.”

<sup>57</sup> Itamar Even-Zohar, “The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem,” *Poetics Today* 11 no. 1 (1990): 50.

<sup>58</sup> Even-Zohar, “The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem,” 50.

<sup>59</sup> Gisèle Sapiro, “Globalization and Cultural Diversity in the Book Market: The Case of Literary Translations in the US and in France,” *Poetics*, 38 no. 4 (Aug. 2010): 420.

<sup>60</sup> Sapiro, “Globalization and Cultural Diversity in the Book Market,” 420.

the diversity that small-scale publishers attempt to inject remains problematic unless more and more of the foreign context is included in the national one. As Lawrence Venuti argues, “the foreign text, then, is not so much communicated as inscribed with domestic intelligibilities and interests... the domesticating process is totalizing, even if never total, never seamless or final. It can be said to operate in every word of the translation long before the translated text is further processed by readers, made to bear other domestic meanings and to serve other domestic interests.”<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the problem of the domestic inscription on translated literature becomes a real problem when translations circulate globally. This is the problem “Almost Island Dialogues” attempts to rectify through talk-culture even though the translations and translators they dialog with in India mostly emerge in the realm of the American (or British) small-scale.

A robust translation scene is often dependent on other infrastructures like pedagogical and institutional initiatives that are not in the direct control of the writer or the translator. That is why Sharmistha Mohanty laments about the “terrible state of translation in India today” and says, “we have to do with what there is.”<sup>62</sup> Talk-culture, or the combination of the literary and critical, therefore emerges as a way to work around such limitations.

According to Narayanan, the 2009 “Dialogues” between the Chinese and Indian writers/intellectuals in New Delhi validated their approach to the problem of domestic inscription and the distance one feels from translated texts. The writers from China were novelist Ge Fei, poets Xi Chuan, Ouyang Jianghe, Zhai Yongming and intellectual Li Tou. Many of them were writers and thinkers who were/are associated with the underground Chinese literary journal *Jintian* (*Today*). The writers from India consisted of novelist Allan

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<sup>61</sup> Lawrence Venuti, “Translation, Community, Utopia,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 468-469.

<sup>62</sup> Sharmistha Mohanty, interview with author. December 18, 2017.

Sealy and Vinod Kumar Shukla, poets Kunwar Narayan, K. Satchidanandan, Joy Goswami, Vivek Narayanan and intellectuals Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Ashish Nandy.<sup>63</sup> Two types of problems were resolved in this face-to-face interaction. First many of the Chinese writers had not been extensively translated into English in 2009 and “Almost Island Dialogues” had no way to access them. Relatedly, there was very little critical and historical material that readers at the “Dialogues” could fall back on. Second, Bei Dao stood out as an exemplary figure in the much larger and invisible context he wrote in. Bei Dao’s prominent status in the Anglo-American literary field literally hid other writers like Ge Fei, Xi Chuan, Ouyang Jianghe and Zhai Yongming. Hence, reading single poems in translation was not enough. This context was not biographical, historical or connected to a writerly craft.<sup>64</sup>

For Narayanan, learning how to read these writers and thinkers meant “to be able to see them interact with each other, to see them as a group, and also spend time with them...” and “by the end of it you really got a sense of who they were as writers, what context they were writing to and writing against and...who they were as a group of writers who are all doing different things.”<sup>65</sup> By bringing these authors together, the “Almost Island Dialogues” had produced something new, an experience rather than a set of knowledges about the journal *Jintian*, the Misty poets, and their political and social implications. The creative consequence of curating these writers emerged from a type of paradox. Narayanan frames this contradiction thus: “on the one hand, you want something to happen organically, but

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<sup>63</sup> A detailed report on this encounter is available in the Autumn 2009 Issue of *Jintian*. It is in Chinese and there is no translation available yet.

<sup>64</sup> See Li Tou, “1985,” *Almost Island*, (Monsoon 2009): 5, [http://www.almostisland.com/monsoon\\_2009/essay/1985.html](http://www.almostisland.com/monsoon_2009/essay/1985.html). Tou writes about a “random,” “non-straightfaced” history that involves personal memories which captures the essence of the “Dialogues” by remembering another scene of public culture where questions of literary modernism in China were waged. According to Tou, in 1985, “the literary scene looked as gorgeous as a riot of autumn colours” as a nascent Chinese public sphere emerged.

<sup>65</sup> Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017.

you are designing something that is then meant to happen organically...you are putting something together, but putting it together in a way that hopefully will then take a life of its own.”<sup>66</sup> The meeting between the Chinese and Indian writers did take on a life of its own. The group continues to meet, produce work influenced by these meetings and hold conversations at regular intervals which has been “really crucial in informing the return to reading them [the Chinese writers] on the page” for the members and participants of the “Dialogues.”<sup>67</sup>

Here talk-culture becomes another way to read closely. On the one hand, this is a practical solution to the lack of availability of translations for a domestic reading public. On the other hand, this festival does not attempt to domesticate the translation because reception of the work occurs alongside the writer and the translator. The knowledges that the reader, the text, the translator and the writer bring, become important components of the listening and reading practice. That is why the “Almost Island Dialogues” is a venue that stages a nuanced combination of practices, performances and experiences as a way to find alternatives to organize, access, listen to and read literatures. This way to access the literary and the critical is a vastly different operation from perusing an anthology or a collected works. It is also a way to mitigate the commodity status of much literature that is highly mediated by corporate interests and publishing trends. When I asked Rahul Soni, who is also a commissioning editor at Harper Collins, India to describe the ethos of the festival he helps curate, he told me that “this is something that has given me sustenance and, I think, it again

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<sup>66</sup> Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017; The 2009 session was followed by another session in 2010 when the Indian writers travelled to China. This is documented but it is also in Chinese. More recently, in 2018, this “ongoing discussion” between Chinese and Indian writers was staged in Hong Kong by the Hong Kong Poetry Festival Foundation in collaboration with *Almost Island* and *Jintian*. See <https://hkpff.com/dialogue-between-chinese-and-indian-writers/>

comes down to that question of...this is where, something like the “Dialogues” or *Almost Island* is where I do not have to consider the market at all. This is where I focus on stuff that interests me; that is craft driven, maybe...publishing is a space which is sales driven.”<sup>68</sup> By interacting with the writers and their ideas, the “Dialogue” mitigates the impersonal nature of reading not by throwing the baby [text] out with the bathwater, but by emphasizing the importance of an embodied intimacy, hospitality and friendship as the appropriate way to engage literature.

### **Through Transformation and Engagements or “The Pocket of Eternity”**

Commenting on the work of artist Adriana Varejão, Brazilian historian and anthropologist Lilia Schwarcz writes that “to become, in this sense, means to create something new: new alternatives of making. ...giving place to the philosophies of our informants, becoming part of those theories [and doing] an anthropology that works together with its subjects, as opposed to simply producing books or essays about those people... that respects others in the sense that we not only listen to and write about them, but we also learn from their theories.”<sup>69</sup> I do not do anthropology. Nor is my study an ethnography. But I do claim, that by observing what writer-curators, the writers themselves, thinkers and the audience members do at literature festivals, we could attempt to understand what kind of knowledges and affects the combination of the literary and the critical evoke. Over the three days, across a conference table, in the lawns when the sun’s out, during readings and over meals I noticed this combination where the literary easily flowed into a critical discussion and vice versa. The literary and critical also took the form of curation that

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<sup>68</sup> Rahul Soni, interview with author. January 7, 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Lilia Schwarcz, “I Was Cannibalized by an Artist: Adriana Varejão, or Art as Flux,” in *Unfinished: The Anthropology of Becoming*, ed. João Biehl and Peter Locke, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, Kindle Edition), 194.

resulted in unique ways to “take care” of texts, writers and audiences. The “Dialogues” produced its own alternatives, or what I call its own version of the desirable and imaginable that tries to read deeply and intimately. In turn, I kept observing that at least for now, talk-culture is a way to overcome the limitations of the Indian literary field and the current models of managing multilingual literatures from both regional and international spaces. It was also a way to address the market for books and an underdeveloped translation field. Ultimately, the “Dialogues” staged the literary and critical in this way because the writer-curators saw value in face-to-face interaction as a supplement to accessing literature only through texts. Like the other festivals I was trying to understand, the “Dialogues” tried to create something new, an alternative, or as Sharmistha Mohanty told me many times, “to seed something within India that is not yet seeded.”<sup>70</sup> I was curious to find out how it articulated the literary and the critical that I kept experiencing at the event. Would Mohanty or Narayanan or Soni describe the different time and place they engendered more formally?

So, I asked Mohanty if she saw the sessions as producing different kinds of knowledge about the literary? Or were the “Dialogues” diffusing literary knowledge and a type of aesthetics? She did not like the words “knowledge” or “production.” She said she would not “use that phrase...I would say that it probably has effected transformations in thought for those who have participated and therefore also transformations in the work of the writers who have been here.”<sup>71</sup> Transformation, for her, was a type of “natural accretion of thoughts and perspectives” without payoff. And the moment of transformation, always a transformation of the self, was ephemeral because it was dynamic. It was a little like the becoming of anthropology, flexible and fluid. What she rejected was the idea of a “body of

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<sup>70</sup>Sharmistha Mohanty, interview with author. December 18, 2017.

<sup>71</sup>Sharmistha Mohanty, interview with author. December 18, 2017.

knowledge” that she thought was inflexible because it is accompanied by codifications, formalizations and institutionalizations. Mohanty answered my questions by pinpointing the inexact (again and again). She said, “there are things inside you and when they come to life later and you remember them and you learned something from what [Mohammed] Bennis said or from Bennis and Sergio [Chejfec’s] conversations. That is how it happens.”<sup>72</sup>

Poet, Vahni Capildeo who participated in the 2010 edition of the “Dialogues,” articulates this very transformation in a wonderfully cryptic three-part belle lettres, ethnography, creative non-fiction and/or prose-poem in the 2010 issue of *The Caribbean Review of Books* (CRB). In “Questions of Approach,” Capildeo offers her readers a glimpse into the “Dialogues,” or what she terms the “pocket of eternity.”<sup>73</sup> The piece is about her first trip to India and the happenstance locations of her postcolonial identity. Capildeo is Indo-Trinidadian. In the piece she writes about her friendship with the Mohanty and Narayanan, the hospitality she felt at the “Dialogues and the complex relationships she shares with England, the Caribbean, Delhi, and the India International Center (ICC). The piece is also about what I have been calling talk-culture, of the combination of the literary and the critical were the “Dialogues was “a conference [that] was waiting, a conference of the new.”<sup>74</sup> Capildeo here references the theme of the 2010 “Dialogues” — “innovation, the making of the new, the originary.”<sup>75</sup> In part three of the essay, Capildeo intimately recounts the combination of the literary and the critical that illustrates what Sharmistha Mohanty means by transformations as opposed to “knowledge production” and a “body of

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<sup>72</sup>Sharmistha Mohanty, interview with author. December 18, 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Vahni Capildeo, “Questions of Approach – Part 3,” *The Caribbean Review of Books* (CRB), May 21 2010, <http://caribbeanreviewofbooks.com/crb-archive/21-may-2010/questions-of-approach/>. Accessed 9 Apr. 2018.

<sup>74</sup> Capildeo, “Questions of Approach – Part 3.”

