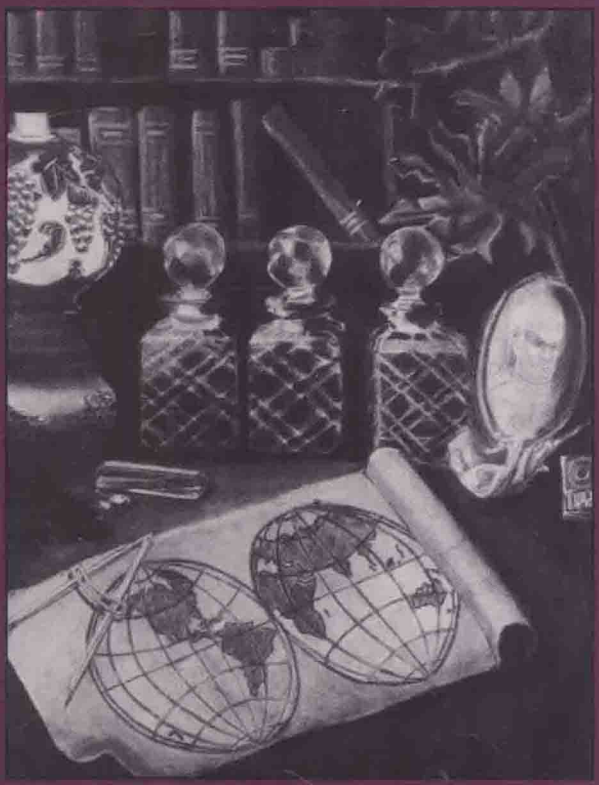
Using the Master's Tools

Resistance and the Literature of the African and South Asian Diasporas



Anuradha Dingwaney Needham

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Resistance and the Literature of the African and South Asian Diaspora

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Introduction

In this book [Outside in the Teaching Machine] *I have repeatedly emphasized the formula of the new politics of reading: not to excuse, not to accuse, establish critical intimacy, use (or ab-use) the seeming weak moments for scrupulous ends.*

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

[Walter] Benjamin was always reluctant to assume individual phenomena under general concepts and advocated that the writer [and also the reader?] should cultivate a sensitivity both to the uniqueness, importance, and complexity of individual detail . . . and to the network of relations—what he called "constellations"—in which they are embedded, drawn together, and made meaningful.

—Dick Hebdige

1.

This is a book about resistance in the texts in English of a select group of primarily literary writers, most of whom are from the formerly colonized countries of the Caribbean, Africa, and South Asia and who now reside (or have resided for extended periods of time) in the West—mainly Britain, but also, in a couple of instances, the United States. Specifically, the writers whose work this book focuses on are C. L. R. James, Salman Rushdie, Ama Ata Aidoo, Michelle Cliff, and Hanif Kureishi. At first glance what might seem a curious mix of writers will not, I hope, seem so curious after all once I have had the opportunity, in this introduction and the chapters that follow, to demonstrate significant affinities in their positions on, and enactments of, resistance, which accrue, in large part, from their locations within the metropole.[1] Residence within the metropole, I argue, is an enabling condition of the work of all five

writers. Or to out it another way, the metropole is the site that has generated not only Western/metropolitan knowledge(s) about the colonial others, but also, as I seek to demonstrate, the negotiations—including overt contestations and acute modifications—of these knowledge(s) by these writers from the so-called colonial peripheries, now situated "at the heart," as Antoinette Burton entitles her work alluding to a somewhat different context "of [a former colonial] empire." Adapting from Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash's definition of resistance in their introduction to *Contesting Power,* by resistance I mean, in particular forms of "cultural [/textual] practice[s] by subordinate [i.e., formerly colonized] groups [and individuals] . . . contest[ing]" the hegemony of their former colonizers, Britain, in particular, and Europe, in general.

The primary audience of these writers' texts is also situated in the West. But insofar as these texts also circulate in the (formerly) colonized spaces of the Caribbean, Africa, and the Indian subcontinent, these texts address audiences in these spaces as well.

Through close readings of selected texts by these writers, this book seeks to enlarge or, at the very least, to modify our understanding of the subject by studying diverse strategies and enactments of resistance as products of specific historical circumstances and rhetorical exigencies and their modes of recuperation. This entails attending as well to those mediations—of ideology, theoretical and other assumptions, desires and expectations—that underpin not only the ways in which these writers conceptualize resistance but also how we as readers recuperate their conceptualizations.

