There is "little certainty and less consensus," writes Celia Applegate, about the meaning of the word "region" where Europe is concerned, while in East Asia there is similarly a long and unsettled history of debating just what exactly counts as "regional," observes Karen Wigen. The fundamental ambiguity of the regional in both areas owes something to its historical role as a social diacritic. It sets off and distinguishes one place or people from another from the point of view of a third, a setting off that also involves the deployment of such temporal markers as "classical," "feudal," or "modern." As both essays make clear, the "region" is that which can alternately or simultaneously appear in various guises: politically as an administrative unit, culturally as an ethnic enclave or linguistic community, economically as zones of production and exchange. It is that which figures the local, the parochial, and the particular in contrast to the national, the cosmopolitan, and the general. As such, it has tended to be seen as backward if not reactionary from the vantage point of the nation-state and urban elites. Yet it has also been valorized as the locus of civilizational authenticity and nostalgic longings, the location of a desirable otherness rendered exotic and available for sacralization as well as commodification. The regional, then, has been neither just symbolic nor just material but both at the same time, circulating in the imagination as much as in the marketplace. For this reason, it has served in a prosthetic capacity as the essential supplement of post-Enlightenment and postcolonial modernity.

In any and all cases, the regional only comes into view comparatively: vertically related to that which seeks to maintain and subsume it, such as the empire, the nation-state, or the metropole; and horizontally in a relation of complementarity and conflict with other regions. Rather than think of regions as sovereign or autonomous entities, Applegate's and Wigen's essays suggest the historical persistence of regimes of regionalities: ways of making and unmaking the peripheral relative to the core, thus practices of locating and relocating the local that are constitutive of and never merely additive to the centers of power.

The practice of spacing implied by regionalisms, however, has also complicated the claims of powerful centers. The indefiniteness of its ontology, the porousness of its borders, and the mobility of its geographical location have made the regional ineluctably unstable and arguably destabilizing. Thus has it also furnished sites for surprising insurrections and recalcitrant alterities. For whatever else the local might seem in various discourses of regionalism, it acts to designate some other place,
indeed the very place (and displaceability) of otherness itself. It is in this sense an agent for anticipating the arrival of certain possibilities. Small wonder, then, that the local in all its particularities tends to be regarded by those outside it as the source of potential crisis. As both essays point out, regionalisms in whatever ideological register call out for the domestication of the regional and its conversion into resources, as Wigen says, for “nationalist and capitalist interests.” “What is at stake, then,” Applegate reminds us, in recent work on regionalism is a “renewed engagement with the regional level of experience . . . [that] can productively destabilize our perceptions of European history.” And, no doubt, the histories of other meta-regions as well.

It is in the spirit of seeking to “destabilize”—and thereby localize—the regionalisms of meta-regions that I offer the following reflections on one of the more important sites for the study of regions and regionalism in the United States: area studies. Having emerged in the midst of World War II and developed throughout the postwar period, area studies resonates with the contradictory impulses of the regionalisms detailed by Applegate and Wigen above. For example, the institutionalization of area studies was propelled by the canonization of modernization theory in American social sciences and policy circles as an instrument for the spread of U.S. hegemony. Yet area studies has also provided critical spaces for generating opposition to imperial interventions, especially in such places as Indonesia and Vietnam, and for calling into question the reification of disciplinary boundaries in American universities at a time when American society itself was undergoing radical changes in its economically peripheral and racially minoritized regions. While bits of modernization theory continue to inform some aspects of area studies (especially among those who call for its abolition in the name of grand theories of rational choice and free markets that see local differences as obstacles to be overcome), counter-currents have also existed analogous to those cited by Applegate and Wigen. Influenced by writers as diverse as Clifford Geertz, Ranajit Guha, and James Scott, for example, a growing number of area studies scholars have tended to shift their focus from the modernization of local differences to understanding the various strategies for localizing modernity. In this latter view, modernity is seen less as the future condition toward which everyone is headed than as a set of events whose coming to pass takes place in contingent, infinitely variable ways. Like the practices of mapping that Wigen and Applegate describe, the myriad translations and transformations of modernity into regional idioms come about as contested and open-ended processes whose outcomes are never entirely predictable.