<sup>75</sup> Personal Communication and Email Invite sent to participants for the 2010 “Almost Island Dialogues.”

knowledge.” In it, Capildeo evocatively remembers a walk with Hong Kong-based writer Xi Xi and Slovenian poet Tomaž Šalamun among the ruins of the Qutb Minar. This description, an extension of the “Dialogues” itself and a scene of the literary and critical, is premised on Xi Xi’s musing on the cultural specificities of an ongoing conversation about surfaces and originaries in the writing and interpreting literature. Capildeo writes that Xi Xi “wondered how to locate the originary of the surface in a culture obsessed with surfaces, claiming that her writing is ‘straightforward’ and ‘like reality,’...trying to illuminate that surface by a light from within.”<sup>76</sup> Xi Xi was comparing her style to the constant presence of mythology in what she thought was an Indian imagination. At the Qutb Minar, Capildeo casually claims that she prefers to be silent among ruins and history but observes that Xi Xi likes to speak amid them. The critical emerges right at this moment when Capildeo qualifies Xi Xi’s claim that her writing is “straightforward” and “like reality.” Capildeo writes, “she shook comparison into comparison until the time and place that we were in, became striped with her simultaneously existing recollected journeys . . . There was a trick of time to her surfaces, then, just as unsettling as the Durga Ma image; perhaps more like *maya*, illusion, so often understood negatively but also the creative play of the god Vishnu.”<sup>77</sup> Similarly, she qualifies Tomaž Šalamun’s “vision of his creativity” through an understanding/transformation she acquires/undergoes through this experience. Capildeo writes that both authors embodied exactly what they thought they did not have and “the forms forever agitating somewhere in my imagination fell away appeased, like animals not normally well treated. The vastness of the Qutb Minar settled into my brain like a revolution

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<sup>76</sup> Capildeo, “Questions of Approach – Part 3.”

<sup>77</sup> Capildeo, “Questions of Approach – Part 3.”



of patience.”<sup>78</sup> What this shows is a nuanced change in the way Capildeo sees her own imagination which has been suddenly appeased.

The transformation that Capildeo recounts is subtle. And the self-knowledge that is revealed at the Qutb Minar is a consequence of the interactions, discussions, readings and experiences that the form of the “Dialogues” produce. The combination of the literary and critical keeps emerging in “Questions of Approach” as she recounts the four days immersed in “these dialogues of past and future crystallised into a continuous present.”<sup>79</sup> She dreamily alludes to the different time and place that the Dialogues produce because readings last for 40 minutes and “there was such a longing and such a willingness in the audience to participate (yet not uncritically) in a quality of listening; to inhabit a space of voices. It was not selfishness. It was like an agreement to be temporarily unserved...”<sup>80</sup> The reader is witness to a description of another transformation where talk-culture is to “inhabit the space of voices,” to read the other more closely. Similar to Hans Ulrich Obrist and Sharmistha Mohanty, Capildeo finds out that talk-culture is also a medium. She writes, “mostly at those readings I was conscious of being within a medium that was being created newly, partly from shared and unknown pasts: a present continuous, into which sources streamed and pooled out: Tamil, Bengali, Slovenian, Chinese, and other...”<sup>81</sup> Another transformation. Throughout, she struggles to identify the critical by other names, because the ebb and flow of the conversations does not match her expectations. The quote below begins with a series of negatives – what the “Dialogues” is not. Capildeo writes,

one of the writers would blaze and stutter into speech. ...It was not polite, it was not argued, it was in no way predictable. One was in the presence of energies, and the words were forming even as thoughts form in the most hidden processes of the

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<sup>78</sup> Capildeo, “Questions of Approach – Part 3.”

<sup>79</sup> Capildeo, “Questions of Approach – Part 3.”

<sup>80</sup> Capildeo, “Questions of Approach – Part 3.”

<sup>81</sup> Capildeo, “Questions of Approach – Part 3.”

creative mind. In so many other contexts . . . in the academic context, in the public lecture hall . . . this could not have happened. There would have been coughing; interventions; the equivalent of the men with white coats, the professional tamers and belittlers, would have arrived, like handlers called to the scene of an escapee tiger in a busy road.<sup>82</sup>

Finally, she simply calls the combination of the literary and critical, or talk-culture, “freedom.” This is exactly what Mohanty means when she calls the “Dialogues” “oral.” The sheer unpredictability of the discussions, the responses, and the thinking through that permeates the sessions are essentially the critical that is produced at the moment of improvisation.

In this context, Vivek Narayanan does not think that the “Almost Island Dialogues” produce knowledge that can be called either critiques and criticism.<sup>83</sup> Narayanan repeatedly questioned my use of these terms by asking me to define and redefine them. He found critiques and criticism too harsh because it involved analysis, a movement towards the concrete, the quantifiable and involved a “cynical calculation” about literature and literary events.<sup>84</sup> Narayanan offered an alternative to both terms – he called it “engagement.”<sup>85</sup> Like transformations, engagement appeared to be a phenomenological operation. The underlying question that drove our conversation that morning was, what does it mean to listen, or as Vahni Capildeo put it earlier, to “inhabit the space of voices?”<sup>86</sup> For Narayanan, the experience of listening at the “Dialogues” is the ability to recognize the other in the room, which is “a sense of presence that is palpable,” and every once in a while, something

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<sup>82</sup> Capildeo, “Questions of Approach – Part 3.”

<sup>83</sup> Curation, the writer-curator, talk-culture, knowledge production, criticism and critique were all terms that I used in the interviews I conducted. Specifically, all three writer-curators gently questioned my use of two terms more than the others by asking me what I meant by critique and criticism. I told them that for me works by Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche exemplified critique. But it also included others like Antonio Gramsci, Franz Fanon and Aimé Césaire.

<sup>84</sup> Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017.

<sup>85</sup> Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017.

<sup>86</sup> Capildeo, “Questions of Approach – Part 3.”

happens, an improvisation by a speaker, something intangible that produces a space of vulnerability where everyone participates.<sup>87</sup> Engagement was made up of presence, improvisation, the intangible and vulnerability. Through these descriptions, Narayanan and I slowly attempted to work out a fuller meaning of what engagement means, and at a certain point, he said, “I think, I think critique is not conducive to my idea of literature, because critique clarifies things too much and it takes sides, whereas I am interested in literature as an open-endedness...The conferences [the “Dialogues”] are also open-ended; it’s not about coming to a conclusion or taking something apart successfully.”<sup>88</sup> There were no deeper truths to be found, or layers to be peeled to discover a purer form.<sup>89</sup> Rather, the “Almost Island Dialogue” was a “safe space” and a way to “pull” different kind of people and literatures together, and “make this a place... place making, a place where you are almost building a little environment for yourself.”<sup>90</sup> Engagement, then, was community, or a way to build community.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017.

<sup>88</sup> Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017.

<sup>89</sup> In retrospect, it seems that Narayanan was rejecting a “hermeneutics of suspicion” that was probably triggered by my own description of critique.

<sup>90</sup> Vivek Narayanan, interview with author. December 17, 2017.

<sup>91</sup> Towards the end of the interview Narayanan asked me if I had read Bruno Latour’s “An Attempt at Writing a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’” and said, “so in that sense we will be closer to composition...or maybe composition is a fancy word for what we do.” I hadn’t read it then. But after reading it, I see how “place making” through engagement or transformations for the “Almost Island Dialogue” is like building, or even instituting a certain kind of value system about literature in India. But something else that Latour points out about climate change and the social construction of knowledge suddenly makes more sense in a literary context after my discussion with Narayanan. Latour writes, “After thirty years or so of work in science studies, it is more than embarrassing to see that scientists had no better epistemology with which to rebut their adversaries. They kept using the old opposition between what is constructed and what is not constructed, instead of the slight but crucial difference between what is *well* and what is *badly* constructed (or composed).” The institution of literature is also socially constructed, like everything else is, but what matters is how “well” or “badly” it is constructed. That is why there exist other possibilities. See Bruno Latour, “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto.’” *New Literary History*, 41 (2010): 478.

## Chapter 4

### Commodifying the Postcolonial: The “Jaipur Literature Festival” and the Pakistani Novel

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I return to the “Jaipur Literature Festival” (JLF) and examine how and why it tries to institute a specific category like the Pakistani novel between the years 2008 and 2011. My sources for this chapter are media coverage of the festival and videos of complete sessions that were uploaded onto the JLF website and their YouTube channel. I use the term “institute” as a verb to suggest the setting in motion the processes that lead to the formation of a category like the Pakistani novel. The festival assigns a foreign status to writing by authors like Mohsin Hamid, Mohammed Hanif, Nadeem Aslam, Daniyal Mueenuddin, Kamila Shamsie, Ali Sethi, H.M. Naqvi, Shazaf Fatima Haider, Saba Imtiaz, Bilal Tanweer and Haroon Khalid. I suggest that the festival draws on two types of discourses to make this claim. The first is the continuing presence of the colonial invention of the idea of Indian literature that is premised on a philological nationalism. The second, more problematically, is what Graham Huggan, among others call “postcoloniality,” particularly the importing of the “alterity industry” into India.<sup>1</sup> The canon that emerged out of the oppositional ethos of an institutional Postcolonialism in British and American academic institutions is combined with the idea of a national literature to assign an Indianness to literary production.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the Pakistani novel in English is re-produced as

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 68. Huggan differentiates between the “regime of value” postcolonialism and postcoloniality produces. The former is more oppositional, while the latter “pertains to a system of symbolic, as well as material exchange in which even the language of resistance may be manipulated and consumed” (6). He goes on to suggest that the two regimes of value are not necessarily separate, but rather “*bound up*” with each other in the context of late twentieth century commodity culture (6).

<sup>2</sup> I understand “Postcolonial” as a metropolitan (Anglo-American) institutional category that labels or produces knowledges about literatures, cultures and practices that sometimes, but do not always emerge in previously colonized spaces. Postcolonialism as an institutional category lies between Huggan’s oppositional

the “other” to an Indian novel in English, which reinforces the national, linguistic and religious fragmentation of an otherwise co-constituted South Asian literary history.

In Chapter 2, I argued that the idea of a “national literature” was abandoned in the 1980s and 1990s because this model of community could not simultaneously institute a stable identity while at the same time account for plural practices. JLF in 2008, somewhat naively, attempts to resurrect the category. But the unpredictability of talk-culture and the debates performed at specific sessions repeatedly undermine this process by pointing to the difficulty of separating mutually constitutive literary and cultural histories. The conversations and debates enact a sense of disavowal towards the idea of a Pakistani novel, an Indian novel and the idea of a national literature. The various writers, speakers and the audience attempt to leave the question of a Pakistani novel open ended, rather than conclude about its presence or absence at JLF. This is because to conclude in this context is also to evaluate a literary work, which in turn declares the existence of the “other” literary identity and history. That is why I argue that the attitude of disavowal towards the literary object and received categories of texts and ideas (that emerge in de-territorialized multinational publishing houses, or even institutional US contexts like academia) are a consequence of an uncertainty about this literature’s status in a national context. I elaborate on this two-step process (the attempt to institute and to undermine) in this chapter and ultimately show that talk-culture undercuts the regime of value that a culture industry and postcoloniality impose.

