Articulations of African-Americanism in South Asian Postcolonial Theory: Globalism, Localism, and the Problem of Race
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W. E. B. Du Bois’s famous assertion in *The Souls of Black Folk*, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line,” has been taken up as a rallying point by activists and critics concerned with the sociopolitical and cultural effects of black racial oppression in the United States. A century later, in the midst of intense affirmative action backlash and in a post–Rodney King world, we can say that the problem of the twenty-first century is still the problem of the color line, Colin Powell notwithstanding. The complete sentence from which Du Bois’s proverbial line is quoted is less well known. In its entirety it reads: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (54). Du Bois saw a continuity in the problems of racial oppression in the United States and the rest of the colonized world. Recognizing the strategic transnational discursive construction of the African-American in Du Bois, or much earlier in David Walker, means participating in a critical reconfiguration of African-American studies and in a broader trend in cultural studies—the move from the local to the global/transnational.

Yet this move is neither unprecedented nor singular. From Lenin’s explanation of imperialism as a prerequisite for capitalism, to world systems theorists who have demonstrated capitalism’s reliance on the development of underdevelopment and unequal exchange in the world economy, the relevance of transnational analyses has been made clear (Lenin 1939, 10–11, 63–64; Wallerstein 1979,
Postcolonial studies have by definition been transnational (although in some versions not Marxist), the imbrication of colonizer and colonized identities being well recognized. The more urgent issue is one of particularity. Does the “post” in postcolonial mark a similarity that renders irrelevant the specificities of the local? Do celebrations of globalism problematically assume the local as static? Has contemporary globalization produced a worldwide diaspora that we can talk about through a common master vocabulary? Are we, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue, in an age of empire with no outside, no local-global dialectic, and only the universal (2000, 19)? I suggest that homogenized ideas of global diaspora and transnationalism, all of which are being increasingly deployed (particularly in ethnic studies) as emancipatory paradigms (often beyond race), in fact meet their limits when we introduce the question of race. Diasporas and transnational connections are significantly marked by the integument of race. Thus Paul Gilroy, despite his critique of cultural nationalism and his invocation of the transnational, is convinced of the importance of race in the construction of modernity and the critical thinking that gave rise to cultural studies (1993, ix, x, 4, 7, 9). Even his later invocation of a “planetary humanism” acknowledges the commercial use of black male bodies to propagate a disciplinary nationalism (2000, 348). Similarly, Carole Boyce Davies’s focus on diaspora instead of nation converges on the black female subject.

Much of postcolonial theory, on the other hand, ignores the validity of race as an analytical category and the specificity of black racial oppression. Davies’s rejection of postcolonial theory, albeit hasty and reductive, is based partially on much of the theory’s rejection of race as an analytical category (85). Yet, U.S. academic postcolonialists, formerly interested largely in European colonization and its aftermath, are now intervening in debates about multiculturalism and ethnicity in the nation. Many are eager to incorporate African-American experiences into theorizations of postcolonial, migratory subjectivities that transcend the national. This essay seeks to examine the terms of this incorporation by analyzing the conceptualization of race and the representation of African-American subjectivity in selected writings of three prominent South Asian postcolonial theorists: Homi Bhabha, Arjun Appadurai, and Gayatri Spivak. Through a brief comparison
with the theorizations of race in the works of some influential race theorists—Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Noel Ignatiev, and Patricia Williams—I consider how the marginalization of the local in both the representations of African-Americans and the interpretation of race in the writings of South Asian postcolonialists might unwittingly reproduce the racism of a liberal multiculturalism that effaces power relations.

In the context of racial politics in the United States, it is useful to note some interesting and conflicting genealogies. Issues of internal racial oppression and colonialism have not, in fact, always been disparate. The 1965 Immigration Act, which radically deracialized new immigration, was politically related to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that, in turn, was related to the contradictions of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War (Singh 1998). The Third World movement of the late 1960s—a coalition of African-American, Native American, Asian American, and Chicano/a students who modeled themselves after Third World liberation struggles, declaring ghettos to be “internal colonies”—combined a critique of internal racial oppression with a critique of colonialism (Liu 1976). This movement, we know, did not last long. On the other hand, the growth of postcolonial theory in the academy since the early 1980s—a period of intense affirmative action backlash and a shift in the social sciences from radical paradigms of race (associated with rights and inequalities) to safer paradigms of ethnicity (cultural difference)—has been nothing short of spectacular. I am by no means suggesting a simple race conspiracy theory for the prestige of postcolonial academic theory in the United States. I am arguing, however, that the production of postcolonial theory needs to be analyzed not only in relation to global capitalism, as Arif Dirlik and Aijaz Ahmad have done, but just as importantly in relation to issues of race and racial politics (Dirlik 1997, 503; Ahmad 1992, 68, 69). (Indeed, connecting the two would reveal the continuity between capitalism and internal colonization.) Thus my unusual designation of Bhabha, Appadurai, and Spivak as South Asian postcolonial theorists is a polemical one, designed to localize and racialize theory production and to situate these theorists among other South Asians of the post-1965 migration to the United States, immigrants who have often been typecast, as Vijay Prashad perspicaciously points out, as the model minority “solution” in opposition
to what Du Bois saw as the fate of African-Americans—being seen as the “problem” (Du Bois 1982, viii, 6–7, 94). Moreover, for all three critics, India functions as a productive catachresis, a site through which they theorize questions of nation, colonialism, and globalism. I intend my use of the terms “global” and “local” not to spell oppositions but rather to signal the importance of paying attention to the raced local-particular. Obviously, as Gilroy has brilliantly demonstrated, African-American intellectuals’ ideas of race and racial struggle were productively influenced by their transatlantic contacts (1993, x). Postcolonialists are also demonstrating how transnational interests and imaginings were central to ideas of community for both whites and peoples of color from the period of early U.S. colonization through the revolutionary and nationalist periods. As early as the late eighteenth century, African-Americans like Prince Hall and John Marrant, for instance, claimed entry into the nation by linking their histories to those of African colonization (see Brooks 2003). It is crucial to recognize such linkages if only to repudiate ideas of American exceptionalism and to formulate global resistances. However, the particular practices and oppressive effects of racialization cannot be understood without attention to the local. Migrancy and diaspora cannot, for instance, explain the racialized beating of Rodney King, the incarceration of Wen Ho Lee, or the shooting of Balbir Singh Sodhi (in the aftermath of September 11). In my invocation of the local, therefore, I am not advocating what Manuel Castells describes as a defensive and retrenched localism, but rather a relationship to the local and specific as a basis for theorizing, much in the manner of Castells’s own analyses (1997, 61–62) and those of critical race theorists discussed at the end of this essay. Thus critical race theory, I argue, offers an important intervention into postcolonial studies, particularly as the field expands to cover the United States.

