

At the Margins of Postcolonial Studies

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Postcoloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: of a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH (149)

As soon as any radically innovative thought becomes an -ism, its specific ground breaking force diminishes, its historical notoriety increases, and its disciples tend to become more simplistic, more dogmatic, and ultimately more conservative, at which time its power becomes institutional rather than analytical.

BARBARA JOHNSON (11)

In the third world no one gets off on being third world.

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK ("What Is It For?" 77)

AS THE EPIGRAPHS above suggest, the "field" of (so-called) postcolonial studies is at that phase in its development in which, like every other revisionary discourse, it is melancholic about its new-found authority and incorporation into institutions of higher learning. This melancholic condition derives not only from postcolonial scholars' apprehension that institutionalizing the critique of imperialism may render it conciliatory but from other significant factors as well, such as their own (First World) place of speaking (which implicates them in the problematic of neo-colonialism), their criteria for political self-legitimation (that is, the impossibility of representing the Third World as anti-imperialist constituency, especially in the face of the retreat of socialism), and their peculiar immobility as a positive oppositional force for curricular change within the (American and British) academies. It is especially in the last sense that post-

colonial studies differs from ethnic studies: for instance, it cannot, unlike African or Asian-American studies, commit itself to canon revision, which is essentially a minoritarian project. Although it is often associated with the impossible category of Third World literature, as a specific form of cultural studies it continually questions such totalizing concepts and thus maintains a critical if not hostile relationship to multiculturalism. The melancholia of postcolonialism also derives from the fact that today it faces its major criticisms and attacks against its very legitimacy and political viability from within its own ranks.¹ The term itself has become suspect: a catch-all phrase for a post (read fashionable) Third Worldism.²

While postcolonial studies has yet to inform positively all scholarly inquiry today, it is not far-fetched to suggest that it has certainly acquired, if not power, a certain institutional cachet, or, to use Arif Dirlik's term, an "aura" of innovativeness. Evidence of this new-found cachet or mystique is lodged, for instance, in a footnote in Naomi Schor's fascinating defense mounted on behalf of French departments in the US. She writes:

Commenting on the interest in postcolonialism, an eminent and respected colleague recently opined that Europe was dead. The statement seems astonishing in view of current (political) and future (economic) developments in that part of the world, which represents a population of 325 million and constitutes the second largest economic block in the world. (33)

What is interesting here is the assertion, by a scholar of such perspicuity as Schor, of the importance of Europe rather than the noting, for instance, of the imbrication of Europe and postcolonial states or her colleague's peculiar disengagement of Europe from its others. In other words, she seems aware of the growing influence of a so-called postcolonial studies, but seems unclear about its scholarly focus, be it the critique of the continuing power of Europe and North America over the Third World (as the work of Edward Said and Samir Amin would testify) or of its institutional place—that it is not a parallel discipline to English or French literary studies, but offers a critique of "national" literatures as such. It is inevitable that this sense of the postcolonial mystique renders the field, for most area- or period-

based scholars, incoherent if not totally "bankrupt," to use Emily Apter's term.³ While there is no doubt that the field has grown rapidly in the past few years, producing its own journals, conferences, book-publishing series, and jobs (the recent spate of readers and anthologies bears testimony to the phenomenon⁴), the field itself remains undefinable and amorphous in its outlines. While it is possible to valorize rather than lament specific aspects of this amorphousness (an issue I will address later in this essay), much of the melancholia from within and the mystification from without emerge, I would argue, from an inadequately enunciated notion of the margin. The largely mechanical connection, even conflation, of postcolonialism with American multiculturalism, despite its perceived difference, even distance, from the latter, has meant that the relation between postcolonial studies and other minority studies has remained under-theorized. What we compromise by neglecting to articulate the linkages between these two (largely academic) initiatives is not only a more textured or nuanced notion of the margin but the very possibility of a "postcolonial" critique. In the following, I consider briefly the ideological thrust of multiculturalism and postcolonialism through a reading of two works by Charles Taylor and Iain Chambers, respectively, not so much to rehearse their differences as to show how both discourses share a notion of the margin (as a spatial category) and thus once more overlook the possibilities of a "postcolonial" critique.

According to Taylor in his "The Politics of Recognition," multiculturalism is based on the recognition of the dialogical nature of identity. The politics of recognition, as he defines it, is based not so much on the admission of historical injustice (as with affirmative action) but on contemporary coequality.⁵ According to Taylor, insofar as identity is constituted in our relations with others, being ignored or being negatively represented could have a detrimental effect on one's sense of self. Thus the right of the powerless or of people in the minority to agitate for proper recognition (through inclusion of their cultural contributions into the curriculum) is deemed consistent with our notions of authenticity and dignity. As Taylor puts it,

The reason for these proposed changes is not, or not mainly, that all students may be missing something important through the ex-

clusion of a certain gender or certain races or cultures, but rather that women and students from the excluded groups are given, either directly or by omission, a demeaning picture of themselves, as though all creativity and worth inhered in males of European provenance. Enlarging and changing the curriculum is therefore essential not so much in the name of a broader culture for everyone as in order to give due recognition to the hitherto excluded. The background premise of these demands is that recognition forges identity.

