

CHAPTER 9

RACE AND POSTCOLONIALISM

When someone asks me what I do for a living, I reply that I'm an English professor. Many people then make some comment about watching their grammar, as if 'English' denoted the field of studying correct grammar, spelling, and composition, and as if my job were to correct the grammar of everyone I spoke with. Rarely does anyone, on hearing my distinctly American accent, assume that I am saying that I am a professor of English nationality. Most people know that an 'English professor' and an 'English department' in a university study works of literature in English. The designation 'English' for this field of knowledge, however, raises a host of questions about the relationships among nationality, language, and literary production.

The field we call 'English' was originally defined based on the equation between nationality and language: an 'English' department studies works of literature written in the English language by people whose cultural history could be traced directly back to England. What is 'English' is what has been claimed by England as belonging to English culture, as well as the island of Britain itself: hence Scotland, Wales, Ireland, the United States, Canada, Australia, India, and parts of Africa and East Asia have been, at one time or another in Western history, considered 'English' or British. The field of postcolonial theory examines the effect that colonialism has had on the development of literature and literary studies – on novels, poems, and 'English' departments – within the context of the history and politics of regions under the influence, but outside the geographical boundaries, of England and Britain.

COLONIALISM AND 'ENGLISH'

From the late seventeenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, Britain extended its national rule to countries and areas all over the world: to North America, to Africa, to the Middle East, to India, to Asia, to the West Indies, South America, and Polynesia, creating British colonies in these lands and, in most cases, taking over the administration of government, so that British laws and customs ruled the people who lived half a world away from the Britain itself. As a US citizen, I was raised on the story of how 'America' rebelled against being governed by a distant land, and fought a war to become independent of British rule. US history as a British colony is somewhat unique, however, as 'we' – meaning the people who became 'Americans' when the nation of the United States was founded – were formerly British citizens who succeeded so well in colonizing the coastal regions of North America, and in subduing the indigenous population of Native Americans, that we shifted national identification away from Britain and named ourselves something else (Americans).

Most of the British colonies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not rebel and form their own nations – largely because the people of those nations were non-whites, non-Western people. British colonial rule, and that of all other Western nations who formed colonies, such as France and Germany, depended on seeing the indigenous populations of these colonized areas as inferior, as therefore needing the 'advanced civilization' offered by Western culture. In fact, as Edward Said argues, the West (or Occident) *produced* the non-white, non-Western cultures and peoples as inferior through a variety of discourses which stated the terms of their existence as inferior.

One of the impetuses for colonization was, of course, the spread of capitalism: colonies offered sources of raw materials, cheap labor, and new markets for Western goods, and the history of colonialism is very much caught up in the economics of capitalism. But colonialism couldn't be confined merely to the economic realm: when a nation like Britain colonized a non-Western region, it exported its own legal, religious, educational, military, political, and aesthetic ideas along with its economic regime – what Marx would call the superstructure, and Althusser would call the Ideological State Apparatus, or ISA. In places like Africa and India, British colonial rule meant teaching the indigenous people about the superiority of

Western practices: through setting up systems of police and courts and legislatures following British laws, through sending missionaries to convert natives to Christianity (largely the Church of England) and establishing churches and seminaries, and through setting up schools to teach British customs, British history, and the English language to children and adults, in order to make them more like British citizens. And with these ideological exportations came British/Western ‘culture,’ in the form of music, art, and literature – so that, regardless of the ancient literary traditions of India, China, or the Arab world, inhabitants of these colonized areas were taught that Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton were the ‘greatest’ authors who ever wrote. In short, British cultural standards were upheld and all other notions of culture, of art or literature or philosophy, were denounced as inferior and subordinated to Western standards.

