Home-Work

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Is There a Subaltern in This Class(room)?

TERRY GOLDIE with ZUBIN MEER

For the last 20 years, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has been my guru. I could explain what I mean by that word, but I think I'll just let it resonate. Take it as used by a White Canadian who does not specialize in South Asian studies, who came of age at a time when guru was a bit of wild exotica which meant—something or other that was very cool. Since then I have learned a bit more about what guru might mean, but still only a bit.

I should also mention, however, that my co-writer, Zubin Meer, is a much younger man, a Parsi, and a doctoral candidate at York University, who works on Marxism and Indian historiography. He says,

I was born after the North American era of the "guru": I am not particularly interested in the latest phase of Western Indophilia, embodied in the 1960s, American counter-cultural movement's exoticized celebration of all things Indian, from yogic spiritualism to Goa's beaches. And what's more, that world is largely alien to me. I am interested, however, in the manner in which the idea of a guru connects to a certain Eastern, especially but by no means exclusively Indian, conception of textuality. In the Western conception of textuality, largely bequeathed to us by Christian hermeneutics and exegesis, the text is a treasure trove, an autonomous, self-sufficient, closed, finished entity, from which meaning is a nugget to be extracted. In various
Eastern conceptions, Sikh, Hindu, but also Islamic and Zoroastrian, the
text is fundamentally open, in the sense that it self-consciously acknowled-
ges its own ontological status as only one half of a dialectic, as a dancer
without her partner. Such conceptions of textuality, then, include some
recognition that the text requires a human partner, quite literally, to
activate it.

I take these words as yet another guide, to the text in performance. Still,
Zubin’s participation in this version of the paper is limited. I wrote the
paper, building on his suggestions offered by e-mail.

I have been teaching at universities for 25 years and Zubin is a new
PhD candidate, but we both see this problem of the Canadian postcolonial
within the shape of our present institution. At York, postcolonial is a
collective term for the literatures of the former British Commonwealth, a
usage common elsewhere. This does not deny that many other literatures
come from countries that evolved out of the tentacles of the European
empires, but most don’t appear in an English department. Thus, this label
is not precise but pragmatic. No such label would be needed for these
courses except for our acceptance of a market in which national literatures
such as Indian and Jamaican are unlikely to get individual courses, at least
before the specialized honours seminars, and postcolonial is a better grab-
bag than the alternatives, which have run the gamut from commonwealth
to third world, world, emergent, and many others.

Many of the arguments over the meaning of postcolonial react to the
definition in The Empire Writes Back: “We use the term ‘post-colonial,’
however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the
moment of colonization to the present day” (2). Some oppose the use of
any word. Anne McClintock states:

Asking what single term might adequately replace “post-colonialism,” for
example, begs the question of rethinking the global situation as a multipli-
city of powers and histories, which cannot be marshalled obediently under
the flag of a single theoretical term, be that feminism, marxism or post-
colonialism. (302-03)

Presumably, McClintock would see the York label as a troublesome obedience. We might better give these courses some less loaded connective term,
such as *various*. Harish Trivedi provides a specifically Indian response through the word *uttar-upnivesh vad*: "To evoke the Hindi word for post-colonialism is at once to begin to perceive post-colonialism differently. Except that post-colonialism would not let us do that" (238). His sad summary is that "the post-colonial double-bind seems to be that not to participate in what is a globally hegemonic discourse would be to dig oneself into a bottomless hole, while to participate at all in this discourse as now constituted would be at once to be compliant and complicit, however radically oppositional one may claim one's agenda to be" (245). In other words, the central difficulty is the foreignness of the theoretical model. One might argue that in its attempt to cover such varied ground, *postcolonial* is never likely to be at home.

I still find the discussion by Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge to be the most compelling excursion through the vicissitudes of the term. They begin with *The Empire Writes Back* and confront what they see as its "postmodern resonance":

> Meaning resides in the "slippage" of language; meaning is constantly deferred; meaning grows out of a dialectical process of a relationship between the margins and the centre (meaning arises out of a discourse of marginality); meanings are not culture-specific and in postcolonial texts are constructed metonymically, not metaphorically. Since metonymy defers meaning, it is repetitive, and returns to haunt us in a replay of a version of the Gothic. (286)

The theoretical interpretation offered here is not an easy one. I think the spectre the writers offer in the last sentence is a reference to the hidden psychology that we now see to be at the core of the gothic. The meaning is metonymic because it is a response to placing, rather than offering either an inherent referentiality, in which a subject represents the object, or a metaphor, in which meaning is represented figuratively, as the subject uses a self-conscious association to suggest the character of the object. It appears that at least part of the problematic that they see in *Empire* is an inadequate view of the power of the specific subject within her specific culture.