The attempt to institute the Pakistani novel and the undermining of this process are two opposite positions in the South Asian literary field. The national model appears to be

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postcolonialism and postcoloniality in the activities of the university, publishing houses, concerned individuals etc. where a series of actions, research, classroom practices and speech-acts formalize the oppositional ethos and make it an activity of its own. When I use “postcolonial” to refer to the Indian nation-state, I do not capitalize it.

competitive, while the co-constituted model is cooperative. Hence the attitude of disavowal towards the national model at the sessions shows that there is a constant slippage between these two approaches. Disciplining either literary fields (Indian or Pakistani) would mean defining boundaries, erecting canons, instituting national literatures and rediscovering the “other” repeatedly. Hence, even though the “Jaipur Literature Festival” tries to produce the category of the Pakistani novel in English, the unpredictability and the intimacy of face-to-face conversation offers a productive alternative. The performance of disavowal mitigates the actualization of fragmentation between shared literatures and cultures.

I begin the chapter with an analysis of 2011 sessions at JLF about Mohsin Hamid’s 2007 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. I turn to this session at JLF because it troubles notions of national belonging and the Urdu-Hindi language divide, while simultaneously asking who the readers of Hamid’s novel (in English and in Urdu-Hindi) really are. This I suggest undermines the original agenda of the session which is simply to stage a popular Anglophone Pakistani novelist and his book. But I also claim that there is a similarity between what is happening at this session at JLF and the critique of aesthetic evaluation and the production of literary value that Hamid’s novel articulates. Through a reading of the novel, I show how this critique is intensified when specific sections of the novel are read at JLF in Urdu-Hindi rather than English amidst his friends. I argue that the work is trapped between values that resemble global finance on the one hand and affective ties like love on the other. I see a parallel here between a festival like JLF and the novel because both seem to undermine the culture industry through (a desire for) intimacy. I then turn my attention to how JLF and the media coverage of the festival attempt to produce a category of the Pakistani novel by importing the “alterity industry” into India. This, I suggest is a way to produce literary value about the book and a category of literature from within India. I argue

that the durability of the category is premised on two social imaginaries that are problematic. The first is a consequence of the commodification of an institutional Postcolonialism that incorrectly proposes the relative newness of an Indian literature and combines it with the competitiveness of national literatures in the region. This literary history begins with Salman Rushdie's 1981 novel *Midnight's Children*. The second is the sociopolitical discourse on terrorism which continuously becomes a backdrop for various sessions at JLF between 2008 and 2011. Both these imaginaries also form the basis for Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Finally, in the last section I turn to the 2010 special edition of *Granta* that dedicates a full issue to the new Pakistani writers, a session at the 2011 JLF called "In a Tough Neighborhood," and a panel discussion at the "Karachi Literature Festival" in Karachi, Pakistan to show how the attitude of disavowal towards the category of the Pakistani novel (and literature) are performed on both sides of the border.

### **The Greatest Literary Show on Earth**

JLF with its moniker "The Greatest Literary Show on Earth" fits perhaps too neatly into a description of a global media event – "the Woodstock, Live 8 and Ibiza of world literature."<sup>3</sup> As I have mentioned earlier in this dissertation, the festival is a mixture of a *mela*, *mushaira-kavi sammelan*, academic conference, graduate classroom, public debate, book reading, creative writing workshop and a book fair that for some resembles a lavish Indian wedding. With its celebrity authors, Nobel Laureates, Man Booker Prize winners and mix of *bhasha* (Indian languages) writers, it mimics the transnational circuits of the global book market and a global (if somewhat vulgar) multiculturalism. It looks like an example of what Shu-Mei Shih has called the "technologies of recognition" in the US literary field that confer

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<sup>3</sup> Teamwork Arts, "Jaipur Literature Festival," Accessed December 26, 2019. <http://jaipurliteraturefestival.org>. The second quote appears on the festival webpage and several online publications who credit it to *Time Out* without specifying a date or location. I was not able to find the original article.

world membership and value to literatures.<sup>4</sup> From certain perspectives, the festival replicates the logics of late capitalist globalization, and to borrow Aamir Mufti's term, it is a symptom of "neoliberal postcolonialism."<sup>5</sup>

But every winter, it becomes impossible to dismiss the sense and the non-sense that comprise experiencing the world of literature at one of these festivals. As I have tried to show throughout this work, the festivals are uniquely marked by the Directors and writer-curators who organize the sessions, and the unpredictability of live conversation. JLF is one of the largest literature festivals in the world which has received extensive media coverage since its inception in 2006. This is also why, the flamboyant and large (65,000 people every day for five days) nature of the festival is the first image that comes to mind when one speaks about literature festivals. But, like any other system, the various festivals, either understood individually or as a network, stage intricate spectacles. What I hope to show in the following pages is the power of this spectacle to shape the narrative of the literary field in India positively and negatively. At the same time, I also want to argue that talk-culture and the unpredictability of debate prevent rigid categories from forming. This, I think, in the present context of the chapter is a positive approach to literatures in India. I begin with a session at the 2011 JLF.

At the 2011 JLF, novelists Mohsin Hamid and Chandrabhas Choudhury engage in an unscripted conversation about Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). Towards the middle of the 50-minute session, Choudhury asks about the global reception of Hamid's

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<sup>4</sup> Shu-Mei Shih, "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," *PMLA*, 119, no. 1 (2004): 17. According to Shih, "'technologies of recognition' ... refers to the mechanisms in the discursive (un)conscious with bearings on social and cultural (mis)understandings-that produce 'the West' as the agent of recognition and 'the rest' as the object of recognition, in representation" (17). Part of JLF's modus operandi, as I will argue later, is to reverse this mechanism where South Asia emerges as a key tastemaker for a South Asian and a global readership.

<sup>5</sup> Mufti, *Forget English!*, 14.



novel.<sup>6</sup> The author modestly suggests that circulation and reception are a hit-and-miss phenomenon. He says he cannot know if a novel did well in one country or language. Choudhury asks if he has come across the Hindi translation (*Changez Ka Bayan*) of his novel.<sup>7</sup> Hamid replies in the negative and refers to the translation as the “Hindi cousin” of his Anglophone novel.<sup>8</sup> At this point, Alia Naqvi steps onto the stage and reads a passage from Hamid’s novel in Urdu-Hindi. Naqvi is a historian and visiting faculty at the Institute of Business Administration in Karachi. She is also the partner of H.M. Naqvi, another Pakistani writer, whose novel *Home Boy* (2009) won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature at the “Jaipur Literature Festival” in 2011.<sup>9</sup> Her appearance is made to feel impromptu, as if someone from the audience just happened to have a Hindi translation of Hamid’s book. The section that Naqvi chooses to read is the moment when the protagonist Changez returns to Lahore and engages in an “inward oriented musing” about received notions of Western aesthetic values.<sup>10</sup>

Several interesting problems about the circulation and reception of Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* comes to the fore in this scene above. Hamid expresses a sense of ignorance about how his novel is really received in various parts of the world. But the conversation immediately becomes localized because the discussion is occurring at Jaipur for an audience that is predominantly from India. Hence, when Choudhury asks if Hamid has

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<sup>6</sup> Choudhury appears to be the resident “Indian-English” writer while Hamid is the “Global Anglophone” writer.

<sup>7</sup> The Hindi translation by Suchita Mittal is titled *Changez Ka Bayan*. It is a commissioned translation and there is little information about the translator. See R. S. McGregor, “*bayān*,” *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp.707. *Bayan* is translated as “description,” “exposition,” “declare” or “assert.”

<sup>8</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, “*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*,” Mohsin Hamid in conversation with Chandrabhas Choudhury,” Jaipur Literature Festival, 2011, WebM Media File, 50:39.

<sup>9</sup> There was no Urdu translation of Hamid’s novel in 2011 and the copy that Naqvi walks up to the stage with is Mittal’s Hindi translation. I am not sure if Naqvi can read the Devanagari script, or if she translated the Devanagari into the Nasta‘līq or Perso-Arabic script. Regardless it shows the ad hoc nature of the staging. Urdu-Hindi is a language that is written in two different scripts.

<sup>10</sup> Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Kindle Edition, 2007), 125.

come across the Hindi translation of the novel, the question is less directed towards Hamid and more towards the audience. Hamid cannot read Hindi. Choudhury's question also anticipates the way the session has been visualized by the organizers, even though what happens next is made to feel impromptu. However, what stands out is the way Hamid describes the Hindi translation of his novel. The English language novel and the Hindi translation are cousins. English and Urdu-Hindi can belong to the same family only in South Asia because this relationship is premised on cultural affinity. At first this seems odd because the session is among many between 2008 and 2011 that slowly established a group of writers in India as a new generation of Pakistani novelists. Further, this filial atmosphere is reinforced when friend and fellow Pakistani, Alia Naqvi comes on to the stage and reads a passage from Hamid's novel in Hindi that sounds like Urdu. Once again, what is first premised as different languages suddenly appear to belong to the same family. The whole session ends up being intimate, especially where Hamid's novel symbolically returns home in Urdu-Hindi rather than English.

Further, when Choudhury asks about the global reception of Hamid's book, what seems to be ignored at first is the session both writers are a part of. This itself is a scene of reception and interpretation of Hamid's novel. In this context, Naqvi's reading of a specific section of the novel is perceptive. She could have chosen to read any part of the text, but I wondered why she chose the section where the protagonist returns to Lahore from the US and examines his surroundings with an alienated sensibility? Choudhury's questions, the language in which the novel was presented to the audience, and Naqvi's choice of text kept insisting on the significance of the local as opposed to the global. In this context, to bring up the question of an alienated sensibility for a local audience is to question their own interpretive lens, especially because of the second person narrative that the novel employs.

In other words, I feel that this set of concerns could have only emerged at a session like this because of the clear intersection between the context of the book and the content of the debate being staged. The conversations and performances at the session undermine the process of labeling Mohsin Hamid's novel as Pakistani by repeatedly pointing to filial relationships, localizing the readers, and pointing to fuzzy boundaries between Urdu and Hindi. But at the same time, the session also critiques the audience members because it makes them wonder what it means to be overdetermined by an evaluative apparatus that is mostly Western. This is the movement when the session appears as a combination of the literary and the critical that I have been calling talk-culture throughout this dissertation. Further, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* too produces a critique of the exploitative economic world that it circulates in. The protagonist in the novel seeks out a value system for literature and culture that are based on affective ties like love but realizes that literature and culture remain trapped within the circuits of global capital. At Jaipur, it seems like the embodied nature and the contents of this session in 2011 compensate to some extent the lack of love that the novel points to. Hence, both the session and the novel participate in and undermine knowingly the institutional structures (and spectacles) they are designed (or destined) to uphold.

In what follows, I turn to a closer examination of the sections that Alia Naqvi reads from at JLF. I then pursue the axiological deliberation on aesthetic value and its production, and argue that the novel, as it circulates at JLF, asks who legitimates, for whom and in what location. Ironically, the book remains doubly displaced even if it is made to feel at home at this 2011 session. At JLF it is part of an expanding Postcolonial American canon that is staged as the "other" to Indian writing in English, while in the US it is analyzed as an "other" to American literature.

