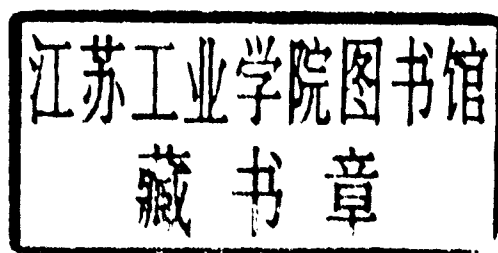Homi K.
Bhabha

The Location of Culture

With a new preface by the author

London and New York

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PREFACE TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION [1]

LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD: NOTES ON VERNACULAR COSMOPOLITANISM

I was not one of midnight's children. [2] My belated birth, some years after the midnight hour that marked India's tryst with freedom, absented me from that epochal narrative. I was not there to witness the emergence of India and Pakistan, born together from a cleft womb, still as restless in relation to each other as the day they stepped into the harsh light of nationhood. But great events persist beyond their happening, leaving a sense of expectation in the air like the telling vacancy of weather, the silence, that often follows a spectacular storm, never letting you forget that it happened. My childhood was filled with accounts of India's struggle for Independence, its complicated histories of subcontinental cultures caught in that deadly embrace of Imperial power and domination that always produces an uncomfortable residue of enmity and amity. In a small way, my early life was caught on the crossroads that marked the end of

Empire: the postcolonial drive towards the new horizons of a Third World of free nations, the Bandung spirit, embroiled, at times, with a desire for the wayward modernist art and literature of Europe that was so much a part of the world of the westernized Indian bourgeoisie. Growing up in Bombay as a middle-class Parsi – a member of a small Zoroastrian-Persian minority in a predominantly Hindu and Muslim context – I never imagined that I would live elsewhere. Years later, I ask myself what it would be like to live without the unresolved tensions between cultures and countries that have become the narrative of my life, and the defining characteristic of my work.

Setting out from Bombay in the 1970s to study English at Oxford was, in many ways, the culmination of an Indian middle class trajectory where formal education and 'high' culture colluded in emulating the canons of elite 'English' taste (or what we knew of it) and conforming to its customs and comforts. My everyday life, however, provided quite a different inheritance. It was lived in that rich cultural mix of languages and lifestyles that most cosmopolitan Indian cities celebrate and perpetuate in their vernacular existence – 'Bombay' Hindustani, 'Parsi' Gujarati, mongrel Marathi, all held in a suspension of Welsh-missionary-accented English peppered with an Anglo-Indian *patois* that was sometimes cast aside for American slang picked up from the movies or popular music.

Learning to work with the contradictory strains of languages *lived*, and languages *learned*, has the potential for a remarkable critical and creative impulse. At times, the English language had the archaic feel of a carved almirah that engulfed you in the faded smell of moth-balls and beautiful brittle linens; at other times it had the mix-and-match quality of a moveable feast, like Bombay street food, spicy, cheap, available in all kinds of quantities and combinations, subtle delicacies with a street-wise savour. I went to Oxford to embellish the antique charms of the armoire; I ended up realizing how much I desired street food.

Why was I intellectually fascinated but unmoved, when I found myself at the academic acme of the literary culture that I had chosen to follow?

Fumbling towards an answer to that question brings me closer to the critical lesson that I was to learn in my early years as an apprentice academic working in the West. It was this: what one expects to find at the very *center* of life or literature – the summation of a Great Tradition, a touchstone of Taste – may only be the dream of the deprived, or the illusion of the powerless. The canonical 'center' may, indeed, be most interesting for its elusiveness, most compelling as an enigma of authority. What was missing from the traditionalist world of English literary study, as I encountered it, was a rich and paradoxical engagement with the pertinence of what lay in an *oblique* or alien relation to the forces of centering. Writers who were off-center; literary texts that had been passed by; themes and topics that had lain dormant or unread in great works of literature – these were the angles of vision and visibility that enchanted me.

I do not mean, in any sense, to glorify margins and peripheries. However, I do want to make graphic what it means to survive, to produce, to labor and to create, within a world-system whose major economic impulses and cultural investments are pointed in a direction away from you, your country or your people. Such neglect can be a deeply negating experience, oppressive and exclusionary, and it spurs you to resist the polarities of power and prejudice, to reach beyond and behind the invidious narratives of center and periphery. Remember the awful realization endured by Rahul Singh, V. S. Naipaul's central character in his novel *The Mimic Men*, when it begins to dawn on him that the great stone walls of London don't contain a unique weight and an unsurpassable resonance; *they* are like stones elsewhere and everywhere; other stones are not pale shadows of them. What he had earlier dismissed as the insignificant stones

and shells of his small postcolonial island of Isabella suddenly, belatedly, develop their own historical presence.

