theories and methodologies

Post-anticolonialism

STEFAN HELGESSON

IN THE WAKE OF 9/11, FROM AN ALREADY DISTANT MOMENT OF GLOBALIZATION (BEFORE WE EVEN KNEW WORDS LIKE *ANTHROPOCENE* or *Facebook*), Arif Dirlik asked if postcolonial critique hadn't failed to take the rapidly evolving new modalities of capitalism into account. By foregrounding the experience of colonialism so insistently, postcolonialism risked cultivating "an exaggerated view of the hold of the past over contemporary realities, and an obliviousness to the reconfiguration of past legacies by contemporary restructurations of power" ("Rethinking Colonialism" 429). What it had achieved, however, was an interrogation of "fundamental contradictions in an earlier discourse on colonialism," whereby the meaning of colonialism had shifted from the post-1945 Manichaean narrative to something far more ambiguous (431). As a consequence, even anticolonial nationalism, which had largely been shaped by native functionaries of colonial rule, came to be understood as a product of colonialism. Frantz Fanon was among the first to confront this problem (119–99). But when his alternative vision of an organic nationhood developing out of the rural peasantry failed to emerge, the intellectual legacies of anticolonialism were, unsurprisingly, subjected to sustained interrogation. Indeed, Dirlik attributes such a reorientation in postcolonial criticism precisely to the failures of postcolonial regimes ("Rethinking Colonialism" 434).

I find Dirlik's account perceptive. It is also intriguing, given that Dirlik was one of the early vocal critics of postcolonial theory. In an earlier essay, he had famously dismissed it as a discourse that throws an ideological veil over contemporary capitalism and "seeks to constitute the world in the self-image of intellectuals who view themselves (or have come to view themselves) as postcolonial intellectuals" ("Postcolonial Aura" 339). His essay "Rethinking Colonialism" modifies this claim considerably and entails not least a complex retracing of temporalities, in which both of the mutually opposed futurities of colonialism and anticolonialism are displaced and turned into futures past. If we agree with Dirlik, we should in fact speak of

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post-anticolonialism rather than *postcolonialism*. *Post-anticolonialism* is analogous to Loren Kruger's neologism "post-anti-apartheid," signifying a moment in which the moral convictions of the antiapartheid movement had waned and been replaced by "uneven development rather than radical social transformation" (35). The label post-anticolonialism thereby has the advantage of locating postcolonialism as a moment with its own historical logic, predicated on the legacy of anticolonial struggle, yet diverging from it—notably—on the back of poststructuralist theory.

On such an understanding, I argue that post-anticolonialism had its most intensive phase between, roughly, 1980 and 2000, bracketed by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000). What follows the turn of the millennium, epitomized perhaps by Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001) but also—if differently—by Dirlik's "Rethinking Colonialism" (2002), is an increasingly critical, retrospective assessment of what by then had taken shape as academically institutionalized postcolonialism. Hence Huggan's well-known distinction between (good, resistant) postcolonialism and (commodified) postcoloniality, which aimed at recuperating *postcolonialism* for recognizably anticolonial causes (1–33).

The absent center of this narrative is Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994). This towering book is far and away the most successful and contested manifestation of post-anticolonialism. As Raphael Dalleo has shown, it is the most cited work in the field, garnering more than 27,000 citations, overshadowing even *Orientalism*, which—at the time of Dalleo's study—had "only" 21,500 (5–6). But today Bhabha's book is more often named, cited, admired, or dismissed than discussed. This situation is what prompts my attempt to make sense of the work historically. But I do so to ask what kind of future *The Location of Culture*, along with post-anticolonialism, may have. My tentative way to arrive at an answer, to my surprise, is to reroute Bhabha's poststructuralism through some current rereadings of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). To substantiate this approach, I provide a brief reading of Solomon Plaatje's 1916 work on Setswana proverbs, which, I hope, demonstrates how the methodological attention to textual detail that Bhabha excels at can yield new insights, particularly about the aesthetic response to colonial histories (*Sechuana Proverbs*).