### Between Global Finance and Love: Readings of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

When Alia Naqvi reads from *Changez Ka Bayan/The Reluctant Fundamentalist* at the Vodaphone Front Lawns at the 2011 JLF, the physical presence of a local community of readers is thrown into sharp relief. Even more, the choice of the section she reads, and the language she reads in limits the community and its potential affective response. What seems like a straightforward criticism of an alienated sensibility in the novel, becomes entangled with the politics of reading and belonging. This moment of alienation occurs in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* when Changez, the protagonist, returns to Lahore and values his house “with the eyes of a foreigner.”<sup>11</sup> Here, value is vaguely aesthetic. The house is “dark” and “shabby” with “cracks running through... and dry bubbles of paint flaking” off its walls. As Naqvi reads on, it is revealed that the house is a stand-in for art (Mughal miniatures), literature (a library), culture, and history that are also dark, shabby, cracked, and in disrepair. But the protagonist is determined to “exorcise the unwelcome sensibility” and re-evaluate the house by means of other categories such as “enduring grandeur,” an “unmistakable personality and idiosyncratic charm.”<sup>12</sup> This appraisal feels more forceful because it occurs on the heels of another aesthetic evaluation in New York City. Changez describes his boss’ “perfectly curated” apartment in Tribeca by the “sense it conveyed of attaching great value to design.”<sup>13</sup> While the appraisal of the house in Lahore turns to history and cultural artifacts that seem derelict on the one hand, and suitable for a museum on the other, the New York apartment is subject to an active process of legitimation and aesthetic evaluation. For the protagonist, Lahore seems stuck in time and static, while New York is in the present and is vibrant. But Changez can see through his alienation.

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<sup>11</sup> Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 125.

<sup>12</sup> Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 125.

<sup>13</sup> Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 119.

Hence, for the protagonist, the process of value production is firmly attached to contexts. Changez continues: “I wondered how I could ever have been so ungenerous - and so blind – as to have thought otherwise, and I was disturbed by what this implied about myself: that I was a man lacking in substance and hence easily influenced by even a short sojourn in the company of others.”<sup>14</sup> The implication of the this self-realization in the form of a confession (*bayan* in the Hindi translation) implicates the audience in the performative framework at Jaipur where this passage is read aloud. The audience that is listening to Alia Naqvi must admit that they too are “lacking in substance” and fail to read *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* appropriately. Or they can reject the protagonist’s confession and acknowledge the influence of global forces that they in fact welcome (or cannot exorcise). The audience fail to read the novel appropriately because even if the session at Jaipur attempts to localize the book and its author, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* continues to be received in the subcontinent as a product of an Anglo-American canon. The text remains foreign. The only literary space it can occupy is the one produced by the South Asian Postcolonial canon in metropolitan locations. How does Hamid’s novel, then, understand this axiological fact that it repeatedly refers to and ironically performs at Jaipur?

The protagonist and Hamid’s novel itself, are trapped between global finance and affective ties (or love) of different kinds. The mediating and unstable term, is the range of meanings “valuing” takes on, both in the novel and in the locations that the work circulates in. To place my argument into context, I first offer a quick synopsis of the novel and its concerns. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a second-person dramatic monologue that is addressed to an unnamed American who finds himself at the Old Anarkali market in Lahore. The story that is narrated to the American is about a young Pakistani international student,

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<sup>14</sup> Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 125.

Changez, who travels to Princeton University for an undergraduate degree and obtains a plush job with a valuing firm on Wall Street. A failed romance, his disillusionment with corporate America, and multiple events such as 9/11 and the bombing of the Indian Parliament (December 2001) by Islamic fundamentalists structure the protagonist's existential crisis that ultimately forces him to return to Pakistan. Literary criticism on the novel in the Anglo-American literary field has focused on the political implications of Changez's "immigrant" experiences in pre-and post-9/11 America, the attack on the World Trade Center (rather than the December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament), the novel's relationship with Islam, multiculturalism, immigration, race, resistance (to American exceptionalism and hegemony), and the "other's" point-of-view of a self that remains either unarticulated or implicit (Europe, US, the West, Christianity, and white).<sup>15</sup> What critics have repeatedly ignored, however, is the way the novel articulates its own position in a deterritorialized and global literary field through its obsession with taste and value that are always dependent on local "surroundings [becoming] familiar."<sup>16</sup>

In the novel, the fear of the deterritorialized and global literary field is represented through the media industry where Changez finds employment after leaving Princeton University. This rearticulates a familiar narrative that production, distribution and reception of all kinds of art and literature is deeply implicated in the flows of global finance and capital.

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<sup>15</sup> See recent essays and books length studies by Anna Hartnell, "Moving through America: Race, Place and Resistance in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46, no. 3–4 (July 2010): 336–48; Scanlan, Margaret. "Migrating from Terror: The Postcolonial Novel after September 11," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46, no. 3–4 (July 2010): 268–278; L. Medovoi, "Terminal Crisis? From the Worlding of American Literature to World-System Literature," *American Literary History* 23, no.3 (September 1, 2011): 643–659; Peter Morey, "The Rules of the Game Have Changed?: Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and post 9/11 Fiction," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47, no 2 (May 2011):135–146; Joseph Darda, "Precarious World: Rethinking Global Fiction in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 47, no. 3 (2014): 107–122; Aroosa Kanwal, *Rethinking Identities in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction: Beyond 9/11*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Madeline Clements, *Writing Islam from a South Asian Muslim Perspective: Rushdie, Hamid, Aslam, Shamsie*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 125.

Or, that a certain kind of artistic and literary production is a consequence of these flows. Hamid is aware of the position of his own work in these circuits and that is why economic and calculable value confront aesthetic value head on in the novel. But Hamid's repeated emphasis on the "local" that I turn to next, betrays a fear of alienation that the "global" universal market represents. This tension, as I will show, is between a certain vision of a literary and artistic world that is premised on an affective category like love. This vision attempts to resist an alienation that underwrites the global book industry where cultural value is selfsame to economic value. In the novel, the instability in the meaning of the term "value" emerge as alienation, but is also taken one step forward, where the relationship between art, literature and the market are rendered unremarkable.

In the novel, Changez's New York City-based, business valuation firm, Underwood Samson, is in the process of assessing a publishing company in Valparaíso, Chile. When he and his boss Jim meet the old, bespectacled chief of the company, Juan-Bautista, they are faced with an odd question. The first thing that the manager asks is what Changez and Jim, his boss, know about books:

He reminded me of my maternal grandfather; I liked him at once. ... "I specialize in the media industry," Jim replied. "I've valued a dozen publishers over two decades." "That is finance," Juan-Bautista retorted. "I asked what you knew of books." "My father's uncle was a poet," I found myself saying. "He was well-known in the Punjab. Books are loved in my family." Juan-Bautista looked at me as though becoming aware of the presence of this youngster before him for the first time.<sup>17</sup>

Juan-Bautista's question points to the well-trodden axiological incompatibility between the economic and aesthetic. What alleviates this incompatibility is the filial rather than the managerial. While Jim turns to his professional reputation to impress Juan-Bautista, Changez turns to family and the love of literature and culture.

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<sup>17</sup> Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 141-142.

Thus, it is only when Changez inserts affective and communal elements like “love,” “father’s uncle,” and “my family” that the plot (and the deal) emerges from an imminent stasis.<sup>18</sup> This “regime of value” is based on kinship. As opposed to this Changez describes his relationship with the vice president of Underwood Samson such: “[he] was a manager of excellent repute...but at the level of human beings our connection was nil.”<sup>19</sup> The literary transactions are small scale and local, even if the scene is premised on the interactions of a jet-setting executive who travels the world for business purposes. A model that follows the circuits of global capital and finance is rejected by the narrative. The intimate connection established between Changez and Juan-Bautista supposedly exemplify a correct relationship between the literary object and its valuation. While, for Bautista, the rejection of the managerial is a Frankfurt School type of critique of a culture industry, for Changez, it turns out to be a “reluctant” rejection of a system of literary valuing premised upon global finance.

The novel critiques the very system it circulates in. But it must operate within the large scale and the global to make a point about the small scale and the local. This self-reflexivity is not new and has been a characteristic of several Postcolonial works. In this sense, Hamid’s text is like other novels in the Postcolonial canon, which allows it to be staged as the “other” both to an Indian writing in English and to a category like American literature in the US.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, such works also become a way of expanding the Anglo-American canon. But to be added to the Postcolonial canon also means to be

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<sup>18</sup> Compare this to how Hamid calls the Hindi translation of his novel a cousin in the scene from JLF at the beginning of this chapter. That scene too is premised on a sense of intimacy and kinship between speakers, the text and the audience.

<sup>19</sup> Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 144.

<sup>20</sup> For a similar argument about the novel see Margaret-Anne Hutton, “The Janus and the Janissary: Reading into Camus’s *La Chute* and Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*,” *Comparative Literature* 68, no. 1 (March 2016):70-71, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-3462651>. She connects the self-reflexivity in Hamid’s text through the figure of Juan-Bautista to an authorial anxiety that recognizes the nature of the (Western) alterity industry in the field of global publishing.



susceptible to commodification and vulgarization. Huggan, for instance, writes that authors like Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy “are conscious that their writing, ostensibly oppositional, is vulnerable to recuperation; in ironically rehearsing a continuing history of imperialist perception of an ‘othered’ India.”<sup>21</sup> But the case with a category like the Pakistani novel is more complicated because it not only holds the possibility of “othering” Pakistan, but also “Islam.” The more intriguing problem is when the reception of a novel like *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is overdetermined by the US context and its thematics are uncritically transferred to a postcolonial context like India. Then the “alterity industry” makes sure that the Pakistani novel is produced as the “other” to an Indian novel in India too.

Still, for Rebecca Walkowitz, Hamid’s novel attempts to “readjust” a “narrative balance of trade” at least in the US.<sup>22</sup> The novel forces readers in America to listen to a foreigner’s point of view, “not to ignore American solipsism or to suggest that American solipsism can be undermined by self-estrangement but to insist that Americans need to encounter *other readers rather than other voices*.”<sup>23</sup> The novel’s second-person monologue attempts to make the US the object of analysis, a type of reverse anthropology, but, it also produces a “we” – a first-person plural –that points to a community and a public that is repeatedly affirmed as Pakistani first, and South Asian second. This “we” that points to South Asia appears magnified when the text is read at JLF. I would argue that these should be read as permeable categories. The “we” are also the audience members who are implicated in Changez’s confession when Alia Naqvi reads from Hamid’s novel at JLF. At times, the “we” is Changez and the unnamed American he is speaking to; or Changez and his girlfriend, Erika; or even the international students that colleges like Princeton University

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<sup>21</sup> See Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, 81.

<sup>22</sup> Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*, 192.

<sup>23</sup> Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*, 201. Italics in the original.

recruit. Hence, to address the “narrative balance of trade” means to ask broader and deeper questions – who are these readers and publics, and can reading practices in South Asia begin to account for them and how they read?<sup>24</sup> My attempt to situate the reading of the novel within the space of JLF is one such attempt. I understand the difference between “readers” and “voices” as the difference between subjects and objects, between the one who interprets and the thing that is interpreted and between the text and the commentary on the text. More specifically, the multiplication of voices has played an instrumental role in institutional reading practices in Europe and America. What remains ambiguous is the location of these imagined readers in India or Pakistan.

I felt that the “narrative balance of trade” that Rebecca Walkowitz points to remains lopsided in the case of Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. If the book allows Americans to listen to a foreigners point of view, its interpretive space ironically remains trapped in an Anglo-American context.<sup>25</sup> Almost all the academic essays and journalistic reviews published in Anglo-American institutional spaces read the novel as post-9/11 fiction that deals with the “war on terror,” American multiculturalism, immigration, race and resistance to American exceptionalism and hegemony. This accumulation of readings, in turn, produces

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<sup>24</sup> See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Knopf, 1993), 294. In a short paragraph towards the end Said asks about the relationship between readers and voices. He is not only speaking of the institution of literature, but also about institutions that engage literature. He writes, “From the Arab point of view, the picture is just as skewed. There is still hardly any literature in Arabic that portrays Americans; ... To my knowledge there is still no institute or major academic department in the Arab world whose main purpose is the study of America, although the United States is by far the largest, most significant outside force in the contemporary Arab world.”

