ARIEL

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Contents

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Contents

Articles

Poems

Introductory Notes: Postcolonialism and its Discontents

I

IT IS UNSURPRISING that the contents of this special issue on "Postcolonialism and its Discontents" have come to be dispersed over two issues of *ARIEL*, and that the Introduction to this collection has been fragmented into three separate pieces. For whatever coherence the term "postcolonial" might have promised in its earliest moments—as an intellectual field or academic discipline, as a critical methodology for social analysis, as a pedagogy, or a cultural location, or a stance—the attributes of postcolonialism have become so widely contested in contemporary usage, its strategies and sites so structurally dispersed, as to render the term next to useless as a precise marker of intellectual content, social constituency, or political commitment. Postcolonialism has become conceptually dis/contented —a suitcase blown open on the baggage belt—and whether the present "crisis" over postcolonialism's meaning and its moment will come to be read as the disciplinary manifestation of intellectual paralysis in a cultural and critical movement that might have been, or as a display of intellectual vitality in the production of new and diverse interventionary practices, new modes for resistance and its representations, and new spaces for the formation of "coalitional transformations" (Radhakrishnan 766) is itself one of the over-riding questions being taken up within contemporary postcolonial debate. No *one* speaks for "the postcolonial." No one place contains its diversity and discord.

Our aim in this special issue has not been to cover, or to restage, the vast network of debate over disciplinary postcolonialism, for it is clear that the issues that underwrite that network go well beyond the question of a single discipline's onomastics,

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field construction, and critical methodology. In the wake of "the Marxist turn" in the 1970s and "the poststructuralist turn" in the 1980s, argue the editors of a recent textbook on human geography, just about every field of academic scholarship has come to "a heightened sense of intellectual experimentation and self-appraisal, a blurring of boundaries and genres, and a determined attempt to reach out beyond the centralisms and parochialisms of the Western academy" (Gregory, Martin, and Smith 5). In the wake of "the increasing globalisation of culture," argue the editors of a recent scholarly collection on postcolonial critical theory, "matters of colony and empire have moved centre stage in Anglo-American" critical and cultural theory during the past 15 years (Barker, Hulme, and Iversen 1). If the first of these two intellectual currents has produced what Gregory, Martin, and Smith (5) have called a disciplinary "lowering of the capitals" in Philosophy, Science, Theory, and History, and a rigorous questioning of the privileges that are ascribed to these categories, the second of these two currents has generated at least one institutional category—the Postcolonial—which is now in the process of accruing, as Barker, Hulme, and Iversen put it, "the dubious privilege of the upper case," at least within "Western" universities (2). This irony needs critical commentary, obviously, and much of the contemporary debate over postcolonialism concerns the cultural location—the material situation—of this new academic field and the modes of knowledge and analysis it produces. "Why is it that the term 'postcoloniality' has found such urgent currency in the First World but is in fact hardly ever used within the excolonized worlds of South Asia and Africa?" wonders R. Radhakrishnan, in his important essay, "Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity." "What," he asks, "is the secret behind the academic formation called 'postcoloniality' and its complicity with certain forms of avant-garde Eurocentric cultural theory?" (750).

But the "postcolonial turn" in intellectual labour (if there is one) is not entirely the same thing as "the" disciplinary crisis of academic postcolonialism. Some of the most urgent debates now taking place within and around postcolonialism—and this

across a wide range of cultural constituencies and intellectual movements—concern the extent to which, in Homi Bhabha's words, "the primary conceptual and organizational categories" of modernity itself need to be revisited and revised in order to represent the "new signs of identity," the "innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation" that come into being in the modern postcolonial world. Bhabha's argument is that

> the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees. . . . The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. The "right" to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is . . . reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are "in the minority." . . . Political empowerment, and the enlargement of the multiculturalist cause, come from posing questions of solidarity and community from the interstitial perspective.
> (*The Location of Culture* 2-3)