Rereading *The Location of Culture* for the first time in years, I was immediately struck by its optimism. How different from the political mood of our day! Its essays all address moments, texts, or sites of contestation—the British miners' strike in the 1980s, colonial discourse in India, slave rememory in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the anxieties of migrant experience in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*—yet throughout Bhabha seems to say that change is inevitable and good and that injustices won't last. As he puts it with vintage verve in the chapter "The Commitment to Theory":

> The language of critique is effective not because it keeps forever separate the terms of the master and the slave, the mercantilist and the Marxist, but to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other*, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very form of our recognition of the moment of politics. (25)

Hence, "the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One* (unitary working class) *nor the Other* (the politics of gender) *but something else besides*, which contests the terms and territories of both" (28). This faith in the transformative potential of

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translational dialogue is indeed consoling. And in the wake of mostly peaceful revolutions in eastern Europe and the more painful roller coaster of the South African transition, Bhabha did seem to have some, if not all (Bosnia, Rwanda), of history on his side. The "Third Space" of negotiation and transformation was, in that respect, not an abstract idea but a lived political reality (36). Transferred to our times, the Third Space should rightly be seen as a crucial conceptual resource for articulating what we may call a procedural alternative to the politics of hatred and confrontation mounting on the Internet and perpetrated politically by the likes of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and the Islamic State.

But it is arguably this optimism and openness (not to mention wit), as much as hard-core theoretical issues, that provoked such searing criticism from the word *go*. From Dirlik and Aijaz Ahmad to Benita Parry, Huggan, and Neil Lazarus, a long line of mainly Marxist critics assailed Bhabha for what they saw as the fudging of social conflict and a detachment from historical specificity. Lazarus claimed that

> Bhabha's textualism and his theoretical idealism prevent him from engaging adequately with the vastly differential thrusts, effects, and modes of domination/subjection of colonialism as practiced at different times by different powers in different parts of the world, or even within single colonies subject to the vicissitudes of uneven development. (134)

In a similar vein, Parry attacked Bhabha's tendency to present power as always already unstable in its discursive articulation. If, as Parry put it, "the ambiguities of discourse are attributed to the semiotic process," then this is "a sufficient condition for all inscriptions to be always fractured and equivocal, no input of social tension and contradiction being required to render enunciation indeterminate" (11).

In identifying an element of universalizing predictability in the poststructuralist premise, the criticism of *The Location of Culture* did gain traction: if a colonial, imperial, or national authority—indeed, any authority—is split and unstable a priori, then, say, torture in apartheid prisons or the violence of colonial warfare in Angola is rendered strangely abstract and at the same time forcibly made comparable with the vastly different and nuanced exchanges between elite Indian mediators and their colonial overlords. Or, to take a more recent example, Syrian refugees awash on the Greek island Samos and suffering from hypothermia are indeed located in a liminal space and highly disruptive of any "pedagogical" national identity—but that doesn't improve their predicament (Bhabha 146). Taken to its extreme, as a strong theory with generalizing ambitions, the poststructuralism of *The Location of Culture* risks becoming Panglossian. This familiar and robust line of critique is clearly valid.

But there is also (fittingly) a minor reading of Bhabha that helps us to understand why the intervention of *The Location of Culture* and post-anticolonialism became so productive after all. The key is to ask not if and how postcolonial theory in the postructuralist vein provides a universal theory but rather how it has been received and inflected in specific contexts. Chakrabarty offers an account of such a situated reception that rehearses my point about the shift from anticolonialism to postcolonialism. Looking back on his affiliation with the Subaltern Studies Group in India in the 1980s, he states that the group emerged out of "anti-, and not postcolonial thought," propelled by a fundamental disaffection with "the Indian nation's failure to deliver the social justice that anticolonial nationalism had promised" (3). Politically frustrated, the group saw its intellectual project in unambiguously liberationist terms:

> We wanted to make the peasant or the subaltern the subject of his or her history, period. And we thought of this subject in the image

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> of the autonomous rights-bearing person with the same access to representation in national and other histories as others from more privileged backgrounds enjoyed. A straightforward plea for social justice underlay our position, just as it did in a variety of Marxist, feminist, or even liberal histories. (4)

Enter here Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who, with her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," unseated this political confidence and challenged subaltern studies to deconstruct the notion of the rights-based subject—and hence the premises of much anticolonial activism. In Chakrabarty's view, such a critique of the subject "was actually a deeper turning towards the human, a move best exemplified for me in the work of Homi Bhabha. It was a turn that both appreciated difference as a philosophical question and at the same time repudiated its essentialization by identity politics" (4).