<sup>25</sup> For a sample of book reviews from around the world see Amit Chaudhuri, “Not Entirely Like Me,” *London Review of Books*, 4 Oct. 2007, 25–26; Jim Ottewill, “Mistaken Identities,” *The Guardian*, 10 Mar. 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/mar/11/fiction.features>; Soumya Bhattacharya, “The Reluctant Fundamentalist,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 Apr. 2007, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/book-reviews/the-reluctant-fundamentalist/2007/04/13/1175971328999.html>; Laila Halaby, “Return of the Native,” *The Washington Post*, 22 Apr. 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2007/04/19/AR2007041903000.html>; Sarah Kerr, “In the Terror House of Mirrors,” *The New York Review of Books*, 11 Oct. 2007, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2007/10/11/in-the-terror-house-of-mirrors>.

value and a discourse that is dependent on local US histories. This in itself is not bad because it allows one to reassess the self. But more worryingly, the South Asian print and online media also reads the novel in the same way as the US field does.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, South Asia also produces a discourse that is dependent on local US histories. This is the consequence of the power and reach of the US discourse. Hence, academic and non-academic discourse in the US moves (or has permanently moved) the discourse on the novel closer to a South Asian literary world imagined within the context of Islam, terrorism, Muslim immigration, the refugee crisis and Middle Eastern geopolitics because it makes more sense in Anglo-American institutional and social contexts. This can be understood as a structure of feeling that permeates cultural production and its interpretation not only in the US, but also in South Asia. One of the consequences is the importing of the “alterity industry” into India. To trace how this discourse is commodified in the subcontinent, we need to return to the “Jaipur Literature Festival” where we first began.

### **Moonlight’s Children in Jaipur**

What happens when the “alterity industry” goes native? When Graham Huggan writes, “India and, by extension, the Third World is very much a central player in...a global ‘alterity industry’ catering mostly, if not exclusively, to the capitalist societies of the West,” the “exotic” is predominantly a term that operates within the Western logic of cultural otherness that “haunts the corridors of postcolonial critical history.”<sup>27</sup> But, what is sometimes neglected in the critical discourse is the effect of this postcolonial critical history

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<sup>26</sup> See S. Prasannarajan, “Clash of Civilizations in Cafe Lahore,” *India Today*, 16 Apr. 2007, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/a-book-review-of-the-reluctant-fundamentalist-by-mohsin-hamid/1/155983.html>; Tabish Khair, “Unquiet American: A Monologue,” *Outlook India*, 23 Apr. 2007, <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/unquiet-american-a-monologue/234442>. For a complete list of reviews see Mohsin Hamid’s personal webpage. <http://www.mohsinhamid.com/trfreviews.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, 68.

in postcolonial locations like India.<sup>28</sup> I already trace this neglected genealogy in Chapter 2 until the moment when an institutional Postcolonialism starts to develop in the Anglo-American literary field. To be sure, critics like Aijaz Ahmad, G.N. Devy, Meenakshi Mukherjee, and Harish Trivedi have been critical of categories like Postcolonial literatures because they seen its progression as a predominantly metropolitan phenomenon. For instance, Trivedi has long maintained that “not all the manifestations of the neocolonial are economic or late-capitalist; they are equally cultural and literary,” indicating a weak, but continued resistance to the Americanization of the literary humanities in India.<sup>29</sup>

Even so, the theoretical crux of Huggan’s oppositional critique is Aijaz Ahmad’s infamous argument about reading practices in metropolitan locations, where “cultural criticism ... becomes indistinguishable from commodity fetishism.”<sup>30</sup> Huggan’s conclusions emerge out of an analysis of the *Granta* special issue on India (no.57, Spring 1997) (that he calls “a festival of cross-cultural memory”), nation-centric anthologies, and an academic conference he attends in Barcelona in 1997.<sup>31</sup> He, like Ahmad, laments the loss of community and a social relation (or affective ties) between the literary (or cultural) object, its producer, and its public. More than twenty-five years later, the boundaries between non-market and market forces seem even more seamless. At first glance, JLF does erect what Ahmad called the supermarket of culture in India for Indians and their neighbors.<sup>32</sup> But, the often unequal international transfer of ideas, texts and authors has consequence for a South Asian reading public, its institutions and the broader literary field.

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<sup>28</sup> See Mufti, *Forget English!*, 19-20.

<sup>29</sup> Harish Trivedi, “Postcolonial Centre, Postmodernist Periphery: Reversing a Discursive Hierarchy,” in *Peripheral Centres, Central Peripheries: India and its Diaspora (s). Vol. 1*, ed. Martina Ghosh-Schellhorn and Vera Alexander, (LIT Verlag Münster, 2006), 98.

<sup>30</sup> Ahmad, *In Theory*, 217.

<sup>31</sup> Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, 62.

<sup>32</sup> Ahmad, *In Theory*, 128.

JLF, as I will argue, can be seen as a manifestation of an institutional Postcolonialism and “postcoloniality” in South Asia. This festival is both a (representative) sign of cultural domination that South Asia employs upon itself, and a practice where discursive critiques of that domination emerge. The cultural logic that underpins this festival emerge out of an ethos that first appears in the Postcolonial moment marked by a metropolitan interest in subcontinental writing in English in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>33</sup> And yet a category and idea like the Postcolonial and the subsequent canonization of texts and writers has material implications in postcolonial locations. The festival in its early years coopted the Postcolonial canon and, in turn, reasserted its universal status problematically. Often, what reads as alterity, or an interpretive method to engage this alterity in the Anglo-American literary field is reproduced as national pride and cultural soft power in South Asia. Hence, when I claim that JLF institutes the category of the Pakistani novel and literatures, I mean that the festival imagines and names a group of authors and a set of texts with shared characteristics for a South Asian reading public.

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<sup>33</sup> By 2008 Namita Gokhale, William Dalrymple and Sanjoy Roy, curators of the “Jaipur Literature Festival” were responding to critiques of the festival that called it an elite club of famous writers hobnobbing with each other, a forum that ignores regional literatures in languages other than English, and a new type of literary tourism sponsored by the Rajasthan government. Journalist, Manoj Nair writes, “If one were to say that the gathering of authors, their fans, critics and journalists at Jaipur's Diggi Palace was a confluence of a mutual admiration society then it wouldn't be a train wreck of a description.” In the following years the festival became more edgy. They invited Tamil author Salma (Rokkiah Begum and/or Rajathi Salma) as “an example of empowerment through literature” (Salam). Gokhale claimed that the festival “will have a range, soul and an unexpected note,” and Dalrymple proclaimed “we have no agenda, no government funding. There are some politically incorrect names maybe, but the idea is, people will come for the big names but go back with new names in their memory” (Salam). The Pakistani writers were meant to represent this political incorrectness. See, Manoj Nair, “Turning the Page,” *The Economic Times, India*, 27 Jan. 2007, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/156455BC26D233B0?p=AW>; Ziya Us Salam, “Jaipur Setting for Major Literary Festival,” *The Hindu*, 8 January 2008, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/11E410B467BD66A0?p=AWNB>.

To be sure, the durability of this category of the Pakistani novel is premised on two social imaginaries. The first I argue is a consequence of the commodification of alterity and magic realism that emerge within institutional Postcolonialism. By producing a category like “Moonlights Children,” to describe the Pakistani writers, the festival and media incorrectly suggest that Salman Rushdie’s 1981 novel *Midnight’s Children* is a watershed moment in the history of the Indian literature. Paradoxically, the relative newness of an Indian literature is combined with the competitiveness of national literatures in the region. Both the erection of an Indian literary identity and the “othering” of Pakistani writing can occur only in a national context. The second social imaginary is the sociopolitical discourse about terrorism which is a constant backdrop for various sessions at JLF between 2008 and 2011. In what follows I show how the festival and media attempt to produce the category of the Pakistani novel. I begin with the commodification of alterity and magic realism, and then move to the sociopolitical.

Indophile and co-organizer of JLF, William Dalrymple, in a 2008 article in the *Financial Times* names Mohsin Hamid, Mohammed Hanif, Nadeem Aslam, Daniyal Mueenuddin and Kamila Shamsie “Moonlight’s Children,” which is a direct reference to Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*.<sup>34</sup> This is the burden of value and a reproduction of the ways of evaluating that Hamid’s novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, labors under. Similarly, in 2008, JLF staged British Pakistani writers Moni Mohsin, Kamila Shamsie and Shahbano Bilgrami. Then, in 2009, Daniyal Mueenuddin, Nadeem Aslam and Mohammed Hanif participated in sessions called “The Fundamentals of Fundamentalism,” “Moonlight’s Children,” and “The War on Terror Has Proved a Clash of Civilizations.” Soon after, in

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<sup>34</sup> William Dalrymple, “Moonlight’s Children - Pakistani Fiction, Long Eclipsed by India, is now Emerging from the Shadows,” *Financial Times* (London, England), 11 Oct. 2008, [infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/123C1F5EF36C7590?p=AWNB](http://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/123C1F5EF36C7590?p=AWNB).

2010, U.K. magazine *Granta* curated a special issue on “Pakistan” (No.112) with the same cast of characters. Academic studies on these new Pakistani literatures in English emerged in the Anglo-American field in and after 2010.<sup>35</sup>

It is in this context that Rashmee Roshan Lall, former editor of *The Sunday Times of India*, is able to write that the Postcolonial and Global Anglophone novel function as salves for the continued political mistrust between India and Pakistan. She called the sessions at JLF a “Rushdie-style magic realism in reverse” where “the ongoing cultural cold war may have briefly chilled out as Indian and Pakistani writers crossed metaphysical borders,” and “presented real people in magical settings.”<sup>36</sup> But her article is ironic:

Hence, the South Asian twist to Lennon's anthem of peace, with the Festival straining to deliver, as Dalrymple says, one Hindu, Muslim and Jew playing together every night to underline the sweet pain of co-existence. ...What, if anything, did it add up to? ...The question is particularly apt today, 24 hours after Pakistan's first peace mission to India since the Mumbai attacks, left Delhi. Salman Rushdie, the father of 20th century sub-continental writing in English, was famously “interested in reimagining reality itself, not in just imagining alternatives to reality.”<sup>37</sup>

Lall's irony can be read as a critique of the way JLF staged these writers, but at the same time, she realizes a generative prospect in placing writers from India and Pakistan in a non-competitive (“Lennon's anthem of peace”), face-to-face dialogue with each other in the public sphere. The question she asks, “What, if anything, did it add up to?” at first seems disenchanted, but quickly turns to the possibility that this may be the first step in cross-border solidarity. In this sense, the festival quite literally “presented real people in magical settings” performing cross-border dialogue between a mostly English speaking, sometimes

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<sup>35</sup> For 2008 and 2009 I turn to media coverage of the “Jaipur Literature Festival” to recreate the space because video footage of sessions is not available. Recordings for 2010 and 2011 are available and I use transcripts from actual discussions and panels for these years.

