

CHAPTER ONE

ISSUES AND CONTEXT: ON KNOWLEDGE AS LIMIT

Often on television screens across North America, a peculiar kind of drama is played out in the service of a conceivably important cause. This drama involves images of poverty, disease, and what is seen as fratricidal war in places like Bangladesh, Sudan, or more recently, Rwanda and Burundi, images that humanitarian organizations beam into North American homes as part of their drive for donations. In these sequences, the setting is all so familiar, and yet, all too distant. It may come in the form of dilapidated tenements or mud huts that stretch their bleak countenances forth to announce a contemporaneity, a modernity, that is everything but modern. It may take the form of scorched earth filling the air with dust (evidence of uncontrolled desertification and failed harvest), a recent bloody confrontation between rebel guerrillas and some government or another, or erstwhile neighbors who now are bitter enemies on account of “primordial” tribal differences. At any rate, the pictorial eloquence in these sequences often resides, not in the singular historicity of each moment and space, still less in the complexity of each such historicity.

Solemnly and skillfully, the camera lingers over a wreckage of dead, bloated animals or abandoned armored tanks. It crawls with sympathy over tired mothers, half naked, emaciated; and then it rests on the child, now no longer a backcloth but foregrounded, powerfully, as the final center of narrative pathos. We see a crying child, but she is in fact too tired to cry: only the clotted mixture of tears and mucus signals an anguish too deep to sustain the exertion of a normal three-year-old’s cry. As she cries by the fact of being too weak to cry, even so does she sleep

in her very wakefulness. Her eyes, glazed, stare at us without effort, plaintive because she can no longer really cry. Her silence and physical disintegration convey a distance that is urgently intimate. For if soundlessness announces her confoundment in the face of tragedy, her physical disintegration calls on a superior knowledge to comprehend her plight. And so the camera speaks what she cannot say, knows what she cannot know. It traces the evidence of her predicament on the visible rib cage and the leathery skin continuously visited by buzzing flies and other curious bugs. It closes in on her distended stomach; in contrasting so crassly with the frailty of the rest of her, her stomach bears witness—with the power of grim hyperbole—to the utter starvation at the root of its prominence. The camera, intimate cognitive subject, distances her tragedy onto the remote but legible plains of the “third world.” By imaging the raw obscenity of her situation, the camera knows what she cannot know, while the voice-over, by imploring all humanity to help save a child, speaks what she cannot say.

Hopefully, the foregoing account strikes us as patently superfluous, for this may in turn enable us to appreciate, in a concrete way, the latent work of these images. In other words, my description’s excess is intended to exhibit in words the concentrated abundance of the camera’s images. For with just a little risk of overstatement, one can say that the camera rarely *ponders* such scenes beyond the assumption of a familiar logic of causality: it merely represents, dutifully, intensively. However, what may pass unnoticed in such representations is the displacement of the complex questions away from the daunting realm of political economy and its sociocultural sign-systems, onto the gripping telepathy of the suffering body. At such moments, it is the terrible corporeality of her victimization that the camera disseminates—a corporeality so terrible that the network of relations that determines (and thereby, narrativizes) the body in pain cannot be visible, dares not be visible, in the time of the viewer’s empathy. These enactments constitute explicit dramatizations of the ideology of modernity in the face of the postcolonial problematic.¹

There are a number of ways of responding to such dramas. One would be to stress that this demonstration is extreme, because its medium belongs in what is called popular culture. Here, the assumption is that in the specialized discourses, one encounters a more sophisticated and illuminating understanding of the ideology of modernity and its intersection with the postcolonial problematic. A variation of this response would insist that such demonstrations have a pragmatic utility for which one should overlook their naiveté. On this view, the philanthropic end is laudable and—in any case—it is wrong to expect a ten-minute sequence on the T.V. to display the kind of critical self-

awareness one expects from specialized disquisitions. The other response would be less charitable, more morally outraged. It would draw attention to the complicity of mass culture with the “imperialist” designs of late capitalist Euro-America; it would denounce the capitalist world system that organically needs the precritical humanism of philanthropic agencies to mask its impact; and it would end with a declamatory exhortation as passionate as it is familiar: namely, that the third world needs (or, alternately, is destined) to break the shackles of “oppression” and “neo-colonialism.”

