FORUM:
TEXTURES OF TIME

2.

WRITING POLITICS BACK INTO HISTORY[1]

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the writing of history and historiography in early modern south India as discussed in the book *Textures of Time*. The book argues that a historical and historiographical awareness was prevalent in south India prior to the arrival of a European field of knowledge under colonial rule. However, this essay maintains that the book unwittingly reproduces some of the very same Eurocentric formulations of the writing of history and modernity that it seeks to refute. A liberal conception of modernity is at the core of how society, history, and politics have been imagined in this book. These attributes of modernity, such as history as a set of causal relations, as presentation of facts, as a realm of the real cannot escape their prior formulation in Europe. The liberal social order also underpins the relationship between writing and the world. In *Textures*, early historians merely represent reality; they are not authors whose practices are constitutive of politics and identity. The conception of modernity overlooks the constitutive role colonial empires played in the very creation not only of the West and non-West, but also in conceptions of the real, the modern, the universal, and the historical.

I. INTRODUCTION

Textures of Time is a provocative and innovative attempt to rethink early modern South Asian history. It is provocative in the questions that it asks of historians and of their concepts, and innovative in its methodological solutions to the problems posed by the study of the period.[2] The central claim of the book is that, in peninsular India of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, intellectuals were developing an early modern historical and historiographical awareness. According to the authors, such awareness is evident in the many Telugu, Kannada, Marathi, and Tamil texts produced in this period. The authors contend that such texts—which were long dismissed as literary, mythic, and folk—when subjected to a close reading of their texture reveal an early modern intellectual outlook that distinguishes between fact and fiction, between the literary and the historiographical, and most

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2. V. Narayana Rao, D. Shulman, and S. Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600–1800* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001). Parenthetical page references are to this book.

importantly between reality and its representation. They argue that such distinctions were transparent to courtly intellectuals of the period, called *karaṇam*s, but were subsequently lost under colonial rule. So, in a nutshell, the authors make the case that even though there was no *sastra* or science of history in India, many of the lineaments of such a canonical field of knowledge—of history, historian, and historiographical awareness—were already present before the arrival of a more Hegelian notion of history in James Mill's *History of India*.

Although *Textures* makes many important contributions, its critique is constrained by its unconscious repetition of some of the very norms of modernity and history that it seeks to challenge. Many of the attributes of modernity, particularly history as the sign of the modern, underpin the arguments in this book. This sign of history—as a set of causal relations, as a presentation of facts, as the realm of the real—is a formulation that is intricately tied to conceptions of politics, and particularly to colonial ways of seeing the world. In *Textures*, early historians are merely representing reality; they are not authors whose practices are political. By placing too much agency and autonomy in historical authorship vis-à-vis political centers in precolonial South India, the authors forgo the possibility of examining politics as more broadly constitutive of authorial practices. Finally, their conception of modernity fails to take account of the constitutive role colonial empires played in the making of Europe and India or the West and the non-West. Conceptions such as the real, the modern, the universal, and the historical are, in fact, products of the encounter between the West and the non-West. The project of *Textures* could be advanced by a deeper exploration of the way power operates in ways of seeing and being.

II. A HISTORY OF THEIR IDEAS

In *Textures of Time*, Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam extend the argument of their earlier work, *Symbols of Substance*, but they also depart from it in crucial ways.[3] In *Symbols of Substance*, they explored the political and social worlds of late Vijayanagara and Nayaka kings of the seventeenth century, showing us, through the courtly productions of the period, how kingship came to be imagined, how South Asia produced its own experiences of early modernity, and how society was marked by the rise of a highly mobile, nonascriptive elite that created an entirely new, nontraditional world. In other works, they deepened our understanding of early modernity by tracing the rise of the individual, the creation of a public sphere, the formation of a state, and development of a monetized cultural economy, as presciently reflected in one of their titles, *When God is a Customer*.[4] In effect, their corpus reveals a consistent concern with how texts reflect an early variant of modernity before its subordination under conditions of colonialism.

