Chapter 14

Homi K. Bhabha

THE POSTCOLONIAL AND THE POSTMODERN

The question of agency

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

HOMI BHABHA'S WORK BELONGS more to cultural and literary theory than to cultural studies as narrowly understood. History and everyday life appear in his writing not so much as objects on their own account but as examples inside a mode of dense, semiotically orientated philosophical analysis – which, however, has been very influential in cultural, and especially in postcolonial, studies.

In this essay Bhabha explores congruences between the postmodern and the postcolonial by way of a post-structuralist theory of language. The classical structuralist distinction between *langue* (language as a system) and *parole* (individual speech acts) is interpreted as a temporal lag between thought and expression, between daydreaming and writing, between the intention to express meaning and the verbal performance in which meaning is articulated. Bhabha argues that each of the second moments in this series is a revision of the first – a revision in which exists the possibility for openness and contingency; the possibility, in short, of a certain freedom. For victims of colonialism, culture means strategies of survival as much as heritage, so that the gap between inherited or official meaning (ideology) and its individual performance provides room for resistance and individuation. Drawing upon Ranajit Guha's researches, the concrete example Bhabha points to is the hybrid, improvised "rebel consciousness" in the Bengali struggle against British imperialism.

Bhabha also suggests that his account of semiotics provides a theoretical basis for a radically multicultural society able to incorporate cultural "incommensurability" (that is, internal cultures which share no values or projects). This is also, he contends, what a postmodern society is.

Bhabha's theory is finally both anti-racist and counter-historical: the kind of cultural temporality he endorses eludes the determining pressures of ethnicity and race as well as the weight of tradition, indeed of history itself. That is what the "contingency" and "incommensurability" of his subaltern or postmodern cultural acts of signification imply. But, however valuable, this move also involves, or at any rate risks, a blanding out of differences – like those between poor rural workers in South Asia and London multicultural artists and theorists, for instance. It is because it carries this risk that "postcolonialism" as a general concept has been questioned by critics such as Anne McClintock – and why the work of a postcolonial theorist like Gayatri Spivak (including her essay in this volume) can be read as negotiating the huge (incommensurable?) distance between the lifeways of the subaltern and the privileged theorist.

Further reading: Bhabha 1994; Dirlik 1994; During 1998; Fanon 1967a, 1967b; Gilroy 1994; McClintock 1994; Young 1995; Zizek 1986.

The survival of culture

Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of 'minorities' within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic 'normality' to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the 'rationalizations' of modernity. To bend Jürgen Habermas to our purposes, we could argue also that the postcolonial project, at the most general theoretical level, seeks to explore those social pathologies – 'loss of meaning, conditions of anomie' – that no longer simply 'cluster around class antagonism, [but] break up into widely scattered historical contingencies' (Habermas 1987: 348).

A range of contemporary critical theories suggest that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history – subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement – that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking. There is even a growing conviction that the affective experience of social marginality – as it emerges in non-canonical cultural forms – transforms our critical strategies. It forces us to confront the concept of culture outside *objets d'art* or beyond the canonization of the 'idea' of aesthetics, to engage with culture as an uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value, often composed of incommensurable demands and practices, produced in the act of social survival. Culture reaches out to create a symbolic textuality to give the alienating everyday an aura of selfhood, a promise of pleasure. The transmission of *cultures of survival* does not occur in the ordered *musée imaginaire* of national cultures with their claims to the continuity of

an authentic 'past' and a living 'present' – whether this scale of value is preserved in the organicist 'national' traditions of romanticism or with the more universal proportions of classicism.

Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement, whether they are the 'middle passage' of slavery and indenture, the 'voyage out' of the civilizing mission, the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World. Culture is translational because such spatial histories of displacement – now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of 'global' media technologies – make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by *culture*, a rather complex issue.

It becomes crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences – literature, art, music, ritual, life, death – and the social specificity of each of these productions of meanings as they circulate as signs within specific contextual locations and social systems of value. The transnational dimension of cultural tranformation – migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation – makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification. The natural(ized), unifying discourse of 'nation', 'peoples', or authentic 'folk' tradition, those embedded myths of culture's particularity, cannot be readily referenced. The great, though unsettling, advantage of this position is that it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition.

The postcolonial perspective departs from the traditions of the sociology of underdevelopment or 'dependency' theory. As a mode of analysis, it attempts to revise those nationalist or 'nativist' pedagogies that set up the relation of Third World and First World in a binary structure of opposition. The postcolonial perspective resists the attempt at holistic forms of social explanation. It forces a recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres.

It is from this hybrid location of cultural value – the transnational as the translational – that the postcolonial intellectual attempts to elaborate a historical and literary project. My growing conviction has been that the encounters and negotiations of differential meanings and values within 'colonial' textuality, its governmental discourses and cultural practices, have anticipated, *avant la lettre*, many of the problematics of signification and judgement that have become current in contemporary theory – aporia, ambivalence, indeterminacy, the question of discursive closure, the threat to agency, the status of intentionality, the challenge to 'totalizing' concepts, to name but a few.

In general terms, there is a colonial contramodernity at work in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century matrices of Western modernity that, if acknowledged, would question the historicism that analogically links, in a linear narrative, late capitalism and the fragmentary, simulacral, pastiche symptoms of postmodernity. This linking does not account for the historical traditions of cultural contingency and textual indeterminacy (as forces of social discourse) generated in the attempt to produce an 'enlightened' colonial or postcolonial subject, and it transforms, in the

process, our understanding of the narrative of modernity and the 'values' of progress.

Postcolonial critical discourses require forms of dialectical thinking that do not disavow or sublate the otherness (alterity) that constitutes the symbolic domain of psychic and social identifications. The incommensurability of cultural values and priorities that the postcolonial critic represents cannot be accommodated within theories of cultural relativism or pluralism. The cultural potential of such differential histories has led Fredric Jameson to recognize the 'internationalization of the national situations' in the postcolonial criticism of Roberto Retamar. This is not an absorption of the particular in the general, for the very act of articulating cultural differences 'calls us into question fully as much as it acknowledges the Other . . . neither reduc[ing] the Third World to some homogeneous Other of the West, not . . . vacuously celebrat[ing] the astonishing pluralism of human cultures' (Jameson 1989: xi–xii).

