

1

Postmodernism and the Rest of the World

I want to begin with a gloss on my title. In yoking together “postmodernism” and “the rest of the world” my purpose is to suggest both a connection and a disjunction: in other words, an uneven relationship, or a relationship structured in asymmetry. Postmodernism is no more idiosyncratic or singular than the world is general or normal. Nor is it the case that there are two entirely hermetic worlds: the one postmodern, and the other “non-postmodern.” There is lots of travel and traffic among locations and what they represent; and postmodernism, for whatever reason, has taken on the imprimatur of the avant-garde; particularly when it comes to questions of theory and epistemology. At the same time, as postmodernism travels from its metropolitan “Western” origins to other sites and occasions, or is appropriated differentially by the minorities and feminists even within the West, its truth claims get “multi-historicized” and relativized with reference to “the Rest.” My title attempts to engage this overdetermined binarity between “the West” and “the Rest,” and in the process think through and (if possible) beyond it. The entire book is an attempt to critically “theorize” the unevenness of the global situation from a postcolonial perspective. In other words, “postality” is a condition that has to be contested and negotiated between the elite avant-garde and the subaltern. It is all a matter for a “double-conscious” but agential and perspectival signification.

For one thing, I am interested in delineating postcoloniality as a form of double consciousness, and not as an act of secession from the metropolitan regime. Not only is postcoloniality a historiography in its own terms, but it is also a critical perspective on metropolitan goings on. Indeed, these two functions of postcoloniality are mutually constitutive. It seems to me that it is incumbent on the third world, having been coercively interpellated by

2 Postmodernism and the Rest of the World

colonialism and modernity, to continue to have a crucial say in the further developments, post- or otherwise, of modernity. The third world, which is often and almost always choicelessly globalized by advanced capital, cannot afford to forfeit its capacity to intervene in matters transnational and post-modern. Unlike theorists of the third world such as Aijaz Ahmad, I do not read ambivalence as a sign of postcolonial weakness or instability. Quite to the contrary, I wish to argue that postcoloniality is always already marked by ambivalence, and the task is to politicize this “given ambivalence” and produce it agentially. This taking charge of ambivalence, this polemical production of double consciousness, is intended as an act of affirmation and as a substantive intervention in the “business as usual” of metropolitan temporality.

It might be argued that there are indigenous realities of the non-West that are not necessarily related to colonialism and modernity. While this is indeed true, the brute fact that every conceivable local–native–indigenous reality has been touched by the morphology of modernism and the dominance of nationalism and the nation-state (notice that the very efficacy of countless grassroots movements and NGOs has to be mediated athwart the authority of regnant nationalisms) makes it imperative for postcoloniality to participate on more than one level, in more than one location. My purpose here is neither to realize a pure either/or relationship between West and non-West, nor to offer any one version of postcoloniality as exemplary or authentic. Rather, my assumption is that there is a place for the ethico-politics of persuasion, and within this space postcoloniality or the “rest of the world” has much to say to the postmodern West. I am aware that there are sections where I might be guilty of conflating postmodernism and poststructuralism. It is well beyond my scope here to begin to differentiate postmodernism and poststructuralism, but suffice it to say that for my present purposes postmodernism is the object of address if for no other reason than that more than poststructuralism, “pomo” has taken on the authority of a global umbrella. And besides, the travel of pomo all over the world, on the wings of capital and virtual technologies, has been more insidious than the travel of poststructuralism, which in many ways can actually be articulated sympathetically with the concerns of postcoloniality.

I would like to begin this chapter with a naive and perhaps brazen “world-historical” observation. The peoples of the world are currently unevenly situated between two historiographic discourses: discourses of the “post-” and the “trans-” whose objective seems to be to read historical meaning in terms of travel, displacement, deracination, and the transcendence of origins; and discourses motivated by the need to return to precolonial, premodern, and pre-nationalist traditions of indigeneity. My intention here is somewhat to bridge the gap between these polar choices and to suggest that these two paths need to be

historicized relationally, and not as two discrete and mutually exclusive options.

Having said this, I would like to briefly analyze three recent happenings in the context of global postmodernity and the emerging new world order. First, the NAFTA agreement. Much has been written about this deal from both sides. The debates are over, and NAFTA is for real. And yet the real implications of the treaty are far from clear. If on the one hand NAFTA represents deterritorialization, the breaking down of international economic borders, and the celebration of a seamless spatiality achieved by the spread of capital,¹ why then on the other hand did the rhetoric of NAFTA advocacy resort to assurances that *American* jobs will not be lost and that *American* identity will be intact, undeterritorialized by NAFTA? As Marx's elegant analysis of the contradictory logic of capitalism points out, the discourse of protectionism on behalf of the dominant order goes hand in hand with the dehistoricization of the periphery. The polemical focus on American jobs and American identity demonstrates that despite all claims of free trade, clearly, there is a *home* and a *not-home*, an *inside* to be protected and an *outside* that is really not our concern. And how do we distinguish between who is "us" and who is "them"? Of course, through the good old category of "nationality." Thus, the return of nationalism lies at the very heart of a despatializing postmodernity.

Secondly, the floundering of GATT on issues concerning cultural autonomy and specificity. The sticking point here was the exportation to Europe of American culture through videos and television programs. Unlike NAFTA that pits two developed countries against a third world country, here the transaction is all Western. And yet this particular instance dramatizes the disjuncture between cultural and political/economic interests. It was not just a question of taxes and tariffs. Surely we are all aware that in the age of late capitalism, culture itself is nothing but a commodity infiltrated irrevocably by exchange value? And still Europe resists American cultural commodities in the name of its own separate identity. Falling back on the notion of organic cultural interpellation, Europe resists the logic of postmodern homogenization or de-differentiation. Clearly this confrontation is taking place on the all too familiar turf of Identity; and we had thought that Identity had been sent packing in the advanced postmodern world of simulacra and the hyperreal. Culture becomes the embattled rhetoric of home, authenticity, and "one's ownness" deployed strategically to resist the economic impulse toward "sameness." Yes, we want to be part of the borderless economic continuum, but at the same time, let us be who we are; our cultural identities are not up for sale or commercial influence. It would seem then that the economic terrain activates a pure process without a Subject,² whereas the cultural domain is anchored deeply in Identity.

4 Postmodernism and the Rest of the World

Thirdly, in the case of the Puerto Rican referendum concerning statehood, “culture” became a fraught term. Would Puerto Rico sacrifice its cultural/historical uniqueness as a consequence of economic/political unionization? Tax issues and citizenship questions apart, the question of culture was raised in all its resistant autonomy. Not unlike a number of non-Western ex-colonized nations that assimilate the West as part of their “outer selves” and cultivate their “inner selves” in response to indigenous imperatives, the people of Puerto Rico chose to symbolize the cultural domain in opposition to a capitalist postmodernist integration with the “Nation of nations.”³

I bring up these examples to show that the “identity question” in our own times is profoundly fissured along different and often mutually exclusive trajectories. Also, all these events are taking place in a progressively postmodern world, which is also being seen as a postnationalist world. Why is it that Identity and Nationalism are celebrating their return under the postmodern aegis? Why is it that the ideology of postmodernism is unable to chase away or exorcize the ghosts of Identity and Nationalism? Is it possible that the “identity question” and a variety of nationalisms⁴ have become the political weapon of “underdeveloped” peoples in their battle against the phenomenon of “unequal global development”?⁵ a phenomenon that is being exacerbated by the spread of postmodernism? But before we can respond to these questions (questions that focus on the global effects of postmodernism), we need to take a closer look at postmodernism as it has developed in the West.

Historicizing Postmodernism

What are the origins of postmodernism? What is the extent of its geopolitical jurisdiction and what is its statute of limitations? Let us keep in mind that the text that gave postmodernity its undeniable cognitive–epistemic status (Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*)⁶ made three important and binding gestures. First of all, postmodernity was a condition. Secondly, it had to do with knowledge and epistemology. And third, it was taking place within the advanced capitalist, postindustrial computerized societies. The term “condition” (as in say, the human condition) has a strong ontological appeal. Unlike words such as “crisis,” “predicament,” or “dilemma,” “condition” carries with it a semantics of finality and fully achieved meaning. It is in the form of a *fait accompli*. In other words, the condition is real, and it was theorized into lexical significance within the first world well before the underdeveloped world could even take a look at it, leave alone have a say in its ideological determination.