Now, the first two options merely rationalize away the drama by stressing its pragmatic necessity. The third merely reinscribes the very mechanism it seeks to read through and beyond: in denouncing the ideological innocence of the cinematic gaze, it merely shifts attention from the pathos of the suffering body to the so-called evil of the imperialist eye. In this vein, all three reactions tell us rather less than their passion suggests. Much too little, since they move too anxiously—as the case may be—to a moralistic recuperation of, or an equally moralistic indignation at, the ideology of modernity dramatized by the cinematic eye. Certainly, such narratives often function, for the potential donor(s), as closed invitations to self-validating philanthropy and an equally self-validating paternalism—both at once. Yet this seems to me to be ultimately uninteresting: its own frame remains moral, its force rests too heavily on the very category it takes for granted—namely, the “self” that is being validated. But what if, in order really to learn from such sequences, we embrace them with incisive cultural criticism in our thoughts? What if, beyond moral outrage or evasive defense, we accord them the status of a drama that encodes large issues of epistemology, issues at the heart of some of the liveliest currents in Anglo-American literary theory and criticism?

Clearly, a double presupposition is at work in these sequences. First, the third world exists as an other, where the first world is the Self.² Second, the materiality of the third world thus imaged simply bears witness to an aberration. Where the first world silently intones its objective approximation to the promise of modernity, the third world comes across as not quite modern—still behind, alas, in humanity’s march towards modernity’s lofty promise. What this indicates is that there is a knowledge, as confident as it is compassionate, that guides the camera’s eye: its humanist calling is simply to represent, to evoke—through motion, color, and sound—that which its knowledge already renders transparent. Under the sway of the ideology of modernity, then, these sequences perform a systematic repression as means to an arguably ethical end. This ideology, which is at the same time a knowledge (*méconnaissance*, in the Althusserian sense) is so sure of its

self-evidence that the humanist gaze it underwrites performs a systematic reductionism with sincere compassion.

This brings us to the suggestion that a more complex and rewarding understanding can be encountered in specialized discourses. At least in part, contemporary literary theory and cultural criticism is concerned with images such as we have been discussing and, even more directly, theories of postcoloniality concern themselves with their determinations and meanings. If media images of third-world poverty tend to freeze the latter as radically other, one consequence of the freezing is that the object thus frozen can never be conceived as a subject with agency. One of the aims of this book is to suggest that current postcolonial theory risks replicating this maneuver in the way it approaches cultural-nationalist discourses of the postcolonial world. I would like us to keep the import (such as I suggested above) of these media images centrally in mind as we step onto the terrain covered in this book. The concerns we shall be addressing can be located at the intersection of two discursive sites: (i) contemporary literary and cultural studies—specifically, theories of postcoloniality and debates around what Habermas has called the philosophical discourse of modernity; (ii) African literature and criticism as a component of what Abiola Irele designates as “African letters.” Using the question of modernity as the common ground of both discursive configurations, we shall try to develop a systematic and what I see as a productive dialogue between them. Thus in structure and argumentation, our discussion is designed to speak to Anglo-American postcolonial studies as equally as it addresses African studies. Investigating the possibilities theory offers for explicating the problems with which African writers and critics are grappling, this book demonstrates the ways in which the adventure of African letters illuminates the strengths and limitations of some contemporary theorizations of postcoloniality.