(65-66)

The key terms in Taylor's analysis of multiculturalism are recognition and respect or the equal right to dignity. Taylor locates the concept of multiculturalism squarely in Western liberalism, and much of his characterization of multiculturalism as the quest for recognition is undergirded by a subjectivist notion of authenticity:

Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, which is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity, and to the goals of self-fulfillment and self-realization in which the ideal is usually couched. (31)

This sense of authenticity, Taylor (quoting Herder) suggests, can be extended to "the people" as well, an idea that then inaugurates the modern form of nationalism. Decolonization, according to Taylor, is "to give the peoples of what we now call the Third World their chance to be themselves unimpeded" (31); in other words, it is a way of returning them to their authentic selves. It is obvious from this emphasis on authenticity that Taylor will privilege traditional and integrated societies, but the key issue in his argument apropos multiculturalism is judgement. No society, he argues, can be judged (as worthy or worthless) before it has been studied with respect. Taylor deploras as hypocritical at worst and condescending at best the form of multiculturalism that demands not just respect and recognition but equal worth before study. As a presumption, he will allow

that it is reasonable to suppose that cultures that have provided the horizon of meaning for large numbers of human beings, of diverse characters and temperaments, over a long period of time—that have, in other words, articulated their sense of the good, the holy, the admirable—are almost certain to have something that deserves our

admiration and respect, even if it is accompanied by much that we have to abhor and reject. (72-73)

Yet *real* judgments of worth, he suggests, must be reserved until after study, a study that will transform our standards of judgment, that will achieve "a fusion of horizons," in Gadamer's sense of the phrase, which will then enable us to form judgments of worth on a comparative basis. Judgments of value and worth "cannot be dictated by a principle of ethics," writes Taylor, they "are ultimately a question of the human will" (69). The fact that a transformation of one's standards of judgment in studying a given culture may make comparative study impossible does not seem to trouble Taylor too much, invested as he is in the core authentic self that apparently can alter its perceptions of a culture without changing its fundamental vision of global cultural differences. To sum up, in Taylor's notion of multiculturalism, hierarchy between groups can be redressed through recognition and respect for the other's authenticity. Marginalized people must be dealt with fairly (63), and all cultures must be given the right to survive in their authenticity. Such a formulation necessarily assumes the following: integrated cultures, traditional long-surviving cultures, stable national, ethnic, and cultural identities, the possibility of studying and completely comprehending the other, comparative studies, and, finally, "authentic" judgments of others based not on ethics but on human will. Taylor's multiculturalism is thus an epistemology of the other that can only make sense within the Christian liberal tradition that he invokes as its proper context. For our purposes, his analysis is useful as a reminder of two aspects of multiculturalism as practised in the US: a) it is essentially supplicatory; for all its talk of revisionism, it asks to partake in the privileges of the centre; and b) it is essentially a reinforcement of Western liberalism. On a more mundane level, we see these claims borne out in Peter Brooks's letter to the editor of the *New York Times* on 19 December 1994. Addressing Yale's latest albatross, the \$20-million gift from Lee Bass (which has since been returned) to establish a Western civilization program, Brooks says most trenchantly: "Western civilization versus multiculturalism is a false opposition." As Roger Rouse argues in his recent analy-

sis of the bourgeois management of the crisis of the nation state in the age of transnationalism, "the greatest significance of conservative monoculturalism," which argues for "a single culture and identity" for the US (381), and of "corporate liberal-multiculturalism," which appropriates the radicalism of left/liberal arguments, lies in their

relationship of complementary opposition. Always offering at least the illusion of significant choice, they have seemed to fully exhaust the field of imaginable alternatives and, in doing so, they have endowed their commonalities [their emphases on bourgeois class positions, nationalism, and educational and political reform] with a powerfully constraining force. (385)

We would do well to remember this point in our discussions of the alliance between postcolonialism and multiculturalism: far from undermining the hegemony of Western civilization, multiculturalism merely expands its frontiers both geographically—world culture itself is appended to the US—and pedagogically—as the universal system of knowledge both in terms of method and ideology.

The discipline of a so-called postcolonial studies, however, is a much more ambiguous one pedagogically, given that it is not really a minority studies. Rather than enhancing the girth of Western liberalism, postcolonial studies, if it is possible to speak of it as a unity or to generalize its political impulse, would work to examine the conditions by which a group arrogates to itself the function of granting or denying recognition and respect. Furthermore, it would seriously call into question Taylor's advocacy of studying the other for comparative purposes as another form of imperialism or orientalism: one that reinscribes the Western cultural relativist as universal subject with the other serving as informant.⁶ However, I would argue that it is the critique of positive knowing, of rationalism, even of humanism and values of radical transformation when undertaken under the sign of post-coloniality, which awkwardly positions postcolonialism as neither liberalism nor (an orthodox) Marxism, that has generated the crisis within this subdiscipline. In other words, it is at this point of differentiation from liberal multiculturalism (which characterizes itself as marginality studies) that postcolonial discourse be-

comes politically vulnerable. Before I take up this theme with reference to Aijaz Ahmad's influential Marxist denunciation of the field on the grounds of its postmodern biases, however, it is imperative to see how the agenda of postmodern criticism again embarrasses "postcoloniality" by once more characterizing it as the discourse of the margin (as the space of otherness), by placing it at the vanguard of cultural and political critique.

