

Introduction

What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.

—*Michel de Certeau*

This volume is a collection of essays that examine various registers and modes of dialogue among people, land, and space in Tamil South India. The region we are concerned with is the area of peninsular South India roughly corresponding to the modern state of Tamilnadu.¹ Cultural constructions of place and space have been of central importance throughout the history of this region. Focusing on the notion of geography in its strictest sense, that is, on verbal descriptions of land and space and how these descriptions build and inform diverse social and aesthetic realities, each essay in this volume raises and addresses conceptual issues regarding Tamil geographies. The authors examine “texts” drawn from a range of time periods and a variety of sources in Tamil society and culture: imaginative literature, performances, historical events and narratives, religious rituals, and daily life in contemporary Tamilnadu. The essays offer fresh interpretations and methodological approaches.

The idea for this book grew out of conversations that took place among some of the authors, in the context of a panel on the topic of “Tamil Geographies” at the University of Wisconsin’s Annual Conference on South Asia. Martha Ann Selby, the convener of the panel, had been intrigued by the ways in which the insights of her anthropologist friends working on Tamil culture resonated with her own interests and findings related to conceptions of space in Tamil literature. Key ideas regarding landscape that she had discerned in the constructions of aesthetic universes in classical Tamil poetics were reflected—transmuted, yes, but still recognizable in language and practice—in contemporary Tamil discourses about space and identity. The original participants in the Madison

panel, Martha Ann Selby, Indira Viswanathan Peterson, Isabelle Clark-Decès, Diane P. Mines, and E. Valentine Daniel (the discussant), were amazed and delighted at how well the papers—on classical poetry, eighteenth-century drama, the narrative of a village temple ritual, and a ritual exorcism—deepened and informed each other. We decided to put together a volume of essays on Tamil geographies, with Selby and Peterson collaborating as editors. The scholars who joined our enterprise have enriched and widened its scope with their essays on the cosmographies of a medieval royal dynasty, the sacred geographies of an ancient city and a Śaiva religious poem, Tamil temple architecture, and the spatial discourses of the theatrical stage and the home in Tamilnadu today. Together, the essays explore the idea of an identifiably Tamil disposition or range of attitudes, a Tamil habitus (in Pierre Bourdieu's terminology) regarding space and place.

*Tamil Geographies in the
Context of the Scholarship on Space and Place*

The authors of these essays are indebted in varying degrees to the writings of Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Michel de Certeau (1984) on culture. We have also engaged with the recent surge of interest in the cultural discourses of space and place that has resulted in several volumes of essays on these subjects by anthropologists and cultural geographers. The social and cultural construction of place is the focus of *Senses of Place* (Feld and Basso, editors, 1996), a collection of essays from diverse disciplinary perspectives, and *Inventing Places: Studies in Cultural Geography* (Anderson and Gale, editors, 1992), essays by cultural geographers. The essayists in *Place/Culture/Representation* (Duncan and Ley, editors, 1993) are concerned with representations and discourses in the Western discipline of cultural geography, and European representations of the geographies of "others" in particular. The writings in *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space* (Hirsch and O'Hanlon, editors, 1995) focus on the idea of landscape as the site of interaction between space and place. All of these recent collections have illumined space and place as socially and culturally constructed ideas. In the new scholarship, European ideologies of time and space have been set in juxtaposition with non-Western ones, and European "geographical" representations of the spatial environments of cultural others have been placed against indigenous understandings to challenge the claims to the

objectivity of Enlightenment and colonialist geographical projects. Following the challenge of feminist and postmodern critiques, these essays have also broadened the field of cultural geography to include voices, perspectives, and subjects that had previously been excluded—female, non-elite, and non-exotic everyday spaces in the “modern” West itself—thus acknowledging geographical constructions as sites of contestations for power.²