My own partial contribution to this argument was an article titled "Queerly Postcolonial," which calls for a recognition that most of the
theorizing on the "postcolonial" pays very little attention to what could be called postcolonial literature: "In many ways this is the pain of the difference between the Leavisite discovery of the human within the postcolonial text and the poststructuralist search for fragmentation." I said of Edward Said: "It must seem at least somewhat paradoxical that this most famous scholar of the textual oppression of the colonial subject should seem so unable to respond to the textual expression of the postcolonial subject" (12-13). Still, as Zubin notes, that subject, no matter how expressed, remains key to the postcolonial:

But it is highly unlikely that Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin are interested in dealing with "all" culture affected by colonialism, but rather, only those cultures receiving the raw end of the colonial deal (i.e., victimized cultures). For example, I would like to argue that it is precisely because of, and not despite, its hegemony, that the USA should be considered postcolonial.

As I write, the United States has conquered Iraq. Few would see this as a symptom of the postcolonial status of the United States, yet as I observed elsewhere, it certainly fits Zubin's model:

Many see this as a prime example of the continuity of colonialism. Even the family business narrative of the process fits the colonial paradigm. The father, the originator of most postcolonial discussion in English, Great Britain, is supportive although he has largely retired from the enterprise, after centuries of imperialist busyness, starting before the first factory of the East India Company in 1611. His strongest son, the United States, has taken over and actually runs the shop much like old Dad, a bit of trade monopoly here, a bit of religious moralizing there, and a use of the military when a spoiled child has need of the rod. ("Where is Queer?")

As I understand it, the School of Literature and Performance Studies at the University of Guelph has at least in some sense agreed with this broad model and has decided to foreground issues of imperialism and colonialism in all its literature courses, not just those texts receiving Zubin's "raw end." Thus all the works of Shakespeare, beyond the usual tokens such as The Tempest, become objects of postcolonial studies, very much according to the rubric offered by The Empire Writes Back, but does this make
Shakespeare a postcolonial subject? Presumably not. In this guise, postcolonial is useful as a method of reading but not as a taxonomy.

Robert Young, in his almost encyclopedic Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction, looks at the broad range of imperialism and states: “Postcolonial cultural critique involves the reconsideration of this history, particularly from the perspectives of those who suffered its effects, together with the defining of its contemporary social and cultural impact” (4). Suffering seems to be in some sense key. He goes on: “Postcolonial theory is distinguished from orthodox European Marxism by combining its critique of objective material conditions with detailed analysis of their subjective effects” (7). Young is no doubt too narrow in suggesting that there is no recognition of anything beyond the “objective material” in European Marxism, but his phrasing is resonant. Young moves from suffering “effects” to subjective “effects.” Thus the postcolonial might be the suffering subject.

Spivak’s A Critique of Postcolonial Reason states that her purpose was “to track the figure of the Native Informant” (ix), but the trail is faint in many places. Zubin refers to “the sin that Said’s Orientalism commits: namely, letting the din and cacophony of the empire, quite literally, drown out, or silence, the voice of the Other. . . . The notion of the native informant is fundamentally a positivity, while that of the colonial subject is fundamentally a question of negation and alterity.” Spivak states, “After 1989, I began to sense that a certain postcolonial subject had, in turn, been recoding the colonial subject and appropriating the Native Informant’s position” (ix). Spivak seems primarily interested in the postcolonial as recent migrant, as in her own example as an Indian-born academic in the United States, but it might have various other designations, such as creolization, as in the Jamaican motto, “Out of many, one people.”

In Canada, “out of many, one people” has been enshrined as multiculturalism. That word shows no consideration of race, and the various government programs that have been promulgated under this rubric rather consider ethnicities. In the minds of most Canadians today, however, multiculturalism specifically refers to that euphemism, visible minorities. The phrase designates other-than-white without mentioning nasty words such as race. At least one race group has carefully excluded itself. Native persons often assert the importance of the difference between the visible minorities category and the Inuit and First Nations, particularly
in terms of indigeneity. A Native person is no doubt the object of racism and oppressed by a White hegemony, but a Native person defines identity rather from a specific relation to the land. Len Findlay has said that our call in Canada should be “Always indigenize.” As a person who has critiqued the indigenization through which the European invaders have naturalized themselves to become us Canadians, I am wary of this. In far too many conferences—rather in the vast majority—indigenous peoples are much more often a topic than a present voice. Perhaps a better call might be, “Where are the indigenous?” I think that should resonate in all academic gatherings—in all gatherings—in Canada.