Affirmative action and multiculturalism, in their liberal modes, conceptualize the margin spatially, as the excluded and unintegrated other. In some ways, these initiatives posit a utopian moment in which the marginal as such will cease to exist, with power circulating freely and fluidly connecting and equalizing all points of habitation. In this conception, the margin is the space of agitation, subversion, and thus of theoretical innovation. Yet, if, with George Yudice, we re-examine the notion of marginality as an "essentially" innovative space, we realize the futility of such a claim, which can only be made through an evasion of material history:

There was a time when to be "marginal" meant to be excluded, forgotten, overlooked. Gradually, throughout this century, first in the discourses of anthropology, sociology, and psychoanalysis, "marginality" became a focus of interest through which "we" (Western culture) discovered otherness and our own ethnocentric perspectives. Today, it is declared, the "marginal" is no longer peripheral but central to all thought. (214)

What is worth noting here is the way in which the spatial margin, that is, margin as subject position, becomes also the source of rejuvenation of the centre, where knowledge as positive knowing is made possible. The academic industry of postcolonial studies has gained the status of a phenomenon within this paradigm of positivity. Thus, despite its contrary political impulses (as I will show in my reading of Iain Chambers), it is aligned uncritically (by liberalism and postmodernism) in an analogical relationship with multiculturalism and thus faces the consequence of melancholia or debilitation. To elaborate: what this subdiscipline is perceived to offer today that, ostensibly, no other minority or ethnic studies does, is not so much a revolutionary method, inventive theories, or even new fields of inquiry, but quite literally (and perhaps crudely) an exotic new frontier, a hitherto

unaccounted-for margin that must be tamed or theorized: it is here we tell ourselves that a theory will be made that will express in dazzling synchronicity and relationality the disparate and incorrigible issues of race, ethnicity, gender, nation, class, and eurocentrism, as well as the conditions of marginality, migration, and minoritization. For many scholars situated "outside" of the field, postcolonial cultural studies seems to or is exhorted to offer the possibility of a radically revised history: a relentlessly dissident method of reading that will alter the way business is done in and out of academia. An excellent and particularly compelling example of this kind of exhortation is Iain Chambers's *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*.

In the chapter entitled "The Broken World," Chambers argues that the presence of increasingly vocal postcolonials in the metropolis not only challenges the univocality of European thought construed as rational, logical, universal, and objective but further confounds the comfortable binarisms of self and other, margin and periphery, English and native. The significant consequence of this disruption of categories, according to Chambers, however, is the exposure of the notion of authenticity: its fascist potential when deployed as Europeaness or Englishness, and its derivativeness when deployed simplistically as Negritude (*pace* Senghor) or nativism. For Chambers, unlike Taylor, authenticity is not a subjective category but a structural one that positions actors outside modernity. "To relinquish such a perspective" of authenticity or of returning to the roots, writes Chambers, "leads us to recognise a post-colonial and post-European context in which historical and cultural differences, while moving to different rhythms, are coeval, are bound to a common time. 'Communication is, ultimately, about creating shared Time'" (74, quoting Johannes Fabian). In other words, in so far as (that suspect category of) authenticity, either of the self or the objectifiable other, is enabled by the imperialist logic of modernity that positions others as occupying another temporality, the recognition of coequality in the postcolonial world means that claiming authenticity is no longer "feasible." "Post-colonialism is perhaps the sign of an increasing awareness that it is not feasible to subtract a culture, a history, a language, an identity,

from the wider, transforming currents of the increasingly metropolitan world. It is impossible to 'go home' again" (74). For Chambers, the poetics of postmodernism best expresses this condition of homelessness and inevitable hybridity. Naming the cultural fusions in world music and other art forms as the "metropolitan vernacular," he interestingly circumvents the Marxist problematic of postmodern aesthetics as a symptom of late capitalism by resorting to the notion of local market demands versus the totalizing agency of capitalism (76-77).⁷ Further, he asks whether phenomena such as world music are not engaging in

a movement of historical decentering in which the very axis of center and periphery, together with its economic, political and cultural traffic, has, as a minimum, begun to be interrogated from elsewhere, from other places and positions? For is it not possible to glimpse in recent musical contaminations, hybrid languages and cultural mixtures an opening on to other worlds, experiences, histories, in which not only does the "Empire write back to the center," as Salman Rushdie puts it, but also "sounds off" against it? . . . The master's language is transformed into creole . . . and all varieties of local cultural refashioning, as it moves to a different tempo in a "reversal of colonial history." (84-85)

What is most commendable about Chambers's analysis is his insistence that the margin/centre dichotomy be thoroughly dispersed. From within this productive confusion, he suggests, may arise two consequences: the exposure of the state apparatus in all its repressive and ideological operations and a recognition of the implication of the citizenry in all forms of repression:

Previous margins—ethnic, gendered, sexual—now reappear at the center. No longer restricted to the category of a "special issue" (e.g. "race relations"), or "problem" (e.g. "ethnic minorities," "sexual deviancy"), such differences become central to our very sense of time, place and identity. (86)

Despite (or perhaps because of) his utopian futurism, however, there are several logical problems in Chambers's argument. First of all is his inadvertent totalization of the postcolonial subject. In his single-minded determination to blow up the centre, the postcolonial construed as the logical agent of sedition is made to carry the bomb. Less metaphorically, it is Chambers's assumption that all migrant subjects inevitably constitute a subculture that is

untenable. It is this unstated assumption that enables him to construct pantheons of black artists (68-69) and postcolonial discourse theorists (70)⁸ as being collectively (even consensually) engaged in the critique of the Occident in a manner that elides serious differences between these writers and ignores these writers as occupying (academically and performatively) an internally conflictual space. As Stuart Hall puts it with reference to black British cinema:

