

**XX International Conference**



**THE HUMANITIES ACROSS CULTURES**



Jointly Organized by



Forum on Contemporary Theory, Baroda, Gujarat, India  
(A Member of the Consortium of the Humanities Centers and Institutes)  
&  
Louisiana State University, Shreveport, USA  
&  
Princeton African Humanities Colloquium, Princeton University, USA

**17-20 December 2017**

**Venue: Mayfair Palm Beach Resort**  
Gopalpur-on-Sea, Ganjam, Odisha

**Conveners**

Simon Gikandi  
Robert Schirmer Professor of English  
Princeton University  
&  
Bishnu N Mohapatra  
Professor and Senior Academic Fellow  
Forum on Contemporary Theory, Baroda

FORUM ON CONTEMPORARY THEORY  
C-304, Siddhi Vinayak Complex, Behind Baroda Railway Station (Alkapuri Side), Faramji Road  
Baroda – 390007, Gujarat, India  
[prafullakar@gmail.com](mailto:prafullakar@gmail.com); [fcobaroda@gmail.com](mailto:fcobaroda@gmail.com),  
Phone: ( 91) - 0265 – 2320870  
[www.fctworld.org](http://www.fctworld.org)

The Twentieth International Conference of the Forum on Contemporary Theory will be held in Mayfair Palm Beach Resort, Gopalpur-on-Sea, Odisha from the 17th to the 20th of December 2017 in collaboration with the International Lincoln Centre for American Studies, Louisiana State University in Shreveport and The Princeton African Humanities Colloquium, Princeton University. The theme of the conference is: “The Humanities across Cultures.” In 1998 FCT’s first international conference was held at the same town. We are planning to return not merely because of the pull of nostalgia but to mark and celebrate a distinct moment in FCT’s intellectual journey, accomplishments and its possible future.

## Thematic Introduction

An idiom of ‘crisis’ inflects the ongoing conversations about the state of the humanities in different parts of the world today. Perhaps it has been like this for some time. There is no doubt that the renditions of ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ of this state vary from location to location. At one level inadequate policies, dearth of resources, and narrow instrumental visions have negatively affected the humanities education in different continents. But at a deeper level the idea of the humanities with its dominant philosophical provenance has created difficulties for its creative mobilization and stifled its elaboration.

Like many other categories associated with the emergence of the modern West, the idea of the humanities has both enabled and disabled conversations about the role of the arts in the global community. There is no doubt that the concept of the humanities- and the practices and institutions surrounding it, has enabled global conversations by establishing the centrality of imaginative works in the making of democratic subjects and collective living. Even in those countries in the Global South where the discourse of the future is often associated with ‘development’, modern technology, and science, the humanities have survived against the wishes of the technological state, sometimes by invoking the prestige of value-free science or, in some instances, claiming association with the ideas and ideals of ancient civilizations, real or imagined. At the same time, however, the association of the humanities with modes of classicism has disabled the range of conversations about how the humanities worked in the modern period and restricted our understanding of the role of the arts across cultures and in multicultural societies. When the humanities seem to be authorized by an invocation of dead languages and civilizations, they may appear to be the mere extension of a foundational narrative, one that is intimately connected to Humanism and the cultures of the European Renaissance at the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th. Indeed, the humanities as they are organized in many European and American universities are still perceived as centers for the study of European high culture and its ideals. In the United States, for example, perennial debates on what constitute the humanities are caught between the desire to imagine the arts as part of a European project with its roots in ancient Greece and Rome and the need to understand the human experience across cultures.

These debates become even more complicated when we turn to the role of the humanities in the Global South. Here, we find elites, many of them products of colonial or Euro-American universities, who see the arts--and invest in them--as part of their will to be modern subjects in the European sense of the



word. In the former colonial universities that still hold much sway in the Global South, the humanities are celebrated as insignias of the colonized elites' mastery of European high culture often at the expense of the larger human experiences that are embodied in the everyday lives of those excluded from these privileged centers of learning. At the same time, the humanities are institutionally separated from the technological institutions and developmental paradigms that are assumed to embody the imagination of a postcolonial future. In this context, the bureaucratic elite in the Global South is impatient, indifferent, or hostile toward the humanities as an integral part of the modernizing project, considering them a luxury or surplus that "underdeveloped" economies cannot afford. How, then, can we imagine the humanities in a global frame? How can we imagine conversations about the arts across cultures?