This is part of what an ‘English’ department was originally designed to do – to study and to assert the mastery of ‘English’ literature as the most important literature (of the most important and advanced civilization) ever known. ‘English’ departments were thus part of establishing the hegemony (meaning the dominance) of British culture worldwide. English departments also served as a regulatory mechanism to teach and enforce the ‘correct’ form of English as a language, making sure that educated people all spoke and wrote in the same grammatically acceptable forms. An ‘English’ department, and its professors, thus historically have functioned to uphold the dominance of a *monologic* form of the English language, just as they have upheld English literature as the universal standard of literary excellence.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR AND ‘THE SIGNIFYING MONKEY’

There’s a strong connection between postcolonial theories and contemporary African-American theories, as both look at how a hegemonic white/Western culture came to dominate a non-white culture, and at how the subordinated culture reacted to and resisted that domination. The history of black–white relations in the United States is quite different from that in Britain, because in the US whites imported blacks from Africa as slaves, rather than urging whites to go and settle in Africa to ‘civilize’ the indigenous peoples. But while the dynamics of racial and cultural politics are different, some of the effects are the same: in the United States, slavery and

racism produced a hegemonic white culture which enforced its systems and values on the non-white population, and that non-white population both obeyed and resisted those systems and values. Both postcolonial theories and African-American theories about US racial dynamics argue that the colonized ‘other’ learns to speak what W. E. B. DuBois has called a ‘double-voiced’ discourse, speaking both the language (in Bakhtin’s terms) of the dominant culture and the language of the subordinated culture.

Henry Louis Gates’s article ‘The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey’ examines a particular mode of speech, a Bakhtinian ‘language’ or sociolect, arising within African-American communities. Gates begins the article by discussing the term ‘signifying,’ which is familiar to literary theorists since Saussure; we know ‘signification’ as the relationship between signifier and signified which creates a sign. Gates points out, however, that the term has an entirely different meaning, and history, in African-American cultural usage. He is using an idea explored by Bakhtin and his colleague V. N. Volosinov about ideas about the multi-accentuality of a sign, the idea that a single word or sign might have radically different meanings in different contexts. Within the context of academic theory-speak, ‘signifying’ means what Saussure laid out; within an African-American cultural context, however, ‘signifying,’ or ‘signifyin’,” is a name for a particular linguistic practice, which Gates links to ‘the dozens,’ calling out, rapping, and testifying.

Gates’s analysis of signifyin’ bridges the gap between the academic dominant-cultural context of the term and the African-American subordinated context; he uses academic discourse, in talking about Saussure, and about classical rhetoric, to support the idea that the African-American (or ‘black’) practice of signifyin’ is just as historically significant, and just as complex, as any dominant cultural linguistic practice. In other words, Gates insists that signifyin’ or rapping is not just how African-Americans talk because they’re not well educated or don’t know about ‘correct’ (i.e. hegemonic dominant cultural, or ‘white’) forms of speech; rather, the activity of signifyin’ comes from an African and African-American tradition, just as classical rhetoric comes from the tradition of Greek and Latin modes of speech. He thus traces the roots of black signifying to African mythology and religious beliefs; more specifically, he looks at a figure called the ‘Signifying Monkey’ as the

archetype and origin of the practice of signifying in the African-American community.

‘Signifying,’ according to the *Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, is a form of verbal play, centering primarily on the insult, whereby people can demonstrate a mastery of improvisational rhyme and rhythm; the demonstration of such verbal mastery is a mechanism for empowerment within communities where other forms of power – political, economic – are unavailable. Gates links this practice to the mythological figure of the Signifying Monkey, who is able to trick the more powerful animals in the jungle through his verbal skills. Gates points out that the link between the Signifying Monkey and the practice of signifying works in at least two directions: the figure, and the practice, come directly from African cultural mythology, and variants can be found in virtually all communities with African origins; and the figure of the Monkey in particular plays on the racist construction of Africans as like apes, therefore less human than whites. The Signifying Monkey thus takes a trope, a figure, from the white racist idea of blackness and reaccentuates it, renames it, signifies on it, so that ‘monkey’ no longer means an inferior, i.e. black, person, but rather represents a person with verbal power and the ability to stir up conflict between those who have more social power than he does.

