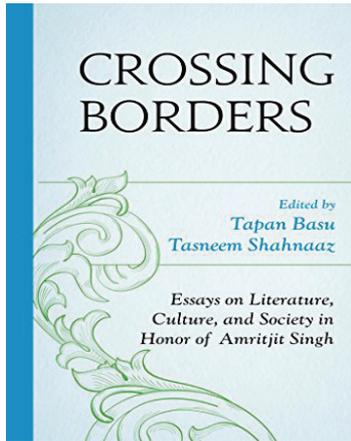


# Of Walls That Cannot Be Mended

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***Crossing Borders: Essays on Literature, Culture, and Society in Honor of Amritjit Singh***  
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I do not know if the Festschrift as a genre has received extended critical attention. If not, it would certainly deserve such attention. For the time being, the academically minded reader has to be content with an interesting albeit brief Wikipedia entry, and hope that a graduate student keen to find a novel topic for a dissertation will spot this lacuna in literary studies.

The genre (unsurprisingly) is German in origin, and antedates the First World War. Scholars fleeing the Nazis introduced it to America, from where it spread worldwide. By now there must be hundreds, if not thousands, of Festschriften honoring eminent scholars, scientists, writers, and artists. A celebrity may be honored by more than one Festschrift; and though a single celebratory volume is the norm, there are instances of multi-volume Festschriften as well. The Germans, who have a well-deserved reputation for scholarly overkill, probably hold the record in this field. A Festschrift to mark the 75<sup>th</sup> birthday of historian Joseph Voigt in 1972, initially planned as a four-volume tribute, has burgeoned into 89 volumes, with more likely to come.

The Festschrift under consideration is of the standard single-volume variety, sturdily bound, and substantial in the number, and wide in the range, of scholarly contributions. In addition, as an “Epilogue,” subtitled “Amritjit Singh: Reflections and Stories,” is a feature not found in all Festschriften, a *Tabula Glaturatoria* (literally, a list of congratulations) containing brief messages from friends and colleagues, thirty-six in all. These will afford a pleasant respite to readers who tire easily of heavy-footed academic prose, and together with the immediately preceding interview conducted by Nibir Ghosh, sketch an engaging portrait of Professor Singh the scholar and Amritjit the person.

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From his youthful years as an assistant lecturer in a Delhi college, Singh has been an intellectual adventurer, an enthusiastic organizer of conferences, a tireless academic networker ever ready to take on organizational responsibilities. As a Fulbright graduate student in America, his reading of Richard Wright's *Native Son* proved to be a life changer. He made African American literature, still a novelty in academic studies, his chief specialty. The spin-off from his doctoral dissertation, *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance* (1976), is considered a seminal contribution to the field. Back in India, Amritjit, now Dr. Singh, spent eight productive years divided among three institutions, the American Studies Research Center, Osmania University, and the University of Rajasthan (where, at 33, he was the youngest full professor in the country), before he made his permanent home in America in 1984. He taught at Hofstra University and Rhode Island College before taking up the prestigious Langston Hughes Chair in American Literature at Ohio University, from where he retired recently.

It is worth noting that there was an existential reason behind Amritjit Singh's choice of research area. Being a Sikh, which identified him as a member of a minority community in his native land, he felt he had a natural affinity with African-Americans. Born in 1945 in Rawalpindi, he is profoundly aware of the dislocation and violence that attended Partition. His heightened awareness of the problems faced by minorities, and of the special significance attaching to their cultural productions, led to involvement with organizations dedicated to the study of minority literatures in America. He is a founding member of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS), and served a term as its President. He played a key role in the formation of the European and Indian chapters of MELUS. In time, these took on a life of their own, rechristening themselves as, respectively, MESEA (Society for Multi-Ethnic Studies: Europe and America) and MELUS-MELOW (the latter half of the hyphenated compound standing for Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the World). Fittingly, Singh was honored with a MELUS Lifetime Achievement Award. Together with Professor K. D. Verma, he was instrumental in setting up the South Asian Literary Association (SALA), and put in a stint as its President. He was also founder President of US-ACLALS, the American chapter of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. Among his many editorial positions is that of Senior Editor of MELA, a series of books on the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of America published by Rutgers University Press.

Lest readers accuse me of overloading a short review of a Festschrift with biographical information on the honoree, let me turn to the numerous and weighty essays that make up its bulk. Though varied in the specific subjects covered, they are thematically linked to Professor Singh's lifelong concerns. As the editorial preface notes, "we decided that it would be appropriate to honor Professor Singh

by bringing out a volume of essays on the idea of crossing borders in life, literature, and culture.” Borders are a feature of the modern world, and crossing borders in this world, whether legally, bureaucratically sanctioned by the issuance of passports and visas, or illegally, maybe to escape an intolerable situation and seek a better life, or perhaps with sinister intent, is an activity marked by a discursive character peculiar to our times. This is borne out by the plethora of terms relating to the phenomenon that have been thrown up in recent years: Diaspora, Migrancy, Transnationalism, Translingualism, Transculturalism, Hybridity, In-betweenness, Globalization, Multiculturalism, etc.