3. V. Narayana Rao, D. Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamil Nadu* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

4. A. K. Ramanujan, V. Narayana Rao, and D. Shulman, *When God is a Customer: Telugu Courtesan Songs of Kshetreyya and Others* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

In *Textures of Time* they add another important piece to our understanding of early modernity. Here they shift their concerns from the ontology of the social world of early modern South Asia—of the individual, the public sphere, the state, and a monetized economy—to the epistemological arena of forms of historical knowledge and practice. Their primary sites for the exploration of these meta-histories are the many classical, folk, epic, and chronicle texts of the eighteenth century. In *Textures of Time*, the authors show us how literary texts, long considered unhistorical, can be made to speak to the concerns of historians. Among its primary questions, *Textures of Time* asks: 1) How and why do Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, and Marathi texts contain their textural variations? 2) What does this tell us about the strategies and tactics, moods and affects, memory, chronicling, and writing that go into experiencing the "historical" at this time? 3) How did concerns of causality, realism, sequence, and motivation seep into the writing of late India?

III. UNTEXTURED HISTORIES OF SOUTH INDIA

The study of the period between 1600 and 1800 remains difficult for historians for many reasons, falling as it does between the end of the Vijayanagara Empire and the rise of the British. The time period remains intellectually balkanized, focusing on "regional" and trade histories, and on Dutch, Portuguese, or English East India companies. The history of peninsular India in particular has been dominated by trade history and by "regional" histories of the Marathas, Nayakas, and the Deccan Sultans. In large part owing to their language training, historians have found it impossible to bridge the bifurcated histories of the trading coast vs. the interior, Hindu vs. Muslim, Telugu vs. Persian or Marathi. Furthermore, questions of political histories of states and empires sit uneasily with questions of faith and belief. Religious histories have not engaged political histories and vice-versa. Most important of all, courtly literary productions have remained completely divorced from political and social histories; rarely have they been understood as themselves *productive* of histories. These divisions are not merely a factor of individual choices on the part of historians, but are more deeply related to the colonial origins of the discipline, in which texts considered literary, mythic, and folk have been systematically excluded from the modern archive. As the authors point out, many of the texts that they read have been left out of the most often-used historical archives—archives that were constituted under conditions of colonialism. As a result, our knowledge of early modern South India has remained balkanized.

Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam deal with many of these texts that fared so badly in the colonial archive. They analyze multiple versions of manuscripts; they read both the internal as well as some external aspects of the writing of texts. They read literary elements such as frame, genre, and style as distinctive markers of history and historian. They read the *kavya* and *caritra*—different textual genres—against each other. They seek to read courtly and political context into the text by looking at the various strategies employed by the poets, chroniclers, and scribal classes in early modern South India. In revisiting the "small histories" of places in eighteenth-century South India—places such as Bobbili, Senji, and Arcot, whose histories have been written as local until now—they dem-

onstrate how *kavyas* are capable of carrying the task of the historical. Implicitly, they question extant colonial narratives of the events that shaped our understanding of late precolonial India.

Texture is a very important concept in the book. In the absence of stable genres, forms, and structures of historical writing that help distinguish "history" from other forms of writing, the authors claim that texture is often the only means a native speaker has to identify differences. They argue that "A native speaker of the language who hears or reads the historian's text immediately identifies it as such, thanks to the many subtle markers—syntactic, evidential, phono-aesthetic, silential, and so on—that clarify and define, in unmistakable ways, the author's intention" (253). According to the authors, a text's historicity depends at one level upon its frame, style, and mood or affect, and at another level on its ability to carry out the tasks of description, accounting, listing, numbers—essentially a range of objectifications. It is this wide array of textual markers, from stylistic to descriptive, that is transparent to the texts' intended audiences. Persons on the inside of these textual communities, then, are uniquely placed to discern the texture of a poem, a chronicle, a *kavya*, or prose writing. In the authors' view, texture

appears as an alternative to the older insistence on genre, form, and structure in a system where history has not crystallized into a single genre. Moreover, as we have repeatedly tried to demonstrate, texture is no less rigorous a criterion than others just cited. Nor does it predetermine other choices that the historian, in India as elsewhere, has to make. A truly impressive range is open to an author interested in providing a factually based, causally interpreted narrative about the past. History requires strong notions of time—probably, as we have argued, at least two, somewhat dissonant temporal modes—and some variety of imagined surface or space (also probably uneven, jagged, and incomplete). Or, more precisely, the very competition, juxtaposition, or merger of differential temporal rhythms opens up the space in which a historical sequence can be conceived, whether it is looped, embedded, flattened out, accelerated, linearised, segmented, collapsed, stretched, staggered, or otherwise topologically sensed and described. Here, too, understanding is a matter of sensitivity to the subtle markers woven into warp, weft, and frame, [that] show us what this particular history claims to have been true. Texture, that is, always provides a strong assertion about the nature of articulated truth. We need to probe this issue, inherent in all historiography, a little further before this essay can come to a close. (254)