The vernacularization of modernity in ways that elude the comprehension of any single global agency reopens the question of what it means to be “modern” in the wake of the Cold War, when nation-states are daily reconfigured by the pressures of a borderless marketplace on the one hand and the emergence of new political subjects on the other. Such conditions have made the work of area studies both problematic and promising. For example, it has been difficult over the last decade to study contemporary “Southeast Asia” without taking into consideration, as in the case of Europe, the emergence of new ethnic and religious identities alongside the renewed persecution of older ones; the urgency of travel and immigration among
certain social groups in search of work and status not only in neighboring countries but in nearly all parts of the globe; and the changing architecture of commodity fetishism in everyday life coupled with the uneven availability of new technologies of communication that result in intensifying unequal access to resources inside and outside of a people’s locality. One result is that social identities, geographical locations, and national allegiances all tend to be out of sync, at least more so now than they ever were in the recent past. New ways of being Filipino, Bengali, or Korean emerge in such places as Southern California, Rome, and Singapore that have yet to be accounted for by academics and governments alike.

For to recognize such disjunctions would also entail redrawing regional maps into weird patterns of discontinuous and broken lines. It would mean acknowledging what tends to be obscured, namely the nature of mapping itself as a set of shifting and contested practices of addressing and remaking the world, one whose worldliness is always present, “a cognitive arena of struggle, a set of ‘idioms, practices, possibilities’—not, in other words, an entity at all about which one could ask ‘what is it?’” (Applegate and Rogers Brubaker). As Wigen and Applegate point out, regionalisms of all sorts rely on the arbitrary and power-laden practices of mapping, which in turn indicate something of the “fluid” nature of regional spaces. One might add that such fluid “practices of placeness,” however distinctive they might be, arise in response to prior and recurring moments of displacement characteristic of modernity: the sense of never being quite at home, because home itself, permeated by the alien forces of history (colonialism, nationalism, big business, big science, spirits both known and unknown, war and memories of war, institutionalized injustice, unexpected betrayals, deaths and the failure to mourn them) feels like it is always another place, at once foreign and familiar. If maps change and are themselves the products of prior mappings, it is because the sites they map are never wholly themselves, never quite “there” in their “proper” places where they were thought or ought to be.

It is the uncanny quality of the regional that emerges when modernity is unmoored from theories of modernization. Area studies, like other regionalisms, has sought to come to grips with the dislocations of localities amid new globalizing forces. Spurred by severe criticism from a range of ideological and disciplinary quarters and urged on by funding agencies and budget cuts, area studies has been in what is now routinely described as a state of “crisis,” besieged by calls to reinvent the institutional infrastructure and intellectual agendas for understanding different regions of the world at century’s end.1

I have elsewhere addressed the institutional history, nationalist wishfulness, and the ambivalent roles of scholars and foundations in the rethinking of area studies in the United States.2 Rather than rehearse those arguments, I want to bracket for

1 One of the more instructive documents of this emergent anxiety about the place of area studies in a post–Cold War and postmodern world is the newsletter of the Social Science Research Council in New York, Items. See especially the issues 1994–1995. See also the essays in What Is in a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea, Arif Dirlik, ed. (Boulder, Colo., 1993); and the essays in Southeast Asian Studies in the Balance, Charles Keyes, ed. (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1990). The locus classicus of area studies critique (though of course he would not refer to it as that) is still Edward Said’s sprawling and obsessive Orientalism (New York, 1977).

a moment the institutional and sociological dilemmas of area studies and take a
detour from the path of assessing the state of the field, as it were, taken by
Applegate and Wigen before rejoining their interests in the practices of regionalism
at the end of this essay. I want instead to pick up the notion of crisis that is said to
plague area studies and follow it along a somewhat different route along the relays
of the accidental and the foreign, which escape even as they solicit practices of
placement.

