

## Review Article<sup>1</sup>

### *Writing on Boundaries: Homi Bhabha's Recent Essays*

SHAOBO XIE

HOMI BHABHA'S *the location of culture* is a provocative and illuminating text that will shock the reader into renewed knowledge of his or her own position in history and cultural discourse. As a cultural hybrid myself—I grew up in China, now live in Canada, and have attended universities in both countries—I find my own mirror image in what Bhabha describes as a forever-exiled, ambivalent, subaltern subject of cultural difference. In an attempt to revise the known, to rename the postmodern from the postcolonial perspective, Bhabha investigates the question of culture “in the realm of the beyond” (1). As he asserts in the introductory chapter, to dwell on the beyond is “to be part of a revisionary time,” to address the present from the position of a new time frame, a new narrative (7). What he sees in that revisionary beyond is the “boundary,” which in Martin Heidegger’s terms, is that from which something begins its presencing. This Heideggerian boundary is ingeniously translated by Bhabha into the liminal space of cultural hybridity. His whole project is intended to theorize the different moments of hybridity in cultural discourse, and he accomplishes this task by relaunching the poststructuralist theory of the sign on postcolonial terrain.

Indeed, New French Theory provides Bhabha with a vigorous and productive method for analyzing the cultural in-betweenness of the postcolonial world. His first chapter, “The Commitment to Theory,” can be read as an answer to the following question: “Are the interests of ‘western’ theory necessarily collusive with the hegemonic role of the West as a power bloc?” (20). In this chapter, he deploys the postmodern concept of

difference in laying the theoretical grounds for articulating the hybrid colonial subject, the split nation, and the translational/transnational process of cultural signification. Bhabha begins by using historical and discursive difference to question the binarism of theory and politics between right and left, progressive and reactionary, and bourgeois and radical. For each position is a process of translation and transference of meaning, and no political position can be determined prior to the act of critical engagement or outside of the moment of its discursive performance. This can be best illustrated by the constitution of the subject. As a gathering of differential moments, the subject is characterized by its multi-positionality. According to Bhabha, a working-class woman's multi-positionality is instantiated by an overlap of class, gender, and racial boundaries and it is impossible to ascertain "[w]hich of her identities is the one that determines her political choices" (29). This is an issue of vital importance to contemporary cultural politics. His argument on the hybrid subject echoes what Chantal Mouffe writes in a different context: "within every society, each social agent is inscribed in a multiplicity of social relations—not only social relations of production but also the social relations, among others, of sex, race, nationality, and vicinity . . . and every social agent is therefore the locus of many subject positions and cannot be reduced to only one" (qtd. 89-90). But Bhabha does not subscribe to the notion of pluralistic counterhegemony implied in Mouffe's position for, as he argues, pluralism begins with difference that is ultimately sublated and transcended. From his point of view, hybridity has become a historical necessity, a birthmark of post-modern thinking. That is to say, in the times of contramodernity, the subject and the sign cannot be otherwise than split, ambivalent, and interstitial.

Bhabha's major contribution to postcolonial counter-discourse is not simply to open up the colonial sign or subject as *différance*, but to salvage its emancipatory counterhegemonic potential from the indeterminacy of the sign that "can be engaged in the postcolonial struggle against dominant relations of power and knowledge" (33). Here the indeterminacy of the sign is deployed by Bhabha against colonialism in a way that parallels

Jacques Derrida's attack on logocentrism. Communication between the colonizer and the colonized is always doubled and the resistance of colonized populations can be located in the doubling space of the indeterminate sign, which renders possible different, subversive interpretations and appropriations of the sign. One exemplary instance of counterhegemonic interpretation is the translation of the Word of God and Man for the Anglo-Indian population, whose Foucauldian use of the concept of God and New Life, consciously and unconsciously, bends it to their own purpose, inverts its meaning, and redirects it against the Western colonizer. What happens at the point of contact between the colonizer and the colonized is the emergence of the Third Space of enunciation, the hybrid, ambivalent, indeterminate space of signification. Just as Derrida adds a third term, the temporal dimension, to the Saussurean sign, so Bhabha constructs a third space, an interstitial locus of meaning, between the indigenous and the European, the colonizer and the colonized. This newly emergent cultural space proves subversive to both the indigenous and the Western, allowing neither of them cultural and discursive continuity.