Gates places the Signifying Monkey at the borders of ‘correct,’ i.e. hegemonic, dominant cultural forms of speech. You might think of the Signifying Monkey in this way as a subject position within language. That position, like the ‘feminine’ position we discussed in Cixous’s feminist theory, is further away from a center where language is fixed, stable, and univocal; at the margins of language or discourse, speech is more fluid, more flexible, more able to ‘play’ in Derrida’s sense. The Signifying Monkey, then, as a linguistic subject, is more able to use words with greater flexibility, to ‘trope’ and play and signify and shift meanings, than the speaker who stands closer to the center of language.

This should start to sound pretty familiar. We’ve been talking all along about the two poles of language: the pole where meaning is fixed and stable, where a word means one thing and one thing only; and the pole where meaning is fluid, and words can have multiple, ambiguous, and indefinite meanings. All the theorists we’ve read have talked about the advantages and disadvantages of fixed vs fluid meaning. Theories of race and postcolonialism, like most of the

poststructuralist theories we've read, uphold the idea that fixity of meaning is associated with rigid systems of thought and government, and fluidity of meaning, play, is associated with systems of thought and government that favor multiplicity and multiculturalism. And, like most of the theories we've been reading, postcolonial theories say that fluidity and play and multiplicity is better, in all kinds of ways, than fixity and rigidity. In explaining the figure of the Signifying Monkey as a subject who plays with language in order to undermine rigid systems of racial domination, Gates celebrates the subversive power of fluid language to disrupt existing hierarchies which create binary relations of domination and subordination.

POSTCOLONIALISM AND ORIENTALISM

Postcolonial theory takes on the politics of the study of 'English' literature and culture from the perspective of those who were colonized by it. Postcolonial theory would ask whether an 'English department' necessarily reinforces the hegemony of Western cultural practices and thus supports the political and economic forces which have subordinated what we have come to call the 'third world.'

Postcolonial theorists and scholars argue a lot about the meaning of the word 'postcolonial,' and particularly about when a 'postcolonial' theory or literature begins to emerge. Does the 'post' of postcolonial begin with national independence? With economic independence from the colonizing country? With cultural independence? In US history, we are taught that 'America' became an independent nation on July 4, 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was signed. But the Revolutionary War still had to be fought to assert that claim of national independence, and to be followed, for emphasis, with the War of 1812, before the US was internationally recognized as a nation independent from Britain. Even then, US economics were closely linked to British manufacturing, and US artists and authors spent a great deal of effort throughout the nineteenth century in trying to establish a clear distinction between British and American literature, and to proclaim the quality of the latter with minimal reference to the former.

So when does a colony become postcolonial? For this book, we'll take the easy definition: postcolonial designates the time after official colonial rule. For most former British colonies, postcoloniality begins in the mid- to late twentieth century, when most of the British

colonies, such as India, fought for their independence from the British Empire, and became separate nations. Postcolonial theories begin to arise in the 1960s as thinkers from the former colonies began to create their own forms of knowledge, their own discourses, to counter the discourses of colonialism: these postcolonial discourses articulated the experience of the colonized, rather than the colonizer, giving what's called the 'subaltern' – the subordinated non-white, non-Western subject of colonial rule – a voice. Postcolonial theorists examine how Western cultures, the colonizers, created the colonial subject, the subaltern, through various discursive practices, and examine also how subaltern cultures both participated in and worked to resist colonization, through various overt or covert, direct or subversive, means.

Postcolonial theory is thus centrally concerned with examining the mechanisms through which the colonizing powers persuaded the colonized people to accept a foreign culture as 'better' than their own indigenous methods of government and social organization. Among the most important kinds of power/knowledge brought by the colonizers was the construction of the concept of 'race,' and more specifically the racial binary opposition of 'white' and 'other' – be that other 'black,' 'yellow,' 'brown,' 'red,' or whatever other color became the signifier for the 'otherness' of the colonized people. In the case of the United States, the 'native' population (once the Native Americans had been colonized or killed) was itself defined as white, a fact which deprived the colonizing British of a dominant form of power/knowledge which worked successfully with non-white colonies to produce their native inhabitants as inferior.