Canada provides an unusual case, met by few others, in being hegemonically postcolonial yet with an indigenous postcolonial minority and an increasingly large postcolonial minority from relatively recent immigration. The first is postcolonial in that Canada continues to be shaped by its colonial heritage with Great Britain and by its neo-colonial relations with the United States. The second is postcolonial in the sense that all of the fourth world is. Fourth world refers to indigenous peoples of nations where independence has been achieved for the state but in which the indigenous peoples are minorities who continue to live as the colonized in relation to my first category who act as colonizers. The First Nations are ostensibly free, but their socio-economic status bears little resemblance to liberation. The third is postcolonial in the sense of having come from countries which are generally recognized as postcolonial, such as Jamaica and India, but also fulfill that primary rubric: they are Black or brown.

It is a typical move to claim that citizenship is what matters and thus all three categories can be equal, as all can be Canadian citizens. Yet, it is constantly recognized that the first group seems little different from other White first-world cultures. It is particularly popular in Canada to observe that the most popular “American” comedians are often Canadians (Jim Carrey, John Candy, Eugene Levy, Martin Short), as are the favourite popular singers in a variety of categories (Alanis Morissette, Celine Dion, Shania Twain, Avril Lavigne). In other words, we can pass for the big guys. The second group represents “the Indian problem,” as First Nations continue, five centuries after the first invasion, to find it difficult to accept the values of the hegemonic order or to gain many of its benefits. On the other hand, while the third postcolonial group often enters the country with
little and must face extensive racism, from the first group, from the state, and even from each other, they tend to conform to the immigrant tradition in North America and many rapidly become exemplary achievers in capitalism. As just one example, Michael Lee-Chin, a Jamaican immigrant, recently donated 30 million dollars to the Royal Ontario Museum. The conservative columnist Margaret Wente emphatically observed that he has required no affirmative action in order to become one of Canada’s wealthiest men.

While these three categories skirt around hegemony and economic status, they also skirt around “the native.” Many years ago I heard someone from my first category introduced as a “native” of Ottawa. He corrected the speaker: “No, I am not a ‘native’: I was just born there.” The common use of native of to mean born in that place is corrected by the much more ideologically heavy meaning of being of the First Nations. Then for the third category, the problem is reversed. For someone of, say, South Asian ethnicity, it is difficult for the hegemony to ever accept nativity. I have a friend who is fourth-generation Canadian and people constantly ask her, “So where are you from?” The answer is Calgary, regardless of the difficulty some—usually but not always White—Canadians have with accepting a Sikh as a native of Calgary.

So only category two is “Native” but all are “postcolonial.” Yet can they be postcolonial in common parlance? Regardless of the careful definition in The Empire Writes Back, postcolonial seems tied to a racial other. A special issue of ARIEL, entitled “Institutionalizing English Studies: The Postcolonial/Postindependence Challenge,” provides a variety of takes on such questions, but one example, in its typically American slippages, suggests what the postcolonial is today. The title of “Art and the Postcolonial Imagination: Rethinking the Institutionalization of Third World Aesthetics and Theory” seems quite clear, but its purpose is much less so. It claims that the post in postcolonial is “a sign and cultural marker of a spatial challenge and contestation with the occupying powers of the West in the ethical, political, and aesthetic forms of the marginalized” (McCarthy 233). “Marginalized” could mean many things, but when the article assumes, without further qualifications, that Toni Morrison is a “postcolonial artist,” it seems postcolonial is once again simply Black or brown. They might as well say subaltern.

Even Spivak might find this reference dismaying, or perhaps insuf-
ferable. The pun seems necessary. Ever since Spivak first used the word subaltern, anyone who has in some sense suffered has claimed subalternity. In the late 1990s, a great deal of academic attention was paid to trauma and all too often this trauma was deemed sufficient to produce something looking like a subaltern. Still, Ranajit Guha’s original definition for the Subaltern Studies Group is of interest: “the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the ‘elite’” (Guha 8). This avoids simplistic racial distinctions although, as Spivak notes, it carries with it a connotation of a neglected victim.