My search for a subject of my own did not emerge directly from the English authors that I avidly read, nor from the Indian writers with whom I deeply identified. It was the Indo-Caribbean world of V. S. Naipaul's fiction that was to become the diversionary, exilic route that led me to the historical themes and theoretical questions that were to form the core of my thinking. For reasons still obscure to me, the detour through Naipaul's milieu brought back the world, and the words, of my Bombay life, even as Naipaul's journey from Trinidad to his ancestral home in India passed through his English experiences. You could say that our paths crossed somewhere between Oxford and London, although we belonged to different generations and social geographies. Naipaul's novels, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *The Mimic Men* and *In a Free State* have been celebrated for achieving a cast of characters whose unpromising lives were turned by him into the most memorable portraits of individuals striving for their independence, attempting to establish their autonomy, against all the odds. The odds in this case were very high; nothing less than the conservative melancholy of the author's own attitude to his own characters and to the postcolonial countries of the South.

What I found intriguing about Naipaul's novels was the way in which the fiction was capable of being read against the author's intention and ideology. His characters made their way in the world while acknowledging its fragmented structures, its split imperatives, and a prevailing sense of a loss of cultural authority. In Naipaul's view, of course, this was nothing more than the fated condition of the Caribbean — 'History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies'[3] — and his unrelenting despair led him to create characters that seemed hopelessly bereft, half-made peoples, who turned into the most consummate literary creations. I took a different view from his. It was the ability of Naipaul's

characters to forbear their despair, to work through their anxieties and alienations towards a life that may be radically incomplete but continues to be intricately communitarian, busy with activity, noisy with stories, garrulous with grotesquerie, gossip, humor, aspirations, fantasies – these were signs of a culture of survival that emerges from the other side of the colonial enterprise, the darker side. Naipaul's people are vernacular cosmopolitans of a kind, moving in-between cultural traditions, and revealing hybrid forms of life and art that do not have a prior existence within the discrete world of any single culture or language. Naipaul makes this point himself.

> The Trinidadian is a cosmopolitan,' he writes. 'He is a natural anarchist, who has never been able to take the eminent at their own valuation. . .[He] is without the greater corruption of sanctimoniousness, and can never make pleas for *intolerance* in the name of piety. He can never achieve the society-approved nastiness of the London landlord, say, who turns a dwelling-house into a boarding-house, charges exorbitant rents, and is concerned that his tenants live in sin. Everything that makes the Trinidadian an unreliable, exploitable citizen makes him a quick, civilised person whose values are always human ones, whose standards are those of wit and style.[4]

There is more to Naipaul's comparison than the contrast between Trinidadian wit and style, and London's sanctimonious piety. The locale that informs his judgment is, in part, the world of extortionate boarding-houses ruled over by prurient, even racially prejudiced, landlords – a world of migrant life that features prominently in Naipaul's early fiction. The cosmopolitan ethic that emerges from the colonized Trinidadian's embattled existence – ironic style, tolerance, a refusal to take the eminent at their own estimation – now delivers a withering judgment on the masked intolerance and posed piety of the

supposedly 'advanced' metropolitan world. Naipaul's early intimation of what a 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' might be is extremely useful in discriminating between two forms of cosmopolitical thinking that are deeply ingrained in contemporary discourses of globalization.