Acknowledging that the humanities cannot be reduced to a single episode in European history, or to be confined to a select set of authors and text written in Italy or Northern Europe in the late 16th century; can be a good starting point. But a far more productive approach is to rethink and re-theorize European Humanism itself in order to understand its unspoken presuppositions and its subterranean connections to other worlds. For a while Humanism may have been an important conduit for the invention of Europe (a point recognized by Desiderius Erasmus, the crown prince of the Christian Humanists), it can also be interpreted as a sign of what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called the provincialization of Europe. Reading Humanism in a global context, for example, exposes it to the destabilizing forces of globalization in the early modern period. Read as an outward, rather than an inward, looking project, European Humanism emerges under the pressures of the tensions between the European city-states and the Ottoman Empire and the discovery of the new World and early European encounters with Africa and Asia. It is within this context that some of the central writers in this tradition (Montaigne, for example) struggle to understand the status of the emergent categories of the self and the other within the expanding networks of global trade and cultural contact. The epic texts of the period (*Luis Vaz de Camões, Os Lusíadas* or Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote*) are generated by the Portuguese and Spanish voyages in Africa. A crucial turning point in the emergence of European Humanism is the discovery of ancient Greek texts (most prominently Aristotle) in Arabic translation. What does it mean to return Humanism to its global conditions of possibility? What would its project look like reading from below--from the sites in the Global South that constitute what, after Frederic Jameson, we would call its political unconscious?

But is provincializing Europe enough in thinking about the humanities across cultures? Doesn't the word itself already carry within it the claims and counter-claims of the European colonizing project in the last five hundred years? Students of the Global South cannot escape the fact that they are products of the European project of rule and control, a project in which the idea of culture came to play an indispensable role. In fact, there is a theoretical and pragmatic aspect to the role of the humanities in a colonial situation. Colonialism is a theoretical project: it classifies peoples, taxonomizes languages, and universalizes its authorized cultural practices. Each of these tasks is carried through disciplinary formations--anthropology, history, comparative religion, and philology--that manufacture colonial subjects in a subjunctive role. And within the context of what Fanon famously called a 'dying colonialism', the humanities are as important as the sciences in either holding back the colonized subjects' will to freedom or redirecting it. The pragmatic dimension to the role of the humanities in colonial



governmentality is equally important. Orientalist philology is inseparable from the idea of the law; English is the discipline through which Macaulay's "mimic men" are produced; colonial anthropology mediates the crisis of the colonial space. The humanities, rather than the sciences, are the authorized disciplines in the colonial sphere. And while decolonization leads to their loss of prestige, the humanities do not simply disappear; rather, they exist as a resource for new modes of social control. In postcoloniality, local elites need philology or comparative religion to justify new forms of cultural fundamentalism; they need European languages to enforce their exceptionalism; they need history and literature as a handmaiden of power. On the surface, postcolonial elites do not seem to care much about the humanities until they need texts and theories to justify sectarianism, ethnic prejudice, and caste privilege. Even genocides come to be justified through invocations of identities and differences produced by ancient texts.

This negative history may support the views of those scholars who believe, with Fanon, that our task is to find a way outside this Europe where they are never done talking of the human, yet murder human beings "everywhere they find them, at the corner of everyone of their own streets, in all the corners of the world." Escaping from Europe and its Humanism might relieve us of its burdens and anxieties and open up a critical engagement with the role of the system of the arts in other parts of the world. What is the vision of a humanities that emerges out of Chinese, Arabic, African, Indian, and Meso-American traditions? Can new, broader ideas, about the humanities enable a rethinking of locality as a resource for conversations across cultures rather than the source of anxieties about nation and region? Can we recuperate classical texts and practices as means to humanistic ends rather than instruments of justifying domination? And what would the institutional structures for this global humanities look like? Affirming the idea of the humanities on a global scale is a significant step in getting out of the "savage slot" (Michel-Rolph Trouillot) and recognizing the Global South as a site for the articulation and the re-articulation of the human. Theories may travel or change, but the human subject remains consistent.

