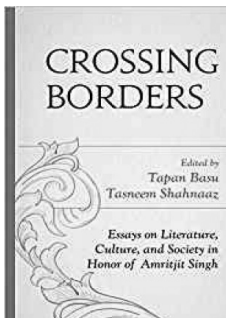


Book Reviews

Crossing Borders: Essays on Literature, Culture, and Society in Honor of Amritjit Singh

Reviewed by Nilak Datta



Tapan Basu and Tasneem Shahnaaz (Eds.) (2017). *Crossing Borders: Essays on Literature, Culture, and Society in Honor of Amritjit Singh*. The Harlem Renaissance and its New Avatars. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc. (XXI, 353 pages)

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Marsha L. Dutton, one of the authors of a series of reminiscences on the life and career of Amritjit Singh, comments on his tireless commitment to teaching and writing across the grain. She writes that Singh “works energetically to expand and deprovincialize students’ educational experience”, so they may take their learning experiences beyond the classroom (p. 325). After reading the volume *Crossing Borders: Essays on Literature, Culture, and Society in Honor of Amritjit Singh*, it can be said that the commemorative essays follow in the footsteps of Professor Amritjit Singh’s work as a teacher and scholar. They “deprovincialize” considerations of literary expression, re-investigate theoretical intersections of race, gender and notions of author/authority, question the socio-political nature of borders, and demonstrate the broader implications for a “post-racial” order.

In an interview with Nibir K. Ghosh (appropriately named “A Native Son Abroad”) Professor Singh seamlessly connects the contributions of Wallace Thurman to the changing cultural demographics in contemporary Harlem, and recent “exclusionary practices” in “banking and housing, schooling and law enforcement” (pp. 276-280). This intellectual move has wide-ranging implications for an overall sense of minority empowerment. He notes how “new Asian

immigrants” have not been able to free themselves from an overwhelming (if unstated) sense of “white privilege”. This is evident in the way they have aspired to take up positions of hegemonic cultural and racial dominance, and failing to do so, have sought “over-compensation in real estate or material goods” (p. 281). The issue of “white privilege” also spills over in the essays by Catherine Rottenberg and Martha J. Cutter. Rottenberg’s reading of Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* focuses on the way white privilege erects borders and recreates existing racial hierarchies. Cutter delves into a different aspect of the problem when she examines how the vulnerabilities of interstitial characters in Sui Sin Far’s stories frequently lead them to privilege one side of a mixed racial heritage at the expense of the other (p. 32). Such hybrid re-evaluations can also bring in unexpected liaisons between peoples across the racial divide. As Fred Gardaphe’s article shows, there occurs an impromptu sense of bonding between African American men and Italian men in Willard Motley’s fiction, since both communities are not perceived as mainstream.

Such sympathetic border crossings can sometimes be quite literally imagined in the Indo-Pakistan sub-continental region, where complex intercultural, intersubjective and interloping borders become part of the heritage of colonial rule. Zubeda Jalalzai shows how the Durand Line (drawn between the former British dominions and Afghanistan) can limit as well as liberate those affected by it. If Jalalzai advocates that such borderlines be envisaged as safe passages rather than as barriers, Rahul K. Gairola’s approach to the “fictive witness” representations of life across the Radcliffe Line (that divided India and Pakistan) as a “borderless genre” is an effective theoretical rallying point (p. 121). Emotional border crossings across the borderlines are marked by amity and tenderness rather than by disharmony and violence (pp. 119-121).

In giving art and literature a chance to heal the unhealable breaches of the past (for instance, see Robin Field’s fiction essay on strife-torn Kashmir), the scholarly contents of the nineteen essays do yeoman’s service to the expressions of profound grief, joyous artistic rebellion, deep empathy and sympathetic, self-effacing irony that were the hallmarks of the Harlem Renaissance. Their wide-ranging implications for artistic expression are highlighted in the application of a border epistemologies concept in the essays by Silvia Schultermanndl and Peter Schmidt. These two essays complicate the notion of borders through their textual analyses of works as diverse as James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pioneers*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* and Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*. The presence of borders reiterates the understanding, as Peter Schmidt shows, that borders are not only ubiquitous in the cultural imagination of the United States, but they are also better understood as “polyvalent metaphor[s]”

in an attempt to understand “global power asymmetries” (p. 13).

Powerfully asymmetrical relations are expressed in Auritro Majumdar’s theoretical treatment of modernity. The diversity and range of interconnections between border epistemologies and modernity can be understood by contemplating the possibilities offered in the brilliant essays by Nalini Iyer, Ayesha K. Hardison, and Thadious M. Davis. These essays show that border-crossings between private and public spaces operate in a diasporic imaginary, the (dis)location of an author’s racial affiliation, and the fluid spatial politics of “transgressive subjects” (p. 173).

Such transgressive activities also concern contemporary work that incorporates the narrative of voices-in-performance texts such as Udai Prakash’s *Mohandas*, G. Kalyana Rao’s *Untouchable Spring* and Kavery Nibasan’s *The Story That Must Not be Told*, works considered by Jasbir Jain who argues for criss-crossing the borderlines between poetics and aesthetics. Following a parallel intellectual trajectory, Robert B. Stepto’s article emphasizes that reading is not a solitary exercise in untangling lexical complexity; rather, it involves an engagement with the narrative’s visual design. Concerns about the nature and function of conventional literary texts are expressed in Arnold Rampersad’s meditative essay on Langston Hughes’ populist writing and the challenges of negotiating the discursive expectations of erudite cultural production. Rampersad’s focus on Hughes’s movement away from mainstream poetic visions allows the reader to make sense of the latter’s clash with Countee Cullen’s radical unmooring from an African “heritage”, especially since Werner Sollors examines the *longue durée* search for a usable heritage in America.

In similar ways, novelist Charles Johnson’s focus on the significance of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* highlights the precariousness of racial others in post 9/11 America. Cheryl A. Wall’s meditation on Jessie Fauset’s (and other women writers’) contributions can also be read in the light of mainstream (mis) constructions of a heritage version of the Harlem renaissance. It is fitting that the final “essay” should be an interview with Elleke Boehmer, where the novelist-scholar questions the nature of borders between creative writing and academic writing. Boehmer speaks of border criss-crossings (in the way Professor Amritjit Singh has spoken of his personal and professional experiences in the final “essay”) as liberating for writers even as readers and scholars want to limit an author’s expression within the narrow confines of nation or ethnicity. As the editors Tapan Basu and Tasneem Shahnaaz note in their introduction, the Borders School relies on the notions of a hybrid culture, embraces its attendant contradictions, and leads hopefully, to a “more interactive, cooperative world” (p. xx).

In closing, I would like to highly recommend this *estschrift* that criss-crosses various disciplinary borders: American/African American literature, South Asian literature, postcolonial studies, performance theory, and diaspora studies. In reading this veritable cornucopia of illuminating essays, I was able to criss-cross the boundaries provided by the editors of the volume who portioned the contents into six parts: “Multiculturalism and its Discontents”, “Nation and Sub-Nation”, “Diaspora and Trans-Nation”, “Gendered Identities”, “Art: Between the Popular and the Populist” and “Journeys Across Art and Life”. Lastly, it is possible to enjoy the book without regard to the borders all editors must paradoxically champion.

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