

In passing, [Vincent] Cheng commented on the papers... published in this issue as "Four Views on Ethnicity," and dismissed them as "ethnicity lite." What he meant by this was clear in his representation of the papers: according to him, two were by white women, one was by a Jew, and one was by Homi Bhabha....

Sander L. Gilman, "Ethnicity-Ethnicities-Literature-Literatures"
PMLA, January 1998

This epigraph, written by a former president of the Modern Language Association, was chosen at the risk of sounding like the beginning of a bad joke (set in a bar or perhaps on an airplane). But in fact this anecdote is meant to hint at a few different things about Homi Bhabha, the Chester D. Tripp Professor of Humanities at the University of Chicago, an enormously famous (in a curious "academic superstar" sort of way) literary and cultural critic, and -- of primary concern to us here -- a Stanford Presidential Lecturer.

Two white women, one Jew, and Homi Bhabha: Ethnicity. Ethnicity Lite? Ethnicity... Light? (As Gilman goes on to explain: this small group of critics was, in fact, rather "too white, too European, and therefore not quite ethnic enough" for Cheng, who made the comment while lecturing, as Gilman reports, in our very own neighborhood at the Center for Advanced Study of the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto.) Does this separate listing make Bhabha an ethnicity unto himself? Does the simple naming of Bhabha, among an otherwise unnamed contingent, make him the single heavy-hitting exception to the Cheng's dismissal of the MLA's "Ethnicity Lite"?

In a way, all of these possibilities hold some insight. Bhabha has, in fact, become one of the most recognized names in the critical current known as *Postcolonialism*, a current with a distinct interest in ethnicity and culture. Whether or not

Postcolonialism's particular take on ethnicity is itself "lite" or rather more substantial is, of course, a matter of opinion and debate; but Bhabha himself is certainly a thinker to be reckoned with across a broad range of critical concerns, including ethnicity. His assessment of ethnicity as it is often practiced in today's academy is a far cry from both facile acceptance and reactionary rejection that would certainly constitute a "lite" approach. As he writes in the article introduced by Gilman's anecdote (called, characteristically, "On the Irremovable Strangeness of Being Different"), the "valiant attempts to achieve representativeness and moral equivalence in the matter of minorities... too often... result in hyphenated attempts to include all multiple subject positions -- race, gender, class, geopolitical location, generation -- in an overburdened juggernaut that rides roughshod over the singularities and individuations of difference."

But more striking in this passage, and more to the point, is Bhabha as *sui generis*, an obviously singular phenomenon, unique even in his status as academic superstar -- a term which, though it could be used disparagingly, is meant here only as a sort of anthropological term to describe a phenomenon of contemporary academic culture. Many of the more popular accounts of Bhabha's career include bits about his humble and exotic beginnings in India and meteoric rise to fame in the West, from the "slightly overlong sheets of filmy onionskin paper, typed with a manual typewriter" that contained what was to be [his first major Western publication](#) in 1984 (see Bhabha's [interview](#) with W.J.T. Mitchell), to the [often-cited](#), standing-room-only panel at the 1994 MLA Convention, dedicated entirely to Bhabha's then recent book *The Location of Culture*.

Such stories, though certainly "true," are themselves texts of our academic culture, and tell a larger "truth" about it; as such, they reveal characteristics of diverse and surprising genres: the Algeresque rags-to-riches morality tale, the pop-culture perennial and favorite of tabloid and TV about a celebrity's rise to fame from humble beginnings... and even, ironically, the exotic adventure tale of Orientalist fiction, say, of Kipling, that is so often the object of Postcolonial criticism itself.

But Bhabha consistently outdoes the tellers of his tale. By writing of the colonial subject's [slyly civil](#), but finally subversive, tactics of [mimicry](#), he himself invites us to read him as a possible practitioner of this mimicry and sly civility. When he claims that a salient characteristic of colonial culture is its [hybridity](#), its "in-betweenness," which is most often greater than the sum of the two cultures, colonizing and colonized (using diverse examples, like Chicano poetry and Black music) -- he invites us to read his own story and writings as themselves some sort of supersalient hybrid. At the same time, though, he resists attempts to read him so simply. Though Bhabha is clearly not without his own highly media-mediated persona -- embodied both in the stories of his academic superstardom and in his place in some of academia's [more negative media spectacles](#) -- still he is too savvy, too perceptive of the "filmic quality" of public life and death (see his discussion of the deaths of Princess Diana and Gianni Versace in "[Designer Creations](#)"), and too aware of the potential for abuse of critical discourse in cases like the Sokal hoax (see his 1996 article "[Laughing Stock](#)") not to be aware of the ambiguities of his own potential roles in these sorts of spectacles.

And in the same way that Bhabha is the theorist of cultural hybridity and in-betweenness, so he himself is "a mediating figure between activists and academics," as his colleague W. J. T. Mitchell told the [University of Chicago Chronicle](#) in 1995. "His work is so powerful because he can negotiate and interpret both positions to both sides -- this is why his work speaks to people from all kinds of situations and backgrounds."

Though Mitchell's "mediating" Bhabha may seem, to judge from many of his dense and intensely theoretical works such as those [excerpted here](#), to be a fantasy -- indeed, the form of Bhabha's writing, its accessibility (and even intelligibility), is a theme that arises in discussions of his work almost as often as does its substance -- and though Bhabha often does write in a way that places serious demands on his readers, still Bhabha's essays, especially in more recent, shorter works like his regular contributions to *Artforum*, are most often fresh, accessible and intelligently activist:

In matters of race and gender, it is now possible and necessary, as it seemed never to have been before, to speak about these matters without the barriers, the silences, the embarrassing gaps in discourse. It is clear to the most reductionist intellect that black people think differently from one another; it is also clear that the time for indiscriminating racial unity has passed. A conversation, a serious exchange, between black men and women, has begun in a new arena and the contestants defy the mold. Nor is it as easy to be split along racial lines, as the alliances and coalitions between white and black women, and the conflicts among black women, and black men ... prove.

What we need is a way of looking that restores a third

dimension to hard-set profiles; a way of writing that makes black and white come alive in a shared text; a way of talking, of moving back and forth along the tongue, to bring language to a space of community and conversation that is never simply white and never singly black. ("The White Stuff," *Artforum*, v.36, n.9 (May, 1998), 21-23)

So Bhabha's writing, never simply academic and never singly theoretical, has restored a third (or even perhaps adds a fourth) dimension to critical discourse of the past ten years. And one would hope for many more years of fruitful observations, conversations, and challenges.

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