There is a kind of global cosmopolitanism, widely influential now, that configures the planet as a concentric world of national societies extending to global villages. It is a cosmopolitanism of relative prosperity and privilege founded on ideas of progress that are complicit with neo-liberal forms of governance, and free-market forces of competition. Such a concept of global 'development' has faith in the virtually boundless powers of technological innovation and global communications. It has certainly made useful interventions into stagnant, state-controlled economies and polities and has kick-started many societies which were mired in bureaucratic corruption, inefficiency and nepotism. Global cosmopolitans of this ilk frequently inhabit 'imagined communities' that consist of silicon valleys and software campuses; although, increasingly, they have to face up to the carceral world of call-centres, and the sweat-shops of outsourcing. A global cosmopolitanism of this sort readily celebrates a world of plural cultures and peoples located at the periphery, so long as they produce healthy profit margins within metropolitan societies. States that participate in such multicultural multinationalism affirm their commitment to 'diversity', at home and abroad, so long as the demography of diversity consists largely of educated economic migrants – computer engineers, medical technicians, and entrepreneurs, rather than refugees, political exiles, or the poor. In celebrating a 'word culture' or 'world markets' this mode of cosmopolitanism moves swiftly and selectively from one island of prosperity to yet another terrain of technological productivity, paying conspicuously less attention to the persistent inequality and immiseration produced by such unequal and uneven development.

Globalization, I want to suggest, must always begin at home. A just measure of global progress requires that we first evaluate how globalizing nations deal with 'the difference within' – the problems of diversity and redistribution at the local level, and the rights and representations of minorities in the regional domain. What is the status of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, or the Muslims in India in the midst of the transformational myths and realities of global connectivity? In the United States, for instance, the American dream is sustained by the 'wave theory' of migration – the Irish, followed by the Italians, Jews, Koreans and South Asians. There is, however, an ingrained insouciance, a structural injustice, shown towards African Americans or First Nations Peoples whose ethical and political demands for equality and fairness are based on issues of reparations and land-rights. These rights go beyond 'welfare' or 'opportunity' and make claims to recognition and redistribution in the process of questioning the very sovereignty of national traditions and territories. And it is because of their interrogations and interventions at this *foundational* level, that such movements are often considered to be 'against the American grain.' Or, for that matter, against the Australian grain too. Kim Scott writes:

> Insecurity, uncertainty, doubt. I still often hear that phrase surrounding Native title discussions, and purportedly its use in reference to economic contract. No, it's insecurity, uncertainty and doubt about something more important than that. Much deeper.
>
> About the foundations of the nation. About who belongs. About who we are.[5]

The hegemonies that exist at 'home' provide us with useful perspectives on the predatory effects of global governance however philanthropic or ameliorative the original intention might

have been. The economic 'solutions' to national and inter-national inequality and poverty as practiced by the IMF and the World Bank, for instance, have 'the feel of the colonial ruler,'[6] according to Joseph Stiglitz, once Senior Vice-President and Chief Economist of the World Bank – 'they help to create a dual economy in which there are pockets of wealth . . . **But a dual economy is not a developed economy**.'[my emphasis] It is the *re-production* of dual, unequal economies as *effects* of globalization that render poorer societies more vulnerable to the 'culture of conditionality' through which what is purportedly the granting of loans turn into the peremptory enforcement of policy:

> If the IMF wanted a nation to liberalise its financial markets, for instance, it might pay out the loan in installments, tying sub-sequent installments to verifiable steps to liberalisation. [And] such *conditions* are seen as intrusions by the new colonial power on the country's own sovereignty.[7]

An economic world-order based on such practices of 'con-ditionality' facilitates peremptory postures of political power that conduct global politics by setting 'conditions' to the rest of the world – 'you are with us or against us' – that are in danger of being unilateral and may not comply with International law or seek consensus amongst representative bodies of the Inter-national community. When global government is conducted in terms of coercive conditionality, it is difficult to enter into equitable negotiations with one's allies or one's enemies.

There is, however, another cosmopolitanism of the Trini-dadian variety, figuratively speaking, that emerges from the world of migrant boarding-houses and the habitations of national and diasporic minorities. Julia Kristeva, in a different context, calls it a wounded cosmopolitanism. In my view, it is better described as a vernacular cosmopolitanism which meas-ures global progress from the minoritarian perspective. Its

claims to freedom and equality are marked by 'a "right to differ-ence in equality,"[8]' rather than a diversity founded on a 'dual economy'.[9] Such a 'right to difference', as Etienne Balibar sug-gests, does not require the restoration of an original [or essentialist] cultural or group identity; nor does it consider equality to be a neutralization of differences in the name of the 'universality' of rights where implementation is often subject to ideological and institutional definitions of what counts as 'human' in any specific cultural or political context. A right to difference-in-equality can be articulated from the perspective of both national minorities and global migrants; and in each case such a right represents a desire to revise the customary com-ponents of citizenship – political, legal and social citizenship (T.H. Marshall) – by extending them to include the realm of 'symbolic citizenship' (Avishai Margalit). The symbolic aspect raises affective and ethical issues connected with cultural differ-ences and social discrimination – the problems of inclusion and exclusion, dignity and humiliation, respect and repudiation. In the context of the world dis-order in which we are mired, sym-bolic citizenship is now principally defined by a surveillant cul-ture of 'security' – how do we tell the good migrant from the bad migrant? Which cultures are safe? Which unsafe?

