

# Staging the Politics of Difference: Homi Bhabha's Critical Literacy

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Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha sees writing, composition, as a “highly political” activity. Writing, defined in its broadest sense, is closely linked to the acquisition of agency. This is why it is important that we not treat writing as a simple medium of communication in which there is some transparent mediation between “already pre-given subjects, pre-given objects, and a preconstituted *mise en scène*.” For Bhabha, writing constitutes, in a dialogic way, new relationships among these elements and is thus a “continually revisionary,” perhaps even “revolutionary,” activity. And, of course, the connection between writing and agency leads to issues of critical literacy. Bhabha believes that critical literacy is intimately connected to the question of democratic representation. For example, he says in the interview below that “literacy is absolutely crucial for a kind of ability to be responsible to yourself, to make your own reading within a situation of political and cultural choice.” Yet, at the same time we must be cautious not to treat literacy as a panacea or to fetishize it. As Bhabha points out, racism often is the “leading ideology” of the most literate people. Thus, critical literacy in and of itself guarantees nothing, but it is an essential step toward agency, self-representation, and an effective democracy. Consequently, the kind of work we do in composition is extremely important socially, and more institutions need to understand that the work of composition is less about linguistic competence than it is about critical intervention in the world.

The acquisition of agency and critical literacy is linked to another subject central to Bhabha's project: the role of theory. Theory enables people, both in the academy and in the public domain, to “break the continuity and the consensus of common sense”—to break it and to break *into* it. As a kind of critical literacy itself, theory helps us “interrupt the dominant and dominating strategies of generalization within a cultural or communicative or interpretational community.” That is, it helps us challenge assumptions, preconceptions, fixed notions; it helps us “deal with processes, subjects, or objects in transition,” not as static entities. For example, postcolonial theory allows us to break into the mastering dis-

courses of sententiousness and colonialism and reminds us that “what was some people’s modernity was somebody else’s colonialism.” It also helps us see boundaries not simply as “the space between one nation and another,” but as a “kind of internal liminal space.” The awareness of sententiousness that critical theory provides underscores, again, the importance of the job of compositionists, for we both help students to “read” the sententiousness in their lives and to “write” from a position of agency. We are helping them, in Bhabha’s words, to look “beyond” the sentence and to learn that “other logics” of signification exist and that “the sentence can sometimes sentence us” to a particular language form. Bhabha does caution, however, that just as we must not fetishize literacy, we must not permit the “arrogance of theory” to settle into its own mastering discourses.

Perhaps no other subject is as central to Bhabha’s work as the question of cultural difference. First, it is important not to essentialize and therefore homogenize a culture or group simply because its members appear to share certain traits or traditions. Cultural difference, according to Bhabha, is a “particular constructed discourse.” Also, we should not conceive of a cultural group independently of other types of cultural difference. Bhabha reiterates that “what we think of as the politics of difference, what we think of as the politics of multiculturalism, what we think of as the politics of new social movements do not allow us to think the subject of any one of those margins—race, gender, class, culture, geopolitical location, or generation—exclusively.” That is, cultural location is always an articulation of various intersecting and often contesting positions, and essentializing difference or isolating it from other positionalities is counterproductive. Race, class, gender and other forms of difference are always being “constituted and negotiated in a cross-boundary process.” But more importantly, the problem of cultural difference is not that various cultures exist in the world; it is that difference becomes a site of “contestation, abuse, insult, and discrimination” when “something is being challenged about power or authority.” Cultural difference becomes problematic when it becomes linked with “the redistribution of goods between cultures, or the funding of cultures, or the emergence of minorities or immigrants in a situation of resources.” Only at this point, says Bhabha, is cultural difference produced, and it is at this point that difference leads to a politics of discrimination. Of course, the typical response to difference is containment. Racial minorities, for example, are forced to represent themselves as subnations, and in that context they do not threaten the dominant hegemony; however, if they “seep in, disseminate in, and change and translate what is seen to be the dominant lines of the transmission of cultural tradition,” they immediately become a threat. Much of Bhabha’s work, including important parts of this interview, is concerned with these dynamics of cultural difference and with finding ways that the subaltern *can* have voice, *can* have representation.

Bhabha posits that one way to understand the politics of difference better is to learn more about the role of affect in the dynamics of power and social marginality. He claims that “the structures of feeling and the structures of affect are radically devalued in the language of political effectivity.” The discourse of political action has, according to Bhabha, concentrated “too much on questions of interest and too little on questions of political passion.” Because the politics of difference have such a “deep and strong affective charge,” it is necessary to “understand the part that emotions, affects, play in the construction of community politics.” Emotions such as anger and hatred are “substantial,” not empty adjectives. Consequently, Bhabha intends to begin looking closely at the role of emotions in politics in his future work.

Bhabha professes a “great respect and desire for fine writing,” and he speaks nostalgically of his attempts at creative writing during his college days at the University of Bombay. His fascination for word choice and carefully crafted prose has carried over into his theoretical writing. He sees himself as doing theory “*by* doing a certain kind of writing.” He comments, “To me, the idea has to shape, enact the rhetoric. There is no concept, I feel, that can stand on its own with great clarity if the writing is workmanlike or clumsy.” To Bhabha, writing is “the staging of an idea, and I use that term with its full theatrical and operatic and dramatic possibilities.” In our view, the interview below provides another important stage for him to perform his theory in a way that will be useful and informative to us all.

- Q. Much of your work deals with the centrality of discourse and the importance of writing, be it in the “inscription or writing of identity,” the “writing of the hybrid colonial subject,” or the writing of the narrative of nationness. You yourself have written a substantial body of works for both scholarly publications and more public forums such as *New Statesman and Society* and *Artforum*. Do you consider yourself to be “a writer”?
- A. Yes, very much so. In fact, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Bombay, it always surprised me how completely absorbed I would be when I wrote my rather small and worthless poems. I was entirely enchanted by the form and the activity. Somehow the agony in “creative writing” (as they call it) seemed much sweeter than the agony in theoretical writing. It just surprised me how completely absorbing it was to decide to use one word rather than another. I wrote rather short poems; that was the form I worked in. The consequence of this for my present work is that I’m very fascinated by doing theory *by* doing a certain kind of writing. To me, the idea has to shape, enact the rhetoric. There is no concept, I feel, that can stand on its own with great clarity if the writing is workmanlike or clumsy. So to me the writing of the theory, the writing

of the concept, is very very important. Quite often I sort of inspire myself by starting out—even my theoretical, conceptual pieces—by reading works that inspire me to a certain fineness of expression. One of the things I often do is to read some completely unconnected work before I start writing, most often poetry. For example, I often read W.H. Auden, who is a great favorite of mine, or I read Robert Lowell—just as a matter of practice, just as a sort of ritual to begin writing a piece, even though it has nothing to do with the piece.

So, I have a great respect and desire for fine writing. Often I will use a word that stretches a point just because I feel that it takes the thought somewhat further than it may need to go, but the suggestiveness of that word both enacts a kind of finer sense and sentiment, even though it would have been easier to close it down with a more workmanlike word that would have done the job and nailed it down. But I prefer to keep that open. I remember Toni Morrison saying to me once, “Writing is all.” If you can’t do it in the writing and through the writing, if you can’t do this whole kind of revisionary history of slavery and sexuality that she’s involved in in some of her work, if you can’t do it in and through the actual writing, you can’t do it by giving people ideas or thoughts. The two things really have to work together. That is what I try to do. In a way, writing to me is the staging of an idea, and I use that term with its full theatrical and operatic and dramatic possibilities, in the way in which the concept might be the armature or the architecture of the idea.