However, to define texture ultimately as a radically localized context, transparent to an internal audience of a textual community, begs several questions. Given that it is always possible to interpret texts in multiple ways, how do we consistently arrive at the same point? A focus on transparency is implicitly a focus on intention and singularity of meaning; such a focus does not lend itself to consideration of the context of textual production and of how meanings are produced in contexts. In examining texts, what evidence of social and political boundaries do we have? More importantly, how are we to examine the social exclusions that remain implicit in the very texts and the knowledge systems to which they belong? Did everyone understand *kavya* texts? If not, what sort of training did one have to acquire and how widely available was it? If such training was not extensively available, how do we understand the social boundaries of the exclusion? Was it by caste or castes?

A major assumption in *Textures* is that the texts were transparent to Indians before the impact of the nineteenth century, suggesting that there was transparency of meaning among the reader, the text, and the author. The idea of transparency is problematic at many levels, not least of which is the absence of politics in the apparent transparency and nontransparency of the texts. Perhaps the problem is in the question of what purpose writing achieves in any given society. In the authors' view, the task of writing is merely a task of representing reality. This would mean that power is absent in the production of representational practices. Might this not be an ultimate reading of Indian history as ahistorical?

The relationship between writing and reality also informs the authors' treatment of the impact of colonial rule and how they propose to recover or "reconstruct" a cultural ecology of Indian texts: "Given the considerable violence inflicted on Indian texts over the last two hundred years or more, this ecology [cultural ecology of available historiographical modes] now needs to be reconstructed. It will not be easy, for the damage is severe. What is required is a new way of reading" (5).

Colonial violence here is understood as an entirely social force in the manifest world, which can be overcome by a recovery of strategies of reading. The loss of textual integrity, or transparency, between the writer and his audiences leads to loss of expressivity. In seeking to "reconstruct" the cultural ecology of precolonial South Indian texts, the authors presuppose that there is actually a coherent ecology and that textual interpretation is easy, accessible, and transparent. I have several concerns about such a presupposition. The assumption that ecology can be reconstructed begs the question: what exactly is the nature of colonial violence? The authors seem to suggest that through a recovery of these strategies of reading, the impact of colonialism on political culture can be erased. Here the colonial is understood as a set of social practices of domination, not as a set of practices that remake the subject.

In the rest of this essay, I will discuss these themes through a central concern of the book—*karaṇam* historiography. *Karaṇam* historiography, named for a group of courtly scribes, serves as a key optic to pull together the vast scope of the book. Simply put, the figure of the *karaṇam* as historian is at the core of what the authors identify as a new way of thinking about the past. They propose that this new intellectual class, which occupied bureaucratic positions across urban centers large and small throughout the centuries, in a sense laid the bedrock of a new historiography. In their social location, the *karaṇam*s resembled groups in North and Central India such as the *kayasthas* and *khatris*, *shaikhs* and *sayyids, munshis* and *kulkarnis*. Such groups served as state-managers who dominated the political landscape as advisors, accountants, revenue officers, poets, and chroniclers of the court societies. Their domination of the imaginative landscape, of aesthetic and political worlds, is said to be so pervasive that their influence can be felt on almost all South Indian cultural productions.