The historical grounds of such an intellectual tradition are to be found in the revisionary impulse that informs many postcolonial thinkers. C. L. R. James once remarked, in a public lecture, that the postcolonial prerogative consisted in reinterpreting and rewriting the forms and effects of an 'older' colonial consciousness from the later experience of the cultural displacement that marks the more recent, postwar histories of the Western metropolis. A similar process of cultural translation, and transvaluation, is evident in Edward Said's assessment of the response from disparate postcolonial regions as a 'tremendously energetic attempt to engage with the metropolitan world in a common effort at re-inscribing, re-interpreting and expanding the sites of intensity and the terrain contested with Europe' (Said 1990: 49).

How does the deconstruction of the 'sign', the emphasis on indeterminism in cultural and political judgement, transform our sense of the 'subject' of culture and the historical agent of change? If we contest the 'grand narratives', then what alternative temporalities do we create to articulate the differential (Jameson), contrapuntal (Said), interruptive (Spivak) historicities of race, gender, class, nation within a growing transnational culture? Do we need to rethink the terms in which we conceive of community, citizenship, nationality and the ethics of social affiliation?

Jameson's justly famous reading of Conrad's *Lord Jim* in *The Political Unconscious* provides a suitable example of a kind of reading against the grain that a postcolonial interpretation demands, when faced with attempts to sublate the specific 'interruption', or the interstices, through which the colonial text utters its interrogations, its contrapuntal critique. Reading Conrad's narrative and ideological contradictions 'as a canceled realism . . . like Hegelian *Aufhebung*', Jameson represents the fundamental ambivalences of the ethical (honour/guilt) and the aesthetic (premodern/postmodern) as the allegorical restitution of the socially concrete subtext of late nineteenth-century rationalization and reification (Jameson 1981: 266). What his brilliant allegory of late capitalism fails to represent sufficiently, in *Lord Jim* for instance, is the specifically colonial address of the narrative aporia contained in the ambivalent, obsessive repetition of the phrase 'He was one of us' as the major trope of social and psychic identification throughout the text. The repetition of 'He was one of us" reveals the fragile margins of the concepts

of Western civility and cultural community put under colonial stress; Jim is reclaimed at the moment when he is in danger of being cast out or made outcast, manifestly 'not one of us'. Such a discursive ambivalence at the very heart of the issue of honour and duty in the colonial service represents the liminality, if not the end, of the masculinist, heroic ideal (and ideology) of a healthy imperial Englishness – those pink bits on the map that Conrad believed were genuinely salvaged by being the preserve of English colonization, which served the larger idea, and ideal, of Western civil society.

Such problematic issues are activated within the terms and traditions of postcolonial critique as it reinscribes the cultural relations between spheres of social antagonism. Current debates in postmodernism question the cunning of modernity – its historical ironies, its disjunctive temporalities, its paradoxes of progress, its representational aporia. It would profoundly change the values, and judgements, of such interrogations, if they were open to the argument that metropolitan histories of civitas cannot be conceived without evoking the savage colonial antecedents of the ideals of civility. It also suggests, by implication, that the language of rights and obligations, so central to the modern myth of a people, must be questioned on the basis of the anomalous and discriminatory legal and cultural status assigned to migrant, diasporic and refugee populations. Inevitably, they find themselves on the frontiers between cultures and nations, often on the other side of the law.

The postcolonial perspective forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive 'liberal' sense of cultural community. It insists that cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity. Questions of race and cultural difference overlay issues of sexuality and gender and overdetermine the social alliances of class and democratic socialism. The time for 'assimilating' minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has dramatically passed. The very language of cultural community needs to be rethought from a postcolonial perspective, in a move similar to the profound shift in the language of sexuality, the self and cultural community, effected by feminists in the 1970s and the gay community in the 1980s.

Culture becomes as much an uncomfortable, disturbing practice of survival and supplementarity – between art and politics, past and present, the public and the private – as its resplendent being is a moment of pleasure, enlightenment or liberation. It is from such narrative positions that the postcolonial prerogative seeks to affirm and extend a new collaborative dimension, both within the margins of the nation-space and across boundaries between nations and peoples. My use of poststructuralist theory emerges from this postcolonial contramodernity. I attempt to represent a certain defeat, or even an impossibility, of the 'West' in its authorization of the 'idea' of colonization. Driven by the subaltern history of the margins of modernity – rather than by the failures of logocentrism – I have tried, in some small measure, to revise the known, to rename the postmodern from the position of the postcolonial.

New times

The enunciative position of contemporary cultural studies is both complex and problematic. It attempts to institutionalize a range of transgressive discourses whose strategies are elaborated around non-equivalent sites of representation where a history of discrimination and misrepresentation is common among, say, women, blacks, homosexuals and Third World migrants. However, the 'signs' that construct such histories and identities – gender, race, homophobia, postwar diaspora, refugees, the international division of labour, and so on – not only differ in content but often produce incompatible systems of signification and engage distinct forms of social subjectivity. To provide a social imaginary that is based on the articulation of differential, even disjunctive, moments of history and culture, contemporary critics resort to the peculiar temporality of the language metaphor. It is as if the arbitrariness of the sign, the indeterminacy of writing, the splitting of the subject of enunciation, these theoretical concepts, produce the most useful descriptions of the formation of 'postmodern' cultural subjects.