Race and postcolonial theorists are interested in studying how distinctions based on race are made, circulated, and enforced. When you think about how you know what race someone belongs to, usually you will think about the physical or biological traits that supposedly mark 'race,' such as hair color, eye color and skin color. These traits or markers show that the concept of 'race' is actually a signifying system, wherein certain physiological facts become signifiers connected to specific ideological signifieds. Within the system of 'race,' a dark skin color becomes a signifier, and the signified it is connected to might be 'athletic ability' or 'musical talent.' The connections of physical signifiers to ideological signifieds in this system is 'racism' – and you can come up with your own examples of how

pejorative the signifieds can be that *get* connected to a particular physiological signified.

'Race,' as a genetic or biological construct, does not exist. Rather, it is a signifying system wherein physical signifiers become connected with concepts of ability to create the 'meaning' of one's 'race' appearance. As in any signifying system, these connections are *arbitrary*; there is no essential or provable connection between the physical signifiers of 'race' and the cultural conceptions (and misconceptions) which we assume those physical signifiers point to.

The question for theorists of race, then, is how these arbitrary connections between signifiers and signifieds *get* made, enforced, expanded, reproduced, and/or modified. The answer that most give is Foucault's idea of discourse. Writings about race, coming from the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, psychology, criminology, biology, medicine, and (of course) literary studies connect a certain kind of eye shape with a certain kind of intelligence, or a hair texture with a social behavior. That is how 'racial traits' are created, elaborated, and perpetuated. And when we have made those associations, connected certain signifiers with certain signifieds, we then view those signs of race as 'real,' as 'true,' as 'factual.'

Edward Said's *Orientalism* is one of the foundational studies of how signifiers *get* connected to signifieds through discursive means to create the ordering system we call 'race.' Following Foucault, Said argues that discourse works to create 'knowledge' about a supposed 'racial' group. The best example of this is what anthropology used to be: a discipline to create knowledge, from the perspective of the dominant (usually Western) culture, about the subordinated/colonized culture. This knowledge wielded power, as it defined and described a culture or racial group, and thus produced the social attitudes, the ideologies and practices, which surrounded and delimited the group or culture being written about.

Said uses the word 'orientalism' to refer to the set of discursive practices, the forms of power/knowledge, that Western Anglo-European cultures used to produce (and hence control) a region of the globe known as 'the Orient.' You might want to take a moment to think about the stereotypes associated with the word 'Orient' and 'Oriental,' all of which labeled 'the Orient' as a place of mystery and exoticism. Such 'otherness' exists in relation to the familiarity of the Western Anglo-European world; the basis of 'orientalism,' like the basis of any form of racism or ethnocentrism, is the idea that

‘we’ are ‘selves’ who are ‘familiar,’ and that ‘others’ are necessarily ‘exotic.’

‘Orientalism’ depends upon the binary opposition ‘occident/ orient,’ meaning ‘west/east’ – but from whose perspective? How are ‘east’ and ‘west’ determined in the discursive construction of ‘occident’ and ‘orient?’ The answer, of course, is that ‘the orient’ is whatever is east of the Anglo-European perspective. ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’ are a product of the ways that Anglo-European explorers drew the map of the world from the seventeenth century onward. Said points out that maps are not just representations of a ‘real world’ that is out there, a way to locate where rivers and mountains are. Rather, maps are texts which, like literary texts, carry with them a cultural perspective and work to create an ideologically-based reality.

An example of this is how the world figures time. In international time, there’s a 24-hour clock, and the earth is divided into 24 ‘time zones.’ Where does time begin? In Greenwich, England, 0:00 is midnight GMT, or Greenwich Mean Time, and the rest of the world measures time in relation to GMT. The same idea works with longitude: zero degrees longitude, the ‘starting point’ of global navigation, runs just east of London.

In both of these examples, England is the center of the world, the place where time and space begin, the starting point for all other models of mapping. And that’s because England drew the maps and created the time-measuring system. And that’s because England was the largest colonial power in the modern world (from the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century), and had the power to create the knowledge of the entire globe.