The trajectory of Bhabha’s ideas is captured in his *The Location of Culture* (1994). Most readers of Bhabha are familiar with his concepts of ambivalence, hybridity, interstitiality, liminality, and splitting, all of which are rehearsed in almost every essay in the collection. What is interesting for our purposes, however, is how this collection attempts to incorporate African-American theory and culture into postcolonial theory and posits a seamless identity between the two.
A look at the back cover of *The Location of Culture* points to the happy marriage of postcolonial and African-American. The two endorsements—both of which praise Bhabha as a postcolonial and postmodern theorist—come from Edward Said and Toni Morrison, signifying the merging of postcolonial and African-American constituencies both outside and inside the book. A similar theoretical enterprise frames the book in its introduction and conclusion, both of which need close scrutiny.

In the introduction, Bhabha posits a postcolonial modernity or contramodernity that emerges from the writings of the migrants, transnationals, and dispossessed. This writing, emanating from interstitiality and unhomeliness, and creating cultural hybridities, interrupts the progressive linear time of modernity through a Benjaminian present of astonishment. From these interstitial and border spaces, Bhabha suggests that politically empowering calls for solidarity and community can be made. Instead of a world literature constituted by different national traditions, the literature of the border might well constitute world literature. What is at stake is not simply the writing of alternative histories, because this would keep intact a binarism between the empowered and disempowered, but an interruption of modernity via disjuncture. For readers familiar with Bhabha’s work on mimicry, stereotype, and nation, none of these ideas are particularly new except the manner in which he now uses these concepts to interrupt the idea of modernity. What is striking about the introduction, however, is the way in which he uses African-American texts to generate these ideas. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, in particular, becomes a theoretical ur-text in *The Location of Culture*. The unhomely moment that can be heard in 124 Bluestone Road relates “the traumatic ambivalences of a personal psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (Bhabha 1994, 11). Bhabha argues that Morrison, like Gordimer, demonstrates the “contemporary compulsion to move beyond, to turn the present into the ‘post’” (Bhabha 1994, 180). And *Beloved* provides the heading for Bhabha’s last section, “Looking for the Join”—the desire for social solidarity.10

The last chapter of *The Location of Culture* is titled “‘Race,’ Time, and the Revision of Modernity,” clearly suggesting for Bhabha the centrality of race in the interruption and construction of modernity. Beginning with Fanon, whose performance of displacement interrupts
modernity’s progressive myth of man, to Houston Baker’s reading of the Harlem Renaissance as a “deformation of mastery,” Bhabha goes on to locate the colonial space as the “non-space” from which the ideology of modernity as beginning and new starts (237, 241, 246). He critiques Foucault and Anderson, two theorists of modernity, for placing racism outside of modernity (249). Again, the interruption of modernity’s time, “the time-lag of postcolonial modernity,” which “moves forward, erasing that compliant past tethered to the myth of progress” (253), is exemplified in black vernacularism, in Cornel West’s construction of a prophetic pragmatic tradition, in Sonia Sanchez’s poem, and, most importantly, in Beloved. Beloved’s presence, “which is profoundly time-lagged, moves forward while continually encircling that moment of the ‘not-there’ which Morrison sees as the stressed, dislocatory absence that is crucial for the remembrance of the narrative of slavery” (254). The chapter ends with Bhabha making Du Bois the precursor for his discourse on the time lag. In this chapter, postcolonial and black become rhetorically interchangeable. Bhabha writes that “subalterns and ex-slaves” seize the spectacular event of modernity (246); “[t]he intervention of postcolonial or black critique is aimed at transforming the conditions of enunciation at the level of the sign—where the intersubjective realm is constituted” (247; emphasis mine).

Clearly, Bhabha wants to privilege and centralize African-American theory, literature, and art in his text. But since he is concerned with the expulsion of race from modernity’s time in Foucault and Anderson, and because the title of the chapter, “‘Race,’ Time, and the Revision of Modernity,” signals an urgency about the category of race, we should ask what race really means in The Location of Culture and how it is deployed in relation to African-American cultural critique. Let us detour a moment to Fanon—another central figure for Bhabha. Working from the first sentence of “The Fact of Blackness” (“Dirty nigger! Or simply, Look, a Negro!”), Bhabha links the effect of this racial categorization to similar affects in Palestine, Zaire, or Antwerp. “Wherever I am when I hear a racist, or catch his look, I am reminded of Fanon’s evocatory essay” (236). Here, what a racist look means or what constitutes racist talk seems incontrovertible and unambiguous. Racism is simply that which marginalizes and condemns on the basis of race. But what Bhabha wants to emphasize
about Fanon is a generalized, interstitial positionality of oppression. Fanon, Bhabha writes, “talks not simply of the historicity of the black man, as much as he writes in ‘The fact of blackness’ about the temporality of modernity within which the figure of the ‘human’ comes to be authorized” (236). For Bhabha, the particular historicity of the black man about whom Fanon agonizingly writes is not as important as Fanon’s questioning of modernity’s construction of the human. “Not simply . . . as much as” is also the logic of the chapter “Interrogating Identity: Franz Fanon and the Postcolonial Prerogative,” where by emphasizing “want” in Fanon’s “What does the black man want?” Bhabha makes a case for valorizing Fanon simply for his use of the psychoanalytical language of demand and desire and for rarely historicizing the colonial experience (42). Transnational power relations and materiality are clearly not important. Bhabha writes: “Colonial and postcolonial texts do not merely tell the modern history of ‘unequal development’ or evoke memories of underdevelopment. I have tried to suggest that they provide modernity with a modular moment of enunciation” (251).

