

Laurie J. Sears. *Knowing Southeast Asian Subjects*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2007. 296+ pages.

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Two concerns recur throughout the essays of *Knowing Southeast Asian Subjects*. The first is for the types of political commitment Southeast Asian studies ought to reflect in an era marked by the rise of religious and neo-conservatisms. The second is a concern for translation, both in its most concrete linguistic forms, but also as a more general problem of coping productively with difference. In their introduction to the collection, Laurie J. Sears and Carlo Bonura point out how a general rethinking of the area studies has assumed a new political urgency, particularly as compared to the 1990s, when debates over representation and the status of postcolonial studies came to predominate. Editors and contributors alike agree that the "provincialization" of Western rational knowledge and its objectification of the "areas" is no longer an adequate response to the present political convergence, and they urge us, therefore, to re-think not merely the epistemic, but also the political and ethical practices that shape our understandings of Southeast Asia.

Sears and Bonura refer to our present moment as the "afterlife" of the area studies, one in which "the world we now live in has already exceeded the original horizons of area studies programs, or even an approach that reduces a region to a cultural whole in time and space."¹ Having abandoned the bedrock of culturally specific "areas," many of the essays in this compilation struggle to find terms in which to imagine new, more democratic, pluralist, and even progressive modes of study that could possibly rescue the discipline from the twin disasters of irrelevance on the one hand, and overt usefulness to imperialist and cultural-chauvinist projects on the other. The struggle is described as an introspective one: "critical engagement," according to Sears, "extends beyond an assessment of the role of scholars in public debate ... to the development of an active reflexive moment of scholarship" (p. 7). The present book serves as a specimen of just such active reflexivity, and the essays do in fact lay out many of the important tensions involved in producing responsible, ethical, and useful area scholarship. Yet aside from the usual exhortations to collaborate, read vernacular scholarship, and rethink epistemic practices of disengaged objectivity, the essays generally betray little hope of serious reform being imminent. As many of the authors note, the epistemological problems of the area studies are rooted in very material differences between the relative freedom and abundant resources of the Euro-American academy, and the quite different conditions prevailing in most of Southeast Asia; these differences are unlikely to vanish anytime soon, no matter how sophisticated our theoretical practice.

Sears's essay, "Postcolonial Identities, Feminist Criticism, and Southeast Asian Studies," lays much of the groundwork for the collection by tracing an historical

¹ Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian, "Introduction: The 'Afterlife' of Area Studies," in *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002). p. 14. Cited in Carlo Bonura and Laurie J. Sears, "Introduction: Knowledges that Travel in Southeast Asian Area Studies," in *Knowing Southeast Asian Subjects*, ed. Laurie J. Sears (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2007). p. 5.

narrative of Southeast Asian Studies' development in post-WWII America. She points out how the migration of area studies to the US marked a break in at least three senses: it incorporated new concerns for the establishment of a post-imperial global order; it initiated new disciplinary perspectives, drawing deeply from modernization and developmentalist paradigms in particular; and, finally, it betrayed an almost total unfamiliarity with the languages and practices of all preceding European scholarship. Having sketched out the initial break, Sears goes on to examine the process by which larger theoretical trends in the humanities have worked their way, most often belatedly, into Southeast Asian Studies area discourse. She points out, for example, that feminist criticism did not reach the field until the 1990s, and that even today there is a relative paucity of Southeast Asia faculty working in English and comparative literature departments. While she points to some of the major theoretical contributions to have emerged from Southeast Asian Studies (the work of Ben Anderson and James Scott, in particular), she takes several pages to demonstrate how polemics over questions of representation and "who has the right to speak for Southeast Asia" continue to plague the field and short-circuit some of the more promising conversations, which she locates as rooted in feminist criticism.

