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“Hybridity and History: A Critical Reflection on Homi K. Bhabha’s ‘Post-Historical’ Thought”¹

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I. Introduction

Without doubt, Homi K. Bhabha’s ‘hybridity’ is one of the most vital concepts in cultural criticism today. Along with his other ideas such as ‘sly civility’ and ‘colonial non-sense’, by the late 1990s it had passed into the currency of theoretical debate and has remained influential ever since.² Its impact has been internationally felt not just in comparative literature and cultural studies, but also in other human sciences, including art criticism, anthropology, and history. Hybridity also plays a crucial role within Bhabha’s own theoretical development, as it is intimately linked with his other concepts such as ‘Third Space’. For all its international fame, however, the concept seems to be little understood, partly because of the notoriously difficult prose-style adopted by this renowned theorist now teaching at Harvard. As a result, except for some notable critical engagements³, it

1 This essay is a substantially revised version of a paper first presented at the Postcolonial Theory Graduate Seminar at the English Faculty, Oxford University on 5 December, 2002. I would like to thank Dr. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Professor Robert J. C. Young for having given me the opportunity to present it. I also thank my colleagues at Doshisha University, Yoshiaki Mihara and Peter Neff, for reading the early drafts of the current paper.

2 Balachandra Rajan, ‘Excess of India’, *Modern Philology*, vol. 95 (1998), pp.490-500, p.469.

3 Robert J. C. Young has played an important role in making Bhabha’s postcolonial theory widely recognized in Euro-American academia. In his influential *Colonial Desire* published in 1995, he famously declared that, along with Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Bhabha constituted the ‘Holy Trinity’ of postcolonial theory. Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p.163. For Young’s detailed discussion on Bhabha’s work, see, Robert J. C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* [Second Edition] (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), especially pp.181-91. Bhabha’s influence can also be known by the degree to which his markedly postmodernist theory has invited harsh criticisms from those critics including Alex

SATOSHI MIZUTANI

has either been dismissed without much effort to grasp its full content, or been uncritically embraced without due scrutiny and referenced as a theoretical support in this age of multiculturalism and transnational border-crossing. This essay will attempt to go beyond both of these reductive views. On the one hand, it will show how 'hybridity' can be productively used to expose and then transcend the Eurocentrism of 'modernity' from a most innovative manner. On the other hand, however, the essay will also argue that the concept's exclusive focus on modernity can unwittingly lead to an analytic exclusion of some of the crucial features of colonial ambivalence.

This essay will attempt a theoretical engagement with this influential concept by introducing it to a specific historical context: namely, the imperial problematization of 'miscegenation' and of the colonial presence of 'Eurasians' in late British India (from 1858 to the early twentieth century)⁴. Bhabha himself has never written anything about the Eurasians of British India, and I am fully aware of the possible misgivings such readings may risk inviting. Certain groups of colonized natives, such as the male Hindu elites in colonial Bengal, became ambiguously 'modern' through Western education: it was the colonial representation of these men—not that of Eurasians—that Bhabha chooses to discuss in his widely acclaimed essay, 'Of mimicry and man'.⁵ I believe, however, that the colonial presence of Eurasians can also be viewed and discussed as a topic highly pertinent to the current debate on 'hybridity'. One recent strand of colonial studies, powerfully led by Ann Laura Stoler, has successfully examined how a range of 'white'

Collincious, Neil Larsen, Bart Moor-Gilbert, and Benita Parry, who have not given up the values of the more 'traditional' Left. See, Alex Callinicos, 'Wonders Taken For Signs', in (eds.) M. Zavarzadeh and D. Morton, *Post-Ality: Marxism and Postmodernism* (Washington, D. C.: Maitsonneuve Press, 1995), pp.98-112; Bart Moor-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997), especially pp.114-51; Neil Larsen, *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas* (London and New York: Verso, 2001), especially pp.36-43; Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2004), especially pp.55-74.

- 4 People of mixed descent were called 'Eurasian' until 1911, when the term was officially dropped and replaced by 'Anglo-Indian'. The essay will adopt 'Eurasian' for purely stylistic reasons but it should be noted that some 'Eurasians' themselves strongly opposed this nomenclature at the turn of the century arguing that it had derogatory connotations. For a detailed discussion on this point, see Satoshi Mizutani, 'Contested Boundaries of Whiteness: Public Service Recruitment and the Eurasian and Anglo-Indian Association, 1876-1901', in (eds.) H. Fischer-Tiné and S. Gehrmann, *Empires and Boundaries: Rethinking Race, Class, and Gender in Colonial Settings* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2009), pp.88-108, pp.97-103.
- 5 Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse', in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* [abbreviated as *LC* hereafter] (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp.85-92.

populations—including mixed-descent groups—emerged as ‘problematic’ categories of imperial rule.⁶ While Stoler herself has written mainly on the Dutch East Indies, her analytic frames have been productively utilized by others to examine the various ‘white’ groups in British India, including the Eurasians.⁷

My own research over the past decade has also concerned the historical implications which Eurasian presence had for the construction of colonial racial boundaries, and this essay will use some of its findings. But, while drawing on my historical research, the essay will not intend itself as a ground for judging the concept of hybridity from an empiricist perspective. Rather the essay will seek to read the concept into the context in question for the specific purpose of expounding its theoretical essence. This reading will make it clear that the concept entails a distinctive view on history, or of how we think about the world in terms of temporality. The essay will then let the theme of history guide our discussion, which, in turn, will suggest another way of reading the same ‘Eurasian question’ from a different, more materialist, perspective on history. Finally the two alternative readings will be compared with one another for elucidating the scope and limits of the concept.