There is nothing wrong with the argument that articulations of the colonial experience address central concerns of modernity. Indeed, this kind of generalizing move is a powerful demonstration of continuum between local and global and suggests that the colonial experience concerns everyone. However, there is something profoundly westernizing and colonial in the idea that the discursive constructions of the colonized are significant mainly insofar as they challenge concepts like modernity, which for Bhabha remains, in its origins, a purely abstract, Western concept that is thereafter challenged by Fanon. Just as we are now suspicious of interpretations of theorists that dismiss their overt racism and ethnocentrism by arguing that such minor details are unimportant to the general outlines of speculative theory, so should we be similarly suspicious of readings of postcolonial colonial experience that dismiss specificity. For instance, we do not think of Cecil Rhodes the humanitarian without thinking of Rhodes the imperialist, or of J. S. Mill’s On Liberty without thinking of his filtration theory of colonization, or, as Gayatri Spivak has pointed out, Marx without the Asiatic mode of production (see Viswanathan 1989, 116, 149; Spivak 1999, 102). It seems like a singular colonial inversion, then, to prize in Fanon interventions
into narratives of modernity. Kumkum Sangari’s argument about how to read postcolonial literature applies also to Bhabha’s reading of Fanon. Sangari writes that only celebrating postcolonial literature’s difference from the center relegates the “Third World’ to the false position of a permanent yet desired challenge to (or subversion of) a suffocating Western sovereignty” (1987, 184).

Yet, like many postcolonial critics, including Said, and theorists of nation such as George Mosse, Bhabha also suggests that racism be seen as integral to modernity, and from here he attempts to create a position for postcolonial agency. Racism, he argues, should be seen “as part of the historical traditions of civic and liberal humanism that create ideological matrices of national aspiration. . . . Such a privileging of ambivalence in the social imaginariness of nationness, and its forms of collective affiliation, would enable us to understand the coeval, often incommensurable tension between the influence of traditional ‘ethnicist’ identifications that coexist with contemporary secular, modernizing aspirations” (250). Despite the polemic of centering racism, Bhabha still sees an opposition between a secular, rational modernity and ethnicist identification that is supposedly atavistic. Here it is appropriate to consider briefly the differences between Bhabha’s approach to race and that of scholars in British cultural studies such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. While Bhabha shares with them an emphasis on hybridity, syncretism, and cultural fluidity, and particularly with Hall an emphasis on mobile, urban subjects as constitutive of the global-hybrid moment—all reflective of immigration to the center by Britain’s formerly colonized—his approach to race differs considerably from that of Gilroy.11 Gilroy interprets modernity as constitutively black. For Gilroy, racial slavery is “internal to modernity and intrinsically modern,” and the specificity of slave experience marks blacks as the first truly modern peoples. The particularities of slave experience constitute modernity (1993, 220).

It is also important to note how in the above quote by Bhabha race is collapsed into ethnicity, which is then conflated unproblematically with religion. Race is clearly not an analytical category, and racism is not important in the specificity of its operations even though Bhabha points out that the project of mapping out an enunciative present for interrupting modernity has a descriptive history
in African-American critics such as Hortense Spillers, Deborah McDowell, and Houston Baker (178). What Bhabha’s analysis attempts is a harnessing of the specificities of African-American experience and history to a generalized celebration of the postmodern (even though he calls it contramodern) and to a critique of modernity, through the tropes of liminality, interstitiality, hybridity, and ambivalence. The project resembles, in many ways, Deleuze and Guattari’s postmodern excitement about the molecular and the rhizomatic, both of which rely on a problematic East-West divide. Moreover, the deep structural resemblances between Bhabha’s contramodernity and what Rob Wilson has called simply textual and white-bread postmodernism (in contrast with a particularized, located postmodernism) make any localized analysis on Bhabha’s terms difficult at best (Wilson 2001, 123–23).

My purpose here is not to rehearse the solid critiques of Bhabha’s celebration of an ahistorical hybridity made by critics such as Ella Shohat, Benita Parry, Robert Young, or most recently Hardt and Negri in Empire, or to point out the obvious structural resemblances between postmodern marketing strategies and cultural hybridity, but rather to see how signifiers of African-American history and critique get circulated in Bhabha’s texts. This brings us again to Toni Morrison and Beloved. Using Beloved to illustrate the transnational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities, Bhabha writes: “Toni Morrison’s Beloved revives the past of slavery and its murderous rituals of possession and self-possession, in order to project a contemporary fable of a woman’s history that is at the same time the narrative of an affective, historic memory of an emergent public sphere of men and women alike.” That is, Morrison’s agonistic representation of slavery opens up the present moment of utterance, although Bhabha does not say how the public sphere will be specifically altered by the haunted presence of slavery. Bhabha continues, “What is striking about the ‘new’ internationalism is that the move from the specific to the general, from the material to the metaphoric, is not a smooth passage of transition and transcendence. The ‘middle passage’ of contemporary culture, as with slavery itself, is a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize experience” (5). Here we get to the crux of Bhabha’s methodology, a belief that the specific must and does always get translated to the
general, the material to the metaphoric, in order to interrupt modernity. But at this point it is not misplaced to ask: What are the elisions and suppressions that must be carried out in order to so metaphorize middle passage? What could the middle passage of contemporary culture be? I am not suggesting that the brutality of middle passage was homogeneous, but that as a moment it cannot be simply equated with other contemporary oppressions (or with oppressions of gender, sexuality, or class through the logic of the comma so prevalent in cultural studies).