<sup>36</sup> Rashmee Roshan Lall, “Magic Realism Tries to Bridge Borders of Hate.” *The Economic Times, India*, 25 Jan. 2009, [infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/15645AAD2F0049A0?p=AWNB](http://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/15645AAD2F0049A0?p=AWNB).

<sup>37</sup> Lall, “Magic Realism Tries to Bridge Borders of Hate.”

diasporic, and often liberal group of writers. In addition, Lall too, like Dalrymple, turns to Salman Rushdie and names him the “father of 20th century sub-continental writing in English” under whose aegis the festival and the participants reimagine reality.

Similarly, the Latin American boom and magic realism as formal categories are repeatedly used to describe the second generation of Pakistani writers. For instance, in a review of Daniyal Mueenuddin’s short story collection, William Dalrymple writes, “at the literature festival I helped direct in Jaipur this January, it was the Pakistani contingent that stole the show ... The writers spoke eloquently about the difficulty of writing in such a volatile environment - Aslam talked of ‘writing fast with a burning quill.’ He and Hanif, author of *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, compared their experiences to what the writers of Latin America faced in the 1970s: a repressive political environment that could not be escaped, and which had to be confronted on the page.”<sup>38</sup> Rashmee Roshan Lall, *The Sunday Times of India* editor I referred to earlier, on the other hand renders the material space of JLF itself magically realist. The form of the festival becomes the form of the magic realist novel reversed, where representation and its reception in a different literary field is made real, or literally material in India. South Asia and JLF begin to dangerously look like the discursive representations of South Asia in Postcolonial and Anglophone novels. Strangely enough, the quote that Lall uses to describe Rushdie’s ethos - “interested in reimagining reality itself, not in just imagining alternatives to reality” comes from a 2000 *New York Times* book review by Mervyn Rothstein called “India’s Post-Rushdie Generation; Young Writers Leave Magic Realism and Look at Reality.”<sup>39</sup> In addition to the belatedness of this debate in 2008 and

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<sup>38</sup> William Dalrymple, "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders," *Financial Times*, London, England, 7 Mar. 2009, [infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/126CD7248829EB88?p=AWNB](http://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/126CD7248829EB88?p=AWNB).

<sup>39</sup> See Mervyn Rothstein, “India’s Post-Rushdie Generation; Young Writers Leave Magic Realism and



2009, when it is no longer cool to be magic realist for Indian novelists, what is more disquieting is the ability of the festival and media in South Asia to imagine itself as a replication of “a particularistic aesthetic that satisfies a demand for *local color* from marginal cultures.”<sup>40</sup>

The way the two reviews repurpose magic realism is a classic example of how literary form gets de-historicized again and again as it circulates. The references to magic realism in Jaipur, and in the press, should be understood as a postcoloniality that emerges via institutional Postcolonialism, where the latter is a type of habitus and cultural capital. There are resistant and emancipatory forms of writing that incorporate the fantastic, and they are historically situated, in contrast to the commodification of the term that we are faced with in the present moment. Mariano Siskind rejects a “formal” notion of magic realism as an empty signifier “that fit[s] practically every text to critique the stability of the referential world and the possibility of accessing it in a transparent and direct manner.”<sup>41</sup> Instead he asks readers to find out what magic realism does in the world. In the case of the festival and Pakistani writing in South Asia, it is not necessarily the literary texts that are read as magic realism, so much as the socio-political context within which these texts are placed. In other words, magic realism transfers so easily to the Pakistani case because of the regions equivocal position in circuits of Islamic extremism and its despotic political milieu.<sup>42</sup>

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Look at Reality,” *The New York Times*, 3 July 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/07/03/books/india-s-post-rushdie-generation-young-writers-leave-magic-realism-look-reality.html>. In this game of telephone, Rothstein is quoting Michael Wood, an English professor at Princeton University.

<sup>40</sup> Mariano Siskind, *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 59.

<sup>41</sup> Siskind, *Cosmopolitan Desires*, 82.

<sup>42</sup> Dalrymple’s reference to Mohammed Hanif’s *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* above is pertinent because it is this novel that accumulates the “magic realism” tag and is repeatedly compared to Salman Rushdie’s work (and style) in both academic and non-academic venues. Ironically, it is Rushdie’s *Shame* which is literally a (Pakistani) rewriting of Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. However, the emphasis in 1983 was on imagining India. It is this recycling of ideas that points to a stagnation of approaches.

The above examples prove that there is an ad-hoc redistribution of academic and non-academic discourse of alterity. And the cost of inhabiting a deeply connected world where dislocated ideas move around weightless and devoid of content. In this sense, magic realism is used to reproduce alterity, which paradoxically demands that a South Asian reading public imagine Pakistani literary production as the “other,” as marginal, magical and in competition with an imagined category called Indian literature. Relatedly, this Pakistani literature can only emerge in the Anglophone literary sphere because its whole logic rests on two premises: the “commodification and the deactivation of [magic realism’s] historico-political potential” and the relative newness and competitiveness of a South Asian literary field that begins with Salman Rushdie’s 1981 novel *Midnight’s Children*.<sup>43</sup>

I now briefly turn to the second social imaginary that I called the sociopolitical discourse about terrorism. While researching the various sessions, I noticed that the November 2008 attacks on Mumbai by the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba repeatedly framed the discussion between 2008 and 2011. This seemed odd because writers do not necessarily have in-depth knowledge on terrorism. In this context, I want to say that I approach both literary works that refer to terrorism and the discourse on terrorism itself with great caution because a full understanding of the competing narratives on the topic is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Hence, I work with the lay assumption that terrorism is the sign of the times because it permeates our media informed consciousness so heavily. I turn to one specific example to illustrate how references to terrorism ultimately resulted in a type of competitiveness between India and Pakistan. This in turn produced “otherness” in the form of religious difference. One journalist highlighted the presence of a Pakistani

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<sup>43</sup> Siskind, *Cosmopolitan Desires*, 68.

“platoon,” that implied both military and sporting connotations of the term.<sup>44</sup> Distinct reading practices in journalistic criticism came to the fore. The language of the media in the subcontinent repeatedly pointed to a commonality of literary cultures between India and Pakistan. According to these contexts, festivals like JLF acted as bridges between cultures, regions and nation-states. However, a sense of skepticism about the power of creative literature remained. The journalist doubted that cultural capital in the form of poetry and fiction really changed public policy in the short run. Contrarily, Dalrymple rendered the 2008 Mumbai attack in language that resembled Bush-era “war on terror” rhetoric. Under the terms of this rhetoric, fundamentalisms of all kinds were pitted against a secular (liberal bourgeoisie) literary field that labored under a sectarian logic. These accounts assumed that Indian writers were oppressed by Islamic fundamentalists in the same way that Pakistani writers were oppressed by Hindu fundamentalists. Further, the British media repeatedly imagined Indian and Pakistani literary production as competitive.<sup>45</sup> Thus, both cooperation and competition repeatedly framed a South Asian literary field. One view was driven by a sense of doubt about the passage of history, nationalism and the Partition between India and Pakistan, while the other reaffirmed the inevitable consequence of historical events and their givenness.

The process of instituting the Pakistani novel at JLF is a consequence of the commodification of both alterity and magic realism that emerge within institutional Postcolonialism. But the need to produce an autonomous Pakistani novel is only a reflection of the need to revive the idea of a unique literary history for India. This is where terms and

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<sup>44</sup> Amulya Gopalakrishnan, “The Greatest Literary Show on Earth,” *The Daily Beast*, 27 Jan. 2009, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2009/01/27/the-greatest-literary-show-on-earth.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Saeed Shah, “As Their Country Descends into Chaos, Pakistani Writers Are Winning Acclaim,” *The Guardian*, 17 Feb. 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/feb/17/fiction-pakistan-hanif>.

categories from postcoloniality and an institutional Postcolonialism join hands, rather naively, with an earlier philological nationalism to reimagine the possibility of a national literature for both countries. In the Western context, if texts from foreign, peripheral and minority cultures are ways to rethink a paradigm like national literature, uncritical engagement with those same texts in other locations produce opposite results. When JLF categorically states that their agenda is to provide a space for world literatures, what it can promote is often diametrically opposite to what the problematic of world literature sets out to resolve in metropolitan locations. The festival, in the case of the Pakistani novel, paradoxically produces otherness which reinforces a national logic, rather than productively contain it. Hence, the global, free and unrestricted circulation of texts, ideas and bodies repeatedly reaffirm the particularity of knowledge production and contexts rather than their universality. That is why, when I started following the debates that occurred in the sessions at JLF, I observed that the various writers, journalist, scholars, and the audience were producing a critique of the system they were participating in. This was very much like the critique Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* mounts against its own circulation and reception.

I had also observed this self-reflexivity firsthand when I was in Jaipur in 2018, and in 2017 at the "Almost Island Dialogues." I also observed it when I followed various sessions online. So, in that sense, my suspicion was correct that even though the sessions were designed to produce a category like the Pakistani novel, the unpredictability of talk-culture continuously pointed to the difficulty of doing so in a variety of ways. The common attitude that kept reappearing at the various sessions was a sense of disavowal towards the idea of a Pakistani novel, or an Indian novel, or the idea of a national literature. Even when nation-thinking appeared as an organizing principle for a debate, there were always few speakers, or

those in the audience who refused to conclude about the presence or absence of anything like an Indian or Pakistani literature. I see this disavowal as an act of public defiance against the way philological nationalism evolved in South Asia, a nation-states' enthusiasm for an integrated national culture, and an organizing principle for literature that begins with nationalism as a base state. At the festivals, this defiance does not only emerge out of scholastic expertise in South Asian literary history, but appears to develop out of a practical sense that something is amiss when one speaks about the Pakistani novel and the Indian novel as distinct categories. At the same time, this performance of disavowal towards categories, in this context, mitigates the actualization of fragmentation.

In this concluding section, I turn to three different instances where I see this attitude of disavowal manifest itself. The first is the 2010 special issue of the British literary magazine *Granta* that dedicated a complete edition to the new Pakistani writers. The second is another session at the 2011 JLF called "In a Tough Neighborhood" that stages a discussion between writers from Pakistani (Ali Sethi), Bangladesh (Shazia Omar) and Sri-Lanka (Romesh Gunasekara) alongside Pakistani human rights activist Asma Jahangir and Indian diplomat Shyam Saran. Finally, I end, with a short description of an exchange between the speakers and an audience member at a panel called "Writing the World: Panel Discussion on Comparative Literature," at the Karachi Literature Festival, in Karachi, Pakistan. The last example illustrates that the attitude of disavowal is performed on both sides of the border.