CRISIS CONNOTES EMERGENCY, the critical point at which a state of affairs reaches a
moment of either turning around or turning into something other than what it had
been. We might say that crisis is a moment of danger and thus the time of
contingency: when things fall apart and the possibility of something new emerges.
If area studies, like regionalism, can be said to have a culture that is now in crisis,
it is because it forces us to think about its contingencies and accidents. We might
be able to see the latter if we paused momentarily and considered area studies from
the point of view not of its funding agencies, administrators, or meta-critics but
rather from the particular histories of its practitioners. Is there something to learn
from asking about the experience of area studies prior to its institutionalization,
that is, at the point before it requires recognition and validation by someone from
above? What is, to re-cite Applegate’s citation of Arjun Appadurai (about whom
there is more below), the “complex phenomenological quality” that attaches to the
study of “others” prior to and beyond having to justify it to a graduate adviser, a
grant agency, or a private foundation? How does a person living in one place come
to have an interest in some other radically different place? What are the conditions
necessary for one to invest considerable personal energy and intellectual resources
in learning a language, traveling to a village or a city, poring over archival
documents and inscriptions, risking one’s personal health and safety, in order to
pursue a set of questions to which there are potentially no definitive answers? How
and why does one return to foreign sites, become attached to them, or, conversely,
come to spurn them? What are the structures of feeling specific to engaging in the
study of that which, in order to be studied at all, must remain forever alien, however
intimate and proximate it may be to one? What are the dynamics of detachment and
fixation that come into play when one studies the foreign? And what are the risks
and rewards of identification or disidentification with “it” or “them”? Finally, is
there a politics to these engagements, an ethics to weaving and unweaving such
affective bonds with the otherness of the other?

What I am suggesting here is that alongside institutional histories we might also
ask about the contingent and, for want of a better term, existentially particular and
intimately local relationships that area studies practitioners form with their areas of
study. In assembling these notes, I started by inquiring how area studies practitio-
ners initially came to have an interest in the particular region or country they
worked on.

For many Euro-American men, there were two major routes that led them to area
studies—in this case, I will limit myself to Southeast Asian studies: their partici-
pation in war, either World War II or Vietnam; or in the Peace Corps. Both entailed travel, extended residence, and sustained contact, hostile as well as friendly, with the peoples of the region; opportunities to learn their languages and histories; and, not uncommonly, love affairs that often enough led to some sort of marriage, family, and for some, divorce. However, both modes of contact also entailed stepping into enormously unequal power relationships. The violence of wars and the authoritarian regimes they install invariably place white men in the position of colonizers vis-à-vis local populations. And the developmentalist altruism of the Peace Corps born in the midst of the Cold War endows the volunteer with considerable privilege backed by the entire apparatus of the American state. Indeed, the American state in both cases mediates the conditions that allow for such travel and contact, and the inequalities as well as mutual dependencies that these give rise to. Nonetheless, the state alone cannot determine the origins of such interests nor can it foreclose their futures. Somewhere along the line, there is always an accidental aspect to these contacts, a sense of things unseen and unexpected that results in one becoming drawn to this rather than that country or region or province.

Think, for example, of the path taken by George Kahin, who founded Southeast Asian Studies at Cornell University. Kahin’s interest in Asia dates back to the beginning of the Pacific War when he helped campaign on behalf of interned Japanese Americans, urging those who owed the latter money to honor their debts. Joining the U.S. Army, he was trained in the Indonesian language and was supposed to be part of the Allied forces that would retake the islands. By some quirk of fate, he was at the last moment assigned to Italy. However, he continued to be interested in Indonesia, going there to do his field research in 1948 at the time that the revolution against the Dutch was breaking out. He thus had, for a Westerner, unparalleled access to the youthful Indonesian leaders and came to write the landmark study on that country’s revolution notable for its deep sympathy with the nationalist cause. Kahin has long been a passionate and committed critic of American imperialism in Southeast Asia, and early on he voiced opposition to the Vietnam War. Hence did his career prove antithetical to the late colonial and Cold War conditions from which it arose.