Well might one ask, why should the underdeveloped countries of the third world even be allowed a peek into what after all is exclusively a first world phenomenon? And here lies the ideological duplicity of postmodernity as an epistemic condition: its simultaneity both as a regional and a global phenomenon. The epistemic location of postmodernity, given the dominance of the West, has a *virtual* hold over the rest of the world too. If modernity functions as a structure-in-dominance that regulates and normativizes the relationship between the West and the Rest, postmodernism, despite the so-called break from modernity,⁷ sustains and prolongs this relationship. Furthermore, given the avant-gardism of the West, it is only inevitable that the very regionality of Western forms will travel the world over as dominant universal forms. In other words, Western realities have the power to realize themselves as “general human conditions.” The passage from a specific reality to a general condition is effected through the mediation of knowledge and epistemology.

It is the formulation of the postmodern “condition” as a matter of “knowledge” that paves the way for the uncontested spread of first world priorities across the world. It is the ability of the developed world to conceptualize and theorize its particular organic empirical reality into a cognitive–epistemic formula on behalf of the entire world that poses a dire threat to other knowledges.⁸ For after all, how can knowledge be irrelevant, especially when accompanied by claims of universality? Thus a report on epistemology elaborated in the metropolis either begins to speak for the human condition the world over, or assumes a virtual reality to be devoutly wished for by the rest of the world. To put it differently, the theoretical need to take postmodernism seriously becomes an imperative even in places where postmodernity is not a lived reality (i.e., has no historical roots). The third world is then compulsorily interpellated by postmodernity even though its own realities are thoroughly out of sync with the temporality of the postmodern.⁹

To what extent and in what specific ways does postmodernism problematize and deconstruct the ideology of modernity? To what extent is postmodernism a radical critique of, and perhaps a form of secession from, the authority of modernity? If indeed postmodernism is an effective interrogation of the legitimacy of modernity within the confines of the first world, then how useful or relevant is this interrogation to other geopolitical areas in the rest of the world? Is there common cause between the interrogation of modernity within the developed world and third world critiques of modernity? Are there sharable issues, agendas, and objectives between these two constituencies, despite the fundamental asymmetry that sustains East–West relationships? In other words, why should the rest of the world pay attention to the emergence of postmodernism in politics if all it is is an intramural “occidental” antagonism?

6 Postmodernism and the Rest of the World

Before I examine the relevance or otherwise of postmodernism to post-coloniality and to third world cultural politics, I would like to briefly and selectively look into the claims of postmodernism within its place of origin. I would also like to keep in mind that even within the first world, the evaluation of postmodernism is far from complete. There are great resistances and “differences within” the first world. Whether postmodernism is good or bad, whether it is a progressive development or a repressive development in complicity with the rationality of capitalist dominance, are issues that are part of an ongoing debate. My purpose here is not to rehearse the by-now many familiar attitudes to postmodernism, both supportive and antagonistic,¹⁰ but rather to focus on a few issues that have to do with the generalization of the “post” and the implications of such a generalization in the context of first world–third world relationships.

Postmodernism within the metropolitan context is often equated with the advocacy of local, regional, and specific politics in opposition to total/global/universal politics. Western authority is over, the process of decolonization is well afoot the world over, and the dominance of Eurocentrism is viable no more. There is the reality of the other, not just the abstract Other capitalized by theory into a transhistorical form of alterity, but several determinate others with different histories, cultures, and political destinies. The postmodern choice that gets formulated in response to this crisis is quite stark: an illegitimate universalism, or relativism. But what about a universalism based not on dominance or representational violence but on relationality and a dialogism based on multiple interlocking histories?¹¹ Confronted by its ideological embeddedness in Eurocentrism (i.e., Eurocentrism masquerading as authentic universalism), postmodernism eschews universalism altogether in favor of a rigorous and uncompromising relativism. Given its relativist stance, postmodernism can have nothing to say about other cultures. Its narrative, used to being “grand” and totalizing, fails altogether.

If narrative in Conrad is either mystified or enraged to hatred by the darkness of the Other,¹² the postmodern withdrawal from narrative attests to the objective reality of the Other while at the same time it claims that the Other is unknowable. The Other’s reality to the Self is postulated on the prior premise of the Other’s unknowability by the Self. Withdrawing from its sorry history of knowing the Other through dominance, a self-critical Eurocentrism abandons the Other altogether in the name of non-interference. The epistemology of relativism justifies this denial of reciprocity and relationality among different knowledges of the world.

This failure of postmodern relativism both at the epistemological level and the political level is typically recuperated as a radical triumph through the practice of what has become a quintessential postmodernist/poststructuralist

strategy: the strategy of self-reflexivity as a catch-all answer for cross-cultural crises and problems.¹³ If canonical anthropology's message to premodern societies was "I think, therefore you are," postmodern orthodoxy takes the form of "I think, therefore I am not. You are 'I am not.'" The Other becomes the burden of the Self's negativity, a negativity produced by the Self through its own auto-critical deconstructive engagement with itself. As Edward Said has argued eloquently in his analysis of Albert Camus' political as well as epistemological orientation towards Algeria, the postmodern impulse furthers the modernist thesis by actively negating the other through knowledge.¹⁴ I am not trivializing the significance of deconstructive self-reflexivity within the metropolitan theater, but the problem is that such a self-reflexivity *by itself* does not and cannot guarantee the knowability of other cultures and histories.

Perhaps a brief explanation is in order here: an explanation of how postmodernism functions predominantly as a critique¹⁵ that is derived oppositionally from the very order that is the object of the critique.¹⁶ The very exteriority of the postmodern critique relies on the givens of modernity, and hence postmodernism, despite vociferous claims to the contrary, enriches modernity in the very act of transgressing it. The putative "break" that is associated with postmodern rebellion in fact rests securely on the spoils of nationalism/modernism. Nowhere is this more visible than in the so-called post-identitarian, postnationalist formations. Postnationalist developments, as my opening paragraphs attempt to demonstrate, are never at the expense of nationalist securities; if anything, they *foundationalize* nation-based verities and privileges to the point of invisibility. The benefits of citizenship of developed nationalism are effectively sublated through postnational transcendence, just as the legacies of modernity are preserved in the postmodern critique. All I am saying is that postmodernism does not absolve itself of modernity, just as powerful post- and transnational developments do not forfeit the privileges of first world nationalism.

This entire discussion leads to an important question: how real and historical is the "post?" I would argue that critiques (such as the postmodern critique of modernity) that are paradigmatically homogeneous with their objects cannot be real alternatives.¹⁷ What then is a paradigm and how are its parameters recognized? How is a paradigm identified economically, politically, culturally, philosophically? My concern here, quite Marxist in its intention, is with the self-identification of any paradigm, both in its totality and through the relative autonomy of the many levels and spheres that account for the totality. Though the historical reality of any paradigm – such as modernity – is independent of the conscious theory or the epistemology of the paradigm, it is through the latter that the paradigm achieves self-awareness *qua* paradigm. I say this to make two points: (1) that the relationship between any paradigm

8 Postmodernism and the Rest of the World

and its epistemology is one of *identification*, and (2) that the epistemology is not constitutive of the paradigm; rather, the paradigm as an interrelated set of practices is anterior to the epistemology. In other words, the epistemology of the paradigm is a function and a product of the paradigm even as it enjoys its relative autonomy as theory.

Given this, what does it mean to assert that postmodernism is an epistemological break from modernity in particular, and from Western thought in general? Is it possible that postmodernism functions as a “break” in matters epistemological even as it remains complicit with the West in matters political and economic? If the break is merely epistemological and not accompanied by concomitant economic and political changes, what is the status of the break, and indeed, what is the “subject” of the break? By and large, theories of postmodernity have focused exclusively and obsessively on theory and epistemology to claim that a break has actually occurred. In this sense, postmodernism has been a revolution “in theory,” in both senses of the term. It is a revolution that seems quite prepared to leave history behind in search of theoretical virtual realities informed by the temporality of the “post.”¹⁸ The decapitation¹⁹ of history by theory, the celebration of subjectlessness, and other such motifs have been the burden of epistemology’s impatience with history.²⁰ It is significant that there exists a telling divide between Marxist postmodernists and “pure” postmodernists when it comes to the question of accounting for the political and the social. Marxist postmodernists such as Neil Smith, David Harvey, Fredric Jameson, and Nancy Fraser tend to see postmodernism as a symptom of late capitalism; the pure postmodernists, *à la* Jean Baudrillard, are happy to inhabit the world of postmodernist immanence, virtually and theoretically. Also, the former are able to raise such questions as “Is postmodernism good or bad, desirable or not?” whereas the latter are happy to thematize postmodernism intransitively (i.e., as an end in itself).²¹

The dangers of hypostatizing postmodern theory as its own autonomous content are as follows.²² First of all, the so-called theoretical break takes the form of an “innocent” counter-memory that chooses to forget an uncomfortable and often guilty past.²³ Radical theory begins to function as a form of forgetfulness (i.e., as a way of justifying the non-accountability of theory to history). The organic and representational connectedness of postmodernity to its past is deliberately and strategically overlooked, so that gains in epistemology may be localized in all their micropolitical specificity, and then legitimated as a successful politics of secession. It is important to keep in mind that what is passed off here, through the dubious reference to the transgressive autonomy of epistemology, as an exclusively metropolitan course of events, has in fact tremendous global repercussions. The minimalization of the grand narratives into the *recit* of postmodernism is an epistemological move that in a

sense attempts to “launder” the guilt of Eurocentrism. Modernity, after all, was achieved as an effect of colonialism with unequal impact on the colonizer and the colonized. Much of the capital needed for industrialization came from the colonies (one obvious example being cotton from India for the mills in Lancashire), and it was the production of surplus value from the colonies that paved the way for the universal sovereignty of modernity. And of course, in the process, other knowledges were wasted. If the dominance of modernity was the result both of the creation and the maintenance of the developed–underdeveloped divide, how come then, suddenly and by the sheer occult power of high theory, postmodernism finds itself absolved of its modernist past?