The 20 essays are divided into groups of three or four, under six thematic parts. Part I, “Multiculturalism and its Discontents,” ranges from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup>, interrogating a number of inter-ethnic texts to disabuse any cozy ideological formulation. Silvia Schultersmandl’s “Out of Line: Shifting Border Paradigms in Cooper, Morrison and Yamashita” examines the different kinds of boundaries, civilizational, racial, national, and geopolitical, that feature in three novels. Interestingly, the essay begins with an apt reference to Frost’s poem “Mending Wall.” Significantly, the walls he and others throughout the book deal with are never complete, cannot be completely destroyed, or properly mended. Peter Schmidt’s “Wave or Particle?: Crossing Borders in Ruth Ozeki’s novel *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013),” brings out the novel’s particular relevance to contemporary ecological issues. Martha J. Cutter’s “Translating across the Borders” has the explanatory subtitle, “Sui Sin Far and Other Interethnic/Interstitial Asian American Subjects.” Foregrounding the pioneering work of the daughter of a British father and a Chinese mother who migrates in 1870 to North America, the essay introduces and explores “the literary trope of the ‘tragic Eurasian.’” In the final essay in this section, Fred Gardaphe’s “Dancing with Italians,” explanatorily subtitled “Chicago’s Italians in Fact, and in the Fiction of Willard Motley,” we are brought to realize that a black novelist need not be limited to racially defined themes to create fiction that reveals significant aspects of the racial situation.

In Part II, “Nation and Sub-Nation,” Robin E. Field’s “Creating Kashmir: Gender, Politics, and Violence in Meena Arora Nayak’s *Endless Rain*,” and Zubeda Jalalzai’s “Drawing the Durand Line: Pakistani Afghans, Borders, and Transnational Insecurity,” the lingering problems of what has been dubbed “the Long Partition,” are painfully elaborated. Catherine Rottenberg’s “Teaching *Giovanni’s Room* in the Shadow of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” is the story of her discovery in the classroom in a fraught geopolitical situation how this famous novel gives us “crucial insights into how privilege operates.” Part III, “Diaspora and Trans-Nation,” opens with Nalini Iyer’s highlight on two crucial texts of “Diasporic Subjectivity.” One is the autobiography *Caste and Outcast* by Dhan Gopal Mukerji (1923); the other, Sadhu

Singh Dhami's semi-autobiographical coming-of-age novel set in 1920s Canada, *Maluka* (1978). Rahul K. Gairola's "A Partition without Borders" gives "Diasporic Readings of *Clear Light of Day* and *Train to Pakistan*." Auritro Majumdar's "Caste, Race, and Intellectual History," is a wide-ranging theoretical excursus on the concept of "singular modernity." Part IV, "Gendered Identities," is a welcome corrective to distortions wrought by gender hegemony. Cheryl A. Wall writes on "Jessie Fauset and the Historiography of the Harlem Renaissance"; Thadious M. Davis on Nella Larsen; Ayesha K. Hardison on Felice Swados's *House of Fury*. Part V, "Art: Between the Popular and the Populist," Arnold Rampersad explores the subject through an examination of Langston Hughes in relation to Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and others. Jasbir Jain's "Orality, History, Tradition," brings Indian aesthetics to bear on several socially conscious contemporary texts. Robert B. Stepto focuses on *Lil' Dan the Drummer Boy* (1983), Romare Bearden's illustrated children's book about black Union soldiers in the Civil War. The last section of essays, "Journeys across Art and Life," ends with the interview with Amritjit Singh, and begins with Werner Sollor's engaging "Literary Stroll" through "'Heritage' in America," Charles Johnson's insightful "Retrospective View" of Ralph Ellison, and Lynda Ng's useful examination of "Race and Gender in Elleke Boehmer's Fiction."

Researchers reading this book will be able to discover many points of entry into interesting and important topics. It is worth mentioning that these essays are informed by a salutary sense of social commitment without which literary studies is liable to become divorced from the highly problematic "real" world. The editorial introduction effectively highlights this point: "The essays gathered in *Crossing Borders* will enliven and enrich debates about the self and the other in the spheres of philosophy, politics, and literature, while also potentially facilitating a reexamination of laws and policies governing migration across borders, challenging the often fraught relationship between the global North and South."

Taking a cue from the book, I should like to end with a note on my own relationship with Amritjit. I remember meeting him in the company of our mutual friend, the late lamented Jaysinh Birjepatil, and R. Parthasarathy, at the 1986 MLA convention in Manhattan. Some years back we established e-contact, and he invited me to contribute an essay on the Bangladeshi literary response to the Partition for the anthology, *Revisiting India's Partition* (2016) that he co-edited with Nalini Iyer and Rahul Gairola. Then, in January 2019, at the 19<sup>th</sup> SALA conference he was instrumental in getting me the Distinguished Achievement Award for Creative Writing. I should also add that my former student, sometime colleague, and friend, Dr. Afrin Zinat, put in a word for me at an opportune moment. In the lively small talk at the conference dinner, I discovered that Amritjit had been a fellow at the American Studies Research Center (ASRC) at Hyderabad. It so happened that in

1977, after a month in Madras doing a course on American Literature of the 1920s organized by the US Educational Foundation in India (USEFI), I enjoyed a week-long research visit to the ASRC in the company of a new friend, the poet and academic Rupendra Guha Majumdar. We exchanged a few words with the late Professor Sequoira and a young and lively Sardarji who was indefatigable in offering advice to several seemingly clueless research students. The Sardarji was, of course, Amritjit. We go back a long way indeed.