My title is a nod towards Stanley Fish’s *Is There a Text in This Class?* Like Spivak’s non-speaking subaltern, Fish’s phrase is constantly parodied. My reworking looks to both the subaltern, I think the unstated target of so much of what is called postcolonial, and also that question of class. In this I am trying to avoid a reductive view that sees class as defined directly by economic status and yet I am recognizing the centrality of economics. Much of postcolonial theorizing could be placed under the heading of cultural studies. While at its best “culturalism” improves the Marxist tradition by adding to the economic base, by treating culture as central to materialism, much of culturalism seems completely to forget economic issues. The tenor of Guha’s definition suggests that whatever else the subaltern is, she cannot be a part of the economic hegemony.

One of the great assets of culturalism is the common emphasis on the importance of race, especially in the work of the great definer of culturalism, Stuart Hall. Lest I seem to be going the other way in this comment on class, I still wish to assert that erasing race from the concept of the subaltern is clearly an error, especially in a realm of White hegemony such as Canada. Yet Spivak notes the too easy assumptions of race for “the postcolonial informant on the stage of U.S. English studies” (360). She confronts the tendency by this figure to identify so readily “with the other racial and ethnic minorities in metropolitan space” (360). Given the reasonable assumption that university professors and their students constitute the elite of which Guha wrote, regardless of their racial or class heritage, their analyses of the subaltern do not represent the self but rather the other, although at times an other of the same ethnicity as the self. Their work is in sympathy.

Still, it can be both sympathetic and materialist. Zubin comments on terms such as postcolonial.
I would like to see the terms used less as subjective, pseudo-psychosocial markers and more as indicators of objective determinants of social reality. Why can we not admit that these literatures were shaped by a very long and complex history of capital and labor, colony and empire?

If race is the first unstated assumption of the term *postcolonial*, class is the second. While most of the authors deemed postcolonial in Canada do not exist in an inferior class position but rather, by education and status, constitute more of an elite, many, if not most, represent, in the figurative sense, such classes, in some cases post- and in other cases pre-immigration to Canada.

Fitting Young’s description of postcolonial theory as concerned with subjective effects, the members of the Subaltern Studies Group have usually pursued their object as a subject. Her identity is established by difference but once identified they search for her consciousness in a rather romantic quest. Zubin suggests that we see this as a quite precise version of “sympathy”:

In *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Barrington Moore, Jr. writes: “For all students of human society, sympathy with the victims of historical processes and skepticism about the victors’ claims provide essential safeguards against being taken in by the dominant mythology. A scholar who tries to be objective needs these feelings as part of his ordinary working vocabulary” (525). Moore signifies by the term “sympathy,” above all, a moment of contact, an encounter, at the level of the mind, and thus, gives pride of place to the emotive lives of historians: like the rudders of a ship, our emotions are, or at least, should be, amongst the chief determinants of a given academic discourse.

Regardless of the emotions Zubin and I are embracing, there seems no question that *postcolonial* will continue to be the term. In a comment which reminds me of Stephen Slemon, Zubin suggests,

Such definitional debates reveal that postcolonial criticism refuses to take its definitional nomenclature at face value, that it aims to employ its vocabulary cautiously and contextually, conducting its inquiries with a healthy dose of vigilant skepticism. The field of study steadily, if falteringly,
attives towards ever-greater clarity, cogency and explanatory power in the analytic-conceptual arsenal at its disposal.

Perhaps Zubin betrays his youth—or I betray my age in making that remark—when he concludes:

I believe that the most pressing challenge awaiting us in literary studies lies in this very vein, in writing the great metaphysic of postcolonial literature, or rather, via a theorizing of various national, regional or ethnic archives, in writing the great metaphysics of various postcolonial literatures.

I cannot embrace any endeavour to write “the great metaphysic” of anything, but I agree that the constant debate over words such as *postcolonial* and *subaltern* seems to represent “vigilant skepticism” and a desire for greater power “in the analytic-conceptual arsenal.”

Yet I must note that the use of the term “arsenal” clearly moves us all in the direction of war. Are we back with the Americans in Iraq? Or is this just one more example of male figures of combat, which feminist linguists so often admonish? Zubin’s phrasing here seems to imply a battle by the postcolonials against some hegemonic order, but perhaps there is a civil war among postcolonial critics, a battle over the arsenal. If so, what is it about? Is it simply a literary war, or a linguistic war? It is obviously not a physical war, unless there have been skirmishes at conferences of which, I am thankful, I am not aware. Perhaps it is in some sense an economic war, about language commodities.