Cornel West enacts 'a measure of *synechdochical* thinking' (my emphasis) as he attempts to talk of the problems of address in the context of a black, radical, 'practicalist' culture:

> A tremendous articulateness is syncopated with the African drumbeat . . . into an American postmodernist product: there is no subject expressing originary anguish here but a fragmented subject, pulling from past and present, innovatively producing a heterogeneous product . . . [I]t is part and parcel of the subversive energies of black underclass youth, energies that are forced to take a cultural mode of articulation.
>
> (West 1988: 280–1)

Stuart Hall, writing from the perspective of the fragmented, marginalized, racially discriminated-against members of a post-Thatcherite underclass, questions the sententiousness of left orthodoxy where 'we go on thinking a unilinear and irreversible political logic, driven by some abstract entity that we call the economic or capital unfolding to its pre-ordained end' (Hall 1988: 273). Earlier in his book, he uses the linguistic sign as a metaphor for a more differential and contingent logic of ideology:

> [T]he ideological sign is always multi-accentual, and Janus-faced – that is, it can be discursively rearticulated to construct new meanings, connect with different social practices, and position social subjects differently . . . Like other symbolic or discursive formations, [ideology] is connective across different positions, between apparently dissimilar, sometimes contradictory, ideas. Its 'unity' is always in quotation marks and always complex, a suturing together of elements which have no necessary or eternal 'belongingness'. It is always, in that sense, organized around arbitrary and not natural closures.
>
> (Hall 1988: 9–10)

The 'language' metaphor raises the question of cultural difference and incommensurability, not the consensual, ethnocentric notion of the pluralistic existence of cultural diversity. It represents the temporality of cultural meaning as 'multi-accentual', 'discursively rearticulated'. It is a time of the cultural sign that unsettles the liberal ethic of tolerance and the pluralist framework of multiculturalism. Increasingly, the issue of cultural difference emerges at points of social crises, and the questions of identity that it raises are agonistic; identity is claimed either from a position of marginality or in an attempt at gaining the centre: in both senses, ex-centric.

The authority of customary, traditional practices – culture's relation to the historic past – is not dehistoricized in Hall's language metaphor. Those anchoring moments are revalued as a form of anteriority whose causality is effective because it returns to displace the present, to make it disjunctive. This kind of disjunctive temporality is of the utmost importance for the politics of cultural difference. It creates a signifying time for the inscription of cultural incommensurability where differences cannot be sublated or totalized because 'they somehow occupy the same space'. It is this liminal form of cultural identification that is relevant to Charles Taylor's proposal for a 'minimal rationality' as the basis for non-ethnocentric, transcultural judgements. The effect of cultural incommensurability is that it 'takes us beyond merely *formal criteria of rationality*, and points us toward the human *activity of articulation* which gives the value of rationality its sense' (C. Taylor 1985: 145).

Minimal rationality, as the activity of articulation embodied in the language metaphor, alters the subject of culture from an epistemological function to an enunciative practice. If culture as epistemology focuses on function and intention, then culture as enunciation focuses on signification and institutionalization; if the epistemological tends towards a *reflection* of its empirical referent or object, the enunciative attempts repeatedly to reinscribe and relocate the political claim to cultural priority and hierarchy (high/low, ours/theirs) in the social institution of the signifying activity. The epistemological is locked into the hermeneutic circle, in the description of cultural elements as they tend towards a totality. The enunciative is a more dialogic process that attempts to track displacements and realignments that are the effects of cultural antagonisms and articulations – subverting the rationale of the hegemonic moment and relocating alternative, hybrid sites of cultural negotiation.

My shift from the cultural as an epistemological object to culture as an enactive, enunciatory site opens up possibilities for other 'times' of cultural meaning (retroactive, prefigurative) and other narrative spaces (fantasmic, metaphorical). My purpose in specifying the enunciative present in the articulation of culture is to provide a process by which objectified others may be turned into subjects of their history and experience. My theoretical argument has a descriptive history in recent work in literary and cultural studies by African American and black British writers. Hortense Spillers, for instance, evokes the field of 'enunciative possibility' to reconstitute the narrative of slavery:

> [A]s many times as we re-open slavery's closure we are hurtled rapidly forward into the dizzying motions of a symbolic enterprise, and it

> becomes increasingly clear that the cultural synthesis we call 'slavery' was never homogenous in its practices and conceptions, nor unitary in the faces it has yielded.
>
> (Spillers 1989: 29)

Paul Gilroy writes of the dialogic, performative 'community' of black music – rap, dub, scratching – as a way of constituting an open sense of black collectivity in the shifting, changing beat of the present. More recently, Houston A. Baker, Jr. has made a spirited argument against 'high cultural' sententiousness and for the 'very, very sound game of rap (music)', which comes through vibrantly in the title of his essay, *Hybridity, the Rap Race, and the Pedagogy of the 1990s*. In his perceptive introduction to an anthology of black feminist criticism, Henry Louis Gates, Jr, describes the contestations and negotiations of black feminists as empowering cultural and textual strategies precisely because the critical position they occupy is free of the 'inverted' polarities of a 'counter-politics of exclusion': 'They have never been obsessed with arriving at any singular self-image; or legislating who may or may not speak on the subject; or policing boundaries between "us" and "them"' (Gates 1990: 8).

What is striking about the theoretical focus on the enunciatory present as a liberatory discursive strategy is its proposal that emergent cultural identifications are articulated at the liminal edge of identity – in that arbitrary closure, that 'unity' . . . in quotation marks' (Hall) that the language metaphor so clearly enacts. Postcolonial and black critiques propose forms of contestatory subjectivities that are empowered in the act of erasing the politics of binary opposition – the inverted polarities of a counter-politics (Gates). There is an attempt to construct a theory of the social imaginary that requires no subject expressing originary anguish (West), no singular self-image (Gates), no necessary or eternal belongingness (Hall). The contingent and the liminal become the times and the spaces for the historical representation of the subjects of cultural difference in a postcolonial criticism.

It is the ambivalence enacted in the enunciative present – disjunctive and multiaccentual – that produces the objective of political desire, what Hall calls 'arbitrary closure', *like the signifier.* But this arbitrary closure is also the cultural space for opening up new forms of identification that may confuse the continuity of historical temporalities, confound the ordering of cultural symbols, traumatize tradition. The African drumbeat syncopating heterogeneous black American postmodernism, the arbitrary but strategic logic of politics – these moments contest the sententious 'conclusion' of the discipline of cultural history.