- Q. In “The Postcolonial and the Postmodern,” you discuss Barthes’ attempt to think “outside the sentence.” You write, “The hierarchy and the subordinations of the sentence are replaced by the definitive discontinuity of the text, and what emerges is a form of writing that Barthes describes as ‘writing aloud.’” You continue, “If you seek simply the sententious or the exegetical, you will not grasp the hybrid moment outside the sentence—not quite experience, not yet concept; part dream, part analysis; neither signifier nor signified. This intermediate space between theory and practice disrupts the disciplinary semiological demand to enumerate all the languages within earshot.” This is an elegant theoretical intervention, and it is useful on a number of levels; however, those of us in rhetoric and composition are charged with helping students to “be in the sentence,” to compose clear, sententious prose. Do you believe that teachers of writing should problematize the dynamics of discourse by introducing discussions of sententiousness?
- A. Yes, I think so. Sententiousness is a particular ideology of rhetoric, and it has a particular history. Eighteenth-century sententiousness, for instance, was a very dominant form. It was related to various discourses like the law or political edicts. It is part of a rhetoric of governance and authority. So, I think some awareness of what sententiousness is—as a production, as a process of communication, its conditions—is very

important. I also think that it is very important to teach students, people, to write in a way that is clear, to communicate what it is that they want to say effectively so that they can feel represented. There is no totality of representation, but I think people should feel—in the sentence, if you will, in the language—that they can represent themselves. I know that this links to the question of literacy, which is a very important subject that we'll discuss later. However, like all pedagogical forms, I think sententiousness must also keep open for itself the possibility that the place where the sentence falls, where it will be taken up again, where the pause occurs in the sententiousness, where there is a hesitation within it, is not just a disturbance. It's not just an abnormality of the sententiousness, but it could be the place for resistance to its authority, for the reelaboration of its object of attention.

What's important to me is the possibility of seeing the borders of sententiousness as porous, not in some simple dyadic form in which sententiousness is the authoritative and nonsententiousness is the marginal or the subaltern or the resistance, not at all like this—but to continually see sententiousness as transforming. As Henry James once said, these are forms of relationship that really don't end anywhere; sententiousness is itself an emergence. Understanding that it is itself not an origin but an emergence is very important because then one is open to other residual and emergent and marginal forms of meaning-making or communication or subject identification. So I think my suggestion that we should look in a way beyond the sentence is not to say, as is often said now in a kind of flippant way, that we should move beyond rationalism or something of that kind, or rationality. Rather, it is to say that there are other logics of signification to which we should be open, and the sentence can sometimes sentence us, in the imprisoning sense, to the kind of prison house of a particular language form.

- Q. "The Commitment to Theory" represents a carefully elaborated view of the interaction of politics, rhetoric, and theory. You write, "Political positions are not simply identifiable as progressive or reactionary, bourgeois or radical, prior to the act of *critique engagée*, or outside the terms and conditions of their discursive address. It is in this sense that the historical moment of political action must be thought of as part of the history of the form of its writing. This is not to state the obvious, that there is no knowledge—political or otherwise—outside representation." It is to suggest that "the 'political' as a form of calculation and strategic action dedicated to social transformation" must acknowledge "the force of writing, its metaphoricity and its rhetorical discourse, as a productive matrix which defines the 'social' and makes it available as an objective of and for action." Some compositionists may understand this view as a confirmation that writing is *the* central political act and therefore that writing instruction is an important form of political

activism. Do you place any limits on the political effectivity of writing (or, for that matter, on the field of composition itself), and, if so, what are they?

A. Before I answer, let me just interject that as somebody who, as you quite rightly detected, is very keen on writing, I would like to compliment you on the form of the writing of these questions. I had the experience when reading them that each question anticipates a thought that will develop in the next one. They really move very well, and the interconnections are not only serial; they go in many directions. They are very finely cast.

To return to your question, I certainly do believe that writing is a political form. By *writings*—if I might use that word—and *inscription*, I'm not only talking about printed writing or writing as we usually understand it. I'm talking about the possibility of making a determining mark on a surface. It may be a social surface; it may be a visual screen. I'm talking about writing in the widest sense: a kind of ordering of things or ordering of communication in one way in the context of a wider contingent structure. That's what I'm talking about. Certain forms of ritual could be inscribed in that way; certain modes of political organization could be inscribed in that way too. Having said that, let me say that I do feel that even in the more narrow sense writing is—and composition is—a highly political activity. It's a political activity. There is a politics of instruction, a politics of composition. Too often writing—in the broadest sense—is treated as a communicational medium where the subjects of that communication are constituted prior to the writing, where the objects of that communication are also constituted prior to that writing, and where the task of writing is seen as transparently mediating between already pre-given subjects, pre-given objects, and a preconstituted *mise en scène*. My interest is in suggesting that the agency of writing actually constitutes in a dialogic way new relationships between elements that may or may not be pre-given such that the pre-giveness is questioned, the preconstitutedness is questioned. Of course, there are certain conditions, certain determinants that precede a particular act of communication, or writing, or mediation; but what happens in and through the writing is the reconjugation of those given conditions, and that is what I believe to be the effectivity of writing as a kind of agency, as a performance, as a practice, and as a process which is too little understood.

I chose here to talk here about metaphoricity because metaphoricity is one of those even more widely recognized moments when you have to stop and think where the writing act is going, what it is trying to constitute beyond what it is in some transparent way saying—the doubleness of the inscriptive act. So, I do think the activity of writing is, in that sense, a continually revisionary, and in some ways revolutionary, activity. I don't mean "revolutionary" with a capital *R*, not in some sort of

political-adventurist sense, as I could be understood to mean. I'm just saying that it's a continual movement. In the "Minority Maneuvers and Unsettled Negotiations" essay in *Critical Inquiry*, it was my purpose to talk about political movement as movement, and indeed writing itself as a kind of movement.

I just want to add that we've talked about this active and even proactive—indeed, even revisionary—sense of writing. And I've tried to think, in the widest sense, of what politics might be conceived in that way. I just want to add that writing, therefore, is itself a mediation. It's not a medium; it's a mediation. Critics, philosophers, and political thinkers are so easily able to conceive of the mediatory nature of individuals, for instance, or of a particular kind of institutional form. But in a way, writing, which scribbles over all these things, subtends them—writing in the widest sense as the inscription of a mark, the making of an order—is somehow relegated to a transparency, as if it is following on from positions, objects, subjects already constituted. So it's this that I'm trying to get at in that passage you highlighted.

Q. You comment that you have tried to "erase" the popular binarism between theory and politics, the intellectual and activist, and you say that, it is a sign of "political maturity" to accept that "there are many forms of political writing whose different effects are obscured when they are divided between the 'theoretical' and the 'activist.'" It is not as if the leaflet involved in the organization of a strike is short on theory, while a speculative article on the theory of ideology ought to have more practical examples or applications. They are both forms of discourse and to that extent they produce rather than reflect their objects of reference. The difference between them lies in their operational qualities." Of course, such a position enters into the larger debate over the efficacy of theoretical work in the public domain, whether critical theory can ever be truly "activist" or achieve ends in the world beyond the academy. What do you see as the role of theory in the world outside the academy, and what are the "operational qualities" that distinguish the work of theory from that of other kinds of writing?

A. I see that the section you have chosen is from "The Commitment to Theory," and I think it took me some time to write that. Let me just say, if I can cut to the bone, that I think that the operational quality of theory in the public domain is to break the continuity and the consensus of common sense. It is to break it and to break into it. Too often, the breaking into common sense has been represented as some deconstructive work of ideological critique or symptomatic reading which then takes that commonsensical false-consciousness or ideological perspective and puts a kind of carapace of conceptual order around it. I can see both historically and philosophically why that should happen and when it has happened. In the last two decades, for instance, the very useful and

brilliant work of Louis Althusser, not so much in itself but in his followers, produced precisely that kind of response. People looked “theoretically” for the fissures in common sense, and then instead of actually occupying those fissures and seeing where else it will get you (which is what I think the work of theory is: if your ontology or your genealogy is a fissured one, then where else will it get you, and how would you work through it?), what they did was to pour the cement of their own theoretical position into the fissure and cover it up. I have always felt uncomfortable with that, even when I didn’t have the theoretical language to deal with it. I’m now talking of seminars in the mid to late ’70s in Oxford when there wasn’t any theoretical work except through the brilliance and the generosity of Terry Eagleton—one seminar a week where we would go to discuss such matters. But even at that time, it felt for me conceptually that this filling up of the fissure, detecting it and then filling it up, was not the appropriate thing. For me it’s always been a matter of asking, “If you actually now reposition yourself in the fissure as a form of knowledge, as a mode of signification, as a place of enunciation, where would you get to? What would you do? What possibilities would be opened up for you?” Not to come with your own already constituted resolution to the fissure. Of course, you come with a whole lot of reconstituted baggage, but the whole point is how can your baggage be thrown around? How can it be challenged by the fissure?

