The Dislocations of Cultural Translation

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THE TITLE THE LOCATION OF CULTURE SUGGESTS THAT THE BOOK'S AUTHOR, HOMI K. BHABHA, PLACES AN OVERIDING IMPORTANCE ON A culture's spatial and geographic situation. Yet Bhabha's readers get too fixated on culture's site and locality; however, the title's emphasis on place is soon qualified by an epigraph from the book's most cited author, Frantz Fanon, that emphasizes temporality: "The architecture of this work is rooted in the temporal. Every human problem must be considered from the standpoint of time" (qtd. in Bhabha xiv). So, while culture must be located, the architecture of The Location of Culture is rooted in the temporal. The place and time of its moments of production are affirmed throughout its essays with a wealth of contemporary references and opening comments like "In Britain, in the 1980s..." (27). No book of theory is more self-consciously embedded in its own space and time. The Location of Culture, published in 1994, is a very English book, written from within the political, cultural, and intellectual world of the London of the 1980s and early 1990s, in which migrant activists from the Caribbean and South Asia such as Bhabha, Salman Rushdie, and Stuart Hall were challenging the verities of a long-established, socialist, masculinist, English intellectual and political culture. The brilliant innovation of The Location of Culture was to create a new language, a new articulation and understanding of minority positions—which is why the response to it has been so overwhelming, from academics, artists, and many others. The work that went into The Location of Culture was intimately related to Bhabha's own milieu and time the book is the product of this decennium mirabile in London.

The chapters of The Location of Culture were—with a few exceptions—published as individual essays from 1983 to 1991. Reordering the book's chapters according to the chronological sequence of these essays can help us understand the forms of its temporality. The four previously unpublished essays in the book were drafted during 1991-93. The following list also includes some relevant texts published in the 1980s and early 1990s that did not become part of The Location of Culture.

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Chapter 1
Chronic Order


3 "The Other Question" (first published in 1983 in Screen, vol. 24, pp. 18–35)


5 "Synecdoche" (first published in 1985 in October, vol. 34, pp. 71–80)

6 "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817" (presented at the 1984 Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature and first published in 1985 in Critique in, vol. 12, pp. 144–65)

N/A "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition" (published in 1986 as the foreword to Black Skin, White Mask, by Frantz Fanon, Pluto Press, pp. vii–xxvi)

1 "The Commitment to Theory" (first published in 1988 in New Formations, vol. 5, pp. 5–23)


8 "Diaspora: Nation, Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation" (first published in 1990 in Nation and Narration, by Homi Bhabha, Routledge, pp. 291–322)

N/A "Third Space" (an interview published in 1990 in Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence and Wishart, pp. 207–21)


Introduction Previously unpublished (drafted by 1991)

10 "By Bread Alone: Signs of Violence" (previously unpublished; drafted by 1991)

9 "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern" (previously unpublished; drafted in 1992)