Said’s work outlines how the cultural knowledge about, and representations of, ‘the Orient’ and ‘the oriental’ constructed by the West produce ‘the Orient’ as a place of ‘otherness.’ When we list the (racist) associations our Anglo-European culture makes with the concept of ‘oriental,’ what we’re doing is listing all the things that our culture doesn’t want to have defining us. For example, we might hear ‘oriental’ and think ‘opium-smoking, heathen, mysterious, exotic’ – all terms which are negative when compared to their binary opposites: sober, Christian, known, familiar. Said argues that the West’s construction of the Orient projects all the things that the West considers negative, all the things that have to be repressed – all the things on the right-hand side of the slash in a binary opposition – onto our construct of the other, the Orient. So ‘the Orient’ becomes the place

where body (as opposed to mind), evil (as opposed to good), and the feminine (as opposed to masculine) all reside. By placing all of these forms of ‘otherness’ on the Orient, Said says, the Occident can construct itself as all positive.

Examples of the West’s projection of otherness onto the idea of the Orient or the oriental appear all over the place in Western popular culture, from the Charlie Chan movies all the way to *The Karate Kid* series. The character of Mr Miyagi represents the American assumptions about a typical Japanese man: he is asexual, has no wife or girlfriend, cultivates bonsai trees, practices martial arts, speaks in broken sentences inflected with a heavy accent (despite having lived in California for 30 years!) and has ‘inscrutable’ behaviors, such as catching flies with chopsticks.

The history of imperialism is the history of discourses about colonized places, whether in the form of official government reports, personal travel narratives, or imaginative fiction set in ‘exotic’ foreign lands. You might think about Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as an example of imperial discourse – and as a novel which shows the contradictions and the collapse of imperial forms of power/knowledge. Said argues that the creation of discourse about a colonized culture, about ‘the other,’ works also to silence that colonized culture, which cannot ‘talk back,’ or write about itself. Rather, such discourse renders the people of the colonized culture the powerless subjects of Western power/knowledge, and anything the colonized culture tries to say or write about itself is by definition considered illegitimate, non-knowledge, nonsense.

Postcolonial literary studies, and postcolonial theory in general, focus on what happens when the formerly colonized culture starts to, or insists on, producing its own knowledge about itself. What happens when ‘the empire writes back’ to the dominant culture, when the silenced subjects of knowledge insist on becoming the producers of knowledge? One way to think about this is via deconstruction. The discourses that create the colonizers as the knowers and the colonized as the subjects of knowledge all depend on our old friend, the structure of binary oppositions, including West/East, Occident/Orient, civilized/native, self/other, educated/ignorant, etc. When ‘the empire writes back,’ these binary oppositions are deconstructed; when a colonized subject insists on taking up the position of ‘self,’ as the creator of knowledge about his or her own culture, rather than as the subject of that knowledge, these binary oppositions start to fall apart.

HOMI BHABA AND 'THE LOCATION OF CULTURE'

In discussing Said, we've looked at how 'race' is created by the discursive connection of certain signifiers, usually physical characteristics, with determinate signifieds. Now let's ask a tougher question: What is 'ethnicity'? We often use the phrase 'race and/or ethnicity' – so what's the difference? Ethnicity is a less definite category than race, in part because the signifiers of ethnicity are less fixed, less obvious, than those of race. But in some ways ethnicity is a more important category, in our contemporary world, than race. Think about the idea of 'ethnic' peoples globally: the wars in eastern Europe, particularly Bosnia and Serbia, over what ethnicity was the dominant one led to a practice labeled 'ethnic cleansing,' which involved killing all the people belonging to the wrong ethnicity. Ethnic cleansing was a common practice in the twentieth century: the Turkish massacre of the Armenians, the Nazi genocide of the Jews as an 'unclean' ethnicity, the wars between Tutsi and Hutu in Africa, and the wars between Pashtus, Kurds, and Arabs in the area we in the West call the Middle East.