We cannot understand what is being proposed as 'new times' within postmodernism – politics at the site of cultural enunciation, cultural signs spoken at the margins of social identity and antagonism – if we do not briefly explore the paradoxes of the language metaphor. In each of the illustrations I've provided, the language metaphor opens up a space where a theoretical disclosure is used to move beyond theory. A form of cultural experience and identity is envisaged in a theoretical description that does not set up a theory–practice polarity, nor does theory become 'prior' to the contingency of social experience. This 'beyond theory' is itself a liminal form of signification that creates a space for the contingent,

indeterminate articulation of social 'experience' that is particularly important for envisaging emergent cultural identities. But it is a representation of 'experience' without the transparent reality of empiricism and outside the intentional mastery of the 'author'. Nevertheless, it is a representation of social experience as the contingency of history – the indeterminacy that makes subversion and revision possible – that is profoundly concerned with questions of cultural 'authorization'.

To evoke this 'beyond theory', I turn to Roland Barthes's exploration of the cultural space 'outside the sentence'. In *The Pleasure of the Text* I find a subtle suggestion that beyond theory you do not simply encounter its opposition, theory/practice, but an 'outside' that places the articulation of the two – theory and practice, language and politics – in a productive relation similar to Derrida's notion of supplementarity:

> a non-dialectical middle, a structure of jointed predication, which cannot itself be comprehended by the predicates it distributes . . . Not that this ability . . . shows a lack of power; rather this inability is constitutive of the very possibility of the logic of identity.

Outside the sentence

Half-asleep on his banquette in a bar, of which Tangiers is the exemplary site, Barthes attempts to 'enumerate the stereophony of languages within earshot': music, conversations, chairs, glasses, Arabic, French. Suddenly the inner speech of the writer turns into the exorbitant space of the Moroccan souk:

> [T]hrough me passed words, syntagms, bits of formulae and no sentence formed, as though that were the law of such a language. This speech at once very cultural and very savage, was above all lexical, sporadic; it set up in me, through its apparent flow, a definitive discontinuity: this non-sentence was in no way something that could not have acceded to the sentence, that might have been before the sentence; it was: what is . . . *outside the sentence*.
>
> (Barthes 1975: 49)

At this point, Barthes writes, all linguistics that gives an exorbitant dignity to predicative syntax fell away. In its wake it becomes possible to subvert the 'power of completion which defines sentence mastery and marks, as with a supreme, dearly won, conquered *savoir faire*, the agents of the sentence'. The hierarchy and the subordinations of the sentence are replaced by the definitive discontinuity of the text, and what emerges is a form of writing that Barthes describes as 'writing aloud': 'a text of pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat . . . a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the tongue, not the meaning of language'(Barthes 1975: 66–7).

Why return to the semiotician's daydream? Why begin with 'theory' as story, as narrative and anecdote, rather than with the history or method? Beginning with the semiotic project – enumerating all the languages within earshot – evokes

memories of the seminal influence of semiotics within our contemporary critical discourse. To that end, this *petit récit* rehearses some of the major themes of contemporary theory prefigured in the practice of semiotics – the author as an enunciative space; the formation of textuality after the fall of linguistics; the agonism between the sentence of predicative syntax and the discontinuous subject of discourse; the disjunction between the lexical and the grammatical dramatized in the liberty (perhaps libertinism) of the signifier.

To encounter Barthes's daydream is to acknowledge the formative contribution of semiotics to those influential concepts – sign, text, limit text, idiolect, *écriture* – that have become all the more important since they have passed into the unconscious of our critical trade. When Barthes attempts to produce, with his suggestive, erratic brilliance, a space for the pleasure of the text somewhere between 'the political policeman and the psychoanalytical policeman' – that is, between 'futility and/or guilt, pleasure is either idle or vain, a class notion or an illusion' – he evokes memories of the attempts, in the late 1970s and mid-1980s, to hold fast the political line while the poetic line struggled to free itself from its post-Althusserian arrest. What guilt, what pleasure.

To thematize theory is, for the moment, beside the point. To reduce this weird and wonderful daydream of the semiotic pedagogue, somewhat in his cups, to just another repetition of the theoretical litany of the death of the author would be reductive in the extreme. For the daydream takes semiotics by surprise; it turns pedagogy into the exploration of its own limits. If you seek simply the sententious or the exegetical, you will not grasp the hybrid moment outside the sentence – not quite experience, not yet concept; part dream, part analysis; neither signifier nor signified. This intermediate space between theory and practice disrupts the disciplinary semiological demand to enumerate all the languages within earshot.

Barthes's daydream is supplementary, not alternative, to acting in the real world; Freud reminds us that the structure of fantasy narrates the subject of daydream as the articulation of incommensurable temporalities, disavowed wishes, and discontinuous scenarios. The meaning of fantasy does not emerge in the predicative or prepositional value we might attach to being outside the sentence. Rather, the performative structure of the text reveals a temporality of discourse that I believe is significant. It opens up a narrative strategy for the emergence and negotiation of those agencies of the marginal, minority, subaltern, or diasporic that incite us to think through – and beyond – theory.

What is caught anecdotally 'outside the sentence', in Barthes's concept, is that problematic space – performative rather than experiential, non-sententious but no less theoretical – of which post-structuralist theory speaks in its many varied voices. In spite of the fall of a predictable, predicative linguistics, the space of the non-sentence is not a negative ontology: not *before* the sentence but something that *could have* acceded to the sentence and yet was *outside it.* This discourse is indeed one of indeterminism, unexpectability, one that is neither 'pure' contingency or negativity nor endless deferral. 'Outside the sentence' is not to be opposed to the inner voice; the non-sentence does not relate to the sentence as a polarity. The timeless capture that stages such epistemological 'confrontations', in Richard Rorty's term, is now interrupted and interrogated in the doubleness of writing – 'at once very cultural and very savage', 'as though that were the law of such a language'. This disturbs what

Derrida calls the occidental stereotomy, the ontological, circumscribing space between subject and object, inside and outside. It is the question of agency, as it emerges in relation to the indeterminate and the contingent, that I want to explore 'outside the sentence'. However, I want to preserve, at all times, that menacing sense in which the non-sentence is contiguous with the sentence, near but different, not simply its anarchic disruption.

Tangiers or Casablanca?