We see this conference as an invitation and a challenge for concentric conversations about the humanities in a world where ideas and ideals seem to be under constant threat both from the relentless process of globalization and the reemergence of nationalism: What would an idea of the humanities outside Humanism look like? How do ideas of the humanities travel and circulate in the world? What are the humanities good for, especially in places grappling with the challenges of bare life? Can we still trust an aesthetic education to produce moral subjects and to create new publics? How are the humanities connected to current theories on the environment, law, and justice? How do the humanities interact with the sciences in the age of new technologies? What is the role of texts and textual practices, including translation, in the production or rethinking of conversations across cultures? How have the humanities been theorized in different parts of the world? It is our hope that these leading questions might enable us to respond to Fanon's challenge at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth*: "For Europe, for ourselves, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man [person]."



## Special Session

A Plenary Session of the conference will be devoted to a close reading of *The Last Brahmin* (2007) by Rani Siva Sankara Sarma.

Can there be a people without religion? Can there be cultural heritages with neither textual nor anthropomorphic centre points? How to configure inheritances in cultural traditions that faced colonialism? Can one think of a tradition outside the pervasive frame of (Christian) European heritage? The one singular work that enables one to address such questions in the Indian context is *The Last Brahmin* (2007). *The Last Brahmin* is a reflective intellectual (auto) biography of a Sanskrit Pandit of contemporary times. Written in Telugu by a schoolteacher of Sanskrit, this work embodies an effort to grapple with the enigma of the Brahman tradition, its pervasive spread across periods, movements, forms, and examines its implications and stakes.

Given the fact that the entire conceptual heritage (of the humanities) we work with today is deeply implicated in “the barely secularized heritage of theology” (Derrida) of Europe, any attempt to reorient teaching and research in the humanities in the Indian context can draw on works (from across cultures) such as *The Last Brahmin*.

Rani Siva Sankara Sarma presently teaches Sanskrit at a Junior College in Andhra Pradesh. His literary work includes poetry, short stories, literary essays; he also wrote a poem in Sanskrit on the Ramayana. He also wrote collaborative hybrid poetry with Dalit writers. Some of his major works include *Grahanataravasi*, *Purana Vedam*, and *Americanism*.

*The Last Brahmin* was originally published in Telugu (Hyderabad: New Syllabus, 2002) and has later been translated as *The Last Brahmin: Life and Reflections of a Modern-day Sanskrit Pandit*, Rani Siva Sankara Sarma by D. Venkat Rao (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007 & (paperback) - 2012).

## Submission Deadline

500-word abstract or proposal is due by August 1, 2017. The abstract should have a title for the presentation along with the name and institutional affiliation of the presenter and should be mailed as an email attachment to Simon Gikandi, ([sgikandi@princeton.edu](mailto:sgikandi@princeton.edu)) and Bishnu Mohapatra ([bishnumohapatra10@gmail.com](mailto:bishnumohapatra10@gmail.com)), the Conveners of the Conference with a copy marked to Prafulla Kar ([prafullakar@gmail.com](mailto:prafullakar@gmail.com)). Complete papers should be limited to 12 pages (approximately 20 minutes of presentation time). A longer version may be submitted for possible publication in the *Journal of Contemporary Thought* or in the conference volume brought out by the Forum. The completed paper should reach the Conveners of the Conference by October 31, 2017.

## Conference Volume

Select papers from the conference and from those submitted in response to the “Call for Papers” will be included in the conference volume. Completed papers for the conference volume should reach the Conference Conveners as email attachments by April 10, 2018.



## Registration Deadline

The last date for receiving the registration fee is September 20, 2017. The fee may be paid through a bank draft drawn in favor of Forum on Contemporary Theory payable in Baroda. An option for a direct bank transfer is also available and can be made upon request. Overseas participants may pay through checks drawn in favor of Forum on Contemporary Theory. The amount should be sent to the Forum's address mentioned on the website ([www.fctworld.org](http://www.fctworld.org)). We encourage the participants to register early so that their accommodation is secured at the Mayfair Palm Beach Resort where the conference would be held. All participants need to be pre-registered. The registration fee is non-refundable. Accommodation is on a shared basis.

