theories and methodologies

The World after Empire; or, Whither Postcoloniality?

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AT THE MLA'S ANNUAL CONVENTION IN 2015, A ROUNDTABLE I HAD ORGANIZED, REMEMBERING *THE LOCATION OF CULTURE*: CIRCULATIONS, Interventions, and Futurity, gathered scholars from across literary periods and fields to reflect on the legacies of Homi Bhabha's seminal work. As new disciplinary shifts in literary studies witness the reinvention of postcolonial literatures as global anglophone literatures, one of the questions that roundtable asked was, Whither postcoloniality? Returning to *The Location of Culture*—one of the most influential texts in the fields of postcolonial studies and critical theory—can perhaps illuminate how postcolonial critique resonates anew for the literature of our world after empire.

Two dimensions of *The Location of Culture* mark it as a text for our times—especially for scholars who work on culture, community, globalization, and minority citizenship. First, it points out the ongoing continuities between the cultures of colonialism and globalization and offers a critique of Western modernity grounded in the fact of empire. Second, it draws attention to the conditions of migrants—their agency and survival. Even as emerging literary voices from across the world bear witness to proliferating wars, to the migrations born of ecological devastation and geopolitical conflict, and to the new empires of financialized capital and racialized expulsions, Bhabha's poetic and political exploration of imperial violence offers us fresh ways of seeing this literary archive.

Twenty-five years ago, *The Location of Culture* noted the persistence of empire and the continuities between colonialism and the postcolonial time of globalization. Like Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and the historians of the Subaltern Studies Collective, Bhabha drew on Frantz Fanon and W. E. B. Du Bois, among others, to explicitly locate the "political and theoretical genealogy of modernity" in the colonial moment. The act of "writing the world," in which imperialism inhabits the invention of modernity, is rooted, for Bhabha, in the critic's responsibility "to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical

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present" (*Location* 12). This idea of the critic's ethical responsibility to witness unrepresented pasts animates Bhabha's conceptualization of the project of postcolonial critique.

Interrogating Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an imagined community, *The Location of Culture* identifies in the literary aesthetics of migration "the belated postcolonial" who "marginalizes and singularizes the totality of national culture," often signifying "the history that happened elsewhere, overseas" (168). From Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*, and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* to Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*, Bhabha shows how literature identifies the contradictions of empire at the heart of Western modernity, making visible the haunting unhomeliness of our histories for those marked minor by their skin color, gender, religion, age, class, and so on. As Bhabha insists, "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 without a history" (197). New directions in literary studies, including the recent work of Asian Americanists, address and recover the lost histories of Bhabha's "others" and speak to his call to map the unrepresented colonial pasts of our contemporary modernities.

A new, postcolonial orientation has taken hold: for instance, in recent works of Asian American literary criticism like Lisa Lowe's *The Intimacy of Four Continents* and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Nothing Ever Dies*, a transnational network of unrepresented archives and memories links slavery, empire, trade, refugees, and international war. Lowe and Nguyen map the intimate dispossessions of imperial modernity across Asia and Africa, returning history and meaning to raced subjects of empire, who today evoke the "unhistorical dead" of war-torn contemporary Sri Lanka in Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* (56). As if heeding Bhabha's reminder of the critic's responsibility to the "unrepresented pasts" of colonized people, Nguyen theorizes "an ethics of memory, a just memory that strives to remember both one's own and others" (12). In different ways, both Lowe and Nguyen unveil the constitutive imperial violence in discourses of American democratic modernity. Similarly, Rajini Srikanth, Inderpal Grewal, Amy Kaplan, Wai Chee Dimock (*Empire* and *Through Other Continents*), Priyamvada Gopal, Neil Lazarus, Robert Young, Judith Butler, Supriya Nair, and Ania Loomba, among others, have noted that critical attention to imperial cultures today increasingly turns its eye on the United States. Extending Bhabha's illuminating critique of the ambivalent discourses of Western modernity, these scholars' analyses of our literary and media archives reframe America as empire. This postcolonial critique thus takes up the challenge of interrogating the new formations of expansion and empire—manifest in everything from trade agreements to warfare, technology regimes, biopolitics, and financialized capital—where the United States' military-industrial complex has a significant role. Saskia Sassen has conceptualized the border crossings of contemporary imperialism as systemic processes of "expulsion" that produce "astoundingly elementary brutalities" (*Expulsions* 220): "Today's systemic edge is a space of expulsions," she argues, from which people, resources, and biospheres are being expelled across the world's geographies (221). *The Location of Culture* and Bhabha's recent writings on Fanon also discuss this expulsion, identifying the "subjects of oppression and dispossession" increasingly displaced to the margins of modernity (*Location* 255).

