

HOMI K. BHABHA

## Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences (1988)

*Postcolonialist critic Homi Bhabha questions whether our focus on cultural diversity does not lead to polarization. He advocates focusing on cultural differences through a third space, a hybridity to define others and ourselves. How significant are the ideological positions of Franz Fanon and Wilson Harris on postcolonialism and colonial imperialism to Bhabha's concept? How does Bhabha enter discussions about differences with Sneed? How might Bhabha be read along with Henry Louis Gates Jr. in "Writing 'Race,' and the Difference It Makes"? Define the following terms: hybridity, the Third Space, international culture, difference, diversity.*

[T]he revision of the history of critical theory rests . . . on the notion of cultural difference, not cultural diversity. Cultural diversity is an epistemological object—culture as an object of empirical knowledge—whereas cultural difference is the process of the enunciation of culture as “knowledgeable,” authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification. If cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics, or ethnology, cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity. Cultural diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural “contents” and customs, held in a time-frame of relativism; it gives rise to anodyne 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 unscathed by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in the Utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity. Cultural diversity may even emerge as a system of the articulation and exchange of cultural signs in certain . . . imperialist accounts of anthropology.

Through the concept of cultural difference I want to draw attention to the common ground and lost territory of contemporary critical debates. For they all recognize that the problem of the cultural emerges only at the signifi-  
catory boundaries of cultures, where meanings and values are misread or signs are misappropriated. . . .

The time of liberation is, as Fanon powerfully evokes, a time of cultural uncertainty, and most crucially, of signifiatory or representational undecidability:

But [native intellectuals] forget that the forms of thought and what [they] feed . . . on, together with modern techniques of information, language and dress have dialectically reorganized the people's intelligences and *the constant principles (of national art)* which acted as safeguards during the colonial period are now undergoing extremely radical changes . . . [We] must join the people in that fluctuating movement which they are *just* giving a shape to . . . which will be the signal for everything to be called into question . . . it is to the zone of *occult instability* where the people dwell that we must come.

(My emphasis) (Fanon 1967: 168)

The enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address. It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated, and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic. That iteration negates our sense of the origins of the struggle. It undermines our sense of the homogenizing effects of cultural symbols and icons, by questioning our sense of the authority of cultural synthesis in general.

This demands that we rethink our perspective on the identity of culture. Here Fanon's passage—somewhat reinterpreted—may be helpful. What is implied by his juxtaposition of the constant national principles with his view of culture-as-political-struggle, which he so enigmatically and beautifully describes as “the zone of occult instability where the people dwell”? These ideas not only help to explain the nature of colonial struggle. They also suggest a possible critique of the positive aesthetic and political values we ascribe to the unity or totality of cultures, especially those that have known long and tyrannical histories of domination and misrecognition. Cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation to Self to Other. This is not because of some humanistic nostrum that beyond individual cultures we all belong to the human culture of mankind; nor is it because of an ethical relativism that suggests that in our cultural capacity to speak of and judge Others we necessarily “place ourselves in their position,” in a kind of relativism of distance of which Bernard Williams has written at length (Williams 1985: ch. 9).

The reason a cultural text or system of meaning cannot be sufficient unto itself is that the act of cultural enunciation—the place of utterance—is crossed by the difference of writing orécriture. This has less to do with what anthropologists might describe as varying attitudes to symbolic systems

within different cultures than with the structure of symbolic representation—not the content of the symbol or its “social function,” but the structure of symbolization. It is the “difference” in language that is crucial to the production of meaning and ensures, at the same time, that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent.

The linguistic difference that informs any cultural performance is dramatized in the common semiotic account of the disjuncture between the subject of a proposition (enonce) and the subject of enunciation, which is not represented in the statement but which is the acknowledgment of its discursive embeddedness and address, its cultural positionality, its reference to a present time and a specific space. The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implications of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot “in itself” be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation. . . .

The intervention of the Third Space, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is continuously revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People. In other words, the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the narrative of the Western nation which Benedict Anderson so perceptively describes as being written in homogeneous, serial time (Anderson 1983: ch 2).

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality of “purity” of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity. Fanon’s vision of revolutionary cultural and political change as a “fluctuating movement” of occult instability could not be articulated as cultural practice without an acknowledgment of this indeterminate space of the subject(s) of enunciation. It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity of fixity, that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew.