Beloved, with its centering of haunting and interruption of time, is obviously a useful text for ideas of interstitiality and hybridity alone as long as one brackets racially specific moments that are undeconstructible: the “Sixty Million and more” to whom the novel is dedicated; the moment when Sethe picks up the ice pick to attack Bodwin (322). And in turn, one must be open to the possibility that what is differentiated and deferred, in the Derridean sense, through interstitiality and unhomeliness, might be more than racial essentialism, which is easy to dismiss. It might be black experience (though particularized), which, as Gilroy suggests, functions as the “changing rather than an unchanging same,” something different from ideas of essentialism or anti-essentialism.14

To move from Bhabha’s use of the African-American voice as an exemplification of a world literature from the margins, or a new internationalism that ruptures modernity, to Appadurai’s conception of a decentered modernity is to enter a celebration of diasporic pluralism in the age of globalism. Although Appadurai is far less invested in claiming an African-American constituency than is Bhabha, the strategy by which this constituency is included and the positionality of this inclusion need further scrutiny. I will focus particularly on Appadurai’s essay, “Patriotism and Its Futures,” first published in Public Culture in 1990 and subsequently reprinted in a shorter version as “The Heart of Whiteness” in Callaloo in 1993. Despite the fact that “The Heart of Whiteness” was solicited by Tejumola Olaniyan in a special issue on “Post-Colonial Discourse,” I want to remark on the specific ways in which Appadurai’s theory “travels,” to use Said’s term, from the tranethnic diasporic concerns of Public Culture to the racially specific concerns of black African-American, African, and African diasporic cultures of Callaloo.15
Most of Appadurai’s ideas about the appearance of a global culture without discernible center and periphery, working through global flows, marked by the fact of immigration, were captured in his essay “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” which first appeared in Public Culture in 1990. In this essay, Appadurai rejects the local as epistemologically helpful. Ethnicity, he writes, “once a genie contained in a bottle of some sort of locality (however large), has now become a global force” (1996, 41). In “The Heart of Whiteness,” Appadurai retains this theoretical emphasis on the global and transnational, but, interestingly enough, adds the problematic category of “personal experience” to localize the workings of race. And he suggests the importance of extending the focus of postcolonial discourse work to include concerns of nation, particularly the United States. It is here, in the attempt to see the local simply as an instance of the global that problems become evident:

Postcolonial discourse studies need to be alert to the ever present danger that they might become another way to contain the unruliness of the postcolony while satisfying the endless appetite of the Western academy for colorful topics. One way to avoid this danger is to ensure that the study of postcolonial discourse should include the United States, where debates about race, urban violence and affirmative action index more general anxieties about multiculturalism, about diasporic diversity and thus about new forms of transnationality. (1993, 806–7)

But in what way, one should ask, are debates about affirmative action really about new forms of transnationality? Does the new transnationalism that Appadurai refers to implicitly assume a post-1965 immigration of professionals (who since the 1980s actually ceased to be the dominant South Asian group)? Is it useful to index affirmative action debates through the immigration of professionals whose physical and sometimes virtual mobility (in contrast to the immobility of the urban poor of the United States or the peasants of the Third World) ensures a constant transnationalism? Might the politics of affirmative action and liberal multiculturalism be entirely opposed? These are questions that cannot be answered in his essay because of Appadurai’s theoretical foreclosure of the local and of race as a systemic (though not unchanging) category that needs to be retained in thinking about African-American culture.
The essay, in both versions, is a powerful invocation of a postna-
tional, cosmopolitan culture, utopian in its vision of transnational,
progressivist affiliations, but premised on class-specific and nation-
specific assumptions. Deterritorialized diasporas, ones in which nei-
ther home nor nation are fixed, are the markers of the contemporary
world for Appadurai. Such a postnational rethinking of the world
is necessary, Appadurai writes, in order to recognize the difference
between the United States “being a land of immigrants and being one
in a postnational network of diasporas. In the postnational world
that we see emerging, diaspora runs with, and not against, the grain
of identity, movement, and reproduction. Everyone has relatives
working abroad” (1993, 803).

The two different scenarios Appadurai sketches here—the land
of immigrants versus the postnational network—do not, of course,
cover the realities of U.S. society, although the immigrant model is
still espoused by conservative ethnicity theorists. Werner Sollors’s
model of consent versus descent to describe ethnicity as it develops
in the United States (via consent), as opposed to the ancestral ethnic-
ity of immigrants, depends on a presumed whiteness in which ac-
culturation and assimilation are simply matters of choice (1986, 4–5).
Even though Appadurai, unlike Sollors, is concerned with immi-
grants of color, the immigrant/postnational model falls far short
of accounting for people of color. Immigration is obviously irrele-
vant for Native Americans who continue to be colonized, for many
Chicana/os who never moved while national borders did, or for
most African-Americans whose ancestors came on slave ships. And,
of course, “everyone” does not have relatives working abroad unless
we translate “everyone” roughly as urban and middle class.17

The privileging of immigration and the interpretation of immi-
gration largely as mobility in contemporary U.S. culture explain
Appadurai’s interpellation of African-Americans within a general-
ized diasporic movement that forecloses race and the local through
the logic of the hyphen and the comma. Appadurai writes,

The formula of hyphenation (as in Italian-Americans, Asian-Americans,
and African-Americans) is reaching the point of saturation, and the
right-hand side of the hyphen can barely contain the unruliness of the
left-hand side. . . . The politics of ethnic identity in the United States
is inseparably linked to the global spread of originally local national
identities. For every nation-state that has exported significant numbers of its populations to the United States, as refugees, tourists or students, there is now a delocalized transnation. (1993, 803)

Voluntary mobility and forcible movement as well as different groups are problematically mixed here into a generalized idea of transnation. Yet it is only when race (as systemic) is foreclosed that purely recreational forms of identity, such as Italian-American, can be equated with African-American, a trick that liberal theorists of ethnicity (as opposed to radical theorists of race) have learned well. And while contemporary Asian American communities might be considered part of a delocalized transnation, African-Americans of slave descent cannot similarly be theorized as a delocalized transnation. As David B. Wilkins writes, “while black Americans can claim African culture, we have never had the luxury of relying on our African heritage to provide a set of common symbols and beliefs within which we can organize our lives. This history separates us from every other group of hyphenated Americans” (1996, 23). But just as Bhabha saw African-American writing as quintessentially a postmodern border writing of the world, albeit unsettling and disruptive, Appadurai sees African-American identity as similar to all diasporic, hyphenated identity constructions—productive, creative, pluralistic.