The project of decolonization, then, remains unfinished. *The Location of Culture* intimates this when it notes the violence of "becoming minority" in the metropole and the racism and "racialization of religion" that have only intensified in the United States and

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Europe since its writing (228–29). Bhabha traces the continuities between colonialism and the inequities of globalization, as well as the links between the colonized subject and slave and the contemporary, ubiquitous figures of the "diasporic, the migrant and the refugee" (231). "In the figure of the witness of a postcolonial modernity," he writes, "we have another wisdom: it comes from those who have seen the nightmare of racism and oppression in the banal daylight of the everyday" (254). This labor of witnessing from the frayed edges of postcolonial modernity is about survival and fashioning a cultural memory. "Political empowerment," for Bhabha, "comes from posing questions of solidarity and community from the interstitial perspective" (4). The idea of the migrant as postcolonial witness and survivor speaks powerfully to our contemporary moment. It opens up a generative approach to the refugee question, which is often discursively constructed in Euro-American public spheres as a racialized problem—as a potential threat not only to a nation's resources but also to its culture.

Our era can be called the era of migration. Indeed, as many scholars from Hannah Arendt to Saskia Sassen (*Expulsions* and *Guests*) and Zygmunt Bauman have observed, migration is the defining feature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The statistics compiled by the United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR, bear this out eloquently. A historically unprecedented number of people—many millions—have been displaced during the last few years from their place of birth, and from the nations they lived in, by poverty, war, ethnic and religious conflict, terrorism, drought, and multinational capital. *The Location of Culture* redefines the postmodern as a "postcolonial contramodernity," in which circulating processes of expulsion and violence, race and racism produce statelessness and dispossession in the banal time of everyday life (252). Today this conceptualization might sustain our reflections on contemporary stories about migrants and refugees illuminated in literature, as well as in other aesthetic projects across media, like the haunting digital photographic archive *Where the Children Sleep*. Five years after the brutalities of the ongoing Syrian civil war began, the Swedish photographer Magnus Wennman documented Syrian refugee children lying in repose in Europe's fields, streets, train stations, and hospitals. Each photo is accompanied by text that historicizes the stateless children. We learn their names, and we hear about a favorite toy, a memory of the day the bombs fell, a missed pillow, or a missing limb (*Where*). Thus, in bearing witness to the embodied trauma and erased pasts of vulnerable asylum seekers demonized in mass media, Wennman's graphic stories of the stateless and their unhomeliness, in the midst of the everyday act of sleep, intimate his ethical critique of the war. In her book *Frames of War*, Judith Butler invites us "to understand how the frames that allocate the recognizability of certain figures of the human are themselves linked with the broader norms of what will and will not be a grievable life" (64). If Zia Haider Rahman's luminous novel *In the Light of What We Know* reframes America's war on terror and deems its postcolonial casualties grievable, Wennman's archive of everyday refugee life reframes the Syrian war and what mainstream Western media call "the migrant crisis." It presents a just memory of grievable lives that interrogates European postmodernity and names it imperialist and inhumane. It also reminds us of the voice in *Anil's Ghost* that, speaking to the Sri Lankan civil war, may as well have been responding to Syria today: "the reason for war was war" (Ondaatje 43).