IV. *KARAṆAM* HISTORIES OF THE REAL

The ability to discern historical attributes in texts long considered unhistorical or literary is a central concern of *Textures*. The authors point to texts previously

considered unhistorical and instead propose that history was an important con-cern of the *karaṇam*s in South India. What exactly are the attributes of such a history? According to the authors, while a relatively stable genre developed in Europe, in South India *karaṇam* histories employed multiple textual genres. They claim that "no single genre was allotted to history writing" in South India; that "if purana is [the] pre-eminent literary form, history will be written as purana; if kavya dominates, we will find history as kavya; if prose chronicles come to the fore; they too will serve history" (4). Method, too, was an important part of *karaṇam* historiography. The *karaṇam* of *Textures* "proceeds via processes of se-lection, ordering, and evaluation;" these processes help distinguish the historical text from the nonhistorical text. The authors note that historiographical concerns, such as evaluation of evidence and judgment, are not made available in the text itself; rather, they are resolved prior to the literary form in the personality of the author or *karaṇam*. So while there is a method to how the *karaṇam*s evaluate their evidence, it is not necessarily transparent to the reader. Stylistic choices also help differentiate the historical from the nonhistorical; these qualities include linear syntax, lexical choices, directness, unadorned and straightforward writing, a mat-ter-of-fact tone, verbs in the past tense, clearly stated dates, spatial and temporal measurements, statistical details, precise and informative writing, and nonlyrical and nonrhetorical expression.

The distinction between "fact" and "fiction" is a further concern for the au-thors, and they lament the woeful manner in which South Indian texts have been poached by positivist scholarship for facts alone. In *karaṇam* historiography, the distinction between fact and fiction is not located at the level of the writing; rather the task of evaluating and discerning facts is "woven" into the historiographical frame. So the frame has a preselective quality of sifting through and winnowing fact from fiction. However, the factual mode thus winnowed is distinct from the Western mode; it does not "insist on an irreducible, irrefutable level of bit-sized data that the historian then goes on to organize and explain" (247). In *karaṇam* historiography,

texts reflect a culture of writing, in prose, intended for communication rather than mere recording. There is an interest in numbers, proper names, and other devices that permit the authors a precise factual anchorage. Factuality has become a value in itself. The style of writing, both in its physical and syntactical aspects, suggests a notion of history as con-tinuous flow, where the technical demands of composition are in fact inseparable from the conceptual features of temporality and event. (136)

Further, they argue that "Facts are pragmatic and sealed by collective experi-ence. . . . Karaṇam historians tell us nothing about a documentary base . . . the principles of selection may also vary, according to context, goal, and focus: like other forms of knowing, historiography is, among other things, a particular kind of attention" (247).

In this historiography, then, the fact and fiction matter, but they matter differ-ently, since what is considered a fact is context-sensitive. Moreover, although the distinction between "fact" and "fiction" is universal, it manifests differently from place to place. It is a context accessible only to the *karaṇam* author as he judiciously sifts his material using his model of factuality and frame. The authors

appear to be suggesting that, in South India, while facts exist (a certain reality), they are also dependent upon perceptions (frame, analysis). In this sense, then, a genre of facts is universal, but the objective fact is not, suggesting that every culture has facts but perceives them differently.

The question is not really one of whether a distinction between fact and fiction exists in South India, but how the distinction informs our understanding of reality. In moving between reality and representation, there can be no other way to access reality as independently existing except through representation. Things like facts, which can easily be represented as the basis for knowing reality, are subject to infinite interpretation. What is more, facts in Europe also have a history. As Mary Poovey has shown in her book, *A History of the Modern Fact*, the history and se-mantics of the fact and the factual belong to a larger narrative of how "description came to seem separate from interpretation or theoretical analysis."[5] According to Poovey, the assumption that systematic knowledge must draw upon data or facts as "untheoretical," and description (as opposed to interpretation) as neutral, has a recent provenance in the emergent history of liberal modernity. The early modern English government encouraged citizens to embark on knowledge-making proj-ects that were simultaneously being read as a mode of governance.[6] In the process, numbers, as facts, "acquired the connotations of transparency and impartiality." In early modern England, then, the liberal state and its knowledge-making projects were central to the production of a reality (fact vs. fiction).

If the fact has been central to the knowledge-making projects of the early mod-ern liberal state and its production of reality, we might ask the authors of *Textures* whether a similar connection existed between the knowledge of fact and fiction and the knowledge-making projects of the South Indian states. It is still inconclu-sive whether the fact acquired symbolic and political value, of the kind Poovey discusses for early modern England, before the English established it as their mode of (colonial) governance in India. That a form of fact and an understand-ing of reality may have existed in precolonial India is hardly surprising; facts of various kinds—detailed lists, spatial measurements, and other "discourses of the real"—were ubiquitous in copper-plate and stone inscriptions several centuries prior to 1600. But did these discourses of the real occupy a primary status as an epistemological, symbolic, and political unit? It has not been established that this same assemblage of facts, lists, and measurements was at all central to the politi-cal imagination of precolonial India.