The thematic and interdisciplinary range of our own volume, and its geographically specific focus, are intentional. We take our cue from Anderson and Gale, who suggest that “the cultural process by which people construct their understandings of the world is an inherently geographic concern. In the course of generating new meanings and decoding existing ones, people construct spaces, places, landscapes, regions, and environments. In short, they construct geographies” (*Inventing Places*, 1992, p. 4). By examining cosmology, space, landscape, environment, region, village, temple, the home and stage, in short, the entire range of geographical constructions in Tamil India, we hope to illuminate the nature of these constructions in the context of broader, inter-related ideas of place and space. We approach verbal as well as other sorts of geographical constructions as *process*, hoping to give insight into how Tamils tell what Michel de Certeau has called “spatial stories”; how, through imaginative and expressive acts and performances, space becomes a “practiced place” in the Tamil region. We believe that the focus on a specific cultural region allows us to pursue the kind of “local” knowledge without which theory loses its edge. As Clifford Geertz puts it in his essay on the value of micro-studies of particular places and cultures, studying particular cultural geographies “is not a matter of reducing large things to small. . . . It is a matter of giving shape to things: exactness, force, intelligibility.”³

The essays also interrogate univocal readings of Tamil geographies throughout history. We are interested in migrations, fissures, erasures, and displacements, as much as in dwellings and continuities, in margins and peripheries as well as in centers and centering, in exclusions and contestations as well as in affirmations, as these are manifested over time in the geographical discourses of the Tamil region. The thematic explorations reveal other sorts of dialogues at play within Tamil cultural discourses themselves, for instance, among older Tamil and transregional constructions of space. Among the conversations we wish to represent and generate in this book are those among humanists and anthropologists, with respect to the ideas of space and place. Returning to the question with

which we began—“Is there a ‘Tamil’ grammar of space and place?”—we find that our essays test the limits of our diverse disciplinary approaches, and suggest that the answers to the questions are more complex than we might have imagined at the beginning of our enterprise.

The “Tamil” Region in Historical Perspective

The definition of regions and regionalism in India has been the subject of much discussion among anthropologists, sociologists and cultural geographers of South Asia.⁴ While there is considerable evidence for the existence in the Indian subcontinent throughout the history of cultural regions conceived on a variety of bases, the most recent subdivision of the territories of the Indian nation-state after 1947 has been into “linguistic” states that are at the same time recognized as “cultural” regions with long histories. Marked by the dominance of the Dravidian language Tamil, with an ancient literature (dating back to the second century C.E. at the very least) and historical consciousness rooted in the region, the peninsular portion of South India has always tacitly been recognized as a distinct cultural region.⁵ Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century movements emphasizing perceived continuities with an older “Tamil” regional and language-based culture have played an important role in the construction of the modern linguistic state of Tamilnadu (Irschick, 1969; Ramaswamy, 1997, 1999).⁶

Classical Tamil literature is explicitly conscious about the close relationships among language, geographical territory, and culture. The first book of the *Tolkāppiyam*, the oldest extant grammar of Tamil language and poetry, is prefaced by an introductory verse that defines the geographical boundaries of the region in which the Tamil language and its grammar are operative; this is “the good world where Tamil is spoken (stretching from) northern Vēñkaṭam to Kumari in the South.”⁷ Later texts offer variations of this formula.⁸ The contours of the map of modern Tamilnadu are not widely divergent from this ancient “map,” except for the splitting off of Cēranāṭu, the southwestern portion of the ancient region, into medieval and modern Kerala, with its own language (Malayalam) and distinct cultural identity.⁹ When the Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh was carved out of the older Madras presidency in 1956, the Vēñkaṭam hill (modern Tirupati), about one hundred miles north of Madras, the older northern boundary of the Tamil culture-area, was absorbed into Andhra Pradesh.



The modern state of Tamil Nadu (in 1969, the name “Madras” was changed to “the land of Tamil” or “the land of the Tamils”)¹⁰ covers the plains of the rivers Palar, Kaveri, Pennar, and Tamraparni, corresponding to the *nāṭu* and *maṅṭalam* territories of the Pallava, Cōḷa, and Pāṅṭiya rulers of the fifth through the sixteenth centuries. The region is bounded by the Western Ghats mountain ranges and Kerala (the old Cēra territory) in the west, the Coorg (Kudagu) hills in the northwest,

and the so-called Coromandel coastal plain in the east. Kanyakumari, also known as Cape Comorin (Tamil *kumari muṇai*) on the Indian Ocean, identical at least in name with *kumari*, the southern boundary mentioned in the *Tolkāppiyam* and other old texts, mark the region's southern boundary.¹¹ The continuing power of the notion of a Tamil region bounded by Tirupati and 'Kumari' is reflected in *Vēnkaṭam Mutal Kumari Varai* ("From Vēnkaṭam to Kumari"), the title of a recent series of volumes on temples and sacred places in the region.¹²

