Tobias Jetter (ed.)

Global Cultural Studies?

Engaged Scholarship between National and Transnational Frames

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JMU Cultural Studies I

Series editors
Zeno Ackermann and
MaryAnn Snyder-Körber

JMU Cultural Studies is dedicated to reinvestigating the cultural studies tradition and retooling its approaches for the contemporary world.

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Engaged Scholarship between National and Transnational Frames

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Acknowledgements

This volume is concerned with engaged and globally connected scholarship. Rather than merely *discussing* the topic, however, the pages in front of you have actually *emerged* from such transnationally connected engagements. A principal goal for the Cultural Studies Colloquia as a teaching and collaboration format at the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg (JMU) has always been to create a robust "community of thinking" around issues of cultural production and practice. In moving from a classroom setting to a publication project, we have now overshot this aim. The result is not only a veritable "community of making" but also a long list of debts. At this point, we wish to gratefully acknowledge these debts – doing so in the urgent hope that we will be able to further increase them as we continue the JMU Cultural Studies publication series.

Thanks go first to the International Virtual Academic Collaboration (IVAC) initiative of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and to the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) for providing the framework for expanding the cooperative framework of cultural studies at JMU: first from the physical classroom into online interaction, and from there into new forms of collaborative research and writing. We particularly thank the IVAC team here in Würzburg, led by Petra Zaus and organized as WueGlobal: Writing, Learning, Digital Connection. Equally heartfelt thanks are extended to Elke Demant and Karin Kernahan at our Department of English and American Studies, who have kept our experiment on track. Gratitude is also extended to the International Program Digital team at the DAAD and our ever-calm liaison Steffen Puhe for their essential support.

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Young scholars form the basis of our community in thinking and now in making cultural studies interventions. We are immensely grateful for the time, energy, and insight that they commit to discussions, events, and projects such as the present one. Specifically, we wish to thank the participants of our first attempt to take on the question of a global cultural studies, a seminar titled "Cultural Studies Around the Anglophone World" which we taught in summer term 2020 (i.e., the first semester of the global Covid-19 pandemic): Vanessa Bayer, Adrian Döring, Samuel Gerlach, Xenia Hoff, David Janocha, Tobias Jetter, Sarah Merker, Annika Rock, Stefan Sauerbrey, Catarina Seeger, and Yexin Shen. Further thanks are offered to participants in the transnational expansion of the format in cooperation with JNU and JMI in summer term 2021 under the title "Cultural Studies Around the World: Theories of Engaged Scholarship between National and Transnational Frame-

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We dedicate this volume to 04093138 Seminar / Sommersemester 2020 / Erste Parallelgruppe and 04093138 Seminar / Sommersemester 2021 / Zweite Parallelgruppe. Who or what is that, you might ask? These are the numbers and specifications given JMU courses in the university's ingenious "WueStudy" course listing system. The entries correspond with the Cultural Studies Colloquia offered in summer term 2020 and 2021 that were the initial testing grounds for the ideas that solidified into this volume. We reference the bureaucratic shorthand here as a reminder that necessities – developing course programmes, teaching online in the face of a pandemic, tracking credits and people in systems, and all the rest – can lead to productive and even creative results.

Tobias Jetter, Zeno Ackermann, and MaryAnn Snyder-Körber
– volume editor and series editors

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Series Foreword

JMU Cultural Studies – Strategies for Struggling with the Obvious

As a matter of course, it was Stuart Hall who offered the most appealing digest of what cultural studies is all about. "Cultural studies," Hall explained in an interview from the late 1990s, "are based on the supposition that it takes a lot of theoretical work to bring light into the darkness of the obvious."[1]

Wistfully – and already somewhat retrospectively – Hall's dictum articulated the central promise of cultural studies: the supposition that cultural forms and practices (especially everyday forms and practices) matter hugely – and that a clearer understanding not only of their weight but also of their volatility and transformability would enlighten the individuals enmeshed in their obviousness, providing them with a lever for unhinging the seemingly inalterable. Hard theoretical work might thus create a position and a strategy for successfully redefining the social and the political on the accessible terrain of the cultural.

The idea proved seductive. This was partly because cultural studies offered a tool of political empowerment which might work against and within the disempowering political situation created by authoritarian neoliberalism since the 1970s. Another reason for the startling success that cultural studies enjoyed in the last decades of the twentieth century (first in the UK and the USA, then in Europe and other parts of the globe) was the new purchase it seemed to provide for the faltering humanities. The result was an academic "cultural studies boom" of which Hall was tellingly sceptical.[2] Cultural studies – often fitted in as a new annex to language and literature departments – became standard fare in universities nearly all around the world.

About three decades after the boom, JMU Cultural Studies is setting out to reinvestigate the analytical approaches of the cultural studies tradition and retool them for the current moment. In the process, the bold hopes on which the cultural studies project of Hall and his contemporaries rested can perchance be revived. Indeed, we

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1 Stuart Hall, "'Ein Gefüge von Einschränkungen': Gespräch zwischen Stuart Hall und Christian Höller," in *Die kleinen Unterschiede: Der Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Jan Engelmann (Frankfurt: Campus, 1999), 99–122, 119. That the quotation comes from an interview which was conducted by an Austrian art scholar and activist – Christian Höller – and which exists only in German translation may be particularly apposite. The interview has not been published in English. The quotation above is our own re-translation from the German version of the interview.

2 See, for example, Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1999), 97–109. Here, Hall argues that "the explosion of cultural studies" certainly should not be regretted but still represents "a moment of extraordinarily profound danger" (107).

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believe that the need for cultural studies – understood as a theoretically astute and critically acute endeavour of "bringing light into the darkness of the obvious" – has never been greater. While disembodied fragments of what Chris Barker terms the standard "language games"[3] of cultural studies (clustering around concepts such as "narrative," "discourse," or "identity politics") have become commonplaces in mediatized political discourse, in the jargon of advertising, and even in determinedly right-wing rhetorics, we are simultaneously seeing a baffling resurgence of nationalist, essentialist, and decisionist ideologies in their most blatant form. This resurgence is coinciding with a long-anticipated, yet nevertheless surprising, configuration of crises: from global warming (yet quicker than feared by many) via the Covid-19 pandemic (more permanent than most would have thought) to Russia's war against Ukraine (more brutal and irrational than could have been imagined), and the concurrent resurgence of Cold-War rhetorics (astonishingly eager on all sides). All of these developments and ruptures obviously play into, and to a large extent are being played out in, the domain of the cultural. This domain in turn seems to be entropically evolving into an ever more expansive and ever more complex network of articulations: an all-pervasive "virtual reality" or "metaverse" driven by the paradox of dissociating associations.

As a consequence, it has never been more necessary to "bring light into the darkness of the obvious," and it has never been more difficult to do so. But is cultural studies up to the task? Can their originally inspiring neo-Marxist fusion of humanism and materialism define a new relationship to the provocations of the environment and the animal? Will they find a language to address the reality-bending dynamic of digital processing and networking, and thus the new power of a machine that will eventually emancipate itself? And will it be possible to push this endeavour of "engaged scholarship" beyond its roots in distinctly national (particularly British and American) discourses? Can there be transnational cultural studies – i.e., a form of cultural studies that might reclaim and redefine the realm of the global in the way in which cultural studies originally tried to reclaim and redefine the realm of the national?

JMU Cultural Studies, the new series of books that we are publishing with Würzburg University Press (WUP), will address these questions from a position that is closely aligned with the concrete teaching and learning environment that emerges from our location at Würzburg in combination with our cooperation with scholars and students from other parts of the world. The present first volume of the series emerges from seminars that took place at Würzburg University in the years 2020 und 2021. Through the support of the International Virtual Collaboration (IVAC) initiative of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), we were able to make a virtue out of the necessity of online teaching at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. In cooperation with our eminent Indian partner universities – Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), both located in New Delhi – Indian students could come on board to join our discussion and enable a genuinely

[3] Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, 5th edition (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016), 4.

transnational framework of exchange. All the essays published in *Global Cultural Studies? Engaged Scholarship between National and Transnational Frames*, the first instalment in the JMU Cultural Studies publication series, emerged from these seminars. The present collection is also edited by a seminar participant.

We would like to close by underscoring our gratitude for the enthusiasm and energy invested by everyone involved in putting this initial volume together. We could not ask for a more intellectually adventurous launch of the publication series.

Zeno Ackermann and MaryAnn Snyder-Körber
– series editors

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Introduction

Global Cultural Studies?

Tobias Jetter

It is the fall of 2022 as we are getting this collection of essays ready for publication. A global pandemic is still gripping the world after three long years, while brutal wars are raging on most continents. As global warming is manifesting itself undeniably and right-wing populisms are continuing their comeback, young people around the world are politicized and radicalized at levels long unseen. In this time of crises, the once-celebrated notion of an interconnected world has taken on a negative connotation. "Globalist" is now a slur in many political contexts. While the notion of one dominating whole is being rejected, the proximate – local and national – is cultivated instead. Concerns about the reliability of supply chains and energy autonomy add a pragmatic dimension to these re-energized local and national orientations.

The result is the sense of a battle between the local and the global in which the image of the patriotic, grounded, and traditional national citizen is pitted against the similarly idealized notion of the just, equality-minded, and forward-thinking global citizen. This begs several questions: What does it mean to be conscious of global problems and is that even an actual possibility? Is our sense of the "global" ever more than our perspective and interests projected onto the wider world? By the same token, can one root oneself within local frameworks without involvement in a bigger picture? And most importantly: Is it moral to prefer one to the other?

Cultural studies has a particular responsibility to take on these debates. It might not be within our power to "solve" such large issues altogether, but we can at the very least try to address them on our home turf: the analysis of cultural productions and practices. Taking its departure from the concept of "positionality," perhaps the most important single term in cultural studies, this book attempts to shine new light on localisms and globalisms alike by re-engaging with key texts and propositions in cultural studies thinking. Rather than relying on "expert" elucidations by established scholars, our book has young researchers and students from India and Germany tackle questions of positionality and transnationality from their own positions within various local, global, and, not least, disciplinary networks.

The essays have emerged from two seminars designed to make young scholars expound, debate, and ponder their ideas in dialogue with seminal thinkers in cultural studies, from Stuart Hall to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. As the output of a

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community of thinking, first developed in the seminar context, the essays represent diverse ideas and movements that not only have the potential to shape further work in cultural studies, but also already create important output along intersectional lines and across gender, religious, cultural, and continental boundaries.

Ours is of course not the first publication to ask if there can be a global cultural studies. In an important mid-1990s take on this question, Jon Stratton and Ien Ang responded in the negative. "On the Impossibility of a Global Cultural Studies" (1996) was a wake-up call for the field, and the essay proves more relevant than ever in the present day. As the two scholars point out, the academic cultures of cultural studies are far from offering "an 'ideal speech situation' in which everybody holds the same power to speak and be heard."[1] Upon closer inspection, they note, the much-touted "internationalism" of the field reveals itself to be an English-speaking and increasingly American-dominated hegemony.[2] These tendencies continue in present-day cultural studies and need to be interrogated, as our volume strives to signal with its questioning title: "Global Cultural Studies?"

However, this volume is not simply an exploration of such criticism from a purely theoretical standpoint. Rather, it performs a more substantial disruption of the Anglo-American monologue. The volume is divided into five sections consisting of two to three individual essays each. The sections and contributions have been chosen with freedom of thought and word in mind. Nothing can be more important in these times than providing space for independent, varied thought from a variety of sources as an opportunity for everyone to exercise agency through their own voice. Positionality served as a fitting and relevant issue of ignition within the seminar, and, therefore, also as a structural starting point for its resulting texts, provoking a number of highly personal essays that make up the first section, simply titled *Positionalities*.

At the same time, contributors also developed their ideas around more traditional topics, such as the theoretical roots of the discipline itself or the intricacies of the concept of feminism and what it means to different people in different places. Feminism proved to be a "hot topic" in seminar discussions, especially in terms of the different national and transnational frameworks under consideration. Thus, *Feminisms* was the logical choice for section two, encompassing a wide variety of experiences, ideas, and demands represented in two texts for the volume.

Using the plural in section titles reflects the diversity in the many spirited essays submitted as well as in the equally spirited seminar discussions. The plural also pertains to the activity of studying culture itself. Not only is it hard to reconcile the German *Kulturwissenschaften* with its English-language counterparts, but the Indian perspective especially prompted questions regarding the notion of a united global cultural studies. What do different schools in our field still have in common today? The discipline itself has, from its very inception, made a point of moving away from

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1 John Stratton and Ien Ang, "On the Impossibility of a Global Cultural Studies: 'British' Cultural Studies in an 'International' Frame," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues*, edited by Kuan-Hsing Chen and David Morley (London: Routledge, 1996), 361–391, quotation: 362.

2 See ibid., 363–368.

its Marxist roots and establishing a *modus operandi* of constant evolution. It is therefore this issue, namely meditating on Marxism and what cultural studies is today and can be tomorrow, that was chosen as the third and once again plural section *Marxist Perspectives*, focusing strongly on established theories in dialogue with possible new directions.

To make sure that the volume's commitment to individual agency and the balance between larger frameworks and the granular detail of particular situations is maintained, the last two sections are dedicated to developing specific scholarly projects and personal perspectives on the collaborative work of the seminar and this publication project. Offering a glimpse into evolving projects, the fourth section, *From Theory to Practice*, offers a broad span of case studies: from a discussion of the cultural role of food in India as an indicator of societal standing to a film-focused analysis of the idea of female "suicidality" to matters of disability in Germany and across the globe.

In the fifth and final section, then, one scholar from Germany and India each was able to take the opportunity to draw their personal conclusions from months of scholarly work, in the form of essays that articulate the thoughts and theoretical developments of and among the participants throughout the debates they engaged in. These last contributions hopefully provide readers with insights into how an academic experiment like this one is able to operate, and how it can be continued. In this spirit, the final section is titled *In Place of a Conclusion*.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank every single participant of the seminars for their engaged contributions, some of which we have been able to feature here, but all of which informed and enlivened the project. In anticipation of the further series that this volume inaugurates, I was honoured to be tasked with the responsibility of editing its very first instalment. I do not consider myself a conventional candidate: A teacher by trade, having stumbled into the field of cultural studies only shortly before the conclusion of my studies, I would never have imagined myself editing a book like this a year ago. Thus, the process has been a source of growth for me – not only in my thinking, but also in my sense of connection to cultural studies as a community and in my understanding of the field itself. My conclusion: Cultural studies truly is a wide-open space of learning and debating for anyone willing and able to contribute. The list of people and institutions to thank for their role in making this volume a reality is lengthy and collected in the *Acknowledgments*. However, dear reader, I cannot finish this introduction without making sure to thank you as well. No text will ever come to life without someone reading it, devouring it, rearranging it in the way only an individual, unique reader can. I hope that you enjoy diving into this book as much as I enjoyed helping to create it. Fare well on your journey through a diverse critical landscape!

Positionalities

Abhilasha Roy | Luisa Koch | Y S Sochuiwon Priscilla Khapai

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Countercultures around the World: A Postcolonial Reading of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*

Abhilasha Roy

I
Minority Cultures and Countercultures

Many a times in discussions regarding cultural studies, apprehensions are expressed about whether to study the field within certain national frameworks or whether a transnational framework has to be developed. There are two primary arguments in this discussion: One focuses on the perils of a national focus and the other on the problems of transnational framing. Firstly, there is the fear that engaging in cultural studies from within a national – or even nationalist – framework will restrict it to the study of homogenous, majority populations and lead to an epistemological gap in understanding minority cultures. Secondly, if we choose a transnational framework over a national one, we might overlook interactions within the nation that shape the larger discourses of culture within the nation and beyond it through migratory diasporic cultures. As Arjun Appadurai has stated about global cultural economies: "[T]he central problem of today's global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization."[1]

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) and particularly that book's opening chapter, "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity," which forms the primary theoretical backdrop for my reading of Gilroy alongside and ultimately into postcolonial discourse, makes us realize why such apprehensions in our practice of cultural studies are not to be neglected. Hinging the tools of a discipline such as cultural studies into restrictive frameworks like the nation or ethnicity make it unaware and unresponsive to what Gilroy, following W. E. B. Du Bois, calls a "double consciousness."[2] Gilroy refers to the idea of a double consciousness as the condition of "being both inside and outside the West" and argues that this might be an important vantage point to understand "the reluctant intellectual affiliation of diaspora blacks to an approach which mistakenly attempts

[1] Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory, Culture & Society* 7.2–3 (1990): 295.

[2] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 1; W.E.B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: Alexander Caldwell McClurg & Company, 1903), 3.

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a premature totalization of infinite struggles."[3] This "approach" is that of an overarching national framework. Nationalism as a project is inherently exclusionary in its attempts at delineating a certain space for a certain group of people. All those who remain outside the contours of this kind of a demarcation, namely immigrants and diasporic minorities, amongst others, have to bear the brunt of forced homogenization into the national culture and subsequent erasure of their specific cultural practices. Hence, the double consciousness that Gilroy attributes to Black people living in Europe, or more specifically Britain, is arguably a broader condition: characteristic not just for people of African descent, but a condition shared by numerous peoples displaced and/or marginalized due to European colonialism. This extension of double consciousness beyond the transatlantic exchange and spaces central to Gilroy, to include the conditions created by colonialism, demands that we as postcolonial readers engage with cultural studies beyond the single vision of a national and ethnic framework. Double consciousness in this context means engaging with those who occupy what Homi Bhabha calls the "third space" between two nations and often two cultures. As Bhabha states:

> What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites or collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.[4]

From its inception as a discipline, pioneering figures such as Stuart Hall have tried many times to rethink cultural studies in its interaction with categories such as gender and race. Some of these attempts and their eventual successes or failures are discussed by Hall in his essay "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies" (1990).[5] The essay was originally prepared for the international conference "Cultural Studies Now and in the Future," held in April 1990 at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and meant, in essence, to celebrate the gradual transformation of cultural studies from a British to a more international or American discipline. This route towards rethinking cultural studies within newer and perhaps larger categories is evident in the struggle it took to produce books and issues of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies such as *The Empire Strikes Back* (1982) and *Women Take Issue* (1978). In retrospect, these attempts form an important part in framing a transnational outlook for a disciplinary project that has erstwhile been strongly connected to British conditions, politics, and institutions. The interventions of categories like gender and race broke through what British cultural studies thought was its theoretical prowess and political project. In the process, its national grounding was also unsettled. This can perhaps be best visualized through Hall's

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3 Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 30.

4 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1–2.

5 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1999), 104–105.

metaphor of feminism breaking into cultural studies "like a thief in the night." And "when it broke through the window," Hall writes, "every single unsuspected resistance rose to the surface."[6] Engaging with questions of race was a particularly potent motor of causing the discipline to look beyond structures of nation and nationality and consequently notions of ethnicity, identity, and culture bound by the nation. Hall calls cultural studies "a discursive formation, in Foucault's sense."[7] Cultural studies, in other words, has been formulated as a discipline where multiple "methodologies and theoretical positions"[8] have been in a constant state of flux. This has further meant that cultural studies has at least had the potential to be a platform where a multiplicity of voices can be expressed and studied. However, at certain points in the history of the discipline, and more specifically in British cultural studies, the theoretical legacies and political project of the field have had to be thought through and reconfigured to retain that potential.

Hall's reflections on the theoretical legacies of cultural studies link us in a streamlined manner to Gilroy's understanding of the Black Atlantic as a counterculture. For Hall, cultural studies is a "question of positionalities."[9] Hence to say that it owes its roots to a Marxist tradition (or the rejection of it by the New Left) is too definitive and counterproductive a statement. He accepts that cultural studies has always worked around Marxism, wrestling, in Hall's terms, with Louis Althusser and the base-superstructure model. But at the end of the day, Marxism represented a Eurocentric model, whereas he (Hall) "came from a society where the profound integument of capitalist society, economy, and culture had been imposed by conquest and colonisation."[10] And more often than one would wish, this is true of most objects of and subjects practicing cultural studies.

In this same vein, while talking of the objects and subjects of cultural studies, it is important for us to go back to what Hall writes of cultural identity in another equally important essay. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1989), Hall formulates that while cultural identities have histories, because of this same historicity they are also always transformed in their interactions with everything around them, including power. Hall talks specifically of diasporic subjects, just as Gilroy does, and expresses how for diasporic subjects there is no single essential past one can go back to. As people are displaced and resettled, identities also change positionalities. This kind of a "politics of identity, a politics of position […] has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin.'"[11] Diaspora subjects live in a flux of multiple cultures. At the same time, the homeland that they left is also undergoing similar changes. Such dynamics might be understood with reference to Appadurai, who argues that "the new global cultural economy has to be understood

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6 Ibid., 104.
7 Ibid., 98.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 101.
11 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 226.

as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models."[12] There is no fixed history that is not affected by the influx of the cultural outsider in this day and age. Hence, to stick to essentialist understandings of identity would be meaningless because, as Gilroy demonstrates, this leads to the glorification of one kind of cultural history while erasing multiple other histories that have shaped popular discourses of our times.

This tendency is evident when Hall discusses how feminism "broke in[to]" cultural studies.[13] Feminism reorganized the field of cultural studies in terms of the objects of cultural studies and reopened the "dangerous area of the subjective and the subject."[14] What feminism and subsequently race taught those at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, according to Hall, was that it is easier to talk of giving space to people from different class, race, gender, and other backgrounds than to actually create space for them: "[T]alking about giving up power is a radically different experience from being silenced."[15] The tendency to go back to the centre-periphery model, where cultures, British and immigrant in this case, are tightly sealed from one another and antagonistically tied by a past of violence and erasure, is precisely what Gilroy has tried to unravel in his work.

II
Gilroy on Cultural Identity

"The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity" challenges the "ethnic absolutism" that places Blackness and Englishness (and consequently Whiteness) in opposition to each other.[16] As Gilroy states:

> Notions of the primitive and the civilised which had been integral to pre-modern understanding of "ethnic" differences became fundamental cognitive and aesthetic markers in the processes which generated a constellation of subject positions in which Englishness, Christianity, and other ethnic and racialised attributes would finally give way to the dislocating dazzle of "whiteness."[17]

For Gilroy, the construction of a nation invokes ethnicity in a twofold manner: first, to construct the nation as one homogenous cultural unit and, second, to defend this same construct against other cultural formations which might lead to a portrayal of the nation as a diverse, multicultural space, meaning a nation formed out of cultural contributions of not just the dominant majority but multiple minorities.[18]

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[12] Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," 296.
[13] Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," 104.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic,* 2.
[17] Ibid., 9.
[18] Ibid., 3.

Multiculturalism and the presence of minorities is used as a double-edged sword, wherein the former colonizers show their superiority as a homogenous population and at the same time display their apparent intentions of goodwill in allowing people of multiple ethnicities to exist in that same space. This scenario is in line with ideologies of a "benevolent" colonialism taming the savage. In this model, the former empire is the benevolent nation offering refuge and recuperation for those who have been displaced, ironically, because of the same empire's spoils in their colonies. When Gilroy invokes the Black Atlantic as a category signifying "the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering,"[19] he is embarking on a project that challenges the ideas of culture being tightly packed into absolute differential categories following the contours of nations inhabited by homogenous populations.

The most intriguing parts from the chapter, for me personally, are those in which we see Gilroy's methodology at work: engaging with cultural studies not from an ethnocentric or nation-oriented framework, but through an ethnohistorical lens, which directly opposes the nationalist ideals that have shaped Western historiography. The methodology of studying moving elements within this space, rather than land-locked features, signals the ever-altering nature of cultural formations and further delegitimizes fixed categories of ethnicity and culture. One of the primary images that he invokes is that of the ship as a hybrid, shifting space between two fixed points where cultural intermingling was at work, both metaphorically and literally. Ships, which were central to the Atlantic trade route generally and the slave trade more specifically, have become central metaphorical figures in literature written by African Americans as well as other diasporic Black and African authors. One of the examples that Gilroy himself gives, of J. M. W. Turner's painting of a slave ship titled *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing the Dead and Dying Overboard, Typhoon Coming On)* (1840), as seen in figure 1, is pertinent to understanding how elements of Black history and culture have fascinated the White consciousness. By painting a picture of the slave ship as it moves away from the dead and dying, who have been thrown overboard to reduce extra weight, Turner, a celebrated artist of the English school and member of the prestigious Royal Academy of Arts, knowingly or unknowingly put the image of the slave ship in a tradition of high art. The ship, while being perused as art, will also raise questions as to the objects it represents and hence contribute to the kind of cultural study that Gilroy hopes will be done in Britain – one in which this kind of minute cultural overlapping is recorded.

[19] Ibid.

Figure 1. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing the Dead and Dying Overboard, Typhoon Coming On)* (1840). Oil on Canvas. On Display in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Public Domain.

Gilroy's use of the ship imagery and of the ocean as a space of transcultural exchange is also a common occurrence in contemporary postcolonial studies. Furthermore, the ocean as a method of writing is a popular trope to signify the diaspora experience of our times as it is found in the works of people like Indian author Amitav Ghosh, whose work on transnational histories of travel, especially water travel and associated histories of creolization and linguistic identities, has generated fascinating postcolonial discourses around the "oceanic imagination."[20] A similar imagery that has been evoked to signify the liminal space of cultural exchange in postcolonial thinking is that of the stairwell. Bhabha takes up African-American artist Renée Green's work on the displacement of binaries. Green, whose work Bhabha calls "'architectural' site-specific,"[21] uses the metaphor of the stairwell to make associations between divisions. The stairwell is the connecting space between binaries and allows access to both sides. The stairwell, much like the ocean, ensures in a certain way that traveling to and fro, up and down, continues to take place, whether in forced forms or voluntary ones. As Bhabha puts it: "The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities."[22]

Apart from these examples of significant spaces, the extensive study that Gilroy does on Martin Delany in the chapter is of consequential importance to my postcolonial reading of his arguments. Delany was a nineteenth-century physician, writer, journalist, soldier, and one of the first proponents of Black nationalism. An academic prodigy, he was one of the first Black men to achieve admittance into Harvard Medical School before widespread protests by White students resulted in his dismissal from the programme. He also served as a major in the Union Army during the American Civil War. Delany planned the establishment of a Black Nationalist settlement in West Africa and travelled extensively in pursuit of a suitable location, but never realized his nation-forming ambition. Born a free person of colour in what is now West Virginia, Delany travelled throughout the pre-Civil War South to witness slavery first-hand. At a certain point in his life, he also worked closely with Frederick Douglass to publish the abolitionist newspaper *The North Star* in New York.

By focusing on the travels of Delany, Gilroy attacks the European origins of modern Black culture which insists on "the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness" rather than "seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes."[23] The tendency to go back to one's roots, before colonialism violently erased cultures around the world, is a strong one in the field of postcolonial studies. However, for nations with a heterogenous demography, where multiple communities are considered minorities, such ideals of a romanticized past more often than not become the source of further

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[20] "Jamia Millia Islamia Hosts Conversation Series 'Ocean as Method: Writing the Ocean,'" *India Today*, 4 February 2021, web.

[21] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 3.

[22] Ibid., 4.

[23] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic,* 19.

physical violence and epistemological erasure. If the nation is to go back to one untainted image of the past, choosing which community's image it will be becomes an act of power play. Furthermore, in what one could label the "ethnoscapes" of our times, migration, mostly to the more developed countries, has become commonplace, especially for those from minority communities fleeing unjust persecution.[24] It is also an act of upward social mobility for a large part of the "Third World" population, who can now afford to immigrate to better living conditions. What this does in terms of identity formation, is that it dislocates identity from one originary state. Identities, and simultaneously cultures, are now spread over a transnational terrain.

The proliferation of Black or immigrant history and consciousness into White subjectivity and aesthetic production through the examples highlighted by Gilroy and Bhabha – the art practices of Turner and Green as well as the life trajectory and activism of Delany – is exemplary of how cultures are continuously crossing and merging with each other, irrespective of national boundaries or ethnic differences. Gilroy's book does two things that are already highlighted in its opening chapter: Firstly, it shows how categories like the nation or ethnicity are restrictive and cannot define the foundational tools of an interdisciplinary and transnational discourse like cultural studies; secondly, Gilroy exposes how these categories of race, nation, and ethnicity shape cultural studies, not because they are indispensable to the project, but simply because British cultural studies traces its origins to modern European aesthetic traditions "that are consistently configured by the appeal to national and often racial particularity."[25] The continuous movement of people from former colonies to Britain, between two or more former colonies, and from Britain to the colonies, means that both physical and cultural positionalities have been dynamic for a long time. It is thus necessary to rework our ideas of nationality, identity, and cultural memory.

The idea that British society, before People of Colour officially settled as citizens, was racially pure and peaceful stems from pre-modern notions of primitivity and savageness as they have been associated with Black and other colonized peoples. As Salman Rushdie states in his widely read 1980s essay: "[F]our centuries of being told that you are superior to the Fuzzy-Wuzzies and the wogs leave their stain. This stain has seeped into every part of the culture, the language, and daily life; and nothing much has been done to wash it out."[26] While, according to Rushdie, there should have been a washing out, an epistemological cleansing of the mind, Britain under the aegis of leaders like Margaret Thatcher was still looking back to a glorified imperial past. The glorification of the process of colonialism meant that notions of Whiteness, Britishness, and associated ideas of civilization, along with the supposed superiority of Christianity as a religion, were renewed in a nation which was already seeing racial tensions, owing to a considerable amount of new immigration that was

[24] Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," 297.
[25] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 8.
[26] Salman Rushdie, "The New Empire within Britain," in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism* (London: Granta, in Association with Penguin, 1991), 130.

seen as racially different not just from the supposedly "native" British, but also from each other. Thus, it was not just one identifiable "other" arriving on British shores, but many different "others." Against this backdrop, the association of Englishness with Christianity and Whiteness, as opposed to a category of Blackness able to subsume different groups, became an epistemological process of complexity reduction. Differences in skin colour translate to racial difference as an absolute differentiating category for organizing and claiming the social. Britain presumably belonged to Whites according to this logic, while Black people and other people of colour were to be regarded as intruders spoiling an untainted White history.

It is exactly this kind of exclusion and discrediting of Black people from British society that Gilroy takes issue with from *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (1987) through *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) to the present. He counters this with examples of famous historical events and figures, wherein Black people played crucial roles in shaping events and history in the pan-Atlantic region. The movement and communication of Black people on both sides of the Atlantic are important cultural markers which need to be traced and recorded to understand the structure of British society and culture as we see it today. The culture of Britain, or any ex-imperial nation for that matter, is not simply that of the colonizer bound within the nation state, but an intermixing of different cultures including those of the previously colonized.

This is where cultural studies as a discourse comes in. Gilroy's main problem with cultural studies, which he aligns with the English New Left and the legacies of Marxism, is ultimately the same as his problem with the more traditional transatlantic histories and theories of modernity that are his even more prominent targets in the chapter "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity": namely, their inception within certain racist, nationalist, and ethnocentric frameworks. He believes this is due to cultural studies' coming up simultaneously with the key cultural transformations in British society since the beginning of the 1950s, when an increasing number of immigrants started settling in. The "parallel growth of repressive state structures and new racisms" in Britain in the 1970s was a starting point to understanding race all over again for those in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.[27]

Gilroy's answer to these challenges was to develop a new transnational working methodology. His emphasis on various travelling artist figures throughout history – especially on Black artists who have altered or added to the discourse on both sides of the Atlantic – is exemplary of Gilroy's methodology of cultural studies. It is the kind of study which does not see the nation as culturally divided into majority and minority ethnicities. Neither does it recognize national belonging as a prerequisite to cultural belonging. One can almost say that, for him, there is no such thing as a singular cultural belonging.

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[27] John Solomos, Bob Findlay, Simon Jones, and Paul Gilroy, "The Organic Crisis of British Capitalism and Race: The Experience of the Seventies," in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70's Britain* (Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982; reprinted London: Routledge, 2005), 7.

III
The Chinese-Indian Community: Fighting for Minority Identities

At this point, I will attempt to relate my theoretical understanding of cultural identity as positioning and of the need for a transnational framework for cultural studies to a representative example, so as to meaningfully sum up the arguments I have made in this essay. The analogy that I wish to make here is between the Black Atlantic and the Chinese-Indian community. This example stems in part from my own interests. At the same time, however, this example offers an excellent test for Gilroy's methodology as a postcolonial analytical strategy, precisely because the former seems so arbitrary and removed from the transatlantic circulations and examples central to *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. There are, of course, connections as well, because this is also a story of colonialization, capitalism, and mobility.

At the centre of the history of the Chinese in India is the tea cultivation by the British in India after China's refusal to export tea to Britain. The discovery of the precious leaf and its preparation in parts of Northeast India and northern Burma was a lucrative alternate option to fulfil the empire's growing demand for the beverage. However, to cultivate tea in large quantities required specialized labour, which was only available in China, where the leaf was processed from a much earlier time in order to mass produce tea. Coincidentally, this period also happened to be one of extreme economic hardship and famines in parts of China. The British East India Company saw this as an opportunity to hire cheap labour from parts of China through middlemen who promised these labourers a luxurious life abroad. The way in which the Chinese were sold to tea gardens in India in the 1800s, after their sea voyage from South China to Calcutta, during which a quarter of them would perish owing to the miserable conditions, is remarkably similar to the transatlantic slave trade. Even though these people were not sold into chattel slavery like Black people in North and South America, they did remain as bonded labourers for an extremely long period.

Eventually, the workers on the tea plantations started interacting with local people and other indentured labourers. These interactions occasionally lead to bonds of marriage and over time, with more immigration in much later times of Chinese people as specialized professionals in tanneries, shoemaking, dentistry, and similar professions, a recognizable community of people who were part Chinese and part Indian was formed. Certainly, the categories "Chinese" and "Indian" are arguably too broad considering that China and India are the two most populous nations in the world, with each of them divided into numerous regions, communities, and ethnicities with their own distinct cultural practices. In this situation, however, the categories served a function similar to the distinction between "Blackness" and "Whiteness" in British contexts: Multiple differences were reduced to a simplifying binary. The difference lies in the uses of these distinctions. In the communities that developed around tea cultivation, the result was not opposition but rather connection in a double or hybrid identity.

The Chinese-Indian community remained an important part of the ethos of multiple small towns in northeast India and metropolises like Calcutta, which still have remnants of the glorious Chinatowns that used to exist into the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. However, after the Sino-Indian War of 1962, the Indian nation persecuted members of the community. A large number of Chinese-Indians from the north-eastern parts of the country were detained in an internment camp at Deoli, Rajasthan, from which some people were deported to China, a country completely new and foreign to them. Those who were finally released from the internment camps ended up slowly emigrating to Canada, the US, and parts of Europe, fearing further persecution and enduring constant discrimination due to being assigned the role of outsiders all over again. These concerns have been voiced by multiple members of the community who have migrated and only very recently have started talking and writing about their experiences in 1962, life in camp and life outside the camp, and eventually outside India. Collections of oral narratives by Chinese Indians, in the form of books like Joy Ma's and Dilip D'Souza's *The Deoliwallahs* (2020) or documentaries such as Rafeeq Ellias's *Beyond Barbed Wires: A Distant Dawn* (2015), reveal the plight of this community floating between nations and cultures while trying to hold on to a sense of their own identity. Ellias beautifully captures scenes where groups of Chinese Indians are eating together in a kitchen, driving around in a car together, and celebrating a holiday in a country completely foreign to them: in this case Canada. Amidst all of these, we see an interplay of languages, both their own and adapted tongues, which signify the shifting nature of their lives. We also witness people from the older generation talk about their experiences of being in the camp, which remain much more vivid than the memories the young have. Camp still interrupts their lives even in these moments of apparent banality. In fact, as we soon realize, the gathering Ellias's documentary follows is one of people attempting to ask the Indian government for an official apology for the events of 1962 and most importantly the unjust internments at the Deoli Camp in Rajasthan. Throughout, there is an atmosphere of precariousness, of not being too aggressive because no one wants history repeating itself. To bring it back to Bhabha's formulation, this is the condition of "unhomeliness" wherein "the recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions […] the borders between the home and the world become confused; and uncannily, the private and public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting."[28]

It is important to note here that this is a community whose roots lie in India and who have enjoyed a long history of cordial acceptance in the social ethos of India. However, when the nation was threatened by what was assumed to be the country of their ethnic origins, the minority in India was immediately segregated. Stereotyped notions of Chinese and Chinese Indians as thugs and criminals were rampant

[28] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 9.

in India throughout the 1960s and continue even today, making survival here immensely difficult in addition to the already existing lack of citizenship laws that govern such minorities in the Indian nation state. To speak with Appadurai: "One man's imagined community is another man's political prison."[29] The most jarring aspect of such physical and epistemological violence is that, because of the expanse of dispersal of the community, some of the distinct cultural practices within the community might be completely wiped out. One instance of this kind of erasure is the rapid vanishing of tanneries that were once run by the Hakka Chinese in Kolkata. The profession of leather tanning is one delegated to the lower castes and immigrants in Indian society because of its involvement with dead carcasses, something upper-caste Hindu people refuse to associate with. As Ellen Oxfeld notes, because of this kind of a "host society with a religious system based on the symbolic opposition to purity and impurity," leather tanning remained a profession open to the new Chinese immigrants to take up and flourish in.[30] Leather tanning, as profession and practice at the peak of the Chinese-Indian community's presence in India, became one of their most distinguishing characteristics as a community. However, in the present, because of the dissemination of people in large numbers, only abandoned tanneries remain in the city. These abandoned tanneries and plots of land around them are now being replaced by high-rise buildings on land that Chinese Indians have sold before emigrating.[31] Another aspect of concern is the fact that many people from the community have been dislocated to places where their ethnicity is only carried forward by a worryingly small group. Over time, while this will cause cross-cultural interactions, it will most probably also lead to the complete erasure of their cultures without any records, oral or written, of many unique cultural practices.

This reiteration of the history of the Chinese-Indian community in India, and the eventual migration of a large part of it to other countries, is important because it provides a fertile ground to engage with the kind of transnational cultural studies that Gilroy is advocating for in his book. The settlement patterns of the Chinese in India, their acculturation owing to inter-community marriages, shared living spaces, post-Independence citizenship laws, and their simultaneous acculturation again in their new homes, along with the journey of migration fleeing persecution, situate them in multiple historical trajectories. All of these trajectories also create an abundance of positions for individuals to locate themselves in. This is a community with no one home country to go back to. They are alien to China, largely unaccepted in India, and refugees in any other country in the world. National boundaries mean nothing for a community like this, which has no roots in one nation because their narratives of origin are transnational in the same way that their diasporic

[29] Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," 295.

[30] Ellen Oxfeld, "Still Guest People," *China Report* 43.4 (2007): 413.

[31] See Sowmia Ashok, "In Kolkata, Dragon Dances and Plates of Biriyani on a Quiet, Covid-Struck Chinese New Year's Day," *Scroll.in*, 21 February 2021, web.

positioning is. As Hall has argued: "[T]here is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin.'"[32]

The popularity of Indo-Chinese food in India, the frequent mention of Chinese Indians (albeit biased) in literature and popular cinema, and most importantly India's continuing legacy as one of the largest tea manufacturers in the world are all markers of Chinese-Indian cultural identity, which has been formed and re-formed in multiple ways and through multiple interactions.

IV
Through the Crevices of the Transnational: A Conclusion

This essay, which has been reworked from a reading response to Paul Gilroy's "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity," has developed into an exercise in understanding transnational categories like the Black Atlantic in their role in shaping cultural identity. As has been found, the "rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural"[33] makes it important for postcolonial readers and cultural theorists alike because it helps us understand identity as it has been fractured by the violence of colonialism and the translocation into varied positionings. What is replicated in diverse transnational cultural formations, however, is evidently not some fixed entity of displacement and loss that is common to all diaspora peoples, but instead the absence of any such fixities.

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[32] Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 226.
[33] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 4.