II. Hybridising History

Acclimatisation and miscegenation as paradoxes of ‘change’

The word ‘hybridity’ evokes mixture of races, or ‘miscegenation’⁸. But the concept of hy-

6 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009).

7 Lionel Caplan, *Children of Colonialism: Anglo-Indians in a Postcolonial World* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001); Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Alison Blunt, *Domicile and Diaspora: Anglo-Indian Women and the Spatial Politics of Home* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); Laura Bear, *Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy, and the Intimate Historical Self* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2007).

8 Throughout this essay, I use ‘miscegenation’ as an analytic term to discuss a range of discourses and phenomena that emerged under European imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I am aware of the term’s problematically essentialist connotation: in today’s post-colonial world, the use of the term has generally been avoided, whether in anthropology,

SATOSHI MIZUTANI

briduity, as Bhabha formulates it, does not concern the racial dimension of miscegenation. It is not intended to serve as a moral ground for favouring racial mixture over the imperialist ideology of racial purity. Nor is it a conceptual yardstick for probing colonial histories to discover some objective, sociological realities about miscegenation. Rather, the sense of mixture evoked by the word is to be used metaphorically. Hybridity helps the postcolonial critic to upset the discourse of imperialism that would otherwise remain 'unmixed', uninfluenced by anything other than itself.⁹ Therefore, the following analysis will also confine itself to the discursive aspect of the Eurasian question in British India.

In late colonial India, every white subject was officially supposed to be the epitome of British racial prestige. The Report of the Select Committee for Colonisation and Settlement (appointed in 1858) described the white-British subjects in India as those who 'by their enterprise, capital and science, set in motion the labour, and develop the resources, of India'.¹⁰ Each white subject would be an agent of colonial development, or an executor of progressive transformation. The following extract from an anonymous article appearing in 1860 in *The Calcutta Review* gave an aesthetic twist to this account. According to it, the 'English gentlemen' ought to be:

'the centres of civilization from whence enlightenment and knowledge shall radiate standing forth like beacon lights to illumine the darkness of a benighted land; an ever present example of the wonders which English justice, probity and independence can achieve'.¹¹

What is rather intriguing in this declaration is the way in which the 'English gentleman' emerged as a discursive subject of colonialism. He was at once a 'centre' and 'ever present'. He existed, always and anywhere. Like a 'light', the white subject would reach every corner of the colonized land, its every spot of 'darkness'. He was not merely a medium of 'enlightenment and knowledge' and of the 'wonders' of English liberalism. He was himself a transcendence, an ever-transcending carrier of these values of Western mo-

sociology, or legal studies, not least because of its biological undertone. Critical historians of colonialism, however, have often chosen to use it, albeit as an analytic concept describing and explicating the question of 'racial mixture' in various colonial situations in the past.

9 For a less metaphysical, but unfailingly 'postcolonial', treatment of hybridity, see Young, *Colonial Desire*.

10 Quoted in Satoshi Mizutani, 'Constitutions of the Colonising Self in Late British India: Race, Class and Environment', *Zinbun: Annals of the Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University*, vol. 38(2005), pp.61-73, p.26.

11 Quoted in *ibid.*, p.28.

dernity.

Such exemplariness of the white subject was predicated upon the fundamental tenet that he was not influenced by the object he colonised. The white subject supposedly caused India to ‘develop’. But such causal relation would be tenable only on the condition of his becoming unaffected by India’s socio-cultural and natural environments. Similarly, the ‘English gentleman’ would be able to know and then classify the colonised subjects into ‘racial categories’ only when he himself was not classifiable into any such categories. To remain the universal originator of historical change, the white subject had to be always ‘extra-environmental’ and ‘extra-racial’.¹²

But would it ever be possible for the white subject to stay completely aloof from the land he colonises? Could he not possibly become altered by environmental influence, by acculturation, and/or by miscegenation? The mere idea of ‘change’ appears logically inconsistent with the discursive designation of the ‘English gentleman’ as an ‘ever-present example’. But if anything, the anxiety over ‘change’ was deeply entrenched in the white community of the British Raj.¹³ And this logical contradiction made the colonial discourse of enlightenment equivocal and internally split. Or in Bhabha’s phrase, it made the ‘tongue’ of that language ‘forked, [but] not false’.¹⁴

We can observe this ambivalence, for instance, in the discourse about what was known then as the theory of ‘acclimatisation’. In essence, this theory maintained that the Europeans would be able to adapt to the tropical climates of their imperial colonies. It is immediately obvious that this theory would have been incompatible with the aforementioned ideal of colonial whiteness. The notion of natural adaptation implied in this theory should have logically contradicted the idea of the white subject as ‘extra-environmental’. By definition, this subject is never transformed by India, let alone ‘acclimatised’.

Its illogical outlook notwithstanding, the acclimatisation theory was to haunt colonial discourse, making it internally unstable. The theory would not be readily dismissed as a trivial, silly, and therefore simply negligible line of thought. Rather, it had to be

12 For a suggestive discussion about whiteness as being beyond all racialised categories and thus racially non-problematic, see Ross Chambers, ‘The Unexamined’, in Mike Hill (ed.), *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), pp.187-203.