That’s why I say again that the use of theory must be both to intervene in the continuity and consensus of common sense and also to interrupt the dominant and dominating strategies of generalization within a cultural or communicative or interpretational community precisely where that community wants to say in a very settled and stentorian way: this is the general and this is the case; this is the principle and this is its empirical application as a form of proof and justification. I think that the importance of theory is to unsettle the complacency of those relations. If I might speak both theoretically and figuratively at once, the role of theory is precisely that kind of alienation and distanciation that, say, Brecht talks about. It’s also, in another kind of philosophical register (and I’m being translative here), the snatching of the moment that flashes out in a situation of danger or emergency that Benjamin talks about. I want to give you a third example in which theory does its work: it is often seen to be an applicative or bridging work. In some ways it is, but it’s bridging in the sense that Heidegger talks about. Until you throw the bridge across the river, you don’t quite know what the banks are. You don’t know what you’re calculating. And I think theory works in that way.

There is a second emphasis in your question, which has to do with the operational nature of the theoretical, the operational qualities that we need to distinguish. For me, the purpose of the theoretical—which I said a moment ago is part of this intervention into the consensus and



continuum of common sense—is to make us aware of what it would be to deal with processes, subjects, or objects in transition. Transitionality has been for me a guiding problem. That’s exactly what it is, a problem: how to deal with the transitional. And various things that I’ve emphasized in the construction of social reality, the construction of subject formation, and the construction of meaning—things like ambivalence—are to me important and become subjects for theoretical speculation because they have within them this agonistic, unresolved moment of transition. They also demand a certain kind of ethical responsibility to negotiate that. Theory has been important for me operationally in these ways.

Q. You write in *The Location of Culture*, “I have chosen to demonstrate the importance of the space of writing, and the problematic of address, at the very heart of the liberal tradition because it is here that the myth of the ‘transparency’ of the human agent and the reasonableness of political action is most forcefully asserted. Despite the more radical political alternatives of the right and the left, the popular, common-sense view of the place of the individual in relation to the social is still substantially thought and lived in ethical terms moulded by liberal beliefs. What the attention to rhetoric and writing reveals is the discursive ambivalence that makes ‘the political’ possible.” This view suggests that the crucial function of the textual and the rhetorical is to make political struggle possible by drawing attention to discursive ambivalence.

A. Yes, I think that’s a fair reading, but let’s flesh it out. What address does is to draw your attention—if I may be figurative—not only to the place where the sign emerges in a particular discourse or a particular speech act, but how it flies and then falls at a point of relocation. That’s what address is—how it moves from one space to another. Now, ambivalence is very important in order to contest forms of rationalism (not rationality but rationalism) that want to ascribe certain kinds of intentionality and achieved intentionality, as somehow flying through this transparent and immaterial medium. My emphasis on address is always to suggest that where the sign emerges and where it ends up may have incommensurable and contradictory terrains of inscription at either end. So to that extent, where address addresses the problem of the construction of social meaning or the ascription of a person or peoples, and so on, the important thing about writing and indeed the ambivalent structure of the sign in its emergence and its destination is to be aware that politically we are continually constructing the constituencies that we address, just as we are constructing the objects of value that we are transmitting. This, therefore, does not enable you to give a universal and transhistorical value to things like virtue or tolerance or secularism—or indeed the sacred. I think this makes you each time reinterrogate, because you are constructing the constituency and, indeed, the consistency of language and thought which you are then pointing to digitally.

Q. In “The Commitment to Theory,” you effectively challenge critical theorists (particularly materialists) to avoid the kind of political idealism in which theory merely develops and augments an a priori political principle or commitment—or, what you call “identikit political idealism.” The language of critique is effective, you argue, not because it keeps separate the terms of opposition, “but to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither one nor the other*, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics.” The opening up of this space of translation is a sign that “history is *happening*—within the pages of theory.” Here you offer a view of theory that is more rhetorical than that of identikit political idealism. You claim it is “deeper” and more “dangerous.” What makes the passage of history in theory more dangerous?

A. When I used the term “passage of history in theory,” I wanted to suggest three ways of reading the notion of passage. First, “passage” more spatially, as in opening up a space. Second, “passage” as a kind of movement, as in a rite of passage. A rite of passage is a way not only of thinking transformation but of thinking the transition that is involved in making the transformation, and I want to make a distinction there. And then I also want to think about “passage” as a piece of inscription, as we might say a passage in a book, which also has many of those meanings: it opens up something; it takes you from somewhere to somewhere; and also, in itself, it holds you in that moment of transition. So there are three ways of thinking of passage in that phrase in *The Location of Culture*. My interest there relates to something we talked about earlier, which is to unsettle the kind of conceptual mastery of what is understood to be theory, as some kind of x-raying mechanism that will take you to the bare bones of a situation, on the one hand; but also, to contest the authority that is given very often to historical event, as if it is somehow there and it is there preceding our theoretical attention, that when we attend to it we attend to it already given an established reality. What I stress is really the need to open a passage between those two in order to make either of those positions untenable, and my language is somewhat Benjaminian, particularly from the essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” where he says that the important thing about translation is to focus on the continuum of transformation, all those small micromovements which if you only look at the large arch, and if you only look at the dominant passage of history, you will miss. It’s those micromovements that happen *in the midst of* moments of change, of transformation, that I think need to be attended to, because if you don’t attend to them, the temptation is always to fall into large claims about

identity and difference, not to see the negotiatory strategies by which positions, or persons, or cultures get constituted. It's for that reason that I think such a passage, in the various meanings that I've given to the term, must be kept open as a way between, or in order not to allow the arrogance of theory—or, indeed, the arrogance of history—to settle into their own mastering discourses.

Q. One of the most important theoretical innovations you offer is the distinction you draw between cultural diversity and cultural difference. You say that "Cultural diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs; held in a time-frame of relativism it gives rise to liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity. Cultural diversity is also the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in the utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique of collective identity." To trouble, if not displace, this notion of cultural diversity and the liberal and left-progressive projects of multiculturalism it underwrites, you suggest a rather complex notion of "cultural difference" as a kind of "adding to" that "doesn't add up." Would you explain more specifically what you mean by cultural difference?

A. Let me start with a rather abstract formulation which I'll then try to flesh out. You take the "adding to without adding up" from "DissemiNation," and in that same essay I also say that we should never simply conjoin or elide the difference between the repetition of the symbol and the iteration of the sign. (This relates back to what you were talking about in terms of address.) Quite often, the difference of cultures is in fact read on the similarity of certain signs that work their ways through cultures, as, indeed, particular cultures are unified by finding—through the concept of tradition, for instance—similarities over time, as the phrase has it. My concern is that cultural difference is constituted in a kind of agonistic and unresolved tension between those two things, the moment of recognition where a community or a culture recognizes itself in some generalizing practice. But then, there has to be the other work, which is, however, that the particular practice—it could be a practice of inheritance; it could be a practice to do with a certain ritual—affects different members of that culture very differently and, indeed, in the translation from the general more pedagogical level to the performative level, there can be oppositionality within that culture.

So to me cultural difference is the awareness that first of all you have the problem of difference not because there are many cultures, preconstituted cultures. The notion that cultural diversity is a problem because there are already many different cultures is not the reason why you have cultural difference. Cultural difference is a particular constructed discourse at a time when something is being challenged about

power or authority. At that point, a particular cultural trait or tradition—the smell of somebody’s food, the color of their skin, the accent that they speak with, their particular history, be it Irish or Indian or Jewish—becomes the site of contestation, abuse, insult, and discrimination. Cultural difference is not a natural emanation of the fact that there are different cultures in the world. It’s a much more problematic and sophisticated reproduction of a ritual, a habit, a trait, a characteristic. That reproduction has to bear a whole set of significations, tensions, anxieties. And it becomes the sign of those tensions and anxieties. Cultural difference is not difficult, if you like, because there are many diverse cultures; it is because there is some particular issue about the redistribution of goods between cultures, or the funding of cultures, or the emergence of minorities or immigrants in a situation of resources—where resource allocation has to go—or the construction of schools and the decision about whether the school should be bilingual or trilingual or whatever. It is at that point that the problem of cultural difference is produced. So, it’s really an argument against the naturalization of the notion of culture.