Animated by Bhabha's insight into the disjunctive temporalities of nation and its narration, I have elsewhere mapped how the literary and filmic inscription of India's decolonization and division along religious lines in 1947—and its accompanying violence—constitutively inhabits Indian nationalism as an event, metaphor, and memory. My

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recent work engages with Bhabha's project of postcolonial contramodernity through an ethical commitment to the millions of unremembered refugee stories of the Partition of India. Committing to these stories entails determining how the refugee, citizenship, and survival appear in Partition's graphic archive of literary, filmic, and visual cultures in South Asia, the United Kingdom, and North America. This cultural archive of statelessness enunciates a political challenge to the state violence involved in the contemporary disappearance of secularism in ethnonationalist India and Indian America. Bhabha's postcolonial contramodernity defies the predatory neoliberal visions of India Shining;[1] its aesthetic intertwines the unmemorialized statelessness of and loss of rights by millions of Partition's Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh refugees in 1947 with the current political oppression of India's Muslim and Christian minorities and with the migrants of other divisions of the post–World War II world, such as those of Korea and China. Among my arguments, then, is that this cultural archive demands that our scholarship about "the American century" and post-1945 culture provincialize America, unveil the fact of American imperialism in the world, and acknowledge the constitutive intimacies of the world's continents.

Within the broad contours of literary postcolonial studies, the scholarly focus on nations and nationalism that followed Anderson's influential work has often meant that, wittingly or unwittingly, the citizen is implicitly or explicitly assumed to be the subject of history. This assumption has both shaped and limited the conversations about community and agency in our scholarship; indeed, it has often removed from consideration the millions of people who became migrants and refugees in historically unprecedented numbers after World War II and who have continued, as Bhabha points out, "to find themselves on the frontiers between cultures and nations, often on the other side of the law" (*Location* 175). Some scholars have interrogated the conflation of historical subject with citizen: for example, Spivak has criticized the indigenous Indian subject's structural-institutional exclusion from political subjecthood in colonialist and nationalist discourses, and Said has reflected on statelessness through his own personal experience. Paul Gilroy, Hortense Spillers, and Simon Gikandi have addressed the enslaved African subject as constitutive of Euro-American national modernity, while the Subaltern Studies Collective, which included Indian and English historians like Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakraborty, David Arnold, and Shahid Amin, rewrote the peripheral Indian peasant as political actor and agent of national history in the pages of the journal *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, first published in 1982.

In solidarity with this critical labor, Bhabha's work turns us to the perspectives of the migrant, the refugee, the slave, and the minority subject as the agents of postcolonial contramodernity. This attention to minor and migrant subjects could not be more relevant for our time, as millions of undocumented, stateless women, men, and children from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iran, Myanmar, Tibet, and Colombia circulate the world, arriving on unwelcoming shores or to face indefinite imprisonment in Europe, the United States, or Australia—if they survive their perilous passages and arrive at all.

Perhaps the most generative aspect of *The Location of Culture* for us today is its preoccupation with the motif, act, and practice of survival. Survival as an aspiration and a form of agency is woven throughout the book. When the concept resurfaces many years later, in Bhabha's foreword to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, survival is linked to collective, political action that confronts resurgent ethnonationalisms. To challenge contemporary cartographies of inequity, in a time when it has become unfashionable to address "hu-

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manism," Bhabha, following Fanon, advocates a new humanism that breaks free from the collectivity of nationalism. This humanism, because it is animated by the energies of Third Worldism, can be strategic, activist, and aspirational—instead of universalist, hegemonic, and essentialist: "Fanon's description of the 'crude, empty, fragile shell' of emergent national histories quickens the long shadows cast by the ethnonationalist 'switchbacks' of our own times, the charnel houses of ethnic cleansing: Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo, Gujarat, Sudan" ("Framing" xvi). Further, engaging Fanon's aspirational ethical and political project for civil society, Bhabha's concern for the migrant and the minority subject reappears: foregrounding the racialization of inequality, the foreword turns our attention to the complex loss of rights that eventually can render the minority subject stateless. Troubled by our time, in which he sees "dual economies celebrated as if they were global economies" (in India and elsewhere), Bhabha also endorses Fanon's call to include economic redistribution in the humanist project, thereby radically altering the terms of its reference (xviii).