The architectural structure of The Location of Culture takes us from an early concern with literary and historical representation of otherness to the transformative dynamics of contemporary culture. The book begins with the problem of how cultural difference is depicted in the context of colonial representations. Bhabha's essays on the stereotype...
and on mimicry argue that however fixed the representation of cultural difference, and however strong the drive to fix colonial representation in the colonizer's imaginary, colonial difference uncannily contrives to represent itself otherwise through means that disconcert the viewer or reader. In his historical essays analyzing Indian colonial history that gesture toward the preoccupations of the subaltern studies historians—"Sly Civility" (1985), "Signs Taken for Wonders" (1985), and "By Bread Alone" (1991)—Bhabha shows the complex processes by which the introduction of the cultural difference embodied in colonialism does not amount to a passive form of misrepresentation but enables cultural resistance and agency among the colonized. His later essays turn from colonial representation to the question of difference in more contemporary concerns, as he considers the possibility of agency for the minority cultural theorist, critic, or artist. He shifts, therefore, from looking for agency through analysis and the interpretation of forms of representation to a metadiscourse in which his own theoretical language becomes both a description to a metadiscourse in which his own theoretical culture and translating it for another, in it but not of it, inevitably changed. Bhabha brought his own distinctive interpretation of the British politics of difference to the United States. Though the United States had a strong theoretical culture, much admired in Britain, it did not have the kind of hybridity for Bhabha describes his own phrase, as a cultural translator of the political idiom of British intellectual culture for an American audience. Once he relocated to the United States, that position, in which he was writing from inside one political and theoretical culture and translating it for another, in it but not of it, inevitably changed. 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three become part of the same process. The fundamental spatial metaphor implicit in the idea of translation in English is exploited so that the expansive process of translation becomes its primary creative and defining activity rather than its source or final output. What does such critique achieve? If produced, we are told, a new form of "recognition"—the very issue that Bhabha had begun with in 1980 ("Representation" 99). While the representations of the colonial text only offered recognition that confirmed a colonial point of view, the hybrid, or translational, critique becomes the means whereby static, fixed forms can be dislodged and new modes of identification and understanding developed. The development of this critical "third space" changes the possibilities of politics through the development of modified or hitherto unthought of positions that operate outside the box.

"In the Commitment to Theory," translation is repeatedly invoked to describe an ongoing process of dislocation between theoretico-political positions. Bhabha uses versions of the phrase "negotiation or translation" four times in the essay (26, 30, 38, 38), as well as "translation and displacement" (26) and "transformation or translation" (52), in arguing that "each position is always a process of translation and transference of meaning" (26). He writes, in an intralingual translation of the passage cited above:

> My illustration attempts to display the importance of the hybrid moment of political change. Here the transformational value of change lies in the recirculation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One (unary working class) nor the Other (the politics of gender) but something else besides which contests the terms and territories of both. (28)

Although it is based on a binary, translation allows for a move away from a politics of polarity because it offers an ongoing, interactive dialogic operation. The way to resolve political differences is to negotiate between the competing positions by displacing, transferring, or translating them to somewhere else, a place that enables forms of recognition that challenge the terms of both. This negotiation is not translation as such, however, since that would be to convert position A (into position B, but rather the transference or passage across the no-man's-land that marks their differences. Bhabha captures this figuratively by turning the negotiating process into something at once spatial and temporal, as if the two competing positions are enabled through translation to meet across the long bridge of spaces that stretches between them. Translation becomes equated not with the transformation from source to target language but with the dialectical act of metonymy that comprehends both languages. It does not move the elements upward onto a new plane where they become resolved in a new form but shoves them sideways into a space where all the original elements continue to operate together according to their diverse, heterogeneous terms.

Bhabha introduced the term "cultural translation" into his work two years later, in "DissemiNation" (1990). He was fully aware that the concept of cultural translation already possessed a long and contested tradition in cultural anthropology, going back to the "Task of the Translator," does not for example, "culture" itself is the universal term through which the anthropologist "translates" the individual practices of the society being studied, in order to make differences equivalent. This poses the question: does not the conceptual category of culture itself imply a form of translation—that is, a mediation between a particular and a universal?

