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4

Culture's In-Between

Homi K. Bhabha

A recent change in the writing of cultural criticisms has left the prose plainer, less adorned with the props of the argument's staging. Where once 'scare quotes' festooned the text with the frequency of garlands at an Indian wedding, there is now a certain sobriety to semiotic and post-structuralist celebrations. The 'isms' and 'alities' – those tails that wagged the dogma of critical belief – no longer wave new paradigms or problematics into being. The death of the author, or the interment of intention, are occurrences that arouse no more scandal than the sight of a hearse in a Palermo suburb. Critical practices that sought to detotalize social reality by demonstrating the micrologies of power, the diverse enunciative sites of discourse, the slippage and sliding of signifiers, are suddenly disarmed.

Having relaxed our guard, hoping perhaps that the intellectual modes we sought to foster had passed into the common discourse of criticism, we are now caught with our pants down. Deprived of our stagecraft, we are asked to face the full frontal reality of the idea of 'Culture' itself – the very concept whose mastery we thought we had dissolved in the language of signifying practices and social formations. This is not our chosen agenda, the terms of debate have been set for us, but in the midst of the culture wars and the canon manoeuvres we can hardly hide behind the aprons of aporia and protest histrionically that there is nothing outside the text. Wherever I look these days I find myself staring into the eyes of a recruiting officer – sometimes he looks like Dinesh D'Souza, sometimes like Robert Hughes – who stares at me intensely and says 'Western Civ. needs you!' At the same time, a limp little voice within me also whispers, 'Critical theory needs you too!'

What is at issue today is not the essentialized or idealized Arnoldian notion of 'culture' as an architectonic assemblage of the Hebraic and the Hellenic. In the midst of the multicultural wars we are surprisingly closer to an insight from T. S. Eliot's *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, where Eliot demonstrates a certain incommensurability, a necessary impossibility, in *thinking* culture. Faced with the fatal notion of a self-contained European culture and the absurd notion of an uncontaminated culture in a single country, he writes, 'We are therefore pressed to maintain the

ideal of a world culture, while admitting it is something we cannot *imagine*. We can only conceive it as the logical term of the relations between cultures.¹ The fatality of thinking of 'local' cultures as uncontaminated or self-contained forces us to conceive of 'global' cultures, which itself remains unimaginable. What kind of logic is this?

It seems to me significant that Eliot, at this undecidable point in his argument, turns to the problematic of colonial migration. Although writing in the main about settler colonial societies, Eliot's words have an ironic resonance with the contemporary condition of third world migration:

The migrations of modern times . . . have transplanted themselves according to some social, religious, economic or political determination, or some peculiar mixture of these. There has therefore been something in the movements analogous in nature to religious schism. The people have taken with them only a part of the total culture. . . . The culture which develops on the new soil must therefore be bafflingly alike and different from the parent culture: it will be complicated sometimes by whatever relations are established with some native race and further by immigration from other than the original source. In this way, peculiar types of culture-sympathy and culture-clash appear.²

This 'part' culture, this *partial* culture, is the contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures – at once the impossibility of culture's containedness and the boundary between. It is indeed something like culture's 'in-between', bafflingly both alike and different. To *enlist* in the defence of this 'unhomely', migratory, partial nature of culture we must revive that archaic meaning of 'list' as 'limit' or 'boundary'. Having done so, we introduce into the polarizations of liberals and liberationists the sense that the translation of cultures, whether assimilative or agonistic, is a complex act that generates borderline affects and identifications, 'peculiar types of culture-sympathy and culture-clash'. The peculiarity of cultures' partial, even metonymic presence lies in articulating those social divisions and unequal developments that disturb the self-recognition of the national culture, its anointed horizons of territory and tradition. The discourse of minorities, spoken for and against in the multicultural wars, proposes a social subject constituted through cultural hybridization, the erdetermination of communal or group differences, the articulation of fling alikeness and banal divergence.