In the Western manichean schemes of representation, the colonial Other has always been the colonizer's "artifact" or an imaginary projection of identity, which only discloses a lack, an absence, a space of splitting. In Chapter Two, "Interrogating Identity," Bhabha rewrites Fanon's existential notion of the contradictory identity of the colonial subject in terms of the post-structuralist split sign. The poststructuralist conception of the priority of the signifier foregrounds the uncanny, disturbing Otherness of language, revealing an untranscendable, unsublatable space of doubling. This subaltern, subversive Otherness of language provides Bhabha with a perfect image for the colonial subject, that has suffered as much violation and disfiguration as the heterogenous signifier, but in its split nature, "the de-personalized, dislocated colonial subject [becomes] an incalculable object, quite literally difficult to place" (62), as does the signifier with its impenetrable materiality. The white-masked black person that emerges in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* is disturbingly represented as the "invisible" man by the Indian

poet Adil Jussawalla and the black writer Meiling Jin. The invisible man, as a Hegelian negative element in the hegemonic order, has learnt the "secret art of invisibleness," knitting the narratives of minority histories in invisible times and spaces, watching and haunting Western historicism, turning its "dreams to chaos" (46). In Bhabha's assessment, subaltern discourse owes its liberatory, oppositional politics to its ambivalent, antagonistic non-Western position, which, transgressing "a signifying limit of space, permits on the very level of discourse, a counterdivision of objects, usages, meanings, spaces and properties" (60).

The emergence of the split colonial subject not only threatens to defeat the Western Enlightenment historicist representation of the non-Western, but deconstructs the unity of the Western nation itself. In Chapter Eight, "DissemiNation," Bhabha writes, "the problem is not simply the 'selfhood' of the nation as opposed to the otherness of other nations. We are confronted with the nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population" (148). Because of massive postcolonial migrations which have characterized the past four decades, the whole world has become restructured by a global cultural liminality or hybridity. There are no longer homogeneous cultural spaces and times. Once the Western nation-space is penetratingly transformed by ethnic Others, the threat of cultural difference becomes a problem of internal Otherness. In this way too a nation's identity is challenged and crossed by a supplementary movement of writing, which subverts the myth of national collectivity and cohesiveness (154). Culture as a process of signification is condemned to an unavoidable constant internal splitting. As is the case with Derridean *différance*, the sign of culture finds only a provisional anchorage to be ceaselessly displaced. In Bhabha's estimation, the liminal structure of national culture accounts for Raymond Williams's dynamic distinction between residual and emergent oppositional cultural practices (148). The tension between residual and emergent discourses, Bhabha argues, does not give rise to cultural plurality, for culture is no longer a clearly-bordered mosaic, but an overlapping of boundaries instead, which constantly calls forth the struggle between the dominant and the emerging.

Bhabha rethinks the problem of culture as having two symbiotic, complementary aspects or movements—the pedagogical and the performative. The pedagogical identifies with tradition, the hegemonic discourse, the conservative desire to totalize and stabilize; the performative can be articulated in terms of disruptive cultural praxis, the counter-discourse, the subversive impulse to destabilize. The people of a nation are doubly inscribed as pedagogical objects and performative subjects, and their duality as such leads to a counter-narrative against the historicist narrative of the naturalistic continuity of community. A national culture is a gathering of various temporalities—modern, colonial, postcolonial, and native which deconstructs “the rationalist and progressive logics of the ‘canonical’ nation” (153). From this complex structure of national culture, minority discourse emerges whose strategy is supplementary. But where and how does the performance of minority discourse acquire its agency?