V. *KARAṆAM* SOCIOLOGY

Moving beyond this relationship between history and reality, *Textures* also dis-cusses the context within which the *karaṇam*s produced their histories. We get a glimpse of the social and political worlds the *karaṇam*s inhabited, and, more importantly, of how they interacted with such a world. While this is not a central concern of the book, nevertheless the political world thus imagined is still crucial

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5. M. Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), xii.
6. *Ibid*., 2.

as it reveals how the authors perceive the world of authorship, texts, and context. The first contribution of the authors is to show the incredible, and often missed, intertextual world of South Asian texts and scholarly practices, although in some ways we are left wondering how these practices are embedded in social context. In their discussion of *prataparudra caritramu*, *rayavacakamu*, and *kumarara-muni katha*, we are shown the interpellation of texts and authorships across space and time. Such a continuity of the *karaṇam* culture, as the authors indicate, is the result of a resilient, autonomous, and interiorized world of the scribal groups of early modern India. In this new mode of history, according to the authors, the *karaṇam*s write for other *karaṇam*s, writing itself is a central experience (a writing that now clearly reports the factual), and most importantly, the *karaṇam* is often the kingmaker in the enactment of sovereignty. The texts they compose are replete with "political realism," "devoid of sentimentality or any show of vanity" (125). As elites, the *karaṇam*s can make the "impossible possible" and leave the kings without a worry (128). The new elite, "dedicated to the written transmission of records and eager to organize historical memory in terms of its own analysis of power, politics, and the state, has secured its place at the centre of the emerging nayaka system" (129).

In *Textures*, the authors describe eminent historians and their signature styles, such as Krishnayya, author of *Hydaru Caritra*, whom they propose "should be reclaimed for South Indian history, not merely as a source of 'raw materials' with his quirks, literary oddities and prejudices, to be sure, but an historian nonetheless" (251). How are these texts different from previous modes of writing? *Karaṇam* texts, we are told, are distinctive in that they are not sponsored by royal patrons nor dedicated to gods, and in that they speak with a collective voice and reveal a self-effacing author. Unlike the Persian and Iberian chronicles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which were produced in courtly centers, the *karaṇam* historiographies mark their identity by keeping a distance from the court or state. *Karaṇam*s were far more autonomous and free from the constraints felt by their European counterparts, whose practice is condemned for its close association with the "official or semi-official 'biography of the state'" (138).

Here, then, is a desire on the part of the authors to recognize the radical agency of the historian in the writing of history. This agency is not only manifested through the style they chose to adopt, but is based in what the authors see as the political autonomy of the intellectual vis-à-vis the courtly centers. In many respects, the *karaṇam* of *Textures* comes across as essentially a liberal, self-governing, modern individual. If, on the one side, the authors are open to infinite individual styles in the historian, on the other, they inadequately conceptualize the constitutive relationship between culture and the individual, between ideological structures and agents, between the social world or reality—essentially a conception of politics—and the historian. To speak of the *karaṇam*s' critical distance vis-à-vis the political centers of early modern South India is, perhaps, to miss a larger point. Their group identity was being historically produced and reproduced through a variety of state-making practices. From the early eleventh–twelfth century onwards, they seem to have occupied an entire range of positions in society, from the courtly advisor to the intellectual-at-large. However, the relationship

between the court and society was very porous in precolonial India, where court and society were deeply connected in complex ways. The politics of the court was never completely confined to the court alone; through factional and familial conflicts, the boundaries between court and society blurred considerably. The politics of succession—an endemic feature of the state in precolonial India—forever drew members of elite families into innumerable alliances with elements "outside" the court. Such families, with their bureaucratic and scribal retinues, were the state, and distinctions of "inside" and "outside" played out very differently than imagined by the authors of *Textures*. In such a world, all claims from the outside cannot be viewed as acts borne of independent thought but should be viewed as part of a political field of claims and counter-claims. Given this perspective on the family and the state, *karaṇam*s on the outside were always oriented toward the state and toward state-making cultural, intellectual, and social practices.