13 Ranajit Guha also discusses this sort of colonial anxiety, albeit one related to a different context. British men in late colonial India confined their place of socializing to racially exclusive ‘clubs’ in which they could enjoy the comfort of the ‘home’—or British—, environment. Guha argues that they did this precisely because the colonial world surrounding their clubs presented itself as too immensely diverse and incommensurate to be ‘known’. India’s sheer *otherness* left the British presence unstable ontologically as well as epistemologically. Ranajit Guha, ‘Not at Home in Empire’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 3 (1997), pp.482-493, pp.483-5.

14 Bhabha, ‘Of mimicry and man’, p.85.

openly refuted, precisely because it touched the strings of a deep-set anxiety over 'change'. For instance, James Hunt, a leading figure in the British anthropological circle, reacted to the theory in an emotionally charged polemic. As he asserted in an academic essay (published in 1863), in British India, *'We have exhaustion and degeneracy, but no real acclimatization'*¹⁵ (the italics original). Hunt's vigilance against acclimatisation betrayed a built-in scepticism about the white subject's supposed capability for remaining unaffected by what he colonises. In fact, such suspicion was only widespread among the British in India in the late nineteenth century. By then, much of the optimism about white colonial settlement had waned. What became increasingly dominant in its place was a stern observation that the white-British population would eventually 'degenerate' and would not survive beyond the third generation. There was an important shift in the view on 'change'. The positive interpretation of change, namely the ability to adapt, lost its appeal. It was then superseded by a cynical belief in the inevitability of degeneration.¹⁶

Along with acclimatisation, we can also read miscegenation as a discursive paradox concerning the relationship between the transforming coloniser and the transformed colonised. Exactly for the same reason as in the case of acclimatisation, miscegenation would also emerge as an obvious logical contradiction to the supposed universality of the white subject and, more directly, to his 'extra-racial' quality. W. J. Moor, who was an influential public figure as a medical surgeon, wrote in his *Health in the Tropics* (1862):

'Not a single reliable fact has been produced to show that our race can be continued even through a few generations without Asiatic mixture. The children of Europeans born in the plains of India grow up weakly, the progeny seldom attain maturity, their generation never have children. All authorities agree in stating that not one descendant of the Portuguese can be found without admixture of native blood. [...] The question, however, is not yet decided if a healthy and vigorous European stock can be propagated and maintained'.¹⁷

The doctor was urged to engage with the notion of miscegenation, if only to dismiss it in the end. He found it problematic because it might allow for prospects for 'change':

¹⁵ Quoted in Mizutani (2005), pp.30-2.

¹⁶ For a detailed account of the theory of acclimatisation, see Mark Harrison, *Public Health in British India: Anglo-Indian Preventive Medicine 1859-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), especially pp.36-59; Mark Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions: Health, Race, Environment and British Imperialism in India, 1600-1850* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Quoted in Mizutani (2005), pp.35-6.

that is, a possible use of racial mixture for effectively acclimatising the conquering race. It might dangerously lead to the suggestion that the infusion of native blood might enable the white race to survive in India across generations. It was precisely such optimism about miscegenation¹⁸ that the doctor was compelled to disavow. Miscegenation might be tenable for the Portuguese (who were seen as more prone to degeneration), but not for the ‘English gentlemen’. It may enable continuous settlement but only at the cost of ‘change’. Yet, those who have changed would be no more; no longer ‘*healthy and vigorous*’, let alone ‘English gentlemen’.¹⁹

The recurring attention to degeneration—whether by acclimatisation or miscegenation—shows that the supposed universality of the white subject was not taken as self-evident. Acclimatisation and miscegenation might enable the Europeans to adapt to India, but, as Hunt observed, this would be achieved only at the cost of leaving them ‘going native’. Such a possibility of alteration would have to be suppressed if colonialism was to maintain the transcendental nature of the ‘English gentleman’ and the universality of modernity which he supposedly embodied. In order for Britons in India to remain the subject of historical transformation, they would have to discipline themselves so that their every-day behaviours matched their discursive edifice as ‘the centres of civilization’. Not least, they would have to embody their incomparable moral dispositions before the increasingly critical gaze of the natives of India, whom they were supposedly transforming into civilised subjects. A sermon given in 1858 at Allahabad by the Rev. Clement Francis Cobb, is highly illustrative of such a perceived imperative for the white subject to stay refined and respectable in the eyes of the natives. In the sermon, Cobb remarked: ‘permit me to remind you that you are most closely scrutinized in your daily habits by the heathen and Mohammedan servants about you. [...] immoral and dishonourable practices, or the excesses of intemperance, where they exist, [are] noted by our [native] attendants, who are thus induced to set lightly by our religion and our God’.²⁰ In a similar vein, the aforementioned Select Committee for Colonisation and Settlement also warned that it would be only with an indubitably higher degree of moral refinement

18 The anthropologist John Crawfurd, for example, had expressed a rather ‘optimistic’ view on miscegenation: he had argued that the effect of miscegenation on the white race was negligible, eventually disappearing after about four generations. *Ibid.*, pp.34-5.

19 The ambivalence about miscegenation was not just about colonial settlement: it manifested itself also as an irresolvable tension between libido and repression, or between the desire for the ‘racial other’ and the repulsion thereto. This ambivalence at the psycho-sexual level has been well carved out by Young. See, Young, *Colonial Desire*.

20 Clement Francis Cobb, *European Christians Appointed to be the Light of Heathen India : a Sermon for the Times* (Mirzapore: Orphan School Press, 1858), p.9.

