

*India and the Diasporic Imagination / L'Inde et l'imagination diasporique: with poems by Khal Torabully.* Eds. Rita Christian and Judith Misrahi-Barak. Montpellier, France : Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2011. 521 pages. ISBN: 978-2-84269-927-7. Reviewed by David Waterman.

*India and the Diasporic Imagination* is the admirable final product of papers presented at the international conference held in France, at the Université Paul Valéry in April 2009, all but three papers written in English. The volume is divided into several sections, each punctuated with a poem by Khal Torabully, generally extracts from *Ode à Pessoa* or *Voice from Future Past*, thus providing a creative structure which frames the academic contributions.

After an introduction by the editors highlighting the plurality of India and its diaspora, the first section, "Setting the Diasporic Stage," is meant to lay some historical groundwork; "India" should be understood in its pre-Partition geography, essentially a synonym for South Asia, as perspectives from Pakistan and Bangladesh are included in the volume. The East Indian experience in British Guiana, the role of memory, food and film, or a pre-*Orientalism* writing class with Mr. Khan serve to underscore the constructed, representational, discursive nature of the Indian diaspora, significantly from a time before the term "diaspora" existed, or if it did, was exclusively used in the Jewish context.

"Loss, Mourning and Trauma" then links geographical displacement with psychological distress in both the individual and collective spheres; memory, and equally important, forgetting, as integral parts of the experience of cultural deterritorialization are presented in a variety of historical contexts. Unreliable memory and the rhetoric of nationalism in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, insidious traumas built into the colonial system in *Cereus Blooms at Night*, or mutual invisibility in *Maps for Lost Lovers* highlight the disappointment which awaits many who sought a better life for themselves or their children. Reappropriation of the process of storytelling, from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to the novel form allows one to escape binary thinking in the example of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, while the immanence of roots and the transcendence of movement become interdependent in a critical appraisal of *The Inheritance of Loss*.

The question of return is seen from several perspectives in the third section, "To Go Home, or Not to Go Home," from the "(im-)possibility of backtracking" to the "going home syndrome" or the "return of the natives" in the work of M. G. Vassanji, Monica Ali and Michael Ondaatje. Throughout these novels, successful returns depend on "reconciliation, regeneration and tentative reconnection," according to Christian and Misrahi-Barak, whereby success is measured by the ability "to achieve agency and meaning" (25).

Alternative spaces from which to negotiate identity and instigate political action are the focus of "From Diasporic Dislocations and Re-Locations to Diaspora as Thirdspace," through the lens of theories handed down by Bhabha, Trinh and hooks, not to mention Soja and Lefebvre. Some spaces of affirmation were opened through the Partition of Bengal, others travelled via cultural texts with indentured servants to Trinidad and Tobago, while others reposition subject positions of Indo-Caribbean women.

The longest section, "The Visual and the Oral, the Playful and the Virtual," attests to the importance of other media, the visual and the virtual (not forgetting sports, music and food), in current research. Cricket, that most English of sports, becomes the marker of diasporic reclamation along several axes: political, historical, and cultural. Cinematic adaptation of

South Asian novels becomes a political issue, depending on what is represented, and perhaps more importantly what is left out, not to mention the historical timeframe in which the director chooses to set the film. Food is not only a commodity, but “metaphor and rhetoric” as well, “central to the perception of India in its diaspora” (27), whereas, to continue the food metaphor, *Mississippi Masala* provides the example of cultures which in fact do not mix. Bhangra and hip hop, however, blend more easily in California, whereas connectivity in cyberspace, and its role in identity maintenance / transformation, is the central question of “Desigirls@blogspot.com.”

Francophone (con)texts comprise the last section of this volume. “Diaspora & Coolitude” examines descendants’ perceptions of indenture in French overseas colonies, while the penal colony, though fictionalized, maintains its links with the real world. The final essay brings us full circle, with an examination of Khal Torabully’s notion of coolitude through the vehicle of poetry, then closing the volume with a final poem by Torabully and an echo of Eliot: “This is the way the world ends avek ene mousoir / Shanti shanty shanty Ashanti / Not with your bang but with multiple whispers...” (479).

*India and the Diasporic Imagination* makes a significant contribution to current research, especially in a domain wherein the term “diaspora” has, in a very short time, grown exponentially to include much in its purview. The colonial and postcolonial legacy of South Asia had already created hybrid subjects, even among those who never left the subcontinent, yet such “preparation,” as we see from many of the contributions in this volume, did not make migration any easier for those who left, nor even for some who chose to return. It is no surprise, therefore, that studies of diaspora, migration and exile often dovetail with studies of traumatic experience, both individual and collective, and the sense that being part of a diaspora often includes an element of loss. Yet, as many of the authors show, the diasporic imagination has made room for new spaces, through literature and music, film and food, cyberspace and inner space, from which to form communities, integrate, accommodate, resist, transform, evolve and grow. Ultimately, it is the imagination which redeems the diaspora.