Survival appears, reappears, and circulates through the essays in *The Location of Culture* as a trope, turning us toward the border-zone existence and acts of minority subjects "in the process of survival" (230). This question of survival inhabits the span of Bhabha's scholarship more broadly, and it connects with recent conversations around precarity, bioinsecurities, and global inequality incited by Butler, Neel Ahuja, and others. In *The Location of Culture*, culture and survival are intimately bound up in each other: Fanon's concept of "culture-as-political-struggle" turns culture into an enunciation that can "traumatize tradition" and become "an uncomfortable, disturbing practice of survival and supplementarity—between art and politics, past and present, the public and the private" (175). Much later, in an interview with Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, Bhabha argues again, "There is a positive, agential value in the whole process of surviving domination that can add an edge, a cutting edge, to the critiques . . . that come from those who have been displaced or marginalized on the grounds of their cultural, civilizational, or as it is more often described, moral and spiritual backwardness" ("Surviving" 370).

Influenced by Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, and resonating with Butler's recent writing on "frames of war," Bhabha's description of survival as an ethical and theoretical stance marks the precariousness of living on the borderline. At the end of his interview with Seshadri-Crooks, Bhabha observes that

> survival continually haunts the dream of sovereignty, with the possibility that failure is not the other side of success or mastery: it is its lining, an intimate or proximate way of being or living, in the midst of that which we think needs to be done afresh or anew . . . and what requires to be repeatedly repaired, revised, and reassembled. It is in this sense, that I believe or hope, that my work may continue to survive. (379)

Today, in our conversations about the growing numbers of stateless human beings, the Anthropocene, and what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" (2), the question of survival is reinvented and newly relevant. *The Location of Culture* survives as well: as we revisit, revise, and reassemble this work, it animates our labor of witnessing forgotten pasts and contemporary expulsions, turning us to the precarious conditions of statelessness and minor citizenship.

If Bhabha aimed in *The Location of Culture* to interrupt the discourses of Western modernity and to posit the presence of a postcolonial contramodernity, then our contemporary moment—shot through with unceasing wars, environmental destruction, and mass displacements—demands from us a new postcolonial critique of imperialist discourses

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of Western freedom in whose name the violence continues. A growing archive of writing explodes our traditional national frames of American literature, British literature, and even world literature. This new literature offers us postcolonial stories unconstrained by national boundaries and often undone by nationalism. They are American and Nigerian, Pakistani and British, Sri Lankan and Canadian, Indian and Bangladeshi, Dominican and American. This archive, which includes Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss*, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know*, Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*, Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Arundhati Roy's *War Talk*, and the anthology *This Side, That Side: Restorying Partition*, ethically witnesses unrepresented pasts, state violence, scarred lands, and contemporary dispossession and its lost histories.

The Location of Culture defines this literary archive of conflict zones as postcolonial, not only because it displaces the hegemonic national frame for narrating human experience but also because it fiercely testifies to expulsions wrought by global regimes of finance, ecological destruction, and war, marked as they are by race, gender, religion, class, age, indigeneity, and other signs of difference.[2] Sometimes these literary works also express the discursive agency and the small gestures by which the expelled ethically and politically articulate community and resist the linked domination of colonialism and globalization in New York, Kathmandu, Colombo, London, Bhopal, San Jose, Delhi, Dhaka, and elsewhere. Their postcolonial critique, for me, evokes Bhabha's powerful exhortation in the concluding lines of *The Location of Culture*: "we must not merely change the narratives of our histories, but transform our sense of what it means to live, to be, in other times and different spaces, both human and historical" (256).

Notes

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1. "India Shining" was a marketing slogan coined in 2004 and popularized by India's ruling Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party. It refers to the feeling of economic optimism in India in 2004; as many critics have noted, the slogan reflects an overly positive view of the economic reforms ushered in by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the 1990s. It masks the dramatic erosion of labor organizations and rights, the growing gap between rich and poor, and the systemic expulsion of the urban and rural poor to the edge of this economically liberalized India.

2. My suggestion to see this literature as an archive of the conflict zone emerges from Sreyoshi Sarkar's analyses of environment, violence, and insurgency represented in Indian literature and film.

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