SATOSHI MIZUTANI

that the coloniser would be able to achieve a hegemonic hold over the consciousness of the colonized.²¹

Mimicry, hybridity, and history

The imperial rejection of acclimatization and miscegenation as possible methods of colonising India had an immediate effect of stereotyping those people of European descent who were seen as having become irrevocably transformed by environmental influences, by racial mixture, or by both. And it was people of mixed descent, or 'Eurasians', who were represented as the case *par excellence* of such degenerative transformation.²² It was commonly held that the Eurasian population was inferior to the non-mixed white population both physically and morally. Yet this process of racial stereotyping is of lesser importance as far as our ongoing discussion is concerned. For our present reading, it is not the *difference* of Eurasians as such but their *ambivalent resemblance* that is more directly relevant.

In spite of his racialised otherness, the Eurasian subject would still resemble and even claim a certain identification with the white subject. To use Bhabha's phrase, he was 'almost the same, *but not quite*'²³, or the 'mimic man'. He was someone who had 'changed', albeit in an incomplete and disturbing manner. It is not the existence of the Eurasian people as such that was disturbing. Rather, it was the aesthetic effect of their mimicry. The Eurasian subject, as the 'mimic man', would not be a fixed, standalone identity by himself. Rather, the mimic man acted out a performance of repeating, duplicating, or mocking. He would not be an identity since that would make him visible and thus named and categorised by colonial discourse. As Bhabha writes, 'Mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents*'.²⁴ The Eurasian subject as mimicry would exist only by relating himself to the original—the white subject. As an anonymous letter to a British newspaper in 1891 complained, the Eurasian subject was 'bloated with false notions of his equal-

21 Mizutani (2005), p.28. For the actual ways in which Britons in India sought to cultivate their whiteness through their quotidian social practices, see E. M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: the Physical Experience of the Raj* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), and Buettner, *Empire Families*.

22 For an historical account of the emergence of the Eurasian community, see C. J. Hawes, *Poor Relations: The Making of a Eurasian Community in British India, 1773-1833* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996). See also Lionel Caplan's anthropological work for the relevance of colonial history to the contemporary state of 'Anglo-Indians'. Caplan, *Children of Colonialism*.

23 Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', p.86.

24 *Ibid.*, p.88.

ity with the Englishmen’.²⁵ The supposed ‘extra-racial’ quality of the white subject would become perverted as he was mocked by somebody who was ‘white, but not quite’. Therefore, the Eurasian subject was accused of being ‘falsely white’, and as always forgetful of the fact of being ‘mixed’. In the words of a journal article in *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review* in 1900, the Eurasian people were ‘desirous of passing themselves off for what they are not’.²⁶

In a Bhabhite scheme of things, it would be the mimetic effect of the Eurasian subject, rather than his racialised identity, that signals a possibility for postcolonial intervention: a moment which he calls ‘hybridity’. As someone who ambiguously resembled his own supposedly un-changing self, the white subject would not be able to represent the Eurasian subject without perverting or ‘ironising’ himself. Here, the effect of mimicry can be taken as destabilising the white subject as the transcendental author of colonial discourse. It was his equivocal resemblance to the white man that turned the mimic man into a ‘hybrid’. As Bhabha spells out in ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’, mimicry was an ambivalence ‘founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention’.²⁷ The Eurasian subject bore the aura of hybridity precisely because he had no essence other than his disturbing resemblance to the white subject. He would not represent any attributes that could be identified by colonial discourse, and therefore would never be subjected into the latter’s totalising system of representations. In Bhabha’s expression, he circulated ‘*without being seen*’.²⁸ Thus, the mimetic effect of the Eurasian subject inhibited, without ever being perceived, the discursive logic of colonial enlightenment, and made it split from within.

The concept of hybridity may most aptly be characterised as challenging the ‘temporal dimension’ of colonial discourse: its logic of permanent presence, or of never-changing identity. We have just observed how the mere idea of acclimatisation and miscegenation

²⁵ Anonymous, ‘The Eurasian Problem. - IV.’, *The Statesman and Friend of India [Weekly.]*, 21 November (1891), p.1.

²⁶ A. Nundy, ‘The Eurasian Problem in India’, *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review*, 9 (1900), pp.56-73, p.70. The British census authorities were also highly aware of the ‘problem of passing’ among Eurasians (*Report of the Census of Bengal, 1881, vol. 1* (Calcutta: Government of Bengal, 1883), p.84). They feared that as a consequence of passing, the boundaries between ‘European’ and ‘mixed-race’ might be problematically blurred.

²⁷ Bhabha, ‘Signs Taken For Wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817’, in *LC*, pp.102-122, p.112.

²⁸ Bhabha, ‘Interrogating Identity: Franz Fanon and the postcolonial prerogative’, in *LC*, pp.40-65, p.55.

SATOSHI MIZUTANI

emerged as a challenge to the imperial construct of the relationship between those who transform and those who are transformed. In the same way, the trope of the Eurasian as the mimic man can be taken as 'hybridising' the same time-frame of colonial discourse. As the never-changing agent of imperial civilizing mission, the white subject would be always 'original'. He 'originates', he *is*—he is the temporal flow itself, reigning, as it were, as the transcendental author of history. Colonial temporality, however, was not always stable. To secure its 'originality', its author had to remain authentic, and that authenticity in turn relied on the fact that he himself was unrepresentable, being an invisible vanishing point from which he could represent everything without being represented in return. The Eurasian subject would put a halt to this very sequential chain of causes and effects by his mimetic ambivalence: he would freeze the original time-frame of colonialism by repeating the unrepeatable, thus reproducing inauthentic versions of it. As it became pirated by an ambivalent mode of resemblance, colonial discourse would have its temporal configuration split from within. The implication of such a form of discursive splitting, Bhabha argues, is that it can serve the postcolonial theorist to emphasise the temporal dimension of colonial discourse: 'The splitting of the subject of enunciation destroys the logics of synchronicity and evolution which traditionally authorize the subject of cultural knowledge'.²⁹