What is under debate here is whether intellectual critique needs to rethink "the economic, social and cultural production of space" and subjectivities (Chambers 110), and whether the political empowerment of certain diasporic, minority, or underprivileged groups might be better enabled by the articulation of new *ways* to represent the "in-between" spaces and subjectivities those groups have come to inhabit in the present postcolonial moment. Aijaz Ahmad enters this debate by saying "no." For Ahmad, the kind of intellectual turn Bhabha is announcing—towards the "dissentual" culture of "theory" that has dominated Euro-American intellectual life after the 1960s—amounts to a "displacement of activist culture with a textual culture" and actually works "to combat the more uncompromising critiques of existing cultures of the literary profession with a new mystique of leftish professionalism, and to reformulate in a postmodernist direction questions which had previously been associated with

a broadly Marxist politics" (1). Ahmad insists on a return to "that fundamental dialectic of our times"—between "imperialism, decolonization and socialism"—as "the necessary backdrop against which issues of nation, nationalism, colony, empire, postcoloniality, and so on, need to be posed, in literary or any other theory" (17, 9-10).

Clearly, this dispute between Bhabha and Ahmad over the use of analytical categories for critique has everything to do with the location of intellectual work and has material effects on the organization of scholarship and pedagogy within postcolonial critical studies in the university. But in no sense, I think, could either Bhabha or Ahmad's position be understood as being "about" postcolonialism in some narrow disciplinary sense. What is at stake in this dispute is not *simply* a scholarly field and its critical methodology but the question of what might comprise an adequate description of contemporary inequalities in privilege and power and an adequate understanding of how those inequalities might come to be changed. Both critics, I think, are engaged in the remarkably difficult project of carrying intellectual labour to a politically generative phase, and it seems to me that those of us who attempt to "do" postcolonial intellectual work, or to "be" scholars and critics within the general field of academic postcolonialism, do little in the service of political emancipation—after colonialism, under neo-colonialism—if we come to read debates such as this one as being important *only* to the extent that they describe a scholarly discipline in which our work has a stake, or if we hear in the contentious clamour of postcolonial critical dispute a voice that counsels us *only* to seek out the silent meditations of intellectual self-reflection and reconstitution, and not to risk the messy productivity of working intellectually towards genuine social change.

We received an unusually large number of submissions for this special issue, and one of our principles of selection for the articles that appear here, and that will appear in the July 1995 issue (Volume 26, No. 3), was a leaning towards scholarly engagements that seemed to envision something politically productive as the end of critical work. We did not attempt to balance the various pro- and anti-postcolonialism(s) that are represented in

the following pages, in order that our "coverage" of the "topic" would appear to be a "fair" one, nor did we attempt to stack the deck with papers endorsing specialized disciplinary arguments the co-editors secretly agreed with in advance. What we were looking for, collectively, was a critical sense of why commentary on "the postcolonial" should *matter*. And so "the diverse, fractious voices of postcolonial scholars" (to use Henry Schwartz's and Sangeeta Ray's phrase) that appear in these two issues on "Postcolonialism and its Discontents" engage the topos of "postcolonialism" in a remarkably disunified, dispersed, and fragmented manner, with a view to locating remarkably different kinds of problems—cultural, political, institutional—and remarkably different modalities of social subjectivity and representation. These papers do not present a collective "take" on "the postcolonial" in any of its manifestations. Nor do the differences between these papers represent, collaboratively, the differences in and around any single postcolonialism and the debate that surrounds it.

In her paper "Once More with Feeling: What is Postcolonialism?," Deepika Bahri considers "the ambiguities and dissonances that plague 'postcoloniality,'" and she offers us this counsel: "let us not be tempted to simplify them for a facile coherence." This is counsel that the co-editors of this special collection for *ARIEL* have very much taken to heart. But to anyone who has worked with a scholarly journal and who knows the importance of coherence, the dangers of ambiguity and dissonance, at the level of typography, orthography, apparatus, voice, and intellectual predication for scholarly work, a manifesto such as this last one will of course strike terror to the heart, especially when it is advanced so capriciously by a disunified collective of *guest* co-editors. And so, for their remarkable forbearance, and for much else, we must thank with genuine earnestness *ARIEL*'s editor, Victor Ramraj, *ARIEL*'s acting editor during the past year, Patricia Srebrnik, and *ARIEL*'s astonishing, profoundly competent, copy-editor, Jennifer Kelly. They kept the wheels on this project while the guest co-editors were so busy making off with the hubcaps.

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