To be complete, however, a study of Tamil geographies must take into account a long history of heterogeneity and change in the regional culture.¹³ In the *caṅkam* corpus of poems, the earliest recorded literature in Tamil, the region is represented as being constituted of small chiefdoms, essentially demarcated by geographical features and ecotypes.¹⁴ The gods and ritual practices of north Indian brahmanism are already present in this literature. The sixth-century epic *Cilappatikāram*, with its strongly Jaina religious background, celebrates the three realms (*nāṭu*) of the Cōḷa, Pāṇṭiya, and Cēra, and their connections with the Greco-Roman world. The somewhat later (seventh century) epic *Maṇimēkalai* presents a Tamil cultural space that is connected through Buddhist religious and other networks, both to North Indian Buddhist culture and to Southeast Asia. From the sixth century onward, the spread of brahmanical cults of the worship of the gods Śiva and Viṣṇu developed into a system of sacred sites and temples that transformed the Tamil landscape. The historical record shows that by the tenth century, the idea of the *maṅṭalam* (Sanskrit *maṅḍala*) political sphere as territorial unit was entrenched in peninsular South India. The Cōḷa and Pāṇṭiya polities of the eleventh through the sixteenth centuries established regional inflections of royal style and conceptions of territory. While Kerala separated itself from the Tamil sphere around the tenth century, by the seventeenth century the rest of the Tamil region came under the rule of Telugu Nayaks who migrated from the Vijayanagar empire in the Deccan. By the eighteenth century, this region included pockets of rule by rulers of varied linguistic and cultural allegiance, such as the Nawab of Arcot and the Marathas of Tanjore, as well as the European coastal settlements that preceded full-fledged British colonial rule. In various ways, our essays reflect on the role of change and the mix of cultural currents in the formation of Tamil geographical discourses.

Space, Place, and Person in Tamil Culture

The most significant studies of Tamil culture in the last thirty years have brought out the centrality of the geographical imagination in this culture. Exploring the world of the earliest Tamil poetic anthologies, A. K. Ramanujan (1967 and 1985) has shown that the aesthetic of *caṅkam* poetry is founded on a grammar of space.¹⁵ According to the exposition of this aesthetic in the *Tolkāppiyam* (probably written in layers over a period ranging from the second century B.C.E. to perhaps as late as the fifth century C.E.), these poems are fundamentally classified into poems of *akam* (“inside”), with love as their subject matter, and poems of *puṟam* (“outside”), with war and public life as their subjects. As we shall see, *akam* and *puṟam* are not merely thematic divisions in ancient poetry but complex concepts that continue to pervade Tamil culture as contrastive pairs, encompassing such “interior/exterior” pairings as heart/body surface, kin/non-kin, and home/world. Both love and war poems are constructed from shared, basic poetic materials. These consist of *mutal* (the “first things”), that is, time (*poḷutu*) and place/type of land (*nilam*); *karu* (“native elements”), that is, the elements characteristically found in a particular type of place, including flora, fauna, and human populations; and *uri* (human feelings) appropriately set in *mutal* and *karu*. Although human feelings are the ultimate focus of these classical Tamil poems, they can be delineated *only in place*, specifically in one of the five “landscapes,” (*tiṅnais*) into which space is organized, and that correspond to the major ecotypes (*nilam*) of the Tamil region: hill, field, pasture, seashore, and wasteland.¹⁶ The *Tolkāppiyam* and the *caṅkam* poems themselves offer nothing less than an early Tamil cosmology, in which space is perceived in terms of the contrasted categories of interiority and exteriority, as well as in terms of specific landscapes, with each of these categories and classes of “natural” space being precisely correlated with what would normally be perceived as aspects of culture: human beings, their feelings and actions, and their artifacts.