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Cultural Studies as a Question of Stance

Louisa Koch

I
Looking Back: A Perspective on Positionality

This essay is a reflection on the importance of position in at least two senses. First, after reading, writing about, and discussing approaches to cultural studies intensively for a semester and then rereading those texts from the cultural studies canon as well as my own written responses and notes in preparation for writing this reflection, the question of stance and how to deal with one's own position in social and historical structures reveals itself as the overarching issue grappled with in the field today. Simply put, positionality is the key term of cultural studies. In a second sense, however, this essay is also about my own changing of perspectives and sense of connection with cultural studies.

I study Francophone literatures primarily. My original motivation for engaging with cultural studies was "to extend my Europe-centred knowledge about cultural studies," as I formulated in an initial statement of interest. Having had only little prior knowledge of the discipline's intellectual history and the issues resulting from the field's transnational scope before taking part in the colloquium, I unconsciously already formulated a sort of presentiment that my access to cultural studies is conditioned by my personal academic background and – to take up Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's terminology – the frame of "geo-political determinations" in which I have been socialized.[1] Apparently, I wondered about my own positionality and, as I learned during the semester, the question of stance regularly reappears when talking about cultural studies' projects, albeit in different contexts. To show how the question of one's own positionality in general and of the intellectual's positionality in particular constitutes an important framework in cultural studies as an area of research, I will now try to tie together some of my discoveries in reading, writing, discussing, and thereby negotiating my own positions towards cultural studies from this point of view.

Particular attention will be paid, first, to the essays "Culture is Ordinary" by Raymond Williams (1958) and the "The Lost Continent" by Roland Barthes (1957)

[1] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–272.

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in view of their uses and reflections on positionality. The consequences of positionality will then be explored through Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) in dialogue with Ranajit Guha's and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's remarks on the subaltern (1982 and 1988).

II
From Uses to Responsibilities of the Ordinary

When I first read Williams's striking essay "Culture is Ordinary," I did not read it within the framework of the question of his positionality. What impressed me the most initially was actually his rejection of an elitist sense of culture by stating that culture is "a whole way of life."[2] I understood the designation of culture as "a whole way of life" in the concrete sense of culture as something formed by living and by people's everyday experiences. His disapproval of an exclusive, elitist sense of culture that does not take into consideration the fact that culture develops in "the most ordinary experience" results from this perspective.[3] Ever since reading "Culture is Ordinary" for the first time, I have been preoccupied with Williams's point that "[c]ulture is ordinary."[4] Instead of speaking in favour of a restrictive understanding of culture, which goes along with "the outward and emphatically visible sign of a special kind of people, cultivated people,"[5] Williams argues that culture can originate from people's everyday life with its everyday social practices. My general impression, after having read Williams's explanations for the first time, has therefore been marked by my appreciation of this accessible definition of culture.

What was not immediately evident to me was Williams's particularly productive way of using his own positionality, which allows him to give numerous examples for his definition of culture as "ordinary." In my understanding, he uses his positionality in two ways: First, he takes a stance on the notion of culture as the son of a British working-class family and, second, as an academic, too. Regarding the first positioning, Williams bases his redefinition of culture on his family history, his education, and his coming of age in the context of post-industrialization in the United Kingdom. By means of an anecdote concerning a bus ride through his home region, Williams creates a surprisingly personal context for his further arguments:

> Not far away, my grandfather, and so back through the generations, worked as a farm labourer until he was turned out of his cottage and, in his fifties, became a roadman. His sons went at thirteen or fourteen on to the farms, his

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2 Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 11.

3 Ibid., 12.

4 Ibid., 11.

5 Ibid., 12.

> daughters into service. My father, his third son, left the farm at fifteen to be a boy porter on the railway, and later became a signalman, working in a box in this valley until he died.[6]

Williams brings into play his own social background, which then becomes the starting point for his approach to the notion of culture since "[t]o grow up in that family was to see the shaping of minds: the learning of new skills, the shifting of relationships, the emergence of different language and ideas."[7] In other words, within the frame of his family history, Williams illustrates the different dimensions of culture such as arts, learning, language, and interpersonal relations. But instead of taking these terms into consideration within the traditional frame of an exclusive and "cultivated" understanding of culture, he strives for a redefinition of the notion by using the reference to the unpretentious context of his own family history, which is the more or less ordinary history of a British working-class family in the (post-) industrial age. Thus, Williams creates a solid experiential basis for his further argumentation that "culture is ordinary."

As already mentioned, the way in which he uses his positionality goes even beyond this reference to his biography as a working-class child since, due to the mere fact of writing an essay on his notion of culture and taking a position in an intellectual discourse, he further brings his stance as an academic into play. He thereby uses his own positionality as an intellectual to show that not only culture, but academia as well can be ordinary. At this point, it is striking to me that Williams's reference to his social and familial background does not seem to be made to contrast his position as an academic; he does not refer to his background to tell a tired version of the usual "rags-to-riches" story. His coming of age in a working-class family and his career as an academic are not presented as the opposite poles of his biography but rather are an illustration of different stations within his life which he presents as continuous. Interestingly, the bus ride, which also metaphorically serves as a narrative structure, seems to follow this presentation of life as a continuum, since the bus travels essentially to every location he mentions in the essay (cathedral, farming valleys, university, teashop, etc.).[8] Furthermore, Williams's unpretentious and authentic way of argumentation is also manifest in his style, which is insightful, analytical, and intelligent without being pretentious or inaccessible to the reader at any point. He thus creates a counternarrative to the sometimes bloated working-class "rags-to-academic-riches" story and illustrates in a strikingly authentic way that positionality is fluid, constantly developing, and not restricted to an "either/or."

An equally anecdotal and accessible way of argumentation is to be found in French philosopher Barthes's essay collection *Mythologies* (1957). Barthes finds

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6 Ibid., 11–12.

7 Ibid., 12.

8 "They [the driver and the conductress] had done this journey so often, and seen all its stages. It is a journey, in fact, that in one form or another we have all made" (ibid., 10).

objects of analysis in the worlds of photography ("The Great Family of Man" or "Photography and Electoral Appeal"), magazines ("Novels and Children"), film ("The Lost Continent"), advertising ("Operation Margarine"), and toys ("Toys") – simply put, in everything around him within everyday life. He analyses these numerous examples with attention to formal, but above all ideological structures in their messaging. By doing so, Barthes demonstrates that everything can become a myth since "[e]very object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society."[9] Barthes proves in his own manner that culture is ordinary, since even the most ordinary phenomena can be ideologically abused by the appropriation of their former meanings. In that regard, many of his essays are virtually pervaded by the realization of the importance of one's own positionality and the responsibility resulting from this fact.

Barthes's essay "The Lost Continent," which refers to a documentary film of the same name made by a group of Italian anthropologists in the Malay Archipelago situated between mainland Indochina and Australia, showcases the close connection between positionality and responsibility in his thinking.[10] The documentary film can be taken as an example of the responsibilities connected to social positions since it reveals several moments of the appropriation processes central to *Mythologies*. First of all, Barthes states that the documentary makers "are good fellows" who therefore do not have any bad intentions, but, to take up Barthes's formulation, "these good people, anthropologists though they are, don't bother much with historical or sociological problems."[11] For the filmmakers, and probably for the majority of Western people for whom the explorers are representatives, "[p]enetrating the Orient never means more […] than a little trip in a boat, on an azure sea, in an essentially sunny country."[12] As a consequence, the Malay Archipelago is deprived of its original meanings by this colourful, flattened, and harmonized presentation and, as a further result, deprived of its history as well. It is, as Barthes writes, "disembodied."[13] The ignorance of historical facts is particularly problematic in this context, since it is not only about the historical facts as such, but about the ignorance of "the determining weight of History," which is a colonial history.[14] Such a "disembodied" presentation of an actually rather complex region, whose structures and problems have largely been influenced by the centuries-long Western colonial presence, therefore has to be reviewed and revised.

By putting the filmmakers' way of depriving the Archipelago of its actual history at the heart of his observations, Barthes inevitably frames the question through the importance of one's own positionality. As he shows in "The Lost Continent," making

9 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 107.
10 Ibid., 94.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 101.

a documentary film about the "Orient" from a Western perspective, itself charged with "the determining weight of History," while ignoring the former at the same time, can never be a neutral endeavour.[15] "[T]he 'beautiful pictures' of *The Lost Continent* cannot be innocent,"[16] he writes, since they always imply the weight of one's own perspective. In that regard, Barthes's reflections are clearly concerned with the questions of stance and responsibility. To assume one's own implication in historical, sociological, and political circumstances means to recognize one's own positionality and to take up responsibility. By means of the example of the anthropologist group, Barthes provides a specific example which could easily be transferred to more general cases dealing with the question of how to assume responsibility and to deal with one's own perspective in a postcolonial world. Similarly to Williams's uses and actions regarding stance in "Culture is Ordinary," Barthes's essay goes beyond the question of the possibility of responsible stance-taking in general, since, just by writing and publishing "The Lost Continent" (and many other essays with a comparable thrust), he positions himself as well. By denouncing the anthropologists' ignorance of history and their own implication in socio-political structures, Barthes takes his explanations to a metalevel from which he then takes a stance as an author and academic. Hence, he brings up the question of the intellectual's positionality.

III
Positionality and its Consequences: Questions of History

The question of the intellectual's positionality touches on another issue, which is the question of historiography, intrinsically linked to the former. Gilroy's striking opening chapter "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity" in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* takes into consideration the importance of a holistic historiography and should therefore be examined in this context. To start out, Gilroy points to the status quo of how culture is perceived and states that "contemporary black English, like the Anglo-Africans of earlier generations and perhaps, like all blacks in the West, stand between (at least) two great cultural assemblages" where *Black* and *White* are presented as opposites.[17] This creation of division is particularly dangerous since the conventional rhetoric connects this confrontation of skin colour "with a language of nationality and national belonging."[18] As a consequence, nationality and ethnic identity are seen as cultural patterns. Gilroy denounces the "fatal junction of the concept of nationality

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 96.
17 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 1.
18 Ibid., 2.

with the concept of culture," since this conception does not represent the reality which is in fact much more complex.[19] Instead of taking up the widespread idea of an ethnic absolutism, based on skin colour and a supposed national belonging, Gilroy speaks out for "another, more difficult option: the theorisation of creolisation, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity."[20] By arguing in favour of "doubleness and cultural intermixture," he creates a counterconception to the conventional, reductionist, nationalist understanding of culture.[21]

Against this backdrop, Gilroy takes into account the role of cultural studies and, by extension, the question of stance. He criticizes that cultural studies appeals to nationalist patterns, which is due to the "ethnohistorical specificity of the discourse of cultural studies itself."[22] Since cultural studies often refers to "England and ideas of Englishness," it does not take into consideration history in its entirety, which notably affects Black history.[23] Gilroy thus criticizes that cultural studies often refers to a narrow historiography that does not represent all of history and therefore only adopts a restricted perspective, despite the "pressing need to get black expressions, analyses and histories taken seriously in academic circles."[24] He therefore opts for a reassessment of historiography in general and of Black history in particular.

This is where Gilroy brings his conception of the Black Atlantic into play, which he declares to be the most important channel for cultural exchange and communication between the members of the African diaspora.[25] The notion of the Black Atlantic takes as its basis the "middle passage" – i.e., the stage of the triangular slave trade which took place on the Atlantic between Africa and America. Here, the slave ship itself can be seen as a both metaphorical and literal "micro-system […] of linguistic and political hybridity" that moved between different nations.[26] Gilroy states that the recognition of the Black Atlantic as a space of "transcultural, international formation" that develops from the middle passage and the further mobilities of Black people, arts, and cultures is the precondition for a new conception of ethnicity and the possibility of hybridity in cultural studies "counterpose[d] against the narrow nationalism of so much English historiography."[27] In this regard, Gilroy is also concerned with the question of how cultural studies can responsibly and correctly write (Black) history. By speaking out for a holistic historiography with the recognition of transcultural spaces within cultural studies, he shifts the importance of the question of stance onto cultural studies as a discipline.

The importance of a reassessment of historiography is also present in Guha's and Spivak's reflections on the *subaltern*. Although their positions within the formation

[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 4.
[22] Ibid., 5.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 13.
[26] Ibid., 4 and 12.
[27] Ibid., 12.

of subaltern studies are very different – the historian Guha as an inspiration and founder versus the literary studies scholar Spivak as a principal critic –, both denounce the exclusion of the subaltern by an oppressive and elitist historiography. Therefore, their thoughts can and should be approached together in the consideration of subalternity, positionality, and historiography that follows.[28]

In his text "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" (1988), Guha criticizes the poverty and perspectival limitation of elitist historiography, which excludes and consequently mutes the subaltern as a social group. According to Guha, there were two dominant strands, both elitist, that constituted the historiography of Indian nationalism for a long time: first, a colonialist elitist historiography, particularly promoted by British colonial rulers in India, and second, a nationalist elitist historiography, which has primarily been an Indian practice promoted by Indian elite personalities. Both can be seen as the "ideological product of the British rule in India" based on the prejudice that the making of the Indian nation is an elite achievement.[29] In this regard, he declares that the aim of subaltern studies as a project is to create a counternarrative to the elitist "one-sided and blinkered historiography," in order to render visible the subaltern within historiography.[30] Guha is clearly concerned with the pursuit of a holistic, responsible historiography and raises the question of stance in subaltern studies and, potentially, in the connections and extensions of such work with cultural studies.

Furthermore, Spivak's much debated essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) attempts to explore how the standardized historiography still contributes to the ongoing exclusion of the subaltern as well. Within the general exposition of the historiography of colonial India as a construction of a Western and elite-dominated historical narrative, she is notably concerned with the Western intellectual's role in that process. Spivak's critical view on the role of the Western intellectual and on their Eurocentric vision of historical facts, as well as the key terms "positionality" and the "Other," constitute a conceptual block in her essay which I would like to comment on at greater length.

By giving the example of the French poststructuralist theorists Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, Spivak demonstrates how Western intellectual discourse contributes to the maintenance of epistemic violence instead of overcoming colonial

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[28] Despite their different positions, Guha's and Spivak's achievements for subaltern studies are closely connected. They also co-edited an essay collection: *Selected Subaltern Studies, foreword by Edward W. Said* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). In his foreword to this volume, Edward W. Said fittingly describes the subaltern project as "an integrative knowledge, for all the gaps, the lapses and ignorances of which it is so conscious" (vii). This description underlines the constructive and holistic aspiration of subaltern historiography which, in turn, becomes manifest in the fact that Guha and Spivak co-edited such a volume.

[29] Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1.

[30] Ibid., 5.

patterns of thinking. As a starting point for her critique of Western poststructuralist theory, she points to the transcript "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze" (1972).[31] In this context, she criticizes the intellectual "desire to conserve the subject of the West,"[32] a phenomenon for which the two French poststructuralists can be taken as an example. According to Spivak, this specific intellectual self-conception, which problematically is mostly unconscious, fits into a general worldview in which "the history of Europe as Subject is narrativized by the law, political economy and ideology of the West" but contradictorily "pretends it has 'no geo-political determinations.'"[33]

Spivak thus criticizes both Deleuze and Foucault for ignoring that they are implicated in a concrete geo-political context. At this point in the argument, the question of the intellectual's positionality arises and Spivak further accuses Deleuze and Foucault of "systematically ignor[ing] the question of ideology and their own implication in intellectual and economic history."[34] She continues by asserting that Western intellectuals' ignorance of their own positionality reveals a more general ignorance of epistemic violence which cannot be overcome as long as Western intellectuals ignore their own implication in historical, economic, and geopolitical circumstances. As I understand Spivak, the recognition of the intellectual's positionality as well as the recognition of the "Westernness" and Eurocentrism of poststructuralist theory can be seen as two important critiques she formulates towards the Western intellectual. Just like Barthes, Gilroy, and Guha, Spivak hence raises the issue of a responsible intellectualism. In addition to this general question of intellectual responsibility, Spivak expands her remarks on the concrete problem of the Western intellectual speaking for the oppressed. She shows that it is highly problematic for so-called "First World" intellectuals such as Foucault and Deleuze to claim to act as speakers for oppressed people in what is designated as the "Third World," since a direct consequence is "an unquestioned valorisation of the oppressed as subject," which she condemns as presumptuous and ignorant.[35] Spivak therefore harshly criticizes the "unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual."[36] The conflation of the intellectual's ignorance of their own positionality, on the one hand, with the unquestioned dedication for the oppressed, on the other, does not solve the problem of epistemic violence. In fact, just the opposite applies since the non-reflective valorization of the oppressed leads to an appropriation of the "Third World" by the "First World." As a consequence, "the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of Other as the Self's shadow" and contributes to an ongoing construction of the colonial subject as

31 Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 271.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 69.
36 Ibid.

the "Other."[37] Spivak reproaches "First World" intellectuals for not taking responsibility and for preserving a colonialist narrative.

Interestingly, Spivak's text itself is emblematic for the difficult relation between the intellectual and the subaltern. As shown above, she criticises (Western) high theory and denounces the lack of an infrastructure for subaltern speaking, while arguably being an intellectual and a representative of high theory herself. Spivak has repeatedly been confronted with this apparent contradiction, also beyond the frame of her text. In an interview with the US journalist Steve Paulson, she is questioned about her own biography since, on the one hand, she teaches high theory at Columbia University and, on the other, literacy and numeracy to illiterate students in rural schools in India, to subaltern students, so to speak. Paulson asks:

> Yet when I look at your career, there seems to be a deep paradox. You are teaching PhD students at Columbia, where you're regarded as the high priestess of literary theory, teaching very theoretical books, like Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. Yet you're also an activist involved in these schools for illiterate students, which would seem to have nothing to do with the world of high theory. Is there really a connection between these two worlds?[38]

In her answers, Spivak is highly aware of this paradox, but at the same time emphasizes that it also illustrates the attempt to "serve democratically at both ends."[39] Thus, she adds in the dimension of the political, of the democratic, to the question of what intellectualism means for her. This underscores that Spivak speaks out for a responsible intellectualism that is critical of the political structures of epistemic violence within traditional (Western) intellectualism and aware of the limits of high theory, which almost seems illegitimate without its activist counterpart.

Another example for her quest for a proper stance within intellectual circles is her translation of Derrida's *De la Grammatologie* (1967), first published in English as *Of Grammatology* in 1976. The translation of Derrida's philosophical work inevitably is an examination of high theory. Spivak did not even know Derrida when she translated his foundational text of deconstruction, but both Spivak and Derrida are clearly concerned with the search for a proper stance within intellectualism from a critical outsider's perspective. Derrida, who was an Algerian Jew and therefore an outsider in the French coterie of high theory, examined the Eurocentrism of Western philosophy. This is a concern which is important and recurrent in Spivak's work as well. In the aforementioned interview, Spivak describes Derrida and herself as "allies." She specifies: "You see, one of the things he understood, perhaps more than I did at that point, was the meaning of this Asian girl who really didn't have much French, launching this book into the world in her own way, so far out of the

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[37] Ibid., 75.

[38] Steve Paulson, "Critical Intimacy: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," *Qualitative Research Journal* 18.2 (2018): 92.

[39] Ibid.

European coterie of high philosophy."[40] The parallels between Spivak and Derrida therefore reflect that, in their case, intellectual work, philosophy, and high theory are embedded in a particular manner of taking a stance, since both formally were outsiders who encountered the set structures of (Western) intellectual thinking by means of taking an inside-view at the phenomena put in question. Hence, Derrida and Spivak have a similar way of approaching Western intellectualism, conditioned by their initial social stance, which allows them to critically examine the limits of high theory.

To sum up Spivak's case, the apparent contradiction of the critique of intellectualism in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and the fact of being an intellectual herself precisely shows the Third World intellectual's difficult relation to (Western) intellectualism, on the one hand, and to the subaltern, on the other. Finally, it has to be noted that even if Spivak proposes to add a political, democratic, and activist dimension to the search for an adequate and responsible intellectual positioning (which is discernible in her attempts to raise literacy in rural schools in India), the mere formulation "Can the Subaltern Speak?" already calls into question the possibilities of subaltern empowerment in general and of subaltern empowerment through intellectualism in particular. Despite the attempts of activism within intellectualism, Spivak thus asks whether the intellectual can act properly at all. Thus, issues of positionality become questions of possibility (or impossibility).

IV
Circling Back: My Position on Positionality

The lesson I personally draw from my engagement with thinkers such as Williams, Barthes, Gilroy, Guha, and Spivak is the insight that talking about cultural studies – regardless of whether the formation is more narrowly understood as a British movement of democratic empowerment, in terms of a movement seeking to render subaltern voices audible, or as a framework to deconstruct myths, colonialist narratives, and persistent structures of epistemic violence – always demands a certain sensitivity for one's own positionality and the limitation of the boundaries of one's own perspective. Since positionality by definition always keeps in mind the social, political, and historical context in which the various patterns of an identity are created, it is intrinsically linked to further concepts such as the nation (as a powerful

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[40] Karen Archey, "Gayatri Spivak on Derrida, the Subaltern, and her Life and Work." *E-flux Conversations*, 1 August 2016, n.p., web. Spivak then goes on to say: "He and I would go out to eat — and he was a swarthy man, a Sephardic Jew from Algeria — and people would take him to be Indian, and I'm Indian and my cultural inscription is strong and sometimes I wear a sari, so it was a joke and he would say, 'Yes, I'm Indian.' He understood the beauty of the situation of this young person who was neither a French PhD nor a native French speaker or native English speaker for that matter, and she was offering his text, not because she was worshipful toward him, because she hadn't even known who he was. She was offering his text to the rest of the world and they were picking it up. There was something very attractive for him about that situation."

and rigid structure of thinking), popular culture, historiography, the role of the intellectual, and responsibility, as I hope to have shown by reference to the reviewed texts. With my choice of the overarching question of stance, I wanted to reflect and comment on my personal process of learning and also group some of the most striking aspects of our readings and discussions around a key term. Moreover, regarding the discussed essays from this point of view does not only raise the issue of positionality in the case of the intellectual, but also raises the question of stance in cultural studies as a discipline. As already mentioned above with regard to Gilroy's, but also Guha's and Spivak's reflections about the possibilities and limits of a holistic historiography, all of the thinkers considered in my essay seem highly concerned with the role of cultural studies (or subaltern studies) as a discipline.

In regard to this final concern, I would like to conclude by pointing to Lawrence Grossberg's, Cary Nelson's, and Paula A. Treichler's remarks in their editors' introduction to *Cultural Studies* (1992), as they deal with the very same question of the disciplinary role in their account of cultural studies history. As they explain, cultural studies as a field of study has always been concerned with the questions of how to position itself with regard to social, cultural, political, and historical issues and of how to act responsibly within the given circumstances. This is due to the fact that it does not have any stable disciplinary base.[41] Cultural studies, therefore, is a multi- or transdisciplinary field that cannot refer to one methodological tradition only and, as a consequence, needs to permanently contextualize and rearticulate its methodologies and aims.[42] The rearticulation of its methodologies is accompanied by the necessity of taking into account that the historical and economic circumstances to which cultural studies refers are constantly changing as well.[43]

As has become evident through the essays considered in this text, the necessity of showing consideration for social, political, and historical circumstances is an overarching issue within the work of theorists identified as scholars of or scholars associated with cultural studies. Williams, Barthes, Gilroy, Guha, and Spivak ultimately all focus on the permanent necessity in any analytical and engaged intellectual project to, in the words of Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, "respond […] to the challenges of history" and "to remain open to unexpected, unimagined, even uninvited possibilities" in the future at the same time.[44] In all the texts mentioned, the open-ended rearticulation and permanent contextualization of sociocultural and political issues thus seem to be the foundation for a responsible way of broaching sensible topics in general and questions of colonial historiography in particular.

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[41] Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, "Cultural Studies: An Introduction," in *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid., 6 and 3.

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Rethinking the Culture of Education with Raymond Williams

Y S Sochuiwon Priscilla Khapai

I
Culture and Education: A Twin Project

It is not often in academic writing that one encounters language which is as inviting as fiction, where theoretical ideas are in constant flux with emotional experiences and their complexities illuminated in lucid form. So, when I first read the essay "Culture is Ordinary" (1958) by Raymond Williams, I was struck not only by his ideas – which I found to be as relevant today as they were back then – but also by a marked sense of sincerity in his voice. His ability to weave together deeply personal experiences with the larger questions of culture in Britain provided a convincing glimpse into the fundamentals of who and what constitutes a given culture. That the personal is inextricable from the public is evident in many of the anecdotes shared in his essay – for instance, the moving account of how his grandfather, a farm labourer, wept openly in church when he was turned out from his cottage in his fifties and had to begin again as a roadman or the story of his father who took great pride in the fact that he had started a trade-union branch and Labour Party group in the village.[1]

These accounts speak to the ways in which the lives of working-class people were profoundly affected by the mechanisms of the social systems that governed them and how their responses, in turn, also affected such systems. Further, Williams's exploration of these issues in the context of an ever-evolving relationship between culture and education struck me as utterly relevant for the present era, where education systems around the world are set to face unprecedented futures due to the pandemic. Thus, what follows is a close reading of Williams's essay and the ways that it has informed one of my recent ventures into the academic landscape of high school systems in India. This exercise proved to be quite productive in examining the validity of his ideas.

Williams's style of employing the individual lens when talking about larger, more conceptual frameworks of society is perhaps not merely an aesthetic one. In fact, I believe that it is one of the most deliberate and effective means of resisting

[1] Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 11.

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the monolithic gaze of elitist cultural gatekeepers who often clump together lower-class people as "the masses" and dismiss their experiences as secondary. Williams counters such stereotypes by insisting on a microscopic lens which reveals the concrete experiences of ordinary people and reveals that they are truly as rich as any other. His upbringing as a working-class boy who later went to an elite university, i.e., Cambridge, afforded him an interesting position, whereby he could experience the richness of an ordinary life while still acquiring the empowering intellectual skills of an academic. This also meant that, for Williams, theoretical discourse had to be in critical dialogue with lived experience and that the crux of principle matters, whether regarding social justice or cultural phenomena, was equally perceivable to people of all classes. Therefore, he says, "I speak a different idiom, but I think of these same things," also keeping in mind that the intents and desires of his working-class father and grandfather were the same as his.[2] Williams considered culture to be the collective possession of a society and identified two of its key features as follows:

> A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; (and) the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction.[3]

This insistence on both the shared communal aspects of culture as well as the highly individualized ones sheds light on Williams's style, which glides between the personal and the general. It is also fascinating to note how he unravels the functionality of such an argument as a way of critiquing the more dominant narratives of his time, which were quite dismissive of the experience of common people. How exactly did he demonstrate this? To begin with, his insistence on "ordinary common meanings" opened the canvas of influence – regarding the ideas that formed and shaped a given culture – to the domain of the public. This was to acknowledge the contributions of ordinary people in the construction of what is considered quintessentially the "English way of life." The willing, organic, and creative participation of ordinary people in the construction of this culture was what granted it the validity and popularity that it could never have achieved on the basis of exclusionary principles. So, it was ironic how so many elite gatekeepers of "English culture" tried to exclude them and differentiate them from their "tasteful" way of life. Unfortunately, this form of erasure was prevalent, and Williams gives us an example when he refers to the so-called "teashop" he encountered during his student life at Cambridge:

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

> I was not oppressed by the university, but the teashop, acting as if it were one of the older and more respectable departments, was a different matter. Here was culture, not in any sense I knew, but in a special sense: the outward and emphatically visible sign of a special kind of people, cultivated people. They were not, the great majority of them, particularly learned; they practised few arts; but they had it, and they showed you they had it. They are still there, I suppose, still showing it, though even they must be hearing rude noises from outside, from a few scholars and writers they call – how comforting a label is! – angry young men. As a matter of fact there is no need to be rude. It is simply that if that is culture, we don't want it; we have seen other people living.[4]

Thus, Williams rejects the exclusiveness of such spaces. At the same time, it is important to note how he does not engage in a combative mode of exchange with these people, simply stating that, "if that is culture, we don't want it; we have seen other people living." This can be read as his way of bringing to the fore these "other" people who are often erased from such elite spaces. It is also a way of asserting that their existence and way of life, which actually constitutes British culture, is accessible to all people, and that culture is not some tangible object which can be sealed off like private property.

II
Growing into and out of a Discourse

Williams states explicitly that "I was not oppressed by the University," as way of showing, quite plainly, that people like him were not at all foreign to the business of learning and acquiring an education.[5] In other words, he chooses to forgo the stereotypical, sentimental narrative of a poor working-class boy who has the good fortune of attending a university like Cambridge and should therefore embody the fairness of the British education system, which was supposedly based on merit. The truth is that it was not a just system; and Williams is not afraid to point that out. As he states in the essay: "It is still very obvious that only the *deserving* poor get much educational opportunity, and I was in no mood, as I walked about Cambridge, to feel glad that I had been thought deserving; I was no better and no worse than the people I came from."[6] It becomes quite clear that, though he appreciated his education at Cambridge, he also found it deeply patronizing that the noble status of learning was granted only to a select few like him, and that prestige was associated solely with the idea of a university education. To him, learning was part and parcel of living, in whichever way or form that took place. The exceptionalism that was often accredited to the supposedly rare deserving student from a disadvantaged background – which was really just thinly veiled contempt – was not lost on him:

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4 Ibid., 12.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 14. Emphasis in the original.

> I was not amazed by the existence of a place of learning; I had always known the cathedral, and the bookcases I now sit to work at in Oxford are of the same design as those in the chained library. Nor was learning, in my family, some strange eccentricity; I was not, on a scholarship in Cambridge, a new kind of animal up a brand-new ladder. Learning was ordinary; we learned where we could. Always, from those scattered white houses, it had made sense to go out and become a scholar or a poet or a teacher. […] At home we met and made music, listened to it, recited and listened to poems, valued fine language. I have heard better music and better poems since; there is the world to draw on. But I know, from the most ordinary experience, that the interest is there, the capacity is there.[7]

Hence, for him to call culture "ordinary" was to put forth a certain notion of openness that was starkly absent in the mainstream ideas of culture prevalent at the time. According to Williams, culture was not some rigid form of living carved out of the suffocating walls of exclusive teashops; it was out there in the streets, in the countless, unexpected nooks and corners of a society where life brimmed with the free flow of ideas and experiences of people from all ages and backgrounds. Curiosity, desire, ambition, love, and passion were (and are) universal human traits, fuels for the evolution of a given culture in its passage along time. It could not be fenced off by material barriers, especially not when it came to the first principles of human potential and capacity. But having said all that, Williams was also well aware of the grave limitations in material constraints. For instance, in a capitalist society, time is a luxury for most working-class people; however, time is essential to the development and production of certain kinds of art or ways of learning that require great technical skill and supervision.

He writes: "Few of us could be spared from the immediate work; a price had been set on this kind of learning, and it was more, much more, than we could individually pay. Now, when we could pay in common, it was a good, ordinary life."[8] In other words, he is not arguing for one kind of culture over the other but instead suggests that one can embrace both and that, in fact, both should be made accessible to all. To Williams, it is crucial to acknowledge the myriad ways in which human intelligence exists in society, and especially in the lives of ordinary people, whose very labour makes possible precisely all the time it takes to produce the more "intellectual" kinds of work that are commonly celebrated. In short, all people play a vital role in the subsistence of a culture through their unique form of participation.

Perhaps one could say that, given his background, it was quite natural for Williams to take these positions. However, I would argue that these ideas were not at all easy to navigate, let alone to articulate and make popular in his time. It was a divisive period in which many arguments were strongly binary and there seemed to be little room for ambiguous musings. For instance, the contentious

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7 Ibid., 12.
8 Ibid.

political lines that erupted during the ideological climate of the Cold War,[9] when fractures emerged within older Left formations in Britain due to the "coordinates of a new cultural politics unfolding around race relations, consumerism, everyday life, social class, and women's oppression."[10] At multiple levels, people were pushed to place themselves and their arguments clearly on either side of political debates. So, it is to his credit that Williams was able not only to avoid the mainstream bourgeois ideas of culture in his era, but also to resist this divisive climate and express his qualms with Marxism. While he retained a critical appreciation for the insights acquired through a Marxist framework, such as "the relationship between culture and production, and the observation that education was restricted," what he rejected was how gravely prescriptive it had become, and how this had stifled any possibility for the emergence of a more creative and radical perspective. [11] Williams states:

> The Marxist interpretation of culture can never be accepted while it retains, as it need not retain, this directive element, this insistence that if you honestly want socialism you must write, think, learn in certain prescribed ways. A culture is common meanings, the product of a whole people, and offered individual meanings, the product of a man's whole committed personal and social experience. It is stupid and arrogant to suppose that any of these meanings can in any way be prescribed; they are made by living, made and remade, in ways we cannot know in advance.[12]

Williams was evidently frustrated by the persistent desire within Marxist discourse to control the course of action and the outcome of any socio-economic development by relying on neat, stable structures of socialization. In fact, the inner mechanisms of a society's cultural fabric were evidently far more fluid and difficult to grasp firmly. Change being the only constant, Williams felt that Marxism had failed to respond effectively to the realities of a swiftly changing post-industrial British society.

Another aspect in which Williams strayed from Marxist orthodoxy was his stance on the question of modern popular culture, represented by motion pictures or jukebox hits. The disdain that was typically directed at people belonging to the lower classes when it came to their tastes and ways of relishing the arts was something that Williams opposed strongly. Without being uncritical, he was far more accepting and open to the prospects of "the masses" embracing new tools of technology. The whole notion of a British culture being cheapened or diluted as a result of more and more people accessing its channels of production and distribution was wildly prevalent during this time. However, despite not having clear-cut, affirmative answers, Williams resisted these conventions and held off space in his writing for dwelling on the complexities of these social realities, anchored by faith in the

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9 For a brief account of Williams's work in this context, see R. Shashidhar, "Culture and Society: An Introduction to Raymond Williams," *Social Scientist* 25.5/6 (1997): 33–53.

10 Steven Gotzler, "Years in Cultural Studies: 1956 – The British New Left and the 'Big Bang' Theory of Cultural Studies," *Lateral* 8.2 (2019): n.p., web.

11 Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," 15.

12 Ibid.

possibilities of collective intelligence. Hence, he said: "[T]he only thing we can say about culture in an England that has socialized its means of production is that all the channels of expression and communication should be cleared and open, so that the whole actual life, that we cannot know in advance, that we can know only in part even while it is being lived, may be brought to consciousness and meaning."[13]

III
Williams on Education

Another important subject of the famous essay at hand is yet to be addressed. This is the issue of Williams's views on education, which I have significantly more trouble agreeing with. But rather than jumping directly into a critique, I will briefly summarize how he establishes connections between culture and education and what his views on the latter are. Understandably, education was one of the most important subjects for Williams. It was the means through which he had escaped a life of farming or other manual labour, which had been a given in his family for generations, and entered a new domain of intellectual pursuits, exercising agency of a kind that was generally kept from people of his class. He says: "There is an English bourgeois culture, with its powerful, educational, literary and social institutions, in close contact with the actual centres of power. To say that most working people are excluded from these is self-evident, though the doors, under sustained pressure, are slowly opening."[14] Thus, his desire was for this pressure to be released and for the doors to be fully open.

One of the ways through which he expresses this desire is by using a similar line of logic as with his views on culture: arguing that education is ordinary. This is to imply that education is meant to be accessible for all people. A persistent criticism against the popularization of education during his time manifested itself in blaming the "masses" for all the ills of a rapidly expanding media industry, an excuse that he opposed firmly. He argues that it is wrong to specifically blame ordinary people for the ills of their society when there is no evidence for such claims at all, but, in fact, plenty of evidence for the exact opposite. Williams deduces that the whole notion of the "masses" plays a significant role in scapegoating the poor for common problems in society:

> Masses became a new word for mob: the others, the unknown, the unwashed, the crowd beyond one. […] Certainly, it was the formula that was used by those whose money gave them access to the new communication techniques; the lowness of taste and habit, which human beings assign very easily to other human beings […]. There was more than enough literacy, long before 1870, to support a cheap press, and in fact there were cheap and really bad newspapers selling in great quantities before the 1870 Act was heard of. The bad

[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 14.

> new commercial culture came out of the social chaos of industrialism, and out of the success, in this chaos, of the "masses" formula, not out of popular education.[15]

Just as it was not a novelty to encounter the coexistence of bad and good newspapers, it was not a contradiction that rapid commercialization produced undesirable effects, which is often the case with any kind of new technology becoming widely used. So, to blame all the faults on ordinary people was beyond reason and, frankly, quite insulting. It was certainly not enough reason to stop the popularization of education. As a matter of fact, it was all the more urgent to provide quality education for everyone in order to build up a populace with a robust capacity of critical thinking, vital for confronting the social chaos of the times. The other arguments referenced in the text, whether classified as equations or analogies that he disapproves of, are more or less different variations of this argument. It is also worth pointing out that Williams advocated for a particularly strong liberal arts foundation for a university education, which could then eventually be supplemented by a specialist degree in the desired area for each student.[16] Many of his propositions are well-intentioned and he carefully assesses both the pros and cons of each scenario before making his suggestions. Hence, theoretically, they are all very sound. But reading the essay today, a little over six decades since it was first published and as a reader living in a totally different country, I wish to interject a few doubts regarding the feasibility of some of these suggestions. And much in the spirit of Williams's essay, I will resort to a few anecdotes of my own instead of elaborating on more theories.

IV
New Terrains: A Glimpse into the Complex Challenges of the Indian Education System

In December 2020, I was part of a project titled "School Education Response to Covid-19 in India and the Way Forward," which was led by the Indian Institute of Education (IIE) at the Savitribai Phule Pune University. Appointed as the field investigator for my home state Manipur (in Northeast India), I visited twenty schools distributed across eight districts in the state during the course of this project. My field work involved collecting data from students and teachers regarding the impact of India's rapid lockdown on many high schools, particularly those located in rural and tribal areas. More specifically, the project was about analysing whether the digitization of education in their schools was successful or not. Far from any kind of success story, the interactions with students and teachers revealed glaring gaps in the accessibility of resources, whether it was regarding electronic devices, internet facilities, or matters of technological literacy. All of these factors led to

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[15] Ibid., 18.
[16] Ibid., 21.

severe academic setbacks during the lockdown. It seemed that one of the primary means through which popularization of education was to be achieved in our times, namely the digitization of learning, was in fact effectively alienating those most in need of aid and support.

To give an example: During the fieldwork I had to carry survey sheets around with me, which the students were required to fill out while I assisted them. And when it came to certain questions regarding, for instance, how many phones their families owned or if they could afford internet data for online classes, I could sense visible discomfort and reluctance in the students who wanted to either skip over the questions entirely or copy exactly what their friends had written. Similar cases were also noticeable among the teachers, particularly among older female teachers, who were more than sufficiently qualified in their own subjects, but totally unfamiliar with digital gadgets. Trying my best to help them fill out the forms and reassuring them that their contributions could help in bringing change, I completed the project with my own share of doubts and frustrations. How could anyone who had seen the ground realities of e-learning in this country consider it to be sustainable for the majority of its students who are struggling to meet basic needs? The following figures give a sense of how many students were affected as a result of digitization during the pandemic:

> A total of 320 million learners in India have been adversely affected and transitioned to the e-learning industry, which comprises a network of 1.5 million schools. An NSSO 2014 report highlights that 32 million children were already out of school before the pandemic – the majority of them belonging to the socially disadvantaged class in the country. […] In a recent 2017-18 survey, the Ministry of Rural Development found that only 47% of Indian households receive more than 12 hours of electricity and more than 36% of schools in India operate without electricity. This suggests that while students from families with better means of living can easily bridge the transition to remote learning, students from underprivileged backgrounds are likely to succumb to inefficiency and a lack of adaptation, either because of the inaccessibility of the technology or the low education of their parents to guide them through tech-savvy applications.[17]

Thus, unlike the situation in which Williams felt the need to defend the easy access of people to new technology and advocate for their collective participation in producing innovative solutions for the resulting problems, the more recent situation created by technology in Indian schools seems to be far more adverse and harmful. In fact, I would go so far as to say that e-learning should not be imposed on these schools at all. I am no Luddite, but knowing now to a reasonable extent not only the usefulness but also – and more importantly – the redundancy and gripping addictiveness of these tools, I am convinced that one cannot be so naïve as to simply expose young children, who are easily influenced, to them and their associated dangers. While these devices rapidly encroach upon traditional classroom spaces,

[17] Sushma Modi and Ronika Postaria, "How Covid-19 Deepens the Digital Education Divide in India," *Weforum.org*, 5 October 2020, web.

can they actually substitute for the benefits of live interaction and active participation? I do not think so. This new breed of popularization of education, currently endorsed by a populist ruling regime in the country, needs to be met with critical investigation and rigorous questioning for the long-term health of schools in India. It cannot be embraced simply on the basis of some good-faith assumption that collective participation will outdo its ills automatically. If that is the "new normal" or the "new ordinary," then I want something *extra*-ordinary.

