

## Of Globes and Phantasies

SCOTT J. JUENGEL

For my ninth birthday, my mother bought me a globe. I had asked for a pocket watch, but apparently mother thought I was too young for such dandyism and decided to promote another kind of worldliness. Despite being a so-called “educational toy,” it didn’t take long to realize that this was an *awesome* present: all the nations on earth were distinguished by different colors, mountain ranges were reproduced in tiny topographical relief, and the whole enterprise could spin on its base at tremendous speeds if necessary. There is a great sense of mastery in owning a globe so young, and as a boy growing up in the American Midwest during the Cold War, with two brothers in the military and another waiting his draft number, it wasn’t long before it fostered a strange geopolitical imaginary. After school I would give the globe a vigorous spin, then trace my finger lightly over its surface, from pole to pole, until the spinning stopped from the gentle friction. Two spins would produce a pair of sovereign enemies and a counterfactual history of life on earth, the whole of which was to be played out with a shoebox full of green plastic soldiers.

Who else remembers the bloody epoch when Finland fought Indonesia for world domination? The fateful “island wars” between Madagascar and Taiwan, or the history of broken treaties that gave us Mongolia vs. Alaska? Such was a nine-year-old’s sense of internationalism, a politics that resembled the strangest World Cup ever held. But importantly, these were wars without qualities: in fact, I routinely took a mulligan whenever my finger lighted on the United States or the Soviet Union (or those rare occasions when it found the sliver that is Vietnam). To wit, there was no point in evoking something real, when all I wanted was to make world war.

Now, it’s fair to ask what this has to do with our ceremony this afternoon, and it may seem strange to admit out loud, but I found myself thinking about my early phantasmatic understanding of geography and geopolitics while rereading Srinivas Aravamudan’s brilliant *Enlightenment Orientalism*. Perhaps it is my admiration for his stunning treatment of nuclearism and the Hindu sublime in *Guru English*, whereby every nuclear test is “the perfect pseudo-event to galvanize a discourse of religious nationalism and euphoria.”<sup>1</sup> There Srinivas notes that “the world of nuclearism, just like that of *Guru English*, was always and continues to be, more ‘fictional’ than ‘realist’”: the bomb produces, in Rey Chow’s evocative phrase, the age of the world target and the advent of the institutionalized targeting known as “area studies.” It is this echo—of a world “more fictional than realist”—that one can’t help but hear in *Enlightenment Orientalism* as well, an echo that begins to speak to the seriousness with which we should rethink the question of fiction.

Had I been fortunate enough to read *Enlightenment Orientalism* at such a young age, I would have discovered that, as Srinivas writes, “[t]rue cultural encounter occurs *not* at false moments of ‘choice’ between one culture and another but at moments of psychic necessity, when the subject acts according to deep-rooted dispositions that are self-revelatory” (146; emphasis added). Obviously one hardly knows what constitutes a “deep-rooted disposition” in the mind of a child entranced by a whirling blur of indistinguishable colors, and it is surely a shame that the only

---

<sup>1</sup>Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 182.

way I could understand my gift was as a prop in an afternoon game of thermonuclear brinksmanship. However it is also true that the utopian indistinction of a child's view of a world he towers over may well amount to a psychic necessity worth our consideration.

In its fine-grained readings of oriental tales, surveillance chronicles, beast fables, libertine novellas, and pseudo ethnographic satire, *Enlightenment Orientalism* asks that we resist viewing the novel as *the* delivery system of an emergent modernity. We are called, instead, to linger in “the multitudinous outside, excluded by acts of enclosure around the novel” (35), a seeming frontier where the laws of genre are suspended, or better, where Derrida finds “the law of abounding, of *excess*, the law of participation without membership.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, Srinivas' argument is that these are not literary hinterlands at all, exotic territories made more so by the consolidation of the novelistic homeland, but rather a kind of resource-rich alternative community that refuses to resolve into anything a map could hold. I am interested in a particular kind of spatial vocabulary operative in *Enlightenment Orientalism*, one that functions rhizomatically in order to hold open what one might call “a network of implausibilities” (44). In some ways the book's emphasis on ambidirectional circulation—its webworks of transcultural matrices and remixed genres—reminds us of the shared etymology of *orientalism* and *orientation*, the measuring of one's position in space according to that which is to the east. Or I should say, it slyly recalls this shared linguistic history in order to remind us of the irreducible subjective aspect that orients all objective knowledge of the world. In other words, on a globe we can always arrive in the west by heading due east.

In thinking about the disciplinary machinery that prioritized the novel over true novelty, diminishing the latter until it became synonymous with the trivial, I was reminded of Hannah Arendt's argument that the uselessness of art, its inexhaustibility compared to “the sheer functionalism of things produced for consumption,” means that it enjoys an endurance that is essential to the world's persistence.<sup>3</sup> Of course, for Arendt the world is our finest built environment and work of art, one that supports the “unnaturalness of human existence” by transcending the cycles of mere metabolic survival associated with its mirror image, the earth. I liken enlightenment orientalism to this same logic of world-maintenance: the works that focus Srinivas' study were often cast as impractical to the historical project of nation formation. However, having escaped not only what Srinivas calls the bourgeois “functionalization of fiction,” but also the historical passing of the nation-state, these prospective fantasies are not used up by use, and allow us to reclaim a critical imagination that is as capacious as the world it—quite literally—makes possible.

As we honor the signal, field-altering contributions that *Enlightenment Orientalism* makes to the study of eighteenth-century literature and culture, I want us to remember also what it might begin to tell us about our political histories of the imagination. One thinks of Gayatri Spivak's call to the task of “imagining yourself, really letting yourself be imagined...without guarantees, by and in another culture,” a form of *letting go* that may well resemble what Srinivas describes as a reader “afloat on an ocean of stories that suspend realities” and buoys us “beyond recognizable referents.”<sup>4</sup> We have such a freighted sense of what worldedness looks and feels like in the realist novel and its traditions, but what kind of world might enlightenment orientalism and its planetary fables make possible for those of us eager to secure its future.

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” trans. Avital Ronell, *Glyph 7* (1980), 210.

<sup>3</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 173.

<sup>4</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 52.