These borderline negotiations of cultural difference often violate liberalism's deep commitment to representing cultural diversity as plural choice. Liberal discourses on multiculturalism experience the fragility of their principles of 'tolerance' when they attempt to withstand the pressure of revision. In addressing the multicultural demand, they encounter the limit of their enshrined notion of 'equal respect'; and they anxiously acknowledge the attenuation in the authority of the Ideal Observer, an authority that oversees the ethical rights (and insights) of the liberal perspective from the top deck of the Clapham omnibus. In contemplating late-liberal culture's engagements with the migratory,

partial culture of minorities, we need to shift our sense of the terrain on which we can best understand the disputes. Here our theoretical understanding – in its most general sense – of 'culture-as-difference' will enable us to grasp the articulation of culture's borderline, unhomely space and time.

Where might this understanding be found?

Despite his susceptibility to consensus, for which he is so widely criticized, Jürgen Habermas's work suggests something of the stressed terrain of culture in the face of social differentiation. Once we give up the universalizing sense of 'the self-referential subject-writ-large, encompassing all individual subjects', Habermas suggests, the risky search for consensus results in the kind of differentiation of the life-world of which loss of meaning, anomie and psychopathologies are the most obvious symptoms.³ As a result, 'the causes of social pathologies that once clustered around the class subject now break into widely scattered historical contingencies'.⁴ The effect of this scattering – migratory difference once more – produces the conditions for an 'ever more finely woven net of linguistically generated intersubjectivity. Rationalization of the life world means differentiation and condensation at once – a thickening of the floating web of intersubjective threads that simultaneously holds together the ever more sharply differentiated components of culture, society and person.'⁵

Multiculturalism – a portmanteau term for anything from minority discourse to postcolonial critique, from gay and lesbian studies to chicano/a fiction – has become the most charged sign for describing the scattered social contingencies that characterize contemporary Kulturkritik. The multicultural has itself become a 'floating signifier' whose enigma lies less in itself than in the discursive uses of it to mark social processes where differentiation and condensation seem to happen almost synchronically. To critique the terms in this widely contested, even contradictory terrain one needs to do more than demonstrate the logical inconsistencies of the liberal position when faced with racist belief. Prejudicial knowledge, racist or sexist, does not pertain to the ethical or logical 'reflectiveness' of the Cartesian subject. It is, as Bernard Williams has described it, 'a belief guarded against reflection'. It requires a 'study of irrationality in social practice . . . more detailed and substantive than the schematic considerations of philosophical theory'.⁶ Multiculturalists committed to the instantiation of social and cultural differences within a democratic *socius* have to deal with a structure of the 'subject' constituted within the 'projective field' of political alienation.⁷ As Etienne Balibar writes, the identificatory language of discrimination works in reverse: 'the racial/cultural identity of "true nationals" remains invisible but is inferred from . . . the quasi-hallucinatory visibility of the "false nationals" – Jews, "wops", immigrants, *indios*, *natives*, blacks'.⁸

Thus constructed, prejudicial knowledge is forever uncertain and in danger, for, as Balibar concludes, 'that the "false" are *too* visible will never

guarantee that the "true" are visible enough'.⁹ This is one reason why multiculturalists who strive to constitute non-discriminatory minority identities cannot simply do so by affirming the place they occupy, or by returning to an 'unmarked' authentic origin or pre-text: their recognition requires the negotiation of a dangerous indeterminacy, since the too-visible presence of the other underwrites the authentic national subject but can never guarantee its visibility or truth. The inscription of the minority subject *somewhere between the too visible and the not visible enough* returns us to Eliot's sense of cultural difference, and intercultural connection, as being beyond logical demonstration. And it requires that the discriminated subject, *even in the process of its reconstitution*, be located in a present moment that is temporarily disjunctive and effectively ambivalent. 'Too late. Everything is anticipated, thought out, demonstrated, made the most of. My trembling hands take hold of nothing: the vein has been mined out. Too late!' Franz Fanon, clearly, is speaking from this time lag¹⁰ in the place of enunciation and identification, dramatizing the moment of racist recognition. The discriminated subject or community occupies a contemporary moment that is historically untimely, forever belated. 'You come too late, much too late. There will always be a world – a white world – between you and us. . . . In the face of this effective ankylosis . . . it is understandable that I could have made up my mind to utter my Negro cry. Little by little, putting out pseudopodia here and there, I secreted a race.'¹¹