### **Performing an Attitude of Disavowal**

In a *Granta* article titled "How to Write about Pakistan," Mohsin Hamid, Mohammed Hanif, Daniyal Mueenuddin and Kamila Shamsie ironically ask, "is this

progress?”<sup>46</sup> The writers are responding to the way their works have been received in the West and sometimes in South Asia too. Earlier in the chapter, I referred to this reception as a structure of feeling that articulates the new Pakistani writers in terms of Islam, terrorism, Muslim immigration and Middle Eastern geopolitics. The question, “is this progress?” refers to a change in the way Pakistan is imagined. The question therefore ironically asks if the country’s imagined movement to the West (Afghanistan and the Middle East) is really progress. For the authors, Pakistan looks:

...just like India, except when it’s just like Afghanistan. (Has anyone else noticed how we seem to have geographically shifted from being a side-thought of the subcontinent to a major player in the Greater Middle East? Is this progress?) It will become clear whether the Pakistan of our work is Indo-Pak or Af-Pak depending on whether the cover has paisley designs or bombs/minarets/menacing men in *shalwar kameez*es (a type of dress).<sup>47</sup>

In the political field, Af-Pak is a way to describe the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan that is embroiled in terrorism. It is an Americanism that refers to US affairs in the Middle East. Indo-Pak on the other hand is a term that is mostly used in the subcontinent. In popular usage it signifies both the fragmentation of South Asia into its parts, but also refers to co-operative efforts between the two countries. In the literary field, Af-Pak and Indo-Pak are not exclusively properties of the literary texts but a consequence of reading practices by multinational publishing firms, editors, agents, literary magazines, and journals, modes of consecration, academic publishing and criticism.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately it is a question of

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<sup>46</sup> Mohsin Hamid, Mohammed Hanif, Daniyal Mueenuddin and Kamila Shamsie, “How to Write About Pakistan,” *Granta* 112, 2010, <https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-pakistan>.

<sup>47</sup> Mohsin Hamid, et. al, “How to Write About Pakistan.”

<sup>48</sup> When I suggest that English language writing from or about Pakistan is interpreted as Af-Pak, I do not mean that readers attempt to understand the current and historical overlap between a contemporary Pakistani and Afghani South Asian literary history. There is a growing body of scholarship on the early modern and pre-colonial links between these regions in the Euro-American academy. But without expertise in any of those literary traditions I cannot draw conclusions about how these links would look in the contemporary period. Af-Pak is the way certain parts of the world (and Pakistan itself) imagine Pakistan as a nation that is embroiled in the geopolitics of terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism and its effects.

how a text and its contents are valued, the symbolic capital it accrues and what use it is put to.

This view is analogous to the section that Alia Naqvi reads at JLF, wherein Changez, the protagonist of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, evaluates his home. Here the novel suggests that the ability to value from and within South Asia is impoverished. The lack of ways to legitimate literary production is overdetermined by value that is often produced in metropolitan locations. Hence, the writers in the *Granta* article repudiate responsibility towards the value-added feature in their work – Af-Pak – because others in the literary field determine that. Or more fairly, value emerges from the interaction of heterogeneous practices in the literary field. It is not that Hanif, Mueenuddin and Shamsie are writing Af-Pak novels and short stories, but it is the complex network of meaning-making that will eventually make their novels Af-Pak or Indo-Pak.

JLF is such a site of meaning making in India and I noticed that the Americanism Af-Pak circulated freely in the sessions that I followed. Af-Pak was grudgingly acknowledged as the neo-imperial present, and Indo-Pak was an (im)possible future. But all conclusions were postponed. An attitude of disavowal towards these terms dominated the various conversations and debates. A particular session at the 2011 JLF will illustrate my point.

During a panel discussion called “In a Tough Neighborhood,” Bangladeshi novelist Shazia Omar responds to journalist Siddharth Vardarajan’s question about India’s status as cultural hegemon and acknowledges India’s “big brother” status in South Asia.<sup>49</sup> Omar rhetorically asks if it is possible to make Bangladeshi and South Asian art that is not somehow Indian. About cinema, she asks, “how do we make movies that are South Asian,

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<sup>49</sup> The panel consisted of three novelists, Omar (Bangladesh), Ali Sethi (Pakistan) and Romesh Gunasekara (Sri Lanka), the Pakistani human rights activist Asma Jahangir and Indian diplomat Shyam Saran.

but not Indian?”<sup>50</sup> The essence of a question like this is not necessarily wrong or essentialist. Literary and cultural production from different parts of a geo-literary region that consist of multiple cultures, languages and milieus will show variation. Omar writes in English, but like many in South Asia, she speaks of it as one among many languages. This is and has been a common view towards the language even though one recognizes its hegemony.<sup>51</sup> However, she rehearses the anxiety about what Bangladeshi literature (and film) is, and how it can accrue value when it rejects a hegemonic entity like Indian literature (and film), or even something like an Indian aesthetic. Omar’s viewpoint is based on the logic that questions power, but in turn buys into a monolithic and impossible category like an Indian aesthetic. It makes a case for a cultural and linguistic authenticity at a regional scale that is first dependent on a homogenous Indian literature. This the same contradiction that I have been troubling since the beginning of this dissertation. Regional competitiveness will also have to institute the “other’s” national literature, while simultaneously accounting for difference. There are no winners and losers in this competition. But Omar’s narrative is compelled to function nationally because it feels the pressure of the South Asian Postcolonial canon that Bangladeshi English-language writers are forced to contend with.

The competitiveness and a nation-thinking between spatial and linguistic regional literatures of South Asia follows the older logic that emerges with Orientalist and later English language technologies of recognition. In the contemporary moment, it appears in the guise of a vulgar multicultural politics of difference based on nation-thinking that

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<sup>50</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, “In a Tough Neighborhood,” 2010, *Vimeo*, uploaded by Dreamcast.in, Published on March 7, 2010, 60:03, <https://vimeo.com/9992319>.

<sup>51</sup> See Rashmi Sadana, *English Heart, Hindi Heartland*, 158. She offers the most recent version of this argument and claims that “to recognize that English emerges and exists alongside other languages in an intensely multilingual society is to repoliticize and reterritorialize Indian novels rather than read them merely in their transnational ‘isolation.’”



becomes the sole marker of identity. As I mentioned earlier, there is a naivety at work here because even if the idea of an Indian literature was discarded in certain institutional locations in the 1980s and 1990s, the power nation-thinking holds is difficult to escape. More particularly, Omar's anxiety is particular to the South Asian English or Anglophone literary field that locates itself uneasily between a South Asian reading public and its earlier reception and canon formation in the Anglo-American field as a certain type of Postcolonial literature. It further shows that to map South Asia's literary history nationally is futile but, at the same time, points to a formation, even a hardening, of a logic that locates literary production neatly within national boundaries. Thus, later in the session, Omar suggests that Bangladesh look to Indian English fiction for influence, but at the same time, she maintains that there needs to be a unique Bangladeshi voice. The idea of a tough neighborhood is, then, not only a geopolitical concern, closely aligned with the sovereignty of nation states, but also a symbolic arena to secure the sovereignty of a literary field.

In contrast, Pakistani writer and musician Ali Sethi, in a white shirt, black jacket and a red *bandhani dhupatta* (tie-dye scarf) (a knapsack between his knees), attempts to bypass the logic of competitiveness and nation-thinking. The literary trope Omar brings up is voice, and in response, Sethi places voice elsewhere: not in the purview of Pakistani (or Indian) national and religious identity, but in contemporary contexts and historical moments that function as structures of feeling. I understand Sethi to be saying that nationalism and religion are part of this structure, but not the sole determinant of voice. He says, "a writer has to position himself as a Muslim, an Urdu writer or an English one, which in turn reflects a class divide (within Pakistan). But these positions emerge and reflect choices only for a globalized author."<sup>52</sup> Voice, for Sethi, emerges from an audience expectation and a contextual

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<sup>52</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, "In a Tough Neighborhood."

ideological alignment. Sethi imagines a link between the reading public and literary voice, as if they are mutually constitutive.<sup>53</sup> Hence, the current anxiety in Pakistani literary production is the difference between representations and structures of feeling that are South Asian or Indo/Pak, and Middle Eastern or Af-Pak. Sethi's use of the term "globalized" is ambiguous; however, voice is contingent on language (English, Urdu-Hindi, Punjabi etc.), the reading public and religious affiliation. Globalized could mean the West, or even just other parts of South Asia. However, since Af-Pak is essentially a creation of American foreign policy, it is most likely to mean the US and the West here.

Sethi's position views an author's voice and style, and reading publics on the other, not as separate entities, but a continuous formation, where each influence the other. It is not simply how one reads, but also about how one writes. In the case of the writer, Sethi claims that voice is a choice and a position to me made. Hence, he suggests that Pakistan must choose between its South Asian identity and an emergent, largely American-dictated Af-Pak identity. Towards the end of the session, the young author and musician invokes the poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz. He phrases Faiz's community and publics in the negative.<sup>54</sup> Sethi says, "He does not have to be a Pakistani poet before he is a South Asian poet, before he is a human poet."<sup>55</sup> Faiz's relation to the world is a function of not completely belonging to Pakistan, to India, or even to South Asia. Faiz only becomes the national poet of Pakistan within the competitive logic of nation-thinking. Further, Faiz does not become a national poet

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<sup>53</sup> See Barbara H. Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 45. It is unlikely that Sethi has read Herrnstein Smith but "position" in the above quote is like her notion of the feedback loop. Smith writes, "every literary work – and more generally, artwork – is thus the product of a complex evaluative feedback loop that embraces not only the ever-shifting economy of the artist's own interests and resources as they evolve during and in reaction to the process of composition, but also all the shifting economies of her assumed and imagined audiences, including those who do not yet exist..."

<sup>54</sup> Ali Sethi, the singer, works in Urdu, while Sethi, the writer, works in English. The audience claps and cheers at this moment.

<sup>55</sup> Jaipur Literature Festival, "In a Tough Neighborhood."

automatically. He must be made one through actions of individuals and organizations who continue to function under a logic that colonial modernity bestowed on South Asia. When Sethi makes this claim at Jaipur, the audience starts clapping. I read this audience reaction as an applause for the lack of closure where the conversation on the stage avoids a conclusion. This is the performance of an attitude of disavowal, which is equally dependent on the readers of Faiz's poems and listener of his songs, especially those who wish to render instrumental the literary or/and the political.

To conclude, I want to end with an example of how nation-thinking is unconscious and always embedded in our approach to South Asian literatures and literary cultures. But this scene also ends with an attitude of disavowal that results in a stalemate. No one wins. The session took place at another literature festival, but this time in Karachi, Pakistan. The "Karachi Literature Festival" is modelled on the "Jaipur Literature Festival." The session was called "Writing the World: Panel Discussion on Comparative Literature," and was moderated by writer and blogger Nabiha Meher Shaikh. It included emerging German writer Anja Kampmann, translator and poet Mahmood Jamal, and writer and editor Jonathan Forman. At some point in the discussion, Mahmood Jamal claims that he hasn't come across a "great" Pakistani novel because that novel will be written in Urdu sometime in the future.<sup>56</sup> The discussion itself is lively and journalist Jonathan Forman assumes the role of gadfly. He argues that Mohammed Hanif's *The Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) is a strong contender. While Jamal agrees, diplomatically, he asks, how can a novel be of the people and a culture, if "the people for whom it is written are hardly able to read it?"<sup>57</sup> Just then, an audience

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<sup>56</sup> Karachi Literature Festival, "KLF-2011: Writing the World," Karachi Literature Festival 2011, YouTube Video, Accessed 10 Dec. 2016, 54:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpWgtSm4piE>. The session was moderated by writer and blogger Nabiha Meher Shaikh. It included emerging German writer Anja Kampmann, translator and poet Mahmood Jamal, and writer and editor Jonathan Forman.

