THE POSTCOLONIAL AND THE POSTMODERN
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Introduction, Katarzyna Marciniak

“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.” This is Homi Bhabha’s well-known formulation of the necessity of intervention 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.” As a postcolonial scholar, Bhabha is interested in exploring the intersection of postmodern culture and the postcolonial condition, postulating the necessity to rethink the meaning of postmodernity through the lens of the postcolonial discourse.

In The Location of Culture, he proposes that the discussion of postmodernity should not be solely “limited to a celebration of the fragmentation of the ‘grand narratives.’” Rather, he claims that “the wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological ‘limits’ of those ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices—women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities.” Bhabha thus suggests that only when we understand contemporary culture as transnational and translational can we arrive at radical cultural and literary practices that may move us beyond Western ethnocentrism and Manichaean polarities, helping us undo the binary oppositions between the First and the Third worlds. By neglecting the postcolonial urgency, he argues, we risk privileging the model of culture based on both humanist bourgeois and patriarchal ideologies. What we can gain by scrutinizing “the technologies of colonial and imperialist governance,” Bhabha suggests, is the space for those “others”—women, natives, the colonized, immigrants—who have been either conveniently expelled from or homogenized into cultural productions of power. This new way of conceiving of culture requires that postcolonial scholars think dialectically, i.e., that they, while addressing cultural differences, do not homogenize or absorb “others” either in the First or the Third worlds, but recognize
that our cultural and political identities constantly come to be through the coinfluential processes that emerge out of these geopolitical divisions.

The postmodern condition is intricately linked with the history of postcolonial migrations and with the experience of exile, diaspora, displacement, and dislocation. Accordingly, the poetics of exile, as Bhabha calls it, undoes the possibility of stable ontology and posits the redefinition of such traditionally homogenous notions as nation, culture, subject, national identity, citizenship, and human community. Within this context, he introduces the concept of the “in-between space” as the Third Space that disrupts the politics of polarity and allows for the possibility of resistance towards nationalistic and ethnocentric ideals and discourses. In his argument, the in-between space is connected to the postcolonial notion of “hybridity” whose perspective insists that cultural and political identities are constructed through the process of alterity. He writes, “it is from this hybrid location of culture—the transnational as the translational—that the postcolonial intellectual attempts to elaborate a historical and literary project.” Consequently, his argument opens up the understanding of what postmodernism means and maintains that “the very language of cultural community needs to be rethought from a postcolonial perspective.”

As you read this selection, consider these three questions: Why does Bhabha argue that it is important “to rename the postmodern from the position of the postcolonial”? How does Bhabha’s notion of the “in-between” space mobilize the idea of postmodernity? Why, according to Bhabha, is it necessary to conceptualize contemporary culture as transnational and translational?

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“[F]or some of us the principle of indeterminism is what makes the conscious freedom of man fathomable.”

Jacques Derrida, “My chances”/“Mes chances”

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 also argue 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.”

These contingencies are often the grounds of historical necessity for elaborating empowering strategies of emancipation, staging other social antagonisms. To reconstitute the discourse of cultural difference demands not simply a change of cultural contents and symbols; a replacement within the same time-frame of representation is never adequate. It requires a radical revision of the social temporality in which emergent histories may be written, the rearticulation of the “sign” in which cultural identities may be inscribed. And contingency as the signifying time of counter-hegemonic strategies is not a celebration of “lack” or “excess” or a self-perpetuating series of negative ontologies. Such “indeterminism” is the mark of the conflictual yet productive space in which the arbitrariness of the sign of cultural signification emerges within the regulated boundaries of social discourse.

In this salutary sense, 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 *musee 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 within 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 meaning as they circulate as signs within specific contextual locations and social systems of value. The transnational dimension of cultural transformation—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—as it is being developed by cultural historians and literary theorists—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, nor . . . vacuously celebrat[ing] the astonishing pluralism of human cultures” . . .

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 metropitan world in a common effort at re-inscribing, re-interpreting and expanding the sites of intensity and the terrain contested with Europe.”
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. 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—it’s 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 sug-
gests, 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 anom-
alous and discriminatory legal and cultural status assigned to migrant, dias-
poric, 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 limita-
tions 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 identity are constructed through a process 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 cul-
tural 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 commu-
nity in the 1980s.