Place, in the specific sense of a particular location, has been identified as a fundamentally important category in Tamil culture. From at least the sixth century onward, in the Tamil regional setting, the worship of the brahmanical gods Śiva and Viṣṇu became cults of expressive devotion (*bhakti*) to these gods, in the form of particular personae, dwelling in specific places in the Tamil country.¹⁷ The resulting proliferation of temples

and sacred places (*pati, talam*) dedicated to these gods in the Tamil region has been termed a “sacred geography” (Spencer, 1970). Although the localization of deities and myths is by no means a peculiarly Tamil phenomenon, historians of religion have shown that orientation to place is fundamental to Tamil religion in ways that are not shared by Hindu and other religious traditions in other regions of India (e.g., Shulman, 1980). At the same time, while drawing on the spatial and aesthetic world of the *caṅkam* poems, *bhakti* and temple religion postulate very different brahmanical cosmographies in which gods, mortals, and others dwell in complex, ordered spatial worlds later systematically described in the cosmographical sections of the Sanskrit *purāṇas*, pan-Indian compendia of mythic and cosmological lore. In a widely accepted version of *purāṇic* geography, the earth (*bhūrlōka*) consists of seven concentric island-continents (*dvīpa*), each surrounded by an ocean. Bhārata-varṣa (the modern South Asian subcontinent) is the southernmost region of Jambudvīpa (“Rose-apple Island”), which is the most central of the continents, and which has at its center the cosmic Mount Meru, itself the bearer of the celestial abode of the gods.¹⁸ In his seminal work on peasant history in South India, Burton Stein has identified the territorial segmentation of society and culture—already present in the five landscape/culture types of the *caṅkam* poems—as a major distinguishing characteristic of the South Indian region (which he defines as including portions of the Telugu and Kannada-speaking areas, with the Kaveri basin of the Tamil region as the “core” region; Stein, 1980, pp. 54–56). Stein argues that this characteristic relates to the more intensely localized nature of interaction among social groups in South India than in other parts of the Indian subcontinent, exemplified, for instance, in the narrow territorial areas in which marriage and descent systems in South India operate, in comparison with their north Indian counterparts.¹⁹ David Ludden, on the other hand, argues for a more balanced narrative of peasant history in the Tamil region, one in which the importance of social creativity and change stimulated by “widening spheres of social interaction” are given equal weight, without deemphasizing the particularities of the localizing disposition in Tamil culture (Ludden, 1985, pp. 3–18).

According to anthropologist E. Valentine Daniel, the relationships between a Tamil villager and the spaces and places he inhabits and the phenomena and persons he relates with—his body, his *ūr* (“home-village”), his sexual partner—are negotiated through an interaction of his own substance with that of the other, with the aim of maintaining or bringing about an equilibrium of substances (Daniel, 1984, pp. 1–12).

In this view, in Tamil culture, person and place interact with each other in organic ways. Both inhabited spaces (the house, the *ūr*, the *nāṭu*) and the persons who inhabit them, have porous, fluid boundaries (Daniel, 1984, chapters 2 and 3). In fact, Daniel argues that for Tamil villagers, unlike concepts such as *tēcam* (country) and *kirāmam* (village, settlement), *nāṭu* and *ūr*, a person's "home-land" and "home-village," are "person-centric terms that derive their meaning from the contextually shifting spatial orientation of the person" (Daniel, 1984, p. 70). One cannot help noticing the parallels between the home-village that is defined by its interactions with persons, the temples and sacred sites of Tamil *bhakti* religion, and the landscape-types of *caṅkam* poetry, with their designated populations.

A major insight that emerges in the above studies of Tamil culture is that, equally in classical Tamil poetry, medieval *bhakti* religion, and in spatial practices in a modern Tamil village, space and place are "person-centric" and inherently imbued with specific moral and aesthetic qualities. While Daud Ali, in his essay in this volume, rightly points out that this conception of space as an inherently "qualified" phenomenon is a pan-Indian one, the essays presented here, including Ali's own, illuminate specifically Tamil cultural inflections of the idea, especially in complex imaginings of space *as* place. In this connection we might mention a recent essay by Sumathi Ramaswamy on the ways in which late-nineteenth-century Tamil intellectuals deployed European theories of the "lost continent" of Lemuria to remap the Tamil region (*tamiḷakam*). The new maps made by the Tamil literati included geographical features which are mentioned in older Tamil literature, and are said to have been lost to the sea during the Lemurian catastrophes (these include the apocryphal Kumari river and mountain). Through this deployment of Lemuria, Ramaswamy argues, the Tamil mapmakers reclaimed lost cultural territory for the Tamil land, and cartographically converted Lemuria from "the paleo-*space* of the European imagination into the lived *place* of the Tamil imagination."²⁰