For American women, the route to area studies is equally complex, often linked to generational differences. It was not uncommon for those who went to college and then graduate school in the 1950s and mid-1960s to come in contact with Manila or Bangkok primarily through the work of their husbands who may have been in the Peace Corps, the diplomatic service, or doing graduate research. Marriage and child-rearing set limits and so opened up different possibilities for earlier generations of women who, for example, may have started out being students of Western music but, finding themselves without a piano in Mandalay or Solo, may have proceeded to pick up the Burmese harp or play in a Javanese gamelan while their husbands completed their doctoral work in the field. Returning home, children now

3 George Kahin, Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia (Ithaca, N.Y., 1952).
4 Kahin’s story appears in Benedict Anderson, The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World (London, 1998), 18–19. Indeed, thanks to examples set by founding figures such as Kahin and Harry Benda at Yale, Southeast Asian scholars for the most part have tended to be skeptical of if not militantly opposed to U.S. interventions in Southeast Asia.
grown and husband tenure-tracked, they may have decided to enter a PhD program within which to pursue an interest that had developed by a combination of chance and circumstance. Later generations of women who came in the late 1960s through the 1980s and even the 1990s undoubtedly had different routes to area studies, some coming through the Peace Corps, others through political activism inspired by social movements such as feminism and civil rights, the opposition to the Vietnam War, the emergence of what we might think of as left-wing orientalism and its concomitant fascination with things “eastern” as alternatives to the oppressiveness of the West. Less encumbered by, and even resistant to, received notions of domesticity, they would have been able to travel without the baggage of husband and children, finding themselves both interested in others as well as the object of their intense interest, and turning such gendered predicaments into the texts and contexts of work that could now be more readily pursued (though not without continuing resistance) at American universities. In all cases, the social facts of race, gender, and domesticity, like the structures of the state, shaped but did not wholly determine the genesis of their interests and the paths that these led to.

Given the specificity of their histories, there exist myriad reasons that led area studies practitioners to arrive at an interest in their particular area. Other colleagues, men as well as women, who were neither in wars nor the Peace Corps tell me that they were drawn into Southeast Asia because they had met by chance someone from there and become intrigued, or, by some stroke of luck, had sat in on a class or a lecture on the region being given by a particularly good teacher. Still others recall that hearing the gamelan, seeing the Javanese puppet theater, the wayang, or photographs of Angkor Wat had triggered a fascination with Southeast Asia for reasons that remain obscure and indeterminate. In other words, “Southeast Asia” or some aspect of it struck them when they did not expect it, like a stone hitting a windowpane. Surprised, they found themselves responding to this accidental intrusion, following the cracks that were traced around the hole left behind.

An accidental encounter brings with it a force of its own, sending one falling (for, after all, “accident” like the word “chance” is formed from the Latin cadere, to fall) into something unexpected and unknown that lies outside yet shapes the limits of what is known. To have an accident is to come in contact with the radically foreign, a kind of otherness that resists assimilation. It is only after the fact of such an encounter that one can look back and see the accident as the first in a series of events that lead to the present.

Here is an example. As a young boy growing up in upstate New York, one of my colleagues remembers meeting a very well-dressed and dignified-looking man who appeared by chance on his family’s doorstep asking to use their telephone. He was on his way to New York City and had been stranded by a winter storm that had blocked all the roads. The stranger turned out to be Filipino and stayed for breakfast until the storm blew over. Intrigued by the stranger, my colleague looked up all the information he could on the Philippines at his local library. Years later,

5 This is the story told by Judith Becker, professor of ethnomusicology at the University of Michigan, about the genesis of her interest in Southeast Asian music.

6 Here, I am thinking of such scholars as Anna Tsing, Gail Hershatter, Laurie Sears, Nancy Florida, Barbara Andaya, Ann Laura Stoler, and Peggy Choy, who were kind enough to relate their stories to me.
he signed up for the Peace Corps and asked to be sent to that country in part because of his memory of this stranger. He realized subsequently that this mysterious man was none other than Carlos P. Romulo, then the Philippine representative to the United Nations and a prominent politician in his home country.

A foreigner appears unexpectedly in one’s home, interrupting the flow of one’s domestic life, making such an impression that he leaves behind a memory. Picking up that memory, one follows its associations, hearing in it all kinds of other suggestions until finally, or rather retrospectively, one sees oneself being carried physically and imaginatively to the other’s home, as if to repay the visit. Drawn to the other, one finds oneself an “other” in turn. It is as if, in meeting the foreigner, one hears a call whose message is discovered only after the fact of its transmission. Further, it is discovered to lie elsewhere, outside the limits of the familiar.