In most of these examples, the question of ethnicity seems to have something to do with national identity. What's the relationship between race, ethnicity, and nationality? How can you tell what nationality someone is, and how is nationality connected to race and/or ethnicity? Certainly in the case of the United States, it's really tough to define what makes anyone 'American' – it's not being born in America, because you can become a naturalized citizen; it's not living in America, because some people who are not citizens live in America, and some American citizens live in other countries. It's not speaking English, because Americans speak all kinds of different languages. So what is it? I'm not as interested in finding an answer here as I am in asking the question: How does anyone define *any* 'national' identity, or racial identity, or ethnic identity – and what are the consequences of those identifications?

I'm asking this because this is a central question in postcolonial theory, and a central question for Homi Bhaba's essay on 'The Location of Culture.' But before we get to that, let's review for a minute some ideas we've already discussed about the notion of identity.

In the humanist model, 'identity' was a pretty easy concept: everyone has a unique identity, a core self which is consistent over time, and

which defines the idea of your self. You can name that identity by stating its characteristics: I AM a certain sex, a certain race, a certain age, a certain religion, a certain job or career, a certain family member, etc. I would say that I am a woman, a Caucasian, a 48-year-old, an English professor, a mother of two children. This isn't all that I am, of course, but these words start to provide a framework within which I exist. From a poststructuralist perspective, I am constructed as a subject by all of these discourses: I am a subject within an ideology of gender; I am a subject within an ideology of race; I am a subject within an ideology of age; I am a subject within an ideology of education and work; I am a subject within an ideology of reproduction and family. My ideas about who I am, about what my sex, race, age, etc. mean, come from my position within these ideologies: my sense of self is thus constructed by the ideologies and discourses I inhabit.

This is a pretty bleak world-view, a pretty deterministic one – 'I,' my self, my identity, is merely the product of all the discourses and ideologies that construct me, that interpellate me. But the saving grace is this: I am constructed by multiple discourses, multiple ideologies, all at the same time; there might be 20 or 200 discourses that claim me as a subject. And not all these subject positions are identical: as a mother, I might believe one thing, as a professor I might believe something entirely opposite or contradictory. What this means is that my subjectivity, my identity, is multiple; it is also 'overdetermined,' meaning that my identity is determined not by just one discourse or ideology, but by innumerable ones. This overdetermination – the fact that I can think contradictory thoughts at the same time, the fact that I could simultaneously be determined by my feminist belief in equality and by my maternal belief in having authority over my kids – means that there's no predicting what I will think, say, believe, or do in any specific situation or in relation to any specific idea or issue. At any moment, I can speak from any of my multiple subject positions. And that starts to look almost like having the 'free will' and 'creative uniqueness' we valued so much in the humanist model.

So, if you start thinking of subjecthood not just as constructed, but as multiply constructed, then you have infinite possibilities for what constitutes a subject or an 'I' identity. And you also have the idea of subjects who do not inhabit unified or stable positions or categories. For example, someone with an African-American father and a Caucasian mother is neither one 'race' or the other, but a mixture of both. Poststructuralist theories of race and ethnicity

refer to such people as occupying a *hybrid* position. Such hybridity is inherently deconstructive, as it breaks down any possibility of a stable binary opposition. If race is divided as white/black, or white/non-white, then someone of white and non-white parentage deconstructs and destabilizes these categories.

The idea of hybridity works for all kinds of subject positions: any place where you can cross categories, inhabit two subject positions at once, or find the space between defined subject positions, is a place of hybridity. For gender, an example might be transsexuals; for race, bi- or multiracial people; for religion, people who practice more than one spiritual discipline, or a bricolage of several. And this is where Homi Bhaba wants us to look, in order to think differently about national identities and national boundaries. He begins his essay by talking about ‘ethnocentric’ ideas, ideas that focus on particular definitions of selfhood by referring to a unified and unitary set of beliefs, practices, and configurations; he wants to challenge those ethnocentric ideas with the idea of dissonant and dissident and dislocated voices, people whose identities are excluded from these fixed and supposedly stable categories. He names specifically women, the colonized, minority groups, and bearers of ‘policed sexualities’ as those voices. He focuses on another kind of hybridity, or challenge to stable categories of national identity: the identity of the migrant, the homeless, the refugee, the displaced indigenous peoples.