Films are not necessarily good because black people make them. They are not necessarily "right-on" by virtue of the fact that they deal with the black experience. Once you enter the politics of the end of the black subject you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism. You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject. Now, that formulation may seem to threaten the collapse of an entire political world. (28)

In other words, Chambers's vision of resistance does not enter into that phase of political engagement that Hall rightly has characterized as the shift from a "relations of representation," which involves counter-racist narratives and a struggle over the access to representation, to a "politics of representation," which not only involves theorizing the differences of race, ethnicity, and culture but a "struggle around positionalities" itself (28):

There is another position, one which locates itself *inside* a continuous struggle and politics around black representation, but which then is able to open up a continuous critical discourse about themes, about the forms of representation, the subjects of representations, above all, the regimes of representation. Once you abandon essential categories, there is no place to go apart from the politics of criticism and to enter the politics of criticism in black culture is to grow up, to leave the age of critical innocence. (30)

Secondly, in his critique of authenticity secured by the argument about temporal non-coevality, Chambers elides Fabian's recommendation to "create" coevality for proper communication with a "recognition" of coevality given the condition of postcolonialism. Thus coevality, or the lack of it, becomes merely false consciousness; what is important, Chambers seems to suggest, is that

we recognize that we are “really,” that is to say, “authentically,” coeval. The problem with this logic is two-fold. First, the situating of authenticity as a spatial category, and that of hybridity as a temporal one, effectively locates authenticity (in so far as space is conceived non-historically) on another temporal register outside the transforming currents of time. Second, authenticity is somehow made to depend on disjunct temporalities and vice versa, and thus the absolute pronouncement—one can never go home again. Thus the postcolonial is not only always-already hybrid, but she is so always with reference to the West. What Chambers is unable to visualize in his delineation of postcolonial ontology, which is really an idealization of the migrant as postcolonial paradigm, are forms of cultural practice—musical or otherwise—that adapt to and march in step with Western hegemony but define themselves as “authentic” in so far as they continue indifferent to the West for purposes of validation, perpetuation, and aesthetic evaluation. This form of authenticity, however, must be distinguished from Taylor’s more subjectivist and essentialist notion. In other words, authenticity can be better understood in performative rather than ontological terms. The vigorous state of traditional music in the North and South of India is an example of this form of “authenticity,” and its practitioners not only presuppose the possibility of going home but would probably argue (despite their itinerant life-styles) that they have never left home in the first place.⁹ In other words, I am suggesting that Chambers’s implication of authenticity in non-coevality is a *non sequitur* and has the curious effect of re-casting the erstwhile “dead native” as hybrid. The overall effect, as I implied earlier, is the construction of the postcolonial as an authentically dissident or marginal subject. It is in response to this interpellation that postcolonial studies falls into melancholia and sometimes political disarray.

While it may appear that Taylor’s liberal multiculturalism and Chambers’s dissonant politics of “no respect” are aversive, what is interesting in both their analyses is the way in which the terms “authenticity,” “hierarchy,” and “margin” carry enormous burdens of significance. Briefly: while authenticity is, for Taylor, an individualist category that directly impinges on one’s self-esteem

and sense of well-being, for Chambers, authenticity is a structural notion, a subject position — an impossibility in the modern world because it implies hierarchy: “Subordinate subjects have invariably been ordained to the stereotyped immobilism of an essential ‘authenticity,’ in which they are expected to play out roles, designated for them by others . . . for ever” (38). Hierarchy, for Taylor, means non-reciprocal “other dependence” (44-51); for Chambers, it means temporal non-coequality. For Taylor, hierarchy can be undone with respect and recognition (temporality and modernity being non-factors in his analysis); for Chambers, on the other hand, hierarchy can be undone only through hybridity and confusion of categories. Modernity, as Chambers construes it, is univocal and imperialist and cannot accommodate authentic differences.¹⁰ Both Taylor and Chambers agree, then, that equality and difference are contradictory and inevitably based on a notion of sameness. Yet Taylor is willing to let the contradiction lie, while Chambers wants to create equality in order that difference becomes a basis for identity rather than alienation. For Taylor, the margin is “them,” the others who must be dealt with and managed: “The challenge is to deal with their sense of marginalization without compromising our basic political principles” (63). The West, he implies, is guilty and can redress the problem. For Chambers, the margin is the site of subversion — it must be made to arrive at the centre and disrupt it. For both Taylor and Chambers, however, as I mentioned earlier, the margin is a source of rejuvenation. A future moment must be posited when it will be either incorporated or dissolved and hierarchy will be undone.