Q. In your discussion of what the prefix “post” in “postcolonialism” means, you write: “Postcoloniality . . . is a salutary reminder of the persistent ‘neo-colonial’ relations within the ‘new’ world order and the multinational division of labour. . . . Beyond this, however, postcolonial critique bears witness to those countries and communities constituted . . . ‘otherwise than modernity.’ Such cultures of a *postcolonial contra-modernity* may be contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in contention with it, resistant to its oppressive, assimilationist technologies; but they also deploy the cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to ‘translate,’ and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of . . . modernity.” Postcoloniality, in your view, is clearly neither another school of criticism, nor a mere extension of postmodernism as the celebration of the fragmentation of the grand narratives of post-enlightenment rationalism, which you call a “profoundly parochial enterprise.” What is striking here, and what we would like you to explain further, is your view of postcolonialism as a spatial and temporal project that opens up an intervening space and revisionary time in modernity.

A. This is a very large question, so I’ll have to restrict my answer somewhat. I want to follow very closely your suggestion that I should locate the notion of the postcolonial in and as a spatial and temporal project, and, in addition to that, as a revisionary temporal and spatial project. Let me say, then, that I think it is the responsibility—theoretical, ethical, aesthetic, political—of what we may call postcolonial discourse (which is a term that has its own problems) to remind us that what was some people’s modernity was somebody else’s colonialism. Therefore, I would say to those who suggest that the word *postcolonial* bucks the responsibility

of a word like *neocolonial* that these terms are not exclusive; the one does not obliterate the other. The usefulness of that ambiguous and ambivalent “post” before “colonial” is that it draws attention to this anteriority, this early emergence when modernity is emerging in and through a very complex negotiation with its own colonial double life. That’s the point, that at the point at which the notion of universality as an ethical and political value is emerging, at that very moment a discourse in the name of universality—a discourse of discrimination, of marginalization, of the negation of autonomy—is being produced by those very cultures themselves in the colonial site. So, I think “the postcolonial” not only refers us to indigenous agencies in the colonial world, it also gives us a sense of how western modernity has its own colonial anteriority and not the kind of claims to origin that it claims for itself. Very often modernity in its desire for democracy might make a claim to some Greek ideal, but I think it should also, at that point, make a claim to the colonial reality in relation to which it has elaborated its own modernity, whether that modernity be the notion of nationhood or civility or civil society or civic society or civic virtue.

So to me the most important thing about the postcolonial project is to make one aware of the global and transnational history of those very early moments of modernity and the various obdurate, incommensurable, and aporetic tensions that modernity has to become ethically and politically aware of (and that postmodernity also has to become ethically and politically aware of) in claiming some discursive or political or spatial authority for itself. That’s absolutely crucial, and that’s why the idea that people who talk about the postcolonial somehow neglect the very important neocolonial social and political arrangements of the contemporary world—the international division of labor, the inequities of the international monetary fund, and so on—are somewhat missing the point, because first of all, they’re not exclusive. And secondly, it would enhance such a reading of neocolonialism or neocoloniality if it were able to date the emergence of the history of modernity to that place that postcolonialism is trying to indicate. So I think that this is really the key to that question.

- Q. Hybridity is a central concept in your critical project. You write, “Hybridity . . . is no jejune post-Modern lark, nor is it simply my invention. It comes from [James] Baldwin’s profound meditation on the unique power and pathos of the American color line.” “Hybridity is not . . . about new ‘alloys’ conceived in an amoral state of historical amnesia; it is not about cultural appropriation or assimilation subsumed in a celebration of citizenship. Hybridity, as Baldwin testifies, is a form of social and psychic recognition; it is an awareness of the graftings, transitions, and translations through which we define our present and articulate an ethics equal to the way we live now.” Would you explain how hybridity, as a form of social

and psychic recognition, is not assimilable to a liberal politics of recognition but instead must disrupt it and its nondifferential concept of cultural time?

- A. Let me just take us back to a question you asked me earlier that really prepares us for this particular problem. I want to remind ourselves of what I said about writing and communication and discourse. The important issue is that there's a similarity here, in this respect: that just as the notion of inscription does not allow there to be a preconstituted subject (that doesn't mean that people are not there prior to the speech act; it just means that in and through the performance of the speech act, those positionalities have acquired different significances), in the same way, when we talk about hybridity, as opposed to the politics of recognition, we are making a similar distinction. The politics of recognition assumes—whether it's in the Hegelian master-slave model or in any other model of a kind of mutual culturally relativistic recognition—that there are these kinds of in-place subjects in and through whom the process of recognition happens. The question of hybridization is precisely to draw attention to the way in which the process of negotiation is continually placing and replacing the members of that act of cultural or social or political interaction. First of all, the "subject" of hybridization is a different subject than the subject of the politics of recognition. The subject of hybridization is an enunciatory subject.

In the enunciatory subject—which is a subject in performance and process, the notion of what is to be authorized, what is to be deauthorized, what difference will be signified, what similarity or similitude will be articulated—these things are continually happening in the very process of discourse-making or meaning-making. They are not subjects which are already given to that process of enunciation. The most important thing about the process of enunciation as a kind of borderline concept is that it is aware that it is through the process of enunciation that the borders between objects or subjects or practices are being constituted. Therefore, it really does contest most of the liberal theories of individualization as being the process of subject formation, and it attacks precisely the punctuality of the notion of a liberal individual subject. That means that there is no naivete in the construction of the liberal individualist subject. It's not as if (as often it is represented as being) it's some kind of completely ahistorical conceit in an ahistorical and universal way; it's not even *that* that bugs me particularly or that I find difficult. What I do find difficult is that somehow that subject is always on time. Its priority always depends upon it being absolutely timely, so timely in fact that its universality is each time affirmed. Its position prior to the process of enunciation is each time valorized. It's that punctuality of the subject that the concept of enunciation, which is central to the process of hybridization, contests.

If you think for just a moment about some influential theoretical images of the subject, you'll find that each of them contests punctuality. For instance, if you think about the Althusserian concept of interpellation as one very popular notion of the way of thinking about the subject in contemporary theory (in cultural studies certainly, although Althusser is no longer in vogue, but much of Jameson, much of Eagleton, much of a whole materialist Marxist cultural studies group still works around that subject willy-nilly), you have in the structure of interpellation, in the interpellated subject, the contest to what I've called individualist punctuality by saying that the subject by its very nature is overdetermined or displaced. Althusser has to, therefore, make his move toward Lacan to construct that subject, Freud and Lacan. Now of course, the limitation of that is dictated much more by a desire to enshrine a kind of structuralist Marxism where the subject can't also be terribly errant and in movement. The subject has to be fixed. So what he gives with one hand he takes away with the other. He gives this notion of overdetermination and displacement by his move toward Lacan and toward the unconscious, but then he pulls back at that point and says, however, "As you know, the subject is not an individualist subject; it's a produced subject of displacement, an overdetermined subject, but it is the subject of the Lacanian imaginary." By making that move, he takes the subject out of the flux and gives it a kind of punctuality, the imaginary relation being the most stable of all the relations of identification in Lacan. So, what I'm saying is not that we've got to move from the one kind of subject to another kind of subject, that we've got to move from timeliness to eternal belatedness. If we choose between those things, then there is no real choice; all we're doing is moving from one to another.

I think, therefore, that the reason why ambivalence is important as a theoretical idea is that we've got to continually calculate the tensions between these positions. That's why I've always been opposed to the way of doing cultural theory or doing theory in general that is always looking for more and more accurate notions of contradictions, subject, or whatever: "We no longer want the Lacanian one, so now we've got to do the Lacanian/Kantian version of it. If only we could get the subject right, if only we could get the object right, and so on." I've always been opposed to that. It's this opening up of the question of the subject, by opening up the question of its nonpunctual evocation, that's important. That's why I've been so insistent upon raising questions of disjunctive temporality at the point of enunciation. That's why to me the question of cultural difference is not the problem of there being diverse cultures and that diversity produces the difference. It is that each time you want to make a judgment about a culture or about a certain element within a certain culture, in the context of some kind of social and political condition that puts pressure on that judgment, you are standing at that

point in this disjunctive difference-making site. And you cannot avoid that this is where, in that disjunctive and slippery and problematic terrain, your foot cannot fixedly grow.