Appadurai’s privileging of a worldwide diaspora as an explanatory paradigm for racial grouping in the United States again undergirds his conceptualization of double hyphenation that is generated by specifying nation. The hyphenated American, Appadurai suggests, “might have to be twice hyphenated (Asian-American-Japanese or Native-American-Seneca or African-American-Jamaican or Hispanic-American-Bolivian) as diasporic identities stay mobile and grow more protean” (1993, 804). Here the universalizing logic of globalism encounters a logical dead end. One can see how while immigration patterns, for instance, might invite an intragroup specificity that necessitates a category such as Asian-American-Japanese, the category African-American-Jamaican is really a noncategory. For if Jamaican immigrants need to be interpellated as specifically from Jamaica, they cannot, at the same time, be absorbed into the African-American category (Jamaica is not in Africa) unless, of course, for
African-American we substitute “black”—a far more powerful political and racial category, which Appadurai’s globalist narrative precludes. Yet, even within Appadurai’s own system, the African-American category seems to resist incorporation into a generalized double hyphenation. Appadurai writes, “Or perhaps the sides of the hyphen will have to be reversed, and we become a federation of diasporas, American-Italians, American-Haitians, American-Irish, American-Africans” (1993, 804). American-Haitians, we note, are differentiated from American-Africans, and thus the category African-American resists double hyphenation.

I have referred to Appadurai’s bracketing of the specificity of African-American culture and of racial oppression as foreclosure in the Freudian sense rather than simply exclusion because even in the original essay, “Patriotism and Its Futures,” these specificities are present as excesses that need to be vigorously denied in order to put forward a globalist multiculturalism. Thus, it is not surprising that in the Callaloo essay “The Heart of Whiteness” racial oppression and the local emerge as part of the Real in a quasi-hallucinatory form.18 Remembering an encounter with the Dotbusters (a white New Jersey–based hate group targeting immigrants from India), Appadurai writes:

I and my fellow migrants from India had arrived. Someone out there hated me. The stakes of my own diasporic existence here had somehow changed; I was certainly American now. . . . I am now well advanced on the road to becoming a person of color. It’s not exactly that I thought I was white before, but as an anglophone academic born in India and teaching in the Ivy League, I was certainly hanging out in the field of dreams, and had no cause to think myself black. (1993, 802)

In this use of personal experience, Appadurai invokes the very categories of white, black, and person of color, categories linked through a normalized power-knowledge system of racial oppression in the United States, and the ones he vigorously foreclosed in the celebratory narrative of universal hyphenation in the global diaspora. Appadurai’s essay leaves us with unanswered, yet urgent questions: What does it mean to think oneself black? Why is a relationship with blackness central to immigrant groups?
While for Bhabha and Appadurai questions of race and the political constituency of “African-American” are indexed through their interest in migrancy and global diaspora, respectively, for Spivak they are indexed through her concerns with the Third World and the superexploitation of Third World labor in the global economy of neocolonialism. Although Spivak’s comments about race and racism are scattered through many of her essays, her two most focused analyses are in the published version of her interview during the “Cultural Construction of Race” conference in 1985 and in her review essay “Race before Racism” (1998), originally published in 1993. In both texts, Spivak’s project can be described as one of “provincializing” blackness and the black-white racial hierarchy in order to look at “larger issues.” “Provincializing,” as in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s provocative use (2000), suggests a de-emphasizing, a restriction of the domain of. My brief analysis of both texts asks where this provincializing positions South Asians and South Asian theorists in relation to race and to African-American culture.

Spivak critiques the trend of multicultural studies that problematically conflate problems of imperialism and immigration and reduce Third World problems to problems at home. To illustrate, Spivak points out how at the African Literature Association convention,

Black Americans are much more interested in the question of any Black tradition, whereas the Continental Africans are much more interested in the problems . . . of the various African nations. . . . What you really mark, is that it is the ones with United States passports who are trying to identify the problems of racism in the United States with what is happening in decolonized Africa. (1990, 64)

In the racial concerns of black Americans in a transnational context, Spivak sees a subsumption of the Third World by the First. Although not misplaced, this critique depends on a problematic interpellation of black Americans within a worldwide system of imperialism. Black Americans are marked as “the ones with United States passports” as if the Du Boisian double consciousness of being black and American, being subject to a local racial hierarchy, is somehow irrelevant or less significant than blacks simply being citizens of a neocolonial power.19

To focus on race, for Spivak, is to indulge in what she calls a
“simple chromatism” that participates in the same epistemic violence of colonialism by ignoring the collusion of Third World comprador capitalists and the “white” world. Spivak writes:

The international division of labor does not operate in terms of good whites, bad whites, and blacks. . . . To simply foreclose or ignore the international division of labor because that’s complicit with our own production, in the interests of the black-white division as representing the problem, is a foreclosure of neo-colonialism operated by chromatic race-analysis. (1990, 126)

There are several unresolved problems in the mutually exclusive positions Spivak maps here, not the least of which is the easy slippages of terms. For Spivak, “race,” “chromatism,” and the “black-white division” are problematically identical. But as we all know, in the United States questions of citizenship, rights, and national character have been fundamentally tied to race, which in turn is related to, but not totally coincident with, skin color. Plessy v. Ferguson, the famous case that legitimated Jim Crow laws, for instance, was definitely about race, but only incidentally about skin color, or chromatism. The black-white division refers both to identity categories and to power apparatuses, but cannot be tied to chromatism. Similarly, although the problems with the international division of labor and those of race in the United States might be very different, they might not be mutually exclusive. As Immanuel Wallerstein suggests, national cases are also part of a world system in which there is a basic division between whites and nonwhites (1979, 180). Even if we suspend the national and world connection for a moment, let us reverse Spivak’s proposition and ask whether the exclusive focus on the neocolonial relation of the United States (U.S. passport holders) to Third World labor and a dismissal of race ignores completely the problem of African-American oppression and denies, in fact, how revolutionary African-American writers from David Walker to Angela Davis have, in fact, affiliated themselves with resistance movements in the Third World. That is, Spivak misses the opportunity of seeing how local racial identities can be linked to critiques of neocolonialism.