The truth is that the roots of inequality are so deeply entrenched in Indian society and their symptoms have been festering for so long that any kind of update in national policy, meagre disbursement of funds, or merely changing the tools of learning will not alleviate any of these problems in a meaningful way. In fact, with a means as vague and polarizing as digitization, which is layered with complications from the lack of technological infrastructure to training teachers or even simply ensuring that the content created online would be accessible for all students (without taking in the question of quality control yet), there is little probability that the process will be successful. On the contrary, it will only exacerbate the already existing gaps of inequality in these social systems. In the end, the poorest students in the most remote regions, who do not have access to phones, data packs, or even a stable network, will be the ones most adversely affected. During the field work, what I witnessed at the ground level was either a total shutdown of schools that could not afford to transition to e-learning or an absolute collapse in the quality of teaching and learning in those schools which had somehow managed to transition with the barest minimum (for example: setting up WhatsApp groups where teachers would share some notes and videos occasionally). The digitization process is, therefore, not about using technology to advance the means of education; rather it is about outsourcing the responsibilities of concerned authorities to thoroughly investigate the ways in which millions of students are falling behind, to address their concerns, and to restructure the school system to appropriately remunerate these devastating losses in learning. The need of the hour is effective structural transformation, not supposed updates in the form of digital alternatives that only harbour graver inequities.

To further elaborate on this need for transformation, let me share another example. During my field trips in some of the more remote villages in the Ukhrul district (a hill district of Manipur), where most schools were completely shut down or repurposed as quarantine zones, I noticed that many of the children had resorted to helping their families, whether in the form of farming, tending animals, or other kinds of household and communal activities. Here, I kept running into young Tangkhul Naga girls who had taken up weaving. The Tangkhuls are one of the Naga tribes living across different states in the Northeast of India, primarily in the hill regions of Manipur and the Sagaing division in Burma. Like other Naga tribes, they have a rich culture of textiles rooted in local practices of weaving. Through my interactions with the young girls and the research that followed, I discovered the rich world of Naga textiles and came to appreciate it as a resilient form of Naga culture – one which had survived the destructive waves of colonization, Christianization,

and the reign of Indian militarization. In fact, I followed this thread of interest into my Master's dissertation and engaged with critical questions about how indigenous communities like the Nagas countered mainstream historical narratives, both in terms of form and content, by studying the semiotics of one of the textile pieces they created.

Without getting into specifics (due to economy of space here), one of the chief agendas of my research was to investigate alternative sources of literary narratives in Naga culture. Textiles proved to be an incredibly rich source not only due to their historical value as an older form of art but also due to their continued persistence in contemporary times as a flourishing medium of expression, whether that be in the social, cultural, religious, or even political domain.[18] I mention all of this to emphasize how so much of local knowledge and vernacular forms of recording, practicing, and preserving knowledge is largely excluded from the current education system in India. During my research, I was overwhelmed by the epistemological gaps encountered when trying to access and analyse various subject matters related to this form. There are little to no means in the current system to incorporate the varieties of languages and dialects, artistic forms, skills, and systems of knowledge from all these communities which are at risk of disappearing. Without falling into rhetorics of cultural sentimentalism that often invoke static notions of reification and romanticization, I believe we can still pursue rigorous questions about preservation in which critical appreciation is a key element and the problematics of cultural loss are wedded to creative notions of change, imagination, and experimentation.

One of the ways in which Williams addressed the question of reform in his essay was by mentioning the case of the working-class men who had amended the English university syllabi to include their lived realities.[19] Such changes at the textbook level may prove to be useful to certain extents, but the current situation in India, especially after the pandemic, calls for far more radical forms of intervention. What is needed is a robust new system of learning which can effectively accommodate all the specific and diverse forms of knowledge already circulating organically. Exploring specific solutions of this kind will require a far more complex set of data and a longer essay than this one, but I believe we can still ask some potent questions. Firstly, is it right to assume that since schools had shut down all forms of learning had ceased? Are the skills, labour, and intangible forms of knowledge gained through community building, care, and hospitality during this period which people of all ages, not least of whom were a large populace of school children at home, participated to be regarded as a "waste of time"? What is learning and education at

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[18] On Naga textiles, see Marion Wettstein, *Naga Textiles: Design, Technique, Meaning and Effect of a Local Craft Tradition* (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2014) and Vibha Joshi, "Dynamics of Warp and Weft: Contemporary Trends in Naga textiles and the Naga collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford" in *Approaching Textiles, Varying Viewpoints: Proceedings of the Seventh Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America* via *DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska-Lincoln* (2000), web.

[19] See Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," 21.

the grassroots level where limited – if not total – absence of resources is the norm? With specific reference to the young girls who were weaving, we can also ask: When schools reopen, why should there not be room in the classroom for a serious discussion on textiles, covering an analysis of the craftsmanship, ideas, and syntactic details which are portals to rich narratives of history, culture, and society? Should such students be subject to quizzes and exams from history textbooks which completely exclude their own histories? Should they feel behind or even drop out because they cannot read the notes or messages from a WhatsApp group? It is against such a backdrop that we should seriously consider the question of digitization (carried out with such speed and "efficiency" in India) and the question of evaluating students through standardized forms of testing, thus conveniently leaving out the irreducible complexity of communal learning, which, for better or for worse, can only take place in a physical classroom. By complexity I mean the rich diversity of lived experiences that students from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds bring into a classroom where they think and co-exist as a collective body, even if temporarily. Is this not a vital component of their education? Can exclusionary digital platforms really replace this sanctuary of communal learning? These, at least, are the questions that have stayed with me since the fieldwork and I leave you with them as well.

I mention all of this to emphasize how so much of local knowledge and so many vernacular forms of recording, practising, and preserving knowledge are absolutely excluded from the current education system in India. During my research, I was overwhelmed by the epistemological gaps encountered when trying to access and analyse these matters. There are little to no means in the current education system to incorporate the varieties of languages and dialects, artistic forms, skills, and systems of knowledge from all these indigenous communities; and they are at risk of disappearing completely. In some forms that disappearance has already become reality: for instance, in the near total loss of oral practices among the Nagas during and after the colonial era due to the imposition of Western ways of living and learning in the name of "education" and "civilization."[20] Today, one can notice similar negligence in the way that the Indian education system is failing to reinstitute many such practices and their associated histories in its curricula. Now, with regards to this matter of curricula, Williams discusses in his essay some working men who had amended the English university syllabi to include their lived realities.[21] But in the case of the schools and communities that I visited in Manipur, I suspect minor changes in the syllabi will not do. Rather, a robust new system of learning needs to emerge: one which can effectively accommodate all the specific and diverse ways in which learning can take place without compromising on its quality. The new and the old can be complementary. Why should there not be as much emphasis on weaving as there is on learning how to code? After all, the former

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[20] For more on this development, see Arkotong Longkumer, "'Along Kingdom's Highway': The Proliferation of Christianity, Education, and Print amongst the Nagas in Northeast India," *Contemporary South Asia* 27.2 (2018): 160–178.

[21] Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," 21.

involves laborious, sophisticated craftsmanship with distinct syntax and vocabularies in composing a design for any genre of textiles. Thus, what I am suggesting is that, instead of half-heartedly forcing some standardized form of learning on these communities, the process of education reform should take on the form of a dialogue to ensure a more fruitful exchange.

V
Against Optimism: A Conclusion

I wish to put forward one final point of contention with Williams's essay. It becomes quite clear upon reading the essay, particularly in parts where he is advocating for an increase in funds, that Williams strongly believed in the stability of the nation state and the legitimacy that could be ascribed to various social structures in its name.[22] Perhaps he had good reason to believe in the social systems of his time, but in our world today, where crisis after crisis looms on the horizon, this way of thinking is no longer adequate. Our times are marked by changes of a scale far greater than any national imagination can fathom, whether this be regarding the migrant crisis, climate change, or the current pandemic. Hence, the openness that Williams wished to retain, and that I also hope remains, may require articulations of a kind that are completely outside the vocabulary of existing systems. The stakes are so much higher, and a good-willed social system, though it may have a part to play, in and of itself will not be able to address the overwhelming problems of our times. Social systems work when nation states function at a reasonable level, but when millions are literally spilling over and outside these constructs called nation states, what then? In what way can we remain open, but also join in collective action to solve some of the most pressing problems regarding healthcare, education, and precarious socio-political problems that await our societies in the near future? What kind of *ordinary* education will be able to address this? It is in this sense that I say some truly *extra*-ordinary ideas are perhaps the only means left – and the need of developing such ideas calls for embracing positionalities beyond the nation state.

[22] Ibid., 22–23.

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Feminisms

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Political and Cultural Negotiations with Feminism in India: A Perspective

Adreeta Chakraborty

I
Doing Theory Differently: Is There a Theory-Praxis Schism in our Feminism(s)?

A persistent theme animating contemporary interventions in cultural studies, mounted on a transnational framework, has been the complicated relationship between theory and praxis. On that theme, I venture the proposition that to think of intellectual work as a site of bitter and dissonant contestation between theory and praxis is perhaps to fall prey to a false notion of scarcity, as if there were only so much ground that could tether intellectual work.

Maitrayee Chaudhuri grapples with this fraught battle for terrain in her study of the women's movement in India. At the very outset of her introduction to *Feminism in India* (2005), she flags a perceived "sparseness of theoretical writing," and this concern occupies centre stage in her analysis of what she calls the "academic-activist dichotomy," alternatively understood as the widely apprehended schism between theory and praxis.[1] She connects this supposed paucity of theorization to two important circumstances. The first is the unequal organization of academic labour in the international arena, by virtue of which the Western academe becomes the arbiter and validator of knowledge claims, fostering and institutionalizing theoretical fluency in rarefied spaces that remain insulated from the tangible realities of the Global South. And the second, a concern that is particularly relevant in transnational conversations, is an exasperation or impatience with theory in a country like India, where the immediate demand for the alleviation of people's quotidian problems surmounts all else.

Chaudhuri's argument reminds one of a critical and poignant question once posed by Stuart Hall: "Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies?"[2] By following Hall's argument further, one can ascertain that much of the dichotomization between theory and praxis in contemporary discourse arises from the fact that theory's consummate institution-

[1] Maitrayee Chaudhuri, "Introduction," in *Feminism in India*, edited by Maitrayee Chaudhuri (London: Zed Books, 2005), xi.

[2] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *The Cultural Studies Reader,* edited by Simon During, 2nd edition (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 106.

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alization has led to a “moment of extraordinarily profound danger” in its history, taking it away from its undeniable roots in social movements and people’s lived realities.[3] Such a distancing results in the ossification of theory into an inert mode of thinking that is far removed from activism or the engaged work of the organic intellectual.

A possible response to these concerns may be that there is a need to reimagine the origins and purposes of theory – in this case, feminist theory. In Chaudhuri’s words, this involves seeing that it is “impossible to separate the history of action from the history of ideas.”[4] A great deal of feminist work or intellectual work towards social justice and emancipation in India is embedded in a “history of doing” that has not always found legibility and legitimacy in the discourse of Western academic feminism.[5] But what if the history of doing is a history of thinking and theorizing in itself?

From the limited purview of my personal experience, I can assert that the feminist politics that Indian students cultivate and sustain on public university campuses is built on a rigorous and decidedly academic engagement with theory, and this project of making theory accessible and actionable to individuals from across the socio-economic spectrum (in a country where theory is so often seen as superfluous and indulgent) is indeed one of the key areas that demand the concentration of intellectual labour. There is a great measure of “doing” involved in the proliferation of feminist theory, in the work of infusing that theory with an orientation towards action, and in rescuing it from the fate of stultification; and this is the crucial task that students’ organizations and collectives undertake on campus. For one such student collective’s weekly meetings, we would routinely discuss or present on various feminist theoretical debates, and our agendas and charters for action would often emerge from such discussions and inform the trajectory of future events organized by the collective. To my mind, these meetings remain some of the most memorable sites of coalescence between theory and praxis engendered by the space of the public university, testifying to the fabricated nature of any binaries between these two domains.

But this repurposing of feminist theory is necessarily complicated because, as Chaudhuri reminds us, as feminists in the Global South, we are expected to first familiarize ourselves with radical, liberal, socialist, Marxist, and feminist debates in the West: a body of scholarship that is projected as an indispensable gateway into our acquaintance with these issues. The kind of primacy afforded to such a mode of entry has given way to “a disjunction between theoretical and empirical work as well as a failure to read theory when presented in a form and style different from accepted Western academic protocol.”[6]

Chaudhuri’s resonant arguments remind one of Patricia Hill Collins’s articulations along similar lines in “Towards an Afro-Centric Feminist Epistemology”

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3 Ibid., 108.
4 Chaudhuri, “Introduction,” 12.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 13.

(2003). In this text, she advocates for a different epistemology whose methods of validating claims to truth are necessarily distinct from those established by the Western academic edifice. She writes:

> Because elite white men and their representatives control structures of knowledge validation, white male interests pervade the thematic content of traditional scholarship. As a result, Black women's experiences with work, family, motherhood, political activism, and sexual politics have been routinely distorted in, or excluded from, traditional academic discourse. […] The suppression of Black women's efforts for self-definition in traditional sites of knowledge production has led African-American women to use alternative sites such as music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behaviour as important locations for articulating the core themes of a Black feminist consciousness.[7]

This proposes a kind of activism and intellectual work that is rooted in a theory of its own making: one whose knowledge claims defy the political and epistemological criteria of the Western context. What emerges is a theory of difference that refers not only to content, but also – and more fundamentally – to form and movement. Such an epistemology enriches our understanding of how historically marginalized groups create knowledges that foster resistance and Collins's ideas seem to be in alignment with what is indicated in Chaudhuri's text: We do theory differently here.

II
Complicated Solidarities: Men within the Feminist Movement

However, this assertion of difference in turn often results in an over-signification of the "Westernness" of feminism, which leads to a search for indigenous roots that is worth problematizing. Chaudhuri rightly points at the potential dangers in such a quest for epistemological indigeneity in a diverse society and polity such as India's, especially at a time when majoritarianism wields immense power and routinely perpetrates the erasure of minorities and their modes of articulation or representation in the body politic. In light of an increasingly widespread radicalization of Hindu society in India – a process that borrows the resources of the term "decolonial" quite often to serve its own disingenuous ends – one becomes sceptical and indeed wary of a rejection of the "Western," because of the inevitable consequences of such an eschewal in a troubled, deeply unequal, and fractured postcolonial society. Certainly, the notion that feminism is a Western imposition cannot be the only thing that haunts the women's rights movement in India. There is also the equally, if not

7 Patricia H. Collins, "Towards an Afro-Centric Feminist Epistemology," in *Turning Points in Qualitative Research: Tying Knots in a Handkerchief*, edited by Yvonna S. Lincoln and Norman K. Denzin (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2003), 47–48.

more, concerning fact that feminism, like other progressive movements, has come to be controlled by upper-caste elites in India's heavily hierarchized caste society. Activists and intellectual workers from the historically marginalized Dalit Bahujan Adivasi caste groups have drawn attention to the many ways in which feminism is Brahmanical in India or has at the very least been co-opted by Brahmanical forces offering piecemeal rewards to upper-caste Hindu women at the cost of breaking the back of any authentic intersectional sisterhood. These contestations and fissures inevitably rise in a society built on caste, where liberal feminism, offering the illusion of choice, unites with existing hegemonies and social formations to run aground any true emancipatory possibilities for women battling structures of oppression beyond, though trafficking with, patriarchy.

Liberal feminism brings us to the question of selfhood and/or individuality, often deployed and weaponized to enact strategies of exclusion. Just as in the West, White feminists may profess a directly adversarial relationship with White men, upper-caste Hindu women in India too often establish distance from the men of their community – a move that enables us to forge our selfhood solely on the axis of gender, free of the accountability that belonging to an oppressor caste would entail. But such negotiations are not black-and-white when women from historically oppressed communities engage in feminist politics: Dalit Bahujan Adivasi or Muslim women in India, like Black women in the US, might not wish to politically distance themselves from the men of their community, who are also systemically disadvantaged.

A quick example from popular culture that illustrates this fundamental difference on the question of women's solidarity with men, is the discernible contrast between White women's feminist punk music and Black women's hip hop in the US. The former, through songs such as Bikini Kill's "White Boy" (1992) and The Julie Ruin's "Mr. So and So" (2016),[8] adopts an avowedly confrontational approach towards men and masculinity. Meanwhile, the latter often sends an affirmative message to Black men in its classics, while reserving the confrontational tones for the society in which they are frequently put down, clearly positioning Black women as Black men's allies. In the poignant classic track called "The Sweetest Thing" (1992), as a prime example for this, Lauryn Hill extols her "sweet prince of the ghetto" for his "precious, precious, precious, precious dark skin tone."[9]

This difference also routinely manifests itself in the way women from marginalized communities mobilize for and participate in political protest. For instance, during the countrywide demonstrations against the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019 and 2020 – now emblematized by the Shaheen Bagh sit-in that led to Muslim women embracing that model of protest across the nation – a strain of analysis emerged that painted women (understood as a monolithic or unified category,

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[8] See Bikini Kill, "White Boy," recorded October 1992, track 1 on *Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah* (Kill Rock Stars Records, 1993), and The Julie Run, "Mr. So and So," n.d., track 7 on *Hit Reset* (Hardly Art Cargo Records, 2016).

[9] Lauryn Hill (featuring the Refugee Camp All-Stars), "Sweetest Thing," n.d., track 3 of *Love Jones: The Music* (Sony Records, 1997).

shorn of the markers of religious identity) as the torchbearers of resistance. Such an approach perceived their protest as a form of mobilization against not just that immediate piece of legislation, but also, on a larger scale, against multiple religious patriarchies. Their protest came to be seen as a feminist resurgence against the masculinist strategies of control and authoritarianism, eliding the particularities of identity in the process and ignoring the reality of Hindu women's participation in the oppression of Muslim women. What this analysis failed to consider or highlight, as was pointed out by many activists and commentators at the time, is that the religious identity of Muslims in particular was at stake and under attack, and that Muslims of all genders were united in their opposition against the regime. By drawing a false equivalence between patriarchy within Muslim communities in India and the Brahmanical patriarchy powered and harnessed by the Indian state, this approach to women's rights activism ran the risk of obscuring and delegitimizing the specific struggles of Muslim women in India – struggles that go above and beyond the battles Hindu women fight. Not to mention that this equivalence also threatened to villainize Muslim men, who are equally vulnerable in a Hindu majoritarian nation state. The construction of this kind of narrative then vindicates a key argument in Chaudhuri's analysis, although she makes it in relation to economic imperialism in the era of globalization rather than religious intolerance: Feminism is appropriated by governmentalities, such that women from marginalized communities are "pitted solely against their unruly men,"[10] who in turn become the "bad subjects of modernity."[11]

III
The New Woman and Mainstream Hindi Cinema: Some Observations

In her analysis of the emerging subjects of modernity and the strategic positions in which they are deployed, Chaudhuri also diagnoses the spread of a neoliberal malaise – a new figure in post-globalization India: The "New/ Liberated/ Modern Woman, commodified as a selling strategy for conspicuous consumption," who apparently makes her own autonomous choices, is free to pursue her own work and leisure, and is capable of articulating her socio-economic independence and ascendancy through her consumption practices.[12] This shift in the narrativization of gender and womanhood in India ushered in a host of transformed cultural desires, fuelling the engines of consumerism.

And, more powerfully than ever, Bollywood now came to determine the ways in which this emergent politics around gender and sexuality was represented and inscribed within Indian consumer behaviour in the 1990s. To that end, glo-

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[10] Chaudhuri, "Introduction," 39.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 40.

balization's dalliance with hegemonic cultural nationalisms across transnational boundaries has often been analysed by looking at mainstream Hindi cinema specifically, heavy-handedly geared as it is towards NRI (Non-Resident Indian) populations in the West. Inderpal Grewal's analysis of the making and marketing of an "Indian" Barbie doll, with particular appeal for NRI markets in the chapter "Traveling Barbie: Indian Transnationalities and the Global Consumer" within her monograph *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (2005) gestures towards similar possibilities. She writes:

> While the Barbie product could only come to India because of the Indian government's changing policies of economic liberalization in the 1980s, it began to make inroads into the consumer market only when it could be understood within a discursive context created by the transnationalization of the beauty and fashion industry in India as well as the transnational connectivities produced by diasporic Indians.[13]

It is interesting to note the paradox wrought by globalization here: On the one hand, there is something aspirational about White femininity, as is evidenced by a Euro-American Barbie wearing Indian clothes or the glamourization of certain inter-racial celebrity marriages that Grewal draws our attention to; on the other hand, there is the development of an increasingly parochial attitude about "traditional" Indian values in reaction against what would be perceived as the loose sexual mores of the West. In the 1990s, this tension could be observed in mainstream Bollywood cinema, with more and more movies projecting the NRI as someone who harbours feelings of deep nostalgia and yearns for India's sanctified cultural values in a land far away from home.

In the now-iconic *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), which can be translated as "The Big-Hearted Will Take the Bride," for instance, the hero and the heroine fall in love in Europe, but stay doggedly loyal to their cultural traditions.[14] They do not consummate their union outside of marriage because the hero, by his own admission, recognizes the worth of an Indian woman's virtue; they do not elope, even though the heroine's marriage has been arranged to a man in her native Punjab, because the hero seeks her father's blessing, without which the union would be tarnished; and finally their love emerges victorious because, despite the time they spent together in Europe, they adhere to the scripts of gender governing love and romance in India.

The heroine in this family is in many ways a damsel in distress, which is a widely used trope in Hindi cinema. But *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, along with other films of its ilk, illustrates that with Indian society's opening up to the values of Western modernity and individualism, the nature of the damsel's distress has changed: from the threat of violation to the denial of the freedom to marry the man of her choice. She would often fall for a man outside of her own class and her disapproving father

[13] Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 89.

[14] *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, directed by Aditya Chopra (India: AA Films, 1995).

would arrange her marriage to a groom better suited for her status. It would then fall upon the knight in shining armour to convince the damsel's family to give him her hand and rescue the passive damsel from an unhappy marriage. On a greater scale, beyond the narratives of individual films, the damsel-saviour dynamic then often became representative of the NRI being the masculine protector and guardian of the feminized Indian nation in distress.

Thus, the emigrant had to be imagined as a dyed-in-the-wool Indian at heart, loyal to an "authentic" Hindu identity and masculinity even as he conquers a multicultural America. By extension, the Indian woman in post-liberalization India, too, had to toe the line between an aspirational Western femininity (insofar as it denotes economic power) and a culturally anchored Hindu ideal of womanhood that demands the rejection of such influences.

But it is not as if the emigrant is always shown as a torchbearer of tradition, representing a Hindu cultural nationalism in the West. Instead, Bollywood also demarcates a distinction between the good NRI and the bad NRI. In another film, *Pardes* (Foreign Land, 1997),[15] the heroine is a doe-eyed epitome of Hindu womanhood whose marriage is arranged to an Indian working in the US. When this fiancé turns out to be a depraved and licentious alcoholic and, therefore, a villain corrupted by "Western" influences, the heroine has to be saved from his clutches by a son-of-the-soil archetype who vindicates her honour. Films like this have come to embody latent anxieties around the transformation of gender norms effected by globalization, hinging their narratives upon an East-West binary in an era of potentially dangerous miscegenation. Grewal points this out:

> In particular, women's sexuality was disciplined in diasporic locations through nostalgic representations of an Indian tradition of women's virginity and purity that were bolstered by the Bombay cinema's dominant discourses, and were negotiated in terms of a pure India where the daughter's sexuality is believed to be safeguarded and an impure West where it is constantly in jeopardy.[16]

However, it was in the nature of globalization as a social, economic, and cultural phenomenon – and indeed, an overzealous marketing strategy – to disturb watertight binaries, and Bollywood cinema was poised at more than a few ambivalent intersections in the 1990s. Whereas in the decades following Independence, the "bad woman" or "vamp" in Hindi films was an immoral temptress, who seduced the hero into straying from the path of ideal conduct, globalization made her aspirations appear less villainous or profligate. Earlier, she served as a foil to the heroine of the film, who was usually the staid and virtuous lover or wife of the male protagonist. But with a change in the perception of modernity, this "bad woman" became less of an evil caricature. Her heavily Westernized apparel (and therefore, her consumption patterns) came to determine the most popular trends and her styling as a go-getter or a liberated woman, working her way up by dint of sheer perseverance, resonated

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[15] *Pardes*, directed by Subhash Ghai (India: Mukta Arts, 1997).

[16] Grewal, *Transnational America*, 117.

with an Indian public in thrall to the promises of liberalization. In the 2000s, this portrayal underwent another round of transformations as the internet boom played a significant role in not only increasing the consumption of global films, but also in proliferating the discourses of Western liberal feminism in South Asia. As a result, the "bad girl" went even further away from being seen as a corrupting influence upon traditional Indian cultural values to being a *soi-disant* feminist icon, defying the moral imperatives of the past. Here too, as in the marketing of the Barbie doll, liberal feminist ideology, shaped by Western individualism, was deployed as a key tactic to sell the image of a "New Indian Woman."

It is by looking at these linkages between the emergence of new cultural texts and scripts of gender and the larger metanarratives constructed by contemporaneous socio-economic and geopolitical phenomena that one understands the need for a cultural studies framework in the project of studying the lives and afterlives of feminism in South Asia. The feminist discourse that arrives at our doorstep after a long transnational passage is naturally riven by contradictory tendencies; the journey complicates things. But it is such complications within the domain of culture that widen the space for interventions which might challenge the mastery of any particular body of theory. So transformative are these complications that no theory that passes through them can claim to be pure or originary. In fact, new feminisms emerge from contestations upon contestations played out in the theatre of our cultural realities. And it is by tracing the trajectories of these offshoots, while recognizing the ways in which the dominant cultural zeitgeist comes to appropriate the impulses of feminism to its own ends, that we can perhaps arrive at an understanding of how our feminisms embed themselves within the complex social content of contemporary India.

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Women as Other? – Women and Other

Anne Heisters

I
Any Word?

“I mean no harm, so I can use any word I want. If others do not like what I say, it is their problem, not mine.” This was uttered by a male participant in a seminar about postcolonial feminism I took part in recently. Of course, he did not use “any word,” but a rather specific one that has been rightfully judged as an offensive and unacceptable designation for people with darker skin or African ancestry since I was a child. While the German word in question may not be quite as offensive as the infamous “N-word” in English, it is certainly dated and strongly tainted. Therefore, I immediately started wondering why someone of my age, at university, and with at least some sort of sensitization for the importance of language would talk as he did. I ultimately concluded that this behaviour was not necessarily born out of malice, but that it was rather lacking critical awareness and missing involvement (as a White European in the concerns of People of Colour, and also as a man in the concerns of women) that made the problem difficult to grasp for the speaker. Still, the fact that this happened in a seminar on feminism pushed me to think how the incident related to racist and sexist structures as well as common public perceptions of feminism. For many men (though not for all), feminism is something abstract, I suspect, because they do not directly and personally *feel* the problem of outdated language and discriminatory perspectives. Like the participant in the seminar, they might also mean no harm using sexist or racist expressions. Their honest ignorance, unfortunately, does not lessen the harm they cause.

Ignorance as an answer to the questions feminism poses is also not exclusive to men. Until recently, I did not call myself a feminist, either. I identified instead with somewhat vague concepts of humanism or gender equality, for I did not want to reduce others to gender categories. However, as I have learned more and more clearly, self-identification as a feminist is an act of communication, a public statement. It makes people hear and reflect on feminism more often than they otherwise would. Hopefully, such actions and processes will someday stop people from saying things by which they mean no harm, but which actually hurt, exclude, and discriminate against others. But this is an idealistic and vague notion in itself – and calls for much-needed elaboration.

The following text is an act of feminist declaration in the first-person voice, drawing on my own experiences as a White German woman and student of European

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and particularly Francophone literatures and cultures. From this vantage point, the text offers an analysis of the conditions that make feminism necessary. I will call for action in three areas in particular: the integration of men into feminist thinking and activism; interventions in the medial representation of women; and greater consideration of women's stories and writing. A combination of academic theory with "the personal as the political," which is a valid motto in feminism and cultural studies in general, seems to me to constitute an authentic approach to the topic.

II
We Need More Male Feminists

Arguably, feminism was born in the streets. It is a child of political activity as well as of women's dissent with social, economic, and political structures that undermine their rights. Fighting injustice based on sexual discrimination, on patriarchal lines of reasoning, and on women's marginalization is the common goal of feminists. As intellectuals called for a more theoretical approach, women's studies and feminist literary theory, amongst other fields, have become established academic subjects.

However, neither street protest nor institution building are the work of female feminists alone. I would, in fact, assert that feminist activism can only be productive and broadly impactful when humans from all genders are integrated. To deny male allies, as perhaps the biggest non-traditional group, the possibility of participation in feminist concerns is bound to weaken, in the long term, all branches of feminist activity. As Alice Jardine already writes in 1987: "Feminist men. Male feminism. Is this but an exercise in oxymorons? Or perhaps a promising utopian vision? I think it depends on what men want."[1]

Some people might see the need for the integration of men into feminism as self-evident and wonder why I highlight this point with such insistence. On the other hand, however, some feminists actively exclude men, often so that nobody could assume a dependence of feminism on men: a conclusion born out of understandable fear and full of bitter irony. Furthermore, why are we speaking of "men" and "women" as the only two possibilities? Why uphold, rather than overthrow, gender binaries in the first place? Male integration is part of a further process of integration that can potentially include everyone.

I would like to remind all of my readers that we still live and act in coteries. If someone feels like "male feminism" is already evident and commonsensical, I will simply ask them to read just a few comments underneath any popular feminist posting on social media, listen to "common people" talk about the state of society at a local bus station, or question their relatives about whether they consider themselves feminists and why (or why not). This research would quickly reveal that the gender binary is alive and well. Cultural critics can easily lose sight of that fact, living in

[1] Alice Jardine, "Men in Feminism: Odor di Uomo or Compagnons de Route?" in *Men in Feminism*, edited by Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (New York: Routledge, 2013), 59.

and working in highly progressive bubbles. But even in a self-reflexive academic milieu, men are still commonly excluded and exclude themselves from feminist discussion – not because they do not want to mix in "women's business" (which would be a potentially discriminatory and sexist statement), but (likely with good intentions) because they feel they should concede spaces for women to talk without interference. Here, I detect a certain concern, which might alternatively be described as a certain male insecurity, with regards to gender questions and hierarchies in this second pattern of actions. A man, at the university and elsewhere, might not always feel entirely free to express his views within a feminist discursive space because his contribution could easily be written off due to his gender alone. This is a problem to be solved. Let me make myself clear: This is not a plea for more (White, cis) men's rights. It is also not written to bemoan the relative marginalization of men in certain discourses and most certainly not intended to suggest that a supposed "backlash against masculinity" is the central sexist oppression we should concern ourselves with, as viral figures such as the Canadian psychologist Jordan B. Peterson have argued.[2] It is rather a plea for an education system that actively shows boys and men that they, too, are involved in feminist issues. If teachers, professors, supervisors, or parents tell them to hold back when it comes to feminism, they will learn that they are not supposed to be actors in such an environment. They will lose interest and the confidence to speak up in that matter. This is a step back for feminism and its ongoing fight for equality which no feminist should tolerate any further.

All of this is completely unrelated to the question of female dependence on men. Rather than creating yet another paradigm of hierarchy and imbalance of power to existing patriarchal structures, the integration of men constitutes a simple necessity, a practical step towards a more just society. The struggle for equal rights takes place in the real world, where real-life circumstances always have to be taken into consideration; consequently, it is necessary to engage the entire next generation in feminist concerns so that they may take up as much space in the discourse as possible.

As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says in her famous TED talk and book *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014): "We must raise our daughters differently. We must also raise our sons differently."[3] Society can no longer be putting boys in a small cage of what Adichie calls "hard man"-masculinity. To escape it, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has further argued, we must "celebrate the female rather than deconstruct the male."[4] Only if men understand that feminism matters to them, too, we can avoid that gender equality is deemed "the women's problem."

This danger, and the necessity for "all [to] be feminists" can be connected to and illustrated by many powerful historical examples, such as that of Swiss women's

2 "Jordan B. Peterson," *BBC News* on *YouTube*, 7 August 2018, web.

3 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), 10.

4 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 113.

suffrage.[5] Switzerland is usually known as a strong and long-standing democracy that has its citizens directly involved in local and national politics alike. Still, and going directly against this extremely positive stereotype, women's suffrage at the federal level was not achieved in the country until 1971, making Switzerland one of the last European countries to give women full voting rights. But what was the reason? As is often the case, the answer is structural and connected to the traditional political structure of the Swiss state. In Switzerland, no parliament or constitution could grant women's suffrage directly or through a legal challenge, because each resolution first had to pass a referendum in which only men could vote. This is why an earlier attempt to extend voting rights to Swiss women in 1959 failed. It would seem that the majority of men who voted were simply not convinced that their wives, mothers, or daughters should be allowed to take part in politics equally. At this point, it would have been justified to turn to protest and the bemoaning of harmful patriarchal structures in society, telling Swiss men that their decision was indeed morally wrong and intensely damaging. Instead, the voting activists kept going with their initial campaign idea of raising public awareness constantly and peacefully, referring to human rights and to the federal constitution which guaranteed the legislative equality of all Swiss people, slowly winning over more and more voters. The strategy worked: Only twelve years after the failed 1959 effort, Swiss women finally attained their political independence and sovereignty via another referendum. Real change, in this example, was initiated by slowly and methodically convincing men that women's rights and real agency-equality were better for society, using democratic means and empathy.

I believe that the process of slowly persuading men through activism and debate, utilizing patience rather than violence or anger, is still a pragmatic and valid method that works in many other areas of social justice too. This might not be a popular opinion these days, but it is demonstrably true. To provide another example: The majority of academic chairs at universities – positions of high societal esteem – are traditionally occupied by men, and it is up to established chairs to appoint women to such offices. This discrepancy is documented in many personal stories, as well as different forms of media such as the 2021 television series *The Chair*, which portrays the difficulties an intersectional woman has to face within the academy.[6] The prestigious German newspaper *Die Zeit* recently published a survey on the gender division concerning departmental chairs in German universities in its weekly magazine: The results show that still only one quarter of these positions are held by women, reasoning that powerful men would rather promote other men than women.[7]

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5 See Andrea Maihofer, "Die Geschichte des Frauenstimmrechts – Verdrängtes Unrecht?" in *50 Jahre Frauenstimmrecht: 25 Frauen über Demokratie, Macht und Gleichberechtigung*, edited by Isabel Rohner and Irène Schäppi (Zürich: Limmat, 2020), 17–30.

6 *The Chair,* created by Amanda Peet and Annie Julia Wyman (United States: Netflix, 2021).

7 Friederike Milbradt, "Professorinnen," *ZEITMagazin Online*, 15 August 2018, web.

It is no different in politics: As of April 2022, taking into account all countries in the world, there are still no more than 27 female heads of state.[8] While gender equality may be heavily discussed in global politics and while organizations like UNESCO create gender related chairs to develop more equality,[9] many leading feminists and their propositions remain completely unknown throughout wide areas of the world, especially in culturally conservative countries where women's rights are much less secure than men's. Here, women alone cannot influence decision-making processes forcefully enough to create real, tangible change. Look only as far as Turkey, where an organization that wishes to inhibit femicides and take them to court is currently being impeached and forced to dissolve after having been judged to be hostile to the idea of the traditional nuclear family.[10] The situation of women's rights in Turkey is in rather stark contrast with the Switzerland of today, despite Swiss women's historical struggles to achieve voting rights. The comparison shows a complicated, yet encouraging truth: Patriarchy is not dead, but no longer do all men necessarily agree with it. Societies in which debates about women's rights are prominent in the public space have been remarkably better at implementing those rights than societies in which they are not. This leaves only one obvious conclusion: Public opinion matters, and it matters a whole lot. Men cannot be ignored as a large part of this public. Hence, to achieve global cultural change, more and more men must be persuaded to acknowledge the equal rights of women.

III
We Need to Rethink Media Representations

There is, however, an essential first step that needs to come before persuasion: namely, consideration of representational dynamics. Fortunately, the analysis of representation already has a long tradition within cultural studies. Spivak, for instance, unravels the meaning of representation in detail and distinguishes between two types of representation: "speaking of" (*darstellen*) and "speaking for" (*vertreten*).[11] Both are a part of the silencing apparatus, "beyond [which] is where oppressed subjects speak, act and know *for themselves.*"[12] In consequence, not all women (as well as other marginalized subjects) are able to speak up for themselves.

Representations are a part of the "whole way of life" which Raymond Williams famously defines as culture.[13] Culture produces and reproduces representations, e.g., through national or religious traditions and the media (books, movies,

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8 "World Population Review," *Worldpopulationreview.com*, 2022, web.

9 "Gender-related UNESCO Chairs and Networks," *UNESCO*, 16 September 2020, web.

10 Hamdi Firat Buyuk, "Turkish Women," *Balkan Insight*, 14 April 2022, web.

11 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 275–276.

12 Ibid., 276. Emphasis in the original.

13 Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 4, 8, and 14.

television, newspapers, and advertisements). Roland Barthes examines cultural phenomena and representation in his writings, as demonstrated in essays such as "Novels and Children" (1957). Barthes here shows how a photograph of female writers and the respective commentary published in the weekly magazine *Elle* put into readers' minds the idea of women as a "a remarkable zoological species [that] brings forth, pell-mell, novels and children."[14] What Barthes observed regarding *Elle* and the powerful "myths" of everyday life in the 1950s still holds true today: The magazine "says to women: you are worth just as much as men; and to men: your women will never be anything but women."[15]

The standard woman represented in film and advertisement is a happy woman who effortlessly juggles having a job and raising equally happy children at the same time and naturally corresponds to the Western norms of beauty as well. This is a woman who can scarcely be real and who should be "murdered," as French-Moroccan writer Leïla Slimani provocatively suggested at the opening of the 2021 internationales literaturfestival berlin, generally abbreviated as ilb or referred to in English translation as international literature festival berlin, Slimani, who won the Prix Goncourt with her novel *Chanson Douce* in 2016 (published as *Lullaby* in the UK and *The Perfect Nanny* in the US), problematizes this sort of representation – not only because it sets aspirational limits to and piles everyday obligations onto the real women who watch and compare themselves with what they see but also because it provides false imaginations and expectations for heteronormative men, who will, even if only subconsciously, look for women resembling this impossible idea.[16] At this point, once again, a personal experience asserts itself: A boy in one of my history lessons in high school was asked by our teacher to describe a historical picture. He observed: "In this picture, we can see women, and also normal people." I do not believe that this young man actually believes now or believed then what his response implied: that women are a special subcategory of people, and that people are principally assumed to be male. But the anecdote certainly shows how heavily young people reproduce given representations, and how they subconsciously integrate such stances into their personal way of thinking and living if they are not taught ways of reflecting on them.

With that knowledge, why are popular media still predominantly interested in representing what could be called the "weak woman," the "sexed object-woman," or the stereotypically "perfect woman"? While these stereotypes still make up the majority of characters shown in popular culture, there is also already change on the way. New ways of representing women are continually gaining traction, specifically in movies, series, and books. Certainly, by now, everyone knows stories that (re)-present a heroine with psychological depth and character development. An often-mentioned example in modern young adult fiction is Katniss Everdeen of *The*

[14] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 50.