The following are the details of the registration fee:

1. Participant from India Rs.12000/
2. Overseas Participant US \$500/
3. Participant from SAARC countries: US \$250
4. Local Participant (without accommodation) Rs.6000/

The registration fee for the outstation participant includes food and accommodation. Participants can arrive to check in after lunch on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2017. On December 20<sup>th</sup>, the final day of the conference lunch will be served. Please check out of your rooms by 12 noon on that day. The conference begins at 5 pm on the 17th December and end with lunch on the 20th.



## Keynote Speaker

Simon Gikandi is Robert Schirmer Professor of English at Princeton University, where he is affiliated with the Departments of Comparative Literature and African American Studies and the Program in African Studies. Before that he was Robert Hayden Collegiate Professor of English at the University of Michigan and the director of the Program in Comparative Literature. Gikandi was elected second vice president of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in December 2016. He will become the first vice-president of the MLA in 2018 and the association's president in 2019. He served as editor of *PMLA*, the official journal of the MLA, from 2011 to 2016.

Born in Nyeri, Kenya, Gikandi earned his BA in literature, with first-class honors, from the University of Nairobi. As a British Council Scholar at the University of Edinburgh, he graduated with an MLitt in English studies. He has a PhD in English from Northwestern University.

Gikandi's major fields of research and teaching are Anglophone literatures and cultures of Africa, India, the Caribbean, and postcolonial Britain; literary and critical theory; the black Atlantic and the African diaspora; and the English novel. His current research projects are on slavery and modernity, African philology, and cultures of the novel.

He is the author of many books and articles, including *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature*; *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism*; and *Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, a *Choice* Outstanding Academic Publication for 2004. He is the coauthor of *The Columbia Guide to East African Literature in English since 1945*, the editor of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of African Literature*, and the coeditor of *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*. His book *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* was winner of the MLA's James Russell Lowell Award; winner of the Melville J. Herskovits Award, given by the African Studies Association for the most important scholarly work in African studies; and a *Choice* Outstanding Academic Title. He is the editor of *The Novel in Africa and the Caribbean since 1950*, volume 11 of the Oxford History of the Novel in English.

Gikandi is the recipient of a number of awards, including the President's Award for Distinguished Teaching at Princeton University (2014), a Guggenheim fellowship (2001), and an American Council of Learned Societies fellowship (1989). He has also received fellowships from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.



## Conference Location

Gopalpur, also known as Gopalpur-on-Sea, is a charming and quaint beach destination situated in the Bay of Bengal in the State of Odisha; around 15 km from Berhampur. An important port during the British rule, the place is steeped in rich colonial history. A visitor's delight, its picturesque beaches, religious shrines, long stretch of cashew nut trees, natural hot springs, a black buck wildlife sanctuary and olive ridley sea turtles that use the beaches in and around Gopalpur as nesting sites enthrall many. The nearby trading town of Berhampur is famous for its hand woven Tassar silk textiles and pickles.

For further information please contact:

### 1. Prafulla C. Kar

Convener, Forum on Contemporary Theory, Baroda, India

Tel: (0265) 2320870 (Office)

Email: [prafullakar@gmail.com](mailto:prafullakar@gmail.com)

### 2. Simon Gikandi

Academic Convener

Robert Schirmer Professor of English

Princeton University, USA

Email: [sgikandi@princeton.edu](mailto:sgikandi@princeton.edu)

### 3. Bishnu Mohapatra

Academic Convener

Professor and Senior Academic Fellow, Forum on Contemporary Theory, Baroda, India

Email: [bishnumohapatra10@gmail.com](mailto:bishnumohapatra10@gmail.com)

### 4. William D. Pederson

Conference Collaborator

Professor of Political Science, the American Studies Endowed Chair, and the Director of the International Lincoln Center at Louisiana State University, Shreveport, USA

Email: [william.pederson@lsus.edu](mailto:william.pederson@lsus.edu)