What we encounter outside the sentence, beyond the occidental stereotomy, is what I shall call the 'temporality' of Tangiers. It is a structure of temporality that will emerge only slowly and indirectly, as time goes by, as they say in Moroccan bars, whether in Tangiers or Casablanca. There is, however, an instructive difference between Casablanca and Tangiers. In Casablanca the passage of time preserves the identity of language; the possibility of naming over time is fixed in the repetition:

> You must remember this
> a kiss is still a kiss
> a sigh is but a sigh
> the fundamental things apply
> ^ë=íáãÉ=ÖçÉë=ÄóK=
>
> (*Casablanca*)

'Play it again, Sam', which is perhaps the Western world's most celebrated demand for repetition, is still an invocation to similitude, a return to the eternal verities.

In Tangiers, as time goes by, it produces an iterative temporality that erases the occidental spaces of language – inside/outside, past/present, those foundationalist epistemological positions of Western empiricism and historicism. Tangiers opens up disjunctive, incommensurable relations of spacing and temporality *within* the sign – an 'internal difference of the so-called ultimate element (*stoikheion,* trait, letter, seminal mark)'. The non-sentence is not before (either as the past or a priori) or inside (either as depth or presence) but outside (both spatially and temporally ex-centric, interruptive, in-between, on the borderlines, turning inside outside). In each of these inscriptions there is a doubling and a splitting of the temporal and spatial dimensions in the very act of signification. What emerges in this agonistic, ambivalent form of speech – 'at once very cultural and very savage' – is a question abut the subject of discourse and the agency of the letter: can there be a social subject of the 'non-sentence'? Is it possible to conceive of historical agency in that disjunctive, indeterminate moment of discourse outside the sentence? Is the whole thing no more than a theoretical fantasy that reduces any form of political critique to a daydream?

These apprehensions about the agency of the aporetic and the ambivalent become more acute when political claims are made for their strategic action. This is precisely Terry Eagleton's position, in his critique of the libertarian pessimism of poststructuralism:

> [It is] libertarian because something of the old model of expression/ repression lingers on in the dream of an entirely free-floating signifier, an infinite textual productivity, an existence blessedly free from the shackles of truth, meaning and sociality. Pessimistic, because whatever blocks such creativity – law, meaning, power, closure – is acknowledged to be built into it, in a sceptical recognition of the imbrication of authority and desire.
>
> (Eagleton 1991: 38)

The agency implicit in this discourse is objectified in a structure of the negotiation of meaning that is not a free-floating time lack but a *time-lag* – a contingent moment – in the signification of closure. Tangiers, the 'sign' of the 'non-sentence' turns retroactively, at the end of Barthes's essay, into a form of discourse that he names 'writing aloud'. The time-lag between the event of the sign (Tangiers) and its discursive eventuality (writing aloud) exemplifies a process where intentionality is negotiated retrospectively. The sign finds its closure retroactively in a discourse that it anticipates in the semiotic fantasy: there is a contiguity, a coextensivity, between Tangiers (as sign) and writing aloud (discursive formation), in that writing aloud is the mode of inscription of which Tangiers is a sign. There is no strict causality between Tangiers as the beginning of predication and writing aloud as the end or closure; but there is no free-floating signifier or an infinity of textual productivity. There is the more complex possibility of negotiating meaning and agency through the time-lag in-between the sign (Tangiers) and its initiation of a disclosure or narrative, where the relation of theory to practice is part of what Rodolphe Gasché termed 'jointed predication'. In this sense, closure comes to be effected in the contingent moment of repetition, 'an overlap without equivalence: *fort:da*'.

The temporality of Tangiers is a lesson in reading the agency of the social text as ambivalent and catachrestic. Gayatri Spivak has usefully described the 'negotiation' of the postcolonial position 'in terms of reversing, displacing and seizing the apparatus of value-coding', constituting a catachrestic space: words or concepts wrested from their proper meaning, 'a concept-metaphor without an adequate referent' that perverts its embedded context. Spivak continues, 'Claiming catachresis from a space that one cannot not want to inhabit [the sentence, sententious], yet must criticize [from outside the sentence] is then, the deconstructive predicament of the postcolonial.'

This Derridean position is close to the conceptual predicament outside the sentence. I have attempted to provide the discursive temporality, or time-lag, which is crucial to the process by which this turning around – of tropes, ideologies, concept metaphors – comes to be textualized and specified in postcolonial agency: the moment when the 'bar' of the occidental stereotomy is turned into the coextensive, contingent boundaries of relocation and reinscription: the catachrestic gesture. The insistent issue in any such move is the nature of the negotiatory agent realized through the time-lag. How does agency come to be specified and individuated, outside the discourses of individualism? How does the time-lag signify individuation as a position that is an effect of the 'intersubjective': contiguous with the social and yet contingent, indeterminate, in relation to it?

Writing aloud, for Barthes, is neither the 'expressive' function of language as authorial intention or generic determination nor meaning personified. It is similar to the *actio* repressed by classical rhetoric, and it is the 'corporeal exteriorization of discourse'. It is the art of guiding one's body into discourse, in such a way that the subject's accession to, and erasure in, the signifier as individuated is paradoxically accompanied by its remainder, an afterbirth, a double. Its noise – 'crackle, grate, cut' – makes vocal and visible, across the flow of the sentence's communicative code, the struggle involved in the insertion of agency – wound and bow, death and life – into discourse.

In Lacanian terms, which are appropriate here, this 'noise' is the 'leftover' after the *capitonnage*, or positioning, of the signifier for the subject. The Lacanian 'voice' that speaks outside the sentence is itself the voice of an interrogative, calculative agency: *'Che vuoi*? You are telling me that, but what do you want with it, what are you aiming at?' (For a clear explanation of this process, see Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* [1986].) What speaks in the place of this question, Jacques Lacan writes, is a 'third locus which is neither my speech nor my interlocutor' (Lacan 1977b: 173).