Arguably, the temporal dimension of colonialism is the greatest concern of Bhabha's entire theoretical discourse in his book, *The Location of Culture*. The interrogation of colonial temporality by the concept of hybridity is incessantly enacted at all levels, while it is also pursued through other closely-related concepts such as 'time-lag' or 'disjunctive time' that have even clearer indications of his preoccupation with this particular aspect of colonial discourse. The reason for this seems simple enough. I would argue that, for Bhabha, the most fundamental source of colonial power is the very idea of historical temporality, or *history itself*. As he puts it, 'colonialism takes power in the name of history'.³⁰

Indeed, Bhabha's colonial discourse analysis can be plausibly read as targeting the modern idea of history born and developed in Western Europe. This does not mean that his critique is a polemic against the discipline of historical studies in the narrow sense: it is not that he picks up a particular historian to expose the prejudices or errors of his work. Rather, what Bhabha is critical of are any *historicist modes of reasoning* that are manifest, not just in history, but in any approaches in the human and social sciences that try to account for the colonial encounter in terms of linear temporality. The philosophi-

²⁹ Bhabha, 'The commitment to theory', in *LC*, pp.19-39, p.36.

³⁰ Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', p.85.

cal concepts of human progress, such as are represented in the writings of James and John Stuart Mill, Gorge W. Hegel, and Karl Marx; the ‘scientific’ ideas of evolution as inscribed in Social-Darwinist and anthropological thought; the notion of philanthropic improvement as is found in the rhetoric of the ‘civilising mission’. It was these historicist discourses of Western modernity that gave a powerful teleological orientation to colonialism. In a passage in his essay ‘The postcolonial and postmodern’, Bhabha expresses this view explicitly: ‘The grand narratives of nineteenth century historicism [...] were also, in another textual and territorial time / space, the technologies of colonial and imperial governance’.³¹ For Bhabha, the historicist *telos* implicit in the Enlightenment is the most powerful logic of colonial domination, and if such logic is to be subverted, it would be by the ‘hybrid’ subject. This subject, he writes, would ‘outstare linear, continuist history and turn its progressive dream into nightmarish chaos’.³²

III. Historicising Ambivalence

The historical representation of mimicry

As it has become clear by now, the concept of hybridity does not denote any specifics of identity that can be represented. The Eurasian subject as the mimic man would relate himself to history only as its incomprehensible other. Therefore, the colonial presence of the Eurasian people in any historically specific terms would be neglected in Bhabha’s theoretical discourse. Such neglect, it should be noted, is a theoretical necessity. The Eurasian subject would be able to be seen as a ‘hybrid’ subject only insofar as he remained unrepresentable. When consigned to one form of historical representation or another, he would lose all its deconstructive potential. I would argue, however, that to construe the Eurasian subject in such a philosophic way seems as limiting as it is illuminating. For only a brief look at the colonial archive suffices to show that a fair amount of representations of the Eurasian people were in existence in late British India. These representations are worthy of critical examination because they are highly suggestive of how colonial ambivalence figured not just as a meta-historical problem but as a historical one. In what follows, therefore, let us move from our first reading of the Eurasian question in terms of hybridity, to another possible reading of it—a reading which takes issue with *what was actually represented*, rather than what was not.

³¹ Bhabha, ‘The postcolonial and the postmodern: the question of agency’, in *LC*, pp.171-197, p.195.

³² Bhabha, ‘Interrogating Identity’, p.55.

In 1860, Lord Canning, who had just become the first Viceroy of India issued a seemingly ambiguous statement about the education of Eurasian children. On the one hand, the Viceroy described the Eurasians as 'a floating population of Indianised English, loosely brought up, and exhibiting most of the worst qualities of both races'. But at the same time, he also referred to them as 'a source of strength to British rule and usefulness to India'.³³ The equivocal meaning of Eurasian presence expressed here is distinctly different from the sort formulated by the concept of hybridity for the simple reason that, unlike the latter, the former actually became *expressed*. It was a *recognised* kind of ambivalence, already consigned to the historical consciousness of colonial power. But why in the first place did Lord Canning decide to articulate such ambivalence?

The Viceroy was well aware of the extent to which the Eurasian population as a whole had economically declined. Its substantial section was visibly forming a class which was 'profitless', 'unmanageable' and ultimately 'dangerous'.³⁴ Dangerous, because its exposure to the wider colonial society would undermine the ideology of British racial prestige and the legitimacy of imperialism itself. As he put it, the Eurasian population would become 'a glaring reproach to the Government, and to the faith [i.e. Christianity] which it will, however ignorant and vicious, nominally profess'.³⁵ The mimicry of the Eurasian people, or their nominal whiteness, would cause the dissemination of a degraded image of whiteness unless their poverty was soon to be put under control. For the Viceroy, then, it was not simply the meta-historical ambivalence of Eurasians but the historically specific meaning of their presence that was problematic.