The inquiry from which this book has emerged itself arose from a sense of unease and dissatisfaction based on two interrelated sources: 1) the recognition of a lack of fit sometimes between what a writer conceived of as his or her counterhegemonic practice and a recuperation of this practice via a notion of resistance at odds with this conception such that it was rendered invalid or, most often, ignored altogether; 2) the recognition, more generally, that most discussions of resistance, in the process, perhaps, of authorizing their views, were framed to exclude (even disparage) those conceptions of resistance that ran counter to their own emphases. For example, in courses in which I have taught C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins* (1938) and *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), his deep embeddedness in and invocations of his "Englishness" have proven to be deterrents to any serious consideration of his revolutionary credentials as a theorist of (and actor, in some cases, in) decolonization movements in the Caribbean and Africa. In a related fashion, a focus on the predominantly positive reception accorded to Rushdie's work in the West has led readers like Timothy Brennan, for instance, to construe Rushdie as a "cosmopolitan" writer whose literary "eye" is fixed on, and a product of his (i.e., Rushdie's) efforts to satisfy the

expectations of the metropolitan publishing industry and readership. While proffering a valuable framework within which the "methods of cosmopolitanism" can be evaluated, such a perspective nonetheless gives short shrift to Rushdie's own claims about his subversive positioning, which, while not at odds with his "cosmopolitanism," cannot simply be reduced to it either.

Deploying a different point of departure, I am not so much interested in contesting such views as I am in providing a different angle of vision through which resistance in the texts of writers like James and Rushdie can also be conceptualized. Once we have acknowledged and engaged with the impact of Western epistemologies, including their "technolog[ies] of cultural meaning" (which is how Burton aptly defines representations [8]), is it possible, I ask, to discern counterhegemonic knowledge(s) and procedures at work in these texts? My analysis argues that it is not only possible but also necessary, certainly if we are to give credence to these writers' own assessments about their practice.

There is a third, arguably just as important impetus for this study. At the time it was conceived, the more substantive and valuable treatments of resistance, revolving around questions of definition and interpretation, and theorizing on the basis of specific historically situated examples, tended to appear in the human and social sciences—anthropology, history, politics.[2] (In section 2 of this introduction, I will have occasion to examine, in some detail, select examples of this work.) Given that "Third World" literatures were being (and still are) in the process of being incorporated within English department curricula in metropolitan universities, and given, moreover, that resistance, as I will demonstrate shortly, was (and still is) a prominent rubric under which materials from the "Third World" were (and are) being studied, there was for those of us who teach these literatures a pedagogical need for bringing into our analyses of these literatures the insights generated by the work on resistance in the human and social sciences. My book attempts to address this need.

But to further clarify the parameters of this study, why it was undertaken and what it seeks to accomplish, a more extended account of its initial impetus is necessary.

2.

When I was hired to teach "anglophone literatures of the 'Third World'" at Oberlin College, I outlined (in the syllabus for what has come to function as a "core" course in these literatures) what I then perceived as key issues or questions pertaining to the difficulties in defining what was then a quite "new" field of knowledge.[3] Included in the outline were questions

about the usefulness of categories like the "Third World," of concepts like "postcoloniality," "marginality," and so forth. Since the course was heavily weighted toward a study of novels, many of them in the "realist" vein, I raised questions pertaining to the ideology of this genre. And I asked whether or not these texts, emerging from and/or about the formerly colonized anglophone "Third World," could be usefully studied as enactments of textual resistance as I have defined it above.

Not surprisingly, resistance was the preferred topic for our discussions, found capacious enough not only to include the means by which all the works we were studying could be discussed, but also to subsume the other questions I had raised within its folds. Nor was this an idiosyncratic choice on the part of my students. For if we look at the by now fairly extensive scholarship, in a variety of disciplines, on what are defined as "Third World" (or "postcolonial") subjects, resistance—as subject matter, strategy, even a way of being—figures prominently in this scholarship.[4]