Bhaba then asks us to think about national identity, and argues that the idea of a homogeneous, stable concept of belonging to a nation is under profound redefinition; he cites the Serbian ‘ethnic cleansing’ as a horrific example of how far a nation is willing to go, in killing its inhabitants, to produce a unified national identity. The effort to make a defined and unified nation is countered, according to Bhaba, by recognizing the idea of hybridity. He talks about ‘imagined communities’ as the idea of what communities we belong to: our identity is shaped by the ‘imagined communities’ we claim as our own. A nationality is such an ‘imagined community.’ Hybridity or transnationalism is a challenge to that idea of a unified ‘imaginary community;’ hybridity brings up the idea that you might belong to many communities or cultures at once, and transnationalism brings up the idea that identity may not be determined by national boundaries, either political or geographic.

Bhaba is talking about the twentieth-century world, and more specifically the geopolitical world that was created after the Second

World War, when ‘nations’ were carved out of territories that had previously been colonial provinces or tribal or ethnic homelands. An example of this is Israel. Israel was created as a state after the Holocaust, and was mapped out on land that had been British Palestine: a territory that had been inhabited by people we now call Palestinians, who had been colonized by the British, suddenly became the state of Israel. That’s what the disputes are about in the ongoing Palestinian–Israeli conflict: what ‘nation’ or ‘imagined community’ do these disputed lands belong to? The idea of a nation, according to Bhaba, is a fiction, an ‘imagined community,’ an entity created to forge a new sense of identity, to unite peoples who may have had in common only the fact that they inhabited the same general geographical region.

Again, you can see the problems with ‘nationhood’ all over the globe, particularly in what the West calls the ‘Third World.’ Another good example is the Arab states, which were, prior to the Second World War, inhabited by people who practiced the Islamic religion and who were identified as ethnic or racial ‘Arabs,’ but who imagined themselves belonging to various nomadic tribal communities. In the early twentieth century, these Arab tribes worked together to resist British colonial rule. Eventually the Arab tribes managed to kick out the British, but in order to do so they had to form a ‘nation,’ like Saudi Arabia, out of all the various indigenous tribes. These tribes, which had existed for centuries, had their own histories and practices and conflicts with each other; uniting them into one coherent thing called a ‘nation’ has proved to be difficult – as has been true in Afghanistan. Bhaba’s question, then, is what holds a ‘nation’ together, when ‘nations’ are imagined communities of widely disparate and different peoples? Who, then, speaks for this ‘nation’ and makes decisions for it in global geopolitics?

Bhaba points to capitalism as a ‘connective narrative,’ an economic practice that holds the idea of ‘nation’ together; you can see this every time you see a product stamped with the name of the country where it was made. ‘Made in Malaysia’ implies that ‘Malaysia’ is a geopolitical and economic entity, rather than a collection of people of various ethnicities and practices. Nations are thus defined by their economic positions in a global economy, as well as by their political positions in global organizations like the United Nations (UN).

Bhaba is interested in forces and identities that disrupt or destabilize the idea of a unified ‘nation,’ a homogeneous ‘imagined community;’

he argues that the concept of 'nation' is built upon the exclusion, or even extermination, of those who are described as not belonging to that nation. When the world is carved up into nations, what happens to those who are excluded from belonging to a nation? What about boat people, stateless people, people whose homes are destroyed and who have no passports to prove that they have a 'nationality?' Where do refugees go when their land is blown up and their nation discards them or their nation is erased from the world map?

Bhaba talks about the idea of the refugee, the displaced stateless person, the nomad, as something that isn't contained within the concept of 'nation,' and specifically which isn't contained within a nation's construction of its history. The idea of a 'nation' is the idea of an entity which has its own history, its own narrative of progress and success: I think of the stories I learned as a child about the foundation of the United States as a 'nation.' Up until recently, that history of the United States left out the histories of the people it displaced, such as the Native Americans and the Mexicans. Bhaba argues that the hybrids, the displaced, the non-nationals, must invent their own 'history,' through art which 'renews the past,' 'refigures' the past as an 'in-between space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present.'