The epistemological *coupure* begins to function as an alibi. Unable to deal with the enormity of its modernist–colonialist past, postmodernism desiccates itself into a bodiless theory so that its accountability to a *global past* could just be forgotten. I am not denying the possibility that postmodernism can be, or even is, an authentic quarrel of the West with itself, but the valence of such a quarrel can hardly speak for the victims of modernity in Africa or Asia. The postmodern quarrel with modernity is much in the nature of a family squabble that takes place within a well-established domain of solidarity and shared economic and political interests. There is nothing in postmodern epistemology that disinherits the beneficial legacies of modernism, in particular, the riches of developmental progress built on piratical capital accumulation. The post-identitarian “games”²⁴ of postmodernism are possible precisely because identity “here” is no more at stake.²⁵ Postnationalist postmodernism, for example, does not cancel earlier identifications such as German, American, French, British, etc. If anything, these identifications are the rich but ideologically invisible bases from which postmodernity is deployed as the politics of heterogeneity, hybridity, and difference.²⁶

This calculated suppression of macropolitical global memory results in the provincialization of the metropolitan political imaginary. The call for specific intellectuality, the insistence on an isolationist subject-positional politics, and the understanding of “location” in opposition to global relationality, the grand obituary notice regarding the death of representation and narrative voice: these themes that constitute the very essence of postmodernity highlight a certain failure, the failure of Eurocentric thought to confront with conscience²⁷ the history of its own Narrative.²⁸ Such a version of postmodernism has been severely questioned within the West by feminists who have sought to postmodernize their feminisms without at the same time conceding to postmodernity its master claims concerning knowledge and theory. (In a way we could also understand this venture as the feminization of postmodernity.)²⁹ In what sense could postmodernism be seen as an ally of Western feminism, and

how and for what reasons does such an alliance break down?³⁰ For my purposes here, I wish to focus on areas where feminism has pressured postmodernism to acknowledge its shortcomings, blind spots, and internal contradictions. The distinction (and here I draw on the distinguished work of such feminist postmodernists as Nancy Fraser, Linda Nicholson, Iris Marjan Young, and Donna Haraway, to name just a few) is between *social* postmodernisms, in the plural, and an unqualified *postmodernism as such*. In other words, the work of these intellectuals warns us that the social significance of postmodernism is not to be taken for granted. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson were among the first theorists to conceptualize postmodernism as simultaneously exciting and problematic, and to spell out a critique of postmodernism from a macropolitical perspective that is external to the epistemic space provided by postmodernism itself (i.e., the agential political space of feminism). Their significant contribution was to demystify the immanence of postmodernism in terms of its undeclared ideology, and to insist on the accountability of the epistemics of postmodernism to its social conditions of production. It would be redundant to capture the overall direction of their well-known and much discussed essay (in particular, the sophisticated way in which they turn the tables on Lyotard), so I will take their critique for granted and proceed further.

Fraser and Nicholson rightly point out that the radical valorization of postmodernism as an epistemological *coupure* in fact throws the baby out with the bathwater (i.e., unless, of course, the very denial of the *socius* by postmodern theory is to be construed perversely as the ultimate revolution, and that would indeed be a bizarre comment on the teleology that Marx had devoutly wished for). Nicholson and Fraser point out that the epistemological site is made into a pure *elsewhere* that connects neither with history nor with sociality. Hence, their diagnosis that postmodernism is very much a *philosophical* formulation authored by male theorists and thinkers. Their essay makes us see that what gets celebrated in postmodernist thought is the capacity of Eurocentric philosophy to master and own itself even during its periods of dark and menacing crisis, its genius to launch its very negativity in the form of a persuasive philosophy. Its loss of privilege thus recuperated by theory, postmodernism begins to assume the function of a non-organic, free-floating signifier with global epistemic ambitions. If the West is the home of progressive knowledge, and if the West itself has begun to question its own knowledge, then clearly, knowledge must be in universal jeopardy. And who else to the rescue but the Western subject all over again, who can convert loss of authority into a pure theory of subjectless knowledge?

The uncoupling of the “post” from postmodernity confers on the “post” a universal sanction to be exercised the world over in the guise of knowledge. It is this philosophical autonomization of the epistemology of the *post* that has

facilitated the production of categories such as post-feminism, postcoloniality, post-ethnic, post-historical, post-political, etc.³¹ Every other constituency is then constrained, for reasons of knowledge, to work under the “post” umbrella. Without a doubt, a strong distinction needs to be made between the indigenous claims of postmodernism and its traveling authority as a blank, generic imprimatur. For after all, why should ethnicity go “pomo,” or for that matter, Islam? What if Islam and postmodernism, and ethnicity and postmodernism, are mutually exclusive and/or irrelevant? Why should these constituencies update themselves in the name of postmodern epistemology and theory? If the historical irrelevance, to these constituencies, of postmodernism is demonstrable, why should they still find room for postmodernism as theory within their internal structures? Why hitch their interests to an alien knowledge and risk their solidarity with themselves?

My purpose here is to submit postmodernism to the relevance test. How relevant and how representative is the postmodern condition, both within the first world and in global terms? In adopting the postmodernist framework as a meta-framework, isn't there the real danger of distorting and misrepresenting other realities and other histories? As Fraser and Nicholson have argued, postmodernism is real as a crisis. To Fraser and others, the denial of globality by postmodern theory indicates a dire need for imagining a politics of connections, correlations, correspondences, and common ground – and clearly postmodernism is no help at all here. How can postmodernism be socialized and politicized is a question that Fraser and Nicholson take up in their work.³² As Western feminists they share with postmodern theory a common heritage: Eurocentrism and the history of Western dominance. But there the commonality stops, for as feminists they occupy a different ground from the one inhabited by male postmodern theorists. Though they take heed of a whole range of self-reflexive practices prescribed by postmodern theory, they articulate (Fraser in particular) quite programmatically their political difference from male, white postmodernism. As feminists of the Western world they have a relationship of difference-in-identity with postmodernism, and the difference is to be explained in terms of interests and polemical situatedness and not just in terms of pure knowledge or epistemology. It is indeed the notion of interestedness and perspectivity that separates postmodern feminists from their male counterparts. Furthermore, in sizing down postmodernism into adjectival significance (i.e., not postmodernism as its own plenary politics, but rather *postmodern* feminism), theorists like Fraser reinvent the need for a macropolitics that will not shrink into a narcissistic self-reflexivity or a technology-driven set of non-organic, specialist practices.