Fanon’s moving metaphor—when reinterpreted for a theory of cultural signification—enables us to see not only the necessity of theory, but also the restrictive notions of cultural identity with which we burden our visions of political change. For Fanon, the liberatory “people” who initiate the produc-

tive instability of revolutionary cultural change are themselves the bearers of a hybrid identity. They are caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation, in the sense in which I have been attempting to recast these works. In the moment of liberatory struggle, the Algerian people destroy the continuities and constancies of the “nationalist” tradition which provided a safeguard against colonial cultural imposition. They are now free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference. The native intellectual who identifies the people with the “true national culture” will be disappointed. The people are now the very principle of “dialectical reorganization” and they construct their culture from the national text translated into modern Western forms of information technology, language, dress. The changed political and historical site of enunciation transforms the meanings of the colonial inheritance into the liberatory signs of a free people of the future.

I have been stressing a certain void or misgiving attending every assimilation of contraries—I have been stressing this in order to expose what seems to me a fantastic mythological congruence of elements . . . And if indeed therefore any real sense is to be made of material change it can only occur with an acceptance of a concurrent void and with a willingness to descend into that void wherein, as it were, one may begin to come into confrontation with a spectre of invocation whose freedom to participate in an alien territory and wilderness has become a necessity for one’s reason or salvation.

(Harris 1973a: 60–3)

This mediation by the great Guyanese writer Wilson Harris on the void of misgiving in the textuality of colonial history reveals the cultural and historical dimension of that Third Space of enunciation which I have made the precondition for the articulation of cultural difference. He sees it as accompanying the “assimilation of contraries” and creating that occult instability which presages powerful cultural changes. It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory—where I have led you—may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism or multi-culturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity. To that end we should remember that it is the “inter”—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between, the space of the entire that Derrida has opened up in writing itself—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, antinationalist, histories of the “people.” It is in this space that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this hybridity, this “Third Space,” we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.

*Suggested Readings with Similar Theme:*

- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., ed. "Race," *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- Olaniyan, Tejumola. "On 'Post-Colonial Discourse': An Introduction." *Callaloo* 16, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 743-49.
- Davies, Carol Boyce. "From 'Post-Coloniality' to Uprising Textualities: Black Women Writing the Critique of Empire." In *Black Women Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, 80-95. New York: Routledge, 1994.

JOY HARIO

## An Interview with June Jordan (1988)

*Jordan addresses general problems with the craft of contemporary poetry. How do her comments transcend literary periods? How might the following quotable lines from Jordan lead to dialogue about the function of contemporary poetry and the role of the contemporary poet: "You cannot have any art without form . . . I am consciously and self-consciously both seeking to represent as a poet not only my own experiences . . . but also the experiences of people . . . different . . . from my usual habitat." How does Jordan expand discussions about the role of the African American artist? Define the following terms: vertical poem/poetry, horizontal movement, free verse, and safe place.*

**Interviewer:** Alice Walker has eloquently stated in an interview in the anthology, *The Third Woman*, that we are all working on the same large story. In your first collection of political essays, *Civil Wars*, in an essay written in 1977 addressing how you came to be a poet, you mention the black women poets who were as you say, working on the same poem of a life of perpetual difficult birth. It is now ten years later. What do you feel you have given birth to in your poetry? That's one part of the question. And secondly and perhaps unanswerably, what might that collective poem look like that we are all participating in?

**Jordan:** First, I think I have been giving birth to myself, progressively, as I have become able to understand and able to tell about what I feel and what I think in every context of my social experience. And I think I have been giving birth to an enlargement of options for other American poets who support the quest on my part for increasing authentic varieties of the American language and our intended multiplying of forms which may qualify as valid poetic form; and third (technical, personal) I believe I have been giving birth to a coherent world view which is passionately determined to include more and more different kinds of people. And because during the last six or seven years I have been privileged to receive more invitations to read my poetry across this country than I can possibly accept, I am able to suppose that these undertakings of my own have perhaps some positive influence and perhaps provide some necessary encouragement of other poets—my peers and younger poets as well. As far as the large collective poem that we are all writing, how would I describe that?