Q. In “The Postcolonial and the Postmodern” you write, “The postcolonial perspective forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive ‘liberal’ sense of cultural community. It insists that cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity. Questions of race and cultural difference overlay issues of sexuality and gender and overdetermine the social alliances of class and democratic socialism. The time for ‘assimilating’ minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has dramatically passed. The very language of cultural community needs to be rethought from a postcolonial perspective.” Is the liberal concept of community inherently flawed, and, if so, what do you think of critical projects, such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s, that propose a hegemonic strategy for the left that does not renounce liberal-democratic ideology but attempts to deepen and expand it?

A. The answer to that question must rest on what we understand by “deepening and expanding.” That’s the issue here. Much of what Chantal is developing is a kind of agonistic democracy, and this is something for which I have a good deal of time. So in terms of that difference, I don’t so much want to define it against what they’re doing because there are many ideas that we share, a whole history of thinking that we share. But I think that what I’m concerned about is the basis on which consent and consensuality as a guiding principle of liberal community puts into place a particular notion of what a subject is, which is where I think I would differ. Another area is what culture is as signification, which I’ve talked about in terms of enunciation; it is very difficult to accommodate that notion of the disjunctive ground of the enunciative. Liberal communities can deal with contradiction and, indeed, need contradiction to test the mettle of tolerance. That they absolutely need. But can they deal with the disjunctive? Can they deal with the aporetic? Can they deal with ambivalence in the way in which I’ve suggested it? Isn’t there a tendency each time to deal with difference or tolerance by preconstituting communities and giving each community its authenticity and integrity and saying that difference is actually integrally and expressively contained within each one we’re choosing between, and between them we choose with various criteria? But *my* thinking of an enunciative community starts out very differently. The whole basis on which constitution takes place is different, so I think that this is another way in which the notion of the liberal community in my view would be different. Finally, I think that really within liberal theories of community—and I realize that I’m biting off a large chunk and trying to be succinct about it—there isn’t often adequate attention given to the fact that the group as an agent cannot be



conceived of as a group of individuals, that we need another way of thinking about what a group interest or a group demand is that does not simply conceive of groupishness as a position negotiated among individuals.

I think that what I'm saying would need us to complicate the whole notion of group identification in and through a more psychoanalytic way of thinking. So, theoretically I can see what needs to be done, but I'm not, at this point, in a position to say that if we started thinking like that, how it would cash out in terms of very important policy-driven, practical, political considerations. It would be like asking, if you raised the question of the phantasmatic, fantasy, social fantasy, in the construction of a particular political position, how would a court recognize that? Or how would a policy institution recognize that? That's the question I'm not entirely clear on at the moment. But I think it's for those reasons that I would say that what I'm suggesting would require not so much a deepening of the liberal ideology as it would a necessary erasure of it, in the Derridean sense. And by that I do mean—and I think you have highlighted to me something that I knew but had not seen demonstrated—that among the various theories and positions and forms of discourse that I have been in conversation with, right from the very beginning I seem to have been more or less naively in conversation with the history of liberalism, something that you really have made me aware of in studying your questions and thinking of a response to them.

Q. In "The Commitment to Theory" you offer an important view on the concept of hegemony, saying that the work of hegemony is "itself the process of iteration and differentiation. It depends on the production of alternative or antagonistic images that are always produced side by side and in competition with each other. It is this side-by-side nature, this partial presence, or metonymy of antagonism, and its effective significations, that give meaning (quite literally) to a politics of struggle *as the struggle of identifications* and the war of positions. It is therefore problematic to think of it as sublated into an image of the collective will." Doesn't the work of hegemony and political struggle also involve an attempt to fix and pre-fix images, meanings, and values and thereby subsume and sublimate social antagonism?

A. Yes it does, but within a general landscape of the iterative, within a general landscape of the contingent. It's a different thing to think about fixation within an economy of iteration and contingency than to think of fixation within a more universalistic or a more communicational or expressive model of the subject or of meaning. It's that the question of hegemonic fixation as I'm suggesting depends upon the profound liminality and instability of the question of representation. That's what we've been talking about in trying to move away from the notion of the subject of recognition toward the subject of enunciation. That's where

we've been moving, and I think rather neatly; and, therefore, I feel that fixation has a very different value when you see it in the trammels of representation as opposed to if you see it as the destiny and the teleology of representation.

Your very interesting question also made me think of something else. There is a kind of narrative or image of power—which has also been one of the specters, the ghosts we've been dealing with in our discussion—that somehow assumes that power works because somewhere prior to a particular exercise of authority it has been fixed. It works because it has already been institutionalized; it's been prefixed in a way. And I think that to some extent, of course, this is true. You enter into a negotiation only because there is a disequilibrium or an inequality. But I think how you negotiate depends very much on how you read the weight and sedimentation of that prior fixing or prefixing of power or authority or domination. It's to try and rethink the context of that prefixing, to suggest that this prefixing may also be disarticulated or unfixed, that I've always suggested lets us think about the moment of prefixing as a kind of anteriority that does itself in the present—in the moment when you're negotiating—produce its kind of anteriority. That's how I also want to try and rethink the *pre*; the *pre* is not a givenness, but an anteriority.

- Q. Much of your work insists on the importance of interrogating the mode of representation of otherness. In "The Other Question," for example, you write, "An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness." But fixity, as you remind us, is a paradoxical mode of representation: "it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition." As you point out, one of the principal strategies of fixity is the stereotype, which "is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation" that denies the play of difference. The consequence is that the stereotype "impedes the circulation and articulation of [for example] the signifier 'race' as anything other than its fixity as racism." What strategies might we take to rethink race beyond the limitations of fixity?
- A. One of the ways in which history or historical situations or political struggles have made us rethink race beyond the limitations of its fixity has been the way in which race theory, so popular in the nineteenth century, and the integrity of race theory as a discourse, has itself been generally questioned. Its object is no longer unitary or fixed. But I also think that the history of political movements has shown us that what we think of as the politics of difference, what we think of as the politics of multiculturalism, what we think of as the politics of new social movements do not allow us to think the subject of any one of those margins—race, gender, class, culture, geopolitical location, or generation—exclu-

sively. We do not or we cannot think those things exclusively in themselves because, I believe, of the concept of difference that I've been trying to explore that underlies them. As I say in that piece on minority maneuvers, we are always in the middle of difference. If there is anything about the theoretical work that I've been doing, it has been to shift—whether it's at the level of enunciation, whether it's at the level of subject formation—away from this idea that the politics of difference consists in the putting together of one originary marking with another originary marking and a third one—one being race, one being sex, one being class. These are always in a way being constituted and negotiated in a cross-boundary process. That does not mean that at any particular time you may not want to emphasize one particular strategy of difference or one particular form of identification rather than another. That is perfectly possible. But as we know it, what is impossible is to, in a sense, take the textuality of difference and separate its threads because somehow the effectivity of thinking through difference is to keep thinking through these nodal textiles and not to give any one of them temporally a prior or an a priori authority. So I think that's very important to understand within the framework of the theory of difference.

Now, let me say something else: it's very important to understand that what the theory of identification allows us to understand—identification as a process of the iterative and the enunciatory—is not just that we identify one on one or one on the another, if I might play with these terms. It's not just who you identify with, but what you identify with in that object. That's a way of thinking the politics of difference. So in the articulation between, say for instance, a certain feminist position and a certain position on race, both of these positions will be substantially transformed because of the object around which they decide to negotiate an articulation between themselves. It could be housing or education, for example. If it's education in an African-American community in the U.S., then the coming together of feminism and the question of race will not be defined by the prior given signs—race and gender. They will be reconstituted in and through a negotiation with this third space or third thing which in a way disjuncts any sense of the two of them doing just some kind of simple dealing with each other. Negotiation is always a double dealing—a doubling dealing, not a mere double dealing. So it seems to me that context is of course very important. If you're thinking then about class issues and education issues and race issues for Muslim minorities in Paris, there's a very different sign of what class is because that sign of class will be class through a certain kind of postcolonial migration and resettlement; the sign of gender will be constituted partly through certain French republican ideas but also through certain other ideas that the migrant community brings with it. So, to return to what I said in response to your question about adding to without adding up,

the sign each time, in each of its iterations, constitutes a different set of priorities and choices and significations in each iterative moment. So my sense is that we think beyond the limitations of fixity because the form of difference and enunciation that I've been suggesting pushes us never to be contained by any sign for longer than its rearticulation or translation demands.