There is yet another important historical context that differentiates postmodern feminism from male, white postmodernism. Unlike the latter, which

is obsessed with self-reflexivity, postmodern feminism sees the postmodern epistemological condition as a problem. Why is it that an increase in epistemological complexity results in the lessening of knowledge, especially of the Other? Why are knowledge and practice, knowledge and “worldliness,”³³ posited in terms of mutual incommensurability? What helps them out of this aporia is not yet another “pure” epistemological nuance but, rather, a very real historical challenge: the challenge both from women of color in the first world and from third world women.³⁴ Postmodern feminism is different precisely because it responds (I am not saying that the response has always been successful) to the ethico-political authority of other worlds and other knowledges and other histories. There is a real *horstexte* to the history and the discourse of postmodernism, and unless this “outside” is acknowledged in its own terms, there cannot be any meaningful coalitions or cross-cultural projects between white women and women of color. It is the reality of other knowledges (and not merely the realities of other histories, for classical anthropology flourished on the notion of “their histories” requiring “our theories”) that makes postmodernism vulnerable and thus open to dialogue and cross-locational persuasion.³⁵

The major issue that in some sense brings feminists together, despite fundamental differences of race, class, sexuality, and nationality, is that of identity, and to be more specific, the issue of identity politics and its relationship to the theoretical/epistemological critique of *identity as such*.³⁶ First world feminism found itself in critical double sessions both with male postmodernism and with the feminisms of women of color, with the two double sessions connected through a relationship of asymmetry. With postmodernism, on the one hand, there was the project of deconstructing the claims of essentialism, and the stranglehold of metaphysical thought; and on the other, spelling out assertively the difference of an agential feminist politics from a male critique of phallogocentric identity.³⁷ In the contexts of the feminisms of women of color, however, the double session had a different sense of historical direction. On the one hand, there was the solidarity of women the world over in their fight against an omni-historical patriarchy (with individual historical differences and variations to be worked contextually), but on the other hand, there were real race- and colonialism-based differences when it came to the identity question in its theoretical aspect. The battle against essentialism that is an integral component of postmodern feminism resonates very differently in the subaltern women’s context, since “essentialism” had a different ring in the third world context.

Postmodern feminists have done an impressive job of pointing out the slippage within postmodernist and poststructuralist theory between notions of “agency” and “subjectivity.” Unlike postmodern theory that glorifies this

slippage as a hallmark of its “difference-from-itself,” postmodern feminism wonders whether this slippage is in fact real, and if indeed it is real, whether such a condition is something to be ecstatic about or a cause for worry. The postmodern “turn” taking shape exclusively as critique would have us believe that a critique is subjectless and that identity is a bad essentialist habit to be discarded by a hardheaded theory. We have heard great claims that the epistemology of the “post” is a daring and self-consuming process of thinking that puts itself at risk, defoundationalized perennially by its own radical momentum. The “subject” of knowledge is dissolved in the “process” of knowing,³⁸ and what is left is the intransitive *jouissance* of epistemological play. There are at least two ways of questioning such claims. First, by way of Marxist ideology critique (interestingly, “ideology” is the neglected term in so much postmodernist critique) one could argue that postmodern pleasure is nothing but the most abject form of mystification by the commodity form; and secondly, by a form of global reasoning that tells us that the so-called “subject in peril” of postmodern epistemology is in fact a hyper-identitarian subject so secure in its dominant identity regime that it can afford to play games without in any way endangering its politico-economic base. The decentered play that the early Jacques Derrida champions³⁹ neither forswears Eurocentric privilege nor does it situate itself relationally *vis-à-vis* the other coeval histories and cultures of the world. In all these critical operations we find the negative ontology of Eurocentrism playing doctor to the rest of the world. This negative ontology would have us believe that narrative in general is devoid of epistemological validity, a belief with shattering consequences for narratives in the rest of the world.

The “theme of themes” in postmodern thought is the statement of a relationship: identity-knowledge-narrative. To put it broadly, postmodernism eviscerates narrative and purports to be fiercely anti-essentialist in its attitude to Identity. (Such an attitude in the final analysis turns out to be anti-Identity also, since postmodernism reads “identity” and “essentialism” as interchangeable and synonymous terms.) As we can see, these two operations are closely related. Why does postmodernism posit an adversarial relationship between narrative and radical epistemology? If narrative is seen as an act of agential-ideological production with the purpose of anchoring identities in their proper, teleological “homes,” radical epistemology is understood as the celebration of the free and unbounded spatiality of *knowing* in all its verbal-processual and desubjectified flows and energies.⁴⁰ If narrative works within specific parameters, historical and political, and the constraints of solidarity that go with parameters, postmodern *knowing* is endorsed as the perennial breaking down of boundaries, barriers, and roots by the sheer will to knowledge. Knowledge is a mercurial form of restlessness that disdains the category of “home.” In the choice between postmodernism as the champion of a

freedom-seeking knowledge (or better still, as a border-busting knowledge)⁴¹ and narrative as a conservative protectionist policy, postmodernism comes off as the more liberating option. After all, who in their right mind can be *against* freedom and *for* censorship and repression through narrative interpellation, particularly during times of NAFTA and a capital-centered world order where any threat to the free flow of capital is construed as an act of terrorism, a heinous crime against the cause of universal freedom?

My polemic here is not to deny the “post” its travel from the center to the periphery, or to assert that third world resistances are necessarily pure and uncontaminated by metropolitan influence.⁴² Rather, my intention is to mark the meta-theory of the “post” with the historical realities of its uneven travel across contesting terrains and cultures. How differentially is the “politics of the post” received and experienced in third world locations, and in particular, how are the identity politics of those locations pressured by the epistemology of postmodernism? Let us now take a critical look at the form in which the identity question is brought to the third world on the postmodern platter.

First of all, the identity question is presented as an unfashionable and backward preoccupation. The third world, in other words, has to choose between a relevant but backward project, and a cutting-edge subjectivity that is purely virtual and devoid of an experiential base. Secondly, the identity question as it affects the third world is as urgent as it is chronic (for nowhere else does the “enjoy the symptom” syndrome find a better context than in the third world Body),⁴³ since the underdeveloped world has to seek an alien epistemology to understand itself better. Thirdly, “identity” is put forward as a necessary and desirable object for deconstruction. Fourthly, identity is divorced from the agential authority of specific narrative projects and their hegemonizing strategies. Fifthly, the quest for identity is separated from legitimation procedures, since all legitimation is deemed by theory to be “always already” repressive. And, finally, the discourse of subaltern identity is emptied epistemically (i.e., alienated from its prerogative to make its own truth claims, for the truth claims would come from the Self of the dominant West).

For the deconstructive attitude towards Identity to attain universal purchase, postmodernism sets up something called “essentialism” as the ideal straw enemy. In spite of prolific scholarship in the areas of “essentialism” and “strategic essentialism,”⁴⁴ it is still not clear what essentialism is precisely, or why it holds such a dominant position in contemporary debates in theory, cultural studies, postcoloniality, and gender and ethnic studies. Why is essentialism bad, why are essentialists naive/stupid and/or evil, and why has anti-essentialism secured a monopolistic hold over theoretical–moral virtue? I am not for a moment discrediting a number of poststructuralist feminists who have argued memorably on behalf of a constructed and de-essentialized notion of identity

(Judith Butler and Diana Fuss to name two prominent theorists) without sacrificing the agential power of identity politics. My point is that when it comes to questions of essence and legitimation, deconstructive theories that emanate from the metropolis egregiously misread the burden of essence as it falls on the third world and thus fail to appreciate the nuance of the “risk of essence” that Gayatri Spivak so eloquently talks about even as she advances the claims of poststructuralist epistemology.

I wish to suggest that the exaltation of the essentialism debate as the “Debate of all debates” only serves to obfuscate our understanding of the term “essentialism” and its specific underpinnings in Western thought. First, essentialism is one pole of a binary interpellation peculiar to Western epistemology: the other pole could be variously termed as “history,” “existence,” “the non-essential/accidental/adventitious.” Secondly, essentialism has been ideologically determined as a critical bone of contention (i.e., prepared as the main battleground where the main event will be the deconstruction of Western ontology by itself). And, as Foucault would have it, this deontologizing project takes the perennial form of an anti-Platonism, so that the genus “anti-Platonic” is canonized as the permanent form of the permanent revolution in thought and theory.⁴⁵ Thirdly, the drama of essentialism is always played out with reference to the non-West, which is made to take on the dark and mysterious burden of essentialism, whereas the West is busy producing its own powerful history. The primitivism of the other (stranded forever in the quagmire of an ahistorical essence) is variously cultivated by the West either as an object of dread to be kept at bay, or as an object of exoticism to be used as a source of rejuvenation (the example of Gauguin comes to mind) to revive the fading Western spirit. Fourthly, the West, particularly during the period of high modernism, was in the habit of projecting its inner fissures, dreads, and hatreds onto the Other, so that the Other was made to appear as the Manichaean counterpart of the dominant Western self. Africa in particular became the favorite dumping ground of all those atavistic drives and terrors that conscious modernity could not account for. Africa thus became the dark continent (the ideal theater for the modern European self to encounter its primordial origins) that would absorb the detritus of the modernist process. The co-implication of the Thames and the Congo, for example, in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, does not so much invoke a common humanity, but rather, an unequal humanity, where the African brother is constrained forever to remain the younger brother.⁴⁶ The contemporaneity of the other is psychologized as the atavistic prehistory of the dominant self, and the way is paved for the creation of the “third world” as a necessary backdrop for the history of modernity.⁴⁷