Potential problems in such an emphasis on "the human" aside, his narrative resonates strikingly with different sites of knowledge production. Consider some seminal contributions around 2000 with clear investments in African and South African contexts. Achille Mbembe's "African Modes of Self-Writing" fired a broadside at the anticolonial intellectual history of Africa, claiming that both Marxist and nativist nationalisms had failed to produce alternatives to historicist thought (in the sense of viewing history as progress) as well as obscured that "there is no African identity that could be designated by a single term or that could be named by a single word or subsumed under a single category" (272). Louise Bethlehem provided a thoroughgoing critique of the desire "to effect a secular closure between the word and the world precisely to safeguard the ethical claims of South African literary culture" (368), and Leon de Kock insisted that the "crisis of the sign thus belongs as much in the country's history of suffering as it does in university seminar rooms" (273). Kruger developed the post-antiapartheid angle in response to the work of Achmat Dangor and others that challenged her "to think beyond the binary black/white opposition that has structured *anti*-apartheid as well as apartheid discourse" (36). (A point borne out, moreover, by Jacob Dlamini's recent, riveting study of complicity in apartheid South Africa, *Askari*.)

Although, as Simon Gikandi has argued, many intellectuals in the global South have felt alienated by postcolonial theory, a significant number have found that the moral certainties of anticolonial (and antiapartheid) discourse neglect the complexities of local histories. Gikandi makes this claim as well but from another angle: in his view, a failure of postcolonialism in the global North has been its elision of decolonization as "a literary event" (164) and, accordingly, of the "narratives of delegitimation" (165) emerging out of decolonization. By being firmly grounded both in current theoretical vocabularies and in local contexts, my examples would seem instead to straddle the institutional gap that concerns Gikandi.

It would thus be misguided to label Mbembe, de Kock, Bethlehem, and Kruger as idealists or political quietists. The white heat of Bethlehem's article is fueled by a powerful conviction that "the claims of the past on its would-be redeemers cannot be settled cheaply" (384), and Mbembe's outrage at the human and political cost of intellectual laziness is no less obvious. Yet in all four scholars' interventions, poststructuralism clearly answered to a historically grounded need to question the conditions of (self-)knowledge. These interventions were not instances of theory produced exclusively at a remove.

The philosophical question that follows is, How can we retain this impetus (which Marxism alone does not provide) to critique the sign without reproducing the risk of flattened universalization? An unexpected answer might be found in the risky but potentially promising postcolonial rereading of Herder currently under way. In recent years, several

