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

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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

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[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.

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.

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[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 post-colonial 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 root-edness" 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 common-place, 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

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[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

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[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

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[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.