By contrast, the liberal dialectic of recognition is at first sight right on time. The subject of recognition stands in a synchronous space (as befits the Ideal Observer), surveying the level playing field that Charles Taylor defines as the quintessential liberal territory: 'the presumption of equal respect' for cultural diversity. History has taught us, however, to be distrustful of things that run on time, like trains. It is not that liberalism does not recognize racial or sexual discrimination – it has been in the forefront of those struggles. But there is a recurrent problem with its notion of equality: liberalism contains a non-differential concept of cultural time. At the point at which liberal discourse attempts to normalize cultural difference, to turn the presumption of equal cultural respect into the recognition of *equal cultural worth*, it does not recognize the disjunctive, 'borderline' temporalities of partial, minority cultures. The sharing of equality is genuinely intended, but only so long as we start from a historically congruent space; the recognition of difference is genuinely felt, but on terms that do not represent the historical genealogies, often postcolonial, that constitute the partial cultures of the minority. This is how Taylor puts it:

The logic behind some of these [multicultural] demands seems to depend upon a premise that we owe equal respect to all cultures. . . . The implication seems to be that . . . true judgements of value of different works would place all cultures more or less on the same footing. Of course, the attack could come from a more radical, neo-Nietzschean standpoint which questions the very status of

judgements of worth. . . . As a presumption, the claim is that all human cultures that have animated *whole* societies over some considerable stretch of time have something important to say to all human beings. I have worded it in this way to *exclude partial cultural milieux within a society as well as short phases of a major culture*. [my emphasis]¹²

Or again:

Merely on the human level, one could argue that it is reasonable to suppose that cultures that have provided the horizon of meaning for *large numbers* of human beings, of diverse characters and temperaments, *over a long period of time* . . . are almost certain to have something that deserves our admiration and respect. [my emphasis]

Obviously the dismissal of partial cultures, the emphasis on large numbers and long periods, is out of time with the modes of recognition of minority or marginalized cultures. Basing the presumption on 'whole societies over some considerable stretch of time' introduces a temporal criterion of cultural worth that elides the disjunctive and displaced present through which minoritization interrupts and interrogates the homogeneous, horizontal claim of the democratic liberal society. But this notion of cultural time functions at other levels besides that of semantics or content. Let us see how this passage locates the observer – how it allows Taylor to turn the presumption of equality into the judgement of worth. The partial, minority culture emphasizes the internal differentiations, the 'foreign bodies', in the midst of the nation – the interstices of its uneven and unequal development, which give the lie to its self-containedness. As Nicos Poulantzas brilliantly argues, *the national state homogenizes differences by mastering social time 'by means of a single, homogeneous measure, which only reduces the multiple temporalities . . . by encoding the distances between them'*.¹³ This conversion of time into distance is observable in the way Taylor's argument produces a spatial binary between whole and partial societies, one as the principle of the other's negation. The double inscription of the part-in-the-whole, or the minority position as the outside of the inside, is disavowed.

Yet something of this 'part-in-the-whole', the minority as at once the internal liminality and the 'foreign body', registers symptomatically in Taylor's discourse. It is best described as the desire for the 'dialogic', a term he takes from Mikhail Bakhtin. But he deprives the 'dialogic' of its hybridizing potential. The most telling symptom of this is that despite his 'presumption of equality' Taylor always presents the multicultural or minority position as an imposition coming from the 'outside' and making its demands from there. 'The challenge is to deal with *their* sense of marginalization without compromising our basic political principles' (my emphasis).¹⁴ In fact the challenge is to deal not with them/us but with the historically and temporally disjunct positions that minorities occupy ambivalently within the nation's space. Taylor's evaluative scheme, which locates the presumption of equality and the recognition of value (the before and the after of liberal judgement) in the *longue durée* of major

national and nationalizing cultures, is in fact antithetical to the Bakhtinian hybrid, which precisely undermines such claims to cultural totalization:

The . . . hybrid is not only double-voiced and double-accented . . . but is also double-langaged; for in it there are not only (and not even so much) two individual consciousnesses, two voices, two accents, as there are [doublings of] socio-linguistic, consciousnesses, two epochs . . . that come together and consciously fight it out on the territory of the utterance. . . . It is the collision between differing points of view on the world that are embedded in these forms . . . such unconscious hybrids have been at the same time profoundly productive historically: they are pregnant with potential for new world views, with new 'internal forms' for perceiving the world in words.¹⁵

Indeed Bakhtin emphasizes a space of enunciation where the negotiation of discursive doubleness by which I do not mean duality or binarism engenders a new speech act. In my own work I have developed the concept of hybridity to describe the construction of cultural authority within conditions of political antagonism or inequity. Strategies of hybridization reveal an estranging movement in the 'authoritative', even authoritarian inscription of the cultural sign. At the point at which the precept attempts to objectify itself as a generalized knowledge or a normalizing, hegemonic practice, the hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of negotiation where power is unequal but its articulation may be equivocal. Such negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration. It makes possible the emergence of an 'interstitial' agency that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism. Hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty. They deploy the partial culture from which they emerge to construct visions of community, and versions of historic memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy; the outside of the inside: the part in the whole.

In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), cultural and communal knowledge comes as a kind of self-love that is also the love of the 'other'. It is an ethical love in that the 'inwardness' of the subject is inhabited by the 'radical and an-archival reference to the "other"'¹⁶. This knowledge is visible in those intriguing chapters where Sethe, Beloved, and Denver perform a ceremony of claiming and naming through intersecting and interstitial subjectivities: 'Beloved, she my daughter', 'Beloved is my sister', 'I am beloved and she is mine.'¹⁷ The women speak in tongues, from a fugal space 'in between each other' which is a communal space. They explore an 'interpersonal' reality: a social reality that appears within the poetic image as if it were in parenthesis aesthetically distanced, held back, yet historically framed. It is difficult to convey the rhythm and the improvisation of those chapters, but it is impossible not to see them in the healing of history, a community reclaimed in the making of a name. As I have written elsewhere.

Who is Beloved?

Now we understand. She is the daughter that returns to Sethe so that her mind will be homeless no more.

Who is Beloved?

Now we may say: She is the sister that returns to Denver, and brings hope of her father's return, the fugitive who died in his escape.

Who is Beloved?

Now we know: She is the daughter made of murderous love who returns to love and hate and free herself. Her words are broken, like the lynched people with broken necks, disembodied, like the dead children who lost their ribbons. But there is no mistaking what her live words say as they rise from the dead despite their lost syntax and their fragmented presence.

'My face is coming I have to have it I am looking for the join I am loving my face so much I want to join I am loving my face so much my dark face is close to me I want to join.'¹⁸

The idea that history repeats itself, commonly taken as a statement about historical determinism, emerges frequently within liberal discourses when consensus fails, and when the consequences of cultural incommensurability make the world a difficult place. At such moments, the past is seen as returning, with uncanny punctuality, to render the 'event' timeless, and the narrative of its emergence transparent.

Do we best cope with the reality of 'being contemporary', its conflicts and crises, its losses and lacerations, by endowing history with a long memory that we then interrupt, or startle, with our own amnesia? How did we allow ourselves to forget, we say to ourselves, that the nationalist violence between Hindus and Muslims lies just under the skin of India's secular modernity? Should we not have 'remembered' that the old Balkan tribes would form again? These questions emphasize an observation that is becoming increasingly commonplace: the rise of religious 'fundamentalisms', the spread of nationalist movements, the redefinitions of claims to race and ethnicity, it is claimed, have returned us to an earlier historical movement, a resurgence or restaging of what historians have called the long nineteenth century. Underlying this claim is a deeper unease, a fear that the engine of social transformation is no longer the aspiration to a democratic common culture. We have entered an anxious age of identity, in which the attempt to memorialize lost time, and to reclaim lost territories, creates a culture of disparate 'interest groups' or social movements. Here affiliation may be antagonistic and ambivalent; solidarity may be *only* situational and strategic: commonality is often negotiated through the 'contingency' of social interests and political claims.