[15] Ibid., 51.

[16] Leïla Slimani, "Eröffnung," *21. Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin*, *YouTube*, 8 September 2021, web. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from German and French are my own.

Hunger Games book series by Suzanne Collins (2008-2010), drawing on older blueprints such as *Jane Eyre* in by Charlotte Brontë's eponymously titled classic novel (1847) or Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982).[17] Yet, as mentioned before, many successful movies and series still do not come close to doing this, as the "Bechdel test" illustrates.[18] Although the test, originally proposed by and named after comic artist Alison Bechdel in her series *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983–2008), is not strictly scientific, it methodically reveals how clichés and fixed role models spread through the entire film industry. Try its three main questions on your own favourite movie: Are there two female characters with a name? If there are, do they talk to each other? If they do, is it about a different topic than "men"? The Bechdel test does not always work (there are highly misogynist movies that pass it, as well as the other way round), but it can serve as a broad guideline and an impressive illustration of just how problematic the representation of women by the film industry still is. And although the test might not be the ultimate tool to measure female empowerment in the media, it provides interesting insights with regard to gender privilege. Try its questions for men. Are there movies that do not pass? One would have to wander far into obscurity to find more than a handful of films that do not easily fulfil all three criteria. Meanwhile, famous movies like *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) all fail the test for women. Even movies with women as main characters, such as the highly acclaimed *La La Land* (2016), do not pass. This is why I call for more diverse stories, the recognition of intersectionality, and resistance against the dominant episteme. A recent, positive example is the 2020 movie *Nomadland*, directed by Chloé Zhao, that not only aces the Bechdel test with flying colours, but also gets around to presenting women with strong personalities who also have deep conversations with each other.[19] The film's Oscar wins (for best film, direction, and best acress in a leading role among other honours) are a step into a decidedly better direction concerning gender representations in the movie industry.

IV
We Need to Read More Female Authors and Listen More Attentively to Women's Stories

Despite a recent wave of reasonably successful attempts at introducing complex female main characters into classic stories and franchises, one fact must never be forgotten: Looking at the bigger picture, we can only circumvent bad or wrong

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17 See, for example, Terry H. Watkins, "What to Read When Trying to Figure Out Who You Are," *The Rumpus*, 26 October 2018, web.

18 See, for example, Scott Selisker, "The Bechdel Test and the Social Form of Character Networks," *New Literary History* 46.3 (2015): 505–506.

19 *Nomadland*, directed by Chloé Zhao (United States: Searchlight Pictures, 2020). Compare also the *Bechdel Test Movie List* website, 18 February 2021, web.

representations by creating new ones from an entirely new point of view. This is doubly true for mandatory reading, outside of the private enjoyment of books or movies. Therefore, the educational system must integrate alternative stories, and with them new norms and representations, into their curricula. My own experience shall again serve to highlight why the current state of the literary canon is untenable: A few months before my high school graduation, one of my female schoolmates asked me why there were no "real" literary works by women. I was willing to contradict her, but when she asked me to name some famous female authors who wrote books as revered as the important (male) classics, I was unable to offer more than two or three names. The traditional literary canon is dominated by male writers, and everyone knows it. That influences not only schools, but also institutions of higher education. In the case of my native Germany, I still detect a huge gap in representation when I take a look at mandatory academic reading lists. For instance, the representative reading list of the Freie Universität Berlin (Free University Berlin), proposed by a male professor, counts 32 twentieth-century novels by male and two by female authors, and the distribution is similar or worse for earlier centuries or other genres.[20] This is not a uniquely German phenomenon. Jane Tompkins shows similar tendencies within American Studies in her book *Sentimental Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (1986) and denounces the "absence of women's writing from the standard American literature curriculum" as an "exclusionary practice."[21]

Somehow, though, a slow development towards a greater gender balance in the canon is taking place. Coming back to my previous example, in autumn 2021, two contemporary female authors, Yasmina Reza and Marie NDiaye, were added to the French literature reading list at the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg (JMU).[22] This might seem a minor improvement, but seen in context it is much more than that: Small steps like these are no longer isolated phenomena. At German universities, in cultural studies, literature, or other humanities' courses, students now read and discuss gender issues, sexual discrimination, and concepts like "women's literature." For instance, I myself participated in a seminar concerning female and male perceptions in German literature around 1800, which can be seen as the beginnings of publicly visible women's writing and publishing in Germany. Participating in the course was extremely revealing, offering insights into historical continuances and today's perception of gender roles.

Writing is a form of empowerment. Kouamé Adou states that "the exclusion of women from writing in patriarchal African societies [has] contributed to maintain them in subjugation" and that today "challenging gender hierarchies through

[20] "Leseliste Neuere Germanistik." *Neuere Deutsche Literatur/Prof. Dr. Peter-André Alt*, Freie Universität Berlin, n.d., web.

[21] Jane Tompkins, *Sentimental Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), xiv.

[22] "Prüfungskanon für die schriftliche Klausur im Bayerischen Staatsexamen Französisch, Italienisch und Spanisch (Teilgebiet Literaturwissenschaft) – gültig ab dem Prüfungstermin Herbst 2023." *Romanistik,* Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, web.

writing" takes place and becomes a means of social empowerment.[23] Writing gives a voice to women, especially to those who cannot speak in public because of political suppression and persecution. The phenomenon of "muting" is doubly interesting, as it means to make somebody silent, but also to (technically) turn the volume down. This leads to so-called "tokenism," which means that one lets marginalized groups speak, but without really listening to what they are saying.[24] A similar occurrence in a parallel marginalized group might be better known, namely "rainbow washing" in the LGBTQIA+ and lately especially trans discourses, which ultimately has the same effect: A dominant group *pretends* to be tolerant and ready to integrate marginalized people to fill quotas and make themselves or their product look better but does nothing to actually and tangibly improve the marginalized people's rights or living situations within society.

Writing enhances the articulation and formulation of subjectivities and identities, which are needed for agency. Just like Adou, Slimani, to once again reference her opening speech to the ilb in 2021, promotes literature and writing as spaces of emancipation, and books as weapons.[25] According to her, "the path to emancipation for every woman consists in part of refusing to correspond to the models offered to us in childhood."[26] To do that, we need more official spaces and platforms for women to speak up and to communicate their perspectives on the world and life. For this to happen universally, everyone needs to have a voice, including those women from countries and cultures that almost no one is paying any attention to. Therefore, to empower a more diverse and complete set of active female voices, we need to dislocate the status of the role model from the global West. We need to decentralize our narratives, because nothing can ever be central but by force of defining a marginal Other.[27] In this spirit, Adichie has not just called for a broader education, but also warned of the danger in the "single story": If we know only one perspective on things, we will claim it as the only and full truth.[28]

Of course, alternative stories do not simply fall into our laps. Often, we actively have to look for them. Many female authors, scientists, doctors, politicians, and other public or professional figures are unknown in spite of their achievements, because they are or were women standing in the shadow of their male colleagues. A prominent example that has been dragged to the cultural forefront in recent years is the unacknowledged contribution made by Black women to NASA's Apollo and

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23 Kouamé Adou, "Écriture et pouvoir: femmes écrivains comme voix majeures en Afrique contemporaine," *Dialogos* 21 (2020): 30–31.

24 See Ina Kerner, *Feminismus, Entwicklungszusammenarbeit und Postkoloniale Kritik: Eine Analyse von Grundkonzepten des Gender-and-Development Ansatzes* (Hamburg: LIT, 1999), 55.

25 See Slimani, "Eröffnung." See also Adou, "Écriture et pouvoir," 34.

26 Slimani, "Eröffnung."

27 See Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, edited by Sarah Harasym (London/New York: Routledge, 1990), 40. See also Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 283.

28 See, in addition to the book publication, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," *TED Global*, 21 July 2009, web.

Mercury missions, as it is dramatized by the movie *Hidden Figures,* based on a book of the same title by Margot Lee Shetterly (2016).[29] Despite their grand achievements, the three African-American women Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson remained largely unknown in their times. They are receiving due attention only now, more than five decades after the fact.

V
We Need to Understand the Importance of Intersectionality and In-Betweenness for the Feminist Movement

These "hidden figures" point to another important topic in feminism. Kimberlé Crenshaw's text "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989) is credited with developing the concept of so-called "intersectionality analysis." Highlighting the structural discrimination of Women of Colour in US-American jurisdiction, Crenshaw demands a reworking of anti-racist and feminist strategies, so that they are no longer simply added to each other, but seen and understood in their entanglement.[30]

While not using the specific term, Spivak also offers a framework for understanding intersectionality across cultures. In particular, her work connects the suppression of women to the term "subaltern."[31] According to historian Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Study Group, who laid the groundwork for this kind of analysis, subalterns are defined *ex negativo*: as those who are not the elite.[32] The higher group can be taken to consist of the hegemonic elite, or – in an expansion of the original class-based understanding of the subaltern in the thinking of Guha and, before him, Antonio Gramsci – of the male gender. Other genders become the object of "othering," downgraded by their non-belonging. Women who are part of a discriminated group and/or minority are (at the minimum) doubly hidden by the intersections of what can be termed "subalterning" structures: They are People of Colour *and* women, economic subalterns *and* women, queer people *and* women, and so on. This entanglement of oppressive forces and separated identities serves to reduce women's solidarity because their belonging is distributed across different groups, and they might not see womanhood as their strongest identification.[33]

Spivak asks: "With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?"[34] She concludes that free speech is not possible for the subaltern because "[t]here is no

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[29] *Hidden Figures,* directed by Theodore Melfi (United States: Fox 2000 Pictures, 2016).

[30] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 1.

[31] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 287 and 294–295.

[32] Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 8.

[33] See Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* 148, and Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 295.

[34] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 285.

space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak."[35] Spivak addresses the immense problem that women often fail to perceive themselves as subalterns.[36] A true sense for equality and independence can only be found in spaces and places in which girls are taught that they should have the same opportunities as their brothers, and in which they are then actually given these opportunities. Where this is not possible, the next best thing is to show where equality does not yet exist and explore ways of pushing for it. Consciousness about one's situation is the clue for getting out of it; it is the first step to self-liberation. A woman who has freed herself from ineffability does no longer belong to that unrepresented group of subaltern women; she has already taken distance to her subalternity.

Of course, women's possibilities and needs vary depending on a country's geographical situation, culture, political system, economy, or religion. It would be naïve to close one's eyes to the fact that we do not start from the same base (i.e., the same set of rights, the same possibilities of free speech and development, the same educational as well as economic resources). One woman is not necessarily able to speak for her "sister." She may speak in favour of her goals, but this again is a form of representation that takes away the other woman's voice. This is what the Francophone writer Assia Djebar powerfully highlights in her short story collection *Femmes d'Alger Dans Leur Appartement* (1980): "Ne pas prétendre 'parler pour,' ou pire 'parler sur,' à peine parler *près de*, et si possible *tout contre.*" This translates to: "Without pretending to 'speak for,' or worse 'speak of,' hardly speaking *close to*, and, if possible, *alongside.*"[37]

In her recent article "Femme ou femme africaine?" (2017), Lucy Mushita adds further nuance by describing the phenomenon of in-betweenness, which often occurs together with intersectionality. Only when an African woman comes to France (in Mushita's example, although the destination could arguably be any other non-African country as well), she defines herself as African, meaning someone who is different from the French.[38] Defined in this manner, she does not belong to the country she lives in now, and neither does she belong to the country she came from. Obsolete historical images still determine the perception of African women in Europe and thereby reduce them to particular social roles.[39] A woman who feels in-between, as Mushita writes, is not standing in her proper place. She cannot live to her full potential. She cannot yet take the step of becoming a subject in both of the worlds she inhabits. To connect this discussion with subalternity, and by implication intersectionality, as reflected on by Spivak: The transformation from subaltern mute to speaking subject is one of Spivak's most important demands.[40]

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35 Ibid., 307.

36 Ibid., 296.

37 Assia Djebar, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement. Nouvelles* (Paris: Edition des Femmes, 1980), 8. Emphases in the original.

38 Lucy Mushita, "Femme ou femme africaine?" In *Penser et écrire l'Afrique aujourd'hui*, edited by Alain Mabanckou (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 2017), 197.

39 Ibid., 198–199.

40 See Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 112, and "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 295 and 300.

VI
We Need to Overcome Given Thoughts, Traditional Rules, and the Status of the Episteme

Gender inequality is a long-standing, historical phenomenon. Thus, only a rigorous review of colonial and postcolonial history can lead to a deeper understanding of it. Colonization itself was initially presented as a project of liberating the "uneducated" non-Europeans from their individual, cultural, social, and religious "ignorance." As the Indian philosopher and theorist Raghavan Iyer observes, European thinking around 1800 was deeply influenced by a "Peter Pan theory" that attributed an everlasting childhood to colonized peoples.[41] Intellectuals like Victor Hugo supported colonial expansion and perceived the exploitation, oppression, and cruelty that came with it as mere epiphenomena to the given improvement.[42]

Even today, European museums still display essentially "looted" art without adequate comments on its history, cultural surroundings, and traditional meanings. Take the writings of Götz Aly, a German historian and journalist, who criticizes the methods of exhibition in the Ethnological Museum at the Humboldt-Forum in Berlin. The Forum – which houses museums, cultural initiatives, foundations, and university-affiliated projects – is named after Alexander von Humboldt who is famous for studying the non-Western world in the course of an Enlightenment project that was, to put it lightly, not always respectful of the non-West. Zooming in on the Ethnological Museum, a certain will for taking steps in the right direction can be identified in the museum's mission statement in which its diversity and cooperation, its openness for discussion and opposition, and its knowledge of the importance of "questioning structural inequalities" as well as the possibility of the project's failure are emphasized.[43] However, observers such as Aly still note systemic issues, e.g. that the presentation within the museum tends to focus on material qualities such as the objects' lengths and heights instead of developing a less art-focused, but ethnological approach by indicating the objects' backgrounds like the way they came to Europe and, if available, their original cultural meanings. Aly, in this sense, documents how cultural objects were snatched from their original geographic and cultural contexts and how colonists plundered villages in punitive expeditions.[44] These facts are being concealed in the exhibitions as they are currently constituted. Aly criticizes that the exhibited objects are dislocated from their historical and cultural contexts and that, still today, dialogue between the institutions in Berlin and the groups to whom the objects culturally belong is rare.

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41 Raghavan Iyer, "The Glass Curtain between Asia and Europe," in *The Glass Curtain between Asia and Europe,* edited by Raghavan Iyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 15–16.

42 Edward Ousselin, "Victor Hugo's European Utopia," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 34.1/2 (2005 – 2006): 33.

43 Humboldt Forum, "Mission Statement," n.d., web.

44 Götz Aly, Bénédicte Savoy, and Nana Oforiatta Ayim, "Decolonizing Worlds: Raub – Beute – Kunst," Live-Talk, *Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin*, 14 September 2021. See Götz Aly, *Das Prachtboot: Wie Deutsche die Kunstschätze der Südsee raubten* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2021).

Another voice highlighting and speaking out against neocolonialist dynamics in European museums belongs to Nana Oforiatta Ayim. The Ghanaian writer and art historian denounces the proclaimed universality of the British Museum, which presents the whole of Africa in one hall in the cellar, ignoring Africa's geographical variety and the incredible diversity of its cultures.[45] Criticisms like these might be powerful enough to set change in motion.

Literature, the arts and scholarship created a distorted image of the Global South that still influences Western views in the present day. Within this falsifying framework, non-Western women are persistently reduced to their bodies, which come to be sexualized.[46] Mushita names paintings such as Eugène Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger* (1834; generally translated as *Women of Algiers*) and Jacques Majorelle's *Modèle nu, allongé* (1931–1932; generally translated as *Nude Reclining Model*) and explains why they are distorting representations of their supposed subjects. She does this by pointing out logical inconsistencies such as not presenting children among the women in societies in which that would be normal or depriving women of their clothes without any obvious reason.[47] To change such patterns of representation, Western intellectuals must no longer hold the power to award or deny somebody their own episteme. The superior system of power, nourished by the intellectual's slow epistemic violence, makes the marginalized or subalterns speechless.[48] Likewise, the label "Third World Woman" still stands for a limit to knowledge.[49] We need to get rid of such prejudices, and of the "single story" in our minds, if we want to have a chance to overcome this untenable situation.[50]

In the process of addressing these dynamics, we need to be cautious about terminology. Epistemic violence starts where careless labelling begins. Such care, for example, needs to be taken in the language used for describing individuals of for ratifying "the way things are": from the unequal distribution of students in fields deemed compatible with "motherhood" as compared to those favouring careerism via gender gaps in election participation to the enduring arbitrary divisions within simple, everyday fields such as children's toys.[51]

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45 Ibid.
46 Lucy Mushita, "Femme ou femme africaine?" 200.
47 Ibid., 201.
48 Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 280–281.
49 Mark Sanders and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Live Theory* (London/New York: Continuum, 2006), 78.
50 Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story."
51 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 53–55.

VII
Conclusion

To my mind, feminism and equity are about everyday decisions all people constantly make, irrespective of their gender. It is influenced by the stories we tell, the actions we repeat, and the structures of representation and argument we are constantly reproducing. Apart from political subversion or systemic transgression, cultural means and our language are the devices with the highest impact on our way of living. I am calling for words that do no harm; I am calling for self-engagement and for cooperation extending beyond the boundaries of gender, ethnicity, nation, and culture; I am calling for the subversion of obsolete concepts and representations; I am calling for agency and articulation concerning the matter of women's rights.

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Marxist Perspectives

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Marxism and Contemporary Cultural Studies

Tushar Rishi

I
What This Paper is Not About

As an introduction, it must be highlighted what this paper is about. As the title implies, this essay deals with Marxism and contemporary cultural studies. But when one has to talk about something as theoretically vast as Marxism alongside a discipline as interdisciplinary or even anti-disciplinary as cultural studies, it is easier to highlight what the paper is not about than what it is about. Thus, this paper is not an overview or a summary of the various strands of the Left's understanding of society and culture, or a review of a particular Marxist text. Nor is it a properly worked out position regarding the role of Marxism in contemporary cultural studies. All that can be said by way of an introduction is that this paper has something to do with Marxism and contemporary cultural studies in India, though what it does with these problematics of Marxism, contemporary cultural studies, and India cannot be declared in advance.

II
"In Shouting Distance of Marxism": Stuart Hall and the Position of Cultural Studies

When one thinks of cultural studies, it is impossible not to think of Stuart Hall. The directions that cultural studies as a discipline explored in the second half of the twentieth century would have been unimaginable without the contributions of the "Birmingham School," which itself would be unimaginable without Stuart Hall. Hall was a pioneer of the field, and his works will continue to shape and re-shape it for years to come. I am talking about Hall because I will now be discussing an essay by him, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies" (1992), in which he talks about the "set of unstable formations" that is cultural studies.[1] In the essay, Hall casts a retrospective glance, covers a brief autobiographical history of working within the field, registers the theoretical legacies and ruptures, and opens up a

[1] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1999), 99.

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whole range of problems regarding the future of such a theoretical and political project.

At the beginning, charting his own entry into cultural studies from the New Left and outlining his influences and Marxist concerns, Hall writes: "These important, central questions are what one meant by working within shouting distance of Marxism, working on Marxism, working against Marxism, working with it, working to try to develop Marxism."[2] Why this struggle with Marxism, and what does it mean to be within "shouting distance of Marxism"? I am reminded of the hailing-in-the-street example used by Louis Althusser to demonstrate interpellation.[3] While Hall discusses the ruptures in the field of cultural studies later in the essay, it is worth noting that Marxist philosophy itself was a rupture in the history of Western philosophy, as captured in the often quoted and misquoted thesis by Karl Marx: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."[4] This commitment to material change is inscribed at the core of any Marxist project.

Interpretation and change, this seems to be the ultimate Marxist maxim. However, as numerous scholars have pointed out, when it comes to interpretations of culture, the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels leave much to be desired.[5] At the same time, while they did focus more on the analyses of political economy than of culture, one can still find a certain framework of society, to understand the cultural formations it produces, within their works. In this regard, one of the most popular quotes from *The German Ideology* (1867) is also the most telling: "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force."[6] Thus, for Marx and Engels, there is a correspondence between the mode of production and the prevailing ideas in culture and society:

> Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking.[7]

This is consistent with the Marxist position that, first, it is not consciousness which determines our social conditions, but the social conditions that determine our consciousness, and, second, the base-superstructure framework of Marxism where the

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2 Ibid., 100.

3 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 174.

4 Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2005, n.p., web.

5 See Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci," in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, edited by Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1979), 168–204. Mouffe begins her argument by stating that "the theory of ideology was for a long time one of the most neglected areas of the Marxist analysis of society" (168).

6 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 21.

7 Ibid., 9.

nature of the economic base, understood as the real material force in the society, determines the nature of the super-structural elements. It is this deterministic aspect of the base-superstructure framework that cultural studies has had to wrestle with from its early days. How do we understand culture in a capitalist society? While different schools of thought ascribe varying degrees of deterministic power to both the economic base and the superstructure, it is the post-Marxist position that problematizes it in perhaps the most radical manner.

III
The Challenge of Post-Marxism

For the post-Marxists, the viability of the Marxist base-superstructure model in understanding hegemony and the (ab)uses of culture in society has to be re-examined in the context of new theoretical and political developments occurring in the last fifty years. As new waves of social movements swept across Europe and America and groups mobilized against discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality and other identity markers, the Western Left found itself at a crossroads: To what extent does the economic base influence the superstructure? And to what extent can the superstructure help in maintaining – or changing – the existing mode of production? Political theorists Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau explore this theoretical crisis:

> What is now in crisis is a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class, upon the role of Revolution, with a capital "r," as the founding moment in the transition from one type of society to another, and upon the illusory prospect of a perfectly unitary and homogeneous collective will that render pointless the moment of politics. The plural and multifarious character of contemporary social struggles has finally dissolved the last foundation for that political imaginary […]. Thus, the very wealth and plurality of contemporary social struggles has given rise to a theoretical crisis.[8]

While the classical Marxist approach, following from the base-superstructure model, has privileged class as the determining factor in its critique of ideology and in exposing the hegemony of the ruling class, post-Marxism attempts to question this position, claiming that such a privileging ignores other forms of oppression that precede and exceed the capitalist mode of production. What is instead argued for is a more pluralistic approach to the socialist project; an attempt to envision a movement that incorporates the diverse sites of struggle that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century without privileging any of them as *the* main struggle. Class contradiction, from this vantage point, is seen as just one contradiction among many. The base-superstructure model is thus brought under rigorous re-examina-

[8] Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy," in *Post-Marxism: A Reader*, edited by Stuart Sim (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 15.

tion, for the dethroning of class as the determining factor, in the last instance, means that the entire structure of society as envisioned by classical Marxists collapses.

For the post-Marxists, this collapse is actually productive. Laclau and Mouffe build on Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony, Michel Foucault's conceptions of power and discourse, and Jacques Derrida's notion of deferral, among other elements, to posit their vision of "radical and plural democracy."[9] Their aim is to put Marxism in a dialogue with these theories, which do not necessarily follow dialectical materialism or determinism. However, as some classical Marxists have argued, such a formulation leaves a lot to the imagination when it comes to "real" political situations of building alliances, for social groups are constituted not just of difference(s), but also of contradictions and antagonisms. Additionally, such a project, which welcomes contingency of social movements and does not prioritize any one group over the other, can also be a source of great anxiety, for it also means that the notion of an "end of history" is dispensed with, since new groups will always be competing for hegemony and power. This too is in disagreement with the classical Marxist teleological framework.

IV
Real-Life Process: Marx, Hall, and Indian Politics

Returning to Marx: "We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises."[10] Perhaps it is this strong (and repeatedly emphasized) materialist and empiricist bent that might get lost within a theoretical project that aims to bring together diverse and sometimes contradictory positions like postmodernism or poststructuralism in a conversation with the socialist project. This is not to take a dogmatic position. Instead, what can be more fruitful is to examine the rise of the "post-" positions with respect to their contemporary modes of economic production and the global division of labour and production, as well as consumption of not just material goods, but intellectual goods too: something akin to the kind of exploration of metropolitan academic trends undertaken by the Marxist thinker Aijaz Ahmad in his book *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures* (1992).

Marx located the origins of "the phantoms formed in the human brain" in the real, material world of humans, and put the emphasis not just on interpreting but also on changing the world.[11] Within such a framework, any discourse must always have a political aim. This would be a good opportunity to return to Hall's essay, in

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[9] Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, "Radical Democracy: Alternative for a New Left," in *Post-Marxism: A Reader*, edited by Stuart Sim (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 25.

[10] Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology,* 8.

[11] Ibid., 11.

which he talks about the responsibility of intellectuals and "the conditions and problems of developing intellectual and theoretical work as a political practice."[12] What would be the aim of such a political practice? Under classical Marxism, this would have been the socialist project, ultimately leading to communism. But as mentioned before, the second half of the twentieth century saw the expansion of the political sphere, in the sense that oppressed identities not necessarily based on class fought for rights and recognition, and these political movements obviously made interventions in the theoretical realm, reorganizing, in Hall's words, "the field in quite concrete ways."[13] In India too one can observe the necessary interventions in cultural studies (and other projects) made by feminism, Dalit studies, queer studies, and disability studies, to name only a few, all inextricably linked to the world outside academia. These are ongoing debates in both academia and national politics, and the proponents of these fields are in a constant tussle with certain strands of Marxism.

In India, as a specific kind of fascism gains ground, syncretic cultures of the subcontinent shaped over hundreds of years are at great risk of homogenization, and marginalized identities are under grave threat of persecution. In December 2021, calls for the genocide of Muslims were made by Hindu religious groups with close affiliation to the ruling political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).[14] Attacks on Christians have also increased. How has Indian popular culture – its institutions, its audience, its participants, and its celebrities – responded? With unsurprising silence. The discourse has shifted to the Right to such an extent that we have now turned into a culture that can easily accommodate open calls for genocide.

What is the role of cultural studies in such a cultural climate, and what is the role of Marxism in such a form of cultural studies? Are we to look at culture in a purely deterministic way, and if not, how much autonomy can be accorded to forms and practices of cultural expressions? It is true that there are apparatuses that work to maintain the status quo without coercion, and that much of the culture industry propagates ideas and values that reaffirm the status quo of our contemporary world order. It is also true that there are resistant subcultures outside the domain of the centres of cultural production, though always at risk of being appropriated by the culture industry (for example, rap music from the slums of Mumbai is always at risk of ending up in sneaker ads). How much potentiality for progress can be ascribed then to cultural formations in an economy that is ready to make profit by selling the very cultural expressions that criticize it? I am afraid I have no clear answer.

Another noteworthy point in Hall's essay is his comment on cultural studies in the United States with regard to the materiality of intellectual production itself. He recalls the ease of professionalization and institutionalization of the project in US-

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12 Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," 103.

13 Ibid.

14 "Hindutva Leaders at Haridwar Event Call for Muslim Genocide." *The Wire,* 22 December 2021, web.

American academia, and the danger this poses.[15] India too is at a critical moment (although different from the North American scenario that Hall picks up) when it comes to the status of academic discourse. The defunding of public institutions, the fee hikes, and the setting up of private higher education institutions mostly by corporate giants (as many of these institutions were established in the wake of implementation of reservation policies for backward castes in public universities to perhaps create a parallel space for upper-class, upper-caste students) are effectively going to kill any political impetus within the academic space. The socio-economic issues of student debt, limited job opportunities with humanities degrees, and other plights of the modern Indian student experience will result in the gradual exclusion of marginalized identities from universities, which have never been all that inclusive to begin with.[16]

This is bound to result in an academically vibrant, but politically dormant university space. One can see it happening already, especially in private institutions providing liberal arts education, where student unions are either absent or reduced to glorified event management teams. Additionally, it is no secret that the public universities, too, have been systematically hollowed out, with some top positions now being occupied by members and supporters of the ruling regime.[17] On top of all this, in 2021, in the middle of a global pandemic, the pro-privatization government introduced (and hurriedly implemented) the new National Education Policy (NEP), which has been termed exclusionary and reactionary and has been resisted by teacher and student bodies across the country.[18] These are material, real-world problems that affect any theoretical project. Cultural studies, as one of these projects, can be set up quite easily and receive heavy funding in such private or defunded public institutions, but will only be studied and practiced by those who can afford it. Such a cultural studies, as a space for supposed elites only, will hardly have any stakes in the real world.

In this respect, I feel that the "irresolvable but permanent tension" that Hall talks about might actually be facing severe onslaught from the current pro-privatization regime and the dominant culture of utilitarian education (education that is useful to create a cheap labour pool for global capital) which it endorses. In this context, working in a cultural studies that locates itself "within shouting distance of

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[15] It is worth noting that Hall's essay was originally prepared as remarks for the international conference "Cultural Studies Now and in the Future" held at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1990. The conference proceedings were then published in 1992 as the nearly 800-page volume *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler. The conference's aim of promoting cultural studies in the US adds a crucial self-reflexive dimension to Hall's piece in his critique of precisely the professionalization and institutionalization he was expected to endorse.

[16] Abhishek Hari, "Casteism Is Rampant in Higher Education Institutions, but Is 'Wilfully Neglected': Study," *The Wire*, 8 October 2021, web.

[17] Ajoy Ashirwad Mahaprashasta, "On Twitter, New JNU VC Has Supported Genocide Calls, Attacked Students, Farmers." *The Wire*, 7 February 2022, web.

[18] Prabhat Patnaik, "NEP: India Takes a Great Leap Backwards," *Newsclick*, 8 August 2020, web.

Marxism," or within shouting distance of any theory that is interested in praxis, might become increasingly difficult.

Hall pointed out the open-endedness of cultural studies: something I find particularly relevant for an Indian cultural studies project. In a country like India, such a project *must* be open-ended if it is really interested in negotiating the diversity and complexity that India has to offer. Yet, as Hall points out, it cannot be simply pluralist for its own sake; it has to consider what is at stake in the real world.

V
Final Thoughts

To conclude, I began with Hall, returned to Marx, jumped to post-Marxism, returned to Marx, then to Hall again – all this traveling only in an attempt to understand what is happening here in India. I am not sure if I am better off now than when I began. Marxism and its "classical" positions, its totalizing and somewhat eschatological tendencies, do feel problematic when we study something as "ordinary" as culture, which resists any kind of homogenization and totalization and frequently ends up taking unexpected forms. Yet I believe that the materialist understanding of society and the political project of philosophy inscribed in the writings of Marx, though not to be imported universally in a dogmatic manner, still provide, in their repeated emphasis on human agency and activity, a productive base for cultural analysis. This is important especially in the Indian context, where the means of cultural production and consumption cannot be thought of without the lived realities shaped by categories of caste, religion, gender, etc. Even the supposedly democratizing effects of the internet on cultural production and consumption can be thought only in terms of pre-existing economic and cultural capital of the involved groups. It is here, in the repeated surfacing of the need for a materialist understanding of culture, that I feel one needs to be within shouting distance of Marxism, no matter in which direction one wishes to venture.

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A New International

Adrian Döring

How can cultural studies overcome international boundaries when it is faced with a world that is globalized in its cultural exchanges and hegemonial relationships, yet also fragmented when it comes to its his-stories and her-stories, to its societal structures and economic circumstances? During many discussions on the topic with my fellow students, questions of transnational cooperation, of globalized versus regional cultures, and of different histories and cultural memories quickly came into focus.

In this essay, I want to present a reading of culture which is modelled as a dialogue between top-down and bottom-up processes. This reading presupposes that disruptive political practices can emerge from the popular cultures of disfranchised groups even in the post-imperialist and late-capitalist twenty-first century. Cultural studies can, therefore, help to articulate hope in the face of oppressive and overwhelming hegemonial forces.[1]

However, I do not think that scholars can simply sit back and watch disfranchised groups produce their way out of the impossible conundrum of exploitation, alienation, and appropriation all by themselves. But, I believe that subversive production is still possible in the current global situation – and that it is our responsibility to find and support these dynamics within the vast wastelands of the culture industry.

I
Relocating Subjectivity

While culture is usually considered to be a practice of the people, it is difficult to deny that articulations of subversion have been commodified to a degree that they are now losing most of their disruptive potential between post-irony, "selling-out," the repackaging old ideas, and a lack of utopian imagination.

When, for example, a corporation (not acting out of malice but simply according to the logic dictated to them by the economic framework) uses the rhetorics of

[1] My argument is mostly built around Chantal Mouffe's interpretation of Gramsci as outlined in "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci," in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, edited by Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1979), 168–204. The idea of elevating "low-brow" culture as a way to subvert hegemonial forces is also informed by Raymond Williams's foundational musings in "Culture is Ordinary," in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 10–24.

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historical struggles for liberation to sell products produced by taking advantage of international networks of racially coded oppression, there is no anti-racist message in consuming your fair-trade morning coffee. Only a theatre of signs remains. If there is a possible future to be discovered in mass culture, it is hiding better by the year. Any meaningful progress seems to be replaced by its own representation.[2]

In the face of such forces, cultural studies can act as an intellectual counter-balance by actively injecting emancipatory critical discourses into the public conversation. However, in order to rejuvenate the emancipatory practice of resistance against the forces of globalized late-capitalist culture we probably need to rethink the relationship between their dominant structures and Western scholarship. How can we reorient our scholarship in terms of transnational alliances? Where is the connection between the academic and the political? Can we postulate a relationship of becoming, in which academia may, one day, turn into a decisive political force? Or are analysis and activism only horizontally conjoined like an uneasy chimera?

Such considerations boil down to a set of answerable questions: (i) Who are we as practitioners of cultural studies, and what is the object of our studies? (ii) How should we approach the divide between the structures in which we live and work and the structures we write about?

Due to the long tradition of academia's entanglements with economic, social, and racial power structures, cultural studies must face the question whether their fundamental assumptions are still productive tools to think emancipation in the wake of capitalism's commodification of its own disruption and its appropriation of traditional modes of resistance. Seriously revisiting and reinvestigating the old idea of subject-object relations might be a way of understanding the concealed dynamics of subaltern resistance. Rather than as a multitude of isolated objects, we must imagine culture as the product of various subject-object relationships. Such relationships necessarily imply a hierarchy. However, subject and object are not only in a hierarchical relationship; they are also existentially co-dependent. At the same time, it appears impossible to conceive of a relationship whose constituents are not *acting upon each other*. In other words: Objects are always subjects in their own right, and vice versa. This contradiction leads to a deeply embedded struggle at the very core of subject-object relationships.

We can find traces of this struggle all over the history of culture and cultural studies, but its basic structure remains the same: It is always about whether culture (subject) acts upon society (object), or whether society (subject) acts upon culture (object). Both relationships suggest very different potential intervention points for activist scholarship. The first assumption implies that a change of culture must come

[2] These dynamics are captured by slogans such as "greenwashing," "pinkwashing," or "wokewashing." Prominent examples include the critique of Amazon by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) for supposedly standing in solidarity with Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements, while simultaneously profiting from racist face recognition or the US-American National Football League's airing anti-racist commercials after mistreating Colin Kaepernick. On these issues, see "Cool Tweet: Will You Commit to Stop Selling Face Recognition Surveillance Technology That Supercharges Police Abuse?" *ACLU* on *Twitter*, 31 May 2020, web; "Inspire Change | Super Bowl LV Commercial," *NFL* on *YouTube*, 7 February 2021, web.

downwards from a position of power – whether intellectually, for example in the form of academic intervention, or by capitalist brute-forcing, or by the sometimes violent imposition of ideology. The second assumption implies a bottom-up-process, levelling the playing field and putting academia in a supportive, rather than in a prescriptive position.

A method to relocate the position of cultural studies within cultural subject/object-relations is to analyse them with the help of key texts from cultural studies. In the next section, I will read Adorno's culture industry thesis in dialogue with Roland Barthes's concept of mythology while focusing on the question of political agency. From the results, I will derive a set of co-ordinates to locate cultural studies in relation to cultural production and chart a possible route bridging the divide between scholarship and political practice in an attempt to disentangle cultural studies from the structural boundaries of national power structures.

II
Rediscovering Subversiveness

Adorno's and Horkheimer's idea of the culture industry reaffirms a top-down process in which cultural production, controlled by a small group of powerful actants, is acting upon society. It might not be a perfectly fitting description for the flattened cultural terrain of the twenty-first century, but it serves as a productive starting point to reframe "high" and "low" culture as "top-down" and "bottom-up" processes. Adorno wrote in 1963:

> [The culture industry] refers to the standardization of the thing itself – such as that of the Western, familiar to every movie-goer – and to the rationalization of distribution techniques, but not strictly to the production process. […] It is industrial more in a sociological sense, in the incorporation of industrial forms of organization even where nothing is manufactured – as in the rationalization of office work – rather than in the sense of anything […] produced by technological rationality.[3]

While a film can be created by a diverse group of workers and artists, by "supposedly great personalities," as Adorno puts it, the product is nevertheless "standardized." Due to the division of labour and the structure of Western mass-cultural production, the artist's individuality can be used by those "who control [the culture industry]" to "reinforce ideology," in so far as it is possible to maintain the illusion that "the completely reified and mediated is a sanctuary from immediacy and life." The result is a mode of production that is "industrial […] in a sociological sense."[4] This means, that, even if the work is structurally not part of a material cycle of resource exploitation and physical production ("nothing is manufactured"), the product – in this case culture – is still governed and flattened by the ideological

[3] Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," *New German Critique* 6 (1975): 14.
[4] Ibid.

hegemony of "those in power." Mass culture as a point of resistance becomes impossible; modernity has succeeded in ingesting almost all facets of everyday life.

This argument is, however, a product of a specific reading. It places the abundance of agency on the industrialized production of culture. New points for intervention emerge when we reframe mass culture as something that can be subjected to the influence of subversive ideological structures. But we must do this in a way that is materially solid enough to become a relevant subject for our studies, politically potent enough to be used for activist practice, and transnational enough to warrant an integration into our reframed practice of cultural studies.

Compared to Adorno's and Horkheimer's writings, Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) offers us a far less rigid and thus a useful framework when talking about cultural production as a product of active reception. Due to Barthes's quasi-linguistic method of deconstructing culture down to its semantic bones, his method can also be used empirically.

In *Mythologies*, "The Face of Garbo" is among the most interesting essays to put into conversation with the culture industry thesis. Barthes looks at a similar object (the movies), only through slightly different lenses. He is not thinking about the sociologically industrial production of cultural imaginations. Refusing to frame the "Face of Garbo" as a bourgeois production, he utilizes images of antiquity and aristocracy by alluding to figures of the essential and metaphors derived from older cultural tropes:

> Garbo's face represents this fragile moment when the cinema is about to draw an existential from an essential beauty, when the archetype leans towards the fascination of mortal faces, when the clarity of the flesh as essence yields its place to a lyricism of Woman.[5]

One can read this as anything from poetic to tasteless and even downright creepy, but the passage relates in interesting ways to the question of cultural production when put into conversation with Adorno.[6]

In "Culture Industry Reconsidered," Adorno postulates the idea of a culture that is only superficially related to history. Barthes, on the other hand, conceptualizes "femininity" (typologized as "fragile" and "lyrical") and "beauty" (linking it to the fragility/woman-complex in the tradition of William Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe) as essences which are deeply rooted within culture. Sure, the archetypical "woman" would not look like Greta Garbo (or Ophelia, or Annabel Lee) in many regions of the globe, but the flexibility of the Barthesian framework allows for extended readings. Compared to Adorno, who places cultural agency on a small group of people as opposed to "the masses," Barthes places the agency of reading "the

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[5] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 57.

[6] This paper is not intended to discuss Roland Barthes's relationship with women. But I still feel like I should interject here, stating that any description of a woman that is at the same time objectifying (both as a poem and as a fleshy crop), alluding to mortality and death at several places (fragile, mortal, flesh), and seemingly hopelessly enamored, all within fewer than fifty words, should be read from a healthy distance.

essential" in Garbo's face into the hands of the people who watch her on the big screen. By doing so, he strengthens the power of cultural memory over the producer's material capital.