In this context, mimicry was bound to take on a different meaning than that implied by the concept of hybridity. As the Eurasian question became constantly problematised, Eurasians were condemned for their alleged tendency to mimic Britons. And what is crucial to note here is that mimicry was not only represented (rather than being unrepresentable): it was also made inseparable from the debate on the origins and causes of Eurasian pauperism. For instance, an ecclesiastic figure long experienced in the Eurasian question wrote in *The Calcutta Review* (1913) that the Eurasian people would:

'organise life on an artificial and not a real basis [...(and) ...] live a life out of harmony with the true facts of existence. The roots of the Anglo-Indian [i.e. Eurasian] are not sufficiently deep in reality [...] He starts from a false position and his life is spent among shadows. He fails, of one

³³ Quoted in *Review of Education in India in 1886* (Calcutta: Government of India, 1888), p.294.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

thing, to distinguish between necessities and luxuries’.³⁶

We can recognise in this passage a distinctive manner in which the question of mimicry emerged. Here, mimicry was not an unrepresentable, indeterminate mode of non-identity. In fact, quite the reverse was the case. Colonial discourse graphically described mimicry so as to explicitly identify it as the primary cause of what was seen as a spurious way of living. The perceived problem was not so much the ambivalence, or otherness, of the mimicking Eurasian as what his mimicry might cause in practical terms: namely, the emergence of an Eurasian underclass and its embarrassing visibility in the colonising context. There was a growing conviction that the Eurasian population became impoverished because its members knew no notion of thrift, even in the midst of their chronic state of economic deprivation; that they were in a habit of spending more than necessary to meet their desire to mimic the ways of Britons, while never learning to live a humble living like the natives whom they despised.

It was natural in this context that the representation of mimicry often found itself in relation to a series of concrete historical processes of colonial social reform. The lives of the Eurasian poor had to be examined and disciplined before they went beyond the reach of British control. The debate on mimicry was often tied closely to a heterogeneous set of reformist measures that were aimed especially at the youngest members of the Eurasian community. For instance, military and marine training were repeatedly proposed as a measure to deprive the Eurasian youth of their mimetic tendencies and give them a proper sense of self: a sense of self as a ‘humble labourer’.³⁷ But the most radical of all these measures was an attempt to remove Eurasian children from their biological families (particularly the infamous ‘native mother’),³⁸ and ultimately from the so-

³⁶ Quoted in Satoshi Mizutani, “Degenerate whites’ and their spaces of disorder: Disciplining racial and class ambiguities in Colonial Calcutta (c.1880-1930) in (eds) A. Tambe and H. Fischer-Tiné, *The Limits of British Colonial Control in South Asia: Spaces of Disorder in the Indian Ocean Region* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp.155-91, p.172.

³⁷ See, *ibid.*, pp.175-6.

³⁸ In British India, as Christopher Hawes points out, it was in part for socializing the ‘mass’ of mixed-descent children ‘away from the influence of their Hindu or Muslim mothers’ that the British created a host of orphanages and free-schools by the mid-nineteenth century (Hawes, *Poor Relations*, p.28). The perceived threat of ‘the native mother’ obviously continued to be a dire concern well into the late nineteenth century and beyond. The fear was graphically expressed by a Rev. J. H. Maynard in Tiruvellur who thought that, from their mothers—whether native or Eurasian themselves—, Eurasian children ‘will get no more moral training than the cats and dogs’ (J. H. Maynard, ‘The Eurasian Question’, *The Madras Times*, 23 April 1890, pp. 3-4, p.3). As Stoler has argued, the fear was rife throughout colonial societies that the ‘aban-

cial context of the colonial encounter all together. It had been officially believed that poor Eurasian children had been forced to grow up under 'ideal conditions for the creation of loafers'. Their psychological make-up was in the wrong: 'The destitute Eurasian, however deplorable his position or remote his connection with Europe, clings tenaciously to the fact that he is in part European. As such he will not do the manual work of the casual labourer'.³⁹ The special institutions who took these children, by far the most famous one of which being St. Andrew's Colonial Homes at Kalimpong (1900), raised them in wholesale isolation from the rest of colonial society, closely disciplining them in an artificially created domestic space. There, the Eurasian children would learn to respect—*rather than mimic*—white Britons, while relinquishing their pride of race and refraining from inferiorising native Indians.

History or 'post-history'?

We have thus far seen that there can be at least two ways of reading the equivocal implications of the Eurasian presence in British India. These two readings are at once similar and different. Similar in that they both focus on Eurasian presence to explore the meanings of its colonial ambivalence. But also different, especially in their respective views as to *where* to locate such ambivalence. The origins of this difference can be traced in their distinctive approaches to the idea of history. The one based on the concept of hybridity regards history itself as a target of its critique. Thus, it does not only discover ambivalence in the Eurasian subject but also turns it, through the aesthetic effect of his mimicry, against the historicist rhetoric of colonial discourse. By contrast, the other reading uncovers ambivalence *in* history. Ambivalence is a result of certain social contradictions of colonialism, unfolding in and through a specific time and place. The discourse of mimicry, then, appears as a dark reflection of the imperialist urge to domesticate these historical contradictions.

For Bhabha, history no longer constitutes a viable field of research from which we would be able to gain further knowledge about colonialism. Rather, the idea of history itself is an oppression in its own right. And, his theory of hybridity is an analytic tool for a postcolonial resistance to it. He locates the seeds of colonial violence in the very idea of reconstructing the past by historicist imagination. Thus in the 'Introduction' of his book, he criticises history, describing it as 'the dead hand that tells the beads of sequential

donment' of white children to these women would 'affront European prestige, and contribute to national decay'. Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, p.87.