This little detour has been necessary to drive home the point that whatever the valences might be of the debates over essentialism within the developed

world, such debates would not have been possible unless essentialism had also been deployed as a powerful weapon against the histories of other cultures. No chapter in Western modernity can really be understood unless it is located in the context of the history of colonialism in both contexts: the colonizer's as well as that of the colonized.⁴⁸ I also would like to emphasize that this cognitive-theoretical hang-up with essentialism is not a postmodern phenomenon. It is in fact a quintessential modernist theme (the modernist angst with history and origins) that has been bequeathed to postmodernism. The allegorization as well as the anthropologization of the native, the ascription of a timeless irrationality or a brute unregenerate facticity to native cultures, the attribution of a phenomenological/perceptual immediacy devoid of cognitive import to native bodies and behavior, and the dark and menacing idealization of the other's geography as primordial earth, nature, etc., have all been thoroughly constitutive of modernity's schizophrenic obsession with itself. Postmodernism's advocacy of these very themes, therefore, is if anything but a continuation of the *longue durée* of modernism, and not a break from it. Postmodernism's sensitivity to the politics of difference and heterogeneity and its seeming solicitude for the other need to be grounded in a history of mutual relationality. On the contrary, what has been happening under the postmodern aegis is that familiar phenomenon of high metropolitan theory repeatedly accusing third world identity politics of essentialism.

This is hilariously ironic when we consider that this entire obsession with essences and the deconstruction of binarity have very little to do with a number of indigenous African and Asian knowledges that do not axiomatize binarity as the founding principle of all thought.⁴⁹ It is the hubris of Western thought that accommodates the belief that the West's antinomian struggle with itself is *the* universal form of all revolution, and that other cultures should genuflect to the jurisdiction of Platonism and its *alter ego*. To vary Derrida's dictum, it is as though the world can never really step out of the pages of Western thought; the only alternative is to turn the pages in a certain way. What is even more alarming is the fact that the postmodern counter-memory quite conveniently forgets the history of essentialism as it has been foisted on the non-West. It was during the modernist regime (in collusion with colonialism) that traditions were invented by the colonizer on behalf of the colonized,⁵⁰ and as Lata Mani had demonstrated brilliantly in the context of *sati*, the so-called authority of indigenous traditions was created and constructed by the colonizer to legitimate and inferiorize indigenous traditions, all in one move. This so-called authority was really not representative of indigenous practices and worldviews. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued powerfully (and here I extend his insight somewhat), the native's obsession with "history" as well as with "knowledge" was produced in response to the colonizer's need to domi-

nate and not in response to the native's need for self-knowledge and authentication.⁵¹

But this is not all. Even if the discussion of essentialism were restricted to the first world, there is still quite a bit of semantic fuzziness to be accounted for. Even within the discourse of Western metaphysical thought, I doubt whether "essences" were ever considered as empirically valid. In the attempt to construct and valorize the discourse of ideality, and in the effort to mediate the gap between "what is" and "what ought to be," the category (the essence-function, if you will) of the essence functioned as a kind of *telos*, as the positing of an *a priori* authority to direct and regulate the paths that history is to take on its way, not to any random resolution, but rather to a desired and willed denouement. Essences therefore belonged to the level of abstract, transhistorical categoriality, whereas the historical world of narrative was subject to error and misdirection. How to theorize ideality with reference to history is by no means an easy task, and nor is it an unnecessary one. My point here is that both "the real/the historical" and "the ideal" are products of human imagination, and are therefore historical through and through. As in Saussurean linguistics, where the signified itself is understood as a function of the linguistic sign and signifying practices, here too, "the ideal" itself should be comprehended as a discursive effect. Ideality and the notion of "essences" that direct history towards a desirable and ideal resolution are themselves (for "essence" connotes completion and an ideal completion) historically motivated categories. Essences have no significance whatsoever except in relationship to the changing world of history and circumstance.

The next step in my argument is to state that the term "strategic essentialism" is redundant, for essentialism has been nothing but strategic. To restate my earlier point, the recourse to essences is a matter of strategy to gain control over processes of history along agential lines. In this day and age, I find it difficult to believe that a Hindu, Muslim, or Jewish person subscribes to Hinduness,⁵² or Muslimness, or Jewishness except as a form of authority to live by and realize one's already given objectives as a group. The important issues here are the extent to which the anterior givenness of teleological objectives are open to historical modifications and reversions; and the political process of representation through which the teleological blueprint is endorsed (from the grassroots and not as top-down authority) and "hegemonized" in authentic response to the will of the members that constitute the group.

There is yet another deployment of strategic essentialism: the recourse by one group, in the context of multiple contradictory and competing historical claims, to the notion of "ontological essence," with the purpose of elevating and prioritizing their claims over and above the "merely historical" claims of other competing groups.

To transfer this philosophic discussion of essence and ideality to the realm of identity, identity politics, and the role played by narrative in the construction of identity: how are narratives interpellated, and how are narratives adjudged as failures or as successes? Before I undertake this analysis, I would like to make it very clear that my position on these issues is historical to the core, and I have undertaken this polemical excursion into essentialism only to show that essentialism itself has been an interested practice undertaken by human beings in search of specific goals, and not a disembodied and disinterested body of knowledge separated from the world of historical praxis.

Why do human communities have recourse to the rhetoric of essences? Any community has a given identity that is sedimented by the imbrication of many histories. There is also the desire to produce from the given identity an ideal community which one can call one's own, and "narrative" as a socially symbolic act is the way from *here* to *there*.⁵³ Can narrative function as pure process (i.e., without the authority of some form of ideological apriorism)?⁵⁴ Which prescripts does and should narrative follow? If narrative is an act of self-fashioning, which prescripts are liberating and which are repressive? Can the narrative function be divorced from the need for identity? Is narrative owned and operated by any agency, or is it external to the jurisdiction of agency? My position is that no narrative is possible without some tacit axiology, simply because narrative is neither a value-free nor a purely descriptive act. The "value" that legitimates the narrative project is in a sense anterior to the project itself, and in another sense it can only be realized as a function of the narrative process.⁵⁵ The success or failure of the narrative is to be measured in terms of its closeness to the intended trajectory; the produced value has to be read in terms of the intended value. Of course, the two will never totally coincide with each other, for that would amount to the preemption of history by pure Presence. "Value" thus presides over the narrative project (also, the identity project), both as an epistemological and as an ethico-political imperative. The imperative is epistemological insofar as the "subjects" involved in the process need to be able to think of their intended identity as a worthy object of knowledge, and ethico-political since the value is also related to questions of representation, hegemony, authenticity, correctness, and fairness. In short, it is utterly meaningless to disconnect identity politics from questions concerning the truth claims as well as the legitimacy of identity. One cannot by definition entertain an identity that is truthless or illegitimate, for "identity" is both an epistemic and a politico-judicial regime.

Furthermore, the thematic securing of any identity within its own truth marks the powerful moment when the for-itself of that identity is in addition transformed to an in-itself that can be acknowledged and respected by other

identities.⁵⁶ Without this passage from its *being-for-itself* to its *being-in-itself*, any identity is doomed to a history of ghettoization (i.e., it will have a reality for itself within its own niche and no more). If identities are denied the legitimacy of their own truths (both in their own eyes and through the eyes of the “others”),⁵⁷ they are bound to languish within their histories of inferiority, deprived of their relational objective status *vis-à-vis* the objective conditions of other identities. To put it concretely, the self-image of an African-American has to be acknowledged as objective knowledge by non-African-Americans. The historical intelligibility of a subaltern/minority worldview is neither a matter of special-interests epistemology nor a function of some mysterious and esoteric insiderism. For any identity to participate equally and meaningfully in a comity of identities, it has to ensure that its knowledge is accorded objective validity by all other parties at the very outset of the meeting. Without such a recognition, some identities are bound to be equal and more than equal, whereas others will be perceived as less than equal, for lack of an evenly realized universality. It might be objected (and more of this later) that the self-identity of any identity is “for the other,” but my contention is that historical differentiations need to be made between intra- and inter-identitarian notions of alterity. Such distinctions may not be necessary in the context of a perfectly realized universality, but clearly no one will claim that such a state has been attained.