The most stimulating issue broached in Bhabha’s book is the question of agency. In Chapter Nine, “The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency,” Bhabha explores the condition of emergence of agency or subjectivity in the liminal space of cultural discourse. His discussion of agency evolves around the event of meaning outside the sentence. This is where the postcolonial and the postmodern meet. In the realm of the Derridean sign crisscrossed by time and space, signification is an event that happens on the boundary of differences. This Derridean conception of the sign provides Bhabha with a narrative framework for analyzing the subject of cultural difference. Bhabha begins by posing these questions: How does the deconstruction of the sign transform our conception of the cultural subject and the historical agency of change? What alternative time schemes can we employ to articulate new histories of cultural minorities? Poststructuralist discourse dissolves the unity of the sign and the subject of history, but can we afford to drift ceaselessly with the anomic deferral of meaning? Does indeterminacy of signification have to head into a cul-de-sac of discourse?

The object of Bhabha’s investigation—cultural liminality or boundary—informs his method of investigation, for he is trying

to establish his discursive position in between pure contingency and historical necessity, and between endless deferral of meaning and transparency of the sign. He locates the possibility of agency in the "time-lag" or the agonistic or disjunctive space "between the sentence of predicative syntax and the discontinuous subject of discourse," and between "the lexical and the grammatical dramatized in the liberty of the signifier" (181). When he poses the question of agency through such an in-between space, he would appear to reproduce Paul de Man's distinction between grammar and rhetoric or generality and particularity. Grammar does not allow any referential meaning to come into being, whereas any particular meaning subverts the logic of grammar.

This is a Barthesian moment of transgression beyond the sentence that witnesses the collapsing of all linguistics, linguistics which holds on to grammar, syntax, and logic. It is also a moment of the subject slipping away from the Enlightened order of discourse into an indeterminate space of twilight, where he or she surrenders to a chaotic total flow of words, images, voices, memories outside of the boundaries of the sentence, a flow of sedimented forms of meaning and repressed unconscious set free. According to Roland Barthes, "The sentence is hierarchical: it implies subjections, subordinations, internal reactions" (50). The sentence as such provides Bhabha with a conceptual frame for investigating the subject of cultural difference. The hegemonic discourse of modernity tends to subjugate all its subjects to its historicist syntax of narrative, moulding their consciousness, structuring their feelings and sensory data accordingly. However, the subject of cultural hybridity, postcolonial, diasporic, and migrant in nature, threatens to subvert the hierarchical syntax of modernity. For the diasporic, migrant subject to dwell in the colonizing space of modernity is to be subject to its grammar of communication, its modes of cultural signification, but never totally contained by the space; instead, it is always positioned on the boundary of modernity, at once inside and outside of the sentence of culture. Dwelling on the boundary, as a handicapped ghost ceaselessly displaced in the half-life, half-light of foreign cultures, the subject of enunciation is seen to emerge as a spo-

radic, discontinuous flow of fragmented memories, images, repressed voices, and forms of thought.

Bhabha's ultimate purpose in locating the Barthesian outside-the-sentence space is to address the question of agency. If the liminal locus of cultural difference collapses linguistics, then "agency [is] the activity of contingency" (187). But the contingent is not the impossibility of closure or endless deferral of meaning; it is the "temporality of the indeterminate and the undecidable" (186), a time-lag in-between the sign. The indeterminate becomes temporally determinate in the contiguous contact between the past and the present, the enunciation and the *énoncé*, the subject and the intersubjective. In Bhabha's view, the concept of agency as derived from such contingent, contiguous contact is already implicit in the Bakhtinian notion of the sign as a heteroglossia and dialogism. The sign is not used for the first time by the biblical Adam, but is "furrowed with distant and barely audible echoes of changes of speech subjects and dialogic overtones" (Bakhtin, qtd. in Bhabha 189). Therefore the agency of the sign, realized outside of the author, is a result of the contiguous contact between the present and the past, the speaker and the discursive Other. Switching to Hannah Arendt's terminology, Bhabha contends that the uncertainty of political matters arises from the contiguous relation between the individual "who" and the intersubjective "what." According to Lacan's genealogy of the subject, subjectivity is an effect of intersubjectivity at the level of the sign. The contiguity between sign and symbol is indeterminately articulated in the constantly renewed contingent tension between the subject and the intersubjective. When the sign, deprived of intersubjectivity, returns as a subjectivity—a temporal break in-between the sign—directed towards a revision of questioning of truth, there happens "a (re)ordering of symbols" in the realm of social discourse (191). In conceiving agency as the activity of contingency, Bhabha turns the post-modern indeterminacy into a space of reinscription and negotiation, for indeterminacy makes subversion and revision possible, opening up "possibilities for other times of cultural meaning" (178).