While the essays in this volume build on the pioneering scholarship of Ramanujan, Daniel, and others, each essay explores new material or takes a new methodological stance toward familiar "texts." The original and important questions about Tamil geographies raised here should bring us considerably closer to describing a Tamil habitus of space and place. For example, the discussion of center-periphery cosmologies in several of the essays, in diverse historical, social, and disciplinary contexts, such as temple architecture and conceptualizations of political

territory, allows us to explore the interactions between these and the older and, it seems, remarkably persistent, *akam/puram* pairing in Tamil culture over time and across milieux. As will be evident from the brief descriptions of the individual essays that follow, together the essays in this book give new insights into the relationships between verbal texts and the expressive practices through which space and place are constructed in the Tamil region, and make us look afresh at the ways in which space, place, person, and communities relate to one another in Tamil culture.

The Essays

Martha Ann Selby's essay, "Dialogues of Space, Desire, and Gender in Tamil *Caṅkam* Poetry," discusses the earliest theoretical formulations of the conventions that inform classical Tamil poetry and poetics. These conventions resurface in surprising and myriad ways in later Tamil literary texts and cultural practices. Her essay thus serves as an introduction to the other essays in the volume. Selby begins with a discussion of the aesthetic system developed in the oldest extant grammar and poetics in Tamil, the *Tolkāppiyam*, based on a language of space that is articulated in terms of the fluid complementarities of *akam* and *puram*, resonating with *tiṇai* landscapes (see above). Selby shows that the ultimate goal of *caṅkam* rhetoric as described in the *Tolkāppiyam* is the erasure, through poetic means, of what critic Georges Poulet has called the "sense of incompatibility between consciousness and objects of consciousness." She suggests that the language of the *caṅkam* poets arose from a desire for the erasure of the split between self and *tiṇai* (geographic/poetic "landscape"), foisting this desire outward onto the environment itself. Through close readings of poems from the two anthologies *Narriṇai* and *Kuruntokai*, Selby examines several ways in which the *caṅkam* poets reshaped their geophysical surroundings by literally "incorporating" them and transforming them into a system of language and poetic "gesture."

Norman J. Cutler's essay, "Four Spatial Realms in *Tirukkōvaiyār*," provides an exploration of the reworking of classical Tamil literary convention within a medieval Śaiva devotional framework. *Tirukkōvaiyār*, composed by the ninth-century saint Māṇikkavācakar, is perhaps the finest example of a work from the *kōvai* genre, wherein the romantic elements of *akam* (expressed through the themes and conventions of

love poems) mingle with heroic *puram* themes, here evoked in reference to the persona of the god Śiva, who is the hero of the poem. In this poem, interleaved with the classical dimensions of landscape delineated in the *Tolkāppiyam* are other sacred geographies, of Śiva's local residences in Tamilnadu and his "translocal" residence on Mount Kailāsa in the northern Himālaya mountain range. Cutler examines the ways in which these several geographies are configured in *Tirukkōvaiyār* and how they construct a specific poetic vision of sacred Śaiva reality in the Tamil context.

Indira Viswanathan Peterson explores the ways in which the *kuṛavañci*, an eighteenth-century Tamil dramatic genre, deploys discourses of landscape, continuing patterns from the classical and medieval literature, yet diverging from them in significant respects. Written by court poets for rulers of small "kingdoms," *kuṛavañci* plays glorify the patron-king, his town (*ūr*), and the god of the temple located in that town. However, the central characters in the *kuṛavañci* genre, the eponymous Kuṛavañci, a nomadic fortune-teller from the hills, and her birdcatcher husband, are marginal figures from the wilderness. Their activities are described in detail, in relation to the hill and field landscapes, and to the upper-class characters in the play, including the lovelorn lady whose fortune the Kuṛavañci tells. Peterson suggests that the genre's innovative treatment of older landscape conventions, and its focus on new and marginal social identities, embody an imaginative response to changing social relations and relations between person and land in Tamilnadu in an era of migrations and fragmented polities. This essay reminds us in a striking way of the uncanny talent that Tamil poets have for infusing the mundane world with profound poetic and symbolic significance.