The time-lag opens up this negotiatory space between putting the question to the subject and the subject's repetition 'around' the neither/nor of the third locus. This constitutes the return of the subject agent, as the interrogative agency in the catachrestic position. Such a disjunctive space of temporality is the locus of symbolic identification that structures the intersubjective realm – the realm of otherness and the social – where 'we identify ourselves with the other precisely at a point at which he is inimitable, at the point which eludes resemblance'. My contention, elaborated in my writings on postcolonial discourse in terms of mimicry, hybridity, sly civility, is that this liminal moment of identification – eluding resemblance – produces a subversive strategy of subaltern agency that negotiates its own authority through a process of iterative 'unpicking' and incommensurable, insurgent relinking. It singularizes the 'totality' of authority by suggesting that agency requires a grounding, but it does not require a totalization of those grounds; it requires movement and manoeuvre, but it does not require a temporality of continuity or accumulation; it requires direction and contingent closure but no teleology and holism.

The individuation of the agent occurs in a moment of displacement. It is a pulsional incident, the split-second movement when the process of the subject's space of contingency. In this 'return' of the subject, thrown back across the designation – its fixity – opens up beside it, uncannily *abseits*, a supplementary distance of the signified, outside the sentence, the agent emerges as a form of retroactivity. It is not agency as itself (transcendent, transparent) or in itself (unitary, organic, autonomous). As a result of its own splitting in the time-lag of signification, the moment of the subject's individuation emerges as an effect of the intersubjective – as the return of the subject as agent. This means that those elements of social 'consciousness' imperative for agency – deliberative, individuated action and specificity in analysis – can now be thought outside that epistemology that insists on the subject as always prior to the social or on the knowledge of the social as necessarily subsuming or sublating the particular 'difference' in the transcendent homogeneity of the general. The iterative and contingent that marks this

intersubjective relation can never be libertarian or free-floating, as Eagleton claims, because the agent, constituted in the subject's return, is in the dialogic position of calculation, negotiation, interrogation: *Che vuoi*?

Agent without a cause?

Something of this genealogy of postcolonial agency has already been encountered in my expositions of the ambivalent and the multivalent in the language metaphor at work in West's 'synechdochical thinking' about black American cultural hybridity and Hall's notion of 'politics like a language'. The implications of this line of thinking were productively realized in the work of Spillers, Baker, Gates and Gilroy, all of whom emphasize the importance of the creative heterogeneity of the enunciatory 'present' that liberates the discourse of emancipation from binary closures. I want to give contingency another turn – through the Barthesian fantasy – by throwing the last line of the text, its conclusion, together with an earlier moment when Barthes speaks suggestively of closure as agency. Once again, we have an overlap without equivalence. For the notion of a non-teleological and a non-dialectical form of closure has often been considered the most problematic issue for the postmodern agent without a cause:

> [Writing aloud] succeed[s] in shifting the signified a great distance and in throwing, so to speak, the anonymous body of the actor into my ear. . . . And this body of bliss is also *my historical subject*; for it is at the *conclusion* of a very complex process of biographical, historical, sociological, neurotic elements . . . that I control the contradictory interplay of [cultural] pleasure and [non-cultural] bliss that I write myself as a subject at present out of place.
>
> (Barthes 1975: 62, 67)

The contingency of the subject as agent is articulated in a double dimension, a dramatic action. The signified is distanced; the resulting time-lag opens up the space between the lexical and the grammatical, between enunciation and enounced, in-between the anchoring of signifiers. Then, suddenly, this in-between spatial dimension, this distancing, converts itself into the temporality of the 'throw' that iteratively (re)turns the subject as a moment of conclusion and control: a historically or contextually specific subject. How are we to think the control or conclusion in the context of contingency?

We need, not surprisingly, to invoke both meanings of *contingency* and then to repeat the difference of the one in the other. Recall my suggestion that to interrupt the occidental stereotomy – inside/outside, space/time – one needs to think, outside the sentence, at once very cultural and very savage. The contingent is contiguity, metonymy, the touching of spatial boundaries at a tangent, and, at the same time, the contingent is the temporality of the indeterminate and the undecidable. It is the kinetic tension that holds this double determination together and apart within disclosure. They represent the repetition of the one in or as the other, in a structure of 'abyssal overlapping' (a Derridean term) which enables us to conceive of

strategic closure and control for the agent. Representing social contradiction or antagonism in this doubling discourse of contingency – where the spatial dimension of contiguity is reiterated in the temporality of the indeterminate – cannot be dismissed as the arcane practice of the undecidable or aporetic.

The importance of the problematic of contingency for historical discourse is evident in Ranajit Guha's attempt to represent the specificity of rebel consciousness. Guha's argument reveals the need for such a double and disjunctive sense of the contingent, although his own reading of the concept, in terms of the 'universalcontingent' couple, is more Hegelian in its elaboration. Rebel consciousness is inscribed in two major narratives. In bourgeois-nationalist historiography, it is seen as 'pure spontaneity pitted against the will of the State as embodied in the Raj'. The will of the rebels is either denied or subsumed in the individualized capacity of their leaders, who frequently belong to the elite gentry. Radical historiography failed to specify rebel consciousness because its continuist narrative ranged 'peasant revolts as a succession of events ranged along a direct line of descent . . . as a heritage'. In assimilating all moments of rebel consciousness to the 'highest moment of the series – indeed to an Ideal Consciousness' – these historians 'are ill-equipped to cope with contradictions which are indeed the stuff history is made of (Guha 1983: 39).

Guha's elaborations of rebel contradiction as consciousness are strongly suggestive of agency as the activity of the contingent. What I have described as the return of the subject is present in his account of rebel consciousness as self-alienated. My suggestion that the problematic of contingency strategically allows for a spatial contiguity – solidarity, collectivite action – to be (re)articulated in the moment of indeterminacy is, reading between the lines, very close to his sense of the strategic alliances at work in the contradictory and hybrid sites, and symbols, of peasant revolt. What historiography fails to grasp is indeed agency at the point of the 'combination of sectarianism and militancy . . . [specifically] the *ambiguity* of such phenomena'; causality as the 'time' of indeterminate articulation: 'the *swift* transformation of class struggle into communal strife and vice versa in our countryside'; and ambivalence at the point of 'individuation' as an intersubjective affect:

> Blinded by the glare of a perfect and immaculate consciousness the historian sees nothing . . . but solidarity in rebel behaviour and fails to notice its Other, namely, betrayal . . . He underestimates the brakes put on [insurgency as a *generalized* movement] by localism and territoriality.
>
> (Guha 1983: 40)