What I did find somewhat disconcerting at first, however, was the sharpness, clarity, and ease with which my students felt they could distinguish between writers, works, and cultural practices they found resistant and those they did not. Moreover, the sharpness and clarity of their distinctions, with few exceptions, depended on or was underpinned by a stark dichotomy that pitted (a predatory, dominant) "West" against (a subordinate, victimized) non-Western "Third World." Any writer, work, or cultural practice that did not aggressively confront and reject the "West" or anything "Western" was declared a witting or unwitting accomplice of the "West"—deemed enthralled by and thus collusive with its value systems. By definition, then, such a writer, work, or cultural practice could not be characterized as resistant.[5] Concomitantly, those writers, works, or cultural practices that declared, mostly in a vocabulary of cultural nationalism, their unremitting opposition to everything Western were, again by definition, found resistant. As my students elaborated upon their judgments, it was hard not to be struck by the irony of these judgments being made in a privileged corner of the West they excoriated. It was also hard not to be struck by the fact that *all* the works we were reading were written in English, by writers from the middle and upper classes, whose incorporation, no matter how selectively achieved, into Western ways of thinking and being could not be so easily gainsaid.

The desire for purity, for a resistant subject and subject matter somehow uncontaminated and therefore uncompromised by (or despite) its encounter with the West, which fueled my students' assessments of what counts as resistance, is not restricted to my students alone. It haunts a fairly substantial and intellectually respectable strand in analyses of resistance in a number of essays and books on the "Third World." In these essays and

books, for example, the dichotomy on which my students' judgments were based is also in evidence, albeit in a more attenuated form, because it is framed by more learned and theoretically informed scholarship and sometimes couched within appropriate disclaimers. To mention but two recent examples of such work, both from literary-cultural studies, this dichotomy underpins as insightful and provocative a study as Tim Brennan's on "Third World" "cosmopolitan" writers, as, too, it underpins Benita Parry's impressive and rigorous defense of anti-colonial nationalisms.[6]

Investigating the conjuncture between negative assessments of all nationalisms in the West, particularly by prominent Western scholars, and the positive reception accorded, again in the West, to "cosmopolitans and celebrities" like Salman Rushdie from the "Third World," who also exemplify "a dismissive and parodic attitude towards the project of national culture," Brennan sharply distinguishes "cosmopolitanism" from "what Barbara Harlow . . . calls 'resistance literature,' the literature of independence movements" ("Cosmopolitans and Celebrities" 7, 4). In "cosmopolitanism," says Brennan, an "artistic embrace of the West" is accompanied by a "rejection of the caustic mentality of resistance" ("Cosmopolitans and Celebrities" 4).[7] He restates this distinction between a Western-oriented (and nurtured) "cosmopolitanism" and authentic forms of "Third World" resistance when, defining the former as "involv[ing] not so much an elite at home, as it does spokespersons for a kind of perennial immigration, valorized by a rhetoric of wandering," Brennan asserts that "cosmopolitanism," by definition almost, "violates an important Third World mode," which, in his critical exegesis on "cosmopolitans and celebrities," he links integrally with a commitment to "Third World" national(ist) agendas ("Cosmopolitans and Celebrities" 2, 10). Brennan's strong critique of "cosmopolitanism," underwritten by the binarism the West versus the rest, is valuable precisely because it implicitly urges us to interrogate critically those discussions of "migrancy" and diasporic position(ings) in postcolonial and cultural studies that see resistance often only as a function of migrant or diasporic locations within the West. Additionally, though my study does not view resistance as a function only (or even primarily) of migrant or diasporic locations, insofar as it does focus on the resistances we can discern in the texts of migrant writers in the metropole, Brennan's critique offers an important counterpoint to a study like mine. Juxtaposed with each other, they can help define the (inevitable) limits of each other.

Like Brennan, Parry, too, finds in anti-colonial ("Third World") nationalisms and nativist positions and formulations important sites for resistance. Somewhat differently from Brennan, however, the objects of her critique are those theories of "colonial discourse" (like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's

and Homi Bhabha's, for instance) that, drawing upon and exemplifying deconstructive and poststructuralist methods, blur or render ambivalent the boundaries between domination and resistance, colonizer and colonized. In so doing, they displace, even obscure what Parry, quoting from Frantz Fanon, characterizes as the "'murderous and decisive struggle between two protagonists" ("Problems" 43).[8] Emphasizing conflict and antagonism, with the colonizer and colonized functioning as "hostile interlocutors" ("Signs" 12) and implacable opponents, Parry locates resistance in "another knowledge and alternative traditions" ("other" and "alternative," that is, to the colonizer's), which are the possessions of the "[colonized] native as historical subject and combatant" ("Problems" 34).[9]