In "Ruling in the Gaze of God: Thoughts on Kanchipuram's *Maṇḍala*," D. Dennis Hudson discusses the symbolically potent threads that weave through *caṅkam* literature, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina religious narratives, temple architecture, and city planning. Poykai, an eighth-century poet, described the main temple complex at Kanchipuram as "a fortified and blooming flower that never closed," thereby building on an earlier poet's description of the city as an "open lotus blossom." Peeling away the many layers of development, urban growth, and modernity, Hudson employs the descriptions of the city found in old Tamil and Chinese texts as a lens through which discernment of the original city plan—a lotus-shaped *maṇḍala*—is made possible. He reflects on the many ways in which geographies are reflexive and found reciprocally mirrored in multivalent orderings of urban, cosmic, and ritual spaces.

Daud Ali defines geography as “an inquiry into the changing relations, both material and ideological, between humans and their physical environments” in his essay titled “Cosmos, Realm, and Property in Early Medieval South India.” Linking the hierarchized ontologies found in early *purāṇic* texts with medieval geographies that are at once topographical and ideological, Ali examines the fascinating homologies created by kings between *purāṇic* ontology and royal conquest, and describes royal attempts to center polities in such a way that kings are not merely the centers of their own physical kingdoms, but are at the center of the whole of Bhārata-varṣa. Ali cites a specific case of such recentering and reorganization in a study of the imperial formation of the Cōḷa dynasty as its kings attempted to rearticulate their realms within the geographical construct of Bhārata-varṣa. Likening the mountain, temple, river, country, wasteland, court, city, and balcony of medieval literature to the *caṅkam tiṇai* system in that these places have “inherent and differential moral and aesthetic value,” Ali challenges us to understand “place” in Cōḷa India as a construct that is fundamentally at odds with cartographic space.

Samuel K. Parker’s essay, “Sanctum and *Gopuram* at Madurai: Aesthetics of *Akam* and *Puram* in Tamil Temple Architecture,” proposes a “reading” of Hindu temples as architectural “texts.” Parker’s theoretically fresh and elegant argument that architecture is in itself a language that changes and evolves over time in much the same way in which linguistic usage changes over time through praxis serves to uncover the patterns of encoding that are metaphorically embodied in Tamil temples. Parker recognizes the “spatiotemporal aesthetics” set out in early *caṅkam* literature—the fluid complementarity of *akam* and *puram*—in the “spatiotemporal order of the later Dravidian temple style,” even as it continues to develop in the present context. Working with A. K. Ramanujan’s description of a *caṅkam* poem as expanding and contracting “in concentric circles, with the concrete physical particular at the center, getting more and more inclusive and abstract as we move outward,” Parker demonstrates the spatial concentricity of Dravidian temples as “perpetually incomplete structures-in-process,” with the intimate *akam* of the sanctum gradually opening outward to the public *puram* exteriors marked by the *gopurams*.

In “From Wasteland to Bus Stand: The Relocation of Demons in Tamilnadu,” Isabelle Clark-Decès argues that Tamil women are “taught, even pressured, to frame their personal predicaments within the idiom of demonic possession”; that is, possession by *pēys*, who are

generally thought to be spirits of humans who have met with an untimely end. Their deaths usually result from suicides due to unrequited love, and their attacks on young women are said to be motivated by love, lust, and an obsessive desire for intimacy. In her ethnographic study, Clark-Decès identifies specific landscapes in which these possessions occur, which are fallow, dry wastelands beyond the boundaries of settled areas. The landscapes of *pēy* possession are intimately tied to classical *caṅkam* constructions of wasteland or, more specifically, to the *tiṇai* called *pālai* (that of vast, desert wastes and abject hardship and separation) both spatially and temporally. Here, the romantic “separation” that occurs within *akam* poetry of the *pālai* type is brought about by the *pēy*, who catches “his girl” and forces her mental and physical separation from her community and from her husband. In her brilliant analysis of ritual discourses surrounding *pēy* possession, Clark-Decès uncovers what amounts to a “reinvention” of *pālai* conventions to suit the urban contexts of post-modernity: desolate, arid wastelands are reidentified as bus stands, railway tracks, or roads to movie theaters.

In her lyrical ethnographic essay, Diane P. Mines explores ways in which “movement makes space” in “Waiting for Vellāḷakaṇṭaṅ: Narrative, Movement, and Making Place in a Tamil Village.” Working with Michel de Certeau’s assertion that “space is actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it,” Mines describes some specific ways in which the residents of a village (*ūr*) in Tirunelvēli District define the *ūr* by the walks they take around and through it. She explains this “actuation of space” in terms of movement as narrative, as a form of “telling,” arguing that different processional routes taken by different temple organizations “make” the village in multiple discursive ways. Since “each procession produces an alternative social and spatial reality in competition with other versions of that reality,” Mines suggests that we cannot understand the *ūr* in terms of a fixed spatial entity, but that it must be understood as “a set of overlapping alternatives.” Through her analysis of the story of Vellāḷakaṇṭaṅ and the processions that honor him, Mines demonstrates how these multivalent “tellings” and enactments form part of “a current discourse on spatial and social relations” in the *ūr*.