The idea of equating cultural interpretation with the transformations between discrete languages was also analyzed by Talal Asad in his well-known essay "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology" (1973), and by Clifford Geertz in "The Task of the Translator," which conveys the asymmetric power relation between the anthropologist as cultural translator and the society being studied: "there is a prevailing trend for the language of the dominated cultures to accommodate to the demands and concepts of the dominating culture. Equally, there are powerful resistances to making any assimilating adjustments within the discourse practices of European scholarship" (171). The controlling culture, they maintained, "The Concept of Translation in British Social Anthropology," does no to Geertz's "culture," and in general terms to Said's in Orientalism. Asad and Dixon asserted that cultural translation in anthropology is a discourse of power and appropriation that destroys the particularity of the culture it translates. This might have been more than enough to toll the death knell of the concept. However, in a brilliant inversion of their argument, Bhabha retrieved and rewrote it. For Asad and Dixon the anthropologists translate the so-called primitive culture for their Western audience. For
Bhabha's theory of cultural translation is thus one in which the translation is, in anthropological terms, back to front or, to put it in more traditional translational language, foreignizing. While he does not challenge the concept of culture as such, Bhabha argues that culture opens up a space of difference, which enables us to experience forms of alterity rather than become fixed in oppositional bunkers. Culture is the in-between, embodying heterogeneous experiences that do not add up to a homogeneous totality, enabling the articulation of the voices that are customarily repressed. Bhabha also suggests that as symbiotic interpellative practices, all cultures are always articulated with each other as open systems. Culture holds together different cultures while remaining incomplete and so gives us the experience of their difference. Such internally differentiated culture can also provide the context for agential intervention by the angels of progress, the cultural translators who will open up these hegemonic spaces within and between the symbolic systems of different cultures. Those living on the borderlines between different cultures, above all migrants, not only exist in a state of cultural hybridity, negotiating cultural differences every day, they also "deploy ... their borderzone conditions" to "translate ... the social imaginary" of the metropolis (6). Cultures are continually developing in relation to other cultures that produce "hybrid sites of meanings" that open up fissures of transformative possibility.

Bhabha develops this idea of cultural translation by returning to Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator." Despite citing Rulphie Gascall's account of Benjamin's spiritual or idealist understanding of the nature of language and translation, Bhabha chooses to read Benjamin in more materialist, normative terms. What he takes from Benjamin are the latter's own idiosyncratic ideas about translation than those found in Benjamin's quotation from Rudolf Pannwitz, also invoked by A. Schmitt and Dixon, which poses the alternatives of domesticking and foreignizing translation, a time-honored antithesis of possibilities in translation theory that goes back at least to Friedrich Schleiermacher's essay "On the Different Methods of Translating" (1813) and that has been more recently championed, in 1993, by Lawrence Venuti. Bhabha's cultural translation is essentially based on the idea of a foreignizing translation, in which the untranslatable components of the language of the source text are infiltrated into the texture of the target language: so the untranslatable element in cultural translation.

The act of translation will embed its difference in what has been translated, leaving an unassimilable residue of cultural difference: the untranslatable thus uncannily transforms the target culture. The most sustained elaboration of the idea of cultural translation as a form of agency, transforming one system through another, appears in the last essay written for The Location of Culture, "How Newness Enters the World: Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation" (1991-93). Bhabha's title invokes an event that had recently animated the London world in which he lived—the fatwa pronounced on Rushdie. The controversy began in January 1989 when a group of Muslims in Bradford, England, burned a copy of The Satanic Verses in a public protest against it. The following month, Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwa calling on all Muslims to kill Rushdie and anyone involved in publishing the book. Rushdie went into hiding. In "How Newness Enters the World," cultural translation forms a central part of Bhabha's discussion of the fatwa and his defense of Rushdie. The title of Bhabha's article is an acknowledged quotation from a passage in Rushdie's 1990 essay on The Satanic Verses controversy, "In Good Faith," in which Rushdie defends himself on the grounds that

The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Melampo, hoplesschotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how

newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. The Satanic Verses is for change-by-fusion, change-by-contradiction. It is a love song to our mongrel selves.

(Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands 304)

Bhabha supports Rushdie by identifying the processes that the novelist describes with his own account of cultural translation, building on an idea already invoked in The Satanic Verses, where the narrator says, "How does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjunctions is it made?" (8). Bhabha then conflates his own concept of a "third space" with Rushdie's idea that migration and immigralion are transforming our cultures ("New professors, new painters, the lot. It's a bloody revolution" [Rushdie, Satanic Verses 270]). Instead of assimilation, or nativism, the hybridity of the third space produces innovative forms of what Bhabha calls "the borderline negotiations of cultural translation." (223) The subject of cultural difference becomes the resisting untranslatable element in cultural translation. Bhabha then follows Rushdie directly by identifying the newness of cultural translations with the act of blasphemy. In Bhabha's account, Rushdie and his characters are described by the agency of the migrant encountering a determinate tradition, for which, Bhabha argues, "hybridity is heresy." Bhabha then directly identifies blasphemy, together with heresy, as the form of the migrant's "transgressive act of cultural translation." (226)

While Rushdie's transgressive poetics perfectly fit Bhabha's earlier arguments for the agential strategies of the migrant, what gets lost here is that while Rushdie's opponents may be the upholders of tradition, they were first- or second-generation migrants too, rather less entitled and privileged than Bhabha's "third space producers." The controversy arose because migrants were rejecting Rushdie's cultural translations as blasphemous, not identifying
with them. The ensuing fatwa, moreover, signaled an era in which cultural and religious tenets, while articulated locally, formed part of a global movement: the fatwa was the first example of the global, nonlocational cultural disjunction of what is now referred to as Islamism. The opposition to Rushdie’s book began in Britain and then developed across the countries of the global South, forming a tricontinental movement (in Africa, Asia, and Latin America) that challenged the occidental precepts of Western modernity. Those who defended Rushdie were the upholders of the Western liberal tradition, the same constituency that had been encouraging the cultural translation of mainstream British culture. Equating cultural translation with hermeneutics and blasphemy while focusing on detailed interpretations of Rushdie’s text, Bhabha seems oblivious to the larger political perspectives that would become a dominant feature of the politics of the twenty-first century after 9/11. The exposition of difference and its hybrid effects became less germane in a radicalized world in which such forms of modernity, whether occidental or not, were being rejected. Summarily dismissing the objection to The Satanic Verses as “the righteous indignation of Magus and Mullah” and claiming that “cultural translation desacralizes [such] transparent assumptions of cultural supremacy” (228), Bhabha moves on to a discussion of feminist antifundamentalism which makes it possible to begin envisaging national, antinationalist, histories of the “people.” It is in this space that we will find those weeds with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this hybridity, this “third space,” we may explore the politics of polity and emerge as the others of our selves” (“Commitment” 22).

In identifying cultural translation with blasphemy, Bhabha seems to miss the fact that a section of the Muslim minority in Britain, mostly poor and working class, had written back in terms very different from those of a metropolitan intelligentsia and had explicitly rejected their cultural politics of the 1980s. While the Iranian Revolution of 1979 did not register hugely with local British politics, the Rushdie fatwa of 1989 certainly did. Rushdie was never to regain the literary greatness and social relevance of his London years. He may have survived the fatwa but it certainly seems to have killed him as a novelist. The new politics first signaled by The Satanic Verses controversy effectively shifted the political-cultural agenda away from the diasporic Caribbean model of Stuart Hall (“Cultural Identity” and “New Ethnics”) into hybridized performative identities, to a starker world in which difference, hybridity, and in-betweenness no longer served as the definitive markers of progressive cultural and political issues. In the face of the “implacable antagonism” of the public demonstrations against Rushdie’s cultural translation (Bhabha, “Black Voices” 112), the theory itself became alienated and estranged, leaving the language of cultural translation confronted by its dark double, the untranslatable—something truly alien and foreign—for which it had no language or understanding and to which it had no response.

Bhabha’s theory of cultural translation as a form of blasphemy perhaps best characterizes the “performative, defunctional structure” of his own theoretical practice (241). Even when Bhabha reads others, he translates them into his own terms, colliding with them and transfiguring them to say something new and unexpected. Throughout The Location of Culture the reader encounters remarks such as “To bend Jürgen Habermas to our purposes...” (170). The book is truly transformative, ending by reaffirming its challenge to normative ideas of Western modernity—a manifesto of the visionary process of postcolonial countermodernity that followed in the wake of its appearance twenty years ago. At the same time, however, as the book itself obligingly acknowledges, often, more militant challenges to Western modernity have arisen from other places and other times, untranslatable that Western cultural translators cannot simply deflect to its own values. The irresolvable differences that Bhabha so persuasively renegotiated have returned in a radically new, unreadable form.