Despite these differences, however, I cannot help but feel that "The Face of Garbo" and "Culture Industry Reconsidered" embody two sides of the same coin. Readings of culture from top-down and bottom-up must coexist to acknowledge the realities of production and the power of the recipient alike. Cultural studies must emancipate itself from adversarial thinking: Instead of pitting Barthes against Adorno, they must think Adorno and Barthes in conversation. Culture acts upon society (since Adorno's industrial forces are still at play), *and* society acts upon culture at the moments of reception and remembering. Society can use memories and mythologies more deeply embedded into culture than industrialized production could ever hope to be; it reaffirms its status as an actant by demanding that producers of culture to adhere to their own prepackaged promises.

III
Reframing Cultural Studies

We can utilize this reframing of subject-object-relations even further to rethink cultural dynamics beyond the subversion of mass-culture within the Western framework of Barthes. The global hierarchies are still "top" versus "bottom" and "industry" versus "mythology," but the questions of "What is top?" and "What is bottom?" become pertinent facing a structure that is still crafted by twentieth century-style cultural cannibalism. What is the late-capitalist empire, if not – sufficiently deconstructed – whatever is placed by cultural studies on the supposedly "top" end of the scale? If we use such a process without acknowledging the possibility of bottom-up subversion, ignoring the Barthesian side of the coin, we risk overlooking bottom-up processes that have reshaped the international cultural landscape.

A valuation of "top" and "bottom" has traditionally served as a gatekeeping process by which certain types of culture have been, voluntarily or not, kept out of the academic discourse. While Western lowbrow and pulp cultures and their potentials of subversion have found their way into the Western cultural canon within the twentieth century, subaltern cultural practices are still pushed to the fringes of public consciousness simply due to their positioning within globalized power structures.[7] Rediscovering the traces of resistance (i.e., the subjectivity of the subjected/objectivized subject, as it were) within globalized cultural structures is an important and urgent task for twenty-first century scholarship.

Of course, the purely Barthesian approach has its limits. While a strengthening of the subaltern mythological perspective is useful, there is still the matter of

[7] This is, after all, what subaltern studies argued against. For an important overview of these discussions, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999).

economic materiality and, thus, of the limits of subversion. The infrastructures which are used for active readings, conversations, and reception are inherently linked to the systems that need to be disrupted. Meta and Twitter are participants in a transnational system of data-commodification and overreaching private ownership. English is the *lingua franca* of international cultural exchange. The material cost of cultural production, the high level of competition in an international network, and a slant towards national bubbles with their own social networks (for instance, Weibo in China or vKontakte/VK.ru in Russia) further this divide. And, as usual, the lines of exclusion often intersect with the still lingering borders of colonialism. When was the last time some truly disruptive cultural production from the Global South went viral on social media in the Global North? Hierarchy is also a product of opportunity. Furthermore, often enough, the culture industry imposes its structures so thoroughly that the result can read like a bottom-up process without being one. This can occur by co-opting "subaltern" cultural resources and memories, while simultaneously displacing their creators from the only spaces where they could possibly be heard.[8]

It is an established gesture within our academic field to note the need for including and amplifying marginalized voices. But it is also important to be aware of existing structures of power from social-media platforms to trans-national late-capitalist and postcolonial structures. In the past, even academia has used its hegemonial force to retell and reframe stories according to its own interest.[9] While this has arguably become much better since the late twentieth century, it illustrates the importance of cultural studies' positioning in relation to cultural structures.

Yet, despite being aware of the limits of bottom-up processes, we should also always remember that the dynamics of reappropriation and capitalist commodification are not the end of everything we hold dear in cultural production. Our culture is indeed subject to constant attempts of top-down industrial production and appropriation, but cultural reception is still a field which is at least partially shaped by the individual subject. Our agency is not absolute, but agential power has not been eliminated altogether. Being aware of this encouraging fact is of the utmost importance. Only a culture that acknowledges the possibility for change can harness its potential.

This depends on reacknowledging the idea of different levels of culture; levels that are not separated by notions of "high" versus "low," or of "canon" versus "mass culture," but rather through awareness of opportunity, material means, and hegemonial interests within a transnational framework. Such an acknowledgement can

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8 Retellings of Native-American histories are a common strategy in parts of the Black Metal scene. White American actors pose as Native Americans to insinuate a "deeper connection to nature" and the image of the "noble savage." An especially problematic example is Finian "Appalachian Wolf" Patraic, of the supposedly "Native" Canadian project "Ifernach," which at some point also included members of the right-wing nationalist band "Brume d'Autonome." See "Ifernach" profile on *Metal Archives*, 20 September 2022, web.

9 This problem has been illustrated by Edward W. Said in *Orientalism* (1978). As he influentially argues, European scholars created an entire pseudo-scientific subject to construct a romantic narrative of the supposed "Orient." See *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 1–28.

be theoretically grounded by critical theory. Every subversive trace that a subaltern agent can leave within culture is inflected by the structural reality in which it was created. Furthermore, a recipient can demand the fulfilment of a promise only in so far as the promise was articulated. Consequently, subject-object-relations in cultural production are multidirectional: Culture acts on society, which acts on culture in an infinite struggle for hegemony.

On the other hand, a strengthening of the recipient's agency against dominant power structures implies the scholar's agency (and therefore their responsibility) as well. We must not shy away from acknowledging and acting against our own entanglements with capitalist, political, and social structures by forming new alliances, strengthening international partnerships, and supporting transnational efforts by demanding the further financing of infrastructure for continuous exchange beyond national and political borders. In our everyday academic practice, we must criticize the dominant frameworks and structures of cultural production – for example by using Adorno's framework – but also by integrating a reading of bottom-up processes, using methods such as Barthes's mythologies to uncover and emphasise the traces of subaltern subversive practices.

A fundamental academic restructuring and rethinking can only work on an international basis. Both aspects of the New International – demanding the financing of international frameworks and using a synthesis of critical and emancipatory readings – only work in an international alliance based on equal footing, continuous exchange, and productive rereadings of cultural studies' touchstone texts. But, most importantly, we must be aware of our own agency. Change can only happen when one acknowledges the ability for change, for our theoretical frameworks shape our realities – and in which way, that is up to us.

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From Theory to Practice

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Food Cultures: Dynamics of Caste, Gender, Religion, and Class in India

Saundarya

I
The Cultural Meaning of Foods in India: A Short Introduction

"Culture is ordinary: that is where we must start."[1] As Raymond Williams famously writes, culture is not limited to the assigned meanings and values in the terrain of art, literature, or language. It is present everywhere, it is the material through which ideology is exercised, it is a factor which determines and limits the condition of things. In *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes explores how the French bourgeoisie established itself as the major articulating force through quotidian cultural objects and practices such as toys, magazines, novels, and photographs, amongst many others.[2] Similarly, I would like to pick one of these daily objects, food, and attempt to trace the various ideological impositions through its politics and culture in the Indian context, which is heavily guided by "upper"-caste Hindus. Since my paper is concerned with everyday practices, I will be citing examples from everyday life. However, including all the ways in which culture is entangled with food, as everyday object and practice, goes far beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, I have kept my focus on the dynamics of gender, religion, class, and caste – especially on the ways class is tied to caste.

Food is one of the fundamental elements through which cultural power is exercised. It is what Williams witnessed in the teashop: a visible sign of the "cultivated people" who would not miss any chance to show that they alone possess the nation's culture. Even though Williams suggests simply ignoring them in order to build a new frame of reference, this is not necessarily an effective strategy in practice, since these "cultivated people" are still often the main guiding forces behind the conventional notion of culture. This problematic reality can also be extended to the context of food practices.[3] It is especially true in India, where certain food practices are looked down upon because they do not fit into the conventional judgement of "taste." Taste, according to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, is determined by the

[1] Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 11.
[2] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).
[3] Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," 12.

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social and cultural position from which it emerges.[4] No judgement of taste can ever be innocent; everything is guided by the system of power relations.

In *Food as a Metaphor for Cultural Hierarchies* (2009), Indian political scientist Gopal Guru – a pioneer of new dimensions in Dalit discourse – observes how it is the sweetness and freshness of cooked food that serve as major criteria for deciding questions of taste in Indian culture.[5] In this working paper, Guru defines taste with respect to the contradictory relationship between the tongue and the skin. According to him, it is mainly the tongue that plays an important role in classifying food. While spicy food such as chili produce a noticeable impact when rubbed on skin and therefore have a haptic aspect, the taste of any sweet dish is determined by the tongue alone, as sweetness is a rather simple and one-dimensional sensation. The tongue thus acquires the sole legislative power when it comes to sweetness. For the many people in India whose diet is dominated by spicy dishes such as chilies, sweetness is a taste-deciding factor and a luxury. Since food items containing sweet flavours are expensive and considered to be delicacies within the country, they become what Guru calls "a hegemonic presence in the cultural practices of the poor."[6] As for the freshness, it is obvious that leftover or stale food would never be considered as being of a superior taste compared to a freshly cooked meal with equally fresh ingredients. *Joothan* (leftover or rotten food) and the meat of dead cattle have been prescribed as staple foods to the "untouchables," now referred to through the category "Dalit," which literally means "broken" and is seen in a revolutionary sense, as it denotes the "material social experience" of marginalization, by the deep-rooted culture, system, and stratification of caste.[7] Such foods cannot be considered items of good taste. Therefore, the freshness of cooked food and its sweet flavours serve as the main standards for Guru's definition of taste.

The literal meaning of the Hindi word *joothan*, as Arun Prabha Mukherjee explains, is food left on a plate that is to be thrown in the garbage. But such food would be characterized as *joothan* only if someone else were to eat it. This particular term has connotations of purity and pollution attached to it, as the root word *jootha* literally means "polluted."[8] At the same time, sweetness implies a sense of social superiority, simply because it is such a strong and supposedly positive factor in determining the taste of any food items that contain it. A majority of the

4 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), 16.

5 Gopal Guru, *Food as a Metaphor for Cultural Hierarchies* (Philadelphia: CASI Working Paper Series, 2009), 8.

6 Ibid., 10.

7 Gopal Guru, "Understanding the Category 'Dalit,'" in *Atrophy in Dalit Politics*, edited by Gopal Guru (Mumbai: Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, 2005), 71. The term "Dalit" was popularized by the Dalit Panther Movement. Inspired by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the Black Panther Party in the USA, the Dalit Panthers were formed in 1972. They emerged from a Dalit literary movement led by the poets and writers Namedo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, J. V. Pawar, and Arun Kamble, who emphasized the revolutionary struggles of Dalits against oppression and represented the Dalit experience through a new perspective.

8 Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), xxxix.

consumers of sweet products are comprised of the top of the so-called "twice-born" in India: the Brahmins. Sweet flavours, freshly cooked food, and other kinds of predominantly vegetarian food automatically generate a sense of an especially "civilized identity," as they are all culturally and socially linked to the upper castes. The economic factor also comes into play here, as sweet products are generally expensive. The association of a supposed sense of "civilized identity" to certain food practices forces a notion of "savage identity" onto the people and community who do not or cannot follow such eating habits due to various cultural, social, or economic factors. For example, in the Indian state Maharashtra *sreekhand* (a dessert made with yogurt) serves as an object of humiliation as it looks like *pithala* (a curry recipe made of gram flour).[9] It becomes a constant source of humiliating experiences for those who cannot tell the difference between the two, as they have never had the chance of tasting due to their socio-economic and cultural conditions, and are now being punished for this perceived lack of civility. The resulting societal and cultural stratification on the basis of food consumption, and the sense of superiority that is commonly attached to particular eating practices, is internalized by its victims to such a degree that it starts working as a nearly automatic mechanism of humiliation for those who are constantly looked down upon for their eating preferences and for those who do not have access to sweet and fresh food. Even when eating in private, the shame is ever-present. The consumption of sweet food is also tied to gender-based discrimination, as I will show later.

II
The Oppressive Force of Food Norms

In India, with its majoritarian politics in which the aspects of caste, religion, gender, and class dictate almost everything, "upper"-caste Hindus have been, and still are, the dictating force behind all standardized food practices. As Barthes points out, there is "a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history."[10] This is also the case with food. The alleged naturalness with which the feeling of repulsion is generated in our minds towards certain food practices is actually created and determined by a long history of oppression and humiliation due to a critical lack of social, economic, and cultural capital within the oppressed groups in Indian society.

The caste names of those at the bottom of this hierarchy have always been associated with the food they consume. Guru points out that the genealogy of the Mahar (a caste in the Dalit community) has been traced to the meat of dead cattle. This association of cultural and caste identity with the consumption of dead cattle is a way of invoking condescension and disgust within the majority. Shailaja Paik, in her

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9 Guru, *Food as a Metaphor for Cultural Hierarchies*, 15.
10 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 10.

insightful work, elucidates the different etymologies of the term *Mahar*. She notes that the word has been associated with *mritaharin* (which translates as "dragging away of the dead") as well as *maha-ahari* ("great eaters").[11] However, the leading anti-caste thinker and social reformer Jotirao Phule instead associated the word *Mahar* with *Maha-ari* ("the great enemy") in his seminal 1873 work *Gulamgiri* (translated as *Slavery*). This etymology can be read in two ways, as Paik writes: "[E]ither upper castes used the term in a hostile way to describe their 'great foe,' which then raises the question of why certain castes saw the Mahar as their great enemy; or the Mahar might have described themselves thus because of their pride in the bravery with which they had fought Aryan invaders."[12]

Led by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, who belonged to the Mahar caste himself, the food pattern of *Mahars* underwent a radical shift in the twentieth century, moving away from the meat of dead cattle and towards meat acquired through hunting and slaughtering.[13] But even after giving up eating the meat of dead cattle, *Mahar* cultural identity still remains attached to it. The notion of the "savage identity" of Dalits has also been propagated by the dominant castes through their food habits. One such example is that of the Musahari or the Musahar caste in the regions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They have been given the name *Musahari,* meaning "rat eaters." The name conjures up disgust in the minds of the wider Indian public, as rats are seen as insanitary creatures and are associated with diseases and dirty environments, without the same public ever considering the economic and social deprivation that this group faces. Such deep-seated food stereotypes bring an additional stigma to a burdened caste that is mostly comprised of landless agricultural labourers, who still have to resort to hunting and eating rats for their survival.

Most dishes of the Dalit cuisine emerged in the economics of survival by using whatever resources were available. They are practical, not intentional in nature; this was never a matter of choice. Only economic hardship, sanctioned by the social structure of the country, allowed the discarded parts of the expensive meat – like blood, offal, or intestines – to become part of the Dalit platter in the first place.[14] Most of the time, it was simply only the "joothan" that the Dalits had access to in terms of available food. As the Dalit author Omprakash Valmiki writes: "After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan. And yet no one had any grudges. Or shame. Or repentance."[15] And still, their simple taking of what is available to them has led to food stigma and has become a constant source of humiliation. This is especially ironic considering that most basic food products in India were and still are being produced by the "untouchables" themselves; and yet they are the ones who are being denied access to the better parts of the product.

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[11] Shailaja Paik, "Mahar–Dalit–Buddhist: The History and Politics of Naming in Maharashtra," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 45.2 (2011): 221.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Guru describes the shift as follows: "from *Murdada* (meat abstracted from dead cattle) through *Hatfatka* (meat acquired through hunting) to *Toliv* (the meat of a slaughtered animal)" (*Food as a Metaphor for Cultural Hierarchies*, 13).

[14] Ashwaq Masoodi, "A Story of Culinary Apartheid," *Livemint*, 16 September 2016, web.

[15] Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life,* 11.

III
Repression and Resistance

Lately, the cultural objects that have been used for subordination for so long are slowly turning into tools of resistance. This can be associated with Dick Hebdige's theory of subcultures, according to which the objects of everyday life, objects which are supposed to carry certain conventional meanings, are endowed with oppositional and subversive meanings.[16] Such an act of subversion can be seen in the reclaiming of Dalit food and in the changing cultural context of beef eating. Guru mentions that the homogenous notion of *Thali* – literally "plate" or "platter," but often designating a multi-course Indian meal defined in terms of its elaborate nature and with sweetness as the dominant association – has been rejected by the Dalits. They use non-vegetarian food as an important source of cultural resistance to counter the nationalist construction of this *Thali*. To do this, Dalits now actively try to reconstruct the notion of downgraded and filthy food.[17] In the cultural taste of the Dalits, goat meat (which is prevalent in most of the Brahmin households) is considered inferior to beef. There are various contestations around this resistance. On the one hand, we find Guru highlighting an important point about the Dalit self that resists by enjoying the freedom to choose and eat any food, which is mainly because their food summons their difficult past into their cultural present. On the other hand, a recent article in *Dalit Camera*, a website which documents life in India from the perspective of Dalits, Bahujans, and Adivasis, talks about how "dalit food becomes a metaphor for the liberation of dalit women, and not of humiliation."[18] In this article, Tarjanee Parmar narrates her great-grandmother's experience of buying cheap leftover meat (offal and remains of the meat that the upper castes would throw away, citing it as "dirty") after the daily wage work and all by herself from the male-dominated area of the butcher's shop, where women were not allowed. This act of disrupting the centre, just to carve out a space near it, by the doubly marginalized is seen as an act of resistance and power on the part of Parmar's grandmother and her community.

It seems important to take into account the international perception of Indian food culture as homogenous. For this purpose, I want to draw attention to a well-known international television show: more specifically to season 11, episode 18 of *MasterChef Australia*, in which a team of cooks had to prepare Indian street food. In this episode, a contestant picked up some beef, to which a teammate immediately responded: "We cannot have beef in the Indian cuisine. Absolutely not. We will be

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16 See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1997), 18.

17 Guru, *Food as a Metaphor for Cultural Hierarchies*, 15.

18 Tarjanee Parmar, "Between Love, Longing and Resistance: Dalit Food and Women's Agency," *Dalit Camera, 5* November 2020, web.

insulting them."[19] Along these lines, rules that are not at all held universally among all Indians, but only propagated by oppressive elites, come to be seen as universal facts about the nation and its culture. This incident shows how the global notion of Indian food has been homogenized, guided, and dominated almost exclusively by the food on the upper-caste Hindu platter.

In India, vegetarianism is strongly charged with a visceral feeling of disgust expressed towards the smell and taste of non-vegetarian food. In a recent podcast by *The Swaddle*, titled "Is Eating Meat Ethical?" (2021), various issues around the culture, politics, and ethics of food habits popped up, especially with reference to vegetarianism and non-vegetarianism.[20] As was mentioned in the podcast, there are separate microwaves for vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods in the cooking areas of major companies within India. Various instances of this active and blatant separation of two social groups along dietary lines can also be found in our ordinary day-to-day lives. In urban spaces – where, on a superficial level, discrimination on the basis of caste is a thing of the past – separate utensils are still being commonly kept for guests and house-helps. All of this is done under the guise of maintaining hygiene, but to see that as the sole reason would mean to read the culture in a naïve way. Another such instance can be found in Dalit writer-activist Sharankumar Limbale's *The Dalit Brahmin and Other Stories* (2018), translated from Marathi by Priya Adarkar. Here, the experience of untouchability is presented in a story in which the narrator is invited to an event. He is to participate in a talk concerning the Dalit experience. The house in which he stays for the duration of the event initially leaves him gratified, as there is no direct sign of discrimination on the basis of his caste. But the actual reality ends up being quite the opposite, which he only realizes towards the end of the story. The narrator notes: "What Dinesh said was true. In that house, every article meant for my use had been decided in advance. The shawl. The cup. The cot. The thali [i.e., plate]. The chair."[21]

Apart from the persistence of caste division maintained through various food practices, the general hypocrisy regarding dietary laws is also striking, as becomes evident in another episode of the already mentioned podcast on *The Swaddle.*[22] A girl from Vapi, Gujarat narrates her personal experience of the blatant hypocrisy in her hometown. She mentions that the men of Jain families (who are not supposed to consume onion and garlic) would go out at night when everyone sleeps, to eat tandoori chicken. They would even boast about it later; and obviously the women of the houses were not allowed to do so. Then, very conveniently, in the morning, these men would eat their food without onions and garlic in it, proclaiming their impeccable manners. This hypocrisy is also highlighted in Omprakash Valmiki's

[19] Amanda Yeo, "*MasterChef Australia* Recap: Everything is Awful and Nothing Goes Right," *Junkee,* 23 May 2019, web.

[20] "Is Eating Meat Ethical?" *The Swaddle,* 2021, web.

[21] Sharankumar Limbale, "Dalit Brahmin," in *Dalit Brahmin and Other Stories*, translated by Priya Adarkar (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2018), 43.

[22] "Is Eating Meat Ethical?" *The Swaddle,* 2021, web.

autobiographical novel *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2003), in which the sanctimonious upper caste known as the Tyagis (a Brahmin caste) go to eat pork in the *basti* (settlement) of the Bhangi (formerly untouchables whose subcaste is Chuhra) at night, yet shame the community on that same pretext during daytime. Valmiki writes:

> The boys would torment me about them. "Abey, Chuhre ke, you eat pork." At such moments I would think of all the Tyagis who came in the darkness of the night to the Bhangi *basti* to eat pork. I felt like calling out the names of all those people. Those who came to eat meat secretly at night observed untouchability in daylight in front of everybody.[23]

In another article from the *Dalit Camera*, public health doctor and researcher Sylvia Karpagam throws further light on the dynamics of caste and gender in food.[24] She writes that eggs, labelled as "sinful," "violent," and "agitating the senses," have been denied to children as part of the mid-day meals in schools for several years.[25] The Akshaya Patra Foundation, which is run by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), is one of the largest providers of mid-day meals to these schools. In her paper "Krishna's Cows: ISKCON's Animal Theology and Practice," religious studies and social anthropology professor Anna S. King talks about the dietary restrictions of Krishna Consciousness, according to which abstaining from meat is a key principle. Indian society has also made the protection of cows one of its main political goals, a direct consequence of a religious food dogma. King writes: "Abstention from meat, fish, and eggs is one of the four regulatory principles; […] Krishna-consciousness leads to cow-consciousness. Key Vaishnava texts teach a human ethos of cow protection (*gorakhsha*) in which the cow is the focus of service and love."[26] Similarly, onions and garlic are not to be used in preparing meals, as they cannot be offered to Krishna.[27] The story of the origin of onion and garlic that Srila Prabhupada (founder of ISKCON) narrated, as circulated through ISKCON websites, refers to the cow's hoof being transformed to garlic and its ankle to onion. In consequence, eating onion and garlic would be as bad as eating cow's flesh.[28] According to the Ayurvedic concept of nutrition, onions and garlic fall under the *Tamasic* category.[29] Tamasic food is supposed to have a dulling effect on body and mind, thereby hindering the process of spiritual advancement, as opposed to the Sattvic diet, which consists of dairy products, fresh fruit and vegetables, supposedly

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23 Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life,* 21.
24 Sylvia Karpagam, "Caste, Food and Ideological Imposition," *Dalit Camera*, 21 November 2020, web.
25 Ibid.
26 Anna S. King, "Krishna's Cows: ISKCON's Animal Theology and Practice," *Journal of Animal Ethics* 2.2 (2012): 179–204, web.
27 "Why No Onion & Garlic in the Krishna Diet?" *ISKCON Toronto*, 20 January 2010, web.
28 Hari-Sauri Prabhu, "Srila Prabhupada Tells Story of Origin of Onion and Garlic," *ISKCON Seshadripuram Bangalore*, 10 January 2021, web.
29 Vaishali V. Agte and Shashi A. Chiplonkar, "Linkage of Concepts of Good Nutrition in Yoga and Modern Science," *Current Science* 92.7 (2007): 956–61.

rejuvenating the mind.[30] Hence, onion and garlic are not seen as pure elements that can be included in a healthy, morally good diet.

The elimination of meat and eggs from mid-day meals in these schools, where most of the students come from Dalit communities, despite their inclusion in the official menu, shows how caste-based discrimination has become institutionalized in India. Karpagam further talks about how, according to an interim order of the Supreme Court regarding mid-day meals, preference was to be given to cooks and helpers coming from Dalit and tribal communities. This sounds like progress in theory, but in reality, the practice has not shown significant impact in most Indian schools, if it has been followed at all. The idea of sinfulness being associated with meat, eggs, onions, and garlic in a sense becomes a tactic of those in the position of power to regulate the food habits of marginalized people by associating them with a mark of disgrace. The notion of "spiritual advancement" then can be seen as nothing but a façade, under which casteism and sexism operates, driven by the strong desire of protecting dominant cultural structures.

IV
Food and Gender: An Intersectional Analysis

Turning to the issue of gender, even today we can see that in most parts of India women in family households often eat only after the men are finished with their meals. This practice is usually explained as a necessary sign of respect towards the husband and the in-laws.[31] Only after these have finished, the womenfolk sit down to savour their modest meal. In earlier times, the wives waited for their husbands to come home, and would eat only after serving them. When their husbands did not come home, they had to go to sleep without eating anything at all. In her autobiographical account *Amar Jiban* (*My Life*), which was translated into English by Enakshi Chatterjee and published in 1999, Bengali author Rashundari Debi remembers how she would wait for her husband to come back, serve him food, and then eat: "There was no sign of him, so I served all the others and waited up for my husband. It was so late that pretty soon the children would be up, I kept thinking. That meant going without food again."[32]

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[30] In her article "Food in the Vedic Tradition" (1985), *India International Centre Quarterly* 12.2 (1985): 141–52, Dina Simoes Guha talks about the *Gunas* (i.e., properties) of food. Foods in traditional Hindu culture are divided with respect to their effect on the souls of human beings. She writes, "Only those foods that were bland, light to eat, free from strong smell and flavours, rose to the mind and developed into a cooling light. They would illuminate the elemental soul. […] The illuminative foods were called *sattvic*, the passion foods *rajasic*, and the putrid foods of darkness *tamasic*" (146; emphases in the original).

[31] Payal Hathi, Diane Coffey, Amit Thorat, and Nazar Khalid, "When Women Eat Last: Discrimination at Home and Women's Mental Health," *PLoS One*, 2 March 2021, web.

[32] Rashundari Debi, *Amar Jiban,* translated by Enakshi Chatterjee (Kolkata: Writer's Workshop, 1999), 47.

Debi's account, originally written in the 1860s, is not some obscure cultural artefact that is simply lost in the past. These practices of waiting for the dominant figures of a household, where mostly it is the woman who waits, and then eating one's food together or after these people have eaten, no matter how hungry the waiting party is, persist even now. Through new ways of discussion, these practices have been shoved into the whole Indian cultural discourse of "love" and "care" and are forced into the conventional structures of the same.

Women in many upper-caste Hindu households are also still not allowed to eat meat. Even though the alleged reasons for this range from avoiding hot food to preventing heavy blood flow during menstruation or the process of birth, the whole idea is really based on keeping the female body "pure" for conceiving and curbing sexual appetites, which are believed to increase through the consumption of meat.[33] In Brahmanical patriarchy, as Uma Chakraverti explains, a woman's existence is a constant struggle of trying to resolve the contradiction between her supposed nature and her assigned function.[34] Female birth is the result of a "bad karma" in a previous life, which results in a supposedly promiscuous nature. This promiscuity needs to be suppressed and directed towards a woman's function as wife and the duty of reproduction. In the case of widows, who have no prescribed place in the Hindu social order because the subject (husband) due to whom their existence is recognized has perished, sexuality has to be strictly kept under control. Thus, "[t]he wife's sexuality," according to Chakravarti, "had to be channelised, the widow's sexuality had to be abruptly terminated."[35]

At the same time, consumption of "hot" food is totally acceptable for men, because they do not have to police their sexuality. The body of a woman in caste society is reduced to a singular organ: the uterus. A woman is defined only in relation to her roles in the patriarchal structure. She is not seen as an individual outside these structures. The "urges" of women have to be controlled by means of domestic rituals centred around fasting, which is often deceivingly expressed as a matter of choice. This false notion of choice is utterly intrinsic to the patriarchal institution. It also relates to what Barthes said in the context of women writing within the French bourgeois framework, where they can exercise their choice, but only if they come back to their condition within the limits of patriarchy.[36] Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in the case of Dalit women, who labour outside their homes, no such restrictions are put forth. But for upper-caste women, controlling female sexuality suddenly becomes highly important. As Chakravarti writes: "Control over female sexuality was almost obsessively applied among high caste women because the danger to the structure of brahmanical patriarchy was greater in their case."[37]

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33 Henrike Donner, "New Vegetarianism: Food, Gender, and Neo-Liberal Regimes in Bengali Middle-Class Families," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 31.1 (2008): 148.

34 Uma Chakravarti, "Gender, Caste, and Labour: Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30.36 (1995): 2249.

35 Ibid., 2251.

36 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 50

37 Chakravarti, "Gender, Caste, and Labour": 2251.

V
The Past and Present of Indian Food Politics: A Conclusion

As evident from the analysis above, the cultural identities of various Indian minority communities have become attached to their specific food practices. Banning certain food habits and marking them with labels such as "unacceptable" or "hurting religious sentiments" leads to the subordination and ultimately even the complete dissolving of these identities. The emergence of so-called "cow vigilantism" is an especially suitable example for this process. In many Brahmin households, where meat is consumed, chicken as food is looked down upon as dirty meat cooked by Muslims, but at the same time there is no hesitation in consuming goat meat. The double standard does not stop there. Cows, which are regarded as holy in Hindu religion, are banned by law as a food item in some parts of India. One of the most recent bills against cow slaughter was passed in the state of Karnataka in December 2020. This bill allows the police to seize cattle if they have "reason to believe" that it is being sold for the purpose of slaughter.[38] It also guarantees protection to those who try to protect the cattle, thus giving vigilante groups a license to lynch minorities in the name of cow protection. This horrific practice has dramatically increased in scope and frequency under the current government led by Narendra Modi. The 2015 case of mob lynching in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, where a mob of villagers attacked the home of Mohammed Akhlaq, killing him for suspicion of slaughtering a cow, is a scary example of how these structures of power use violence and force to discipline subjects into submitting to the majoritarian ideology.[39] The veneration of cows has been converted into a symbol for Hinduism itself and has also been turned into a powerful cultural and political tool. This arbitrary association, according to Dwijendra Narayan Jha, refuses to acknowledge that the cow has not always been this sacred, especially in the early Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical traditions. Jha cites H. H. Wilson, who asserted in the early nineteenth century that "the sacrifice of the horse or of the cow, the *gomedha* or the *ashvamedha*, appears to have been common in the earliest periods of the Hindu ritual."[40]

Dalit rights pioneer Dr. B. R. Ambedkar contextualizes untouchability in the struggle for supremacy between the Brahmins and the Buddhists. The practice of untouchability, used against beef eaters, started only after the Brahmins stopped cow sacrifices to win the ideological battle against Buddhists. It was a political, not a moral move from the very start. The Buddhists preached against animal sacrifice, thereby gaining popularity among the cultivators whose cattle were seized for ritual sacrifices by the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. According to Ambedkar, in order to regain their allegiance, the Brahmins banned killing cows and eating their meat.[41] It is interesting to note how smoothly meanings change in these cultural processes,

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[38] Supriya Vohra, "Where's the Beef?" *The Caravan* 13.4 (2021): 9.

[39] "The Dadri Lynching: How Events Unfolded," *The Hindu,* 3 October 2015, web.

[40] Dwijendra Narayan Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2009), 21.

[41] Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life,* xxiii.

always suiting the dominant structures and conveniently developing overtime to uphold them. This particular change of meaning assigned to all lower castes who ate beef a tag of "untouchables" and religions other than Hinduism that of "foreign." Food always was and continues to be central to the practices of untouchability and discrimination within Indian society. It is an important site, where questions and memories of communalism, caste, and gender constantly come up. Food history and some of the recipes of specific communities have become common topics in Indian cyberspaces, sparking much needed debates on the national level.

Relating all of this back to the topic of this book, an issue that truly demands our urgent attention as international and transnational scholars right now lies in the inclusion, the study, and the documentation of these food practices within global theories and frameworks such as the transnational framework of cultural studies, which is an especially promising way of approaching this topic. This is because cultural studies as a discipline primarily engages with quotidian practices, along with focusing on the power dynamics of the hegemonic structures of society, owing to its Marxist foundations. Its transnational frameworks allow for a better understanding of cultures and questioning of the dominant power positions by providing perspectives that are outside the set of traditional national contexts. By widening transnational horizons, the shackles of national cultural stigmata can eventually be weakened, and potentially even broken.

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Western Constructions of Disability and Local Systems of Knowledge: A Look at the Problematic Aspects of Intercultural Work

Sophie Schönfeld

I
Definitions of Disability: An Introduction

In the globalized world we inhabit today, disability has come to be seen and worked with in an international context, with support programmes that reach into the most remote areas of the planet no longer being an extraordinary occurrence. These new circumstances, however, give rise to unique cultural problems, some of which I hope to be able to illustrate in this essay, especially for all those who are not deeply involved in disability studies. Much of what is presented in the first two sections, dealing with the way concepts of disability and processes of othering come into existence, is based on my own observations and conclusions compiled over the course of seven semesters of studying special education. An extremely useful work for anyone who wishes to explore the connections of culture and disability within an international framework is *Disability in Different Cultures: Reflections on Local Concepts* (1999), a collection that emerged from the symposium "Local Concepts and Beliefs of Disability in Different Cultures," which took place at the Gustav Stresemann Institute of Bonn in 1998.[1] Reading the various essays compiled in this book has sparked many of my following observations, which will highlight the troubles that accompany the clashes of differing cultural notions of disability.

In order to be able to fully grasp the tensions that come along with putting disability into an intercultural context, a firm understanding of what disability actually is and how it is rooted within the dynamics of culture is necessary. The longer one ponders the concept of disability, the more arbitrary and constructed it appears. Additionally, ever more aspects come to mind that make remarkably little sense for something that seems so reasonable at a first glance. For instance, legal definitions vary greatly. While section nine of the German Code of Social Law (*Sozialgesetzbuch*) states that an impairment must last for six months or longer to be labelled

[1] Brigitte Holzer, Arthur Vreede, and Gabriele Weigt (editors), *Disability in Different Cultures: Reflections on Local Concepts* (Bielefeld: transcript, 1999).

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as a disability,[2] the British Equality Act speaks of twelve months.[3] An individual who has been unwell for eight months is then, at least from an official point of view, a chimera of disabled and able-bodied. Someone who has been unwell for five months and three weeks is effectively disregarded altogether, caught in a limbo where neither realm appears accessible. This description might appear somewhat exaggerated at first glance, but it serves to show that when we observe the concept of disability, we are looking at a construction rather than a natural fact. The matter can be made yet more obvious by looking at the bigger picture: "Disability" serves as an umbrella term for an extremely wide range of impairments, grouping together individuals who experience challenges that vary fundamentally from person to person and who have highly individual needs. Assigning the same label to individuals with quadriplegia, hearing loss, and severe mental illness does not necessarily make for a useful way of thinking of these persons, communicating with them, or supporting them. The inclusion movement, made up largely of people who fall under the disability categorization, articulates highly ambivalent feelings regarding the term, with a clear tendency towards its eventual abandonment.

In her 2017 essay "Theorien der Inklusion: Eine Übersicht" ("Theories of Inclusion: An Overview"), German disability studies scholar Mai-Anh Boger impressively illustrates the various and often paradoxical perspectives on disability through a system of basic approaches to inclusion and, more specifically, otherness. Having a look at three key terms taken from this text may convey an impression of the theoretical complexity behind inclusion efforts and concepts of disability, as well as of the arbitrariness of such concepts: "the right not to be othered"; "resistant fundamental otherness"; "the right of the other to participation in a normality."[4] These short excerpts already make plain the markedly different approaches in rejecting the category, the demand to have a right to exist with a difference in our society, and the acceptance of being different in order to affirm one's right to participation. The concepts *other, othering,* and *otherness* deserve our special attention, for this trinity carries in it much of what characterizes the Western concept of disability that dominates global discourses on the subject as well as many associated concerns.

Disability in the modern global framework is most often considered within the bio-medical discourse. This puts educators, other professionals and, unfortunately, in many cases also those affected as well as their families and immediate social circle (i.e., those who have the direct and intense experience of what it means to be disabled), into a secondary, passive position at best. Simultaneously, a nearly mystified and extremely powerful status is attributed to doctors. After all, the medical professional, usually pictured as an older, exceptionally educated White man, has been the prime example of reason and knowledge ever since the Enlightenment. The doctor is, in society's perception, the sole lord over life and death, for religion and folk magic (practices which granted to their practitioners a sense of empowerment) went

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2 "§ 2 SGB IX Begriffsbestimmungen." *Sozialgesetzbuch (SGB)*, 2021, web.

3 "Definition of Disability under the Equality Act 2010," *Government Digital Service*, 2015, web.

4 Mai-Ahn Boger, "Theorien der Inklusion: Eine Übersicht," *Zeitschrift für Inklusion* 1 (2017), n.p., web. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

into decline around the same time. The doctor is the master of the bio-medical discourse. Little time is spent together, and all encounters occur within the same setting, that of the treatment room. Measures such as therapies are conducted by different specialists in a different place, and these visits usually follow a steadier rhythm, increasing the familiarity of the client with the situation, and therefore reducing the possible level of stress and discomfort which may be experienced in a doctor's office (especially for individuals with manifold health issues, this environment can quickly become associated with bad news as well as with potentially painful medical procedures).

The actual day-to-day life with the disabled person, their abilities, personality, and the challenges they face, are only witnessed by whoever they spend the most time with. In the United States as well as Western Europe, there is a chance of these people being professionals in their own right, in the form of personal assistants or as the staff of a care facility.[5] By far the most common form of accommodation, however, especially in developing countries where other options are often not readily available, is within the family, who, despite spending more time around the person in question than anyone else, are not considered to possess professional knowledge. Even when living alone and independently, the routines and daily life of an individual with disabilities are likely to be much more intimately known to friends and relatives than to the health professional in the treatment room. The doctor has no comprehensive image of the client, in whose personal experience of being othered medical issues are only one of many factors anyway. The expert status is furthered by the manner in which medicine is divided up into subdisciplines. This specialization creates the impression that there is supply for every possible demand, a solution for every problem, offered by medical professionals. The issue here is, of course, not to be attributed to medical staff personally. Knowledge regarding the biological factors of disability is important and extremely valuable. However, the prevalent structures within a Eurocentric cultural framework appear to make it the only knowledge that is considered truly valid.

Both medicine and psychology are marked by a focus on normative, comparative evaluation. This characteristic, since the bio-medical discourse is so dominant in constructions of disability, makes the concept un-questionable by rooting it in science. After all, disability can supposedly be measured and must therefore be an objective fact, from grades in school to measurements of the body to the percentage of disability (or grade of disability given in percentages) stated on one's handicapped identification card in Germany.[6] Through its claim to science and objectivity,

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[5] According to ADA-PARC, a research project conducted by seven ADA (i.e., Americans with Disabilities Act) regional centres between 2012 and 2016, an average of just under 7% of disabled US-Americans lived in specialized institutions or other group quarters. See "Community Living Indicators," *Center on Disability at the Public Health Institute,* n.d., web.

[6] The German handicapped identification card is an official document that can be obtained by disabled individuals. It states the degree and category of their impairment and is a necessary prerequisite for requesting compensations for disadvantages. The degree is given in increments of 10, ranging from 0 to 100. A person is considered disabled at a degree of impairment of 20 or higher, with severe

medicine stabilizes the knowledge it produces, allowing change to only arise from within the strict borders of the discipline and therefore becoming largely immune to outside factors, may they be corroding or actually beneficial in nature. Sociocultural influences in the construction of disability are pushed to the background, clouding our view of the actual inner workings of the concept, as well as of the actual factors making international cooperation so problematic. Framing disability purely as a biological fact legitimizes discrimination and segregation instead of encouraging a questioning of the prevalent structures within our society; little room is given to alternative perspectives, let alone alternative modes of knowledge. It seems that the dominant position of medicine is only ever questioned once it (physically or morally) affects a great number of people or is represented as doing so. Examples of such questioning include matters such as abortion, genetic engineering, and assisted suicide.