³⁹ *Review of Education in Bengal, Third Quinquennial Report* (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot: 1907), p.150.

time like a rosary, seeking to establish serial, causal connection’.⁴⁰ In Bhabha’s postcolonial politics, it would be nothing but this ‘serial, causal connection’ which the Eurasian subject subverts. No author of colonial discourse would be able to narrate the mimicry of the Eurasian subject without gainsaying his transcendental status as the originator of colonial temporality. The ‘mimic man’ would then put an end to this historicist structure of colonial discourse; or, as Bhabha hopes in ‘In Interrogating Identity’, it would ‘produce a historylessness: a “culture” of theory that makes it impossible to give meaning to historical specificity’.⁴¹

For Bhabha, freedom is not about the oppressed people *making history* by becoming its agent, but about them serving to deconstruct historical causality itself by their unrepresentable otherness. Unmistakable here is an influence of the philosopher Martin Heidegger, for whom, ‘The problem of causality is a problem of freedom and not vice versa’.⁴² It should be noted that, in recent postcolonial studies, Bhabha is not at all alone in taking such a post-Heideggerian perspective on the question of historical representation and anti-imperialist resistance. For instance, he has been closely connected with some of the internationally prominent members of the *Subaltern Studies* collective, with whom he has long been in a relationship of mutual influence. Particularly in their later works, many of the *Subaltern* historians, most notably Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gyan Prakash, have formulated subalternity as a sense of alterity which, like Bhabha’s hybrid subject, would deconstruct the tyranny of historical reason.⁴³ According to Prakash, writing a history of subalterns is itself an ‘impossible’ task, because subalterns by defini-

⁴⁰ Bhabha, ‘Introduction: Locations of culture’, in *LC*, pp.1-18, p.4.

⁴¹ Bhabha, ‘Interrogating Identity’, p.57.

⁴² Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Human Freedom: An Introduction to Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2002), p.205.

⁴³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002) [Bhabha forwarded this book, ‘out of friendship’ (p.ix).]; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000); Gyan Prakash, ‘Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography’, *Social Text*, vol. 31/32 (1992), pp.8-19; Gyan Prakash, ‘Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism’, *The American Historical Review* (1994), pp.1475-90; Gyan Prakash, ‘Who’s Afraid of Postcoloniality?’, *Social Text*, vol.49 (1996), pp.187-203; See also Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). An exception to this collective shift towards the post-historical perspective is the position taken by Sumit Sarkar, who was a founding member of *Subaltern Studies* but later left the collective. Harshly criticizing the post-historical turn of his former fellows, he has called for an immanent critique of colonial history, partly by reviving the virtues of the tradition of radical social history. See Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), especially, pp.82-108.

tion defy being represented by historians.⁴⁴

IV. Some Closing Remarks

Homi Bhabha's 'hybridity' is a complex and sophisticated concept. It is powerful, as we have seen above, particularly as an ethico-political (as well as a purely analytic) vehicle to deconstruct historical thought and colonial modernity inseparably linked therewith. But the concept, for all its intricate theoretical formulations, also suffers a set of contradictions and insufficiencies. Let me conclude this paper by pondering some of these.

First of all, his identification of historical reason as the ultimate source of imperial power seems to lead Bhabha towards excessive abstractions with effects that undermine his own post-historical argument against universality. For all his exhortations against the universalist pretensions of historical reason, Bhabha's own theoretical formulations tend to universalize the colonial encounter. Ania Loomba points out that the hybrid agents projected in his works are ironically undifferentiated and homogeneous: they always exist in the same fashion whenever and wherever there are colonial discourses representing them in terms of modernity.⁴⁵ While it is meant as an antidote to the transcendental reason of history, hybridity risks becoming yet another kind of transcendentalism. It is just that the table has been reversed: ambivalence now occupies the seat of omnipresence formerly reserved for the discursive subject of history like the Hegelian *Spirit*.⁴⁶

In this context, even more problematic still is Bhabha's formulation of hybridity as a mode of resistance. In this formulation, as was shown above, resistance occurs within the workings of colonial discourse. But, as Rey Chow has understandably cried out, 'what kind of an argument is it to say that the subaltern's "voice" can be found in the *ambivalence* of the imperialist's speech?' 'It is an argument', Chow continues, 'which ultimately makes it unnecessary to come to terms with the subaltern since she has already "spoken", as it were, in the system's gaps'.⁴⁷ Similarly, Ann McClintock has also argued that, in the theory of hybridity, it is 'discourse', rather than any concrete historical actors, that 'desires, dreams, and does the work of colonialism while also ensuring its demise'. Such a 'formalist fetishism', she argues, 'effectively elides the messier question of

⁴⁴ Gyan Prakash, 'The Impossibility of Subaltern History', *Nepantla*, vol.1 (2000), pp.287-94.

⁴⁵ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism / Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p.178.

⁴⁶ For a critique of this kind of transcendentalism, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p.382.

