theories and methodologies

Hybridity, Redux

DEEPIKA BAHRI

THE ENSUING REMARKS ON HOMI BHABHA'S COLLECTION OF ESSAYS *THE LOCATION OF CULTURE* ARE FRAMED BY THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

Under what discursive conditions does a text arrive? How do conditions beyond the text determine its reception and circulation? And why is Bhabha routinely associated more with ambivalence, interstice, and liminality than with the ways in which they illuminate problems of race, the archive, history, or the affective bodily subject of history? To focus these ruminations, I will discuss the intervention, impact, and afterlife of *The Location of Culture* through the concept of hybridity, arguably one of the greatest hits of postcolonial studies and one closely associated with the work of Bhabha.[1] Informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's propositions about hybridity in linguistic utterance; by Sigmund Freud's theories of ambivalence; by Walter Benjamin's discussions of history, event, and language; by Jacques Lacan's discourses on ego, language, and subjectivity; by Michel Foucault's investigations of history, knowledge, and power; and by Jacques Derrida's theories of *différance*, Bhabha's formulations have gained currency well beyond the humanities. Appropriations of hybridity in globalization discourse, however, often do not honor Bhabha's poststructural politics or its rooting in a complex history of ideas even as the critics of hybridity fail to recognize its inception in archival moments and particular enunciative contexts.[2] Bhabha's work not only poses questions *to* history in a mode characteristic of deconstruction, it also commences *in* history in a clearly postcolonial modality. I want to review missed appointments with pressing questions of history and race in the global reception of Bhabha's concept of hybridity, an approach that constitutes an implicit plea for the recognition and reanimation of these questions in contemporary uses of the term *hybridity* in the discourse of globalization.

The appeal of Bhabha's work and the problems of misprision arise in part from the conjunctures that attend the arrival of this influential collection of essays in 1994. Of particular importance in this contextual history is the force of the linguistic turn and its

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rolling impact on almost every discipline in the humanities. Beginning with structuralist theories in the work of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, in anthropology; of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alfred Whitehead, and John Dewey, in philosophy; of Ferdinand de Saussure and J. L. Austin, in linguistics; and of George Herbert Mead, in sociology, this turn steadily gained traction with the poststructuralist theories of Derrida, Lacan, and Jean-François Lyotard.

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colonized, reworking the effects of the colonial encounter as the production of hybridization "rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions" (*Location* 112).

Within this deconstructive framework, the topic of race takes the stage frequently in *The Location of Culture*. The fetish of racial difference emerges as an open secret, the "common knowledge" that "plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies" (78). Bhabha links racism explicitly to European imperialism, lamenting the characterization of racism as historical retroversion in Foucault's work and as a "dream-text" that is "outside history" in Benedict Anderson's. Bhabha takes Foucault to task for omitting considerations of "race and blood" in conceiving of modern sexuality, and Anderson for casting racism in "an archaic ahistorical moment outside the 'modernity' of the imagined community" (248). For Bhabha, the distinctive semiotics of race are produced by particular circumstances and needs and by the exercise of power. Indeed, while not letting Foucault off the hook for his stance on the problem of race, Bhabha nonetheless credits him with illuminating "the imbroglio of the culture wars" in his "insistence that modern power emerges from, and operates within, 'local conditions and particular needs' rather than the instrumental or 'universal' rationalities of identifiable groups" ("White Stuff").

Bhabha's groundbreaking essay "Signs Taken for Wonders," reprinted as a chapter in *The Location of Culture*, is based in archival research "on early-19th-century Hindu peasants in northern India who were approached by early 'native' catechists who sought their conversion to Christianity" ("Translator"), while "By Bread Alone: Signs of Violence in the Mid–Nineteenth Century" undertakes an expository reading of the circulation of chapatis during the Indian Mutiny, an event that uncovers the value of examining totemic foods in a material-historical context as signs at the enunciative level. These readings illuminate the event of resistance and racial differentiation in circumscribed and historically situated contexts of subjugation. Bhabha's interests in history, race, and bodily feelings—affective states and emotions as well as structures of feeling that arise in relation to political action—thus collaborate in the production of the enunciatory subject of hybridization in performance. In a 2015 essay, "'The Beginning of Their Real Enunciation,'" Bhabha explains how agency, change, history, and affect are allied in ways that might be construed as a retroactive gloss on many of his central propositions in *The Location of Culture*:

> Theoretical discourses that usher in new social movements do not simply add to our vocabularies of change; they transform the temporal medium through which we interpret the world and act upon it. Affectivity—fear, ambivalence, terror, shame, disorientation, or dispossession—figures prominently in addressing the subject's identification with, or resistance to, the indeterminacy of change. Affect registers and regulates the subject's ambivalent and anxious responses as it faces what is new, partially known, or without guarantees; at the same time it provides the agent with an imminent sense of sensory and bodily attentiveness to the task of change. To the extent that affectivity is crucial in positioning subjects in relation to contingent and indeterminate circumstances, affect is an acute measure of the *time* change takes—in particular, the temporalities of transition or transience. (8)

Because Bhabha casts the historical event, as he does hybridity, into a processual and psychoanalytic drama designed to scuttle the anxious authority of colonial writ, on the one hand, and to yoke political effectiveness to affective states generated by the historically situated staging of difference, on the other, history seems to recede from view despite its inaugural role. No longer recognizable as political action, because it has been dispersed

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throughout the intertextual, intercultural weave of encounter, but translated into an enunciative present, the very idea of change appears to disappear. However, Bhabha's sense of the politics of ideology, of discourse, and indeed of historical change is influenced not only by poststructuralist thought but also by the work of critics, such as Stuart Hall, whom Bhabha admired and wrote about. Hall's essay "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees" had a powerful influence on Bhabha's thought. Hall directs us to "the necessary 'openness' of historical development to practice and struggle," underscoring "the real indeterminacy of the political—the level which condenses all the other levels of practice and secures their functioning in a particular system of power." Systems of power and "the existing balance of social forces, the specific nature of the concrete conjuncture" allow for the political and for an understanding of "a marxism without final guarantees'" (45). Hall's strategic blend of Marxism, poststructuralism, critical race theory, and feminism exemplifies the kind of work Bhabha understood as necessary to ethical thinking.

Joining the lessons of poststructuralism with those he draws from Hall, Bhabha writes that "[s]olidarity 'without guarantees' is deeply etched in the ethical imaginary of the best work in cultural studies, protecting it from the purism of identity politics." Bhabha concludes that solidarity relies on "affiliation—in the midst of the articulation of differences" and its attendant affective mechanisms of empathy and anxiety. In the end, "the radical edge of difference comes from its liminal enunciative position, located somewhere between affective pressures exerted on the inside and forces summoned by political contingencies on the outside" ("'Beginning'" 10).

Consistent with the general drift from race to culture, *race* is situated as a subset of the more generalized term *culture* in *The Location of Culture*, in an expansive bid for a relevant, ethically motivated way of reading difference in a time of transit through culture's location in interstitiality. Underlying this method is a scrupulously ethical insistence on the understanding that the universalizing tendencies of authoritative discourse and its discriminatory logic cannot be combated by relying on fundamental racial identity.

Bhabha's stake in race is often understood through a postmodern hermeneutic—in a discursive struggle over signifier and signified, in the "time-lag," a delay conjoining with indeterminacy in the process of signification. *Time-lag* underscores the retroactivity of signification and the closure of meaning, thus shifting attention to betweenness. On this understanding, hybridity is perceived as a general problematic with limited purchase for historical moments of encounter. Bhabha's postcolonial rearticulation of Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* 'retrospection' and Derrida's *décalage horaire* 'time difference,' however, develops the "discourse of race" such that it "displays the *problem of the ambivalent temporality of modernity* that is often overlooked in the more 'spatial' traditions of postmodern theory" (*Location* 239). Bhabha now forces an encounter with time before time, the time of modernity, as it were. It turns out that hybridity and the crisis of signification are concepts "driven by the subaltern history of the margins of modernity—rather than by the failures of logocentrism" (175). Relocating the origins of the crisis of signification, Bhabha explains 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 judgment 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. (173)