I think the primary reason postcolonial wins, at least in this case, is less than perfectly principled. Rather than some triumphal revision of Derrida’s white mythologies, it is a rather more debased coinage. Here I agree with a slightly different Semon, who posited *postcolonialism* as “an object of desire for critical practice: as a shimmering talisman that in itself has the power to confer political legitimacy onto specific forms of institutionalized labour . . .” (45). Kim Michasiw, head of York’s English department, in a comment e-mailed to me, takes an understandably sales-oriented approach to these questions:

The term “postcolonial” is a brand name and a brand name that has market caché. The nearest parallel would be “cultural studies” under which
act of branding are published and publicized all manner of texts that would have belonged to some other genre a decade ago (theory, for instance). From our point of view retaining "postcolonial" in a title is a marketing advantage.

One might agree that postcolonial is an attractive logo but what of alternatives? Kim continued:

From an administrative point of view "postcolonial" is post-ideological while "visible minority" (especially the "minority" part) is somewhat less safe. I'd not be surprised if one of the upper committees which vet such things were to suggest that "visible minority" might scare off white students. There also might be some twitching about suggesting that anyone at York is a minority.

The term visible minority seems typically Canadian. It says race without saying race. It of course depends on all kinds of assumptions that go well beyond the bland claims of multiculturalism. Most assume that certain visible characteristics are typical of southern Italians, of certain groups of Jews, of Swedes, of the Irish, but these ethnicities are not now considered visible minorities. Had the term existed in the past, all of these would have been considered such by the English hegemony in Canada, who freely denoted the physical appearances of the non-English through words of far less delicacy. Still, most Canadians would assume that they know what visible minority means today. Any careful analysis would demonstrate, however, that visible minority lacks the precision it seems to offer and at the same time avoids the necessary import of subaltern. Presumably visible minority, unlike subaltern, is not inherently other than the elite. It implies the inevitability of White hegemony yet it fails to recognize the many ways in which non-White Canadians become part of the hegemonic order, as in the case of Michael Lee-Chin. It is difficult to deem that someone is outside the hegemony if he can donate 30 million dollars to a museum. While we might never agree on an absolute demarcation of who is and who is not subaltern, Guha's definition implies a shape to the figure for which all of our studies seem to yearn.

I suspect that Kim Michasiw's observations about York will hold true for most of Canada. Neither visible minority nor subaltern is ever likely
to appear post-ideological. On the other hand, regardless of so many claims by Arif Dirlik and others, *postcolonial* is not so bereft of meaning as to necessitate its abandonment. I still would claim that postcolonial is viable as a reading strategy, and includes many different ideological problematics, but perhaps as a denotation of people, the postcolonial subjects, the term looks too "post-ideological" to be viable. Not that I actually believe that post-ideological is possible. I hope I don't seem too deconstructive if I suggest that "post-ideological" is, like "post-feminist," one of those dangerous ideologies not unlike Francis Fukuyama's "end of history." Never trust an ideology that denies that it is one.

A last word from Zubin:

There is a central division between postcolonial as an epistemological marker, a textual analytic or a methodology, and as an ontological/metaphysical marker, what you call the postcolonial subject. The former usage employs a constructivist logic and suggests that postcolonialism is a function of the theoretically self-conscious analyst; the latter usage employs a realist-positivist logic and suggests that postcolonialism is a function of concrete, historical agents, of their ontologies, their epistemologies, their phenomenologies. The big question comes down to: whose being, whose existence, are we talking about?

Zubin's "epistemological marker" seems a bit larger than my "reading strategy," but they inhabit similar territories. As he suggests, in this category postcolonialism, whatever it might be, is used as an analytical tool. The obvious problem is that this process implies that postcolonialism is something which is done by a postcolonialist to a text. The other, Zubin's "ontological/metaphysical marker," seems to be something that is already in the text and which the analyst discovers. The postcolonialism is not in any sense bestowed upon the text but rather is inherent to it. The question Zubin raises is whether there is a "being" in the process. If the text is the primary object but the postcolonialism is in the application, then presumably there is no ontology at stake. One might find a being in the analyst, but rather than a being the analyst is presumably rather more of a diagnostician. I suspect we analysts are less divorced from the subject than this would suggest. If we are "talking about" postcolonial, then no matter how complex our theoretical claims, we are likely looking for the
ontology within. So Zubin and I, this we, are talking about some “subalternt” ontology. We look for this ontology through a name that broadcasts itself as problematic and multifariously ideological. It offers a combination of discomfitting observations most students and academics are unlikely to enjoy: 1) there are significantly oppressed minorities in Canadian society; and 2) while your parents, your aunts, even your brothers and sisters might be, you are unlikely to be a member of one.