If I seem to belabor the obvious, it is only because Spivak is minutely aware of the different racial positioning of minorities in the United States and yet often chooses to interpret U.S. racial identities
through the prism of the Third World, or more narrowly South Asia, and thus paradoxically denies the local in the United States. Spivak’s “Race before Racism” is a laudatory review of Jack Forbes’s *Black Americans and Native Americans*, a work that focuses on racial mixture and thus offers resistance by denying the validity of distinct racial groups. Spivak praises Forbes’s demonstration of the heterogeneity subsumed under racial markers, the legal reduction of this heterogeneity to a white and nonwhite distinction in the United States, and the structural problem of minorities replicating the power structure by constructing themselves as the Other of the dominant group. Concluding her review, Spivak writes, “Given that, in the literally post-colonial areas such as Algeria or India, white racism is no longer the chief problem, Forbes’s historical reasoning is yet another way of bringing together the intuitions of global resistance” (1998, 51).

Again, Spivak’s reading of U.S. race relations through Third World postcolonial cultures is problematic because it does not address the local in the United States. Most obviously, the argument suggests that just because white racism is not a problem in India and Algeria, this “post” of racism should function as a premise in the United States as well. But at this point one is compelled to ask how racialized unequal access to resources within the country can be addressed simply by dismissing white racism.

Yet, although Spivak disallows race as a category of analysis by dismissing it as chromatism, race enters through the back door, as it were, when Spivak writes about the positionality of South Asians in the United States. Because of the post-1960s brain-drain immigration of Indians to the United States, Spivak writes, “we don’t share the same history of oppression with the local Blacks, the east Asians, and the Hispanics; on the other hand, our skins are not white, and since most of us are post-colonials we were trained in the British way, so there is a certain sort of Anglomania in the United States, we can be used as affirmative-action alibis.”20 It is the *nonwhite skins* of Indians, along with their white-associated British (read: privileged) training, that allows Indian immigrants in the United States to be used as evidence against affirmative action. Frank Chin had written two decades earlier about Asian Americans functioning as being “not black”; similarly, Spivak here sees Indian immigrants manipulated in order to serve the needs of a power structure that thrives on black
racial oppression (Chin and Chan 1972, 75). Although the Indian immigrant is obviously constructed by imperialism, and her entry into the United States is obviously a product of the international division of labor, within the local space of the United States that immigrant also functions within a racial hierarchy. Blackness cannot simply be provincialized here in relation to the “larger” concerns of the Third World.

Because most of Spivak’s oeuvre is insistent on a scrupulous historicity, her work has the possibility of offering valuable insights into the functioning of race in the United States through a local-global dialectic. There is potential, for instance, in the occasional moment of comparative analysis, such as the one in the essay “The Political Economy of Women As Seen by a Literary Critic” in which she argues the importance of maintaining distinctions between the subjects of “post-modern neocolonialism” who are reentering a “feudal mode of power” and ethnic subjects in the United States who are “still caught in some way within structures of colonial subject-production . . . especially, from the historical problem of ethnic oppression on First World soil.”21 At present, however, such analyses remain incidental in her work.

A brief analysis of the writings of a few selected critical race theorists demonstrates the ways in which their theorizations of race (despite variations among their approaches) differ fundamentally from the conceptualization of race in the writings of the South Asian postcolonialists discussed above. These differences, in turn, point to both the problems and possibilities of incorporating African-American discourse within a globalized diaspora or transnational capitalism. Interestingly, none of the postcolonial theorists discussed above maintain any engagement with, or awareness of, critical race theory.22 The first and very obvious feature about race that needs to be emphasized, because it has become the straw man for those seeking to negate the significance of race, is that for these theorists race is not biological or fixed but sociocultural and fluid. It is a postfoundational concept. As Omi and Winant point out, race is “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by social struggle” (1986, 68; emphasis in original). But that does not mean that racial categories do not have decisive and painful effects.
This brings us to the second and the most important characteristic of these studies: all agree about the centrality of race in U.S. society. Omi and Winant’s concept of racial formation, which has proven indispensable to cultural critics, depends on this centrality. Racial formation refers to “the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings. Crucial to this formulation is the treatment of race as a central axis of social relations which cannot be subsumed under or reduced to some broader category” (62).

Because the centrality of race is so contested by the liberal ideologues of colorblindness, postmodern performativity theorists, and theorists of globalism and hybridity, it needs some clarification. Seeing race as central does not mean denying the importance of other identity categories such as gender, class, or religion, but it does mean seeing every identity, institution, and social practice in the United States as being saturated with race. Not only was the United States part of, and heir to, enlightenment constructions of the “human” based centrally on racial othering, but it furthermore institutionalized a raced conception of the citizen, the effects of which persist until today. Thus Noel Ignatiev’s pioneering study, How the Irish Became White, positions itself as a corrective to works by labor historians that either ignore race or see race simply as a disguise for class. Ignatiev demonstrates how the Irish, themselves fleeing caste oppression, adapted to a society in which “color was important in determining social position” by choosing to become white by embracing white supremacist positions (1995, 183, 2). Ignatiev sees no use for the term “racism,” which denotes only actions on an individual, personal level, and focuses instead on racial oppression. He demonstrates the centrality of race to the formation of an American working class; moments when an anticapitalist coalition become a real possibility are not realized, he demonstrates, because of the “alliance with capital on the basis of a shared ‘whiteness’ on the part of some workers” (184). Similarly, David Roediger sees whiteness as a psychological wage that white workers accept in lieu of better wages (1991, 13).