Finally, as if to provide an emblem for my notion of agency in the apparatus of contingency – its hybrid figuring of space and time – Guha, quoting Sunil Sen's *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal*, beautifully describes the 'ambiguity of such phenomena' as the hybridized signs and sites during the Tebhaga movement in Dinajpur:

> Muslim peasants [came] to the Kisan Sabha 'sometimes inscribing a hammer and a sickle on the Muslim League flag' and young maulavis '[recited]

> melodious verses from the Koran' at village meetings 'as they condemned the jotedari system and the practice of charging high interest rates'.
>
> (Guha 1983: 39)

The social text: Bakhtin and Arendt

The contingent conditions of agency also take us to the heart of Mikhail M. Bakhtin's important attempt, in speech genres, to designate the enunciative subject of heteroglossia and dialogism. As with Guha, my reading will be catechrestic: reading between the lines, taking neither him at his word nor me fully at mine. In focusing on how the chain of speech communication comes to be constituted, I deal with Bakhtin's attempt to individuate social agency as an after-effect of the intersubjective. My cross-hatched matrix of contingency – as spatial difference and temporal distance, to turn the terms somewhat – enables us to see how Bakhtin provides a knowledge of the transformation of social discourse while displacing the originating subject and the causal and continuist progress of discourse: 'The object, as it were, has already been articulated, disputed, elucidated and evaluated in various ways . . . The speaker is not the biblical Adam . . . as simplistic ideas about communication as a logical-psychological basis for the sentence suggest' (Bakhtin 1986: 93).

Bakhtin's use of the metaphor of the chain of communication picks up the sense of contingency as contiguity, while the question of the 'link' immediately raises the issue of contingency as the indeterminate. Bakhtin's displacement of the author as agent results from his acknowledgment of the 'complex, multiplanar' structure of the speech genre that exists in that kinetic tension in-between the two forces of contingency. The spatial boundaries of the object of utterance are contiguous in the assimilation of the other's speech; but the allusion to another's utterance produces a dialogical turn, a moment of indeterminacy in the act of 'addressivity' (Bakhtin's concept) that gives rise within the chain of speech communion to 'unmediated responsive reactions and dialogic reverberations'.

Although Bakhtin acknowledges this double movement in the chain of the utterance, there is a sense in which he disavows its effectivity at the point of the enunciation of discursive agency. He displaces this conceptual problem that concerns the performativity of the speech act – its enunciative modalities of time and space – to an empiricist acknowledgment of the 'area of human activity and everyday life to which the given utterance is related'. It is not that the social context does not localize the utterance; it is simply that the process of specification and individuation still needs to be elaborated within Bakhtin's theory, as the modality through which the speech genre comes to recognize the specific as a signifying limit, a discursive boundary.

There are moments when Bakhtin obliquely touches on the tense doubling of the contingent that I have described. When he talks of the 'dialogic overtones' that permeate the agency of utterance – 'many half-concealed or completely concealed words of others with varying degrees of foreignness' – his metaphors hint at the iterative inter subjective temporality in which the agency is realized 'outside' the author:

> [T]he utterance appears to be furrowed with distant and barely audible echoes of changes of speech subjects and dialogic overtones, greatly weakened utterance boundaries that are completely permeable to the author's expression. The utterance proves to be a very complex and multiplanar phenomenon if considered not in isolation and with respect to its author . . . but as a link in the chain of speech communication and with respect to other related utterances.
>
> (Bakhtin 1986: 93)

Through this landscape of echoes and ambivalent boundaries, framed in passing, furrowed horizons, the agent who is 'not Adam' but is, indeed, time-lagged, emerges into the social realm of discourse.

Agency, as the return of the subject, as 'not Adam', has a more directly political history in Hannah Arendt's portrayal of the troubled narrative of social causality. According to Arendt the notorious uncertainty of all political matters arises from the fact that the disclosure of *who* – the agent as individuation – is contiguous with the *what* of the intersubjective realm. This contiguous relation between *who* and *what* cannot be transcended but must be accepted as a form of indeterminism and doubling. The *who* of agency bears no mimetic immediacy or adequacy of representation. It can be signified only outside the sentence in that sporadic, ambivalent temporality that inhabits the notorious unreliability of ancient oracles who 'neither reveal nor hide in words but give manifest signs'. The unreliability of signs introduces a perplexity in the social text:

> The perplexity is that in any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion; and although this agent frequently remains the subject, the 'hero' of the story, we can never point unequivocally to him as the author of its outcome.
>
> (Arendt 1958: 185)

This is the structure of the intersubjective space between agents, what Arendt terms human 'inter-est'. It is this public sphere of language and action that must become at once the theatre and the screen for the manifestation of the capacities of human agency. Tangiers-like, the event and its eventuality are separated; the narrative time-lag makes the *who* and the *what* contingent, splitting them, so that the agent remains the subject, in suspension, outside the sentence. The agent who 'causes' the narrative becomes part of the interest, only because we cannot point unequivocally to that agent at the point of outcome. It is the contingency that constitutes individuation – in the return of the subject as agent – that protects the interest of the intersubjective realm.

The contingency of closure socializes the agent as a collective 'effect' through the distancing of the author. Between the cause and its intentionality falls the shadow. Can we then unquestionably propose that a story has a unique meaning in the first place? To what end does the series of events tend if the author of the outcome is not unequivocally the author of the cause? Does it not suggest that agency arises in the return of the subject, from the interruption of the series of events as a kind of

interrogation and reinscription of before and after? Where the two touch is there not that kinetic tension between the contingent as the contiguous and the indeterminate? Is it not from there that agency speaks and acts: *Che vuoi*?

These questions are provoked by Arendt's brilliant suggestiveness, for her writing symptomatically performs the perplexities she evokes. Having brought close together the unique meaning and the causal agent, she says that the 'invisible actor' is an 'invention arising from a mental perplexity' corresponding to no real experience. It is this distancing of the signified, this anxious fantasm or simulacrum – in the place of the author – that, according to Arendt, indicates most clearly the political nature of history. The sign of the political is, moreover, not invested in 'the character of the story itself but only [in] the *mode* in which it came into existence'. So it is the realm of representation and the process of signification that constitutes the space of the political. What is temporal in the mode of existence of the political? Here Arendt resorts to a form of repetition to resolve the ambivalence of her argument. The 'reification' of the agent can only occur, she writes, through 'a kind of repetition, the imitation of mimesis, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arts but is actually appropriate to the drama'.