Q. Given what you've just said, in the national discourse on race here in the U.S., the media now regularly call on people of color to represent divergent political positions on various issues. Does this development suggest that fixed notions of race may be loosening up somewhat?

A. This is a very interesting issue to bring up in this context because it calls on people of color to represent divergent political positions on various issues so long as their diversity is contained by a kind of ideological and political matrix that always makes them into little nations. They have to be subnations. They have to see their context as subnational. One of the most influential works recently in this area is Will Kymlicka's *Multicultural Citizenship*. You cannot read anything without reference to Kymlicka's work. He says very clearly that the only way in which minorities, in the long run, will be able to conceive of themselves as being participants in wider cultures is to accept the national or subnational form. But that's the issue: represent yourself as a little national minority and of course we will support you; but seep in, disseminate in, and change and translate what is seen to be the dominant lines of the transmission of cultural tradition, of national ritual, then we're not so sure. Become a virus and we don't want you; remain virtuous in the national mold and you can come and join "the mixed salad," or "the melting pot," or the consommé, or the casserole, or whatever else you'd like. Sit at our table.

Q. In several of your works you theorize a cultural construction of nationness as a form of social and textual affiliation. For example, you say that the project of *Nation and Narration* is to "explore the Janus-faced ambivalence of language itself in the construction of the Janus-faced discourse of the nation." You write, "To study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself. If the problematic 'closure' of textuality questions the 'totalization' of national culture, then its positive value lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols associated with national life." You seem to believe, then, that critical theory has the potential to help rewrite the nation, to alter the material realities as well as the symbolic content of nationness. What specific strategies do you see critical theory developing to effect such changes?

A. First, in its obstruction to the processes of totalization, critical theory allows us to reconceive of a very potent myth in the construction of a homogeneous society: the myth of the national past. I think it's obvious

from what I've been saying about enunciation and the iterative temporality of national culture why that would unsettle the notion of a continuous past. But for reasons that take us right back to the question of sententiousness, in allowing us to break down, or break through, or write across, or run across the sententiousness of the discourse of the national life, critical theory allows us to see the residual and emergent forces often linked with communities of interest—with the way in which, say, national self-belonging can for AIDS and gay communities be mediated through the notion of mourning, melancholia, illness, citizenship, and effective citizenship. Just to give you one example of what I think the sententiousness of citizenship once broken down can open up into, we could think about similar ways in which women's movement can emerge out of this trumping, or negotiating, or displacing the sententious.

So, rethinking what authority and tradition is through the treachery of trumping the sententious not only allows for sites of emergence; that emergence—and I've talked about the emergence of, say, the gay community—allows you to rethink the notion of the people. What is the people? What is the national people? If the past is the myth of the nation in a displaced time, "the past," the people is the recurrent myth of every national discourse about its presentness. The presentness of the nation, let me propose, is often symbolized in a notion of a people. Its contemporaneity is always the people. And I think that to study nationhood through its narrative address must make you question what it means to construct a people, or how a people is inscribed, or how a discourse creates its own authority by referencing "a people." It makes you rethink that. In fact, in *Nation and Narration*, where I deal with the concept of the pedagogical and the performative as a kind of agonistic and ambivalent construction of the nation, the fulcrum of that argument is how we may rethink the notion of the people. So the past, I think, can be rethought. I think the present, the notion of the people, can be rethought.

Another way in which critical theory can do its work is to help us to see boundaries not as simply the space between one nation and another, one self and another, but to see the boundary as always also facing inward, as some kind of internal liminal space; this allows us to think more generally of a way of connecting nations or countries, not by using the national form as a currency of exchange, but by using those kinds of minorities within nations who are always seen as both partly belonging to and not belonging enough; that partial condition becomes a way of making a transnational articulation. For instance, ecological movements very often—and a number of minority groups who by the nature of the demand they make, or by who they are, or by the voice they articulate are seen to be neither inside nor outside—find their theater of action by moving across boundaries to those other groups who occupy similar

ambivalent and liminal positions outside. So I think there is a different way of elaborating the transnational than using the nation as the counter of exchange.

Q. In “DissemiNation,” you make what is for us a provocative but underdeveloped statement that identifies literacy as one of the instruments for narrating the nation. In this context, you say that historians and political theorists (and we might add, compositionists) ignore literacy in an effort to evade “the essential question of the representation of the nation as a temporal process.” Would you elaborate on what you see as the role that literacy and literacy instruction play in the constitution and interrogation of the nation?

A. This is a very important question, and coming as I do from India, it has a very specific significance for me. I feel that literacy is connected intimately and institutionally with the question of democratic representation. It’s more complex than saying that you can’t really have a one-person one-vote system unless you have literacy because people are open then to all kinds of pressures, particularly in poorer countries where votes can be bought and sold. (Of course, votes can be bought and sold in Chicago or in any other place.) It’s not limited to the South. But I do think that literacy is absolutely crucial for a kind of ability to be responsible to yourself, to make your own reading within a situation of political and cultural choice. In the Indian context, fascinatingly, the state of Kerala in the south has the highest literacy, that literacy fostered very much by Jesuit and other Catholic missionaries. And Kerala has been (or was until recently; I’m not sure of the situation at the moment) the state which had communist rule in an unbroken period of fifteen or twenty years. So there was a particular collaboration between Catholicism, communism, literacy, and democratic development.

Literacy is very important for the representation of “self,” by which I don’t mean individuals, just self-representation within a democratic foundation. But I think that there’s no doubt that literacy is also in some ways an equalizing force. There is a danger of course in fetishizing literacy, the kind of fetishism when people say (and I’m talking about literacy in the more general sense), “We have this terrible racism, and it’s because people don’t know enough about another’s culture. They don’t know how to appreciate another’s language or cuisine.” That’s a load of crap. Racism is often the leading ideology of the most educated and literate people. So, that’s not important. But I think the kind of composition, the kind of writing, the kind of literacy that *we* have been talking about—which is not merely about competence but is about intervention, the possibility of interpretation as intervention, as interrogation, as relocation, as revision—is often not taught even at the best institutions and should be talked about and taught much more.

Q. How do we counter the growing popularity of the claim that the unity

of the nation as a symbolic force has been superseded by “those new realities of internationalism, multinationalism, or even ‘late capitalism’”? In other words, how do we demonstrate that there is little that is new in the rhetoric of these global terms, for they are most often underwritten, as you say, “in that grim prose of power that each nation can wield within its own sphere of influence”?

- A. First, let me take up the issue of there being little that is new in the rhetoric of these global terms. Of course, there are many new things. Digital technology has speeded up this transnational process, and I accept that this speeding up is not just a quantitative issue; it’s a qualitative issue. It can be fetishized as a kind of technophilia, and I think that this is a very important issue, the belief that because you can conjure up anybody you want at any time through e-mail, we have therefore somehow transcended time and space and geographies and inequalities and disjunctions. Only so long as both of you have connectivity and access. . . . Well, you know that argument; it’s too familiar, so I won’t rehearse it here. I do want to remind myself that really the first globalization was mercantilism and colonialism. Of course, there is a big difference in time there. I once calculated (and this is not an accurate calculation) that it took something like five or six months in that era—the early and mid-nineteenth century—to make colonial connectivity. In London, they produced an edict that was to be enacted in India, then they sent it by ship, then they distributed it through India, then the viceroy wrote a report as to whether it worked or not, and then they sent it back. So before they could actually reconsider what they’d done, it took about five or six months. Now, of course, it takes about two minutes for some global organization to effect a change in policy.