This discovery of deferred meaning shares in the structuring of a vocation. Years later, making sense of one’s professional identity and the pressures that come with it, one reconstructs one’s interest in a region as the response to a call whose significance at the time of its issuance had not yet been disclosed. Rather than approach the Philippines in the mode of an explorer seeking to conquer new territories or expand one’s power, one instead imagines oneself as being summoned by the area itself crystallized in the memory of a stranger and the sense of something lying behind or beyond that figure. That one doesn’t know what the message might mean brings with it the risk of misinterpretation and adds all the more to the urge of responding to that call. To think of area studies as a kind of vocation (from the Latin vocatio, derived from vocare, to call) is thus to imagine oneself elsewhere, in the place of the foreigner as a foreigner oneself and therefore as capable of the same power of transmitting messages whose meanings are deferred, lying at some other place in some other time.

It is not difficult to read an element of romanticism in the notion of area studies as a vocation. In the most banal terms, we say that one is drawn to study Japan or Thailand because one is in love with “it,” whatever that “it” might be at different moments in one’s life. And it is here in the realm of the romantic that sentiment and mystification become difficult to tell apart. Having fallen in love with the foreign, learning its language and reconstructing its history, one might then begin with some justification to consider oneself to be an authority who can speak for the place and its people to those at home. At the same time, one begins to feel a sense of responsibility, even missionizing zeal, about the beloved country’s fate so that one begins to act like an authority among the foreigners themselves, diagnosing their problems, devising solutions, and even demanding adherence through force or persuasion, especially when one thinks that one has the backing of the state and other powerful interests at home. The romance of area studies can thus just as easily, or better yet uneasily, bring with it a kind of sentimental imperialism that the United States is only too famous for.

There is, then, a risk in construing the accidental encounter with the foreign retrospectively as a narrative of vocation, of thinking that falling into the zone of alienation was the first moment of hearing, then responding to, an alien call. Edward Said had warned us precisely about such risks when he referred to
orientalism as a “battery of desires and dreams” as much as it was a tendentious storehouse of knowledge about the Orient that secured the Occident’s positional superiority. In a post-orientalist and postcolonial world—or at least in a world permeated with the desire for post-orientalism and postcolonialism—there are good reasons to be wary of such traps.

Thus might we understand the institutionalization of area studies as an attempt, always partial and uneven, to ensure against such orientalizing risks. It does so in at least two ways. First, institutionalization tends to repress and marginalize the element of the accidental, tending to see the contingency of foreign encounters as historically and structurally determined, and therefore as not contingent at all. From the standpoint of an area studies program, the accidental is merely so, an irregularity of no real consequence. Second, institutionalizing area studies means setting aside its vocational aspect, stressing instead the professional rationality, detached approaches, and practical effects of studying the other. Professionalizing area studies entails, among other things, placing the question of affect and imagination on hold. We see this in the stress on disciplinarity in the university that segregates forms of knowledge and their practitioners from one another. For example, the study of language and literature as a single pursuit has been systematically sundered in area studies programs, just as the study of theory and philosophy once joined to history, anthropology, and sociology is now routinely held apart. As a result, real interdisciplinarity, which, in my opinion, requires a relentless skepticism toward disciplinary divisions, becomes a difficult if not a suspect activity. Domesticating and regularizing the risks of foreign encounters, the institutionalization of area studies runs the risk of turning area studies into perennial servants of the disciplines and vulnerable clients of powerful corporate and government patrons. One result is that their usefulness will always come under interrogation in a way that disciplinary departments never would. Attempting to secure the place of area studies, programs ironically enough invite continued scrutiny and thus live on with a deep sense of insecurity as an irregular, supplementary, and therefore accidental formation in the university.