Sara Dickey explores the *akam/puṇam* continuum in contemporary domestic boundary-making in her essay titled “Permeable Homes: Domestic Service, Household Space, and the Vulnerability of Class Boundaries in Urban South India.” Domestic workers help to create and support their employers’ class standing, but also introduce dangerous

“outside” elements into a protected “inside” order. Domestic service “involves a mixing of spatial categories” which informs and “continually shapes daily behavior . . . molds . . . concepts of self and other, and affects . . . movements through space.” Dickey deftly illustrates the fluidity of *akam* and *puṛam* in her meticulous discussion of domestic spaces; for instance, how particular parts of a home are more “*akam*” than others, or how something as seemingly public as a street is actually *akam* in certain contexts. In her interviews with middle and upper-class employers and with domestic workers, she analyzes concerns and fears about boundary and class transgressions, and what can be transported across boundaries by servants: they can bring in *puṛam* dirt, morals, and disease, and carry out *akam* property and secrets. Arguing that shifting *akam* and *puṛam* complementarities are central to constructions of class identity, Dickey clearly demonstrates that women householders are the primary producers and protectors of class status.

In the final essay of this collection, “Gender Plays: Socio-spatial Paradigms on the Tamil Popular Stage,” Susan Seizer analyzes the use of stage space during performances of a popular theater genre known as “Special *Nāṭakam*” (“Special Drama”). Arguing that “the organization and use of stage space in Special Drama enables what is enacted on stage to speak directly to the dominant organization of Tamil social relations offstage,” Seizer explores the gender dynamics of the comedic duet that typically opens plays of this genre. She finds dialogic ties with classical Tamil conventions, and juxtaposes these with “some of the more uncomfortable ambivalences” that structure contemporary gender relations. She particularly examines the lives of actresses, women who invert the typical Tamil ideal of “the chaste wife” due to the public nature of their livelihoods. As Seizer puts it, being constantly in the public limelight “threatens to expose the fragility of the culturally naturalized division of gendered spheres into home and world, as actresses move onto public stages to enact what are meant to be the most private of relations.” In her detailed and refreshing analysis, Seizer offers us her intimate understanding of the Special Drama stage as gendered space; as a space that is, once again, “actuated” by human movement.

In sum, every essay addresses basic problems of boundaries and definitions of space, and how these are continually modified (and sometimes even radically violated) to redraw parameters and remake identities by superimposing and “grafting” new borders onto old. Although each essay draws on a different discipline and employs a different methodological

approach, it is apparent from each one that lines between the “literary” and the “anthropological,” for instance, are often blurred, and at times totally erased. While we have no pretensions or illusions of being comprehensive, it is our hope that this volume will serve well as an interdisciplinary introduction to Tamil culture. The essays clearly demonstrate the ways in which early aesthetic and linguistic paradigms have survived through the present moment as living, vital expressions through which contemporary boundaries are shaped and constructed—through poetic convention, temple construction, ritual experience, through concerns about maintaining differences between the “home” and the “world,” and by an act as seemingly simple as taking a walk. They also illuminate the many ways in which, when confronted by new paradigms and experiences, Tamil individuals have continually modified and restructured classical paradigms through literary and metaphorical mapping, to reshape political, social, and religious identities. We hope that the volume will be of use to teachers of general courses on Asian and South Asian civilizations, and that it will also provide comparative material for use in courses on literature, anthropology, and religion. Even though the essays are, for the most part, grouped by “discipline,” we strongly encourage our readers to read the book randomly, or to read the essays in tandem across academic disciplines. We would suggest, for instance, that our readers pair Norman J. Cutler’s essay with Daud Ali’s, Martha Ann Selby’s with Isabelle Clark-Decès’, Indira Viswanathan Peterson’s with Diane P. Mines’ or Susan Seizer’s, or perhaps Samuel K. Parker’s essay with Susan Seizer’s, in order to experience the rich and endlessly generative nature of Tamil conceptions of space and place.