Ariel Heryanto presents an eye-opening account of an Indonesian scholar's encounters with the so-called cosmopolitan world of Southeast Asian Studies in his essay, "Can there Be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies?" Heryanto writes perceptively on the many concrete ways that disparities between Western and "home scholars" manifest in the day-to-day experience of Southeast Asians training to become Southeast Asianists. Some of these differences are as simple as they are seemingly intractable. How, for example, is the home scholar to write in the language of current Western scholarship when books and journals are simply unavailable in Southeast Asian university libraries? Further observations demonstrate how often the writing of home scholars is treated as little different from the utterances of "native informants." Why, for example, are home scholars not accepted as Southeast Asianists until they have attained expertise of some place outside their own countries, while their Euro-American colleagues might call themselves Southeast Asianists by virtue of knowing even a single dance tradition in a certain corner of Bali? Not only is the practice inequitable, it also serves to fetishize nationality as the sole field in which diversity of representation must be preserved. By this standard, why not demand that straight, middle-class intellectuals study slum-children or homosexuals, if the matter is truly an innocent one of diversity?

Heryanto ends his essay in a discussion of epistemology, questioning whether the adoption of postcolonial and poststructural reading practices does not insert area knowledge once more into an only slightly updated universalizing project, one maintaining fairly tenuous connections to facts on the ground. He points out that, while deconstructive techniques have been instrumental in illuminating the rational function of power in Western traditions, it is still an open question as to whether these practices are adequate to areas in which Western post-Enlightenment thought has not achieved such hegemonic status. He sees two promising trends here: one takes inspiration from Islamic traditions as an "alternative paradigm to current Western-derived practice," while the other he describes as a "search for plural, nonpurist, nonessentialist, but more hybrid and globally embedded (Southeast) Asian agencies" (p. 97). While both are clearly important projects, Heryanto does not explain just how

we are to understand a grounding in Islamic tradition as different from the search for deep communal genealogies, nor how the discovery of “nonessentialist” and “hybrid” approaches might provide us with something other than updated forms of relativist universalism. The proposed solutions seem to leave us in the same double bind that the essay otherwise urges us to transcend.

Judith Henchy’s “Disciplining Knowledge” is a fascinating essay on the complex challenges involved in decolonizing the modern research library. It focuses on the strategies involved in cataloging and organizing texts from various political, media, and epistemic climates within a single integrated system. The essay is framed by Henchy’s distinction between the “bibliographic” and “exhibitionary orders” (the latter term is taken from Timothy Mitchell, but draws as well on Walter Benjamin), and how the two representational orders structure the sorts of preconceptions we bring to our reading. Henchy describes the bibliographic order as the familiar structure of scientific works, wherein textual artifice is formalized and transparent, and content remains assimilable to universalist grids of rational knowledge. The exhibitionary order applies to those texts, often manuscripts, whose language is “opaque,” whose representational strategies are exotic, and which are more often studied than read. Henchy’s article deals provocatively with the many problems of collecting and ordering texts caught between these two representational poles, which these days also include the ephemera of television, radio, websites, NGO reports, and even the work of foreign scholars from the areas themselves.

One of the most provocative of these chapters is Celia Lowe’s, on “Recognizing Scholarly Subjects: Collaboration, Area Studies, and the Politics of Nature.” Lowe urges us to forget the liberal bromides extolling collaboration as though it were a simple matter of logistics, and invites us to reimagine collaboration as a political project of near-utopian proportions, requiring radically non-objective and inter-subjective modes of scholarly work. Lowe arrives at these conclusions through case studies of several collaborative efforts being carried out in Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand, where research methodologies have been permitted to emerge organically from the researchers’ own engagements in the field. In all of these places, the collaborators have endeavored to understand and creatively address “the relations between culture, nature, scholarship, and political power” (p. 111). Her article begins by noting how a scholarly discourse pitting traditional modes of resource use against a Eurocentric “will-to-conservation” too often frames debates around third-world ecological issues so that indigenous knowledge is romanticized even while being formally delegitimized. This, Lowe points out, is the inevitable consequence of a discourse that disavows forces of “governmentality, privatization, corruption, markets, [and] ideologies” (p. 118). The insight is both useful and transferable, and it serves to remind us of how all such debates over rights of representation should be located within the context of these larger forces, from which they largely emerge.