Our nation-centered view of sovereign citizenship can only comprehend the predicament of minoritarian 'belonging' as a problem of ontology – a question of belonging to a race, a gender, a class, a generation becomes a kind of 'second nature,' a prim-ordial identification, an inheritance of tradition, a naturalization of the problems of citizenship. The vernacular cosmopolitan takes the view that the commitment to a 'right to difference in equal-ity' as a process of constituting emergent groups and affiliations has less to do with the affirmation or authentication of origins and 'identities,' and more to do with political practices and ethical choices. Minoritarian affiliations or solidarities arise in response to the failures and limits of democratic representation,

creating new modes of agency, new strategies of recognition, new forms of political and symbolic representation — NGOs, anti-globalization groups, Truth Commissions, International courts, local agencies of transitional justice (the gacaca courts in rural Rwanda). Vernacular cosmopolitanism represents a political process that works *towards* the shared goals of democratic rule, rather than simply acknowledging already constituted 'marginal' political entities or identities.

If I have argued that the success and failure of globalization begins at home, then the great African–American vernacular cosmopolitan, W.E.B. Du Bois, understood this only too well. In a lecture on Human Rights delivered in 1945, he suggested that the essence of the global predicament is to be found in 'the problem of minorities':

> We must conceive of colonies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as . . . [part of] the local problems of London, Paris and New York. [Here in America,] in the organized and dominant states of the world, there are groups of people who occupy the *quasi-colonial status*: laborers who are settled in the slums of large cities; groups like Negroes in the United States who are segregated physically and discriminated spiritually in law and custom . . . All these people occupy what is really a [quasi] colonial status and make the kernel and substance of the problem of minorities.[10]

The poet Adrienne Rich explores the kernel and substance of global minorities in *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991), one of the most striking series of poems dealing with the contemporary cosmopolitical world. Rich takes a global measure — a measure that is both moral and poetic — by decentering the place from which she speaks, and the location in which she lives. There is no ventriloquism of victimage here; no consensual cartography. Rich's resistance to such facile forms of identification and

xix

resolution comes from the relentless, repetitive power of her verse to reveal the profound 'unsatisfaction' that dwells in our 'shared' history of human civilization and barbarism. Anxiety links us to the memory of the past while we struggle to choose a path through the ambiguous history of the present. Such a restless apprehension about who one is — as an individual, a group or a community — and the complexities of forming a global perspective, are beautifully evoked in these few lines:

> Memory says, want to do it right? Don't count on me . . .
> I'm a canal in Europe where bodies are floating
> I'm a mass grave I'm the life that returns
> I'm a table set with room for the Stranger
> I'm a field with corners left for the landless
> I'm a man-child praising God he's a man,
> I'm a woman who sells for a boat ticket
> ✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳✳
> I'm an immigrant tailor who says A coat
> is not a piece of cloth only
> ....
> I have dreamed of Zion I've dreamed of world revolution
>   I'm a corpse dredged from a canal in Berlin
> A river in Mississippi. I am a woman standing
> I am standing here in your poem. Unsatisfied."

The insistent repetition of the phrase — 'I'm a /I'm a . . . I am' — as in some bleak counting-song of a monstrous child of our times, finds itself both implicated in the traumatic events of global histories — slavery, war, migration, diaspora, peasant rebellions, revolution — and yet unsatisfied in its attempt to imagine how one might stage a relationship to a world rendered restless by its transhistorical memories. Each line contains its own encrypted narrative: Rosa Luxembourg may be the corpse dredged from the Landswehr canal in Berlin; the civil rights

moment of the American South is invoked in the burning Mississippi. Rich struggles to find a way of establishing a narrative of human interest, in the sense that Arendt gives to the term: an exploration of what lies in-between (inter-est) these distinct, even disjunct moments that allow them to become affiliated with one another in the spirit of a 'right to difference in equality.' The repeated phrase – 'I am – *a table . . . a field . . . a man-child . . . a woman . . . an immigrant*' – does not seek to establish the sovereignty of a 'representative' world-subject who can speak for all peoples.