VI. EUROPE AS MODERNITY IN *KARAṆAM* HISTORIOGRAPHY

As discussed earlier, despite the book's claims to a distinctive epistemology, its conceptions of modernity, history, and politics depend on a historical sociology formulated in reference to Europe. Texts are interpreted as following a social totality that is preconceived as already defined. The European colonial encounter is understood as an administrative, regulatory, and disciplinary mechanism, but not as something that shaped ideas and practices, and that embodied experiences of living in the present and of thinking about the past. In this sense, then, Europe continues to be what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called the "silent referent" in the writing of South Indian history.[7]

Although in important ways in the book concepts of modernity underpin *karaṇam* historiography's orientation to reality, such concepts still remain tied to sociological understandings of Europe as the site of the rise of the individual and of rational self-critical reflection. In historical sociology, these "modern" attributes are usually based upon studies of empires and state-formation, trade and capitalism, religion and identity, technology and knowledge—which, then, are no longer viewed as exclusively European developments by many scholars, but instead are understood as broader global phenomena.[8] Many scholars extend conceptions of the early modern to every region of the world, thereby rendering obsolete questions of European agency and Asian or non-Western response. This approach to early modernity seeks to understand the origins of capitalism, of the development of rational-bureaucratic state systems, of legal, juridical syntheses, and of humanistic endeavors—to name just a few of the elements that have come to define early modernity. But as Timothy Mitchell says, "If modernity had its origins in reticulations of exchange and production encircling the world, then it was a creation not of the West but of an interaction between the West and the non-West. The sites of this interaction were as likely to lie in the East Indies, the

7. D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 28.

8. J. A. Goldstone, "The Problem of the 'Early Modern' World," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41:3 (1998), 249-284.

Ottoman Empire, or the Caribbean as in England, the Netherlands, or France."[9] It would appear, then, that modernity, at least in its economic formulation, is a simultaneous and connected process all over the world.

The society imagined in the world of *Textures* presupposes a relationship between the individual and forms of governance that rarely existed in precolonial India. Modernity is not just a set of sociological conditions; it also involves the embedding of such conditions within modern governmental modes. In taking the sociological modes from Europe to India, and from the present to the early modern past, the authors of *Textures* conflate a specific social ontology with an epistemology. Evidence of the personhood of the *karaṇam* authors in precolonial India is celebrated as evidence of modernity in the form of the individual. However, in accounts of nineteenth-century political thought, the individual is not merely a sociological entity, but is also placed at the center of a political theory that invested the individual with property rights and within regimes of governance. In the words of C. B. Macpherson, a *possessive individual* and a possessive market society shaped nineteenth-century utilitarian and liberal social theory, which incidentally serves as the foundation for modern social science.[10] More importantly, the political theory of the possessive individual with a distinctive set of rights vis-à-vis the state and access to the market became a sociological reality in the production of modernity in Europe. When the authors of *Textures* highlight the presence of a *karaṇam* individuality they extend a sociological conception of the individual—a product of liberal theories of society—to a pre- or non-liberal social and political order in South Asia. In nineteenth-century India, the individual was not merely endowed with access to the market and with a set of rights, but was produced through colonial disciplinary and regulatory practices. Veena Oldenburg, in her book *Dowry Murder*, showed how the colonial made possible the production of the individual as the proprietary focal point in the revenue systems of colonial Punjab with its administrative, revenue, and juridical discourses.[11] In India, then, such a regime came about through the application of liberal utilitarian ideas of society and governance upon a subject population where power was organized around ever-shifting forms of kin, family, and kingship.

The social reality that informs *Textures* has thus been shaped by a notion of early modernity that continues to be informed by European ideas of culture, of religion, of state, and of the relationships of each of these to the individual. As mentioned earlier, such relationships have a history that is tied to specific intersections between knowledge and politics. The emergence of the individual and his or her distinctive relationship to other ingredients of modernity—such as free will, rationality, culture, and religion—have been made possible by the division of the subject as both universal (individual, legal-juridical, rational) and particular (inequality, constraints). Premodern corporate identities such as caste, kin, family,

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9. T. Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity," in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. T. Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 2.