And yet it is precisely the accidental nature of area studies, or more precisely the accidental ways by which their practitioners stumble into studying specific areas, that makes them worthwhile as sites for encountering regions of otherness the disciplines tend to discount. In this sense, we can think of the putative weakness of area studies programs as their actual strength. They serve as terminals for the unlikeliest meetings among the most diverse groups and individuals, who because of some unforeseen occurrence or chance meeting at some point in the past were drawn to go “there,” wherever that might have been. What they or, better yet, we have in common is the fact that we not only study “otherness” but often find ourselves through our travels and our readings in foreign languages to be an “other.” Thus do practitioners of area studies feel themselves doubled: there is the “I” who comes home and writes about alien places, and another “I,” the alien who appears knocking on doors, asking to use telephones in the middle of storms,

7 Said, Orientalism, 78.
provoking curiosity, irritation, and suspicion at times, and commanding authority at other times from those he or she encounters.

This doubled identity whereby two “I’s” exist without one ever fully knowing much less controlling the other is not only present among American practitioners, whether male or female, of area studies. It applies with even greater force to immigrant scholars as well. For my last set of examples (and here, I rejoin Applegate and Wigen), I want to look briefly at two of the most respected practitioners of area studies—who are also two of its most imaginative critics—who happen to be immigrants to the United States: Benedict Anderson and Arjun Appadurai.

In the autobiographical introduction to his collection of essays, Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia, Benedict Anderson relates how he came to be involved with Southeast Asian studies.\(^8\) It started with a blow to his face. While studying classical languages at Cambridge in 1956, he found himself wandering into a political demonstration held by a small group of South Asians and then trying to stop a fight initiated by a group of English students hurling racial insults at them. “My spectacles were smacked off my face, and so, by chance, I joined the column of the assaulted.”\(^9\) The rest of Anderson’s account consists of tracing the cracks created by such a chance encounter, cracks that lead to more fortuitous meetings and unexpected events.

His interest in “Asia” stoked by the violent encounter, he decides to learn about Indonesia, which had been in the news. He had heard that there were only two places where Indonesia was being seriously studied, Yale and Cornell. Thanks to an “old friend,” he finds a teaching assistantship at the latter and there meets three of his most important mentors: George Kahin, John Echols, and Claire Holt. Aside from Kahin, it is Holt, an art historian, who has a profound effect on Anderson, in part because she mirrors his own predicament as an exile many times displaced and yet seeming to be at home everywhere. Anderson describes himself as “someone born in China, raised in three countries, speaking with an obsolete English accent, carrying an Irish passport, living in America, and devoted to Southeast Asia,” the author of an “odd book” on nationalism, Imagined Communities\(^10\) “that could only be written from various exiles and with divided loyalties.”\(^11\) Claire Holt was the daughter of a wealthy Jewish family from Riga, a dancer in Paris and New York, then the lover of the Dutch scholar William Stutterheim. She had lived in colonial Java in the 1930s, had translated for the U.S. military during the war, and fled the McCarthyism of Washington to Ithaca on the invitation of Kahin to teach courses in Indonesian culture. And it was precisely her lack of formal academic training that made her so valued by her students, particularly Anderson. Her interest in Javanesse


\(^9\) Anderson, Language and Power, 1.


\(^11\) Anderson, Language and Power, 10.
Regionalism, Area Studies, and the Accidents of Agency

mythology, arrived at unintentionally through her wanderings and love affairs, encouraged Anderson to think about Indonesian politics differently through the lens of its cultural logics. The result, as many of those in Southeast Asian studies know, has been a series of theoretically rich and highly influential essays on the politics and culture of the Indonesian Revolution and its counter-revolutionary aftermath.12

While doing fieldwork in postrevolutionary Indonesia during the early 1960s, Anderson’s interests were again guided by unexpected happenings. Jakarta then was adrift with possibilities, rumors, and contradictions, yet also awash in what appeared to be a genuinely egalitarian ethos. While there, he writes, “I was lucky enough to have two remarkable elderly Javanese teachers who were also brothers” to teach him about “traditional” Javanese culture while remaining “wholly sharp-eyed” about its delusions.13 “Luck” in this case also foreshadowed catastrophe. The coup and subsequent massacres of 1965–1966, which were totally unexpected both in their extent and viciousness, led to Suharto’s dictatorship and the subsequent banning of Anderson from Indonesia for having co-authored a report implicating the regime for its role in the killings.