In keeping with the spirit of the 'right to narrate' as a means to achieving our own national or communal identity in a global world, demands that we revise our sense of symbolic citizenship, our myths of belonging, by identifying ourselves with the 'starting-points' of other national and international histories and geographies. It is by placing herself at the intersections (and in the interstices) of these narratives that Rich emphasizes the importance of historical and cultural re-visioning: the process of being subjected to, or the subject of, a particular history 'of one's own' – a *local* history – leaves the poet 'unsatisfied' and anxious about who she is, or what her community can be, in the larger flow of a transnational history. If we look at the relation of cultures in this way, then we see them as part of a complex process of 'minoritarian' modernity, not simply a polarity of majority and minority, the center and the periphery. Rich does not merely string together the woes of the 'wretched of the earth'; she turns the abjection of modern history into the productive and creative history of the minority as a social agent. Out of a spirit of resistance and forbearance emerges the minoritarian will to live, to *make*, to introduce the act of *poesis* into the imagined life of the migrant or the minority as part of civic and civil society: 'I'm an immigrant tailor who says A coat/is not a piece of cloth only.'

Is 'unsatisfaction' the pessimism of the idealist or the

aspiration of the utopian? Is Rich's evocation of an ethic and poetic of 'unsatisfaction' a subtle warning against the stance of the 'informed bystander,' or of the political realist who acts largely on the grounds of enlightened self-interest?

I am standing here in your poem. Unsatisfied.

The emphasis, in the last line, on 'standing' – *I am a woman standing/ I am standing here in your poem* – should not be passed over. For this is a peculiar kind of political stance, the 'standing of citizenship' as a measure of public 'good', as respect and recognition, upon which Judith Shklar founds her theory of American citizenship.[12] Citizenship as 'standing' is testimony to her insistence that as active citizens we must vigilantly guard against the state's strategies of exclusion and discrimination in the midst of its promises of formal equality and procedural democracy. As a woman, whose effective elision from the polity becomes a 'negative' condition for the empowerment of the male citizen, Rich now stands with those who are in the minoritarian position on a global scale.

In the wake of these voices, we are led to a philosophical and political responsibility for conceiving of minoritization and globalization as the quasi-colonial, a condition at once old and new, a dynamic, even dialectical relation that goes beyond the polarizations of the local and the global, the center and the periphery, or, indeed, the 'citizen' and the 'stranger.' A recent UNESCO report of the World Commission of Culture and Development suggests that a minoritarian condition is, indeed, a kind of global citizenship. The last two or three decades have seen more people living across or between national borders than ever before – on a conservative estimate, 40 million foreign workers, 20 million refugees, 20–25 million internally displaced peoples as a result of famines and civil wars. Immigrants, refugees or minorities who live in the midst of the metropolitan

xxii PREFACE TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION

centers in the North and South represent the most tangible and proximate presence of the global or transnational world as it exists within 'national' societies. When we talk of the ever-expanding boundaries and territories of the global world, we must not fail to see how our own intimate, indigenous landscapes should be remapped to include those who are its new citizens; or those whose citizenly presence has been annihilated or marginalized. Regional movements of peoples within nation-states, and the financial and cultural impact of migrants upon their 'home' communities and societies, should not be neglected in favor of a celebration of diasporic communities. In my home state of Maharashtra the Shiv Sena party turned against the Muslim minority as 'foreigners' in the riots of the late 1980s, only after they had targeted 'economic refugees' from Southern India who came to seek jobs in Bombay a decade earlier.

Article 27, one of the two main implementing conventions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, supports 'the right of minorities, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language.' However, Article 27 emphasizes the need for minorities to 'preserve' their cultural identities, rather than to affiliate across emergent minority communities. For all its good intentions, such rights neglect the 'inter-cultural' political existence and ethical imperative that Rich and Du Bois direct us towards. For Rich the speaking 'I,' the location and locution of poetic voice must repeat and reverberate across historically specific moments of the minority predicament. For Du Bois, a minority only discovers its political force and its aesthetic form when it is articulated *across* and alongside communities of difference, in acts of affiliation and contingent coalitions. Many member states proposed an amendment that immigrants, for instance, should not be considered minorities. It was held that 'the very existence of *unassimilated* minorities would be a threat to national unity; and