10. C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 3.

11. V. Oldenburg, *Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

and religious sect, to mention a few, become depoliticized, and culture is reduced to food, dress, and style. In this depoliticizing process in liberal thought, culture is anything but power and its constitutive role in the making of individuals is ignored. Culture, then, is positioned as the necessary background, and corporate identities (family, religion, kin, and caste) are, in the words of Wendy Brown, "dethroned" as forms of rule and "replaced by the self rule of men."[12] In the case of the *karaṇam*s, an understanding of the relationship of the individual to corporate identities—of the *karaṇam*s' relationships to family, kin, caste, and court—is essential to an understanding of how and why they wrote.

The authors are forced to explain that the elements of history, historiography, and the historian are a particular South Asian variant distinct from that of Europe as the "original" conceptualization. They do not sufficiently question the ontology of Europe as always already existing. Europe as a space of modernity was negotiated, contested, and produced in the encounter between Europe and its outside. As Timothy Mitchell says, "to see modernity as a product not of the west but of its interaction with the non-west still leaves a problem. It assumes the existence of the west and its exterior, long before the world's identities had been divided into this neat, European centered dualism."[13] We need to ask what constitutive role empire played in the making of subjects, individuals, modernity, and the public sphere in Europe. As Ann Stoler has argued, European identity, as in the case of the Dutch Indies, was formulated in the cauldron of an "empire of night" that regulated sexual arrangements and affective attachments in the process of creating a Dutch identity in Java.[14] The European identity thus formed in the colonial encounter "prefigured" the emergence of the bourgeois self in Europe. Modern selfhood in Europe cannot be understood without recourse to the constitutive role played by colonial empires.

VII. CONCLUSION

Finally, as a historian working with inscriptions from the Vijayanagara Empire, I am interested in the way that writing produces social and political worlds. Stone and copper-plate inscriptions, for example, portrayed a social world of agents: kings and chiefs, parents and children, priests and devotees, traders and guildsmen, barbers and shepherds, agrarian and pastoral communities, village- and forest-dwellers. In the study of the politics of the period, few other texts provide as many intersections with local politics and the production of power. In this sense, I am interested in all writing as it relates to power and subjectivity rather than in how and whether it draws or expresses the distinction between history and literature. Questions about power, ideology, and hegemony render inadequate liberal modern conceptions of the individual, the state, public sphere, and historical

12. W. Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 153. Once dethroned, such identities come back as optional choices of the individual's behavior. Brown calls this "excessive freighting of the individual" or the "saturation of the individual."

13. Mitchell, *Modernity*, 3.

14. A. Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 112.

consciousness. The intersections of history and power, ideology, and hegemony are important, then, for two primary reasons: they frame our current disciplinary practices as themselves productive of certain forms of power, both global and national; and second, in going back to earlier periods, they continue to aid us in seeing how textual practices were productive of imperial subjectivities. This simple assertion can lead to many productive readings. It can, for example, offer new ways to read the *puranas*, as done by Daud Ali in his discussion of a copper-plate inscription of the Cola king Rajendra I (r. 1012–1044 AD), in which he has shown how the text carries with it social, political, and cultural claims to lordship in medieval India. He discusses how royal eulogies of the medieval Cola kings connect their world to that of the *puranic* (read as mythic, unhistorical) discourses extant at the time. He does not search the texts for a discourse of the real; he makes a productive reading of the "cosmological" or "mythological" aspects of the *puranas* for their conceptions of time and space. Consequently, he suggests that the *puranic* discourses of space and time should be understood as "universal histories" or "world histories" that were hegemonic in medieval India. This hegemonic discourse, he contends, has much in common with Hegelian notions of history in the modern world; that is, "they set the teleological terms to which other historical practices submitted or from which they dissented."[15] Ali reads a social construction of reality that is both a "universal claim" and one that is distinct from that of a Hegelian world. Did the *karaṇam*s produce or imagine a different conception of time and space? Judging from the discussion in *Textures*, the *karaṇam* histories do not propose a new social reality; instead, their reality appears to have been already imagined for them.

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15. D. Ali, "Royal Eulogy as World History: Rethinking Copper-plate Inscriptions in Cola India," in *Querying the Medieval: Texts and the History of Practices in South Asia* ed. R. Inden et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 179.