The work of critical race theorists also demonstrates how seeing race as central does not mean embracing a racial essentialism or static binarism that denies the insights that derive from the deconstruction
of binaries. Indeed, Patricia Williams’s project of race(ing) the color-blindness of law is also, and as importantly, a critique of the hypostatization of exclusive categories that mark legal understanding in Anglo-American jurisprudence: “rights/needs, moral/immoral, public/private, white/black” (1991, 8). Thus Williams challenges the traditional legal understanding of redhibitory vice, based on a perfect/defect distinction, by invoking an 1835 case in Louisiana in which the redhibitory vice was the alleged craziness of Kate, a slave that the plaintiff had purchased for $500 (1). Indeed, her own paradoxical social interpellation as black and nonblack simultaneously questions clear racial dichotomies and emphasizes the importance of racial categorization. For instance, Williams notes how she is interpellated as nonblack when colleagues include her as part of “us,” urging her not to make too much of her race because they don’t even think of her as black, and how she is viewed as (good) black when another (troublesome) black woman colleague engages in an unsuccessful tenure battle (9–10).

The third characteristic of critical race studies is what legal studies theorist Richard Delgado terms the “call to context,” which challenges the traditional juridical preference for universalism over particularism and abstract principles over perspectivism. This is particularly important, Delgado points out, in normative discourse such as civil rights (1995, xv). Thus Patricia Williams challenges what she sees as the “transcendent, acontextual, universal legal truths or pure procedures” by demonstrating the racially inflected nature of particular cases (8).

This critique of universalism is of course not news to anyone since the 1960s. Poststructuralism’s challenging of Western metaphysics as based on a structure of hierarchical binary oppositions, French feminism’s focus on the gendered versions of these oppositions, and critiques of feminists of color of the raced construction of woman in white feminism are all challenges to universalism. However, postcolonial theory, despite its poststructuralist bases, has created its own seemingly oxymoronic postcolonial universalisms that, while not claiming the humanism of the Enlightenment or the progressive teleology of modernity, serve to ignore certain kinds of contextual specificities that remain necessary, particularly when thinking about race. At the same time, as our focus on South Asian
theorists reveals, what seem to be manifest generalizations about diaspora and transnationalism often turn out to be implicitly about the South Asian diaspora or of Indian colonization. A postcolonial homogenization operates in such moves. On the other hand, my call for specificity should not be confused with what Joan Scott has cautioned against—a valorization of an untheorized “experience” prior to social construction (1991, 777). Race is, above all, a social construction. In this essay, I have focused on the negation of the specificity of African-American racial oppression enabled by three different, but ultimately homogenizing narratives: Bhabha’s notion of a new internationalism based on migrancy, Appadurai’s dismissal of the global-local dialectic in favor of a global diaspora, and Spivak’s privileging of what she terms the Third World at large.

How does this foreclosure of the local in South Asian postcolonial thinking about race position the theory itself in relation to contemporary U.S. culture? At one level, there is a structural resemblance between the idea of white as norm and of a normative idea of migrancy. At another level, the very presence of narratives of race and the African-American presence in South Asian postcolonial theory suggest, as Morrison has pointed out about whiteness in Playing in the Dark, that these theorists construct themselves in some way in response to blackness (1992, 96). It remains to speculate on what the nature of this construction is. Is the relationship of this theory the one first outlined by Frank Chin, and reiterated by many other Asian American critics, that the function of Asian Americans is to be not black (1972, 75)? Clearly this question cannot be answered in the affirmative. Bhabha’s positioning of Beloved as a master text in the interruption of modernity, and his linking of it to diasporic South Asian texts like Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses, as well as other diasporic texts, suggests a commonality of the border; Appadurai’s hyphenated Americans together form a broad community that includes African-Americans; Spivak points to a community constructed by imperialism even though she recognizes the model minority function of South Asians. But this move out of the model minority position still poses the further question of whether South Asian postcolonial theory formulates possibilities for progressive identifications and alliances with African-Americans and a basis for critiquing racial oppression. These possibilities are present in the theories to be sure,
but are also undermined, I contend, when the theorists make similarity rather than difference the basis for an alliance.

At another level, these questions have to do with the relationship of postcolonial theory to African-American studies. Although neither of these fields are unified monoliths, existing absolutely apart from each other, and although many thinkers such as Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., Angela Davis, and Richard Wright have seen a continuity between African-American and other struggles of the colonized, the political trajectories of African-American and postcolonial studies have been different. Perhaps because of the specifically different though related histories of colonization, decolonization, slavery, apartheid, and civil rights, the theoretical concerns of these fields have not tended to coincide. Theorizations of race have been central to this difference. The dismissal of race as an analytical category in much of postcolonial theory, despite the brilliant articulations on race by Fanon (who is recognized as a major figure in postcolonial studies), has resulted in theoretical blind spots that have made connections between the fields tenuous at best. Yet, possibilities for engagement are being articulated by scholars such as Kenneth Mostern who are demonstrating the persistence of postcolonial tropes and the inseparability of postcolonial and racial concerns in the writings of African-American intellectuals far predating the advent of postcolonial theory.

Notes

1. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan suggest that this is the case and argue instead for a conception of multiple globalities and localities. They use the term “transnational” to cut across what they see as the binarism of the global and local (1994, 8, 11, 13).

2. This question has been taken up by many critics in different contexts. Jenny Sharpe cogently critiques the idea of a homogenized diaspora by pointing out the differences among South Asian diasporic experiences in Canada, the United States, and Britain (1995, 190). In a manner similar to his work on the Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy also suggests that the idea of diaspora, because outer-national and relational, provides better ways of thinking about identity than particularity, which is static. However, it is significant that Gilroy focuses mainly on the African diaspora and tangentially on the Jewish diaspora and links them together through the particular experiences of pain. See Gilroy 2000, 123, 13.

3. Hardt and Negri’s idea of a nonlocalizable empire, without an outside,
is actually premised on a very specific migrancy—that of people from the underdeveloped world to the developed (2000, 212–13, 253). These migrants, to a large extent, constitute the multitude that Hardt and Negri nebulously theorize as possibilities against empire. Thus they completely ignore major migrations that take place between nations such as Pakistan to India, Bangladesh to India, Afghanistan to Pakistan, and so on.