Writing in 2022, the extensive protests in major US cities against the tightening of legal regulations regarding abortions unto *de facto* bans on abortion access in the states constitute a prime example of this circumstance. Matters of disability, it might seem, simply do not affect enough people directly in order to create a sufficient popular reaction. Since disability is a largely arbitrary umbrella term that necessarily groups together people with vastly different needs, interests are fragmented even among the "disabled community." Is that all there is to it, though? Is inclusion, defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary* as "the idea that everyone should be able to use the same facilities, take part in the same activities, and enjoy the same experiences, including people who have a disability or other disadvantage,"[7] only prevented by a lack of focused interest? Taking into account the (very real) possibility of becoming disabled is something the vast majority of people appear to avoid, perhaps precisely due to its being a realistic and frightening scenario. In reality, everyone is constantly in danger of becoming directly impacted. On an emotional level, this topic may then be comparable to death; something most people are highly uncomfortable discussing, let alone diving into more deeply. The concerns and problems of individuals with disabilities are, in a way, a smouldering fire. They have been an issue for ages, with palpable progress made here and there, but a large-scale collective public outcry usually fails to materialize. Some of the most recent disability-related events that made headlines in Germany are the deaths of twelve residents in a care facility in the course of the severe floods in the Ahr valley in 2021,[8] and the murder trial of a caretaker who was found guilty of killing four people with disabilities in Potsdam.[9] Both incidences did receive a fair amount of media attention. However, after the initial wave of outrage, demands for action

disability beginning at 50. The assessment is carried out by medical examiners based on a legally established set of criteria.

7 "Inclusion," *Cambridge Dictionary*, n.d., web.

8 "Zwölf Menschen in Wohnheim für Behinderte ertrunken," *Tagesspiegel*, 16 Juli 2021, web.

9 Alena Kammer, "15 Jahre Haft für vierfachen Mord in Behinderteneinrichtung," *Zeit Online,* 22 December 2021, web.

have remained limited to the disabled community and some particularly interested individuals.

There is more to this topic. So far, we have looked at processes of direct othering directly, without, however, taking into consideration its integration into larger cultural processes. We must question not only factors within the process of othering itself, but also its function within our society.

II
Discrimination in Practice: How Oppressive Definitions of Disability Manifest Themselves

It might be useful to remind ourselves of a simple societal truth: Norms are always constructed. They are naturalized and universalized over time, conveying the impression of being in some way logical and justified; but in the end, they are just as arbitrary as disability, which is characterized as deviation from norms and what is perceived as normality by definition. The division between being "normal" and being "disabled" is a self-referential and paradoxical one. Oscar Thomas-Olalde, a political scientist and researcher of education in intercultural settings, and Astride Velho, a professor of social work, describe the paradox as follows:

> [The discursive] construction of difference makes the radical distinction between inside and outside of the social system a plausible part of the repertoire of normality. Only by constructing social antagonisms, cultural antitheses and epistemic dualities, it is possible to achieve discursive stability and thus stability of power.[10]

The perceived deviations, produced by the construct, prove their supposedly objective character by showing that people labelled as disabled are indeed unable to participate fully in our society. The fact that the structures we live in, from architecture to education, are themselves based on our conception of normality and must therefore be seen as part of this self-referential system, is conveniently ignored. In the duality into which society is being split, centre and periphery support and justify each other, but they also stabilise the identities of those who inhabit these realms by offering a point of orientation through the perception of fundamental difference. The periphery is therefore a particularly important spot within the system, and it needs to be inhabited in order to offer a point of reference for the organization of social and cultural life. This, of course, immediately raises questions about the possibility of true inclusion: will not the periphery always find a new mode of existing, no matter the number of measures taken? For a better understanding of how deeply

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[10] Oscar Thomas-Olalde and Astride Velho, "Othering and Its Effects: Exploring the Concept," in *Writing Postcolonial Histories of Intercultural Education*, edited by Heike Niedrig and Christian Ydesen (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011), 35.

ingrained the duality described above is in all areas of our lives, a few examples may be beneficial.

First, the process of othering and the periphery's immense will to survive are especially obvious within the system of education, where inclusive schooling is being opposed by parents on grounds of potentially affecting their children's learning progress adversely. This discussion has been documented in a variety of articles, interviews, and other media texts. For instance, a 2013 article in the German newspaper *Westdeutsche Zeitung* illustrates the manifold anxieties surrounding a switch towards more inclusive education.[11] Parents doubt that the ideal of inclusive education, which would fundamentally change the existing education system, is feasible. They fear that the approach may be overly idealistic, a concern which is shared by many teachers, who are worried that the new classroom situation may become overwhelming. The process which is currently (supposed to be) taking place in Germany is effectively a transition from segregation (children with and without disabilities are often taught in separate schools) to inclusion (all children learning together). Various models exist in which a sort of "in-between" is created, e.g., through "partner classes," where separate groups of children (usually belonging to different school types) with and without special needs are partially taught together.[12] In these classes, phases of separate instruction are also included to the degree deemed necessary.

Meanwhile, the parents' worries do not seem to be exclusively tied to the idea that their children's learning progress may be compromised in an inclusive model. It appears, additionally, that a system in which children are not judged based on what a supposedly normal student is expected to achieve is viewed by those who consider themselves to be part of the realm of normality to be unfair or inefficient, lacking a common standard for comparison. Clearly, a form of organization which perpetuates division by causing a certain percentage of children to fail, creating the much-needed periphery, is met with more agreement (from those who are comfortably positioned in the centre). The parents alone may not be blamed, however. Their thought pattern is simply symptomatic of patterns of othering within society at large – whoever can be part of the social centre, the in-group, tends to seize that opportunity. Clearly, a restructuring of the education system (which in itself is no easy task) is not sufficient. The issue persists on a much larger scale and is much more deeply ingrained in people's minds.

Second, special needs education itself, although on the surface advocating for inclusion, is crucial in maintaining division and can, in its current state, only exist based on continued separation. It is hard to believe that any discipline would sincerely and actively advocate for its own abolition. The name itself, "Special Needs Education," still stands for segregation and stresses difference, no matter its outwardly shown support for the ideal of an inclusive world. The Institute for Special Education at the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg (JMU) states the following on its website: "Inclusion is understood to be a task of society at large; special

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[11] Thomas Lekies, "Inklusion verunsichert Eltern," *Westdeutsche Zeitung*, 17 April 2013, web.

[12] "Partnerklassen," *Inklusion und Schule Bayern,* n.d., web.

needs education here plays the role of a mediator and interlocutor, providing scientifically based applicable knowledge and functioning as an advocate for those affected – with their participation, of course."[13] This shows that, naturally, like any other department, that of special education seeks to maintain itself. The disappearance of special education as a discipline would mean an aggravation of the already existing lack of professionals who are needed to make inclusion work, if it can work.[14] The situation is somewhat paradoxical: Inclusion calls for an abolition of divisive factors within society, and especially in education; this would, strictly speaking, leave no room for the discipline in its current form, which focuses on students who are, after all, perceived as different on a cognitive, physical, and/or behavioural level, and structures its subdisciplines accordingly. At the same time, the specialized knowledge and skills conveyed to future professionals are indispensable, as is the institutionalized advocacy for the concerns of disabled individuals – for, as we have learned by now, the larger public tends to avoid the topic, and non-professionals often remain unheard – although this latter position has been contested by disability studies for some time. However, within the framework of inclusion, new sets of tasks emerge, creating new spaces for special needs education to operate in. The discipline thus appears to be in need of redefining itself. Such a renegotiation may be laborious, but it, which transcends all such discussions about ideals and possibilities rigidly maintaining the divide. For a student at the institute, encounters and exchanges with people with disabilities are remarkably rare. And as if to open the eyes of the last, most oblivious individual to the irony of this situation, students who rely on a wheelchair are required to use the side entrances at the Institute for Special Education. The grand main entrance, whose broad stairs also serve as one of the main meeting spots for students and are, therefore, of great social significance, is not wheelchair-accessible.

[13] Kollegiale Leitung des Instituts für Sonderpädagogik der Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, "Positionierung Inklusion," *Institut für Sonderpädagogik,* May 2018/January 2021, web.

[14] Florentine Anders, "Lehrermangel verschärft sich weiter – Was die Länder dagegen tun," *Das Deutsche Schulportal,* 10 August 2021, web.

Figure 1. The non-wheelchair-accessible front door of the Institute of Special Education at the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg (JMU), Main Building at Wittelsbacherplatz (photo: Sophie Schönfeld).

This leads us to my final example of structures that serve to maintain centre-versus-periphery divisions: that of architecture. Nora Ellen Groce, director of the Disability Research Centre at University College London, focuses on matters of disability and health in a global framework. She stresses the importance of ideas regarding aetiology (the presumed origin or cause of a disease) and social expectations as the main factors that determine how difference is dealt with in a society.[15] Interactionist models that touch on societal and environmental contexts – e.g., the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) framework – are widespread today within the professional discourse, but not within the minds of the general non-professional public that, as previously discussed, tends to locate the source of disability exclusively in the realm of the bodily, since the implicit (non-professional) definition is that of some type of physical aberration. While interactionist models may be seen as a step in the right direction, they too need to be viewed critically, for they suggest that there is a hard, essential reality or a natural state of things not shaped by cultural factors whatsoever, which does not make disability appear as a construct, but rather as a necessary, although unfortunate, consequence of said reality.

Buildings, for example, are not just a product of architectural necessity and aesthetics, but also an integral part of the structures that reinforce the aforementioned self-referential system. Dick Hebdige elaborates on the connection between culture and architecture in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). Here, cultural studies can add a useful dimension to the way we theorize disability, a train of thought which appears to have been largely neglected in special education so far. What the ICF model usually refers to as "environmental factors" is not random, let alone natural; and the description as simply "environmental" does not do the actual character and function of these barriers justice.[16] Our surroundings are fundamentally shaped by cultural norms and notions of power, or, in short, the way we think about the world. This becomes visible in architecture and the interior design of buildings as well as other human constructions (e.g., playgrounds), for here the realm of the cultural, rather difficult to grasp otherwise, is expressed in material terms. As Hebdige expresses it: "[T]he frames of our thinking have been translated into actual bricks and mortar."[17] The division of people into belonging and not belonging is manifested in such a blatantly literal manner in built environments that one cannot help but feel uncomfortable upon being confronted with the matter. Something about the wheelchair user who is not able to participate in a work meeting because it is upstairs, seems too un-metaphoric, too palpable to be comfortably ignored for the sake of stable norms. Indeed, in recent years attempts have been made to make public and commercial architecture more accessible in Germany, although that

15 Nora Ellen Groce, "General Issues in Research on Local Concepts and Beliefs about Disability," in *Disability in Different Cultures*, edited by Brigitte Holze, Arthur Vreede, and Gabriele Weigt (Bielefeld: transcript, 1999), 287.

16 See "The Integrative Bio-Psycho-Social Model of Functioning, Disability and Health," *ICF Case Studies*, n.d., web.

17 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1997), 13.

certainly does not mean that there will be an end to exclusion.[18] Additionally, initiatives that aim at increasing the accessibility of public spaces based on improvised solutions are becoming more and more common these days. One of the most well-known of these campaigns involves the construction of wheelchair ramps out of LEGO bricks,[19] while in another one, people are asked to knit or crochet colourful covers for bollards and barrier posts in order to increase their visibility.[20] Changes, slow and partial as they may be, are being effected; yet critics may claim that such effort is being made to make ignoring inequality comfortable again, by allowing those responsible to claim that they have at least shown good will. A wheelchair ramp in front of an office building is largely useless if no wheelchair user finds employment in the edifice, and improvised solutions such as the ones mentioned above are just that: improvised rather than suitable for permanent use.

III
Intercultural Conceptions of Disability: A Clash of Ideologies, not Facts

Even based on my necessarily incomplete selection of examples, it has become obvious that there are a variety of systems in place to perpetuate division within our society. Ray McDermott and Hervé Varenne, both professors of education, sum this up by stating that "people in all cultures can use established cultural forms to disable each other."[21] What, then, happens when culturally specific norms and notions that were established within a unique local and historical framework are transferred to a new locality with different cultural, social, and environmental conditions, becoming dominant within the work that is done there in support of individuals with disabilities? Problems are guaranteed wherever this kind of intercultural work takes place.

If we are all, as Clifford Geertz claims, "suspended in webs of significance" that we have spun ourselves and if culture indeed shapes our entire existence, it appears extremely insensitive to carry a cultural construct as complex as that of disability over into a different context and simply expect things to work out.[22] Our professional behaviour is saturated with culture, as is everything else we do.[23] Acquiring

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18 Svenja Heinecke, "Barrierefreiheit in Deutschland: Was hat sich in den letzten 5 Jahren getan?" *IGPmagazin: Ihre Gesundheitsprofis*, 2 July 2019, web.

19 "Bunte Legorampen begeistern Deutschland," *Aktion Mensch*, n.d., web.

20 "Bitte ran an die Nadeln: Stricken und Häkeln für mehr Sicherheit auf Deutschlands Gehwegen!" *Deutscher Blinden- und Sehbehindertenverband e. V.*, 14 April 2021, web.

21 Ray McDermott and Hervé Varenne, "Culture 'as' Disability," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 26.3 (1995): 332.

22 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New Work: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

23 Patrick Harris, *Culturally Competent Disability Support: Putting It into Practice: A Review of the International and Australian Literature on Cultural Competence* (Harris Park: Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association of New South Wales, 2004), 24.

some superficial information on customs and traditions in a foreign country is not an effective way to bridge the gap. Culture does not work like the vocabulary of a foreign tongue. Holding on to the language metaphor, one can indeed acquire a limited range of vocabulary and thereby gain a rudimentary understanding of what is said fairly quickly, as long as the sentence structure is simple. However, one missed word or an unnoticed undertone is already enough to destroy the entire operation. Failing to understand the larger structure and logic that connects everything, as grammar does in language, will result in misunderstandings and in limitations to communicative complexity.

Thinking of culture as a grammar of life may prove useful in preventing important matters from getting lost in translation. This may not give us culturally specific knowledge, whose importance is so often (over)stressed, but potentially something more valuable: awareness of and openness to fundamental cultural difference. As Australian public health researcher Patrick Harris expresses it:"[W]hat is required is not familiarity with every culturally specific belief and behaviour, but a general approach to culture that respects the diversity of cultural perspectives that influence the health of individuals and communities."[24] Openness and flexibility are necessary conditions for intercultural work: It is simply not feasible to familiarize oneself with every aspect of a foreign lifestyle prior to getting involved in an international project. Mindfulness may therefore be our best bet when it comes to recognizing and letting go of hindering stereotypes that are rooted in various othering processes – which, on an international scale, include many more levels than just disabled versus able-bodied. In a context that allows for such a broad range of tensions, cultural awareness and, equally importantly, self-awareness (in terms of professional self-reflection) can make the difference between mutual understanding and mutual frustration.

It is just as vital to recognize local knowledge(s) as useful. This, however, poses a special challenge that goes well beyond simple cultural openness, and which must be analysed within the context of power as well as within the context of the real-life structures supporting the respective relief organizations. The global discourse on health in general, and therefore also on disability, prioritizes Western forms of knowledge. Interestingly, this issue has not really received widespread attention in the context of disability, but only became relevant to a wider public after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, when internationally coordinated disease control emerged as a topic of focus within the media. An article published on the *Bill of Health* website, a page maintained by the Harvard University Law School, states that "despite having the institutional competence to do so, the WHO failed to address the holistic determinants of health affecting the enjoyment of the right to health during the pandemic, predominantly determinants affecting those in the Global South."[25] The World Health Organization (WHO) being, as its name suggests, the officially recognized, worldwide main authority on the subject, while operating

24 Harris, *Culturally Competent Disability Support*, 29–30.

25 "A Critical Analysis of the Eurocentric Response to Covid-19: Western Ideas of Health," *Bill of Health*, 11 June 2021, web.

primarily based on Western, Eurocentric modes of theorizing health, also publishes international standards for relating to diagnostics and disability, thereby shaping the global discourse. Non-compliance with its immanent rules and systems of logic results in reduced possibilities of participation in international dialogue. Alternative modes of knowledge, which are often connected to regional spiritual beliefs (such as the thought of ancestor intervention as a possible cause of disability) are framed as literal non-sense clashing with Western, globalized ideas, which are usually centred around the bio-medical, strictly scientific discourse, explaining disability through genetics and other physical causes.[26]

This is not to say that there is a full-fledged consensus over all aspects of disability present even within the West, but there is a certain amount of common ground that enables a smooth exchange of information, as well as rather uncomplicated cooperation. The wallpaper might look different, but the foundational walls are the same, insofar as medical knowledge tends to be prioritized and "un-scientific" ideas rigorously excluded. Upon encountering communities whose understanding of disability is based primarily on local knowledge, the common ground tends to shrink from a seemingly world-spanning dimension to what appears to be scarcely enough to take a first step in one's endeavour to support people with disabilities: From assigned roles to concepts of disability and from the origins of disability to its medicalization, local ideas may be vastly different from the globalized norm in public health and may not immediately make sense to outsiders. They are embedded in a specific cultural, historical, and material framework, are limited to certain regions, and oftentimes tie into religious and spiritual beliefs. Where Western countries value the ability to lead a self-determined lifestyle as well as being economically independent, setting up interventions accordingly, a community which relies primarily on indigenous knowledge and cultural practices may prioritize marriage and the ability to start a family.[27] The vast majority of disability professionals have come to naturalize their notions of what constitutes a fulfilling life, and it may come as a surprise just how starkly different the opinions of those they plan to support can turn out to be. What makes local knowledge valuable and useful is precisely its local character: It is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but a system adapted to its unique setting, following a more holistic approach, and therefore possessing a quality globalized knowledge alone cannot offer. Besides being practically useful by inherently taking into account the specific conditions of its environment, local knowledges also serve as "sources of identity and pride."[28] These two aspects alone should be reason

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[26] Friedrich Albrecht, "The Use of Non-Western Approaches," in *Disability in Different Cultures*, edited by Brigitte Holzer, Arthur Vreede, and Gabriele Weigt (Bielefeld: transcript, 1999), 125.

[27] Dee Burck, "Incorporation of Knowledge of Social and Cultural Factors in the Practice of Rehabilitation Projects," in *Disability in Different Cultures*, edited by Brigitte Holzer, Arthur Vreede, and Gabriele Weigt (Bielefeld: transcript, 1999), 205.

[28] Patrick J. Devlieger, "Local Knowledge and International Collaboration," in *Disability in Different Cultures*, edited by Brigitte Holzer, Arthur Vreede, and Gabriele Weigt (Bielefeld: transcript, 1999), 176.

enough to meet these alternative systems of understanding disability with a certain amount of respect, instead of insensitively attempting to replace them.

Effective communication and collaboration between globalized and local frameworks of knowledge are hindered by a certain arrogance, which carries with it the idea that people must be taught and convinced, to be led to the right path, for their approach is thought to be less valuable or even harmful. This arrogance, to be quite fair, is not "produced" by the individual workers whose intentions may very well be altruistic and who, on an individual level, may themselves possess the aforementioned awareness and mindfulness regarding cultural difference. After all, had they lacked humanitarian passion, they would have likely chosen a more comfortable occupation. Instead, this phenomenon appears to be rooted within society as a whole and concentrated by the administrative structures operating within public health organizations.

I have granted much room to an analysis of the dominant role of the bio-medical discourse, which serves to legitimize practices and hierarchies and is hardly questionable. This is problematic enough within the Western context, but even more so when encountering local systems of knowledge. We are, after all, talking about a perspective that includes a self-image of science as the only truly legitimate way of seeing disability and which is now up against ways of knowing that may appear radically unscientific, as is the case with some indigenous theories of aetiology which interpret disability as (among other things) signs from God or the ancestors, or as a consequence of witchcraft.[29] If the disability is seen as fated or as serving a spiritual purpose, it is highly unlikely that the family or the affected individual will actively seek treatment, and in many cases, offers to intervene by means of scientifically proven tools and procedures will end up being resolutely rejected. This, of course, is then quickly interpreted as "unreasonable" and "uncooperative."

Positive aspects of local approaches, especially in what is considered the "Global South," often are not only dismissed but concealed. Making use of a theory proposed by anthropologist Benedicte Ingstad, special needs educator Friedrich Albrecht explains the so-called "North-South Myth" as follows:

> This myth has arisen as a result of supportive measures in the disability field between North and South. Here also concepts like shame, concealment and killing are emphasized in order to attract attention and to legitimate assistance measures. Let the developed societies teach the underdeveloped nations how to integrate people with disabilities is the message of this myth.[30]

The catchword in the quoted passage is *power*. Lending any sort of credibility to alternative modes of knowledge would inevitably compromise the position of what Albrecht calls "developed societies" by putting into question the narrative of bio-medical explanation as the singular reasonable approach. Local knowledge

[29] Maya Kalyanpur, "Meanings of Disability for Culturally Diverse and Immigrant Families," in *Disability in Different Cultures*, edited by Brigitte Holzer, Arthur Vreede, and Gabriele Weigt (Bielefeld: transcript, 1999), 141.

[30] Albrecht, "The Use of Non-Western Approaches," 123–124.

therefore cannot be treated as equal. This is, of course, an uncomfortable and inconvenient truth, since the lending of a helping hand to supposedly "underdeveloped" communities and countries is presented as an altruistic, selfless act – not as an act of oppression with almost colonialist features. I use the term "colonialist" purposefully here. The British Empire, for example, justified its colonial activities by interpreting them as "the White man's burden," an expression that gained fame through Rudyard Kipling famous poem.[31] According to this interpretation, the Empire existed not for the benefit – economic or strategic or otherwise – of Britain itself, but in order to make sure that supposedly "primitive" peoples, would, with British guidance, eventually become civilized.[32]

Other cultures have, against all claims regarding the sole validity of the globalized approach, developed useful concepts and well-functioning techniques of coping with disability within their systems of local knowledge. This, of course, is not to say that such conceptions are inherently unproblematic and have no potential or need for further development. This would mean falling for another, equally blinding myth: that of "Better People in Other Places," which is as much of an ignorant essentialism as the myth previously mentioned.[33]

IV
Balancing Support and Sensitivity: An Analysis and Some Constructive Ideas

At this point, the work of special needs educators, social workers, doctors, and all others involved in intercultural projects may seem like a tightrope act. These frontline workers act within an extreme tension, in which they can hardly be or remain neutral. They are the first ones to experience all the issues arising from the problematic aspects addressed, while in many cases also being the ones who must come up with solutions (which need to be set up in a way that does not violate certain guidelines). Even if they strive to proceed in a culturally sensitive manner, they are still likely to encounter cultural phenomena that they simply cannot agree with, because they seem detrimental to the well-being of their clients. Yet how can one legitimize global judgements and interventions when still judging from an inherently Western-aligned perspective, looking through a distorting lens of universalized "truths?" The cases in which support programmes that are rooted in a globalized but ultimately Eurocentric perspective work towards the culturally determined aspirations of the foreign clients are few; and if these aspirations are fulfilled, more often than not this is a mere side effect of having worked toward different goals, a lucky coincidence, so to speak. Dee Burck, a Dutch rehabilitation specialist who has

[31] Rudyard Kipling, *Stories and Poems*, edited by Daniel Karlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 479.

[32] See David Cody, "The British Empire," *The Victorian Web*, 1988, web.

[33] See Albrecht, "The Use of Non-Western Approaches," 124.

worked extensively within various cultural settings, recounts the following experience:

> There is an example of a project in Africa some years ago, which was quite successful in assisting blind men to become economically independent. The men were involved in various handicraft activities and when I visited their centre, I noticed that the handicrafts they produced did not sell much. Nevertheless, virtually all the men left the vocational rehabilitation centre after their training period, settled independently in the village and managed to sustain themselves thereafter. Finally, it was revealed to me that, while at the training centre, virtually all the men were married off to women who had been divorced or widowed and who had been working in the centre as cleaners. This aspect of the project had never been revealed to the donors however, as they might have opposed this marriage broker role of a rehabilitation project.[34]

More frequent than stories of obvious success, however, are instances of mutual frustration of all those involved: The Western workers feel that their work is not being fully respected, and the clients feel that their individual concerns are not being taken seriously. This poses a serious risk: In cultures where cause and effect of disabilities are interpreted in religious or spiritual ways, seen as fated and therefore as serving an important purpose, unwanted and insensitive involvement has the potential to throw a whole community off balance, actually worsening the situation of the clients.

It is within the system of administration and financing that the full extent of organized cultural insensitivity operates largely unnoticed, which is also indicated by the events described by Burck above. People who run the charities from afar and rarely see themselves confronted with the reality on site, must work out the financial support the organization needs to function. This support is gained by showing off successes, which are being judged within the realm of certain cultural standards. "This man got married" is simply not as impressive as "this man is now supporting himself through his employment in a small workshop." Most sponsors would not donate money to help people in some foreign country get married, be they disabled or not. The current, intrusive models cannot be fully successful because they cannot and are not allowed to work in a culturally sensitive manner. What matters to the business of disability organizations is not primarily the satisfaction of the individual client, but the judgement of the wider public and the sponsors.[35]

How, then, can people with disabilities be supported in a culturally sensitive manner? The answer is rather obvious: They themselves can take initiative in the form of self-advocacy. Employees of aid programmes should be recruited locally or should ideally have a bicultural background, allowing them to reliably navigate the winding paths of culture. Clinical psychologist and multicultural studies scholar Stanley Sue concludes from his own research that culture-specific experts "are effective in their own cultures because they know the cultures and have the skills to

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[34] Burck, "Incorporation of Knowledge of Social and Cultural Factors in the Practice of Rehabilitation Projects," 205.

[35] Ibid., 206.

translate this knowledge into effective interventions."[36] It would then appear to be the duty of those who are in charge of organizing aid systems to support local actors and ensure the free distribution of information, while standing back from getting otherwise involved. This, however, would necessarily mean both a loss of control and severe damage to the carefully constructed self-image. There is little enthusiasm about playing second fiddle, especially since our image of the *other* has been equally meticulously fabricated. In painting the picture of the primitive, indigenous barbarian as well as that of the helpless, victimized individual *suffering* from a disability, we have concluded in advance that individuals are not to be trusted with taking their fate into their own hands. The same patronizing attitudes we have against people with disabilities within our own culture are here amplified through several additional layers of othering, maintaining the strained status of intercultural relationships for the sake of maintaining the dominant position of the West.

[36] Stanley Sue, "In Search of Cultural Competence in Psychotherapy and Counselling," *The American Psychologist* 53.4 (1998): 446.

Tobias Jetter (ed.), Global Cultural Studies? Engaged Scholarship between National and Transnational Frames, Würzburg, 2023, p. 129–147. DOI: 10.25972/WUP-978-3-95826-207-2-129

Female Suicidality and Its Cultural Aspects: Watching the "Living Dead" in Deepa Mehta's *Water*

Ridhi Chaturvedi

I
The Politics of Gendering Death: An Introduction

> The general law for widows, that they should observe *brahmacarya*, was, however, hardly ever debated. […] It is […] of much greater significance that there was no debate on this nonexceptional fate of widows – either among Hindus or between Hindus and British – than that the *exceptional* prescription of self-immolation was actively contended. Here, the possibility of recovering a (sexually) subaltern subject is once again lost and overdetermined.[1]

The problem with studying suicides from a humanities and cultural studies perspective in contemporary India is that there is an evident discomfort in the academic circle with regards to this subject. The researchers, therefore, generally adopt either an entirely psychological approach or a survey-like pragmatic scientificity in dealing with the topic, probably because there is always a preconceived moral stance attached with it, either prohibiting or endorsing. This is why, as an Indian scholar, one has to refer to Western theories and ongoing research such as Mark E. Button's "Suicide and Social Justice: Toward a Political Approach to Suicide" and Daniel Gordon's "From Act to Fact: The Transformation of Suicide in Western Thought" (both 2016) in understanding the cultural, political, and social complexities of suicide, although these theories might or might not be appropriate in the Indian context.[2] The reason for this reliance could be similar to what Maitrayee Chaudhuri identifies in feminist studies as the "existing international academic division of labour which presumes that theorization is the preserve of western concern and expertise."[3]

Suicides among *women*, however, have not been in focus even in Western academia. This is partly because statistics generally reveal a huge gender gap in suicide

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1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 302–303.

2 Mark E. Button, "Suicide and Social Justice: Toward a Political Approach to Suicide," *Political Research Quarterly* 69.2 (2016): 270–280; Daniel Gordon, "From Act to Fact: The Transformation of Suicide in Western Thought," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 42.2 (2016): 32–51.

3 Maitrayee Chaudhuri, "Introduction," in *Feminism in India*, edited by Maitrayee Chaudhuri (London: Zed Books, 2005), xi.

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rates: Men die by suicide almost twice as often as women.[4] However, women attempt suicide at least three times more frequently than men do.[5] Now, since men are more tangibly at risk, the risk for women is not given much (or any) attention, as psychologist Silvia Sara Canetto writes: "Because women generally have lower rates of suicide mortality, relative to men, women's suicidality tends to be viewed as less serious and urgent."[6] Another reason why Western theories are used in Indian research on female suicidality is because of "an active lack of interest, an impatience with 'theory' in societies such as ours [i.e., Indian] where the sheer urgency of people's problems demands immediate alleviation."[7] Furthermore, since suicide rates in India are generally rather high, theories from the humanities about suicidalities in the broadest sense – that is not just suicide as the attempted and/or achieved ending of one's life, but the different kinds of self-incurred metaphorical deaths – become absolutely inutile in practical terms.

Outside academia, too, there is a gender bias. A man's suicide tends to be seen sympathetically – as a tragic response to adversity, a form of mastery, an affirmation of autonomy and rationality in the face of unrelenting adverse circumstances caused by physical, professional, or societal reasons,[8] or by the negative influence of a female partner.[9] On the other hand, when it comes to women, suicide typically triggers a (negative) character judgment and is treated as a form of deviance from the subject's femininity because for a woman, who is so heavily regulated under the burden of dignity, chastity, and her familial and social duties, to make an individual "choice," even if it is solely about their own death, is seen as the abandonment of her expected feminine roles and responsibilities. Suicide is, in other words, an exercise of "power": a term which is commonly associated with masculinity.

Therefore, after a woman's suicide, one might hear statements like: "She did not even care about her children," "What about her parents?" or "How could she be so selfish?" Now, one might bring forth the instance of *sati* to counter my point,

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[4] "Suicides in India," Chapter 2 of *Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India 2021*, *National Crime Records Bureau of India*, n.p., web.

[5] This fact has been established for more than a century. See Émile Durkheim's classic 1897 publication *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, edited by George Simpson, translated by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2005), especially 121 and 263. Compare figures recently published by the World Health Organization (WHO), "Suicide Rate Estimates, Crude – Estimates by Country," *Global Health Observatory Data Repository, World Health Organization*, 2019, web.

[6] Silvia Sara Canetto, "Women and Suicidal Behaviour," in *Oxford Textbook of Suicidology and Suicide Prevention,* edited by Danuta Wasserman, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 333–342.

[7] Chaudhuri, "Introduction," xi.

[8] Silvia Sara Canetto, "Gender and Suicidal Behavior: Theories and Evidence," in *Review of Suicidology,* edited by Ronald Maris, Morton Silverman, and Silvia Sara Canetto (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997), 145.

[9] The media narrative on the death of the Bollywood celebrity Sushant Singh Rajput on 14 June 2020 is a recent example of such discourses. See, for example, "Bollywood Killed Sushant Singh Rajput Out Of Jealousy, Sister Meenu Singh in New Social Media Post," *OutlookIndia,* 11 September 2022, web.

especially as it is close to the focus of the text analysed in this essay: Deepa Mehta's *Water* (2005), a film that follows the lives of widows in a fictional 1930s ashram on the banks of the Ganges. I want to make it clear that, above and beyond the discourses of resistance and power in these rites, self-immolation of widows was rarely a personal "choice" of the woman, and even when it was, it was only to escape the difficult *brahmacarya* – i.e., the life of celibacy and acute self-denial, enforced on widowed women as objects.[10] As Canetto says: "[I]n Hindu tradition, a widow does not have good life-choices; she only has a good-death choice."[11] Therefore, it becomes relevant to ask what is meant by "choice" when referring to suicide, and if there is any real "choice" involved at all. Are not most of these suicides resulting from social issues, basically enforced from outside pressures, that is, almost an indirect form of murder, so to say? And, if the death is not physically manifested, there is not even any responsibility or blame to be assigned. This is why, in India, female suicides either remain underreported and misrepresented, or female life itself turns into a long haul of suicidality comparable to what Achille Mbembe calls being "*living dead*."[12]

Mbembe, in his essay "Necropolitics" (2003), uses the examples of contemporary as well as historical political crises in understanding biopower and necropower. He asks how death and suicide enmesh in themselves the potentiality of resistance, sacrifice, redemption, martyrdom, and freedom. While the political topographies of the essay might not be relevant here, I want to hold on to Mbembe's understanding of life in death and death in life. Using Georges Bataille's definition of death, Mbembe explicates how death is an "*excess*," "the most luxurious form of life," and an "*absolute expenditure*," or "expenditure without reserve."[13] From what we are going to discuss in the next sections of the essay, we will realize how the Indian widows of the 1930s, who were not offered the option of self-immolation, were stripped of life to such an extent of humiliation that they could not even afford this luxury or expense of death. Both life and suicide became unaffordable privileges, so that the widows had to indulge the life of death. This is close to what Mbembe calls "a form of death-in-life" in the context of slavery, where the slave is "kept alive but in a *state of injury*, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity," turning the slave's commodified existence into the "perfect figure of a shadow."[14] Widows too, as we will see through Mehta's film, lose the right over their life and death, and in their case, this "form of death-in-life" is living with *brahmacarya*. Mbembe also discusses the logic of martyrdom and survival. The logic of survival lies in the killing of the opponent and in surviving their attack, where in the opponent's death, one feels a higher security regarding one's own chance at

[10] Widows were burned, mostly against their wishes, by greedy male relatives in those parts of the subcontinent that followed the *dāyabhāga* mode of inheritance: that is, where the women, too, had the power to inherit. This point was discussed thoroughly in a private conversation with Professor Saugata Bhaduri from the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi.

[11] Canetto, "Women and Suicidal Behaviour," 333–342.

[12] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 40. Emphasis in the original.

[13] Ibid., 15. Emphases in the original.

[14] Ibid., 21. Emphasis in the original.

surviving. In the context of the lives of the widows, in their secluded spaces of ashram, with extreme deficiency of food and the basic necessities for survival, they achieve their sense of security by the death of the other widow, their companion as well as opponent. Mbembe's logic of martyrdom focuses on suicide bombers, but what is significant is that the idea of death becomes a source of self-awareness. For widows, who do not have access to death, the expectation to have the awareness of self is impossible. Therefore, their selves are slaughtered at the very moment they are expected to live at the cost of dying. Mbembe explains how death and freedom are intertwined, and that death becomes the mediator of redemption, which in this context reiterates the argument of how these widows are pushed to the limits of being stifled with no hopes of redemption or release. The absolute abduction of agency is a signifier of how death becomes not the ultimate emancipation, but the cruel struggle of everyday life.

In such a case, I propose to view death not as the final moment of living but as a performance, a struggle through which these social outcasts are supposed to live. In this context, suicidality can be taken to mean the submission to death as a spectrum, where the common understanding of death as the physical indicator of the end of life lies only at the extreme end of the scale. No matter how much of a lived reality it is, this manner of existence cannot be rendered in the figures and data of scientific studies on suicide. Hence, I believe that it is only in the humanities, and perhaps particularly within a cultural studies framework that is attuned to the dynamics of representation, ordinary life practices, and power, that a case study on suicidality in the sense offered here could be undertaken and understood through the experience of being human. This essay will foreground my definition of suicidality as an alternative to suicide, and thus as the enigmatic presupposition of what was expected of a widow in 1930s India. For this purpose, I will study Deepa Mehta's film *Water* closely and use its symbolic economies, plot, and cinematography for understanding the possibilities of dying every day, or, in my argument, of suicidalitiy.

II
Theoretical Conceptions of Suicidality

Suicide in the general understanding of the term means a death that has resulted from any immediate, voluntary, physical action. However, Émile Durkheim explains:

> The intrinsic nature of the acts so resulting is unimportant. Though suicide is commonly conceived as a positive, violent action involving some muscular energy, it may happen that a purely negative attitude or mere abstention will have the same consequence. Refusal to take food is as suicidal as self-destruction by a dagger or firearm. The subject's act need not even have been directly

> antecedent to death for death to be regarded as its effect; the causal relation may be indirect without that changing the nature of the phenomenon.[15]

And then he adds:

> Whether death is accepted merely as an unfortunate consequence, but inevitable given the purpose, or is actually itself sought and desired, in either case the person renounces existence, and the various methods of doing so can be only varieties of a single class. […] Of course, in common terms, suicide is pre-eminently the desperate act of one who does not care to live. But actually life is none the less abandoned because one desires it at the moment of renouncing it; and there are common traits clearly essential to all acts by which a living being thus renounces the possession presumably most precious of all. Rather, the diversity of motives capable of actuating these resolves can give rise only to secondary differences. Thus, when resolution entails certain sacrifice of life, scientifically this is suicide.[16]

In that case the question is: If the explicit choice of immediate physical death is a privilege, a cry of individuality, and a protest against social structures, can the person (in this instance, a woman) cease to exist? That is, is there a suicide of the "self" without immediately and physically dying? American psychiatrist Karl A. Menninger defines such death as "chronic suicide":

> The individual postpones death indefinitely, at a cost of suffering and impairment of function which is equivalent to a partial suicide a "living death," it is true, but nevertheless living. In such persons, however, the destructive urge is often of a progressive nature, requiring larger and larger payments until finally the individual is, as it were, bankrupted and must surrender to actual death.[17]

The examples that Menninger provides for such slow or rather chronic suicides are those of "martyrdom" and "ascetics," which I will consider more closely in regard to *Water*.

To continue creating a possible definition of alternative suicidalities, Slavoj Žižek's tripartite categorization of violence and his use of the Lacanian understanding of suicide can make things clearer for us. In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008), Žižek offers three types of violence: subjective, systemic, and symbolic.[18] The subjective is the visible type of violence, in which an identifiable agent – that is, the subject – causes a disruption in the normal and peaceful order of things. For instance, in suicide, the subject, who is easily identified, is also the object of violence. However, Žižek suggests that one should primarily reflect on the other two types, which constitute objective violence: namely, systemic and symbolic violence. Systemic violence is the result of economic and political systems. Symbolic violence occurs when language is employed to create reality or when it is superimposed on

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15 Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, xl.
16 Ibid.
17 Karl A. Menninger, *Man Against Himself* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), 88.
18 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 59–67.

real acts of violence. Here, Žižek gives the instance of the Jews as an ethnic group on whom attacks are made not on the basis of immediate reality, but on the basis of a symbolic, hateful image traditionally circulated.[19] Thus, while suicide may appear to be a form of subjective violence, an attempt could also be made to observe the simultaneous presence of systemic and symbolic violence.

In *The Fragile Absolute* (2001), Žižek provides three variants of suicide – real, imaginary, and symbolic – that further nuance our perspective. Real suicide is the variant in which, as the Freudian/Lacanian explanation goes, the subject considers itself incomplete and over-identifies with the object of desire. When the object is lost, the void is so consuming that the subject chooses to die. Imaginary suicide is the variant that springs from the subject's wish to send a message of disappointment to its Other(s), expecting a narcissistic satisfaction in the imagination that once the subject is gone, the loss will be regretted. Finally, Žižek sees symbolic suicide as the most fundamental and momentous kind. Here the subject kills its subjectivity by cutting off all the links that anchor it in its symbolic substance, thereby depriving the self of its subject identity.[20]

III
Water and the Role of the Widow: An Analysis

Deepa Mehta's *Water* follows the story of the eight-year-old child widow Chuiya who is in effect dumped at the widow-house by her parents. We are introduced to the other widows in the house from her perspective. Madhumati, the head of the widow-house, exploits the other widows in order to satisfy her own desires. Shakuntala is the only literate widow in the house and assumes a motherly role for Chuiya. The still youthful Kalyani is forced to sexually gratify the patrons of the house and falls in love with a liberal Western-educated university student, Narayan. Patiraji (referred to as *Bua* or Aunt) has grown old and fragile but still remembers her wedding day because of the rich sweets which had been served there and for which she yearns until they become the reason for her death. Through these characters, we witness the horrifying state of living in the ashram where these widows are deprived of food, clothing, and bedding. Any thought, except for that of God, is forbidden and treated as a digression from being dedicated to God and the sacred memory of the deceased husband.

