Race and Postcolonialism, 2

Homi Bhaba, "The Location of Culture"

Let's start today by asking the question Jayson didn't ask in his lecture on Orientalism: what is race? But let me ask that differently: how do you know what race someone is? We listed on the board a lot of characteristics, including skin color, eye color, eye shape, hair texture; we then noted that all of these characteristics serve as *signifiers* which then get connected to certain *signifieds*, so that a particular eye shape gets associated with a level of intelligence, or a hair texture with an athletic ability. Race is, in short, a means of identifying people by connecting their bodily configurations, the way they look, with culturally constructed notions of identity; it's a way of connecting the signifiers of a physical body with the signifieds of cultural ideas about what a person can or cannot or is likely to do. These days we call this "racial profiling" or "stereotyping," and we usually want to find alternatives to labeling people on the basis of assumptions about the racial signifiers they present.

Now on to a tougher question: what is "ethnicity"? We often use the phrase "race and/or ethnicity"–so what's the difference? Again, we listed on the board some characteristics, which tended to be cultural practices or beliefs, ideologies, rather than physical signs. Ethnicity is a less definite category than race, in part because the signifiers of ethnicity are less fixed, less obvious, than those of race. But in some ways ethnicity is a more important category, in our contemporary world, than race. Think about the idea of "ethnic" peoples outside of the United States: the wars in eastern Europe, particularly Bosnia and Serbia, over what ethnicity was the dominant one led to a practice labeled "ethnic cleansing", which involved killing all the people belonging to the wrong ethnicity. This practice has a lot in common with the Nazi genocide of the Jews as an "unclean" ethnicity, and a lot in common with the wars between Tutsi and Hutu in Africa and, perhaps most relevant, the war between the ethnic Pashtus of Afghanistan and the other ethnic groups which inhabit that country.

And now another question: how do you know what nationality someone is? Is this the same as race or ethnicity? Certainly in the case of the United States, it's really tough to define what makes anyone "American"– it's not being born here, because you can become a naturalized citizen; it's not living here, because some people live here who aren't citizens, and some American citizens live in other countries. It's not speaking English, because Americans speak all kinds of different languages. So what is it? I'm not looking for a concrete answer here; in fact, our country since Sept. 11 has been searching hard for some answer to what defines an "American." But what I'm interested in here is how one defines *any* national identity, or racial identity, or ethnic identity– how do you know what group you belong to?

And I'm asking this because this is a central question in postcolonial theory, and a central question for Homi Bhaba's essay on "The Location of Culture." But before we get to that, let me review for a minute some ideas we've had this semester about the idea of identity.

In the humanist model, "identity" was a pretty easy concept: everyone has a unique identity, a core self which is consistent over time, and which defines the idea of your self. You can name that identity by stating its characteristics: I AM a certain sex, a certain race, a certain age, a certain religion, a certain job or career, a certain family member, etc. I would say I AM a woman, a caucasian, a 43 year old, an Episcopalian, an English professor, a mother of two. This doesn't name all that I am, of course, but these words start to provide a framework within which I exist. From a poststructuralist perspective, I am constructed as a subject by all of these discourses: I am a subject within an ideology of gender; I am a subject within an ideology of race; I am a subject within an ideology of age; I am a subject within an ideology of education and work; I am a subject within an ideology of reproduction. My ideas about who I am, about what my sex, race, age, etc. mean, come from my position within these ideologies: my sense of self is thus constructed by the ideologies and discourses I inhabit.

This is a pretty bleak world view, a pretty deterministic one–"I", my self, my identity, is merely the product of all the discourses and ideologies that construct me, that interpellate me. But the saving grace is this: I am constructed by multiple discourses, multiple ideologies, all at the same time; there might be 20 or 200 discourses that claim me as a subject. And not all these subject positions are identical: as a mother, I might believe one thing, as a professor I might believe something entirely opposite or contradictory. What this means is that my subjectivity, my identity, is multiple; it is also "overdetermined," meaning that my identity is determined, not by just one discourse or ideology, but by innumerable ones. This overdetermination–the fact that I can think contradictory thoughts at the same time, the fact that I could simultaneously be determined by my belief in feminism and my belief in Episcopalian doctrine– means that there's no predicting what I will think, say, believe, or do in any specific situation or in relation to any specific idea or issue. At any moment, I can speak from any of my multiple subject positions. And that starts to look almost like having the "free will" and "creative uniqueness" we valued so much in the humanist model.