Bhabha elaborates the concept of the split or liminal subject of cultural difference by using poststructuralist conceptual lan-

guage, and then constructs a theory of agency for postmodern cultural politics. In his view, the postmodern and the postcolonial become merged or overlapped, not only because the postcolonial has to be postmodern, but because both the postmodern and the postcolonial subject position are characterized by indeterminacy. In the realm of culture, Bhabha argues in Chapter Eleven, "How Newness Enters the World," that the old national boundaries have collapsed, and the centre has disappeared. Culture has become a translational and transnational process of production of meaning. It is in these translational and transnational interstices that new times of meaning, new temporalities, have emerged. Living in the interstices of culture and history, he maintains, the subject of cultural differences assumes the status of what Walter Benjamin describes as the element of resistance in the process of translation (224). In translation there are many interstitial points of meaning whose determination is also a violation. In much the same way, the ambivalent migrant culture, the interstitial minority position, "dramatizes the activity of culture's untranslatability" (224), and therefore reveals the indeterminate temporalities of the in-between.

Bhabha's microstructural analysis of cultural doubling opens up a new horizon for postcolonial studies. In relaunching Derridean *différance* on postcolonial terrain, he provides a narrative scheme for analyzing the hitherto neglected grey, ambiguous space of culture, renaming the colonial subject and the colonial discourse in terms of the in-between, and more importantly, mobilizing indeterminacy of colonial discourse into agency of counterhegemonic resistance. In other words, indeterminacy in Bhabha becomes the enabling condition of subaltern subjectivity which is negative and disruptive in nature. The ambivalence of colonial discourse makes it possible for the subaltern to interpret the colonial sign outside of the hierarchal syntax of modernity.

For all these insights, however, Bhabha's brilliant book is not without serious shortcomings. While focusing exclusively on the indeterminacy of the cultural sign and the ambivalence of colonial discourse, he has regrettably bracketed the political history of colonialism, ignoring the actual imperialist practices of violat-



ing cultural systems and socio-economic institutions, and of exploiting populations and their resources. While able to produce rigorous analyses of the psychic and cultural structures of the diasporic migrant in the postcolonial "beyond," Bhabha's conceptual system falls short of understanding the colonial past of the world. His writing certainly alerts us to the imaginary extent of success of Western colonialism and the neglected facts of the colonized people in possession of colonial power and of the potential agency of resistance to domination made possible by the indeterminacy of the sign. But he fails to address the historical situations in which European colonialists promoted "the destruction of native legal and cultural systems, and ultimately, the negation of non-European civilizations," which "produce pathological societies, ones that exist in a state of perpetual crisis" (JanMohamed 61). European colonialists destroyed the indigenous mode of production in those pre-capitalist areas, substituting capitalist social relations and values for local ones. Since such changes were intended only to optimize colonialism's exploitation of human and natural resources instead of answering the needs and desires of native peoples, the result was a perpetual conflict between pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production and in an irresolvable crisis in social ideology and politico-cultural systems. Populations were caught forever in poverty and inferiority while seduced by a tantalizing future of the good life forever beyond their reach. All these historical facts Bhabha's postcolonial discourse makes no efforts to address.