**Notes**

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations of Bhabha refer to The Location of Culture.

2. In a later, unpublished version of this essay, I examine Bhabha’s early writings in the context of the theoretical, cultural, and political milieu in which Bhabha worked in Oxford and London from 1970 to 1984.

3. The penultimate essay in the book, “How Newness Enters the World,” cites two published works—Sara Suleri’s The Rhetoric of English India (1992) and Edward Said’s Culture and Imperialism (1993)—both of which Bhabha describes as “scant” (272). This essay, along with the other three previously unpublished essays in The Location of Culture, are not part of the dissertation version of the book, which includes “Representation and the Colonial Text” and “A Question of Survival—Nations and Psychic States?” (OUP dissertation completed in 1991 at Oxford University). My own analysis of Bhabha in White Mythologies, published in 1990, discusses Bhabha’s work up to that date, and therefore use the later chapters of The Location of Culture.

4. The contrast between the title of Said’s talk at the convention, “Postcolonial Discourse,” and Bhabha’s “Styretton and Fantacy: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” nicely points to the differences between the two critics’ approaches (Program 1990).

5. If this was how English cultures appeared to come in the 1980s, it was nevertheless highly strained (Young, Ideals 103-10).

6. The following paragraph draws on some material from my article “Hybridity and Cultural Translation.” On Donna Haraway’s own account as the originator of the metaphor of translation in anthropology, see Geertz, Local Knowledge.

7. Bhabha himself had already made a comparable argument in “Representaion and the Colonial Text” (1989), about the loss of colonial texts, losing their particularity in the process of attaining literary supremacy (114).

8. “To that end” Bhabha writes in the original ending to “The Commitment to Theory.” We should remember that it is the “ster”—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between, the space of the entire that Deleuze 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 weeds with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this hybridity, this “third space,” we may explore the politics of polity and emerge as the others of our selves” (“Commitment”) 22.

9. “Cultures are only constituted in relation to that which was internal to their own symbolic-forming activity which makes them decentered structures—although that displacement or lineality (there) opens up the possibility of articulating different—even incommensurable—cultural practices and priorities” (Bhabha, “Third Space” 213 n. 10; cf. Location 82-83).

10. In the introduction, cited here, Bhabha uses the term cultural translation only once, and somewhat differently, in characterizing the photographs of Amin Abbas (1995-2013), who “takes the borderline condition of cultural translation to its global limit in his work (1989-95), his photographic project on harborers” (201). In 2013, he had an exhibition catalog at the Santa Monica Museum of Art described in it, “explored the historical, sociopolitical, aesthetic, and literary connections among such far-flung port cities as New York, Rotterdam, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, and Seoul. Consisting of a sequence of 105 large works, color photographs interspersed with handwritten notes penned authored by Abbas, as well as two slide projections, Fish Story was an intricate web of visual and verbal associations among panoptic views of the sea, detailed close-ups of naval devices, cargo containers, warehouses, sailors, and shipyard workers, locating the individual elements in an ever-shifting cross-current of global exchange of goods, money, knowledge, and power.” It is not entirely clear how the hybrid cultural condition that Bhabha describes suffices for the migrant apply to the work of a white leftist photographer demonstrating the processes of globalized commercial traffic and exchange.

11. Compare the idea of using the instability of culture as a means for its transformation with the arguments of Evans (Young, Ideals 103-10).

12. Benjamin’s quotation from Pannwitz, in the Harry Zahn translation of “The Task of the Translator” that Bhabha cites (228), reads, “Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindu, Greek, English into German instead of turning

Works Cited