Gayatri Spivak has addressed the profound contradictions of this liberal/postmodern demand, most notably in her essay “Who Claims Alterity?” Regarding the position of marginality (construed as a potentially subversive space) sometimes claimed by but often imposed upon postcolonial subjects, Spivak writes of this ideological entrapment:

the stories of the postcolonial world are not necessarily the same as the stories coming from “internal colonization,” the way the metropolitan countries discriminate against disenfranchised groups in their midst. The diasporic postcolonial can take advantage (most often unknowingly, I hasten to add) of the tendency to conflate the

two in the metropolis. Thus this frequently innocent informant, identified and welcomed as the agent of an alternative history, may indeed be the site of a chiasm, the crossing of a double contradiction: the system of production of the national bourgeoisie at home, and abroad, the tendency to represent neocolonialism by the semiotic of "internal colonization." (274-75)

The consequence of this poorly analyzed double contradiction is that by homogenizing and masking the contingent otherness of postcoloniality into an undifferentiated margin, the political efficaciousness of a "postcolonial" critique is weakened considerably. However, it is actually in its points of differentiation from such homogenizing notions of the margin, more precisely in its critique of positive knowledge alluded to earlier, that postcolonial studies faces its greatest challenges. It is not simply that being marginal is no longer a possibility. Rather, it is that some of the impasses in our field result from the ways in which the margin as sign and standard (as a measure of value and as political cause) gets deployed.

We can conceive of margin/marginality in two ways: a) as subject position—the excluded other that must be coaxed into the centre through incorporation, inversion, hybridization, revolution; or b) margin as irreducible other—the condition for the production of our discourse (and all positive knowledge) that must be acknowledged as incommensurable and irrecuperable. The former speaks the positive discourse of rights, while the latter speaks the negative discourse of limits.¹¹ With reference to the latter, in *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault characterizes the modern episteme as marked by the emergence of Man in his finite spatiality as the subject and object of his own knowledge:

At the foundation of all the empirical positivities, and of everything that can indicate itself as a concrete limitation of man's existence, we discover a finitude—which is in a sense the same: it is marked by the spatiality of the body, the yawning of desire, and the time of language; and yet it is radically other: in this sense, the limitation is expressed not as a determination imposed upon man from outside (because he has a nature or a history), but as a fundamental finitude which rests on nothing but its own existence as fact, and opens upon the positivity of all concrete limitation. (315)

In other words, it is no longer a question of knowing the limits of knowledge, as with classical philosophy, but of discerning the

constitutive negativity, the otherness, the irrecuperable, the “unthought” that makes positive knowing possible.¹² It is this latter notion of the margin, of course, that has enabled the most powerful critiques of anthropology, orientalism, and comparative philology.¹³ Said’s *Orientalism*, which was the first significant attempt to disclose the constitutive function of this margin for western knowledge, attests to the fact that such critiques are often implicit in the deconstruction of the “metaphysics of presence”; more explicitly, they may be channelled through Foucault’s notions of the limit and of power/knowledge. That so many analyses of colonialism, following in the wake of Said’s work, have reiterated the shadow of this margin, is the precise bone of contention between postcolonialists and so-called orthodox Marxists, represented most vocally by Aijaz Ahmad. But let us attend in greater detail, if briefly, to Ahmad’s problems with a so-called postcolonial discourse.

In his essay “The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality,” Ahmad characterizes postcolonial literature and cultural criticism as offsprings of a postmodernism that they disseminate zealously (10).¹⁴ Ahmad does not explain what he specifically means by the term “postmodernism” (other than by positing the untenable proposition that it is an anti-Marxism), nor does he explain why the term should be self-evidently disparaging. Rather, he illustrates his thesis that postcolonialism is the progeny of postmodernism by fastening on short passages from Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha and then performing close readings of them after the manner of deconstructive literary critics. While there is much in Ahmad’s essay that merits close attention, I shall focus on his interpretation of Spivak and those themes that he designates as characteristic of postcolonial postmodernity—hybridity and contingency (ambivalence is mentioned but not analyzed)—to show that despite his call for a return to a fundamental Marxism, his own critique is caught up in the contradictions that attend totalizations of any kind, be it Marxism or postcolonialism.

For instance, in his reading of Spivak’s often-quoted passage in which she asserts that the concept metaphors of “nationhood, constitutionality, citizenship, democracy, socialism” are

"*effectively* reclaimed" in postcoloniality as "regulative political concepts" for which "no *historically* adequate referent may be advanced from postcolonial space" ("Scattered Speculations" 281), Ahmad mounts his polemic on what turns out to be a contradictory ground. In his quotation, he elides the following: Spivak says, "Within the historical frame of exploration, colonization, and decolonization, what is being *effectively* reclaimed is a series of regulative political concepts, the supposedly authoritative narrative of whose production was written elsewhere, in the social formations of Western Europe" (281). By choosing to elide the question of ideological regulation, which invokes Althusser's notion of ideology (in general) as having no history (Althusser 159-61), Ahmad can read the phrase "no historically adequate referent" literally as about "political history" (4). There is socialism and nationalism in India, he reminds us; we only have to remember the masses who vote for the communist ticket and the fact that it was the nationalist struggle and not colonialism that invested India with nationhood. The literalism here is a consequence of what Ahmad marginalizes: Spivak's insistence that socialism, nationalism, etc., in so far as they function as regulative political concepts, *effectively* resituates struggle within the frame of imperialism. This is not a denial of history but a comment on the limits of historiography itself. Yet the literalism permits Ahmad to read ideological critique here as free-floating dehistoricizing postmodernism, thus re-enacting, in the name of Marx, what Spivak problematizes: ideological regulation. Yet Ahmad is not consistently an orthodox Marxist, for in his consideration that perhaps Spivak is speaking of these concepts in terms of "the European origin of these words," he expresses his consternation thus:

Even with regard to concepts, I did not know that mere origins —("myth of origins?")—mattered all that much in postmodern discourse, nor does it seem appropriate that everything that originates in Europe should be consigned so unilaterally to the "heritage of imperialism," unless we subscribe to an essentialist notion of an undifferentiated Europe where everything and everyone is imperialist. (5)

Here the problem with Spivak is that she is not being constructionist enough for Ahmad, and is slipping into a pre-modern

“dangerous” notion of origins and essences. From what was first a charge of too much postmodernism, Ahmad now castigates Spivak for not being postmodern enough for his purposes.