Narratives of historical reconstruction may reject such myths of social transformation: communal memory may seek its meanings through a sense of causality shared with psychoanalysis, that negotiates the recurrence of the image of the past while keeping open the question of the future. The importance of such retroaction lies in its ability to reinscribe the past, reactivate it, relocate it, *resignify it*. More significant, it commits our understanding of the past, and our reinterpretation of the future, to an ethics of 'survival' that allows us to *work through the present*. And such a working through, or working out, frees us from the determinism of

historical inevitability repetition *without a difference*. It makes it possible for us to confront that difficult borderline, the interstitial experience between what we take to be the image of the past and what is in fact involved in the passing of time and the passage of meaning.

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Notes

- 1 T.S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1949, p. 62.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64.
- 3 Jürgen Habermas, 'The normative content of modernity', in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA: 1987, p. 348.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 346.
- 6 Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1985, p. 116.
- 7 Etienne Balibar, 'Paradoxes of universality,' in David Theo Goldberg (ed.), *Anatomy of Racism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and Oxford, 1990, p. 284.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 285.
- 10 See my 'Race, time, and the revision of modernity', in *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994.
- 11 Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lamb Markmann, Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1967, pp. 121–2.
- 12 Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and 'The Politics of Recognition'*, Princeton: University Press, Princeton, 1992, pp. 66–7.
- 13 Nicos Poulantzas, *State Power and Socialism*, trans. Patrick Camiller, NLB, London, 1978, p. 110.
- 14 Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, p. 63.
- 15 Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', in Michael Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981, p. 360.
- 16 See Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Reality and its shadow', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff, Dordrecht, the Netherlands, and Boston 1987, pp. 1–13.
- 17 Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Plume/NAL, New York, 1987, pp. 200–17.
- 18 From my essay 'The home and the world', in *Social Text*, 10: 2 and 3, 1992, pp. 141–53, in which I develop this line of argument concerning Morrison's *Beloved* at greater length.

5

Interrupting Identities: Turkey/Europe

Kevin Robins

Seen from this perspective, the world today lives in the climate of a single universal civilization, but one which has its own specificities, obvious or hidden, that depend on the various peoples.

Adonis

... for amnesty and against amnesia.

Adam Michnik

In general, I am concerned with the possibilities of dynamism and openness in cultural identities, and consequently with what inhibits and resists such qualities, promoting in their place rigidity and closure. Change implies the capacity to relinquish at least aspects of a given identity. This, however, is likely to provoke feelings of anxiety and fear in the collectivity (Shall we not suffer through our loss? What shall we be turned into?). This is a basic fear about the mortality of the collective institution. It is, as Cornelius Castoriadis maintains, 'the fear, which is in fact quite justified, that everything, even meaning, will dissolve'.¹ In defence against such a catastrophic eventuality, the collectivity will assert the possibility of its self-perpetuation, elaborating myths and symbolic representations concerned with a 'perennial meaning' and 'imaginary immortality' in the culture. Following Castoriadis, we might see these in terms of cultural repetition: repetition (in the psychoanalytical sense) being 'the small change of death' through which an institution defends itself against the reality of 'wholesale death'.² There is a kind of living deadness in a culture that does not admit the possibility of its own mortality.

In Castoriadis's view, it is western culture that has most effectively and creatively resisted this logic of closure, through what he calls its 'project of autonomy'. He argues that what has been distinctive in Graeco-Western history 'is the rupture of this closure, and the questioning of all signification, institutions and representations established by the tribe'.³ In thus acknowledging the potential mortality of every instituted signification, it has made itself into a historical culture – the historical culture *par excellence*. For Castoriadis, it was in the high period of European modernity that this questioning and self-questioning spirit