George Dutton’s essay, “Southeast Asian Studies in the United States and Southeast Asia: Missing Links,” considers collaboration more from institutional than ideological perspectives. The essay characterizes the many forms of disconnect in the relationship of Western to Southeast Asian area scholarship as the result of historical and linguistic conditions, but also emphasizes the way these two factors continue to act upon one another. Dutton narrates in admirable detail, for example, the process by

which American post-WWII foreign-policy objectives compromised the priorities of many academic institutions, and further describes how a process of lopsided translation led to these same priorities getting picked up by the Southeast Asian academy itself. He closes with a discussion of the mostly underwhelming results of attempts at institutionalized collaboration between cosmopolitan and home scholars of Southeast Asia. These failures are attributed first of all to conventions of humanistic study that do little to support or otherwise encourage collaborative work. (Dutton points out a few notable exceptions here—the University of Michigan–Pusat Studi Realino partnership, among others.) For the most part, university-to-university collaborations are established with a great deal of enthusiasm before falling into disuse and oblivion. As for the growing number of American students participating in exchange programs at Southeast Asian universities, Dutton points out that the onus remains on program coordinators to see that students do not return with their earlier preconceptions merely strengthened. Finally, there are the activist links, whether within international activist organizations or between Western activists and their Southeast Asian counterparts, which by all accounts probably do more to shape the general public's awareness of Southeast Asia than the academic humanities do in any case. Critical Asian Studies at the University of Washington has been the most consistent in forging these kinds of links, but there is still a tendency to see activists as students of the Western academy rather than as experts.

Finally, Carlo Bonura contributes an essay on what has become known as the rational-choice/area-studies debate in "Political Science, the Anxiety of Interdisciplinary Engagement, and Southeast Asian Studies." He begins by providing an intellectual-and-historical gloss on the controversy, which he characterizes as pitting a self-congratulatory universalist discipline of comparative politics against the more culturally rooted and qualitative perspectives of the area studies. Bonura's essay functions as a sustained argument against the model of disciplinary practice in which area specialists collect raw data that later get churned into theory by political comparativists; he favors, instead, a comparative political theory approach that takes account of area studies itself as a space of theoretization. He cites the recent Islam-and-civil-society literature in particular as one that has self-consciously challenged much of the political theory orthodoxy rooted in Rawlsian liberalism and Habermasian rational discourse. Of course, many of us working outside of political science departments will probably be surprised to hear that we area specialists could be considered insufficiently theoretical. Indeed, Ariel Heryanto focuses quite explicitly on the problem of postcolonialism as a form of theoretical fetishism—albeit one with very different methodological prejudices from those of mainstream political science. In all, Bonura's partisan essay demonstrates how political theory approximates the modernization paradigm of old, biding its time in anticipation of a day when the areas have at last become "liberalized" and their political institutions have begun to match up to pre-theorized norms.

While most of us will not find ourselves overly surprised by the problems addressed in this collection, the essays do serve to underscore their depth and universality, and they are filled with interesting historical analyses, biographical anecdotes, and specific concrete workings-out of familiar, yet often abstract, epistemological problems. In light of the demonstrated global nature of the challenge, however, it seems almost inevitable that the various attempts at solution in these

chapters will strike most readers as inadequate. Lurking not far beneath the surface of these essays is a question of just what project the area studies ought now to serve. Yet, it is a question most often answered in the negative—not US imperialism, not the particularist visions of cultural chauvinists, not a “civilizing” educational mission, and certainly not the salvaging of some lost cultural wholeness. The danger in thinking of area studies negatively, however, is that it vacates the space of positive political engagement for right-wing policy analysts and all other brands of opportunist. I take it this is the problem that Sears has in mind when she emphasizes the conceptual, political, and ethical practices of understanding—that as long as we fail to think deeply about the areas in all three of these modes, we will surely be relegated to producing scholarship that is irrelevant at best. Thus, Judith Henchy addresses the matter head-on when she writes of the best area studies knowledge as emerging from, and acting within, a field of direct political engagement.

Perhaps most embarrassing to those of us reading from the Western academy is a resolution offered by Ariel Heryanto, when he discusses the particular “strengths” of home scholars trying to get along within the cosmopolitan world of area studies. He suggests that the home scholar stick to his “comparative advantages” of working on “cultural and sociological analyses of contemporary life, oral history, ethnography, religion, pop culture, and the media, and avoid theoretization, politically sensitive topics, macro and comparative studies across regions, or studies that rely on colonial archives” (p. 99). This sort of suggestion ought to be very sobering, and remind us that while we (no matter where) struggle with questions of positionality in our own scholarship, we must also look forward to, and keep working toward, a global solution in which bowing to the necessity of comparative advantage is no longer necessary.