If my reading of the essentialism–narrative nexus is correct, then it would seem that there is something disingenuous about the polarized choice offered by postmodern theory: essentialism or a pure subjectless process. This binary choice seems like the only option possible because postmodern theory considers the identity question purely from a philosophic perspective. In so doing, it represses the programmatic and intentional connections between *interests* and identity. What is left out of the discussion, of course, is the politics of representation.⁵⁸ Epistemology, theory, and philosophy are reified as absolute sites of revolution, cleansed of political and representational partisanship. Such a celebration of epistemological revolutions at the expense of organicity and the solidarities of representational politics ill-befits the needs of postcoloniality, and yet why is it that theorists of postcoloniality (myself included) take postmodern/poststructuralist lessons to heart in their attempts to delineate postcolonial subjectivity?⁵⁹ My focus here will be on some of the significant contributions made by Homi Bhabha in the area of postcolonial narratology. These interventions have been as much postcolonial in their intent as they have been postmodern/poststructuralist in their conviction. The cardinal question that comes up in Bhabha’s case (and by extension, any theoretical work that uses poststructuralist epistemology to clarify issues in

postcoloniality) is which is the tenor and which the vehicle? Which is the figure and which the ground? Which is the historical body and which the animating spirit: poststructuralism or postcoloniality? What does it mean to articulate the two “posts” together?⁶⁰

Whose Knowledge and Whose Politics?

The deconstructive dissemination⁶¹ that Bhabha proposes as a resolution to contemporary identity crisis works on two levels. On a political level, “dissemination” stands for the dissipation of the legitimacy of nationalist regimes and their “imagined communities.”⁶² On a philosophical level, dissemination works as the radical postponement of *Identity as such*; in the place of identity we have the notion of displaced hybridities.⁶³ If radical theory deconstructs and defers Identity, history rebukes and calls into question the sovereignty of nationalism. Interestingly enough the figure that connects the two levels is narrative. In Bhabha’s reading, the narration of the nation is a historical failure; but more consequentially, it is an allegorical failure of the “always already” variety. But why is it a failure? Is it a failure for specific historical reasons, or is it the failure intrinsic to the very form of the project such that historical circumstances do not really play a part in the determination of the outcome? Is the narrative failure of nationalism just another name for an omni-historical cognitive failure? The question that Bhabha does not raise (and this is consistent with his own stated intention of dealing not so much with the histories of nationalism, as with the temporality of Identity in a general sense), and one that Partha Chatterjee would raise with tremendous rigor and specificity, is the following: which particular agent of nationalism failed, through its performative, to achieve pedagogical authority on behalf of the people? The failures of different agencies such as neocolonialist, comprador, the indigenous elite, the subaltern, the nationalist male, the nationalist female, are all conflated into one monolithic failure. What then follows is an idealist refutation of all pedagogical authority, and consequently no account is provided of how certain “intentions” went awry in their performance, or how certain intentions were not truly representative of the people. There is no way to read diagnostically and meaningfully into the gap between the performative and the pedagogical. Quite in keeping with the Lacanian thesis that the very possibility of meaning is grounded in the radical possibility of miscommunication and misrecognition, Bhabha’s thesis capitalizes failure absolutely, overlooking in the process the ongoing historical tension between any specific act of knowing and the omni-historical horizon of failure and negativity. Bhabha’s theoretical model (more

psychoanalytical than historical) thus loses the ability to learn something from failure.⁶⁴ Learning from failure is possible only when failures are understood as relational phenomena that help in evaluating the distance between intentions and achievements. But the essentialization of failure by Bhabha trivializes the significance of specific failures as they occur during specific times for specific reasons.

It could be argued that there is some justification for launching an all-out global critique of nationalism, for isn't nationalism in disrepute the world over, including the West? And besides, isn't it unfair to talk about the West as though it were one undifferentiated bloc? First of all, nationalisms the world over are defunct only in theory, but not in historical practice. And as my opening to this chapter argues, nationalism is hale and kicking in the first world, including the USA. Yes, indeed, the West is not one homogeneous formation (there are all kinds of "differences within"), but my point is that during colonialism the West was orchestrated as a unified effect, with telling consequences for the non-West. But more importantly, yes, there is an East–West divide, but this divide was not the doing of the third world. On the contrary, discourses of modernity and nationalism found it convenient to play the East–West game as a way of dealing with other cultures.⁶⁵ It is galling for the third world to be told that the West suddenly no longer exists, just because the West has willed it so: yet another example of the West's ability to unilaterally change the very name of the game whenever it freely chooses. The "West" is not just its localized name, but also the history of its travels and pernicious effects on other histories, and unless this aspect of the historical effects of the West on the rest is acknowledged as part of its identity,⁶⁶ East–West cooperation, by way of the "post," is bound to be entirely superficial.

The problem not addressed by Bhabha is that decolonized people, after their overthrow of colonialism, are faced with the crisis of agency. Bhabha's theory of postcoloniality does not acknowledge the basic non-coincidence of post-colonial *interest* with poststructuralist epistemology. Although through his elaboration of concepts like "sly civility" and "mimicry"⁶⁷ Bhabha has helped us to understand how the native is always in an antagonistic–deconstructive relationship with colonialist discourse, he never goes beyond the strategy of playing the master's game against him/her;⁶⁸ nor is he interested in ascertaining if there are other knowledges besides the master discourse of the West. Bhabha does assert that he is interested in producing through theory a "third space," but here again, the third space, as a movement of deconstructive displacement and "difference," falls well within the epistemological jurisdiction of Western discourse. The third space that I am interested in is an emergent macropolitical space (complicit neither with the West nor with fundamentalisms that are after all reactive to the West) with its own independent

knowledge claims. To Bhabha, however, it is enough to theorize postcoloniality as a lack that frustrates the plenitude of metropolitan theory. Take postmodernism/postconstructivism away from Bhabha's theory, and instantly postcoloniality disappears also. In other words, there is no sense of *constituency in the theory* apart from the *constituency of theory*.

One way to account for this excessive dependence on poststructuralist theory is to invoke Bhabha's diasporan location as explanation. Living in the West and being an integral part of theoretical, cultural, and academic developments in the West, how can one's theory not be constituted by one's location as well as subject position? This explanation is not only quite insufficient, but it also trivializes and vulgarizes the profound significance of the very term "politics of location."⁶⁹ Clearly, by "location" we cannot mean something as impoverished and debilitating as one's actual and physical location. Locations are as factual as they are imaginary and imagined, and as physical as they are prepsychic, and as open to direct experience as they are to empathic participation. Location and identity, and location and knowledge are not mutually implosive, but mutually ek-static. And besides, locations are never simple, but rather multi-layered realities overdetermined by diverse cultural and political flows. In a postmodern world that is almost a virtual product of protean and multi-directional transfers and relays of information bytes and knowledge chunks, it is just a little bit shabby to claim location as an alibi for one's non-presence in other realities. The "politics of location" is productive not because location immures people within their specific four walls, but because it makes one location vulnerable to the claims of another, and enables multiple contested readings of the "same reality" from a variety of locations and positions. As Lata Mani develops this notion so thoughtfully, location is a heavily mediated concept, and unless the many mediations that interpellate location are studied in all their interconnectedness, locational analyses will be no more than exercises in defensive self-absorption.⁷⁰

Like any location, diasporan locations are characterized both by an "expressive totality" and the reality of uneven and relatively autonomous mediations that constitute and account for the totality.⁷¹ The provocative question is always this: how is the totality spoken for or represented? How does the straddling-many-worlds experience result in a "home" and how is the ethnoscape of such a home produced into knowledge?⁷² To take a hypothetical example: my taste in music could be primarily Carnatic music and jazz, secondarily Hindi and Tamil film music, and, at a tertiary level, contemporary rock and Western classical music. My affinities in literature could be primarily contemporary multi-ethnic literature of the USA; secondarily, canonical British and American literary works; tertiarily, contemporary Tamil bestsellers. My lifestyle may priv-

ilege the two-career nuclear family ethic, but my values may well endorse the extended family system. I could be a fierce champion of individual rights and the right to privacy, but on another level I am an uncompromising opponent of capitalism and the privatization of morality. I could be a secular atheist who participates in Indian religious events for cultural and ethnic reasons. I might scoff at nationalist ways of denominating realities, and at the same time I could be a passionate Indian, but under the third world umbrella. In other words, I could be hyphenated more than once and in more than one direction. In each of these configurations, the relationship between experience and identity is differently achieved: in some through physical intimacy and proximity, and in others through psychic and emotional solidarity. Some realities are real in a physical sense, and others imaginary. Different spaces get collocated through the logics of nearness and distance: there are multiple accents and patterns, and often, clashing priority agendas. As I have argued elsewhere, this profile of multi-historical hybridity operates hierarchically, whereby some of the elements that constitute hybridity have a greater say than others in giving it a name.⁷³ Thus, if my culinary preferences were exclusively South Indian, my cultural identity generally Indian, but all my cognitive–rational–intellectual value systems secular Western, it is inevitable that in an overall sense I would be more Western than Indian or South Indian. This is simply because the domain where I have chosen to be Western, the domain of cognition and rationality, is more determining in this last instance of my totality than any of the other domains. My very awareness of my Indianness in those other areas will be the result of a cognitive production, itself not Indian in its mode of operation. Within such a conjunctural “cross-hatching,” to use Gayatri Spivak’s ringing phrase, epistemology plays the honored role of speaking for the hybridity. In Bhabha’s version of hybridity, the expressive historical totality in the final analysis is articulated by poststructuralist epistemology.