⁴⁷ Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p.35.

historical change and social activism’.⁴⁸ Its call against the silencing of minority voices notwithstanding, Bhabha’s theory may be seen as having its own mechanism of exclusion. The Eurasian people of late British India did struggle to change the unequal relationship with the colonizing British,⁴⁹ but Bhabha’s totalising theory would disregard such struggle for the simple reason that it had been firmly based on a certain historical consciousness, or a will to represent their political cause in order to effect historical changes. The very idea of historical consciousness, for Bhabha, is nothing but an evil hand of Western modernity, rather than the necessary first step for a minorised people to try and change the structural circumstances that disadvantage them. But as Frederic Cooper has recently argued, the historical claims for material equivalence, when taken up by those in the subordinated positions, could and did evolve into something markedly different from forms of pro-imperialist universalism, allowing them to powerfully challenge colonialism from within the empire-state.⁵⁰ Any un-nuanced attack on such ‘universalist’ concepts as ‘freedom’, ‘justice’ and ‘equality’ can itself end up becoming Eurocentric. ‘Universality’, as Terry Eagleton warns, ‘is not to be universally abjured’.⁵¹

Another inseparably related problem is one concerning the teleology of historical reason. According to Bhabha, the hybrid subject becomes an agent of resistance when he inhibits the inner fractures of colonial discourse. This seems to suggest that his deconstructive potential would be realized only *after* he enters the discursive field of colonialism. But one might argue that this ironically legitimises—rather than helps us overcome—the teleological logic of imperial penetration. In order for the mimic man to inscribe his hybridising subversion into historical reason, would he not paradoxically *need* colonialism? Thus, despite his critique of the idea of linear time-frame, Bhabha is not really free from the notion of the West as the centre of history—the difference being that capitalism has been replaced by modernity as a mortar of globalisation. And as far as modernity is concerned, one crucial problem of Bhabha’s post-historical approach, it

48 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p.64. For a similar critique, see, Neil Larsen, *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas* (London and New York: Verso, 2001), pp.36-43.

49 See Mizutani, ‘Contested Boundaries of Whiteness’.

50 Frederic Cooper, *Colonialism in Question* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

51 Eagleton continues, ‘Post modern thinkers should be properly anti-universalist on this score, distinguishing in the true spirit of pluralism those uses of the concept which are pragmatically fruitful from those which are not’. Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2000), p.57.

seems, is that, as it equates history with modernity, it emphasises the latter's significance all too disproportionately. In Bhabha's hands, psychoanalytic themes, for instance, are treated not as topics for historical analysis but deliberately projected as something beyond its epistemological reach. With colonialism rather reductively defined as a question of modernity, Bhabha's use of psychoanalysis becomes characteristically postmodernistic. One may plausibly protest, however, that there is little reason why a psychoanalytic critique of the colonial situation must *replace* a historical one. At least, Franz Fanon—the single most important hero-figure for Bhabha—never gave up the idea of history. As a number of critics have pointed out, while massively drawing on Fanon, Bhabha's theory of hybridity ignores his view of the coloniser-colonised relation essentially as one of historical conflict and struggle, thus requiring a materialist analysis of its underlying structure.⁵²

It is not, of course, that the rhetoric of historical reason as critiqued by Bhabha should be seen as less relevant than the material foundations of history. Insofar as the Eurocentricity of colonial discourse is concerned, the concept of hybridity does remain a useful, almost indispensable tool for radical analytic intervention. As our first reading of British India's Eurasian question demonstrated, it may serve us to lay bare an implicitly oppressive nature inherent in the very idea of history. However, as our second reading showed, the real colonial situation did not always conform to the historicist self-image of colonial discourse. Rather, the colonial situation often turned out to be one that embarrassingly contradicted the cherished ideal of Europeans as a transcendental centre of all historical change. Faced with the challenge of such contradiction—most explicitly embodied by the dreaded figure of the Eurasian as an inauthentic 'double' of the white man—the colonial state and social reformers set out to contain it by intervening in the lives of 'internal enemies'.⁵³ I would argue that this should also be recognized as one aspect of colo-

⁵² For example, see, Abdul R. JanMohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature', in (ed.) Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Race, Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), pp.78-9; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 'Critical Fanonism', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 17 (1991), pp. 457-470, p.462; Kyung-Won Lee, 'Is the Glass Half-Empty or Half-Full? Rethinking the Problems of Postcolonial Revisionism', *Cultural Critique*, vol. 36 (1997), pp.89-117, p.93.

⁵³ Recent historical studies have shown that such perceived contradiction was not confined to the Eurasian question. The series of works on 'white subalterns' by Harald Fisher-Tiné graphically demonstrate how some European groups of lower order, such as prostitutes and seamen, figured as a political contradiction to British racial prestige. See, for instance, Harald Fisher-Tiné, "White women degrading themselves to the lowest depth". European networks of prostitution and colonial anxieties in British and Ceylon ca. 1880-1914, *The Indian Economic and Social*

nialism, an aspect no less important than that of colonialism as a discursive power imposing historical reason. The agents of colonial power were themselves sharply aware that the imperialist logic of history—Europeans as the cause of transformation and not its effect—had been blatantly breached in reality. The fact that they made a number of concrete social interventions suggest that whatever occurred in time, or whatever took place in history, were as paramount. The mimic man did not at all produce a ‘historylessness’. The ambiguous resemblance of the Eurasian subject did not always produce a hybridising effect required for a deconstruction of history. Often enough, the mimicry of the Eurasian subject was given a clear-cut meaning *within history*. After all, it *was* possible, and above all imperative, for the colonial authorities to represent and articulate mimicry in historically specific terms. This shows us that any critical engagements with the question of colonial ambivalence should require an immanent critique of history, particularly its contradictions that emerged through concrete social processes of the colonial encounter.

History Review, vol. 40 (2003), pp.165-192; Harald Fischer-Tiné, ‘Britain’s other civilising mission: Class prejudice, European ‘loaferism’ and the workhouse-system in colonial India’, *Indian Economic Social History Review*, vol. 42 (2005), pp.295-338.