Nevertheless, postmodernism continues to function as a peculiar catch-all phrase of derision for Ahmad, usefully encapsulating poststructuralism, deconstruction, and, of course, colonial discourses. The most egregious example of this totalizing impulse is evident in his critique of Bhabha’s notion of hybridity. What is peculiar in Ahmad’s reading of Bhabha is that he attributes a “celebratory” tone to the latter, believing that the notion “partakes of a carnivalesque collapse and play of identities, and comes under a great many names” (13). While it may be beside the point to engage in an argument on the “correct” interpretation of hybridity, which I understand to mean not an arbitrary mixture of cultures and a surplus of pleasure but the uncanny and undermining effect produced by the incompatibility of discourses in unequal power relations,¹⁵ it must be acknowledged that the notion of carnivalesque subversion is more evocative of Bakhtin than of Bhabha. Ahmad’s real quarrel with Bhabha’s notion of hybridity, however, is that: a) it dispenses with “a sense of place, of belonging, of some stable commitment to one’s class or gender or nation [which] may be useful for defining one’s politics”; and b) that it is “posited as the negation of the ‘organic intellectual’ as Gramsci conceived of it” (14). The point about stable identities is a familiar one; we have already encountered it in relation to Charles Taylor. The fact that such stability may not be easily available in this age of total capitalist penetration, and that, in fact, such (commodified) commitment to “one’s class,” at this historical moment, may produce fascisms of the sort Ahmad himself laments in India and elsewhere (where religious and ethnic solidarities exceed those of class), is not considered at all. This is because Ahmad is not so much interested in the question of the nature or grounds of political commitment but rather in the deployment of Marx and Gramsci as prophylactics of postmodernism. Thus Bhabha’s bracketing of the organic intellectual is again read as travesty rather than on its own terms. While I do not want to open a discussion of Gramsci’s concepts or Bhabha’s reading of them at this point, it would be salutary to

recall Gramsci's declared view of intellectual orthodoxy in his "The Study of Philosophy," with its particular attention to limits as such:

Who is to fix the "rights of knowledge" and the limits of the pursuit of knowledge? And can these rights and limits indeed be fixed? It seems necessary to leave the task of researching after new truths and better, more coherent, clearer formulations of the truths themselves to the free initiative of individual specialists, even though they may continually question the very principles that seem most essential. (341)

"Organic intellectual" is not a term that transparently signifies social good. Like everything else, the possibilities of such leadership need to be "elaborated," in the Gramscian sense of the term, in its contingent and specific historicity.

This leads us to the next point that Ahmad invokes as characteristic of postcolonial postmodernity—the theme of contingency as mediated once again through Bhabha's quotation of Veena Das (Ahmad, "Politics" 14-15). For Ahmad, the emphasis on the contingent nature of a given (caste or class) conflict is an act of de-historicization and political passivity. It is de-historicizing because it recommends that,

when it comes to caste conflicts, each historical moment must be treated as *sui generis* and as carrying within itself its own explanation [and that] the understanding of each conflict [must] be confined to the characteristics of that conflict. . . . What is denied . . . is that caste is a structural and not merely contingent feature in the distribution of powers and privileges. . . . [W]hen the theorist . . . denies the structural endurance of histories and calls upon us to think only of the contingent moment . . . we are in effect being called upon to overlook the position of class and caste privileges from which such theories emanate and such invocations issue. (15)

The consequence of such anti-structuralist analysis for Ahmad is political passivity:

Such premises preclude . . . the very bases of political action. For the idea of collective human agent (e.g., organized groups of the exploited castes fighting for their rights against upper-caste privilege) presumes both what Habermas calls communicative rationality as well as the possibility of rational action as such; it presumes, in other words, that agencies are constituted not in flux and displacement but in given historical locations. (15-16)

There are at least two unexamined contradictions in Ahmad's argument: a) the opposition between the historicity of conflict and contingency, and b) the alliance between a structural reading of history and rational action. Much of the problem has to do with Ahmad's untheorized notion of conflict and its relation to history in the first place. For Bhabha, as I understand it, the analysis of conflict as contingency is reliant on the notion of conflict as constitutive of history or historical change, rather than on a view of conflict as a factor in an idealist progression of an objective and real history. In Laclau's terms, in so far as "identities and their conditions of existence form an inseparable whole" (21), "the conditions of existence of any objectivity that might exist must be sought at the level of a factual history" (22). For instance, to such a question as "is the English revolution of the seventeenth century the bourgeois-democratic revolution?" Laclau responds:

The "bourgeois-democratic revolution," far from being an object to be identified in different latitudes (France, England, Italy)—an object that would therefore establish relations of exteriority with its specific conditions of existence in different contexts—would instead be an object that is deformed and redefined by each of its contingent contexts. There would merely be "family resemblances" between the different "bourgeois-democratic revolutions." This allows the formulation of questions such as: how bourgeois was the democratic revolution in the country X?; or rather, how democratic was the bourgeoisie in context Y? (22)

Thus, for Laclau, and for "postcolonials" such as Bhabha and Veena Das, the analysis of conflict requires that "the very categories of social analysis . . . be historicized" (Laclau 22) in a movement that "radically contextualizes" rather than de-historicizes conflict.