This repetition of the agent, reified in the liberal vision of togetherness, is quite different from my sense of the contingent agency for our postcolonial age. The reasons for this are not difficult to find. Arendt's belief in the revelatory qualities of Aristotelian mimesis are grounded in a notion of community, or the public sphere, that is largely consensual: 'where people are *with* others, and neither for nor against them – that is sheer human togetherness'. When people are passionately for or against one another, then human togetherness is lost as they deny the fullness of Aristotelian mimetic time. Arendt's form of social mimesis does not deal with social marginality as a product of the liberal state, which can, if articulated, reveal the limitations of its common sense (inter-est) of society from the perspective of minorities or the marginalized. Social violence is, for Arendt, the denial of the disclosure of agency, the point at which 'speech becomes "mere talk", simply one more means towards the end'.

My concern is with other articulations of human togetherness, as they are related to cultural difference and discrimination. For instance, human togetherness may come to represent the forces of hegemonic authority; or a solidarity founded in victimization and suffering may, implacably, sometimes violently, become bound against oppression; or a subaltern or minority agency may attempt to interrogate and rearticulate the 'inter-est' of society that marginalizes its interests. These discourses of cultural dissent and social antagonism cannot find their agents in Arendt's Aristotelian mimesis. In the process I've described as the return of the subject, there is an agency that seeks revision and reinscription: the attempt to renegotiate the third locus, the inter subjective realm. The repetition of the iterative, the activity of the time-lag, is not so much arbitrary as interruptive, a closure that is not conclusion but a liminal interrogation outside the sentence.

Revisions

The concept of reinscription and negotiation that I am elaborating must not be confused with the powers of 'redescription' that have become the hallmark of the liberal ironist or neo-pragmatist. I do not offer a critique of this influential non-foundationalist position here except to point to the obvious differences of approach. Rorty's conception of the representation of difference in social discourse is the consensual overlapping of 'final vocabularies' that allow imaginative identification with the other so long as certain words – '*kindness*, decency, *dignity* – are held in common. However, as he says, the liberal ironist can never elaborate an empowering strategy. Just how disempowering his views are for the non-Western other, how steeped in a Western ethnocentricism, is seen, appropriately for a non-foundationalist, in a footnote.

Rorty suggests that

> liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement [and that] Western social and political thought may have had the last conceptual revolution it needs in J. S. Mill's suggestion that governments should optimize the balance between leaving people's private lives alone and preventing suffering.
>
> (Rorty 1989: 92)

Appended to this is the footnote where liberal ironists suddenly lose their powers of redescription:

> This is not to say that the world has had the last political revolution it needs. It is hard to imagine the diminution of cruelty in countries like South Africa, Paraguay, and Albania without violent revolution . . . But in such countries raw courage (like that of the leaders of COSATU or the signers of Charta 77) is the relevant virtue, not the sort of reflective acumen which makes contributions to social theory.
>
> (Rorty 1989: 63)

This is where Rorty's conversation stops, but we must force the dialogue to acknowledge postcolonial perspective: 'Bourgeois culture hits its historical limit in colonialism', writes Guha sententiously, and, almost as if to speak 'outside the sentence', Veena Das reinscribes Guha's thought into the affective language of a metaphor and the body: 'Subaltern rebellions can only provide a night-time of love . . . Yet perhaps in capturing this defiance the historian has given us a means of constructing the objects of such power as *subjects*.'

In her excellent essay 'Subaltern as perspective', Das demands a historiography of the subaltern that displaces the paradigm of social action as defined primarily by rational action. She seeks a form of discourse where affective and iterative writing develops its own language. History as a writing that constructs the moment of defiance emerges in the 'magma of significations', for the 'representational closure which presents itself when we encounter thought in

objectified forms is now ripped open. Instead we see this order interrogated'. In an argument that demands an enunciative temporality remarkably close to my notion of the timelag that circulates at the point of the sign's seizure or caesura of symbolic synchronicity, Das locates the moment of transgression in the splitting of the discursive present: a greater attention is required to locate transgressive agency in 'the splitting of the various types of speech produced into statements of referential truth in the indicative present' (Das 1989: 316).

This emphasis on the disjunctive present of utterance enables the historian to get away from defining subaltern consciousness as binary, as having positive or negative dimensions. It allows the articulation of subaltern agency to emerge as relocation and reinscription. In the seizure of the sign, as I've argued, there is neither dialectical sublation nor the empty signifier: there is a contestation of the given symbols of authority that shift the terrains of antagonism. The synchronicity in the social ordering of symbols is challenged within its own terms, but the grounds of engagement have been displaced in a supplementary movement that exceeds those terms. This is the historical movement of hybridity as camouflage, as a contesting, antagonistic agency functioning in the time-lag of sign or symbol, which is a space in-between the rules of engagement. It is this theoretical form of political agency I've attempted to develop that Das beautifully fleshes out in a historical argument:

> It is the nature of the conflict within which a caste or tribe is locked which may provide the characteristics of the historical moment; to assume that we may know a priori the mentalities of castes or communities is to take an essentialist perspective which the evidence produced in the very columns of *Subaltern Studies* would not support.
>
> (Das 1989: 320)

Is the contingent structure of agency not similar to what Frantz Fanon describes as the knowledge of the practice of action? Fanon argues that the primitive Manichaeanism of the settler – black and white, Arab and Christian – breaks down in the present of struggle for independence. Polarities come to be replaced with truths that are only partial, limited and unstable. Each 'local ebb of the tide reviews the political question from the standpoint of all political networks'. The leaders should stand firmly against those within the movement who tend to think that 'shades of meaning constitute dangers and drive wedges into the solid block of popular opinion.' What Das and Fanon both describe is the potentiality of agency constituted through the strategic use of historical contingency.