Of course, there is also an extensive body of work on resistances enacted by the oppressed, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised in the context of anti-colonial and other struggles against domination, which refuses a singular or clear-cut model on which resistance is (or can be) based and/or evaluated. (This body of work, incidentally, constitutes the privileged mode of analysis in studies of resistance, unlike Brennan's and Parry's, for example, which constitutes a "minority" strand, as it were.) Additionally, in a number of instances, this work, on principled and pragmatic grounds like Brennan's and Parry's, refuses to draw the lines clearly and decisively between domination and resistance, colonizer and colonized. Heterogeneous in terms of its points of departure, theoretical assumptions, and ideological investments and agendas, this work underscores "the difficulty of situating resistance" (Sharpe 147), not the least because the meaning of a resistant act, or practice, or event, is not transparent or simply "given"; instead, as James Scott points out, "it is socially constructed" (205), a product of interpretation in which historical moment and milieu interact with the purposes and interests of those assigning meaning. Eschewing the tendency to focus on confrontation and overt trials of strength as constitutive elements of resistance, this work has expanded the scope of what counts as resistance by taking on board a whole range of humbler and less obvious or visible strategies and processes through which sociopolitical and cultural transformations are accomplished.

Jean Comaroff, for example, in her study of tribal life in South Africa, urges us not "to discount," as we are likely to if we focus only on "revolutionary success," "the vast proportion of social action . . . played out on a humbler scale." For if we do so, she adds, "we also avoid, by teleological reasoning, the real question as to what are the transformative motors of history" (quoted in O'Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject" 215). In a similar vein, Stuart Hall, while noting that the "classic metaphors of transformation are modeled on 'the revolutionary moment,'" points out how the contributions to *Resistance Through Ritual* (a volume of essays on "Youth

Subcultures in Post-war Britain," published by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, of which Hall was a director) "actively distanced [themselves] from the classical metaphors" because these metaphors were inadequate in accounting for those "forms of disaffiliation . . . which were in some sense challenges to and negotiations of the dominant order but which could not be assimilated to the traditional categories of revolutionary class struggle." By proffering instead of the "reform/revolution antinomies" analysis that drew upon the "Gramscian notion of 'repertoires of resistance,' which [the essays] insisted were always conjunturally defined and historically specific," *Resistance Through Ritual* also proffered "an expanded definition of social rupture" through which transformations within a society are produced ("For Allon White" 294).

In another influential model for studying resistance, James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* argues that there is a range in the strategies and political discourse subordinate groups deploy in their interactions with those who dominate and have power over them. Among these, he scrutinizes the modalities represented, on the one hand, by the "public transcript," which describes the "public performance of the subordinate [that, "with rare . . . exceptions,"] will out of prudence, fear, and the desire to curry favor, be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful," and is therefore "accommodationist" in tone (2, 3), and, on the other, the "hidden transcript," which "characterize[s] discourse that takes place off-stage, beyond the direct observation by powerholders" (3). He also scrutinizes a range of practices located between these two. Through the "hidden transcript" a "sharply dissonant culture is possible" (15), but typically the "hidden transcript" "consists of off-stage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript" (3). Noting that the "hidden transcript . . . is specific to a given social site and . . . elaborated among a restricted 'public,'" Scott also expands the definition of resistance(s) it enables to include a "whole range of practices . . . such as poaching, pilfering, clandestine tax evasion, and intentionally shabby work for the landlord" by peasants (14). These practices, easy to disregard in (or not even visible to) analyses that privilege open confrontation or direct challenges to domination, are here brought within the purview of what might also constitute resistance via attention to local, small-scale, and humbler actions through which subordinate groups manage to "imply that they are grudging conscripts to the performances" elicited by the "public transcript" (15).[10]

Like Scott, for whom the "frontier between the public and hidden transcripts is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate—not a solid wall" (14), the cultural-materialist analysis of theorists like Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore draws upon the insights of Raymond