Culture becomes as much an uncomfortable, disturbing practice of sur-
vival 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 post-
colonial prerogative seeks to affirm and extend a new collaborative dimen-
sion, 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 dis-
courses whose strategies are elaborated around nonequivalent sites of repre-
sentation 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 “postmodern” cultural subjects.

Cornel West enacts “a measure of synecdochical 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 drum-beat... 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.

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.

Earlier in his book, he uses the linguistic sign as a metaphor for a more differential and contingent political 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.

The “language” metaphor raises the question of cultural difference and incommensurability, not the consensual, ethnocentric notion of the pluralis-
tic 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. In Britain today this is certainly true of the experimental art and film emerging from the left, associated with the postcolonial experience of migration and diaspora and articulated in the cultural exploration of new ethnicities.

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—a before that has no a priori(ty)—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.”

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/their) 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:

[As 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.

Deborah McDowell, in her reading of Sherley Anne Williams’s Dessa Rose, argues that it is the temporality of the enunciatory “‘present’ and its discourses . . . in heterogeneous and messy array,” opened up in the narrative, that enables the book to wrestle vigorously with “the critique of the subject and the critique of binary oppositions . . . with questions of the politics and problematics of language and representation.” 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 “counterpolitics 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.”

What is striking about the theoretical focus on the enunciatory present as a liberatory discursive strategy is its proposal that emergent cultural iden-
tifications 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.

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.

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; 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 propositional 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-sen-
tentious but no less theoretical—of which poststructuralist 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.

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, McDowell, 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 nondialectical 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.

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 discourse. 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 “universal-contingent” 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’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.

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.”

* * *

**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 ethnocentrism, 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.

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.

This is where Rorty’s conversation stops, but we must force the dialogue to acknowledge postcolonial social and cultural theory that reveals the limits of liberalism in the 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 time-lag that circulates at the point of the sign’s seizure/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.”

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/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 volumes of *Subaltern Studies* would not support.

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.
The form of agency that I’ve attempted to describe through the cut and thrust of sign and symbol, the signifying conditions of contingency, the night-time of love, returns to interrogate that most audacious dialectic of modernity provided by contemporary theory—Foucault’s “Man and his doubles.” Foucault’s productive influence on postcolonial scholars, from Australia to India, has not been unqualified, particularly in his construction of modernity. Mitchell Dean, writing in the Melbourne journal *Thesis Eleven*, remarks that the identity of the West’s modernity obsessively remains “the most general horizon under which all of Foucault’s actual historical analyses are landmarked.” And for this very reason, Partha Chatterjee argues that Foucault’s genealogy of power has limited uses in the developing world. The combination of modern and archaic regimes of power produces unexpected forms of disciplinarity and governmentality that make Foucault’s epistemes inappropriate, even obsolete.

But could Foucault’s text, which bears such an attenuated relation to Western modernity, be free of that epistemic displacement—through the (post)colonial formation—that constitutes the West’s sense of itself as progressive, civil, modern? Does the disavowal of colonialism turn Foucault’s “sign” of the West into the symptom of an obsessional modernity? Can the colonial moment ever not be contingent—the contiguous as indeterminacy—to Foucault’s argument?

At the magisterial end of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, when the section on history confronts its uncanny doubles—the counter-sciences of anthropology and psychoanalysis—the argument begins to unravel. It happens at a symptomatic moment when the representation of cultural difference attenuates the sense of history as the embedding, domesticating “homeland” of the human sciences. For the finitude of history—its moment of doubling—participates in the conditionality of the contingent. An incommensurable doubleness ensues between history as the “homeland” of the human sciences—its cultural area, its chronological or geographical boundaries—and the claims of historicism to universalism. At that point, “the subject of knowledge becomes the nexus of different times, foreign to it and heterogeneous in respect to one another.” In that contingent doubling of history and nineteenth-century historicism the time-lag in the discourse enables the return of historical agency:

Since *time* comes to him from somewhere other than himself he constitutes himself as a subject of history only by the superimposition of . . .

the history of things, the history of words. . . . But this relation of sim-
ple passivity is immediately reversed... for he too has a right to a development quite as positive as that of beings and things, one no less autonomous.