The purpose of this chapter is to spell out the terms and ramifications of three key questions. In a general way, these questions can be formulated thus: To what extent are the questions energizing some of the influential debates and perspectives in Anglo-American literary theory and cultural criticism relevant to the problematic of African letters? Is it possible that in some of its motions, theories of postcoloniality unwittingly replicate the logic of repression and decontextualization more unselfconsciously dramatized in media homilies about the third world? And in what ways can the framing of the question of agency—discursive as well as concrete-political—in contemporary theory benefit from direct engagement, such as this book undertakes, with a discursive phenomenon like African letters? As indicated earlier, the major issues of contention in current theory can be said to devolve ultimately on the

question of subjectivity and agency, specifically, the human capacity to know (if not master) itself as well as its environment. This chapter illustrates and reflects upon some exemplary responses to this issue as a way of laying out how I intend to approach it in the chapters to follow. I begin by discussing an exchange on the question of subjectivity between Terry Eagleton and Homi Bhabha. I then move on to consider Satya P. Mohanty's contribution in his book, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*. Although Eagleton and Bhabha are arguing from two putatively opposed standpoints (the former from the perspective of Marxism, the latter, poststructuralism), their shared commitment to a *theoretical* resolution of the status of the subject in cultural as well as discursive practice results in a situation where they both risk obscuring the reality of concrete subjects in datable interaction with specific historical challenges. Mohanty's "post-positivist realism" promises greater attention to the history and context of specific human endeavors or, on my terms, discursive formations. However, I argue that, in spite of itself, Mohanty's undertaking shares the sort of theoreticism he ascribes to poststructuralism. Finally, the chapter revisits Louis Althusser's theory of ideology in order to formulate the substantive premises that will inform our exploration of, on the one hand, postcolonial theory and, on the other, African letters, in the rest of the book. The chapter suggests that, applied to the problem of discursive formations—our specific area of concern in this book—Althusser's account of ideology and interpellation can be read in a way that makes it serviceable for a productive apprehension of the implications for cultural studies of African letters.

ON THE PROBLEM OF THE SUBJECT

The meaning of the third world and its inter-relationship with the first is currently at the center of a number of discussions in Anglo-American literary theory and cultural criticism. In these discussions, there appears to be a broad consensus around the basic idea that the dynamics of imperialism, and the discourses that witness to it, are being sorted out by the practitioners of cultural studies and, as a subspecies of that general category, critics who work under the rubric of postcoloniality. The consensus points to a certain confidence that the illumination promised by or actually offered in, the sorting out, has important ramifications for literary theory and cultural criticism in general. One of the aims of this book is to inquire into the basis of this confidence as well as the extent of payoff it offers. I take postcolonial theory as an influential rubric within the broad discursive configuration we have generally come to call

cultural studies. Into this configuration, I intend to introduce a related but not entirely commensurate one, namely, African letters. The term African letters here designates the adventure of mind that is exemplified in African literature and criticism, as well as in other broadly cultural-nationalist writings. One of the questions this book explores, then, is the following: set off against the evidence of African letters, could we fully endorse the preoccupations and findings of postcolonial theory and come off rigorously vindicated?

This question is called for in light of the kind of interaction that postcolonial theory has tended to have with non-Western literary and critical traditions. It is well known that what is currently referred to as postcolonial theory gets its institutional baptism in the wake of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and is overwhelmingly poststructuralist in premises or reference. The genealogy of the broader terrain of cultural studies is, of course, more complicated. But it remains the case that the kind of cultural studies that is at present most influential in the academy tends to be influenced by poststructuralist premises. Under the language of ratification, continuation, qualification, or outright rejection, poststructuralist theory can legitimately be said to be the single most recognizable context and flashpoint of contemporary postcolonial theory and cultural criticism. To be distinguished from this configuration are the critical discourses that comment upon, speak to, or otherwise draw meaning out of, say, African or Caribbean literary texts. The latter often use conceptual tools that remind one of Lukács or Leavis, rather than Derrida or Lacan.

In light of the impact of poststructuralist theory on the way we think and talk about history, culture, and language, the high visibility of poststructuralist postcolonial theory is altogether to be expected. Going strictly by the rhetoric and overt claims in contemporary theory and cultural criticism, one might expect a warm friendship with "third world" and "minority" literary and critical traditions. This is however far from the case: often in African literary criticism, theory is cast as a "first-world" preoccupation, Eurocentric and self-mystifying—ultimately irrelevant to the passion of African letters. At one level, this accusation may appear to have some merit. For although a central idea in current theory is that third world literatures have a lot to tell us, it is hard to be certain of the conviction behind the idea. Despite the general celebration of otherness, the literatures emerging from the former European colonies seem not to be as securely in the forefront of analytical attention as the abstract theoretical claims made about them (see Slemmon and Tiffin, "Introduction").