But again as luck would have it, Anderson’s exile from Indonesia coincided with the overthrow of the military dictatorship in Thailand in 1973 and the return to a more open society. Having cultivated close friendships with a number of Thai dissident intellectuals, Anderson was given another chance to pursue his interests in Southeast Asian revolutionary movements. And in an even more fortuitous spin of the wheel, his brother Perry Anderson had been editing the New Left Review and had authored important comparative works on the history of nation-state formation in Europe. Thanks to the accident of birth, Anderson finds his intellectual and political horizons shifting again toward more comparative directions. In the midst of repeated displacements and exiles, he finds himself “haunted” by unsettling questions about solidarity, difference, and imagination, and accompanied by a recurring object of love, the “imagined community.”14 The latter is alternately figured as the nation, the family in its most extended form, mentors, colleagues, students, and friends from various parts of the world linked by the generosity and affection of their regard.15 The imagined community, born out of a series of violent mishaps and exiles, contingent meetings and ghostly questions, is also a community of sentiment.

It is this very notion of sentiment as the basis of community that Arjun Appadurai theorizes in his book of essays, Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization.16 Like Anderson, Appadurai is also an immigrant intellectual who writes, among other things, about his “own” country, India. But unlike nationalist scholars, indeed in sharp and self-conscious distinction from them, Appadurai is

12 See, for example, “The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture,” “Old State, New Society: Indonesia’s New Order in Comparative Historical Perspective,” “The Languages of Indonesian Politics,” “Cartoons and Monuments: The Evolution of Political Communication under the New Order,” all of which are in Anderson, Language and Power. See also the essays in Spectre of Comparisons.
15 Anderson, Language and Power, 14. See also the dedication of Spectre of Comparisons.
quick to tell us that his “India” is “not a reified social fact nor a crude nationalist reflex” but an “optic” from which to gauge the uneven effects of what has been termed “globalization.” Appadurai in this sense finds himself in the situation of many immigrant scholars from the so-called third world working in area studies in the United States. On the one hand, there is the expectation that, unlike European immigrants, they can only study their “own” culture because that is what they are “naturally” interested in. On the other, there is the pervasive assumption that their work, like their country, will be parochial and of little consequence to the “serious” work of theory building and policy making.

However, Appadurai converts this dilemma into an advantage. He deflects suspicions of parochialism by turning to the question of the “local” and argues that it is really there that one sees the incarnation of the social science abstraction, “modernity.” What interests me, though, is how this theoretical turn is initiated by an autobiographical note. Whereas Anderson’s account tells of how he came to be interested in the nationalisms of Southeast Asia, Appadurai writes of how India, specifically Bombay, drew him out of the nation and into the world. Bombay is the setting of his earliest encounters with modernity, and there the modern is experienced in what he calls its “pretheoretical form”: as sensuous immediacy and seductive materiality. He writes of his desire for the modern:

I saw and smelled modernity reading Life [magazine] and American college catalogues at the United States Information Service Library, seeing B-grade movies (and some A-grade ones too) from Hollywood and Eros theaters five hundred yards from my apartment building. I begged my brother at Stanford (in the early 1960s) to bring me back blue jeans and smelled America in his Right Guard when he returned.18

In place of England, Appadurai discovers “America” as the site of the modern, or at least the most modern of the modern. “I did not know then that I was drifting from one sort of postcolonial subjectivity (Anglophone diction, fantasies of debates in the Oxford Union, borrowed peeks at Encounter . . . ) to another: the harsher, sexier, more addictive New World of Humphrey Bogart reruns, Harold Robbins, Time, and social science, American style.”19