Bhabha’s reading of a poem by Jussawalla is an interesting example of how metropolitan theory rereads a postcolonial dilemma as a poststructuralist aporia. In his analysis of the semantics of the letter/spiritual symbol “OM” (a religious Hindu symbol which raises the further question: what is the significance of a Hindu symbol to different secular Indians, the Hindu Indian, the Christian, the Parsi, the Sikh Indian, etc.), Bhabha felicitously subsumes “OM” within poststructuralist–deconstructive procedures without ever acknowledging, let alone analyzing, the indigenous genealogy of that profound symbol.⁷⁴ My concern is not with the “correctness” or the “insiderness” of one genealogy and the “incorrect alienness” of the other, but rather with the nonchalant manner in which Bhabha’s reading denies the poem its intense “double-coding.”⁷⁵ The rich symbolics of a different culture automatically become the

pretext for metropolitan theoretical virtuosity. Could poststructuralism by any chance be a problem here? Is it conceivable that Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault may at best be distracting when applied to postcoloniality? Could there be other epistemic starting points for the elaboration of postcolonial complexity?

I do not want to be misunderstood as an ideologue who would resist at any cost the “interruptions” and “readings against the grain” of the kind advocated and practiced by Gayatri Spivak.⁷⁶ There is a great and urgent need for transnational and transcultural readings, but these readings have to concede the reality of other knowledges. Transcultural readings are the very turf where the legitimacies of different knowledges should be contested, and not an arena where readings take on a purely epiphenomenal significance long after the question of knowledge has been settled in favor of metropolitan knowledge.⁷⁷ Unless and until “other worlds” are recognized not merely as *other histories* but as *other knowledges* that question the legitimacy of metropolitan theory,⁷⁸ no substantive common ground can be coordinated between postmodernism and postcoloniality. The postmodern concern and solicitude for the “other” has to step beyond the pieties of deconstructive–psychoanalytic thought.⁷⁹

The vexing issue facing postmodern epistemology is how to reconcile a radical incommensurability among multiple knowledges and knowledge games with the dire need for a politics of mutual recognition – analogously, how to honor multiplicity and heterogeneity without an understanding of the very terrain of connectedness that makes heterogeneity visible in the first place. The category “recognition of the other” is posited at the level of cognition and epistemology; ironically, the very level at which “incommensurability” is also posited as a motif intrinsic to the postmodern condition. If there is radical incommensurability, then there can be no recognition. If recognition is to go beyond the mere phenomenal and/or empiricist acknowledgment of the mere facticity of the “other,” then a way has to be found to transcend this incommensurability. Without such a transcendence in the name of a potentially multilateral universalism, we cannot even begin to pose the problem of how to read one history in terms of another. Neither the relativist postmodernist impasse nor the liberalist invocation of multiculturalism in the name of the dominant One serves the postcolonial need for equitable transactions among different histories and different knowledges.

To repeat myself, it is at the level of knowledge that the postcolonial subject has sustained crucial damage. Caught between two knowledges (one not one’s own, and the other one’s own but lacking in historical–political clout), the postcolonial subject remains a purely reactive subject: its *for-itself* rendered exclusively a function of its existence *for-the-other*, its *for-itself* hampered from producing its self-version as a form of a universal *in-itself*. Lacanian proponents may well claim universal purchase for their theories of alterity, but in the

case of the postcolonial subject we cannot afford to forget that the Self–Other conjuncture has been mediated by the structure-in-dominance of colonialism that is historical and not a mere matter for allegory. As Partha Chatterjee has convincingly argued, decolonization by way of secularism has been a poisoned remedy for postcolonial peoples.⁸⁰ For them, secularism represents political victory at the expense of epistemological self-esteem. The difficult and unenviable task facing third world intellectuals is that of upholding secularism as a political ideology while at the same time critiquing secularism as a form of epistemological dominance. As Madhu Kishwar develops her thesis in essay after essay,⁸¹ it is not a question of denying Western influences, some of which are beneficial, but rather a question of affirming one’s own knowledge base in a global context that views “experiences” as “underdeveloped” and “Eastern,” whereas the epistemic categories that make sense of “experiences” are deemed to be of the West. Furthermore, an unquestioning acceptance of secular modernity often comes in the way of third world projects that return in a revisionist mode to their own past – a past in fact invented by modernity in Manichaeic opposition to its own spirit. These projects of return to one’s own traditions have become epistemologically unfashionable, thanks to the postmodern insistence on identity deconstruction. It must be stated that the revisionist return projects are not necessarily characterized by nostalgia or by a fundamentalist impulse, but the need to separate the truth of one’s own traditions from the significances attributed to them by the colonizer. Are the truths of Islam and Hinduism no different from the form they have been given by Indologists and Orientalists? What are the realities of one’s tradition, good and bad, when viewed from within the tradition? Are there traditions other than the ones set up by colonialism in its attempts to essentialize and inferiorize indigenous cultures? The fact of the matter is that modernity effectively delegitimated the Hindu critique of Hinduism and the Islamic critique of Islam. It is as though such critiques did not exist at all, and the only critiques available were through the deracinating modernist theories of knowledge. As we have already seen, capitulation to modernist ideology preempts possibilities of one’s own history and one’s own knowledge: the center of one’s reality is always made to lie elsewhere.

As we look at hybrid realities the world over during a period of increasing demographic and cultural overlaps, it seems sensible to question modernity’s claim that it is the *Interpellation of all interpellations*. Can the claims of modernity be relativized and contextualized with reference to the criteria of relevance as experienced in the third world? Can the travel of modernity to the third world (to borrow from Said’s notion of “traveling theory”) be anything other than an “epistemic violence” of local theories and knowledges? This negotiation between “the local” and “the global” is an all-important issue that

unfortunately receives no attention in postmodern theory that lives and dies by the logic of binary opposition: local *or* global. Controversial issues the world over raise this question repeatedly: when is global/universal policy or law relevant and when is it a violation of local traditions and laws?⁸² On what grounds can “intervention” be justified morally and epistemologically? If global law is involved, on whose terms will the law be drawn up and promulgated? Should some areas be made available for global jurisdiction, while others are left to the authority of local norms and values? Given such a diversity of epistemic–juridical–moral spaces, how are events, situations, and experiences to be understood both *within* and *across* the legitimacies of discrete spaces? This problematic of space and spatiality has received (and rightly so) extraordinary theoretical attention in postmodernist theory.⁸³ And as I attempt to conclude this chapter, I would like to turn to the politics of space as empowered by postmodernist theory.

Unlike existential phenomenologists like Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, who invoked time and temporality as radical agents of change, postmodernist theory suggests that temporality is a spatial–discursive matter, and that when we say “time” or “temporality” we do not signify some raw, feral, and preconstituted force, but a very specific structuration of time (nationalist time, women’s time, industrial or pastoral time, etc.) produced discursively into a binding episteme. Foucault’s brilliant notion of *dans le vrai* sums up this idea of truth in history as a matter of spatial subjection. Ideological time is nothing but discursive epistemic space. Such a notion of spatialized time interrogates the unilinear teleology that underlies so much historicism. The sense of space, both physical geopolitical space and in an epistemic sense, cuts across and fragments the idea of identity evolving through history into a plenitude. Heterotopic and disjunctured realities are as much history as the history of rooted locatedness.⁸⁴ As Foucault’s early work attempted so bravely, it is the advocacy of *discontinuity as history* that pits postmodernism against traditional historiographies that privilege the inherence of identity in non-moving origins. Postmodernism thus offers a dire threat to discourses of identity. If identity is nothing but a narrative effect and if, furthermore, narratives themselves are instances of unavoidable cognitive failure, then surely “identity” is neither viable ontologically nor defensible epistemologically. Hence the need in Foucault to “think a different history” and to write the history of the present, which requires different tools, strategies, and a different sense of space. This spatial revolution could be valorized as an entirely formal project (and I would not endorse that option), or better still, empowered as a historical project of imagining different spaces for different histories and knowledges that have been subjugated for too long – constrained to exist in darkness as gaps, holes, and “ineffables” within the body of a dominant historiography.