Furthermore, when Ahmad goes on to read the consequences of radical historicization or contingency as precluding "communicative action" (in Habermas's sense of the term) because the former has no structural understanding of history, he generates a further confusion by collapsing structuralist theories of history with the more consciousness-based theories of Habermas or even Lukács. The relationship between Habermas's notion of commu-

nicative action (which is based on Enlightenment notions of progress) and the more structural notions of history (which one associates with Althusser and Balibar) does not seem self-evident or in any way a logical connection. Again, the problem here is Ahmad's refusal to engage with the fundamental question of identity as such; thus his analysis falls into a kind of idealism that Gramsci would characterize as "common sense." My point is that Ahmad's denunciation of postcolonialism as an anti-Marxism (due to its association with postmodernism) seems highly dubious given that Marxism is not some sort of ready-made grid that can be imposed upon social realities; rather, Marxism is itself a highly conflictual discourse whose terms and concepts must be constantly negotiated if they are to be made useful. The fact remains that issues of ideology, structure, and conflict or historical change, insofar as they must be negotiated and re-defined in their contingency, do radically call into question our totalization of knowledge. To dismiss such inquiry as ludic postmodernism because of its compatibility with Derrida's critiques of philosophy or with Foucault's rewriting of historiography seems hasty at best and authoritarian at worst. The problem with Ahmad's criticisms of postcolonial discourse is that he refuses to acknowledge, at the "fundamental" level of political orientation, i.e. the investment in class and race politics, the continuity between his own position and that which he repudiates as the brood of postmodernism.

But to return to the question of postcolonial studies as marginality studies: one consequence of deploying an undifferentiated notion of the margin is that postcolonial studies has been stereotyped as an acceptable form of academic radicalism.¹⁶ This has meant that scholars once intimately, even emblematically, associated with the "postcolonial" find themselves having to distance themselves from this "politically correct" term by denouncing it from within. What it comes down to is an anxiety over the loss of the margin, which results in the redrawing of lines and a struggle over the margin itself. As R. Radhakrishnan puts it in "Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity,"

the critic intellectual is divorced from the politics of solidarity and constituency. The critic is forever looking for that radical "elsewhere" that will validate "perennial readings against the grain," and the

intellectual is busy planning multiple transgressions to avoid being located ideologically and/or macropolitically. (761)

The notion of the margin as the site of struggle for the outermost limit, then, takes on a new meaning as it is fetishized and reified as the “dislocated” and authoritative *critical position*, which then reveals the “real” stake in these battles: the margin as turf.¹⁷

My task here is not to ride out in the defense of postcolonial studies, even if such an object existed for the purpose. Rather, what I am interested in are the consequences that attend the deployment of an undifferentiated notion of the margin. I suggest that the exploration of postcoloniality from the point of view of the margin (as the excluded and the limit) can be thought of as the realm of postcolonial scholarship. While we cannot cease to uncover the politics of marginalization that provides the impetus to criticism, we also need to conceive of the “politics of criticism” as elaborated by Stuart Hall as an ironic project. By this I mean that “postcolonialism” must rehearse continually the conditions for the production of its own discourse or be doomed to fall into a form of anthropology.¹⁸ As Barbara Johnson suggests in the context of deconstruction, “any discourse that is based on the questioning of boundary lines must never stop questioning its own” (14). If postcolonial studies can be said to possess any pedagogical efficacy at all, then that energy arises from its indeterminate location and failure to recoup the margin. The conflationary (counter) critiques mentioned above, then, cannot be located “outside” of the field and thereby be made to engender what Said, in his “Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World,” terms a “politics of blame” (45). It is undeniable that the debates generated by these critiques are not only salient to the project of postcolonial studies but are themselves indicative of the thankful lack of triumphalism of the field—or so it seems, as long as they do not divert discussion from the issues about larger material determinants to a skirmish over or at the margin. To quote R. Radhakrishnan again:

Postcoloniality at best is a problematic field where heated debates and contestations are bound to take place for quite a while to come. My point here is that whoever joins the polemical dialogue should do so with a critical-sensitive awareness of the legitimacies of several

other perspectives on the issue. In other words, it would be quite futile and divisive in the long run for any one perspective such as the diasporic, the indigenous, the orthodox Marxist, etc., to begin with the brazen assumption that it alone has the ethico-political right to speak representatively on behalf of "postcoloniality." Such an assumption can only take the form of a pedagogical arrogance that is interested more in correcting other points of view rather than engaging with them in a spirit of reciprocity. No one historical angle can have a monopolistic hold over the possible elaborations of the "post-colony," especially during times when master discourses in general, e.g. modernity, nationalism, international Communism/Marxism, are deservedly in disarray. (762)