“I did not know then,” which is to say he had no idea where he was going, only that he was moving, thanks to coming into contact with the shapes and smells of the “modern.” Here, it is not surprising that the modern should also have a foreign, specifically imperial origin: England, then later the United States. Through sudden and inexplicably pleasurable encounters with the objects of modernity, Appadurai comes to know that there is something he does not yet know. To come in contact with the modern in all its lush and sensuous materiality was to come into a fantasy about another “I” speaking a different language and in different accents, choosing among exotic items that seem to appear fortuitously in Bombay. Confronted by the foreignness that is the very stuff of modernity, both in its colonial and what he terms postcolonial versions, Appadurai becomes an agent of desire whose satisfaction is forever strung out into a potentially endless series of objects: books, movies, blue jeans, deodorants, American social science. Drawn to these objects, he heads out,
going from his neighborhood cinemas to the USIS library, to Brandeis University, and finally to the University of Chicago in the 1970s. Whereas Anderson begins with an unintended identification with South Asian students that leads him from England to the United States, then to the revolutions in Indonesia, Thailand, and lately the Philippines, Appadurai begins with an avid identification with commodities and their mysterious allure that leads him to follow their circuitous routes, first around Bombay, then to the “first world,” looping back to India and then back again to the American Midwest, while zigging and zagging to other areas of the physical and virtual world.

Clearly, their projects have important differences. While Anderson sees in the nation the utopian possibilities of a post-Enlightenment community subsequently compromized if not violated by the state, Appadurai sees the nation-state as an exhausted form that can no longer respond to the demands of emergent communities. Anderson’s interest in modernity is tied to his concern with the possibilities of nationalist revolutions and the loss of such possibilities in Asia, and he has spent considerable time examining the moral, historical, and political consequences of such a loss. Appadurai is far less interested in revolution as a medium of change and far more concerned with the technologies of migrations and mediations chained to capital flows that give rise to a variety of vernacular responses and strategies of local adaptations. Hence while Anderson thematizes the historical possibilities in nationalism and its promises that have yet to be met, Appadurai has signed off (at times too hastily, in my opinion) on the nation-state, bidding it good riddance while keenly anticipating other forms of association that will take its place.

However, despite the differences in the trajectory of their projects, they are also joined by their recurring fascination with the foreign. For both, the “foreign” is memorable, if not the point from which memories arise. Surprised by the foreign, they were provoked to follow its call, drawn into its communicative power. Because it appears accidentally, as their accounts show, the foreign insinuates a gap in their lives that they are compelled to cross imaginatively and physically. Contact thus leads to communication, or, more precisely, the fantasy of communication. Such a fantasy is enacted in the process of translation, or what Appadurai theorizes as “vernacularization,” which entails substituting the foreign for the familiar and vice versa. But such translations, as they point out, are never complete. They are always lacking and are bound to be full of errors and mistakes, thereby making more translations necessary. They thus lead you out, to texts you did not think existed, to places you did not expect to go to, to encounters you did not foresee. In this way, you become a kind of exile, transformed into someone who is, we might say, periodically beside oneself. To the extent that encounters with alien presences compel Anderson and Appadurai to travel and translate, the alien becomes the source of the language with which to fashion their own identities as agents exiled from any fixed identity. Hence, when they speak of themselves, it is always in terms of two “I’s,” one that belongs to them and their disparate histories and the other that belongs to someone else who eludes them but to whom they are nonetheless attached.20

20 The richly problematic notion of the first-person pronoun as inherently divided between the self that speaks and the language that is spoken owes its most compelling formulation to Emile Benveniste,
The unresolvable doubleness of their identity is, I suspect, prototypical of all other practitioners of area studies. A stranger to itself, it is an identity that, like the senses of the regional discussed by Applegate and Wigen above, is not only in motion but is always in translation. Such translations, which form the stuff of their—and perhaps I should say our—lives, are never complete because they are never exact. Working with foreign language sources, we know how words in one language never have their exact equivalent in another. What we have are always approximations. Part of us hopes that somehow these will be heard by others in ways we intended them to. But the other part of us, the other that is our double who resides in language, whether native or foreign, makes sure that this is never quite the case. Meanings remain elusive, and something always escapes only to emerge elsewhere in one guise or another. At times, we find them, or more often, they find us, confronting us in forms we did not anticipate. And if they do, and if we are surprised, or we mistake them for something else but feel compelled to live through that error and follow the traces it leaves behind, then we can be certain that our work, the work of area studies, the study of regions and the practices of placing what nonetheless eludes placement, would have already begun.