In positing "the signifying time-lag of cultural difference . . . as a structure for the

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representation of subaltern and postcolonial agency" (a project he likens to Frantz Fanon's [237]), in casting "the colonial presence [as] . . . always ambivalent" (107), and in characterizing hybridity as "a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal" and expanding its remit to suggest that "hybridity reverses the *formal* process of disavowal so that the violent dislocation of the act of colonization becomes the conditionality of colonial discourse" (114), the theorist has attempted all along "to revise the known, to rename the postmodern from the position of the postcolonial" (175). Bhabha thereby attributes the postmodern moment—and its whiff of ahistoricism—to a postcolonial provenance with the distinctive smell of history.

In "Black and White and Read All Over," published a year after *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha emphasizes an alternative history of ideas for hybridity that obliges us to include James Baldwin alongside the usual cast of characters (Derrida, Freud, Lacan, and Foucault). On the scene of arrival of hybridity and *The Location of Culture*—dominated by what Bhabha calls the "linguistic turn and its poststructuralist progeny" ("'Beginning'" 7)—we are asked to discern the patient space clearing of African American writers and thinkers who explain how history works on and through them. Bhabha points to the sourcing of his theory of hybridity in this living history to counter the willfully selective genealogy that locates the "crucial premises of postcolonial criticism" in "post-structuralist thinking and the various postmodernisms it has informed" (Dirlik 336). In "Black and White," Bhabha writes, "Hybridity . . . is no jejune post-Modern lark." Nor, he explains, disavowing the ruse of original thinking, "is it simply my invention." Bhabha traces the concept of hybridity to "James Baldwin's profound meditation on the unique power and pathos of the American color line." Baldwin's meditations on the Negro as hybrid strike Bhabha as profoundly generative for his own investment in the production of difference in the crucible of contact. "Alienation," Baldwin writes, "causes the Negro to recognize that he is a hybrid. . . . In white Americans he finds reflected—repeated, as it were, in a higher key—his tensions, his terrors, his tenderness. Dimly and for the first time, there begins to fall into perspective the nature of the roles they have played in the lives and history of each other." This insight, he explains, implies not a forfeiture of his birthright but rather what "he is struggling to recognize and make articulate" (qtd. in Bhabha, "Black"). Bhabha underlines the ethical and political gesture implicit here: "Hybridity, as Baldwin testifies, is a form of social and psychic recognition; it is an awareness of the graftings, transitions, and translations through which we define our present and articulate an ethics equal to the way we live now" ("Black"). Crucially for Bhabha, hybridity is not "about new alloys conceived in an amoral state of historical amnesia," nor is it about "cultural appropriation or assimilation subsumed in a celebration of citizenship" ("Black"). Bhabha's sense of the relevance of hybridity as an ethical stance for the current "post" moment derives from a struggle against historical amnesia, against forgetting the lessons to be learned from those "who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement" and who point not only to suffering but also to what is possible, in theory and in praxis (*Location* 172).

Choosing to give poststructuralism a postcolonial provenance, Bhabha takes time to task. Under this dispensation, dismissals of hybridity as a "post-Modern lark" are tantamount to a disavowal of the very history that agitates the desire for politically urgent intervention. Given Bhabha's theoretical commitments, his formulation of hybridity is not intended to generate a postcolonial theory of the subject or a predictable politics of solidarity and community. Nor, it should be

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repeated, does this concept of hybridization lend itself to the celebratory rhetoric of global mixture and the production of a new global subject. His formulation undertakes a task invested in disaggregating the usual iterations of identity, power, authority, and agency:

> For me, hybridization is really about how you negotiate between texts or cultures or practices in a situation of power imbalances in order to be able to see the way in which strategies of appropriation, revision, and iteration can produce possibilities for those who are less advantaged to be able to grasp in a moment of emergency, in the very process of the exchange or the negotiation, the advantage.
> (qtd. in Olson and Worsham 390)

Recognizing the increasing use of *hybridity* to define the fusion of cultures and to celebrate diversity in the discourse of globalization, Bhabha writes:

> Hybridization is much more a social and cultural and enunciative process in my work. It's not about people who eat Chinese food, wear Italian clothes, and so on; but sometimes, in a very complimentary way to me personally, it's been taken to mean some kind of diversity or multiple identities. For me, hybridization is a discursive, enunciatory, cultural, subjective process having to do with the struggle around authority, authorization, deauthorization, and the revision of authority. It's a social process. It's not about persons of diverse cultural tastes and fashions.
> (qtd. in Olson and Worsham 390–91)

Bhabha's own sense of the relevance of hybridity as an ethical stance confronts history and the realities of dispossession and displacement, even if his critical modality does not always clarify how one undertakes sustained explorations of the totalitarian force of modernity in its most contemporary iteration, much less what course of action is suggested by his theoretical formulations. In an essay on Said, Bhabha seems acutely aware of "the emergent, recurrent space between the realm of words and field of social action occupied by the humanist consciousness and its philological criticism" ("Adagio" 10). Extolling adagio, the idea of slowness, he writes, "The slow pace of critical reflection resists processes of totalization" (12). Construed by his critics as a forfeiture of the political, Bhabha's stance, I would argue, reflects not only an investment in Hall's understanding of the "indeterminacy of the political" but also solidarity with the work of Said and Said's mentor, Theodor Adorno, who understood the importance of theory and thought to praxis, indeed of theory as praxis, a stance also worthy of any student of Foucault's lessons about the nexus of power and knowledge.

In sum, hybridity is no playful postmodern lark; nor is it an insouciant celebration of mixture, of neoliberal corporate style. Race is always relevant, every day, in specific ways. Theory derives from those who have suffered the sentence of history. As immigrants wash up on the shores of Europe and their cries for succor are heard in a hybridized discourse marked by anxiety and ambivalence as the call to unleash terror, we do well to remember that geography is not history, pace Iridium British Telecom's advertising slogan, and that despite the fact that Bhabha's theory of hybridity arrives in an age of infatuation with the present, history is not history.

Notes

1. In *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, one of the pedagogic master texts in the field, its editors claim that "hybridity and the power it releases" stand out as "the characteristic feature and contribution of the postcolonial" (Ashcroft et al. 183). Critics of Bhabha are legion, as are his followers. While his critics are often troubled by the flattening of material and historical specifics in the extrapolation of hybridity as a general problematic of encounter, his followers often embrace hybridity as a celebration of mixture, a propensity Bhabha himself recognizes and decries in "Black and White and Read All Over." Benita Parry

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contends that "the construct of binary oppositions, if epistemologically faulty, retains power as a political category" (15). Ella Shohat expresses her dissatisfaction with the idea of culture as in-between, complaining that "post-colonial theory's celebration of hybridity risks an anti-essentialist condescension toward those communities obliged by circumstances to assert, for their very survival, a lost and even irretrievable past" (110). Aijaz Ahmad's summary of Bhabha's notion of hybridity "as a critique of essentialism" and "a carnivalesque collapse and play of identities" denounces its production of a subject "remarkably free of class, gender, historical time, geographical location, indeed any historicisation or individuation whatever" (370–71). Anthony Easthope complains that Bhabha's theory, reliant as it is on a Derridean notion of the presence-difference binary, offers no account of the identity that is undermined by hybridity; Daniel Boyarin observes that while Bhabha's hybrids represent "a difference 'within'" the subject, "the literal ascription of hybridity on the part of hegemonic discourses to one group of people, one set of practices, disavows the very difference within by externalizing it" (343). Žižek (220) and Friedman find that the concept of hybridity is valuable only for a cosmopolitan elite.

2. In a related vein, the vulgar appropriation of difference as simulation substitutes identity effects for material specifics in late capitalism in the name of hybridity. Citing Indy-pop, "Indian" music without any historical context, for instance, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests that "under the auspices of the New World Order, the production of such authoritative hybrids as representations and representatives of an unmarked origin is the name of the game, especially in the field of ideology as culture in the service of the political calculus that manages the abstract economic machine" (346n50).

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