So if you start thinking of selfhood, not just as constructed, but as multiply constructed, then you have infinite possibilities for what constitutes a self or an identity. And you have the idea of selves who do not inhabit unified or stable positions or categories. For example, someone with an African-American father and a caucasian mother is neither one "race" or the other, but a mixture of both. Poststructuralist theories of race and ethnicity refer to such people as occupying a *hybrid* position. Such hybridity is inherently deconstructive, as it breaks down any possibility of a stable binary opposition. If race is divided as white/black, or white/non-white, then someone of white and non-white parentage deconstructs and destabilizes these categories.

The idea of hybridity works for all kinds of subject positions: any place where you can cross categories, inhabit two subject positions at once, or find the space between defined subject positions, is a place of hybridity. For gender, an example might be transsexuals; for race, bi- or multiracial people; for religion, people who practice more than one spiritual discipline, or a bricolage of several. And this is where Homi Bhaba wants us to look, in order to think differently about national identities and national boundaries. He begins his essay by talking about "ethnocentric" ideas, ideas that focus on particular definitions of selfhood by referring to a unified and unitary set of beliefs, practices, and configurations; he wants to challenge those ethnocentric ideas with the idea of dissonant and dissident and dislocated voices, people whose identities are excluded from these fixed and supposedly stable categories. He names specifically women, the colonized, minority groups, and bearers of "policed sexualities" as those voices. His article, however, focuses on another kind of hybridity, or challenge to stable categories of national identity: the identity of the migrant, the homeless, the refugee, the displaced indigenous peoples.

Bhaba then asks us to think about national identity, and argues that the idea of a homogeneous, stable concept of belonging to a nation is under profound redefinition; he cites the Serbian "ethnic cleansing" as a horrific example of how far a nation is willing to go, in killing its inhabitants, to produce a unified national identity. The effort to make a defined and unified nation is countered, according to Bhaba, by recognizing the idea of hybridity. He talks about "imagined communities" as the idea of what communities we belong to: our identity is shaped by the "imagined communities" we claim as our own. A nationality is such an "imagined community." You can see this every day as we (meaning citizens and residents of the United States) struggle to say what it is to be "American" and to define ourselves as "united," as an imagined community, in the face of the Sept. 11 events. Hybridity or transnationalism is a challenge to that idea of a unified "imaginary community;" hybridity brings up the idea that you might belong to many communities or cultures at once, and transnationalism brings up the idea that identity may not be determined by national boundaries, either political or geographic.

Bhaba is talking about the 20th century world, and more specifically the geopolitical world that was created after WWII, when "nations" were carved out of territories that had previously been colonial provinces or tribal or ethnic homelands. An example of this is Israel. Israel was created as a state after the Holocaust, and was mapped out on land that had been British Palestine: a territory that had been inhabited by people we now call Palestinians, who had been colonized by the British, suddenly became the state of Israel. That's what the disputes are about in the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict: what "nation" or "imagined community" do these disputed lands belong to? The idea of a nation, according to Bhaba, is a fiction, an "imagined community," an entity created to forge a new sense of identity, to unite peoples who may have had in common only the fact that they inhabited the same general geographical region.

Again, you can see the problems with "nationhood" all over the globe, particularly in what the West calls the "third world." A good example is the Arab states, which were, prior to WWII, inhabited by people who practiced the Islamic religion and

who were identified as ethnic or racial “Arabs,” but who imagined themselves belonging to various nomadic tribal communities. In the early twentieth century, these Arab tribes worked together to resist British colonial rule (this is what Lawrence of Arabia is about). Eventually the Arab tribes managed to kick out the British, but in order to do so they had to form a “nation,” like Saudi Arabia, out of all the various indigenous tribes. These tribes, which had existed for centuries, had their own histories and practices and conflicts with each other; uniting them into one coherent thing called a “nation” has proved to be difficult–as we see with Afghanistan. Bhaba’s question, then, is what holds a “nation” tog ether, when “nations” are imagined communities of widely disparate and different peoples? One of the questions arising from the conflict in Afghanistan right now is, who will speak for the “nation” of Afghanistan? Is the Taliban the legitimate ruling government? If not (and it seems like they won’t be) then who is? Who runs the “nation” and makes global geopolitical decisions for it?