Current literary theory and cultural criticism, then, appears to have enemies (or at best, polite fellow travelers who smirk at every avail-

able opportunity) where one would expect allies. This scenario is not altogether new. As is well known, theory has proven to have a remarkable capacity to draw an unhelpful kind of reaction: namely, that its label (i.e., this or that theory, or this or that theoretical affiliation) elicits more or less reflex rejection, where what is being rejected is a label that is conflated with a content. From ongoing complaints about philistines and the trauma that culture is supposed to suffer at the hands of postmodernists and canon-busters, it would seem that wherever two or more are gathered in the name of theory, there you will find some cursing or gnashing of teeth. The matter is quite often compounded by the preeminence of theoretical camps that seem foremost to operate on the strength of slogans and declarations. Thus, for instance, it is sometimes taken for granted that to announce one's camp as poststructuralist entails a standpoint in favor of cosmopolitanism and opposition to nativism or essentialism. By extension, to be for cosmopolitanism is to be conceptually more up-to-date and global, committed to transnational solidarity as against narrow parochialism (see Benita Parry, "Cheers").

One of the aims of this book is to show that poststructuralist postcolonial theory can be most useful if its implicit opposition to certain kinds of (non-poststructuralist) third world discourses is dialectically superseded. On this view, not only is it more interesting to grant labels and slogans less weight than they may otherwise acquire, doing so actually rescues theory from itself. To undervalue (let alone reject) Anglo-American theory because it is a first world preoccupation is to misconceive a lot that is of value in it. Whatever they happen to be (and we shall be elaborating on some of them), the limitations of Anglo-American theory cannot be made visible from a standpoint that withdraws from it on the basis of, as it were, its place of birth. Consequently, this book seeks to develop and exemplify a critical vocabulary that can make a genuine interaction between Anglo-American postcolonial theory and African literary criticism possible and productive. This involves developing a way of thinking and talking about literature, culture, and history that speaks to mainstream theory as well as African literary criticism at once.

It might be helpful to proceed by rehearsing a genealogy of sorts. Around the turn of the twentieth century, and more comprehensively after the Second World War, global politics took an epochal turn with the consolidation of nationalist movements in the colonized world, movements that combined sustained—sometimes, armed—activism with a passionate interrogation of the colonizer's claims about culture, social organization, and the epistemology that is taken to underpin these two. If the concrete struggle of nationalist movements in the colonized world

aimed at political emancipation, never was there any doubt about the necessity of an epistemological liberation—hand in hand with such political emancipation. In this respect, a large part of the intellectual energy of what in this book we shall be calling African letters has been devoted to the project of establishing the difference—cultural and epistemological—of the postcolonial subject from its Western counterpart. Less a discourse of global, magisterial ambition, these discourses tend to pursue a truth that is avowedly circumscribed as historical, framed—as it were—with the vision of an explicit project. The impetus is that of understanding the colonial and neocolonial moment in African history, and the project, that of contesting negative representations generally associated with European imperialism.

If these epistemic developments first took root in the colonized world, the impulse has by now taken some hold in Euro-American literary theory and cultural criticism. One significant contribution of post-structuralism is the basic proposition that the world has at the present time become a village. As we shall see in chapter 2, this spirit energizes Jean-François Lyotard's account of the "postmodern condition." Such an account posits the mutual imbrication of such binary opposites as first world/third world; it suggests, in other words, that we recognize the interpenetration of economic, political, and cultural systems that may otherwise be seen as radically disparate. In this sense, the angle from which someone like Lyotard joins the project of epistemological decolonization would seem to be dated. Rendered schematically, the interdependence that Lyotard points up has always been taken as a self-evident subtext in African letters, so self-evident as not to merit belaboring. On this view, it would follow that the burden of analysis, in African letters, tends most often to be placed in identifying the contours of that interpenetration. We have then a complex and problematic intersection. On the one hand, first world critical thought seeks to expose epistemic imperialism by destabilizing the logic of binarisms while, on the other, Africanist discourses appear most often to retain that binarism in order to underscore the different knowledge of the colonized—the knowledge that had to be suppressed so the West can understand itself and ratify its sense of human potential and epochal advance.