The Politics of Spatiality

It all depends how and in what interests postmodern spaces are to be imagined and activated. In the name of what principles should postmodern spaces be coordinated? Postmodernism at its best champions the phenomenology of lived experiences and verities against the authority of top-down identity regimes and their deceitful historiographies. These realities need to imagine their own discursive homes; homes that are not as yet real in history. These spaces need to be “imagined” in excess of and in advance of (avant-garde in this sense) actual history in the name of experiences that are real but lacking in legitimacy. Each of these lived realities, such as the ethnic, the diasporic, the gay, the migrant, the subaltern, etc., needs to imagine its own discursive-epistemic space as a form of openness to one another’s persuasion: neither totalized oppression (where, for example, “nationalist time/history” presumes to speak for all other times/histories), nor relativist isolation whereby each history remains an island unto itself.

Given the aegis of the “post,” what kind of new spatiality is to be conceptualized so that different histories can, in and of their very being, be responsive to the realities of other histories? How can the decentered spatial politics of the “post” help us understand the representational identity politics of specific groups and their interconnectedness? By way of responding to these questions, I go to a novel by Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, a work that goes a long way in developing such a dialogic cartographic imaginary.⁸⁵ It is well beyond the scope of this chapter to do justice to the complex perspectives on nationalism and the diaspora that are historicized in the novel. I would merely like to sketch a few of the important formulations on the space–location–identity problematic that Ghosh develops in his novel through a strategy of polyvocality and heteroglossia that is a lot more multi-historical than the kind of metropolitan ventriloquism one finds in the works of Salman Rushdie. Here, in schematic fashion, are some of the insights in the novel:

- 1 Spaces are real precisely because they are imagined.
- 2 The imagination of spaces acknowledges both the need for and the limitations of fixed spaces.
- 3 The transcendence of fixed spaces is motivated globally but executed locally.
- 4 One does not have to be an insider to understand the reality of any specific space; all spaces are reciprocally ek-static/exotopic.
- 5 The meaning of history is a function of narrative.

- 6 All realities are “versions” in their epistemological grounding, but all too “real” in their political effects; hence the need to have “one’s own” version.
- 7 One can, through global empathy and the practice of a “precise imagination,” understand and experience realities other than one’s own.
- 8 Understanding history is a deeply interpretive procedure and not a matter for a fact-based empiricism.
- 9 Histories are never discrete; in fact, when any collectivity looks into a mirror to obtain a reflection of itself, the mirror operates both as a mirror into one’s self and as a window into other selves.
- 10 Distinctions are to be made between a longing for the other’s reality based on violence or exoticism, and a genuine dialogic longing based on possibilities of reciprocal and equal transcendence.⁸⁶
- 11 The deconstruction of the “shadow lines” of nationalist divides is to be achieved by a transnational populist force that calls into question the adequacy of nationalist regimes by way of the authority of lived experiences and reciprocal realities.

My brief focus here will be on the manner in which Ghosh’s postnationalist, traveling text calls for a thoroughgoing critique of existing discourses and regimes of Identity. But unlike a Rushdie text, this very call for deterritorialization is located in multiple histories: colonialism, nationalism, and only then transnationalism or the diaspora. There is no joyous counter-memory at work here; all three histories, each with its different but related center, are made to commingle in a variety of relationships. This substantive critique, to use Lacanian parlance, is interested in the overthrow of the mighty Symbolic by the Imaginary.⁸⁷ Ghosh’s text demonstrates the utter poverty of the regime of the Symbolic, and argues for the need for a different political Imaginary. In a historical sense, the Symbolic stands for the authority of nationalism as interpellated by the nation-state that insists that all other and prior imaginary relationships and identifications (be they gender- and sexuality-based, or class-, religion-, ethnicity-, and community-specific) be mediated and alienated into knowledge by the symbolic authority of nationalism that, like the duplicitous Lacanian phallus, exercises total command precisely because it cannot be *had* by any one group, and yet can perform its representative–pedagogic function with seeming neutrality. Consequently, the symbolic of nationalism is thus turned into a perennial and incorrigible “lack” that can be critiqued perennially, but never transcended in the name of a different alternative.⁸⁸

Like a number of feminists who have refused the notion of such a total interpellation by the Symbolic (in the name of the father), Ghosh, too, rejects the attractions of the negative critique, which in the ultimate analysis prolongs the

same and “enjoys the symptom.” Ghosh’s fiction suggests that there is a pressing need for “imaginary” self-identifications of peoples across the world, and that such a need is by no means naive or pre-theoretical. The “imaginary” compels us to rethink our existing affiliations that have been founded entirely on an epistemology of alienation: the alienation of the Imaginary by the Symbolic.

Perhaps I must hasten here to point out a few things about “imaginary self-identification” so as to anticipate a number of canonical Lacanian objections. First of all, the act of self-identification through the mirror is “imaginary,” and not real, and adulthood is all about the realization that identifications are indeed as imaginary as they are necessary. Secondly, the imaginary realm is necessary so that human beings may measure and evaluate the extent to which they have or have not attained their imaginary self-identity. Without the Imaginary there is no way of appraising the distance between who we are and who we want to be: all that we would be left with is the fetishized authority of the Symbolic accountable to none other than itself. Finally, the Imaginary, unlike the Symbolic, is a historically vulnerable mode of operation and not the “name of the Law.” The mirror, as Ghosh develops it in a fictional world where voices resonate off each other and different worlds “image” one another despite distances in time and space, avoids the error of a dominant universalism based on one’s self-image, as well as the perils of a chic relativism that uses the mirror as a form of self-enclosure. The mirror turned into window becomes a mirror–window dyad that does not allow the relational–historical structure of the Self–Other conjuncture as it operates both within and athwart cultures, to ossify into One Self–Other configuration as warranted by the dominant world order. As a result, the Self–Other problematic is posed as a multi- and inter-historical issue and not as a philosophic issue rooted in the rectitude of the dominant world order. There are “selves” and “others” operating within and across cultures, there are innumerable “comings” and “goings,” “arrivals” and “departures” that refuse to make sense within a single historiography.

The spatial vision offered in *The Shadow Lines* is as imaginary as it is experiential. Between events and their meaning, between peoples and their destinies, a gap has opened up, and it should be the ethic of new historiographies to imagine new spaces that will connect legitimately the world of experience with the language of meaning. These spaces are the spaces of the “post” that are transformative of the status quo. This transformative imagining of relational spaces is equally an attempt to enfranchise different knowledges with historical reference to one another.

This way of imagining the “post” seems to me to be more worthwhile than the fashionable global regionalism/localism that is being promoted currently in the name of the universal commodity form. It is in the interests of a

capital-driven postmodernism to cultivate and support localism in far-off places, only to reclaim these localisms as part of a universally vendible global localism. We cannot also afford to forget, given the asymmetry of power relations, that the West retains the power to decide when the “other” is like “us,” and when not, so that the very cultivation of the “politics of difference and heterogeneity” is subservient to the dominant demand for difference and heterogeneity. It is “access” that postmodernism is after, and consumption is its basic premise. Localism and specificity should be available to the metropolitan gaze so that the remotest spot from the most underdeveloped sector of the third world may begin to satisfy the “epistemological thirst” of the metropolitan center.

This entire chapter has been a tentative effort to separate out the emancipatory possibilities of postmodernism from its colonizing potentialities, and to articulate coalitions between East and West, between First and Third. I have also tried to argue that the valence of postmodernism cannot be decided upon without reference to the accountability of postmodernism to the rest of the world. For postmodernism to have any kind of meaningful travel across the world, it has to present itself to the world as a finite ideology based on specific interests and not as a value-neutral and ideologically free form of knowledge or human condition, and be prepared to face challenges from other knowledges from other parts of the world and consent to have its self-story narrativized by the “others.” This turning of tables (or what Gayatri Spivak has termed suggestively “the anthropologization of the West”) is historically necessary before the time-spaces of the “post” can begin to reinvent and reimagine a truly equal and multilateral universality. Without a change of direction, the “post” will only serve to exacerbate existing asymmetries. Perhaps postmodernism is also post-Western in ways not available to the metropolitan consciousness.⁸⁹

In the words of Samir Amin, as he “imagines” a more egalitarian universal society, such a “society will be superior to ours on all levels only if it is worldwide, and only if it establishes a genuine universalism, based on contributions of everyone, Westerners as well as those whose historical course has been different.”⁹⁰ A universalism liberated from dominance, and captive no more to the ventriloquism of the West.⁹¹