What I’m getting at is that there is an obduracy of certain power blocks and power forces that can translate, particularly at the economic level, the power of the transnational for very parochial even nationalist concerns at the level of institutions, at the level of ideologies, and at the level of economies. So there is no guarantee that translationality and transnationality (which I see as being linked) will not be used for the most nationalistic ends. For instance, if you speak to the Hindu nationalists in India who are now very seriously contesting the cosmopolitanism of the Indian subcontinent, which is remarkable, with their anti-Muslim acts (political acts, not just propaganda), they will say, “Our notion of nationalism, our notion of Hinduism is very much a western concept of the nation. Hinduism is a very tolerant religion; we believe in peace. All we are saying is that we want to have that kind of hegemonic function that, for instance, Protestantism as a state religion has in Britain. And then we will happily tolerate Muslims or Parsees or Christians. So we are not archaic; we are absolutely out there in the transnational discourse. We see our desire for what we call *Hindutva*, the Hindu state, as being

absolutely in a translational relationship with western nation forms. We're in fact modernists in a western sense, and we're demanding this because we have a modern faith in Hinduism which will be this umbrella; it'll be a normative form, but it'll be an umbrella very tolerant to all kinds of religions." So I do feel that there is grim prose of nationalist and national authority.

My sense is not to say that in many ways this blurring of the boundary of nation has not taken place; it has. And it has often taken place through refugees, the eighteen million people displaced for one reason or another (you have eighteen to twenty million according to some United Nations figures). And I think they are producing what must be recognized as a kind of vernacular or vernacularizing or vernacular cosmopolitanism, internationally. But at the same time as we recognize the liminal form of the nation form, we have to recognize possibilities of actually using the transnational in a very national sense. I mean, you can sign whatever transnational agreement you want, but very often what you find is that the ruling national elite channels and filters its benefits in its own direction. So I think that we should be more cautious in celebrating the transnational, and we should be aware that we are, certainly historically at the moment, at the level of or in the place of liminal nationality or nationhood.

Q. In your discussions of nationness, you write that "the concept of the 'people' emerges within a range of discourses as a double movement. The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference." That is, "The nation's people must be thought in double-time; the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin *in the past*; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity: as that sign of the *present* through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process." Thus, "the people are the articulation of a doubling of the national address, an ambivalent *movement* between the discourses of pedagogy and the performative." What are the implications of thinking "the people" in this double-time? Does such a conceptualization have the potential of generating social agency?

A. This is a very thoughtful question. There are two immediate effects implied by thinking of the people in a double-time. One I've already referred to: to see the nation as an internally liminal formation. The second follows from that: to see the way in which minorities or minoritization are very much part of the other side of the national people, that the problem of minoritization should be seen as the problem of



nation construction. It's usually seen as the abnormal, the thing that didn't work, or the adjacent thing, or the accidental. I'm saying that the construction of minorities is as much a process of nation formation as the construction of a national people. In fact, the two may be as closely linked as I believe the emergence of modernity is to the emergence of coloniality. The effects of this would be to change the way in which we think of the citizenship of communities, interests, minorities, migrants. I believe we would have to rethink those questions of citizenship if we did think in terms of what I call the double-time. So it's really to try to make us reconsider the question of cultural membership and national membership.

Q. You have said that your concern is "with other articulations of human togetherness as they are related to cultural difference and discrimination"—other than the liberal vision of togetherness. "For instance, human togetherness may come to represent the forces of hegemonic authority; or a solidarity founded in victimization and suffering may, implacably, sometimes violently, become bound against oppression; or a subaltern or minority agency may attempt to interrogate and rearticulate the 'inter-est' of society that marginalizes its interests." Do you envision contingent, temporary, strategic alliances as a way to bind individuals in social agency, as a way to rearticulate human togetherness?

A. I made that statement because there was a sense that human togetherness had a kind of inherent value. Solidarity was what happened to the left, and a sort of rather evil hegemony was what happened on the right. *They* formed power blocks; *we* formed solidarities. There's some truth in that, but I've always wanted to suggest that the real power of the political is the power of understanding how the political object, aim, or constituency was actually a result of the ethical and practical labor of construction and negotiation. I made that statement to get away from this idea of the power block versus solidarity, but also to get away from the idea that if you had a kind of more social constructionist way of thinking, you would automatically come out on the right side. I've always wanted to suggest that you can come out completely on the wrong side. That's what politics is about: to be vigilant about that very moment in which groups are being constituted, or objects are being created.

But yes, I think that much of my work—I'm thinking especially of the piece on Indian mutiny in *The Location of Culture*—has been an attempt to see social agency where it has mostly been denied or where it hasn't ended up in great acts of revolutionary transformation. But then it has also been my purpose to say that revolution or radical social transformation cannot be seen altogether, at the same time, from one place. You've got to look at it in different moments and times, and things add to rather than necessarily add up. I've always been interested, therefore, in stressing that in a way this togetherness is also (if I may produce a rather bad sort

of pun) to be aware of the “to-gatheringness,” the gathering as an important assumption of togetherness. It’s been my desire to suggest that this expressive togetherness—that we assume that the category of woman or the category of class already is an expressive subject—is problematic. And I’ve tried to problematize that. My use of the concept of enunciation and psychoanalytic identification has also led me to want to understand not only, as I said a moment ago, agency in times and places where it is least acknowledged, but also to try and understand forms of agency that do not emanate from individual intention. I’ve wanted to see the way in which in the construction of the collectivity, something else, some other body gets constituted as the site of a community or a togetherness. And I only use that awkward phrase “to gather” because it actually stresses the important disseminatory potential that there must be in order to be able to think about collective agency.

Q. In “The Postcolonial and the Postmodern,” you write that “a range of contemporary critical theories suggest that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement—that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking. There is even a growing conviction that the affective experience of social marginality—as it emerges in non-canonical cultural forms—transforms our critical strategies. It forces us to confront the concept of culture outside *objets d’art* or beyond the canonization of the ‘idea’ of aesthetics, to engage with culture as an uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value, often composed of incommensurable demands and practices, produced in the act of social survival.” In the idea that the affective experience of social marginality has the potential to transform living and thinking, there is suggested the important role of political emotions, those emotions (for example, anger and outrage) that are produced in the act of survival. Do you think that political emotions provide an occasion for social solidarity, if not community? Are the affective experiences of social marginality incommensurable, just as are cultural meanings and values?

A. The answer to both questions is yes. Yes, I do think that the structures of feeling and the structures of affect are radically devalued in the language of political effectivity, cultural identity, and so on. I’m going to have to elaborate on that, but I also think that the possibility that affect is both effective and incommensurable in a social and cultural sense must be entertained fully, and we must learn to work with that and to understand it. My longer response is that the discourse of political action and political choice has concentrated too much on questions of interest and too little on questions of political passion. Of course, this was not always the case. In fact, that great book, *The Passions and the Interests* by Albert Hirschman, was written in a way to track the history of the shift. But I do think that in our contemporary moment, the politics of

difference, the politics of community, the politics of communities of interest have such a deep and strong affective charge that we now have to start to understand the part that emotions, affects, play in the construction of community politics. For instance, almost all the very effective journalism on Bosnia has never failed to describe the almost perverse and pathological passion involved in the most horrific acts. If we see that, then we're seeing something that is motivating that construction of the group, or that construction of the group in action, that construction of a performative subject. The something that is constructing that is not just ethnic hatred or racial hatred; there is another charge that is working there that is actually creating solidarity, creating a camp. And I think it is our responsibility to begin to understand it. Anger, violence, hatred—these are seemingly just adjectives always attached to what is seen as something more substantial, but I don't think that this is the right way to see it.

So a history of affect as well as an affective history are very important tasks, certainly for me, for the future. I've worked on the question of ambivalence in quite a sustained way, and now some of my new work is focusing around anxiety as an affect of social transition and translation. Let me also say that I believe that one of the great contributions of Franz Fanon was to raise this question of the psychoaffective moment in the wider moment of political autonomy. His theory of violence, I believe, is not (as it is often read as) some kind of surrealist excess; it is part of this process of taking seriously the question of the body, the question of the emotions, the question of affect at the level of political identification.