As a result the *heimlich* historical subject that arises in the nineteenth century cannot stop constituting the *unheimlich* knowledge of itself by compulsively relating one cultural episode to another in an infinitely repetitious series of events that are metonymic and indeterminate. The grand narratives of nineteenth-century historicism on which its claims to universalism were founded—evolutionism, utilitarianism, evangelism—were also, in another textual and territorial time/pace, the technologies of colonial and imperialist governance. It is the “rationalism” of these ideologies of progress that increasingly comes to be eroded in the encounter with the contingency of cultural difference. Elsewhere I have explored this historical process, perfectly caught in the picturesque words of a desperate missionary in the early nineteenth century as the colonial predicament of “sly civility.” The result of this colonial encounter, its antagonisms and ambivalences, has a major effect on what Foucault beautifully describes as the “slenderness of the narrative” of history in that era most renowned for its historicizing (and colonizing) of the world and the word.

History now “takes place on the outer limits of the object and subject,” Foucault writes, and it is to probe the uncanny unconscious of history’s doubling that he resorts to anthropology and psychoanalysis. In these disciplines the cultural unconscious is spoken in the slenderness of narrative—ambivalence, catachresis, contingency, iteration, abyssal overlapping. In the agonistic temporal break that articulates the cultural symbol to the psychic sign, we shall discover the postcolonial symptom of Foucault’s discourse. Writing of the history of anthropology as the “counter-discourse” to modernity—as the possibility of a human science postmodernism—Foucault says:

> There is a certain position in the Western *ratio* that was constituted in its history and provides a foundation for the relation it can have with all other societies, *even with the society in which it historically appeared*.

Foucault fails to elaborate that “certain position” and its historical constitution. By disavowing it, however, he names it as a negation in the very next line which reads: “Obviously this does not mean that the colonizing situation is indispensable to ethnology.”

Are we demanding that Foucault should reinstate colonialism as the missing moment in the dialectic of modernity? Do we want him to “complete” the argument by appropriating ours? Definitely not. I suggest that the
postcolonial perspective is subversively working in his text in that moment of contingency that allows the contiguity of his argument—thought following thought—to progress. Then, suddenly, at the point of its closure, a curious indeterminacy enters the chain of discourse. This becomes the space for a new discursive temporality, another place of enunciation that will not allow the argument to expand into an unproblematic generality.

In this spirit of conclusion, I want to suggest a departure for the postcolonial text in the Foucauldian forgetting. In talking of psychoanalysis Foucault is able to see how knowledge and power come together in the enunciative “present” of transference: the “calm violence”—as he calls it—of a relationship that constitutes the discourse. By disavowing the colonial moment as an enunciative present in the historical and epistemological condition of Western modernity, Foucault can say little about the transferential relation between the West and its colonial history. He disavows precisely the colonial text as the foundation for the relation the Western ratio can have “even with the society in which it historically appeared.”

Reading from this perspective we can see that, in insistently spatializing the “time” of history, Foucault constitutes a doubling of “man” that is strangely collusive with its dispersal, equivalent to its equivocation, and uncannily self-constituting, despite its game of “double and splits.” Reading from the transferential perspective, where the Western ratio returns to itself from the time-lag of the colonial relation, then we see how modernity and postmodernity are themselves constituted from the marginal perspective of cultural difference. They encounter themselves contingently at the point at which the internal difference of their own society is reiterated in terms of the difference of the other, the alterity of the postcolonial site.

At this point of self-alienation postcolonial agency returns, in a spirit of calm violence, to interrogate Foucault’s fluent doubling of the figures of modernity, What it reveals is not some buried concept but a truth about the symptom of Foucault’s thinking, the style of discourse and narrative that objectifies his concepts. It reveals the reason for Foucault’s desire to anxiously play with the folds of Western modernity, fraying the finitudes of human beings, obsessively undoing and doing up the threads of that “slender narrative” of nineteenth-century historicism. This nervous narrative illustrates and attenuates his own argument; like the slender thread of history, it refuses to be woven in, menacingly hanging loose from the margins. What stops the narrative thread from breaking is Foucault’s concern to introduce,
at the nexus of his doubling, the idea that “the man who appears at the begin-
ing of the nineteenth century is dehistoricized.”

The dehistoricized authority of “Man and his doubles” produces, in the
same historical period, those forces of normalization and naturalization that
create a modern Western disciplinary society. The invisible power that is
invested in this dehistoricized figure of Man is gained at the cost of those
“others”—women, natives, the colonized, the indentured and enslaved—
who, at the same time but in other spaces, were becoming the peoples with-
out a history.