Another reason for the lack of triumphalism of postcolonial studies pertains to its institutional and theoretical amorphousness: it has no theory to speak of, concerned as it is with micro-cultural and micro-political practices and issues. Unlike other area studies, postcolonial studies has no identifiable object: it would be impossible to suggest that it pertains to one or another area of the world or that it is confined to a period, genre, or theme; nor can it name a stable First or Third World subject as its legitimate speaker (as can, for instance, women's studies, Afro-American, or gay and lesbian studies). From this perspective, it may be acceptable to claim that postcolonial studies is concerned more with the analysis of the lived *condition* of unequal power-sharing globally and the self-authorization of cultural, economic, and militaristic hegemony, rather than with a particular historical phenomenon such as colonialism, which may be plotted as a stage of capitalist imperialism. It is interested, above all, in the materialist critique of power, and how that power or ideology seeks to interpellate subjects within a discourse as subordinate and without agency. In some ways, it is this amorphousness that permits it to be simultaneously self-critical and oppositional. As well, it is this free-form aspect of postcolonial studies that makes it the target of both the Right and the so-called Left. Yet perhaps it is this shapelessness, this refusal to stay still, to define itself, or defend itself, that makes postcolonial studies a particularly hospitable interstice from which to work out the paradoxes of history (the temporality of modernity) and colony (imperialism and nationalism).

NOTES

- 1 As R. Radhakrishnan points out, "[t]he important thing to notice here is the overall *culturalist* mode of operation: in other words, we are not talking about postcolonial economies, histories, or politics. The obsessive focus is on post-coloniality as a cultural conjuncture" (751).
- 2 See Shohat for an elaboration of this theme.
- 3 Apter writes:
It seems that the theoretical and political categories of postcolonialism, even as they burgeon and become increasingly sophisticated, are also becoming more rapidly used up and, in many instances, altogether bankrupt. Preludes and prefaces that take great pains to situate the writer/viewer in a redemptive practice that is ultimately a reenactment of just what she or he is trying to avoid (the voyeurism of "other-gazing"), all these verbal markers and narrative devices repeat the colonial gesture of self-authorization. (299)
- 4 In an essay written in 1991, Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge argue that Bill Ashcroft's, Gareth Griffiths's, and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) was the first attempt to substitute for the erstwhile category of Commonwealth literature that of postcolonial writing. Although this book came out 11 years after Said's *Orientalism*, which most scholars consider as the inaugural text of the field, I agree with Mishra and Hodge that for all of its problems, *The Empire Writes Back* did perform an important pedagogical function: there was now a teachable text on the market that summarized the limits and possibilities of this new field of inquiry. Mishra's and Hodge's essay has been reprinted in Williams and Chrisman. For other notable anthologies of postcolonial "theory," see Adam and H. Tiffin; Slemmon and H. Tiffin; Whitlock and H. Tiffin; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and H. Tiffin (*The Postcolonial Studies Reader*); C. Tiffin and Lawson; and White.
- 5 For a characterization of affirmative action as a recognition of past historical injustice see Steele, Chapter 7.
- 6 See also Mohanty, and Appiah.
- 7 For an explanation of the "Marxist problematic," see Harvey, and Jameson.
- 8 For instance:
here, in the crisis of enunciation, we can also recognise a potential convergence between radical feminist theory—Luce Irigaray, Carla Lonzi, Helene Cixous, Alice Jardine, Rosi Braidotti, Jane Flax, Susan Hekman, Judith Butler—with its sustained critique of the presumptions of occidental discourse: a convergence that is directly inscribed in the work of Gayatri Spivak, Trinh T. Minh-ha, bell hooks, Paul Gilroy and Homi Bhabha, for example, and which is destined for greater dialogue. (70)
- 9 See Clifford's "Travelling Theories" for a discussion of this notion of authenticity.
- 10 For an excellent reconsideration of the monological views of modernity, see Fuchs.
- 11 I am indebted to Cornell's monumental book *The Philosophy of the Limit* for an understanding of this concept as a primarily ethical demarcation. See especially Chapter 3.
- 12 For a neo-Marxist formulation of negativity as the foundation of radical politics and history, see Laclau.
- 13 See Bernal; Clifford and Marcus; and Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors."

14 He writes:

[T]he term "postcolonial" also comes to us as the name of a *discourse* about the condition of "postcoloniality," so that certain *kinds* of critics are "postcolonial" and others not. . . . Following on which is the attendant assertion that only those critics, who believe not only that colonialism has more or less ended but who also subscribe to the idea of the end of Marxism, nationalism, collective historical subjects and revolutionary possibility as such, are the *true* post-colonials, while the rest of us, who do not quite accept this apocalyptic anti-Marxism, are not postcolonial at all . . . so that only those intellectuals can be truly *postcolonial* who are also *postmodern*. (10)

15 See Bhabha's essays "Signs Taken For Wonders" and "Articulating the Archaic" in his *The Location of Culture*.

16 For an understanding of the concept of "stereotyping," see Bhabha, "The Other Question."

17 It can be argued that the skirmish over the margin is not peculiar to postcolonial studies, and that feminism, in fact, seems to be at the centre of such battles.

18 For a sweeping though provocative critique of so-called postcolonial cultural studies' failure to conceive of colonialism in plural and local terms see Thomas.

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