'The performance of identity as iteration, as re-creation of the self in the world of travel, the resettlement of the borderline community of migration,' is where Bhaba locates the project for those not included in unified definitions of 'nationhood.'¹ This is not just relocating a lost past or reinvoicing indigenous cultural traditions, but creating an identity for an 'imagined community' that is not based on geopolitical or economic ideas of 'nationhood.' One important place where this happens, according to Bhaba, is in literature. Where literature has been defined by nationality – English literature, American literature, French literature, Chinese literature – now literature needs to incorporate the transnational, postcolonial, hybrid experience; in fact, this hybridity, this refugee experience, this non-national identity must transform how we think about literature and its relation to nationality. Postcolonial literature, literature by people who can't be identified as belonging to one specific nation, challenges us to think about how we might organize our universities, and our systems of knowledge, so that we don't reproduce the narratives of nationhood and thus silence or lose the voices which are excluded from those narratives.

GLORIA ANZALDÚA AND 'BORDERLANDS/LA FRONTERA'

Homi Bhaba's idea of 'hybridity' shares the poststructuralist political critique of the binary oppositions that structure racial, ethnic, and national identities with Gloria Anzaldúa's Chicana lesbian feminist analysis of 'the border.' In 'Borderlands/La Frontera,' Anzaldúa describes 'the border' as where two or more cultures, classes, races, ideologies, edge or confront each other. The border is both the space between cultures, classes, races, sexual orientations – the slash – and the place where they meld and mix, where they are both sides of the slash and neither side of it. This marginalized, liminal space is a space of contradictions, a space between and disruptive of defined categories of race, class, nationality, sexuality, and other identity formations.

Anzaldúa's essay is concerned with naming – but not 'mapping' – the multiplicity of identity formations she inhabits simultaneously and contradictorily. She writes in both Spanish and English (in fact, she identifies at least two kinds of English and six kinds of Spanish) to highlight how the politics of language operate within and around the politics of racial, ethnic, national, gender, and sexual identity. She agrees with the (post)structuralist view that language speaks us, and agrees with Bakhtin that the languages we speak define our identity, our cultural make-up, our ideologies, our definition of self. 'Language is a homeland,' Anzaldúa says, '*Un lenguaje que corresponde a un modo de vivir.*'² She asserts that 'ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language.'³ But those who occupy 'the border,' those who have multiple and conflicting subject positions or identity categories – such as a Chicana lesbian – are '*deslanguadas*' [without language] according to Anzaldúa:

*Somos los del español deficiente. We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic mestizaje, the subject of your burla. Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally and linguistically somos huerfanos – we speak an orphan tongue.*⁴

Homi Bhaba argues for a hybridity imagined and articulated through transnational literatures, but Anzaldúa asks in what language such texts can or should be written. What happens when your language is illegitimate, an unacceptable language?

RACE AND POSTCOLONIALISM

Anzaldúa's own essay, in English and in Spanish – sometimes translated, sometimes not – embodies her answer to the problem of dominant and subordinated languages and identities. Her concept of '*la frontera*' is a deconstructive place where everything is '*mita y mita*' – half and half. Anzaldúa sees her linguistic mixture, her '*lenguaje mestiza*' as a mode of empowerment, rejecting both sides of a choice structured as a binary opposition in favor of a more multiple version of W. E. B. du Bois's 'double-voiced discourse.' In her text, as in her multiple identity positions, Anzaldúa is constantly slipping in and out of two or more worlds and world-views, and she claims this slippage as a form of power: 'Maimed, mad, and sexually different people were believed to possess supernatural powers by primal cultures' magico-religious thinking. For them, abnormality was the price a person had to pay for her or his inborn extraordinary gift.'⁵

NOTES

- 1 Homi Bhaba, 'The Location of Culture,' in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds, *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, pp. 939–40.
- 2 Gloria Anzaldúa, 'Borderlands/La Frontera,' in Rivkin and Ryan, eds, *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, p. 895.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 898.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 897.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 890.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Gloria Anzaldúa, *La Frontera/Borderlands*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Press, 1999.
- Bill Ashcroft, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
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- Edward Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.