Q. In "Black and White and Read all Over" you write, "When a figure arises from behind the black mask to address a range of publics—black, white, academic, vernacular, church congregations, *Newsweek* readers—there is a palpable anxiety about his or her 'representative' status. It is commonly held, after all, that the authenticity of the intellectual, whether conservative or radical, is founded on the possibility of free and unfettered choice among competing ideas and interests. . . . By this logic, minority intellectuals lack the ethical autonomy to be properly representative because they lack the conditions of freedom: they are, so to speak, *partis pris*." The position you appear to be taking here seems to support the work of various feminist standpoint theorists such as Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, and Nancy Hartsock, who argue that positionality is actually a strength in the production of knowledge rather than a liability. Do you see any theoretical affinities between your work and feminist standpoint theory?

A. Yes, to the extent to which I think what we're both talking about is the importance of recognizing what the conditions of one's situatedness are. What is one's situation? I think my notion of enunciation affirms the need to each time understand what is happening at the place of utterance,

what each iteration and reiteration of a particular sign is, how it produces its own strategy, its own authority. This is an emphasis on situatedness that I think the feminist standpoint theorists also have. As I understand it, the other shared idea would be an attempt to think about political action not merely as liberation, but also as an active process of survival—survival as a very positive thing, not just as what you do when you’re not running around winning arguments and battles. I think those would be the two shared ideas.

Q. In “Are You a Man or a Mouse?” you suggest that in the study of masculinity the aim should not be “to deny or disavow masculinity, but to disturb its manifest destiny—to draw attention to it as [an enunciative site and] a prosthetic reality—a ‘pre-fixing’ of the rules of gender and sexuality” and a kind of “blocked reflexivity” that is masked by “an appeal to universalism and rationality.” Do you see the new men’s studies movements (particularly those inspired by and responsive to feminism and gay studies) bringing greater self-reflexivity to the history of the construction of masculinities? To polemicize the point slightly: are there significant limits to the self-reflexivity that a white straight man can bring to the study of white straight masculinities?

A. I don’t know what to say about this question because I’ve not really followed the men’s movement. On the one hand, if it’s in response to certain feminist or queer interrogations, well one would say it’s not a bad thing. On the other hand, there must be a way in which that kind of work, even in the process of interrogation, makes you fetishize something about your own group. I suppose what I would say *there* is that I’m interested in responding to the interrogations of masculinity. I’m interested in what a white, straight, male group would want to identify itself as, and in what would be its conditions of solidarity under those specific signifiers. Why would it want to foreground those signifiers to identify itself? The most progressive parts of the women’s movement don’t just come together only because its members happen to be women; they come together because women as signs signify certain things about inequality. Queer movement, gay movement, race movement come together because, again, those signs signify certain terrains of political action. I’m interested in finding out if you are a white straight male how you engage in discourse. Do you say, “We’re straight white men and we’re exploiters?” How do you enter that discourse? Do you say, “Now we want to understand the conditions under which we are exploiters?” I would be as untrusting of a group that’s actually pronouncing itself guilty as I would be of a group that’s saying that everybody’s trying to make them feel guilty and they don’t feel guilty. I would want to know what claims these people are making for themselves.

Q. In *The Location of Culture*, “translation” becomes almost the paradigmatic instance of “the performative nature of cultural communication. It is

language *in actu* (enunciation, positionality) rather than language *in situ* (*énoncé*, or propositionality). And the sign of translation continually tells, or ‘tolls’ the different times and spaces between cultural authority and its performative practices. The ‘time’ of translation consists in that *movement* of meaning, the principle and practice of a communication that, in the words of [Paul] de Man ‘puts the original in motion to decanonise it, giving it the movement of fragmentation, a wandering of errance, a kind of permanent exile.’” Your self-conscious use of the word *tolls* is provocative. Would you more fully explain your view of the task and responsibility of translation?

- A. Let me respond to the use of the word *tolls* straightaway. I used it to emphasize that in the very telling—that is, in the discursive act of the translational process—there has to be a sense that every translation is at once the death of something and its revival, that there’s a sort of spectral logic, as Derrida would say, in the construction of translation. In fact, somewhere (I think when talking of translation) Derrida, stimulated by Benjamin, has said that translation is about survival, *survivre*, to live on—living on a borderline, as well as *living on*, just the act of living on. I used the word *tolls* to indicate that complex sense of both the death of meaning and its relocation in the act of translation or in the act of cultural translation. That’s why I used that particular word.

The task and responsibility of translation—which is after all the task not only of transferring or relocating meaning but the responsibility of setting up a site of revisionary meaning, which means that what you receive is also being revised—produces an enormous responsibility to the present, to the future, and to what has gone before, if you put it in temporal terms. It produces this responsibility because through this whole process of the rearticulation of these temporalities, you are also addressing your “self”; you are addressing your “self” to an act of judgment about where you stand in the process of transition, where you will go to through translation. But I think, as I have said before, that translation as a form of enunciation is an ethical act because one is from a position of midstness, of being in the middle of difference, taking the responsibility to deauthorize something that has put itself about as being the place of the powerful or the original; and one is revaluing a genealogy in order to revise, to empower, to resituate a set of concerns, or a set of identifications. Both the acts of empowering and deauthorizing must be undertaken with the greatest reflection, circumspection, and modesty.

- Q. In your writings you have taken numerous controversial, and some say “radical” positions. And given the complexity of the ideas you are struggling with, it would not be unusual that some readers might misconstrue some of your positions. Are there any misunderstandings or critiques of your work that you’d care to address at this time?
- A. Well, this for me has been such a rich exploration of what I’ve done that,

entirely due to your skill, I feel myself completely understood in a moment of luminous clarity, which I'm sure is completely wrong. It's entirely due to you and not to me or what I've written. Yes, people point to a whole range of aspects of my work, often in a complimentary way, sometimes in a critical way. But there are some things that are misunderstood. I'll just list them. Very often what I've talked about as ambivalence is misunderstood as ambiguity, and they're radically different things. Ambivalence is a struggle for identification; ambiguity is a much more hermeneutic process. There may be some ambiguity in ambivalence, but these terms are not the same thing. Where I have tried to, in a way, contest certain traditions of intentionality in order to be able to open up the question of agency and to see agency in acts that are often not seen as agential, people have sometimes misunderstood that (I think rather ludicrously) as a complete loss of any agency.

Where I have tried in the same vein, in pursuit of the same kind of value, to address myself to archival moments, literally moments in the historical or discursive or theoretical archive that have been overlooked (moments where I actually go into the archive to reconstruct the missionary discourse, as in "Signs Taken for Wonders" or in "By Bread Alone"), people have seen these moments as purely anecdotal and they ask, "Where is the history there?" The fact that in these moments I talk about the printing industry, the ideological and the discursive practices of missionaries, the fact that I locate this within the kind of quasi-state governance of the East India Company, somehow is not history enough for some people. They want a different kind of narrative history. Because I will not give them an easily continuous, conjoined history loaded with large generalizations about state formations or "exploitation" or "resistance" or whatever, they feel that this is not history. That's not my problem in a way. I want to do a different kind of work. I feel that the task demands historicity, which I believe I to some extent satisfy, but I think there is a demand by critics for a kind of "historicism," a particular kind of narrative history. It's not that I've never produced such work, but it's not my dominant mode.

Finally, I think there is a misunderstanding about my notion of hybridization. For me, hybridization is really about how you negotiate between texts or cultures or practices in a situation of power imbalances in order to be able to see the way in which strategies of appropriation, revision, and iteration can produce possibilities for those who are less advantaged to be able to grasp in a moment of emergency, in the very process of the exchange or the negotiation, the advantage. Hybridization is much more a social and cultural and enunciative process in my work. It's not about people who eat Chinese food, wear Italian clothes, and so on; but sometimes, in a very complimentary way to me personally, it's been taken to mean some kind of diversity or multiple identities. For me,

hybridization is a discursive, enunciatory, cultural, subjective process having to do with the struggle around authority, authorization, deauthorization, and the revision of authority. It's a social process. It's not about persons of diverse cultural tastes and fashions.

### **Kinneavy Award Winners Announced**

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay in volume 17 of *JAC* was awarded to Bruce McComiskey for "Social-Process Rhetorical Inquiry: Cultural Studies Methodologies for Critical Writing about Advertisements." Honorable Mention was awarded to Pamela Gilbert for "Meditations upon Hypertext: A Rhetorethics for Cyborgs."

The award is generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas, and was presented by Professor Kinneavy at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC Convention in Chicago.