In the filmic text of *Water* there is only one obvious and visible suicide, that of the character Kalyani Devi (played by Lisa Ray). She did not even meet her husband before his death, and so does not remember when and how she became a widow. However, the cultural ideologization amongst the widows is so deeply rooted that despite being unaware of their sins, they obey the punishment as faithful subjects. Their subjectification is such that, when the widowed child Chuiya (played by Sarala

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute* (London: Verso, 2001), 27–31.

Karyawasam), who has not yet been ideologized, asks about the residence of the "male widows" in an early scene, she is rebuked for her childish imagination by the widows themselves. This shows that the sacrifices made by the widows are only meant for women, while men are supposed to prepare the altar for those sacrifices. Kalyani, too, like a faithful subject, initially tells her upper-caste love interest Narayan (played by John Abraham) that those traditions that are "good should not die out."[21] Being a subaltern both in terms of gender and by force of being a widow, Kalyani expects Narayan, in his hegemonic role, to articulate on her behalf, as she puts the responsibility of differentiating between good and bad on him.

This stance is highlighted in a crucial scene. On her way to the Ganga Ghat for a romantic rendezvous with Narayan, Kalyani takes the lamp from the temple, showing her complete trust in and submission to him like those shown to a god with the song in the score literally saying "Meri aas ka tu manmeet" ("You are the friend of my soul's hopes").[22] But by the time Narayan could act and speak for the subaltern against the dominating force of an upper-caste Hindu male client, who is also his father, it is too late for him to be the "friend of [Kalyani's] soul's hopes." While Kalyani's suicide is apparently an instance of subjective violence according to Žižek's model, we realise that it is just the ultimate stage in her objective suicidality. Her chronic suicide had begun at an extremely early stage as a child widow, as she was and is subjected to symbolic violence like all the other widows. For instance, when she mistakenly jostles with another woman on the street during an outing with Chuiya early in the film, she is told, although the encounter is completely harmless, that "widows shouldn't be running around like unmarried girls. You've polluted me! I have to bathe again."[23] This is due to the symbolic idea of the widow as an embodiment of bad luck.

Kalyani is also subjected to what Žižek identifies as systemic violence because the widow-houses were not sponsored by anyone and to survive (that is to keep breathing, not to live), the most beautiful amongst the younger women had to provide sex to upper-caste men (who are almost invariably also upper-class). These men would propagate their exploitation as benevolence in providing monetary help in exchange for sleeping with the widows, since it was believed that sleeping with Brahmin men blesses women. Narayan even admits towards the end of the movie that, "[d]isguised as religion, it is just about money."[24] In fact, the word he uses is *vyapaar*, which literally means "business," extending the sexual connotation of the exploitation to the economic. In this connotation, then, the character of Madhumati (played by Manorama), the chief of the widow-house, can be treated as the "boss" figure in a business structure who, despite being a subaltern herself, allies herself with the oppressor for individual benefits. Kalyani finally decides to break the chain

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[21] *Water*, directed by Deepa Mehta (Canada/USA/India: Searchlight Pictures/Mongrel Media/B. R. Films, 2005), 01:04:46. For English-language subtitles, see "Water Subtitles," *Open Subtitles*, n.d., web.

[22] *Water*, 00:59:12. Unless otherwise indicated, all further translations are my own.

[23] Ibid., 00:21:19.

[24] Ibid., 01:38:24.

of these symbolic and systemic forms of violence and chooses symbolic suicide. As Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming observe in their analysis of capitalist work structures, *Dead Man Working* (2012): "[I]t is not enough for us to kill the boss […]. Because, ultimately, we *are* the boss […] To kill ourselves, symbolically, is to kill the boss function."[25] Kalyani wishes to kill the "boss function" by deciding to get remarried, thus killing how she knows herself, that is, as a widow, and starting "anew."

This hope of renewal is countered by pessimistic foreshadowing. Like the parrot in the cage, whom Chuyia had offered a violent freedom in an earlier scene, Kalyani's dreams and optimism cannot survive. She returns to the widow-house after an inevitable humiliation and Madhumati expects her to reinstate herself in the same sexually exploitative systemic violence. However, this time, instead of killing her own autonomy, she chooses to assert the self within by dying corporeally. This decision is not formulated in words, but rather shown through symbolic action. Before dying, Kalyani removes the white cloth that is bought from the money of the clients, showing her absolute separation from the exploitative economic system (figure 1). The close-up shot of the cloth with the Tulsi neck beads, signifying the life of penance as a widow, with the rippling sound of the water, signifying Kalyani's movement away from the discarded items into the water, shows that this is her final and only way to escape from the long, painful, and continuous life of death, or chronic suicide.

Kalyani's death in *Water*, though it is quite context-specific, can be situated within the larger framework of female suicidalities. Her literal suicide is strikingly close to the emancipating death of Edna Pontellier at the ending of Kate Chopin's novella *The Awakening* (1899).[26] Unlike the common belief that the aesthetics of suicide have to be represented as in a rush, in an atmosphere of restlessness and through uneven anxious gestures, in both Kalyani's and Edna's entrance into the water there is a relief as well as a hopeful fecundity of death. Water as the mode of suicide becomes even more relevant in this discussion. Kalyani's death takes place in a notably calm Ganges, and this calmness is emphasized by a serene background score of the flute. In Chopin's novella, Edna's walk to the sea is equally peaceful. She is compared to a child and her exhaustion is emphasized:

> How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. […] Her arms and legs were growing tired. […] Exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her.[27]

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[25] Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming, *Dead Man Working* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012), 66.

[26] Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (Elibron Classics, 2006). I am very thankful to my fellow discussant Adrian Döring for highlighting the similarity between the characters of Kalyani Devi and Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier.

[27] Ibid., 120–121.

Figure 1. Kalyani removing the white cloth before her descent into the water. Still image taken from the film *Water* (2005).

In both cases the act of getting rid of one's clothing is significant. Along with the death by water, the film and the novella suggest the reverse birth of a naked, unexploited, innocent baby. According to medical research on the psychodynamics of suicide, "[d]rowning represents not only suffocation, but also rejoining mother, by immersion in what becomes literally a fluid *matrix*."[28] Therefore, death by drowning can be understood as a gasp of longing for a new life at the other end of this endeavour as well as a union with the mother figure. The two characters are extremely different in various ways, but their absorption into a larger motherhood or womankind strengthens the hope for a transnational, universal feminist world where no woman has to undergo death every day. In fact, Kalyani's walk into the water, being rid of the clothes and all their implicit significance, is also a walk away from a cremating dead body. This suggests that her suicide is to be seen as an act of breaking away from the vicious circle of life, agony, and painful endings.

When the movie begins, there is an epigraph quoted from *Manusmriti* (*The Laws of Manu*):

> A widow should be long suffering until death, self-restrained and chaste. A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven. A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal.

Therefore, the expected behaviour of a widow is a form of asceticism similar to the kind that Menninger talks about in describing chronic suicides. Another relevant example Menninger uses is that of martyrdom, and one can immediately associate this type of death with the rites of *sati*. However, the kind of martyrdom for a widow who is alive is different from that of *sati*, which the historian Upendra Thakur glorifies in *The History of Suicide in India* (1963).[29] This distinction takes us directly to what, in the film, the preacher Sadananda (played by Kulbhushan Kharbanda) explains about the life of a widow:

> The scriptures say that widows have three options. They can burn with their dead husbands; or lead a life of self-denial; or, if the family permits, marry their husband's younger brother.[30]

However, these are not strictly all the "options" available to women, but rather the options decided by the cultural lineages of the particular families. Amongst the three, women who are expected to lead a life of self-denial are arguably making particularly painful sacrifices; instead of ceasing to exist at once, they are denying life and destroying the self every day.

In such a case of self-denying chronic suicidality, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's comparison between Mahatma Gandhi's *satyagraha* and *sati* in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) is twisted because *sati*, as Spivak says, is a "good

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[28] Sidney Furst and Micol Ostow, "The Psychodynamics of Suicide," *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 41.2 (1965): 201.

[29] Upendra Thakur, *The History of Suicide in India: An Introduction* (Delhi: Munshi Ram Manohar Lal Oriental, 1963), 183.

[30] Mehta, *Water*, 00:00:36.

wife, who […] escapes the regressive stasis of the widow in *brahmacrya*,"[31] while Gandhian resistance was a delayed sacrifice through hunger strike and renunciation. Spivak's definitive text, which acts as a gateway for Western academics into Indian theories of the subaltern and *sati*, fixates so much on the "voice," free will, subjectivity, and agency of women in choosing or transgressing the ritual of *sati* that it almost obliterates the existence of the widows who are forced to survive, living as the sanitized, less scandalizing figures of *sati*. In Spivak's essay, the claim that the "root in the first part of satyagraha and sati are the same" puts the sacrifice of the widows on a sacred pedestal.[32] Therefore, the preacher's reference to Gandhi in Mehta's film points not just to a saviour figure, but also to the prototype of sacrifice. Thus, the *sat* that Spivak mentions as being beyond gender specificity becomes gendered.[33] While Gandhi, being a man, has a choice and is part of the hegemonic force, the widows are choiceless subalterns. In contrast to Gandhi, who was fighting for rightful freedom, the widows portrayed in the film are not even aware of their rights nor do they have a clear sense of freedom. As Spivak mentions, the reference to the *sat* is also important because of its association with the holy symbol of the *swastika*, which means "domestic comfort."[34] Interestingly, in the film's first shot of the widow-house the two *swastika*s are drawn in reverse to how Hindus compose the symbol (figure 2), which hints at the desecrated lives of the deprived: the *sat* not as spiritual growth, but as a punishment enforced. Moreover, given the kind of hunger, poverty, and ghettoization the film widows go through, these *swastikas* also remind us of the fascist symbol and its connection to dehumanization and extermination. Therefore, while the *sat* that Gandhi represents is one of self-liberation, the *sat* of the widows, with no remaining self, is one of bare survival. This is why, when Kalyani seeks her self-liberation in love, she is told off by Madhumati: "How we survive here, no one can question, not even God!"[35]

Similarly, the self of each of the widows has been denied in the movie. Shakuntala (played by Seema Biswas) becomes the central figure to depict the conflict of being a particularly compassionate and the only literate woman in the ashram, caught in a turmoil between being obedient and faithful or questioning the meaning of self-liberation as a human being. She not only becomes the substitute maternal figure for Chuiya, but also rebels for Kalyani's cause. While she never transgresses the boundaries for herself, she actively questions the mistreatment and fate of being a widow. When she is asked if she feels closer to self-liberation, she says: "If self-liberation means detachment from worldly desires, then no, I'm no closer."[36] Unlike Kalyani – who, as a young widow, unwittingly commits the grave mistake of jostling with a married woman – Shakuntala is so used to her own defunct soul and its

[31] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 302 and 305.
[32] Ibid., 302.
[33] Ibid., 100.
[34] Ibid., 102.
[35] *Water*, 01:15:58.
[36] Ibid., 00:41:54.

Figure 2. The holy symbols, *swastika*s, shown inverted on either side of the entrance-door to the widow-house. Still image taken from the film *Water* (2005).

indignation that when the priest instructs her to "Watch it! Don't let your shadow touch the bride!" she does not even react. As she recedes from the pond in this scene, she eagerly looks at the couple and their wedding rites, while in the background, again, dead bodies are being cremated (figure 3). The composition and cinematic unfolding of the scene show that even in her disowned desires, the only consummation is through erasing the imaginary traces of those desires, much like those burning dead bodies which have no animate aspirations left.

As is shown in the film, exceptionally young girls who had not even reached puberty were often married to elderly men. The result was early widowhood, with the self being mutilated when it had not even developed yet. This raises the question: If the self has not survived with the body, how does one liberate it? Mehta's film explores this question through the figure of the elderly Patiraji (*Bua*/Aunt, played by Vidula Javalgekar). She is introduced as an old, fragile woman with a childish rationality, whose adult identity, having been widowed at the tender age of seven, could not be developed thereafter. She is the only one in the ashram who is thoroughly amused by Chuiya when she runs away after biting Madhumati. Her desires are still stuck in the child-like craving for sweets, when, after the initial introduction, she asks for *laddoo* and confesses how she only ever thinks of it and nothing else, whether awake or asleep. The rich Indian sweet *laddoo*, which is considered a sign of new beginnings, becomes the crux of her deep desires, as it is a forbidden food for the widows. Self-denial, therefore, extends not just to the right to a dignified life, but also the right to pleasure, including food. By finally satisfying the desire of the self with the *laddoo* (figure 4), she reverses the imagination of death from being treated as an end of life to the symbol of an auspicious new beginning, perhaps even a better and more humane afterlife. She also puts in question the symbolic violence inherent in the imagination of desire fulfilment being sinful for the widows. In this process, she goes ahead with symbolic suicide by breaking away from the years of renunciation and choosing pleasure instead. Thereby, she also chooses a literal, but content death. When Shakuntala says to Chuiya "Don't worry, after eating the *laddoo*, she'll go to heaven" she not only reinstates the right to pleasure as a human being who also happens to be a widow but also utilizes the symbol of the *laddoo* to define death as a commencement rather than an end. Heaven is the source of hope for those who have spent all their lives in disillusionment.

Chuiya, too, has been uprooted from her family at a young age and wonders if there is any end to her life of death. The movie begins with her rubbing her eyes after sleep, as she asks her father innocently about how long she has to stay a widow.[37] By rubbing her eyes, she is shown to enter into the world of horrifying realities; and through her vision, we are introduced to the widows. It is through her perspective that we realise that these women are more dead than their dead husbands because, unlike them, these women are dumped and forgotten. When Madhumati dehumanizes the widows, arguing that they cannot feel pain because

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37 Ibid., 00:03:43.

Figure 3. Shakuntala looking at the wedding rites as she walks away, while dead bodies are being cremated behind her. Still image taken from the film *Water* (2005).

Figure 4. Patiraji satisfying her forbidden longing for *laddoo*. Still image taken from the film *Water* (2005).

one half of them dies after the death of their husband, she knows that she is half alive too and completely capable of feeling pain and sorrow.[38] At the same time, Chuiya is still unaware that this half-life is what gradually, as a widow, she would be expected to sacrifice by giving up colourful clothes, tasteful food, her already fissured childhood, and even her sexual security. Chuiya keeps hoping to return home even when she knows she cannot,[39] and towards the end of the film, after she is sexually abused, we are not sure if the lively, playful Chuiya can ever return to her-*self* anymore. We are left with the unnerving question of whether her life of death as a living widow ever ends, so she can finally leave her trauma and indignation behind.

IV
Suicidality and Filmmaking

In *Water* Mehta traces suicidality not only in the narrative, but also in her cinematography through scenes strongly tinted in a blue hue. The technique goes back to early filmmaking. The US-American director D. W. Griffith famously tinted emotionalizing scenes blue in *Birth of a Nation* (1915). In particular, blue was used for scenes in which women and children were endangered. The color coding thereby primed for the emotional response of empathy.[40] While arguably drawing on this background, Mehta's use and understanding of the color's implications are more complex. For the director, blue means "the step before darkness, […] gradation towards something that's perhaps looming and inevitable."[41] She could have easily worked with whites and blacks for such a grim theme, but her choice of blue is interesting because it depicts how for women, and in this case widows, there is never really any binary in their existence.[42] There is always a suspension into a deadly blue gloom, shaded along a continuum from the light and airy to nearly black gloom, and never the liberty or assurance of finality between the blacks and the whites that could have offered a secure contrast.

However, in India, Mehta is more known for the public outrage she draws than for her art. One cannot talk about the shooting and release history of *Water* (2005) without talking about Mehta's previous films *Fire* (1996) *and Earth* (1998).[43] *Fire* created a huge scandal because it was apparently the first film featuring mainstream

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[38] Ibid., 00:09:35.

[39] Ibid., 00:55:40.

[40] See *Birth of a Nation*, directed by D. W. (David Wark) Griffith (United States: David W. Griffith Co. / Epoch, 1915), 00:46:44.

[41] "Deepa Mehta Opens up about Her Work and Shares the Best Advice," *CBC Arts* on *YouTube*, 13 September 2017, web.

[42] This can be contrasted with the black-and-white colour palette in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), which suggests stark differences between the victim and the victimizer with red highlighting the possibilities of human warmth and connection.

[43] *Fire*, directed by Deepa Mehta (Canada/India: Deepa Mehta Productions, 1996); *Earth*, directed by Deepa Mehta (Canada/India: Deepa Mehta Productions, 1998).

Indian actors that depicted a lesbian bond between two characters who were in addition also named after two revered Indian goddesses, Sita and Radha.[44] Right-wing groups violently protested the film, claiming that homosexuality is a Western concept and that there are no lesbians in India. They further demanded that even if such a film is shown for the sake of awareness, the characters should be renamed as Shabana and Sayra. That is: They should be given Muslim names.[45] *Fire* was believed to be an attack on Hinduism and on an Indian cultural heritage which the commentators believed to be exclusively constituted by Hinduism. Despite the riots, however, the film was released and did fairly well in the box office, grossing $8,172,058 worldwide.[46]

In *Earth* Mehta then tried to show the plight of Hindus and Muslims amidst the chaos of Partition in 1947. She strategically won over Hindu sentiments by depicting the ultimate villain in the movie as a Muslim (the character of Dil Nawaz, played by Aamir Khan) who victimises a Hindu woman (the character of Shanta, played by Nandita Das). Probably, this turn to a conventional black-and-white kind of storytelling was a key reason why the film was chosen as the official Indian nomination for the Academy Awards in 1999. By this time, Mehta was aware that she was on the national radar because of the controversies surrounding *Fire*; so much so that she confessed in an interview: "In this climate right now, it would have been disastrous, you know, if I was Muslim, I would have been lynched by now."[47] Despite being aware of the risks in triggering majoritarian sensibilities, she attempted to shoot *Water* in 2000. *This* was not only a likely career suicide, but actually a life-threatening, literally self-destructive, decision. Right-wing mobs destroyed the film set in the northern Indian city of Kashi (officially, Varanasi) on the second day of the shoot and threatened to lynch the actors and the director. They claimed that the movie was a Western conspiracy against Hinduism and the integrity of widowhood in India.[48] Most strikingly, given the focus of the film, they threatened to hold suicide protests. The government did not help the artists much, in spite of Mehta's Academy Award nomination. Finally, after a long legal struggle, Mehta was asked to drop the project and leave the country because of the risks to her life and to the lives of the film cast.

Despite this appalling display of personal humiliation, Mehta did not drop the project. In 2003 she returned to shoot the film in Sri Lanka under the pretended title "River Moon."[49] Because of the violence and stigmatization the entire crew had experienced before, she also signed new actors. The film was finally received with great enthusiasm all over the world. It was nominated for the Oscars and won

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[44] Sita, the wife of Rama, and Radha, the lover of Krishna, are Hindu mythological characters, but they are often revered and worshipped as goddesses.

[45] "Fire by Deepa Mehta | Documentary | Behind the Scenes," *Steria* on *YouTube*, 30 October 2020, web, 14:48.

[46] "Water 2006 Re-Release," *Box Office Mojo*, 2016, web.

[47] "Fire by Deepa Mehta | Documentary | Behind the Scenes," 15:52.

[48] "'Water' Shooting Stopped Again, Mehta Asked to Leave Varanasi," *The Hindu,* via *Archive.ph*, 7 February 2000, web.

[49] "Water (2005 Film)," *Wikipedia*, 28 November 2021, web.

awards at the Bangkok International Film Festival, the Oslo Films from the South Festival, and from the Vancouver Film Critics Circle. In India, however, the film remains banned to the present day.[50]

The transnational, national, and nationalist dimensions of the making of *Water* are important. Mehta continues to face boycotts in India, and it is curious how during the controversies surrounding *Fire* she was seen as the evil Western woman, while during the promotion for *Earth* she apparently represented India. However, ever since *Water* she has been seen as the Western, desecrating element again. Despite being born and brought up in India, Mehta has had to use her Canadian citizenship for sheer survival throughout her career. As she has often said in interviews, when the shooting for *Water* was halted and she was receiving death threats coming back to Canada was a huge relief.[51] In spite of its Indian topic, the film was sent to the 2007 Academy Awards as a Canadian entry for best foreign film. These developments might be taken to suggest the flexibility and even the relative unimportance of national categories. However, the violence directed at Mehta, and particularly the gendered dimensions of that violence, suggests something quite different: the power of the national and the perils of a hyper-nationalism so deeply enmeshed with hyper-masculinity that any woman's rising to the hegemony in order to articulate for the subaltern is responded to with violence.

This reaction is a continuation of the history of conflating the image of a chaste and self-sacrificing woman with that of the nation. In fact, in the violent protests against both *Fire* and *Water* in India, some women were taking the lead because of Hindutva politics offering "individual women real space in the public realm, a degree of empowerment and a new sense of self-confidence."[52] However, one must observe "its uncompromising orthodox compulsions as well as its decidedly fundamentalist tendencies," as Chaudhuri observes:

> An inalienable gap exists between the spaces that it [i.e., Hindutva] affords to some middle-class women and the overall thrust of the Hindu right's offensive against the basic premises of liberal rights and thereby of modern secularism. It is no surprise, therefore, that these women do not join contemporary women's agitations for gender rights and justice [but rather those against it].[53]

The result, therefore, is that the important discourses around the struggles of womanhood are lost, reduced to scandals, and remain unacknowledged within the politics of choosing which narratives are supposed to be validated.

[50] "Water," *IMDb*, 2014, web.

[51] "Deepa Mehta Opens up about Her Work and Shares the Best Advice," *CBC Arts* on *YouTube*, 13 September 2017, web.

[52] Chaudhuri, "Introduction," xxiv.

[53] Ibid.

V
Questions for the Future

As a conclusion, I can only offer a rather bleak statement, which is necessary in assessing reality. The kind of suicidality we witness in *Water*, though focusing on Indian widows, is not exclusive to India, or to widows, for that matter. There are instances of similar chronic suicides where death is never even a choice, especially when considering the incessant silencing and marginalization of women across the world. In these circumstances, some questions are worth contemplating: What are the roles of the spectators – national, international, or transnational – as an audience and as political citizens in the articulation of the issues of the subaltern? How does the "personal" tragedy of a woman's suicide become "political," and is the "local" subjective violence of suicidality linked directly to "global" objective violence? Finally, how does the sheer ignorance within Indian and Western academic and political elites, towards such unacknowledged sacrifices take away the universal characteristic of solidarity that feminism claims? This research is still developing, and so I am not able to answer my questions. Nonetheless, it is to be hoped that through the continued critical work in cultural studies and the humanities one will soon be able to delve deeper into the aesthetic counterparts of being the living-dead, and probably even offer new perspectives on these issues.

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In Place of a Conclusion

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Rethinking Cultural Studies: From the Role of the Intellectual to Transnational Feminism

Saskia Wohlfahrt

I
Broadening Perspectives

In his essay "On 'Cultural Studies'" (1993), Fredric Jameson calls for "a cultural studies analysis of Cultural Studies itself."[1] While Jameson is highly critical of the cultural studies *en vogue* in the late twentieth-century North American academy (his essay is a takedown of the 1992 omnibus volume *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler), in his attempt at singling out those features of the field which distinguish it from other social sciences, he does stress the potential of cultural studies to promote intellectual and political discussion in a space of reciprocity and exchange between various social groups and movements. According to Jameson, cultural studies rejects the notion of one group affiliation in favour of a more diversified conception of identity. He thus asserts that the discipline is concerned with working out the tension that arises from dealing with a multitude of different identities at once and several distinct attitudes which arise from these identities. This assertion fits the course environment that I encountered while writing this essay. Rather than recreating a United Nations plenary session, "in which each of the groups said its piece […] and was given respectful (and 'politically correct') hearing by all the others,"[2] the colloquium opened up a virtual room of discussion much closer to Jameson's ideal, in which participants from different cultural and intellectual backgrounds could actively engage and react instead of just politely listening and nodding to different perspectives.

The overall course design guided the students towards such a climate of engagement and exchange. It enabled the taking in of insights from other international students – insights that reflected different interests and different degree prgrammes. Each session, we were tasked with revisiting canonical essays that have shaped cultural studies, attempting to illuminate the texts' blind spots as well as enriching them with new, modern meanings in light of the field's trend towards more transnational perspectives. The all-access online approach was especially helpful in that, in contrast to the usual framework of seminars in which we could only get glimpses into the minds of the other participants through their answers in discussion, in the

1 Fredric Jameson, "On 'Cultural Studies,'" *Social Text* 34 (1993): 17–52.
2 Ibid., 27.

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colloquium we could get to know each student's point of view also through their writing. The diverse reading responses also illuminated how the assigned readings could be reread and reinterpreted from the most varied and unusual perspectives. Moreover, the professors did not assume the role of explainers and ultimate judges of the texts, but rather moderated a free exchange of ideas. Being left completely alone with the essays as well as not being given some sort of explanatory summary of the text at the beginning of each session, but going straight into the discussion instead, showed great confidence on the part of the professors in the independence and quality of the students' own intellectual work. Apart from learning many new things concerning cultural studies and international approaches, this course has hence strengthened my confidence in myself and in my own academic performance.

Since each student and/or scholar in the course had a different academic as well as cultural background, many new points of view came to light that I would have never encountered otherwise. For instance, I still distinctly remember the work of one participant in particular who looked at both Raymond Williams's essay "Culture is Ordinary" (1958) and an excerpt from Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) from the point of view of her educational degree. Consequently, the focus of the discussion shifted to the question of how learning processes – cultural learning mechanisms applied to our specific case – can be understood and to what extent education can integrate people into cultural processes as well as exclude them from participation. Moreover, adding more international perspectives through the contribution of our Indian colleagues has proven valuable to unveil more of my own biases. I was incredibly impressed – and at times a little intimidated – by their knowledge and ability to connect works they had previously encountered with essays from this colloquium. What impressed me most, however, was the warm atmosphere of the seminar despite the pandemic, which had hit India in a particularly hard way.

The following essay can be understood as a reflection of my experiences as a student in cultural studies, literature, the humanities, and my study focus on feminist studies as well as a confrontation with my own intellectual biases, which have been illuminated through the discussions with students from different backgrounds. Some issues that came up in our discussions left me thinking long after the seminar had ended and have therefore had a lasting impact on me. Especially striking was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's and Michele Wallace's assertion of the voicelessness of subalterns and of the intellectual's inability to speak for or represent these groups. This prompted me to ask myself if there could be a unique approach to confronting this issue in cultural studies through an increased self-reflection of the intellectual in terms of their own positionality as well as through rethinking the role and the potential of cultural studies in the intellectual and public spheres.

Examining the role of the intellectual has also caused me to reflect more on my own positionality regarding feminism. Maitrayee Chaudhuri's and Inderpal Grewal's deep reflections on feminism in India and transnationally have caused me to rethink my definition of feminism, which had previously been shaped by an understanding of the movement as a unified effort of women all around the world to fight the inequality between the sexes. However, I came to realise the inadequacy of this

internationalization of feminism for highlighting distinctive national and local challenges and for reflecting attitudes of women differing from Western feminist perspectives. While I came to the conclusion that the challenges of feminisms around the world must be approached from a more regional or national level, I still want to shed light on the merits of transnational perspectives in cultural studies, to which I will dedicate the last section of this essay.

II
The Vagueness of the Social Sciences: Why the Humanities Should Dare to be Different

From the beginning of this course, the issue of subalternity emerged again and again. The first time we talked about the intellectual's positionality was brief, regarding only Williams's "Culture is Ordinary," but this was quickly followed by much deeper discussions of Jameson's reflections on cultural studies and Spivak's essay concerning the subaltern's voicelessness.

Both Wallace and Spivak throw light on subalternity's relationship with cultural studies when they point out the inability of the intellectual to truthfully speak for subaltern groups. While Spivak is primarily concerned with shedding light on the marginalization of subaltern groups in India's colonial past and present, Wallace, with her focus on feminist studies in combination with intersectionality, extends the concept of subalternity to Black women whose voices have been historically and systematically silenced. Spivak's stance on this problem is rather pessimistic. She concludes her lengthy and well-known observations on the complex nature of subalternity and the issues linked to representation by stating that the subaltern woman is doubly objectified: by her own culture, defining her as the property of her husband, and by the British colonists, who imagine her as an immobile object in need of rescue from her own people. Hence, "[b]etween patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the third world woman caught between tradition and modernisation."[3] Spivak's final verdict is clear: The female subaltern does not have a voice. She can never speak for herself nor be realistically represented by intellectuals.

In "Negative Images: Towards a Black Feminist Cultural Criticism" (1992), Michele Wallace draws on Spivak's notion of subalternity. Wallace is an African-American literary scholar and feminist writer who concerns herself with the (under-/mis-)representation of Black American culture in the media, intersectional feminism, and Black masculinity. Her essay, which adresses issues of Black feminism and

3 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 306.

media silencing, is included in the 1992 collection *Cultural Studies* alongside other prominent Black studies scholars such as Cornel West, bell hooks, and Paul Gilroy. Moreover, the essay is referenced in Jameson's "On 'Cultural Studies,'" as he reflects on the positionality of the intellectual.[4] In her text, Wallace voices concerns similar to those originating in Spivak's work when she asks herself whether the Black feminist movement is able "to speak for black women, most of whom are poor and 'silenced' by inadequate education, health care, housing, and lack of public access."[5] However, Wallace seems decidedly less pessimistic about the issue, as she also presents a possible solution to the problem. In her view, the main problem of any intellectual is not actually their incapability of realistic representation itself, but that they do not always address and reflect this incapability within intellectual discussion. Reflecting on one's own positionality in this way, as a scholar, is far from a universal practice in any school of cultural studies, even today. As Jameson points out, many scholars still seem to understand their role as intellectuals as outside observers of social phenomena and issues, actively ignoring the blind spots of their own viewpoint. He especially singles out traditional sociologists whose "glacial disengagement from social phenomena" and whose exclusion from "any activist participation in the social" results in "losing the very insights, the very power of demystification, paid for by just this epistemological separation from the human."[6]

This issue of the intellectual's positionality emphasized by Wallace, Jameson, and other scholars raises questions concerning the value and usefulness of cultural studies and the humanities in general. I feel like social and cultural studies are commonly looked down upon by other disciplines and the public alike precisely because of this issue. I often feel belittled for my own choice of studies, especially for my focus on feminist theory. Again and again, people are told that the reason for their failure to find a job is not the current market situation, but their own decision of choosing to pursue a degree in the humanities. I have also had many experiences with strangers, friends, and family asking me the dreaded question: "And then what can you do with your degree?" And I am not referring to the politely delivered, genuinely interested version of this question, but to the version that is asked with a slightly cocky grin and in a patronizing tone. There have been family gatherings where I had to explain that no, I do not hate men, and that my opinions were not just drummed into me by my university professors. Why does one find such reactions concentrated especially in discussions about the humanities, even more so when it comes to literary and cultural studies? An understandably limited public imagination regarding the possibilities of these degree programmes is certainly part of the problem. While everyone can roughly say what a lawyer or a medical doctor

4 Jameson, "On 'Cultural Studies,'" 42.

5 Michele Wallace, "Negative Images: Towards a Black Feminist Cultural Criticism," in *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 654–671; quotations are taken from the summarizing discussion in Jameson, "On 'Cultural Studies,'" 42. For further reading, see Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (London: Verso, 2015) and *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (London: Verso, 2008).

6 Jameson, "On 'Cultural Studies,'" 39–40.

does for a living, the answer is less obvious for graduates and scholars in the humanities or social sciences.

However, this does not fully explain the sometimes fiercely negative reactions towards social and cultural studies, as opposed to the much more esteemed fields of the natural sciences, legal studies, or medical training. In my opinion, these negative reactions have a lot to do with both the self-perception and outward appearance of the scholars and students of the field themselves. The social sciences often seemingly try to gain recognition from other academic fields by imitating them as closely as possible, which can indeed produce positive outcomes. I am especially thinking of my time as a student of sociology when I was reading texts written by scholars like Max Weber, which often felt like studying law papers. Surely, this style of writing can be useful in that it produces lines of thought that are incredibly well-structured. Nonetheless, this *modus operandi* does not magically turn the humanities into sciences, which are understood to be strictly guided by data and verifiable facts. Yes, we also analyse facts (cultural practices, social structures, and so on), but we often have far a greater scope of interpretation – which is actually necessary to truly grasp the vast area that is to be captured in an interdisciplinary field like cultural studies that draws on tools of literary analysis, historical approaches, and a range of theoretical paradigms. We do not look at closed, regulated systems like they are typically found in mathematics, in which the same rules always apply regardless of time and space, but at cultural systems that are by definition open and thus constantly changing. To claim that our work delivers similarly incontestable and unchangeable results and facts as the natural sciences is not only false, but rightfully comes across as arrogant to outsiders. Even if most scholars do not hold this view uncritically and do not openly communicate holding it either, they will still seem untrustworthy as long as they do not come to terms with their own biases and their own positionality as intellectuals. Being more open about their own possible shortcomings in being able to represent certain groups of people as well as practising self-reflection about their own positionality could hence positively impact the public image of the humanities.

So, what can the humanities actually do to improve their public standing? In my view, they must start by recognising their own strengths and communicating them openly. How can the studies of culture truly be acknowledged for what they are able to contribute if they are always trying to veil their most special features? What distinguishes them from the natural sciences, the inability to prove all of their claims through objective evidence, should not necessarily be regarded as a negative thing, but as a possibility to think the role and responsibility of the intellectual in a different way. If intellectuals are not bound by a hard, number-supported, seemingly objective way to the one ultimate truth, they can build their diverse and differentiated claims by drawing on personal experience and reflexion. This type of approach, which is partly based on emotional and subjective arguments, can open new intellectual spaces for more empathetic discussions. Thus, while feminist studies are rooted in deep research and draw on hard facts as well, I think there is major potential in having a unique approach to intellectual discussions that stands out from

usual academic writing styles. Enrichening one's work with personal experience and clearly questioning one's own social status and privileges could have a huge positive impact on political discussion outside of academia, as especially feminist studies have had and continue to have a strong impact on political and societal processes. Recognising that political programmes gain voter approval not just because of the facts and figures presented, but because the socially important issues are also highly emotionally charged, could therefore be a chance for cultural studies and the humanities to generate a more empathetic intellectual discourse leading towards progressive societal changes and a wider consciousness of cultural issues among the public.

Radically rethinking one's positionality could therefore solve the issue of intellectualism's outside perception of being inherently elitist. Some scholars even like to regard themselves as the mouthpiece of the people, calling themselves "organic intellectuals." Organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense are intellectuals who are "in charge of elaborating and spreading organic ideologies," i.e., those ideologies which are "the expression of the 'communal life of a social bloc.'"[7] These might be articulations of "higher philosophies," but they are communicated in a vernacular, simple manner.[8] However, this ideal of the organic intellectual is ultimately a utopian concept that positions the scholar as "one of them." As long as scholars of society and culture claim to be able to speak for a certain group as a whole, almost all attempts of proving their works' merits, especially to non-intellectuals, will fall flat. Intellectuals must disillusion themselves from the concept of the organic intellectual, realise that this ideal will always remain unreachable and redirect their saviour complex toward more attainable goals.

To further illustrate what I mean by possible unique approaches to this issue of the intellectual, I must return to Williams's essay "Culture is Ordinary." Williams describes journeying by bus across a landscape at once pastoral with its "rivers out of paradise," mountains, and farming valleys, and simultaneously modern with its streets and cinemas.[9] After this personal, almost narrative anecdote, he reveals that he "was born and grew up halfway along that bus journey."[10] Williams also shares that he was born into a working-class family, his grandfather having worked as a farmer and roadman and his father as a porter and signalman. He ends his personal account by saying that he himself, after a non-prestigious education at the village school, began studying at Cambridge. Then, he immediately jumps to his bold claim that "culture is ordinary."[11] Opposed to what most intellectuals tended to claim at the time, culture to him was not something that is produced only in higher-class circles. This becomes apparent in his section on his experience in the

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[7] Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci" in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, edited by Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1979), 187 and 186.

[8] Ibid., 186.

[9] Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 10.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., 11.

Oxford teashop where people sported the “visible sign of a special kind of people, cultivated people.”[12] For Williams, however, this was more appearance than substance: These people “were not, the great majority of them, particularly learned; they practised few arts; but they had it, and they showed you they had it.”[13] For Williams, culture is rather a concept that must be understood as consisting of already established meanings and new meanings which are still being tested and debated in society.

These learning processes of adopting certain cultural meanings subconsciously or contesting them consciously are, according to Williams, experiences everybody shares: They “are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds,” hence culture being ordinary.[14] Much of our discussion during the semester was centred around the issues negotiated in Williams’s text, especially concerning the inclusivity of his understanding of culture and cultural production. This raised some individual questions: Does everybody have the mental capabilities to understand and participate in cultural learning processes? Also, how can Williams be so confident in declaring himself the interpreter of how contemporary working-class citizens of his time are thinking and feeling? It is certainly true that what Williams lacks is a certain type of “modesty” in his approach to the intellectual’s positionality, as Jameson would phrase it.[15] Williams clearly regards himself as the mouthpiece of a yet underestimated group, the lower classes. The issue here is not that Williams is striving for a more nuanced representation of the underrepresented, but that he does not undertake a critical evaluation of his ability to truthfully represent them.

I would nevertheless like to redirect the focus to the merits of Williams’s essay. Interestingly, the beginning of our discussion on Williams very much centred on his use of language and personal experience. Everybody seemed to agree that his essay is as compelling as it is beautifully written and that his anecdotal style enriches the text. Williams hereby undoes – albeit only partly – the illusion of being an objective outside observer of cultural phenomena. Hence, Williams’s “Culture is Ordinary” is a suitable example for what I am promoting: an approach to cultural studies which does not shy away from giving its author a face and voice and which evokes an affective response to the text supplementing critical intellectual reactions.

III
International Feminisms

The cultural studies approach modelled by Williams and especially Wallace has led me to rethink my own role as a young scholar. Identifying as a feminist and having a focus in feminist studies, it was only natural for me to start my own journey of self-reflection in this specific academic context. My own biases regarding feminism

[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., 12.
[14] Ibid., 11.
[15] Jameson, “On ‘Cultural Studies,’” 42.

came to light especially clearly while we discussed Chaudhuri's 2004 introduction to a volume devoted to Indian feminism and Grewal's 2005 examination of the appropriation of feminist ideas during the adjustment of the Western Barbie doll to an Indian market.[16] What I immediately noticed and was surprised by in our discussion of these essays, was the Indian students' striking perception of colonialism (to me as a Western woman), both in this discussion and in prior sessions. I had expected them to be decidedly critical of the impact that colonialism has had on today's India, as all postcolonial essays I had dealt with before in my studies – mainly the Black and "oriental" colonial experiences analysed in Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin – had focused almost solely on negative aspects, mainly on how Eurocentric perspectives still dominate the discourse on cultures outside the Western world, overwriting their language, literature, cultural practices and products with Western meanings. Hence, it came as a surprise to me that, while postcolonialism's harsh stance on the influence of Western imperialism was oftentimes criticized by the students, they simultaneously stressed the positive consequences colonialism has had on Indian society and culture.