<sup>57</sup> Karachi Literature Festival, "KLF-2011: Writing the World."

member asks Mahmood Jamal if he doesn't consider Shaukat Siddiqui's *Khuda Ki Basti* (1962) or Abdullah Hussein's *Udas Naslein* (1963) "great" Urdu novels?<sup>58</sup> Jamal doesn't think they make the cut, but before he can say why, the audience member interjects and says isn't Qurratulain Hyder's *Aag ka Darya* (1959) a "great" Urdu novel.<sup>59</sup> Jamal agrees that it is a "great" novel, but says that it is not a Pakistani novel, because it is written by an Indian – to which the person replies "Ya that of course, you will have to overcome that...you have to overcome that particular dilemma."<sup>60</sup> There is a lengthy pause.

How is one to overcome this dilemma? My own understanding in this dissertation and the chapter has been that nation-thinking is a category that has be overlaid on the practice of culture and cultural production in the subcontinent through the process of colonization. The contradictions that postcolonial literary fields like India or Pakistan face is a consequence of this asynchrony between the emergence of nationalism and the formal study of languages and cultures. However, I do not claim that the situation was better or worse before colonial contact. As we have already seen in various parts of this dissertation, there were other hegemonic organizing principles and categories. Sanskrit poetics is a classic example. Amidst all this need to organize and systematize our aesthetic and literary practices and artifacts, cultural is also practiced in a haphazard and spontaneous form in the popular realm. In this realm, I feel that culture's base state is often always plural and its boundaries somewhat fuzzy. At JLF, which is essentially a popular festival for the masses, community is staged at multiple scales ranging from the regional, to the national and the international. The

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<sup>58</sup> Shaukat Siddiqui's *Khuda Ki Basti* was translated into English as *God's own Land: A Novel of Pakistan* in 1991 by David J. Matthews. It was also adapted for television by Pakistan Television in 1969. Abdullah Hussain translated *Udaas Nasle* as *The Weary Generation* in 1999.

<sup>59</sup> Hyder translated her novel into English as the *River of Fire* in 1998. Siddiqui, Hussain and Hyder's novels have been available for at least twenty years in English, but do not circulate the same routes as the Global Anglophone or the postcolonial novels.

<sup>60</sup> Karachi Literature Festival, "KLF-2011: Writing the World."

festival also celebrates and consecrates, and in turn assumes the role of tastemaker for a domestic readership. In a postcolonial location, it is inevitable to avoid seeing this as promoting “Brand India,” “Brand Pakistan” etc. But there is ample slippage in staging such diversity and plurality. JLF constantly runs up against the contradictions between regions, languages, cultures, histories, institutions and class-positions in the South Asian literary field. Contradictions in this context are ultimately good because I feel that it prevents us from believing too much in our cultural specificities, whether be it Pakistani or Indian.

## Epilogue

I began this project with the question: why has there been an explosion of literature festivals in South Asia since 2006? But the inquiry that followed was also premised on my own encounter with literature and literary studies in India in the 1990s and early 2000s. My experience with literature in India was mostly outside educational institutions like schools and universities. In fact, there were many who thought that literature within those institutions was conservative, and what we read and experienced outside was somehow more radical. I came across this view again and again during my discussions with the writer-curators I spoke to over the last few years. The outside also allowed access to literature in languages other than English that always came as a revelation.

The point I am trying to make is that the source of the corpus I and many others encountered were heterogenous. The books and authors were always drawn from many different parts of South Asia, the world at large, and reflected the eclecticism of a public sphere rather than the more formal classroom syllabus. Of course, the mechanism of the circulation of this world literature was somewhat opaque. The personal reading list often emerged through word of mouth, literary magazines, independent publishers and bibliophile booksellers. This did not seem unusual until I decided to pursue, first, the writing of literature and then, literary studies within the US academy. This experience revealed two things to me. And I believe that the reason to turn to events and activities in the public realm was influenced by these revelations. My experience in the US, showed me that literary production in India is and has always been prolific, while what has always been poor is academic literary studies, mostly within the structures of the disciplines and the university. I also realized that this is essentially a problem of the function of criticism in postcolonial locations like India. The weakness of an organized study of literature and culture is also a

question about how one is to engage with and change adopted institutions that over time have gained momentum in postcolonial societies.

As this dissertation has already shown, this doubt about the efficacy of a specific type of humanities education and literary criticism is well recorded within the Indian academy. However, even as late as 2017, a philosopher like Sunder Sarukkai claims “that the enduring problem is the lack of clarity on what constitutes the doing of humanities, particularly in a formal academic environment.”<sup>1</sup> He asks, what *is* the “site” and what *should* be the “site” of the humanities, and as a result, what roles should universities play?<sup>2</sup> These questions point to a disjunction between the location of the humanities – one that is more public, or in forms that may not register as secular, literary or academic, and the other that is embedded in the imperial and global history of formal literary education and the development of disciplines. But at the start of this study, I was firmly entrenched within academic humanities in the US while thinking about the future of the same in the Indian literary field. This incoherence informs this project. Simply put, the two fields are entangled, but still unlike each other. I also realized that a top-down approach would necessarily build on an already sophisticated scholarship and engage (sometimes oppositionally) with terminologies that circulate in Western universities. This would mean that there is a universal, and common approach to studying literature and culture in terms of what constitutes as literature and what one should investigate within this category.

Alternatively, I thought that if I could begin in the literary field in India, I would be able to learn something new from the often-unrehearsed and often-unintentional practices of writers, writer-curators, readers, non-experts, event managers and audience members. I

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<sup>1</sup> Sunder Sarukkai, “Location of the Humanities,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 37, no. 1 (2017): 157.

<sup>2</sup> Sarukkai, “Location of the Humanities,” 159.

felt that this was the space where new ways to practice a different relationship to literature and culture resided. To me, the festival was both a part of the literary field and a microcosm, a place-and time-bound performance of that field at a smaller scale. As I mentioned earlier, literature festivals are not only part of the literary field in the subcontinent, but also trying to change the nature of the field itself by producing new connections between agents who would have not interacted otherwise. I was also aware that I was working with a largely middle-class formation that was already interested in things literary and had a stake in producing a new narrative through these events. Hence, I wanted to find out what those narratives are and how one could interrogate and learn from them.

I decided to approach the phenomenon of the literature festivals and engage with various individuals who produce different types of meaning about literature and the literary experience through an ethnographic lens to negotiate my own insider/outsider status among the various literary fields. Just when I thought that I was an insider to the US academy, I felt like an outsider to the Indian literary field and vice versa. This is a methodological idealism I took from anthropologist João Biehl who writes:

...epistemological breakthroughs do not belong only to experts and analysts. Simply engaging with the complexity of people's lives and desires—their constraints, subjectivities, projects—in ever-changing social, economic, and technological worlds constantly necessitates rethinking. So, what would it mean for our research methodologies and ways of writing to consistently embrace unfinishedness, seeking ways to analyse the general, the structural, and the processual while maintaining an acute awareness of the tentativeness of our reflective efforts?<sup>3</sup>

Hence, the objective was to find the “epistemological breakthroughs” in the practices of actors, institutions, organizations, and the audiences that were so ardently engaging and debating what they considered literature in the public sphere.

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<sup>3</sup> João Biehl, “Ethnography in the way of Theory,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 28, no. 4 (November 2013): 583.



But this dissertation is far from realizing this and more work remains to be done. I am cautious about making any overarching claims about such a heterogeneous space. Therefore, I ended up identifying attitudes and dispositions that I thought these festivals and the writer-curators embodied. Frustratingly, some of them remain abstract and utopian. For example, my conversation with Rizio Yohanan Raj is theoretical and future oriented because the possible institution of practice is a way to engage with literature and culture beyond the sense of community that nationalism still imposes on a plural and multilingual literary field. On the other hand, the practice of intimacy at the “Almost Island Dialogue” is within the realms of the possible. The model they produce is replicable in more formal spaces like the university classroom. Similarly, both Raj and the writer-curators of the “Dialogues” assign a different use of the literary. Raj thinks of an encounter with plural literary histories as “conservation” while the “Dialogues” suggests that the literary should transform the self. In both cases the notion of literature and literary culture as a body of knowledge, or something that should be preserved is rejected in favor of a more immediate affect like the experience of change within the self. And finally, the mass publicity that an event like JLF engenders, I think, not only responds to the changing nature of the Indian polity, but also assists in democratizing culture and cultural production simply by adopting a form that is popular. This suggests that to allow different institutional attitudes and practices to seep into each other is to be open to the outside and give up some of the certainty that strong institutions offer. And talk-culture is simply the way to stage the conditions for co-operation that can lead to different possibilities.

## Appendix 1: Interview Questions

I conducted semi-structured interviews with festival directors who are also practicing writers and academics. These interviews were conducted between December 2017 and January 2018. The aim was to gain subjective perceptions and narratives on purpose, motivation, position and curatorial procedures. The following questions were used as a guide.

1. How would you describe the role of the literature festival, the public event and speech culture more generally in a field where parallel and related literary institutions compete for space? I have in mind, print in the form of journals, magazines; the national academy, academic criticism and journalistic criticism.
2. Almost Island Dialogues is a journal (text) and an event. How do you see the relationship between these two forms of literary engagement? More specifically, what role does the event play in terms of the type of public it attempts to gather?
3. Do you think you are drawing on a longer history of public literary culture in India and South Asia? Would you call this a revival of other historical events like gatherings held in bazaars (market places) and *baithak-khanas* (place of sitting), and events like the *mushaira* (competitive poetry sessions), *kavi sammelan* (literature conventions), *majlish* (place of sitting) and *adda*?
4. If so how is the literature festival different? If not, what kind of genealogy will you trace for public events of this sort?
5. Can you speak a little about the relationship between the festive and literature or the literary? For instance, literature is also a highly bureaucratized field that is attached to work and labor, as in academic criticism and the teaching of literature

as a humanistic practice to engage with our world. In this context, does the festive behave differently and serve different purposes in a country like India?

6. Relatedly, access to film, theatre and art culture has always been through events like the festival. Literature, at least in the West, has had a twin history, where the individual act of reading has always been projected as more important. Does this have to do with the format of presentation and genre of different kinds of literature?
7. What is the basis for curation at literature festivals or events of this sort?
8. If festivals engage with already consecrated authors, then do they essentially re-stage both texts and individuals for local consumption?
9. An important part of literature festivals in India is the presence of the by-product of the literary field in the form of discussions, round tables, debates and polemics. Why is this important to the format of the festival?
10. Do you think the festival, or event is designed to produce or is producing unintended but important knowledge about the Indian, South Asian and global literary field in the form of discussions, round tables, debates and polemics?
11. What role do you think the bi-products of the literature festival play in determining literary and cultural taste in India? Is there a responsibility attached to this?
12. Do you think the festival is replicating a global taste that is often controlled by what one calls the metropolitan centers of literary production, or do you see the festival and your role in it (like journals and other technologies of recognition) as arbitrators of culture?

13. What relationship does the festival, or the event have with high and low culture/literature? Does it bridge the gap in the public sphere in a way that is democratizing or is it a venue that enforces limits on what is literary and what is not?
14. Do you see the literature festival as a (more ingenious) way to represent and manage the multiple literary traditions and languages in India and South Asia?
15. In the process does the festival homogenize regional difference, or does it multiply and grant autonomy to different traditions?
16. What values about literature and the literary do you think the festival and literary event propagate?
17. Do you see festivals and similarly designed events developing into a network of informal institution that plays a role similar to, provides alternatives to and sometimes replaces national academies like the Sahitya Akademi, academic institutions etc.?

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