Notes

1. The idea of a ‘Tamil’ region is discussed more thoroughly below.
2. “Anthropologists are concerned less about place in broad philosophical and humanistic terms than about places as sites of power struggles or about displacement, as histories of annexation, absorption, and resistance.” Feld and Basso, 1996, p. 5.
3. Geertz, “Afterword,” in Feld and Basso, 1996, p. 262.
4. See, for instance, Crane, ed., 1967, a collection of papers on the issue of regions in South Asia, resulting from a symposium on the subject. See especially the essays by Cohn and De.
5. Note, however, that this region is also perceived as a subdivision of the larger regional division of “South India,” distinguished from the North by geographical location (the Deccan plateau and the peninsula to the south) and the preponderance of Dravidian languages, all of which are related to Old Tamil, the only Dravidian language with an ancient literature. Cultural geographers and anthropologists cite

- the Tamil region as an example of a well-defined region, one that is at once a linguistic, cultural, and historical region in the typological schema outlined in Cohn (in Crane, ed., 1967). For his history of medieval South Indian peasant society, Burton Stein (1980) proposes a South Indian cultural macro-region that includes the southern portions of territory now included in the states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, whose respective Dravidian languages are Kannada and Telugu. On classical Tamil literature, see Hart, 1975 and Ramanujan, 1967 and 1985.
6. On the reorganization of the Indian states on the basis of language, see Wolpert, 2000, pp. 368–369.
 7. “*Vāṭa vēṅkaṭan teṅkumari āyīṭait tamīl kūṟum nallulakattu . . .*”. Prefatory verses by Paṇampāraṇār to *Tolkāppiyam*, *Eḷuttatikāram*, 1–2. For references in the *caṅkam* poems, see *Puraṇāṅṅūru* 6 and 17.
 8. E.g., *Cilappatikāram* VIII.1–2: “*Neṭiyōṅ kuṇṟamum toṭiyōḷ pauvamum tamīl varamparuṭta taṇṇāṭu.*” “The good Tamil land watered by cool rivers and bounded by Neṭiyōṅ (Viṣṇu’s) hill (Vēṅkaṭam) and the Goddess’s (*toṭiyōḷ*) sea.”
 9. For discussions of the geographical boundaries of the Tamil region, see De, especially p. 62ff.; Cohn (both in Crane, ed., 1967), and Stein, 1980.
 10. See Ramaswamy, 1997, pp. 154–161 and *passim*.
 11. Several nineteenth-century Tamil scholars hold that the *kumari* of the *Tolkāppiyam* refers not to Cape Comorin, but to either a mountain or a river of that name, referred to in some of the ancient texts, and which are said, according to legend, to have been submerged in the ocean in successive deluges. See *Tolkāppiyam*, *Eḷuttatikāram*, introduction by K. Subramaniya Pillai; Purnalingam Pillai, 1927; and Kanakasabhai, 1904.
 12. Pāskarattoṅṭaimāṇ, 1967.
 13. For an introduction to the history and culture of the Tamil region, see Nilakanta Sastri, 1955/1976 and 1964.
 14. For the topographical and territorial divisions of the *caṅkam* poems, see Hart, 1975, and Marr, 1985.
 15. The brief exposition of the theory of landscapes and poetic universes that follows draws from A. K. Ramanujan’s “Afterword” in his *Poems of Love and War* (1985).
 16. *Pālai*, “wasteland,” is not a separate landscape-region, but a landscape-type into which any fertile landscape (e.g., mountain or forest) might be transformed. Actually, the texts speak of seven *tiṇais*, but only the five “middlemost” are appropriate for *akam* and *puram* poetry. For a detailed discussion of the *tiṇais* and their deployment in *caṅkam* poems, see Selby, this volume, and Ramanujan, 1967 and 1985.
 17. On place in Tamil devotional (*bhakti*) religion, see Yocum, 1973, and Peterson, 1989. On the localizing character of Tamil temple myths, see Shulman, 1980.
 18. For a detailed discussion of *purāṇic* cosmology, see the essay by Daud Ali in this volume, and Sircar, 1967. There are Buddhist and Jaina cosmographies, as well.
 19. Cross-cousin marriage is the standard practice in many Tamil communities.
 20. Ramaswamy, 1999, p. 69.