Feminism could have been one of those positive Western influences, but apparently has had a difficult time establishing itself in India: a point which Chaudhuri strongly makes in her introduction.[17] The utilization of feminism by Indian nationalist movements for their own political gain as well as the issue that feminism has yet to address "historical circumstances and values that render the women's issue different in India" still remain challenges that have to be overcome in order to create a feminist movement which addresses the problems of Indian women specifically.[18] But which concrete problems do they actually face? To be completely honest, my direct knowledge of women's issues in India is limited to what I have gleaned from general media coverage and documentaries. Interestingly, although the access to actual issues of women in India is strongly limited in Western media, one can find a vast array of features about sexual violence and physical endangerment in the country. Prominent examples include documentaries like *The Holy Wives* (2010),[19] which portrays the lives of three Indian women who have been sexually exploited in the name of religion, or multiple features on the issue of gang rape in India.[20] Surely, the common Indian woman faces many other issues, such as economic inequality or access to childcare, as well, but this is not being reported on specifically.

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16 Maitrayee Chaudhuri, "Introduction," in *Feminism in India*, edited by Maitrayee Chaudhuri (London: Zed Books, 2005), xi–xlvi; Inderpal Grewal, "Traveling Barbie: Indian Transnationalities and the Global Consumer," *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 80–120.

17 It is still interesting to note that, despite the comparatively weak institutional as well as public recognition of feminism in India, the Indian students in the colloquium stressed that Chaudhuri, who currently teaches at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi, is nevertheless regarded as a prominent figure in Indian feminism.

18 Chaudhuri, "Introduction," xxii.

19 *The Holy Wives*, directed by Ritesh Sharma (Andra Pradesh: Ahwaan, 2010).

20 "The Truth about Rape in India," *BBC News* on *YouTube*, 26 November 2020, web.

Rather, the media choose to flood viewers with images of women who have been brutally raped or murdered. These viewing experiences left me with a pronounced feeling of rage at the fact that the perpetrators of these heinous crimes often seem to go unpunished, with lawyers and lawmakers being either indifferent to women's issues or agreeing with the world view of the rapists. I am thinking specifically of a documentary titled *India's Daughter* (2015), which features the tragic story of 23-year-old Indian student Jyoti Singh who in 2012 was brutally gang raped and murdered by six men on a bus in New Delhi.[21] Her male friend was also injured, but survived. The main blame was placed on Singh herself: by the perpetrators, police, and lawyers alike. She was accused of not having been a decent enough girl because she had been hanging around on the streets. The perpetrators claimed that it had merely been their civic duty to make an example of Singh to show Indian women their supposedly rightful place at home. Some of the men who were interviewed for the documentary – politicians, lawyers, and police officers – agreed with the perpetrators' stance or even praised their crime. Yet the documentary also depicted a different reaction to the rape and murder of Singh. It showed thousands of people – women and men – protesting on the street in favour of a reform of the legislative and judicial system in rape cases. Hence, these images also left me with the hopeful impression that a sizeable part of the population is finally standing up against these injustices and is starting to demand equal rights.

Nevertheless, I had not been able to infer the actual societal progression towards a less patriarchal Indian culture from these representations of women's issues in the popular media alone. What I therefore wanted to know, as I entered into discussion with Indian students, was if and how India's stance on feminist issues might have progressed over the last decade, especially considering the increasing outside influence of Western cultures, norms, and ideals. Almost ten years after the rape of Jyoti Singh, what had changed for women in India? What shocked me was that India's academic world apparently shares the same unease with Western feminism that the general public in Germany and the United States still seems to have. Some of the Indian students in the colloquium reported little exposure to feminist studies at their university to begin with. At one point in the discussion, it was stated that male professors and students have made comments denoting feminism as a kind of Western souvenir with little to no relevance to Indian realities. Moreover, accounts explaining that more and more feminist organizations and academic departments are being shut down in India were downright depressing to me. What I had expected, or perhaps rather hoped for, was a steadily growing openness, especially among engaged studies and intellectuals, towards what I would identify as the "progressive" idea of feminism and see as a part of an increased willingness to engage with the issues of the younger Indians and Indian women in particular. Were these expectations wrong? Or did I have the wrong ideas about how critical engagement regarding feminism should be handled on a transnational level?

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[21] *India's Daughter: The Story of Jyoti Singh*, directed by Leslee Udwin (London: Assassin Films, 2015).

Through the personal accounts of Indian students, I was able to gain insights that would otherwise have eluded me. Although our discussions on feminism were focused more on India and the Indian diaspora, these type of exchanges about specific cultures were by no means one-sided. The Indian students repeatedly expressed interest in how Germans specifically view and experience issues of social and gender justice. When asked about the current state of feminism in Germany, I realized that I seldom think about feminism from a national perspective, but rather tend to perceive all types of Western feminist perspectives as one. In general, I perceived feminism in the West as a fight for equality, which inevitably triggers animosity between men and women, as some men realise that their economic and social advantages are now being contested. For me, the distinction between Western and non-Western feminism was only made on the basis of differences in the actual expression and severity of the inequality between men and women. I had never differentiated feminism according to national criteria before entering this kind of transnational discussion.

Ironically, narrowing the scope of feminism to national peculiarities has made me reflect more on the internationalization of Western feminism. While the attempt to universalise feminism as a concept, promoting equality between all sexes and genders, can be read as a well-intentioned attempt at unifying people from all around the world and spreading progressive ideas, it also disregards existing national differences. These differences are not to be understood as mere minor variations. Returning to Chaudhuri's observation that feminism in India does not express the same type of anger as Western feminisms, as it is, according to her, not based on an adversarial male-female dichotomy, Indian feminism would not even agree on the basic definition of Western feminism as a movement trying to compensate the inequalities between the sexes. Chaudhuri sees in this viewpoint of feminism a reflection of India's apprehension towards Western influences in general. Considering the modernist changes brought about by colonialism and Western authority in India, she points out that "for Western feminists whether or not to engage with non-Western feminism is an option they may choose to exercise, no such clear choice is available to non-Western feminists or anti-feminists."[22] Hence, nationalist feminist discourses have sought to annihilate all Western influence from Indian feminism. Intertwining concepts of culture and nationalism with notions of the Indian woman as the representative of Indian culture and morality untainted by Western influence, as well as effacing all internal differences between the sexes, were strategies deployed by the nationalist movement to construct the image of a united India.[23] Therefore the "women's movement in India had none of the man-woman antagonism characteristic of women's movements in the West."[24]

[22] Chaudhuri, "Introduction," xiv.

[23] Ibid., xx–xxi.

[24] Aparna Basu, "The Role of Women in the Indian Struggle for Freedom," in *Indian Women from Purdah to Modernity*, edited by B. R. Nanda (Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1976), 40, as quoted in Chaudhuri, xxi.

Even within the Western framework, feminism in Germany also differs from feminism in the United States. Political and social changes accompanying the election of Donald Trump have had drastic consequences on women's reproductive rights specifically. His three conservative appointees have given the Supreme Court an entirely new, decidedly reactionary identity: one which resulted in the shocking decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, a decision that allows pro-life-leaning states like Texas to further limit access to procedures and criminalise abortions, thus stripping women of a long-established right to bodily autonomy.[25] This threat to women's rights in the US produces a different understanding of the practices and challenges of feminism than those perceived by feminists in Germany. For while the abortion process is challenging for women in Germany as well, a complete reversal of reproductive rights is more than unlikely at present. Thus, discussions are more concerned with issues of equal pay, quotas, and – unfortunately, in my opinion – the usefulness of feminism in our modern times. One also must consider the multiplicity of definitions of feminism circulating within one culture alone. Many different movements exist under that umbrella term, approaching it with a diverse set of motivations while weighing today's problems differently. The more I think about it, the less it makes sense to think of feminism from an international or transnational perspective, or even as a singular block at all. The specific national and regional challenges for women are just too extensive to be subsumed into one broad concept of feminism.

Ultimately, it continues to be surprising to me how much even my most basic definition of feminism had changed by the end of the course. Feminism in my mind – that is, feminism in the Western sense – had previously been a kind of unchanging concept, one that could be applied to any nation and culture with only some small and localized cultural challenges depending on the country. This seems no longer fitting to me. I am now inclined to use the plural form *feminisms* more often. Hence, I also had to first learn of my own positionality as a Western woman regarding this issue, before I could truly grasp the depth of it. Even though I identify as a woman I certainly cannot fully understand the challenges other women in other cultures face every day. I am not able to produce a truthful representation of every feminist struggle on the planet, nor can I speak for all women around the world.

IV
The Merits of Transnationalism

The lively discussions we had in the colloquium and the detailed examination of canonical texts in cultural studies have taken me on a journey towards making more balanced and careful reflections. As one of the key goals of the colloquium was to generate discussions about the problems and merits of nationally specific

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[25] Eleanor Klibanoff and Maria Méndez, "What the End of Roe v. Wade Would Mean for Texas' Past, Current and Future Abortion Laws," *Governing.com*, 4 May 2022, web.

perspectives and to evaluate the possibilities of a more transnational or global approach in cultural studies, I have also attempted to outline my personal line of thought regarding one of the research topics we have discussed, coming to the conclusion that a transnational approach might not always be the best solution for tackling specific issues.

What I have not done so far is talk of the merits a transnational approach to cultural studies can generally have. This is a pity, because such a discussion is sorely needed. Examining the transnational turn in modern literary studies, Gül Bilge Han observes that "[a]n increasing number of scholars have come to challenge spatial and temporal boundaries that previously confined modernism to the early twentieth-century Euro-American realm of cultural production."[26] One of the goals of these new approaches is "to trace literature's border-traversing capacities, and the cross-cultural affiliations that may be found not only *between* but also *within* literary works."[27] Cultural studies' shift towards a more international and transnational perspective also allows for the same type of critical reflection on the limitations of the nation state and sheds light on the variety of "cross-cultural" attitudes and identities. Analysing cultural modes and practices outside the restraint of national borders and the Western framework hence opens the possibility of completely new interpretations and spaces of discussion, which are much more open and diverse. Therefore, I would like to end this essay with a humble suggestion: Let us extend the reach of cultural studies more – not just in the sense of expanding our interdisciplinary affiliations, but also our intercultural relationships.

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[26] Gül Bilge Han, "Transnationalism," in *The New Wallace Stevens Studies*, edited by Bart Eeckhout and Gül Bilge Han (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 72.

[27] Ibid. Emphases in the original.

Tobias Jetter (ed.), Global Cultural Studies? Engaged Scholarship between National and Transnational Frames, Würzburg, 2023, p. 171–180. DOI: 10.25972/WUP-978-3-95826-207-2-171

Strategies for Survival and Resources for Resistance

Sudeeti Geeta Mantraraj

> The vocation of cultural studies has been to enable people to understand what is going on, and especially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival, and resources for resistance.[1]

I
Introduction

As I was writing the first draft of this essay in the last months of 2021, India was on the verge of its third major wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. This would mean another long spell of uncertainty, the most brutal outcome being a shutdown of economic activity, particularly for India's vast informal sector. Before sitting down to write, I bought a cup of *chai* from the small university canteen. The owner told me, "If there is another lockdown, the poor can survive one week, maybe fifteen days, but after that one does not know. People do not have any money left now, hell, even I do not have any money left."

What is the relevance of this anecdote in a reflection on cultural studies? The essay which follows is an attempt at responding to this question, which might be more pointedly reformulated as follows: How do the theories of cultural studies connect to lived realities in India? This is perhaps a compulsive pathological trait that accompanies intellectual work in India, and a line of thinking that bears the mark of the tradition of postcolonial studies: We are driven to thinking comparatively at almost all times, always referring back to our own national situation, our own particular national anxieties. Yet the project of cultural studies seems like the appropriate space to raise such questions, due to its own anti-disciplinary, open, and overtly political pasts.

That cultural studies, as an intellectual and engaged critical project, emerged in a specific historical scenario and responded to particular national situations, is fairly clear. One could easily use its British and subsequently American heritage to delineate how cultural studies frameworks cannot be used for postcolonial countries like India. Its rise as a kind of anthropology of the centre, for urbanized, industrialized societies utilising mass communication techniques, is another factor which makes cultural studies difficult to translate into the Indian context. Urbanity and industri-

1 Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities," *October* 53 (1990), 22.

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alization have, of course, existed for a long time, but its breaks and continuities with rural India are less clear. Britain has not been a dominantly agrarian society for at least a century, whereas at least half of India's population still depends on agriculture. Yet, a listing of differences is a trivial affair which leads us down futile paths. These differences should not result in a wholesale rejection of the tradition of inquiry that cultural studies represents. On the other hand, we should, like all great artists, steal what we like from tradition.

Thinking and writing about cultural studies and determining what can be productively stolen from its frameworks has also involved reassessing my own assumptions. Rereading the initial statement of purpose I submitted to participate in the seminar "Cultural Studies Around the World," in which this essay developed, I am struck by how differently I think of the field after an extended engagement with a range of its foundational texts. Before I engaged with the texts we collectively studied, I felt that the field was somewhat outdated, an interesting token of the past. But now I feel quite differently. With its vast variety of differing tools and concerns, centred around the interaction between political economy and cultural-ideological life, it feels like it is not cultural studies that is outdated, but that instead it is we who have lost the sophisticated tools of cultural studies.

Therefore, I do not think that the task is to *go beyond* cultural studies, but rather to urgently identify what within cultural studies is useful to us today. I argue that what we should steal from cultural studies has its roots in the foundational moments of the field, and not so much in its postmodern wanderings (however interesting and important they might be) into the study of multiple identities, marginal groups, or, in Lata Mani's words, "the new politics of difference – racial, sexual, cultural, transnational."[2] These foundational gestures in the works of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall open up two major aspects which, I believe, have a contemporary relevance that transcends whichever national paradigms we exist in. The first is cultural studies' dual intellectual and political lineage due to which Hall has even called the project of cultural studies "politics by other means."[3] The background in Marxism and New Left political traditions, and their explicit concern with examining everyday working-class life and consciousness, should be a pillar which continues to centre any future cultural studies programme. Its location in the tension between the inside and outside of the academy, with its concerns grounded in the working class, particularly in the synthesis of working-class culture with progressive intellectual traditions in the West, is by no means a finished, outdated, or useless project. The synthesis of these two strands – however differently the working class is configured in India and however more sensitive we have to be to the ways in which intellectual traditions of the West are used in India – remains important, if not necessarily in a complete translation and substitution of paradigms, then at least in the spirit of the work.

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2 Lata Mani, "Cultural Theory, Colonial Texts: Reading Eyewitness Accounts of Widow Burning," in *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 392.

3 Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies," 12.

The second aspect of cultural studies which has lasting importance lies in its intellectual framework. What is evident in reading texts from foundational figures in British cultural studies such as Hall to thinkers who can be connected with the field's further development beyond a narrower British context – such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Inderpal Grewal, and Paul Gilroy – is the foregrounding of the category of political economy within the realm of culture. Cultural studies gains a disciplinary identity perhaps most keenly when it positions itself as the site of examining the determinations between cultural-symbolic forms and economic-power relations. If *determination* seems too strong a word, reminiscent of a deterministic reading of Marxism where the cultural moment is reduced to the economic structure, the term *mediation* may be more useful. The project of cultural studies is unique in its making explicit of the problematic of the relationship between the base and the superstructure.

While Fredric Jameson was one of the most cutting critics of cultural studies as embraced by North American academia in the 1980s and 1990s,[4] his refinement of the Althusserian framework of mediation is a major theoretical contribution from which cultural studies as a project grounded in, but moving beyond, classical Marxism, can profit.[5] To schematically summarise, the relations between symbolic activity and economic activity are not to be understood in a mechanical cause-and-effect relation. Nor is the framework to be of an essence or an epiphenomenon whose ultimate meaning lies in economic activity. Mediation, or the relation between different levels in the structural world (such as politics, culture, law, economics, and art), asserts only that there is reciprocal influence. Simply put, there is no autonomous domain of human life. This may sound like a paradox, but what cultural studies can do most effectively is to creatively explore this lack of autonomy of cultural life. The Barbie doll, to take an example explored in depth by Grewal in a central chapter of her book *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (2005), does not merely function to create global images of beauty rooted in Western stereotypes, manifesting as a symbolic representation of Western cultural hegemony. The Barbie doll was also a unique commodity, entering the specificities of class society in India, and had to adapt not only to cultural norms, but also market formations and class identities. Grewal writes about how Barbie became "an embodiment of the Indian state's policy of economic liberalization and its need for foreign investment," while also being a good that had to be "transcoded" and localized in the particular class and gender dynamics within the nation for it to truly become a meaningful object of desire.[6]

These two aspects of cultural studies, the former as "politics by other means" and the latter as a sophisticated form of theoretical inquiry, prompt us to think of another agent of intellectual activity, i.e., the thinker. The academic, sequestered in an ivory tower, away from the strife of the world, pouring over some ancient

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4 Fredric Jameson, "On 'Cultural Studies,'" *Social Text* 34 (1993): 17–52.

5 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2014), 1–60.

6 Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 82.

manuscript, is one traditional representation of a thinking subject. The other is that of a public intellectual, who utilises the wisdom of learning and scholarship as a responsible actor in worldly affairs. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler elaborate further on this essential link between cultural studies and the "real world" in the introduction to their 1992 collection *Cultural Studies*:

> Intellectual work is, by itself, incomplete unless it enters back into the world of cultural and political power and struggle, unless it responds to the challenges of history. Cultural studies, then, is always partly driven by the political demands of its context and the exigencies of its institutional situation; critical practice is not only determined by, it is responsible to, its situation.[7]

Perhaps the figure of the committed public intellectual is a fading figure, a remnant of the twentieth century. Yet, cultural studies heeds this call most overtly and unabashedly: In that as long as there are crises, we will need strategies for survival and resources for resistance. And even if we do not have figures on which to project our desires, we still maintain the responsibility of continually responding to the world. Hall admits the lack candidly:

> We were organic intellectuals without any organic point of reference; organic intellectuals with a nostalgia or will or hope (to use Gramsci's phrase from another context) that at some point we would be prepared in intellectual work for that kind of relationship, if such a conjuncture ever appeared.[8]

The moment of decision is also the moment of anxiety. We decide to conserve these two aspects of cultural studies (leftist political engagement and Marxist theory) not because these are the essential aspects of a complex tradition, but because we have chosen to do so. In making this decision, we also risk the exclusion of many other aspects associated with cultural studies: the study of identity formation, for example, or racism, or gender studies. Does such a selection of elements not impoverish cultural studies, which fashions itself as a welcoming space for all sorts of new social movements and marginalized identities? This question should be foregrounded and maintained, even if it is outside the objective of this essay to answer it.

II
Cultural Studies in Whose India?

When I joined the seminar, I was interested in the question of cultural studies in India. There are very few institutes and universities in the country teaching cultural studies proper. At best it will be a module within a media studies or journalism

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[7] Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, "Cultural Studies: An Introduction," in *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 6.

[8] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1999), 102.

course. Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Inderpal Grewal, and Maitrayee Chaudhuri are considered historians, literary critics, and feminist scholars respectively. There really do not exist, in the vein of Raymond Williams or Stuart Hall, people who represent "Indian cultural studies," although a great deal of work is done which can easily be counted as cultural studies. There is a proliferation of work on marginalized identities, popular culture, and non-mainstream traditions. Yet this work has not been unified into any project of Indian cultural studies and usually remains within established disciplines such as political studies, history, or sociology.[9]

My thesis for the non-emergence of cultural studies as a separate field in India is that, whereas cultural studies began as a specific project to understand the national cultures of Britain (whether they be seen as counterhegemonic working-class cultures as Williams does, or not), in India the question of nationality is much more fraught. What was the basis of the demand for the nation in India, one which substantively could imagine a nation as opposed to merely a negative definition postulated in opposition to British colonialism? Indeed, many have argued that India is a multi-national country – with twenty-two official languages (not to mention more than 19,500 spoken languages), multiple religious tendencies and vastly different cultural manifestations. Consequently, even maintaining one dominant national culture is a deeply volatile and inevitably contested process.

A secular version of the narrative of Indian nationalism would claim that nationality was only based on residence within the geographic boundary of India and an acceptance of the democratic political system. A more critical view would characterise nationality as based on Hindu religious identity. After all, the country gained Independence only after dividing the subcontinent into majority Muslim and majority Hindu areas after a bloody Partition and a mass migration of people across the region. Indian cultural studies, to name a thing that does not really exist, lacks the grounding that the formation of cultural studies in Britain had in some conception of national culture, what was marginal to this culture, and what was oppositional to it.

Grewal's framework of transnationality, highlighted in the case studies and larger argument of her study *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*, referenced in the previous section, seems useful beyond the fact that it helps in understanding how subjectivity is really produced through international and not solely local processes. Specifically, I think the framework can be employed not only to gain a better understanding of India's diasporic relationships, but also the many shifting contours within India. In 2020, for instance, a massive mobilization of farmers agitating against the Indian government's pro-corporate laws successfully forced the government to roll back this legislation. These farmers come from different states in India, speak different languages, belong to different religious groups, and have different forms of caste-based alliances. Many have family in

9 See, for example, Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009); Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2013).

Canada and the United States, giving the agitation a decidedly global thrust.[10] Interestingly, the Indian government was extremely upset when global pop star Rihanna retweeted photos in support of the protesting farmers on Twitter. This was even seen as an international conspiracy to defame India.[11] A cultural studies framework strikes me as apt to describe and understand this movement. The rallying point of the movement has been the opening-up of agriculture to international markets and foreign capital, a move which is seen by the peasant unions as detrimental to the livelihood of farmers. Creating a framework which can integrate this basic insight of political economy, along with its relationship with factors such as gender, linguistic, religious, and caste identity, seems like a potentially relevant contribution through which cultural studies can provide insight into the many facets of the movement.

In my personal opinion, the transnationality emphasized in different ways by Spivak, Gilroy, and Grewal is an important theoretical tool that is not being focused on enough in India. Taking into account the global flows of capital into different regions of the country, its relationship with regional capital, which also travels all across the vast subcontinent, and its relationship with constituting and reconfiguring local cultures, religious communities, and caste identities, seems to constitute such a framework to me. Without a truly global perspective and without investigating the role of capital, India seems like an endlessly differentiated and endlessly varied space of multiple languages and multiple contending identities and practices.

Nationality, which is such a fraught topic in so many texts in cultural studies and is a central point of contention for many non-White or non-Western authors, remains a central issue in Indian culture today. Indeed, one of the major contemporary political discourses in the country is centred around a set of supposedly simple questions: Who is a true Indian? Who truly represents the nation? I do think cultural studies as a discipline has engaged systematically and sophisticatedly with this contested and relevant question and will continue to do so in the future.

Let me return to the original theme of the essay, finding strategies for survival and resources for resistance, in the spirit of cultural studies. While the current ruling political party in India strives to construct a monolithic imagination of the Indian nation and Indianness, imposing a national identity on the multiplicity of diverse cultural traditions of India, what could the purpose of cultural studies be in that context today? In a certain sense, oppositional intellectual activity is already in progress, even if it does not take the name of cultural studies. To give an example, the government banned the consumption of beef in several states of India and regularly calls for the arrest of citizens who are involved in the slaughter of cattle. This was mostly read as an attempt at forcing an upper-caste Brahmanical notion of dietary culture onto the people at large, along with restricting the Muslim and Dalit populations from consuming an affordable type of meat. Many scholars responded by

[10] Olivia Bowden, "Hundreds Rally Outside Indian Consulate in Solidarity with Protesting Farmers," *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, 5 December 2020, web.

[11] Geeta Pandey, "Farmers' Protest: Why Did a Rihanna Tweet Prompt Indian Backlash?" *BBC News*, 4 February 2020, web.

demonstrating how, in different cultures, contexts, religious, and ethnic circumstances, people have consumed beef as a part of daily life in India.[12]

This is only one example, but the larger point is that, while cultural studies perhaps cannot be used to understand "the national culture of India," or even the "national culture of India's working class," it can still serve as an important oppositional resource. When a particular power imposes a hegemonic understanding of, say, dietary practices, it is a knowledge of the ordinary, everyday habits of people that becomes an important tool to struggle against imposed dictates of what is "our tradition" and "our culture." It may strike one as ironical, but in India cultural studies may be useful as a tool not to construct a unified or homogenous culture, but to gather intellectual resources to struggle against its imposition.

III
Retracing Origins

> The questions I ask about our culture are questions about our general and common purposes, yet also questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind.[13]

Cultural studies is often associated with the democratic gesture of enabling popular culture to enter into the halls of the academy, as opposed to the hierarchising distinction between "high" and "low culture." Whereas "high culture" is associated with the study of canonical, classical texts chosen by authority, cultural studies enables the "low" to become a fully legitimate domain of inquiry. However, when we look at Raymond Williams's text "Culture is Ordinary" (1958), which itself has become a classical and even canonical reference within cultural studies, there is a very distinct sense of culture which is perhaps lost in associating cultural studies solely with the popular (the non-academic, the non-classical, the non-elite).

I wish to take this moment to ponder upon the second way in which Williams thinks of the term culture in this essay. He writes "A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested." For Williams, culture is both traditional and creative, both common and individual. It is "a whole way of life, the common meanings," but also "the arts and learning – the special process of discovery and effort."[14]

Williams does not exclude the study of the arts and learning from the domain of cultural studies; indeed, it is associated with what is creative in a particular society. "Common meanings" are associated with tradition, whereas "the arts and learning" are associated with discovery and effort. In differentiating between the two,

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12 See Dwijendra Narayan Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2009), 21.
13 Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 11.
14 Ibid.

Williams emphatically does not degrade “high culture” and venerate the popular. What he does, instead, is to call for the democratization of both. In a touching way, Williams expresses how, for working people excluded from the ivory towers of supposedly proper learning, “the interest is there, the capacity is there.”[15] In his humanist best he writes: “An interest in learning or the arts is simple, pleasant, and natural. A desire to know what is best, and to do what is good, is the whole positive nature of man.”[16]

It is of course odd to hear this kind of discourse in our arguably post-humanist world, which has witnessed not only the death of God, but also the death of Man, and where any thinker claiming to determine an essential human nature is deemed, at best, to be naïve, or, at worst, a reactionary. Williams does two things in this passage: He argues that the arts and learning are not arbitrarily constructed bourgeois values assigned to particular texts, but that they possess a real value in national life. The second thing he does is speak a language of human potentiality. Those excluded from the institutions of learning, he argues, have the potential and innate ability to learn and access what is passed on in traditions of learning. While I reflect upon the many texts we read in the seminar, it is this element which I find only in Williams. His assertion of cultural value and human potentiality disrupts the classification of cultural studies as the study of practices excluded by traditional learning and classical disciplinary structures. Williams considers *both* to be ordinary – not high or low, but ordinary. That is: Shakespeare as well as youth culture and Barbies, Sanskrit plays as well soap operas. In a certain way, Williams delineates not a disciplinary object of inquiry, but an attitude towards culture, and specifically culture as a whole. The point is not to decide whether the framework is multi-disciplinary, post-disciplinary, or anti-disciplinary, or whether we are doing sociology, semiotics, psychoanalysis, or critical race theory. The more disruptive point is that this gaze is applied as much to traditional domains of learning as it is to non-traditional ones. While the institutionalization and categorization of disciplines may be perfectly content with allowing cultural studies to exist as a fringe, politically radical, and subversive department, a true cultural studies perspective, following Williams, leaves no domain untouched.

On another note, Williams's – and, before him, Hoggart’s – rootedness in the concerns of the working class, adult education, and adult literacy programmes are also important points of origin, which have perhaps been lost in the vast, many-headed concerns of cultural studies. Williams maintains a perspective of humanism and human potentiality: The acquisition of culture is something that all human beings are capable of. Cultural studies is therefore not only a critical project of choosing different domains of analysis within certain “left” frameworks, but also a pedagogical project of sharing and teaching cultural resources within a nation to those previously excluded from elite institutions. This understanding of cultural studies as a pedagogical endeavour, along with maintaining a humanist perspec-

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[15] Ibid., 12.
[16] Ibid., 14.

tive of the innate potential of people to grasp, understand, learn, and enjoy "high" culture, is another aspect which remains an integral part of Williams's project.

This question is also rooted within Williams's articulation of the harnessing of a British national culture. Opposed to left traditions that follow a prescriptivist notion of how culture should be, what art people should create, and what traditions they should follow, Williams proposes an idea of openness and creativity: Culture can never be prescribed beforehand, but consists instead of the whole range of human meanings while relating to the world and each other. The project, therefore, is not only critical, but also constructive. Why is this relevant to us today? In India, for instance, there has been a highly successful cultural-political attempt at rewriting the ancient past, picking and choosing historical enemies, and building a universe of myth, symbols, and narrative in forging right-wing culture. Formations of identity, othering, a sense of Self, a sense of origin: All these are consciously produced through a variety of religious and cultural organizations.[17] Theirs is not a critical, but a constructivist project.

With such developments in mind, what I think that we should maintain from Williams is the necessity of a differently formulated and practiced constructive understanding of culture: one tied to notions of pedagogy, sharing, openness, and creativity. Too often the task of many left academics in universities is overly focused on critically deconstructing many cultural artefacts. When we discuss strategies for survival and resources for resistance, we require not only the important critical tool of analyses, but also the pedagogical and creative activity of creating, curating, and building culture.

How can this building up of culture occur without a directive element? Williams writes: "I saw the future and it didn't work. […] The Marxist interpretation of culture can never be accepted, while it retains, as it need not retain, this directive element, this insistence that if you honestly want socialism you must write, think, learn in certain prescribed ways."[18] How does one maintain a constructive notion of culture without falling into prescriptive notions? I cannot help but think the answer lies somewhere close to what we do in universities.

IV
The Worldliness of Cultural Studies

In the violent histories of our nation-states, there comes a time when it feels as if the detour through theory to understand reality is futile. The immediate has a way of imprisoning us and absorbing us in patterns of shock and despair. In June of 2022 we witnessed frontal attacks on the Indian Muslim community that ranged from shooting into an open crowd to demolishing the homes of poor Muslims as well as

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[17] See, for example, Geeta Pandey, "Aurangzeb: Why is a Mughal Emperor Who Died 300 Years Ago Being Debated on Social Media?" *BBC*, 21 May 2022, web; Pavan Kulkarnai, "How Did Savarkar, a Staunch Supporter of British Colonialism, Come to Be Known as 'Veer?'" *The Wire*, 18 May 2017, web.

[18] Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," 15.

prominent Muslim activists. The shock of these events has reverberated throughout India, where it seems like we have run out of anger but not tears. It is in these moments more than anything else that we need strategies for survival and resources for resistance, and we need to traverse the detour of theory to begin to understand a reality which now expresses itself only in violence. We are not even properly able to name what is happening in India, and we use borrowed words: "apartheid," or "genocide," or "fascism," while knowing that what is really happening inside our peculiar national prison is our unique curse, which requires a unique name of its own.

I think we must desperately grasp on to theoretical and political practices that can help us out of this mess and prevent our own minds from becoming numb or stupefied by current events. Perhaps our friends in Germany do not know this, but Germany's Nazi past is one of the most frequently evoked political metaphors for where many fear we are headed in India. The work of cultural studies, critical theoretical work held in the same fist as engaged political work, becomes not just one more discipline offered in the academy, but a real resource to understand how to survive in a crumbling democracy.

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Afterword

Engaged Scholarship in Practice; or: How to Look Back into the Future

Tobias Jetter

I
Intertwining the Local and the Global

> It is stupid and arrogant to suppose that any of these meanings can in any way be prescribed; they are made by living, made and remade, in ways we cannot know in advance. To try to jump the future, to pretend that in some way you are the future, is strictly insane.[1]

Critical thinking functions in never ending circles. Throughout the present volume, in which young scholars take a detour through theory to arrive at their own conclusions, cultural studies shows its cyclical nature as a discipline that cannot and must not ever become completely attached to anything. So, what have our authors found out about the possibility of global cultural studies? Is there one answer, or are there many contradicting ones? And what is at stake in formulating such an answer or answers? In my afterword, I would like to argue that our book offers not one clear message, but rather an authentic picture of where cultural studies is right now globally. Moreover, I will make a humble proposal as to where it could go.

Perusing the twelve essays making up this collection, one observation suggests itself to me with surprising clarity: There is a certain break in the methodology and contents of the essays, and this break seemingly depends on where the texts originated. While the case studies penned by our Indian authors tend to be rooted in a relatively firm consciousness of their positionality – local examples, for instance, are repeatedly brought up –, some of the texts produced by German contributors privilege a more global or transnational view. At the same time, global becomes theory and local becomes practice. While one should beware of generalizing – or worse, essentializing – I still believe that our book reflects a general trend that permeates cultural studies as an academic field: Cultural studies is done differently in different regions, drawing from the unique conditions at hand. With respect to our collection, it would be a mistake to draw strong conclusions or to privilege one approach over

[1] Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 10–24, quotation: 15. Emphasis in the original.

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the other. Rather, we should enquire about the reasons for these differences and their ultimate consequences for our discipline and its transnational ambitions.

A global alliance of cultural scholars is not only a possibility, but already a given reality, albeit one that is still in its beginning stages. What I consider the major moment of danger is not the creation of such an alliance, but rather its strenuous mission of finding common ground. Stressing voice and agency with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a theorist frequently referenced in this volume, the solution could be simple: to focus on whatever is most pressing and attack it relentlessly until progress is made.[2] This, however, is not in and of itself a complete mode of thinking. Let me instead formulate an alternative meta-methodology: one that does draw on the fundamental ideas of cultural studies and is already taking shape.

II
On the Possibilities of Practical Optimism

> If we understand cultural growth, we shall know that it is a continual offering for common acceptance; that we should not, therefore, try to determine in advance what should be offered, but clear the channels and let all the offerings be made, taking care to give the difficult full space, the original full time, so that it is a real growth, and not just a wider confirmation of old rules.[3]

One of the major points of contention outsiders have with the postmodern left, not only in the academic space, is its purported tendency towards a certain kind of exclusionary moral elitism. There is no need to deeply discuss viral and tired buzzwords such as "cancel culture," which is in fact both a highly destructive misapplication of progressive thought and a potentially useful tool of a truly democratic culture, to see examples of this. As a field closely jointed with practical political work, cultural studies is an arena for engaged scholarship and, consequently, particularly vulnerable to ideological fights. One ought to remember Raymond Williams's weighty words in "Culture is Ordinary" (1958): His cultural growth is about "offering," not forcing, and it is about open minds instead of ideologically predetermined directions.[4]

Williams was not alone in foreseeing the dangers of elite-thinking. The picture that Stuart Hall paints concerning the dangers of institutionalisation in his essay "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies" (1999) is much darker. Hall's anxieties, however, are productive ones: Instead of panning the new developments in the field, he critically embraces them because "dangers are not places you run away

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2 See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988). 271–313.

3 Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," 22–23.

4 Ibid., 22.

from but places that you go towards."[5] This assertion is grounded in the clear vision of a constant core of cultural studies. No one has more clearly defined the evasive field than Hall, who characterizes cultural studies as a discipline that is attractive and productive "not just because of its sometimes dazzling internal theoretical development, but because it holds theoretical and political questions in an ever irresolvable but permanent tension."[6]

Rather than simply serving as a political tool of whatever the zeitgeist demands, we ought to hold on to this conception of cultural studies as a field of continuous and ardent debate. Tension is uncomfortable and it is occasionally counterproductive. However, I believe, that it is also the only way forward for our discipline. We need yet more diversity: not just diversity in terms of ethnicity or religious belief or gender identity, but also diversity in relation to political opinions and basic ideas. A cultural studies that is no longer hungry for change in discourse has no reason to exist.

That change arises from the very tension, controversy, and conflict that tend to be actively discouraged in the conformist academic environments in which we often find ourselves. Making space for controversy also means to admit voices with which we might be uncomfortable. It means widening the topics we discuss. And it finally means addressing our own dogmas and interrogating the monuments we have built to our own values and methodologies. As Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler have admonished: "Cultural studies must constantly interrogate its own connection to contemporary relations of power, its own stakes."[7]

To do so, cultural studies needs to rid itself of any illusion of standing on a moral high ground. It needs to courageously disconnect its scholarship from political projects that want to use it as a mere means to an end, and not as a method of investigating discourse and changing it for the better. Because, according to Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, "critical practice is not only determined by, it is responsible to, its situation,"[8] we have to keep in mind that "these mutual interests do not in themselves make every 'progressive' project of cultural recovery and transformation an integral part of cultural studies itself."[9] To be sure, my argument is not intended as an attack on engaged scholarship. Rather, it represents a call for a more nuanced approach that is more democratically adventurous in its voices and agency, and yet also more ready to call out problematic or even false conclusions and discuss even deep discord productively.

One such departure from dogma could lie in taking evidence more seriously. Evidence-based critique has plenty of merits and ignoring those merits is not a winning strategy, neither in terms of finding truth nor in terms of facilitating successful

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5 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 2nd edition (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 97–109, quotation: 107.

6 Ibid., 106.

7 Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, "Cultural Studies: An Introduction," in *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1–22, quotation: 13.

8 Ibid., 6.

9 Ibid., 12.

communication. This process could include, for instance, new approaches towards our field's relationship with capitalism. Do we, as Fredric Jameson puts it, "think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together"?[10] This is just one topic out of many in which a changed basic assumption could lead to productive cultural analyses. Replacing a reserved cynicism with a pragmatically optimistic approach is the direction I would suggest.

In such an approach, the public must always be implicated. An accessible cultural studies, open to a wide range of voices, trusting the forces of the working class and what some might call "the masses," makes an incremental, ever-continuing progress viable. It puts the ultimate agency in the hands of the people, who then exercise their own influence on the process as they see fit. This is what thinking democratically ultimately means, if we take democracy as seriously as we like to assert. To come back to Williams one last time: "We should not seek to extend a ready-made culture to the benighted masses. We should accept, frankly, that if we extend our culture, we shall change it: some that is offered will be rejected, other parts will be radically criticized. And this is as it should be […]. I, for one, do not fear this."[11]

III
"Global Cultural Studies": A Concluding Proposal

Now, how does this proposal of a more open, incremental, and courageous field correlate with the opportunity of a global cultural studies? Limiting areas of application, as much as opinions, inevitably stalls possibilities for finding global voices. Therefore, cultural studies must continue to take an open and participatory approach. This can be achieved by building networks of local thinking on both local and global issues. The diverse inhabitants of such networks must be free to disagree and argue, united only in the basic aspects of methodology and aim. The ground rules could be fairly simple: Target whatever needs to be talked about locally with as much weight placed on local, involved voices as possible and only as much outside input as necessary. If this is implemented in an accessible fashion, what could ensue is a global community of local issues. Its pillars would include celebrating incremental progress over grand triumphs and diverse, authentic amateur work over the often scarcely readable work of a limited circle of professionals.

Thankfully, all of this is anything but a purely hypothetical musing. On the contrary, such a development showed itself everywhere around me while editing this book: both in the classic texts that the volume revisited and the new essays and projects that were developed. Cultural studies as a practice already seems to be evolving into what I have outlined. Now, the task ahead is to stay the course. This is an exciting challenge with the very real stakes of influencing global politics. Yet,

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10 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991), 47.

11 Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," 22.

while dreaming of a better world is tempting, we should also be careful not to overestimate our own reach. To invoke Stuart Hall one last time, all researchers in the discipline, including myself, would do well to remember that "there is all the difference in the world between understanding the politics of intellectual work and substituting intellectual work for politics."[12] The "intellectual modesty"[13] that Hall espouses is a key component of incrementalism and our only way of avoiding frustration. Improvements in working on and with a discourse are necessarily almost always small. Working in cultural studies means committing to a slow pace of progress, piece by piece and step by step. If this book can be one such tiny step towards a more grounded, open, and participatory discipline, it has more than served its purpose.

[12] Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," 109.
[13] Ibid.

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JMU CULTURAL STUDIES I

Can cultural studies attend to the problems of our globalized world? Or is this project of "engaged scholarship" too deeply rooted in the parochial terrain of the national? This collection of essays – the first volume in the new JMU Cultural Studies publication series – attends to this vital yet difficult question. Based on joint seminars bringing together emerging scholars from Germany and India, the contributions confront "classic texts" from US-American, British, and Indian cultural studies with the specific concerns and contemporary perspectives of the authors. The collection thus tests the potentials of the tradition to speak to the transnational as well as the national environments of the very present. Emphasis is placed on Marxist and feminist legacies, which are then projected into the domains of contemporary disability, food, and film studies.

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