My original intention was to move to a broader representation of race-based writing, but a more useful method might be to follow Spivak’s argument. The Native informant in Canada is a special category, which needs to be isolated from the term *postcolonial* or even the *subaltern*. The interwring of immigration patterns and Canada’s particular role in the history of imperialism can hide the specific importance of the First Nations and this must never be allowed. Still, those same patterns have created new implications for the postcolonial in Canada for which many of us seem compelled to search. Guha’s definition of subaltern produces a context for this search in our classrooms. As Spivak shows, the capital’s Subaltern cannot speak, but a literature that could be labelled “postcolonial writing in Canada” might be the representations of the subaltern by authors who might be mis-recognized as subaltern.

It would be possible here to engage in a long discussion of the Lacanian implications of that mis-recognition. There are no doubt deep psychological needs being met by those who pursue the subaltern, regardless of whether or not they believe themselves to be part of the category. Simply the process of mis-recognition, however, is worth consideration. As many theorists have shown, identification is a necessary but difficult process. One might say it is an impossible process because it is dependent on assumptions of sameness that deny obvious difference. It is in identifying the Other that one constitutes the self, but it is also in identifying with at least some “others” that the self is able to constitute herself as a possible identity. We all believe ourselves to be unique individuals but we also recognize the inevitability of patterns and groups. I wish to be an individual but I would never wish to be a stateless individual, so I might be comfortable to identify as a Canadian.

Such processes of identification are particularly interesting in multicultural Canada. Thus to be a Canadian citizen is no doubt more important psychologically to an immigrant from Iraq than it is to me,
someone born in Canada more than 50 years ago. Yet if asked for an identity, I will say “Canadian,” not without pride. The Iraqi-Canadian is likely to say “Iraqi,” with pride in her origins and yet possibly a sadness at what her country has become. This identity, however, in no sense suggests a lack of pride in being a Canadian citizen. All of these identifications are engaged in some sense in mis-recognition, in that none of us is precisely that identity, whatever it might be. In Lacan’s mirror stage, the individual recognizes the self in the mirror but this is clearly in a sense wrong. For a start, the image is reversed, opposite to the real self. Even more important, this image is an object whereas the self is a subject. Yet we must engage this process in order to be who we are. We feel ourselves as subjects but we only see ourselves as objects. And we see others as objects. Yet we must learn their possibilities as subjects. This goes beyond recognition to something which Spivak has called “ethical singularity,” to deal with the other as though the self.

The subaltern in Canada requires identification, requires mis-recognition. The “outside” critic, the person who feels him or herself to be of the elite, wants to identify a subaltern in order at least to begin to find the consciousness of that victim of the hegemony. Spivak herself recognizes the impossibility of this victim in her title: the reader wishes to hear that identity that in its pure definition cannot speak. The reader yearns to encounter the ultimate victim of imperial history, to embrace a subjectivity at the extreme of the “raw end of the colonial deal.” In the present our need is to understand not the Cecil Rhodes of the process but the subaltern. The choice of the reader who is outside, who does not claim to be one with the subaltern’s race or ethnicity, might be to accept a slightly subaltern figure, one who does not truly fit the identity but is sufficiently subaltern to be mis-recognized, although sufficiently non-subaltern to speak. Similarly the reader who is “inside,” who does make at least some such claim, can find an almost subaltern whom she can mis-recognize as herself. Thus her speaking in itself represents the possibility that at least the slightly subaltern can speak.

As Lacan and his followers have shown so often, mis-recognition is a mistake but also a necessity. We need to mis-recognize in order to create our positions in the world. The yearning for Zubin’s “objective determinants” is doomed but perhaps the lack of that yearning is also doomed, doomed in the sense that the necessary energy of the pursuit of a subaltern
consciousness would be erased. We need that sympathy to which Moore referred, but still more we need to see and hear that mis-recognized subaltern. Or, in other words, the postcolonial subject.

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