Williams to argue "the co-occurrence of subordinate, alternative, oppositional cultural forms alongside the dominant, in varying relations of incorporation, negotiation, and resistance" (Sinfield 9). Thus, both Sinfield and Dollimore urge assiduous attention to those moments of "conflict and contradiction that the social order inevitably produces within itself, even as it attempts to sustain itself," because it is in these moments that we can discern the "inability or refusal" on the part of the subordinate "to identify . . . with [the interests of] the dominant, and hence where dissidence may arise" (Sinfield 41–42). For Dollimore (whose *Sexual Dissidence* examines a range of resistant, or rather, dissident practices from attempts by the subordinate at inclusion in the dominant to deviant identifications, such as inversions or perversions, by the subordinate with the dominant's cherished values, beliefs, and self-descriptions), because "contradictions render social processes the site for contest, struggle, and change," making contradictions visible "contributes to transgressive or dissident knowledge" (88). This work in cultural materialism, incidentally, has also added to the vocabulary through which a range of resistance practices can be specified—dissident/dissidence, subvert/subversion, transgress/transgression—and whose meanings extend from disagreement and dissent to the more potent overthrow or ruin or destruction of something established, like a government or institution or belief.

Resistances enacted by women have provided especially fertile ground for theorizing "unlikely forms of resistance"—resistances that are "subversions," as Lila Abu-Lughod puts it, "rather than large-scale collective insurrections, small or local resistances not tied to the overthrow of systems or even ideologies of emancipation (41). In an account that marries, as it were, the insights of feminist theor(ies) with those of Scott's and others on the more pervasive, "everyday" forms of resistance, Abu-Lughod's "The Romance of Resistance" looks at "the changing situation of women in a Bedouin community in Eygpt's western desert." Employing Foucault's formulations about power and resistance as her starting point, Abu-Lughod's interest in using "resistance as a *diagnostic* of power" leads her to what "the rich and sometimes contradictory details of resistance" by these women tell us about "the workings of social power (42). The Bedouin women she interviewed and writes about in this essay, she says, both collude with and resist their confinement within a gender ideology "enforced by the elder men of their community" by "enact[ing] all sorts of minor defiances" that are yet practiced within the parameters of what is defined as their space in a "system [underwritten by patriarchal ideologies] of sexual segregation"; but they make this space an enabling one, "fiercely protect[ing] the inviolability of [this] separate sphere" because this is the arena within which their "defiances can take place" (43).[11]

A majority of the accounts that look for and discern resistances in unlikely places focus as well on the complexities and ambiguities in motivations and processes leading up to the performances of resistance. Additionally, arguing, as does Sherry Ortner, for example, that "individual acts of resistance, as well as large-scale resistance movements, are often themselves conflicted, internally contradictory, and effectively ambivalent in large part because of these internal complexities" (287), scholars contributing to our understanding of these forms of resistance argue that the forms of domination that provoke these individual and collective acts of resistance are also themselves marked by contradictions and ambiguities and are therefore not exempt from internal instabilities and incoherence. Included among these accounts of contradictions and ambiguities within resistance and domination are analyses that address what Simon Gikandi, in a somewhat different context, characterizes as "the mutual imbrication and contamination" of the dominant and the subordinate, colonizer and colonized (xviii), which in turn renders each "impure," or, as Stuart Hall puts it, "inextricably mixed" and "hybrid" ("For Allon White" 292). Thus, we are reminded again and again that the categories through which we set out to examine resistance (and domination), should be flexible, "multifarious and nuanced" (Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject" 281).[12]

The studies of resistance that addresses the "mutual imbrication" of the discourses of the dominant and the subordinate are able to better (and more persuasively) account for the forms of resistance we can discern in literary texts, as I point out in my opening remarks, that are most often taught in courses on the "Third World" in metropolitan universities. Primarily in English, these texts about the "Third World" also constitute one of the predominant ways in which the "Third World" is made available and consumed in the West. I should also add that insofar as such understandings of resistance speak more accurately to my own experience and cultural and intellectual formation, I often tend in my own courses to choose several literary texts that foreground mixtures and impurities in practices and/or strategies of resistance. (Examples of these literary texts include: Merle Hodge's *Crick-Crack Monkey,* Tsi Tsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions,* Bessie Head's *A Question of Power,* Earl Lovelace's *The Wine of Astonishment,* Tayib Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (originally published in Arabic but now easily available in a fine English translation) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children, Shame,* and *The Moor's Last Sigh.* Incidentally, a number of these texts address the "mixed blessing" that colonial education turns out to be.) For as a recipient of what is often thought of as a classic instance of (neo-)colonial education (I was educated in a convent run by Irish nuns, with a college degree in English literature that focused exclusively on canonical English texts), I have found that my cultural and