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critics have argued that because Herder's theory of language is both material and semiotic, it is pertinent to postcolonial concerns. Nicholas Robinette discusses Herder's philosophy in terms of "language labor," which is based in Herder's theory, radical in the eighteenth century, of language as a human and not a divine construct (193). Emerging as distinctive "marks" in the flow of sensuous impressions, the signs of language are for Herder constructed but not arbitrary; they are understood, not as neutral tools for thought, but as thought itself (194). "Thought sticks to the expression," in Herder's well-known phrase (qtd. in Robinette 195). His theory offers a productive opening for a constructivist-realist understanding of language and cultural difference. As Robinette puts it, "[W]e cannot operate only in the mode of critique, refutation, deconstruction: postcolonial scholars must also" provide "interpretations that are more realistic than the ideology we would refute. Allowing for both the distorted partiality *and* the realistic potential of language, Herder's theory of the sign could thus provide a coherent epistemological beginning for work in postcolonial studies" (196). In fact, more than epistemology is at stake here: as John K. Noyes demonstrates in his magisterial *Herder: Aesthetics against Imperialism*, Herder's thinking is based in an ontology that posits being as an inarticulable foundation from which all human diversity emerges. On the one hand, this irretrievable origin loses itself in the obscurity of the past; on the other hand, it is repeated in each individual's growth from infancy to adulthood. In Noyes's reading, this philosophical premise favors aesthetics as the activity that constantly renews the passage from the inarticulable (but real) to the articulable (but constructed). Hence, language, along with the aesthetic, "promises Herder an alternative to the dualism of the organic and the will, and to the dualism of particularism and universality. The aesthetic is the realm of freedom in so far as it represents the actualization of the will, in the context not of moral certainty, but of cultural self-formation" (20). If, following Herder, we ground the notion of language, not in the arbitrariness of the sign, but in the embodied and social nature of sense impressions and work—as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o does, in a way, in his theory of language—we can recalibrate Bhabha's always ingenious readings of slippage and ambivalence. This recalibration is also precarious, given that Herder is a thoroughly idiosyncratic thinker amenable to reactionary interpretations. Here we should hold on to *The Location of Culture*'s enduring vigilance against the ideological closure of identities. What Bhabha famously invokes as "cultural translation" should therefore be understood as the imperative to continue language labor under conditions of migration and social crisis, to stop short of reifying this labor as *a* language, *a* tradition, but without denying the sedimentation of historical, cultural, somatic, and psychological experiences through language (163).

This intuition seems to have informed the work of the South African author Solomon Plaatje (1876–1932). When this polyglot translator, journalist, editor, writer, and activist produced the slim volume *Sechuana Proverbs with Literal Translations and Their European Equivalents / Diane tsa Secoana le maele a sekgoa a a dumalanang naco*, in 1916, the pages were set up in three columns. The first column contained 732 proverbs in Setswana; the second, Plaatje's translation of the proverbs; and the third, "equivalents," mostly in English but also in Latin, German, French, Dutch, Spanish, and Italian. The column with equivalents also contained a few English translations from Danish, Portuguese, Hebrew, and Arabic. The centrality of European languages, as a consequence of imperial power, is evident in the publication, but the book's textual and linguistic performance is not exclusively determined by this power relation. When Plaatje translates "Se ileng sea bo se ile, lesile ke mo se-lateledi" as "What's gone

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is gone, he who pursues it is a fool" and then provides no fewer than two equivalents—"The mill will never grind with the water that is past" and (in German) "Hin ist hin, verloren ist verloren" (86)—he is not just voicing an experience of loss (that we could historicize), nor only providing a safely ethnographic packaging of cultural diversity. Rather, he is both displaying the sedimentation and equivalence of geographically discrete cultural experiences in a Herderian spirit and disrupting settled linguistic and cultural patterns. The juxtaposition produces something new, but on top of it is the middle column—a Third Space, if ever there was one—with Plaatje's translation into English. Taken together, the proverbs' assonances and repetitions—ileng/ile/lesile, mill/will, hin/hin—are further strengthened by Plaatje's gone/gone in the translation, providing a fleeting but uncanny moment of translingual resonance in which the assemblage of languages (juxtaposing English and German in the midst of the First World War) becomes greater than the sum of its constituent parts. This work is language labor in action, published at the very moment that Plaatje was producing the reportage *Native Life in South Africa* in protest against the effects of the Natives' Land Act. Obviously, *Sechuana Proverbs* does not disable the brute exercise of settler-colonial power in the Union of South Africa, but by being "*something else besides*," it intimates possibilities denied, possibilities of a path not taken by history yet susceptible to retrieval, like a gift to the future. What gives the work its poignancy is the very fact that Plaatje wrote it while struggling as a racialized subject against settler colonialism. The proverbs engage in this way a deeper temporality that exceeds the violent shallowness of the colonial present and that cannot be retrieved through a deconstructive reading alone. Being one "mark" of Plaatje's lifelong labor with language(s), *Sechuana Proverbs* possibly indicates that renewed attention to Herderian aesthetics promises something more resolutely noncolonial than yet another affirmation of the arbitrariness of the sign. By allowing for a future form of post-anticolonialism, we can also grant space for a more credible theory of language(s) that refuses the disavowal of language as embodied and embodying practice.

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