4. Viet Thanh Nguyen and Tina Chen contend, for instance, that a postcolonial perspective decenters the raced rhetoric of “claiming America” so integral to Chinese and Japanese American self-representation and introduces the contradictory concerns of homeland and diaspora as well as global capitalism, which “creates the conditions of migrancy and re-settlement for many postcolonial Asian populations” (“Editor’s Introduction,” *Jouvert* 4, no. 1 [2000]: 4). On the other hand, in an argument about retaining the political Asian American category, David Leiwei Li points out the problems of the diaspora model disregarding race as a category (1998, 202).

5. Davies, however, problematically collapses the “black” communities of Britain with African-American and Caribbean (1994, 52).

6. For an explanation of the different politics of race and ethnicity, see Omi and Winant 1986, 12. Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva argue that the growth of postcolonial studies and the “context of Anglo-American identity politics indicates the convergence of discourses of postcolonialism, identity and ethnicity” (1996, 12). My inquiry suggests, on the other hand, the need to interrogate this supposed convergence and to differentiate between different kinds of identity politics and discourses of ethnicity.

7. In a brilliant reading of Du Bois, Kenneth Mostern argues that there is, in fact, no contradiction between a Marxist framework and a racially defined sense of identity (2000, 269–72).

8. See also Singh 1996. Although Bhabha began his academic career in England (the publication of *The Location of Culture* roughly coincided with his move to the United States, although most of the essays in the book had been published much earlier), I include him in the group with Spivak and Appadurai for two reasons: First, his work found ready academic acceptance within the United States from the start. Second, I don’t want to make overly schematic distinctions among immigrants based on their length of stay.

9. The relationship of the global and local and the inseparability of the two has been the subject of much theorizing. Cindi Katz positions her “thick historical geography of Howa [Sudan]” as an instance of the importance of seeing globalization in “its encounter with existing social relations and material social practices in particular places” (2001, 1228).

10. *Beloved* has often been read in relation to ideas of community, trauma, and history. More recently, postcolonial frameworks have proved useful in reading *Beloved*. See Mary Jane Suero Elliott (2000) and Satya P. Mohanty (1993).

11. See Hall, “The Local and the Global” (1997). Hall’s celebration of the global and his insistence that the local no longer exists are questionable. To Hall’s
rhetorical question, “Are there still traditional musics that have never been influenced by modern music?” I would venture to say, “yes” (186).

12. Interestingly, although Deleuze and Guattari are at pains to critique binarisms such as the West and the Orient, many of their ideas derive from a sense of West-Other difference. The idea of the rhizome comes from the Oriental despot (1987, 19), while the idea of plateau comes from the different libidinal economy of the Balinese (xiv).

13. See Shohat 1992; Parry 1987; Young 1995, 4–8; and Hardt and Negri 2000, 143–45. Hardt and Negri, however, see all of postcolonial theory as fundamentally incapable of dealing with the contemporary world situation (146).

14. Gilroy 1993, 101. Gilroy writes, “Music and its rituals can be used to create a model whereby identity can be understood neither as a fixed essence nor as a vague and utterly contingent construction to be reinvented by the will and whim of aesthetes . . . Black identity . . . Whatever the radical constructionists may say, it is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self” (102).

15. Said uses the term “traveling theory” to point out the ways in which theory travels from one site to another in order to be put to a different use (1983, 226–27).

16. Obviously, forms of racial oppression change. Manning Marable, for instance, rightly points out a major change signaled by the civil rights period. However, his suggestion that contemporary African-Americans can be race insulated is debatable. Marable writes, “It is now possible for a member of the present-day Negro elite to live in the white suburbs, work in a white professional office, attend religious services in an all-white church or synagogue, belong to a white country club, and never come into contact with the most oppressed segments of the black community” (1995, 102).

17. Mexican workers crossing the border do not think of the United States as abroad but rather, as Gloria Anzaldúa has powerfully suggested, as borderlands.


19. Du Bois writes in The Souls of Black Folk, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others. . . . One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (1982, 45).

20. The Post-Colonial Critic (1990), 62. In a later interview, Spivak makes a similar connection between South Asians and African-Americans: “the only postcolonial society in terms of internal colonization in the United States, for all of us, the new immigrants, is the African American and not ourselves” (Bahri and Vasudeva 1996, 71).

21. Spivak 1989, 226. Spivak draws on the distinction Partha Chatterjee makes between the elaborate constitution of the subject through educational and legal apparatuses in the colonial era to the lack of any such constitution or training in the age of electronic capitalism where the subjects are reentering a feudal
mode of power characterized by sheer dominance (224). Spivak talks about the necessity of distinguishing between the subjects of postmodern neocolonialism and immigrants in the United States, but her argument only makes sense if we substitute raced subjects or ethnicities for the term “immigrants.” Native Americans, African-Americans, and many Chicana/os, for instance, are not immigrants, and the argument would not hold for white immigrants.

22. No mention of critical race theorists appears in the works of these theorists or in Gilroy’s Against Race (2000). The only exception is Spivak’s short critique of Carole Pateman’s silencing of Patricia Williams, an instance of the woman from the North silencing a woman from the South in A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason (1999, 389).


24. Arun Mukherjee makes an excellent argument about the importance of race and its dismissal in postcolonial theory, particularly the Australian versions espoused by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffin, and Helen Tiffin. See Mukherjee 1990.

25. See Mostern 2000, 258–76. Many scholars of African-American studies have found reading anticolonial resistance as a useful paradigm for their work. Much of Henry Louis Gates’s work since The Signifying Monkey can be seen as an attempt to articulate an indigenous, “anti-colonial” voice. Wahneema Lubiano refers to her reading of “Elbow Room” as an explication of it as an anticolonial text (1997, 222).

Works Cited


Lubiano, Wahneema. “Shuckin’ Off the African-American Native Other: What’s