Moreover, in renaming the postmodern from the position of the postcolonial, Bhabha conflates the two distinct discourses. This position not only symptomatically betrays the inadequacy of postcolonialism as a counterhegemonic discourse, but threatens to subvert its discursive foundations and its historical urgency. Over the last few years since the advent of "postcolonial," there has been no consensus on the actual or professed status of postcolonialism, but one feels tempted to agree, although not without reservations, with Gyan Prakash that it is a discourse "to force a radical rethinking and re-formulation of forms of knowledge and social identities authored and authorized by colonialism and western domination" (8). In this view, one can draw a

definitive distinction between postcolonialism and postmodernism. Postcolonialism is supposed to designate, first of all, a counter-discourse of the formerly colonized Others against the cultural hegemony of the modern West with all its imperial structures of feeling and knowledge, whereas postmodernism is primarily a counter-discourse against modernism that emerges within modernism itself. Postmodernism, while rigorously challenging the fundamental assumptions of Truth, Order, sign, and subjectivity institutionalized since Plato and sublimated by modernism, tends to universalize its own problematics. Postcolonialism, in order not to be recontained by Western master narratives, has to historicize postmodern thematics, deploying postmodern arguments in the service of decentering world history as well as vindicating and asserting the identities of the formerly colonized. It is also an act of rethinking the history of the world against the inadequacy of the terms and conceptual frames invented by the West. If postcolonialism signifies an attempt by the formerly colonized to re-evaluate, re-discover, and reconstruct their own cultures, critiquing and dismantling the manichean allegory of racial oppositions and the imperial structures of feeling and knowledge underpinning colonial cultural productions, then the postcolonial critic has to break out of the postmodern limits of indeterminacy which confines the critical subject to political ambivalence. As Linda Hutcheon has pointed out, the postcolonial needs a distinct political agenda and must put on hold the current postmodern challenges to the coherent, autonomous subject, for it has to strive to assert and affirm a denied or stigmatized subjectivity (168). But Bhabha's postcolonial project, sophisticated in theorizing yet ambivalent in political orientation, deliberately avoids such constructive, political commitments.

Bhabha certainly has made a significant move, in turning to locate liminal or ambivalent areas of culture, to readdress the colonized subject as an exiled gathering of contradictory, indeterminate temporalities. In his analysis, the colonial subject identifies neither with the colonized nor with the colonizer; rather, he/she occupies a liminal position, a third term that negates the colonizer and the colonized at the same time. But Bhabha's

valorizing of liminal subjectivity amounts to declaring that the world has moved beyond colonialism, whereas in fact it is still struggling with hegemonic systems of colonialism or its all-too-common successor neocolonialism which effects "a repetition with a difference" (Shohat 107), a regeneration of colonialism through hegemonizing Western economy, technology, and ideology. With its economic and technological superiority, neocolonialism is penetrating the third world or pre-capitalist spaces with its "entire system of values, attitudes, morality, institutions, and more important, mode of production" (JanMohamed 62). Neocolonialist invasions are creating new, unforeseen socio-political chaos and unrest in those pre-capitalist areas and countries. Bhabha's postcolonial theory seems to prove impotent for handling neocolonialism, and, ironically, the professed counterhegemonic thrust of postcolonialism appears irretrievably compromised in Bhabha. This is partly why Arif Dirlik, in his recent intervention in the current debate on postcolonialism, says that critics like Bhabha "have engaged in valid criticism of past forms of ideological hegemony, but have had little to say about its contemporary figurations" (356). In deriving its language and conceptual framework from poststructuralism, Bhabha's postcolonial criticism becomes apolitically immersed in discourse on "hybridity" and "in-betweenness" outside of global power relations and corresponding political struggles. These blind spots of his theory, however, point not only to the inadequacy of his conceptual framework of analysis, but also to the difficulty of resisting the all-subsuming power of postmodernism itself. If Dirlik is correct in arguing that postcolonialism is a progeny of postmodernism (352), then we have to acknowledge a global predicament that no counterhegemonic discourse is innocent of complicity in reaffirming postmodernism's hegemony. This inescapable encounter with postmodernism confronts every progressive intellectual with an acute awareness of the necessity of constantly opening, as Bhabha himself emphasizes throughout *the location of culture*, new spaces of reinscription and negotiation, of thinking on renewed boundary. If Bhabha's project purports to take postcolonial discourse beyond what is known, then, to move beyond his "beyond" is just what he expects us to do.

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Homi Bhabha. *the location of culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Pp. xiii, 285. \$21.50.

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