The basic project shared by all strands of Anglo-American radical thought—namely, the critique of foundationalist philosophy—sets out to undercut the epistemic cartography of the Enlightenment, where true cognition (i.e., science against myth, culture against nature), and the global advancement it promises, was attributed to the European genius. Rejecting the ethnocentrism of this presumption, contemporary theory sets out to demystify its assumptions and claims. And so it is, that the

critique of Enlightenment foundationalist thought becomes an interdisciplinary stimulant, a way of bringing to light the evidence of erstwhile suppressed concerns such as race, gender, or sexuality. The routine way of referring to this trend is to cast it in terms of the “death of the subject.” Generally, everyone agrees that the rise of the West, and its subjectification in discourse, has been accompanied by a good many contradictions. But this is where the divergences arise. At the level of theory, how do we go about rethinking our traditional (preconstituted) knowledges and ways of knowing? Some would charge others with throwing away the subject altogether, insisting—as a more politically serviceable move—on the construction of “other” subjectivities as a strategy, precisely, of resisting the actually existing imperialism of the West. The debates rooted in this basic site of contention take various forms. For our first illustration, let us examine an exchange between Homi Bhabha and Terry Eagleton on the pages of *ICA Documents* entitled “Identity.” The particular exchange discussed here appears in short pieces by both Eagleton and Bhabha, but it concisely dramatizes an observation that deserves to be put in place.³

Eagleton’s short piece presents a general account of the debate around the question of the subject. There are those for whom, to quote Eagleton, “the theoretical decentering of the subject, the prising open of its fetishized self-identity to the powers of dissemination and self-subversion signals an unqualified triumph” (47). At the other end are those who view this dissolution as a symptom of political quietism; for this group, the “dispersed, ungrounded, non-autonomous subject is less the potential negation of patriarchal capitalism, than the graphic image of its very victim” (47). Both views, Eagleton contends, have a case. However, he argues for “a political theory, or theory of the subject, which is capable . . . of grasping social transformation as at once diffusion and affirmation, the death and birth of the subject” (48). What he misses, then, is a *dialectical* (his own word) conceptualization of the status of the subject in political engagement and social transformation. By contrast, Bhabha expresses less disenchantment with the assaults on the subject. For him, it is precisely “the dialectical hinge between the birth and death of the subject that needs to be interrogated” (10). Invoking Eagleton’s worry over the “vacuously apocalyptic” cast of most of contemporary radical theories, Bhabha counters that the “compensatory and vicarious processes of signification” of these modes of thought “are a spur to social action; the production of something else besides which is not only the cut or gap of the subject but also the ‘intercut’ it produces across social sites and disciplines” (10). “This hybridity,” he concludes, “spatialises the project of political thinking by continually facing it with

the strategic and the contingent” (10). The undermining of the subject thus constitutes, for him, a timely and valuable project.

Both Bhabha and Eagleton share a number of basic assumptions. Both agree that critical thought can participate in social transformation via an epistemological revolution, a theoretical witnessing of the forms and strategies of political or cultural struggle. They do not deny the value of constructions of imaginary identity, neither do they deny that expediency should not lead to the elevation of such constructions to the level of the natural. Where they part ways is with regard to the allocation of priority. Are we serving the revolution better, so to speak, by belaboring the imaginary status of identity, or is it enough to admit that insight and then concentrate on what specific movements and formations achieve via such imaginary constructions? These are interesting questions, but it should be noted that they presuppose the possibility of conceptual, transhistorical, resolution. However, the occasion of meditation derives from the pressures of a particular cultural and political conjuncture, a recognizable moment and space.

Paradoxically, it is this moment and space that may remain hidden because it is taken for granted. When Bhabha writes: “[w]hat must be left an open question, *post* postmodernism is how we are to rethink ‘ourselves’ once we have undermined the immediacy and autonomy of self-consciousness” (10), he begs the question of who the “we” denotes, as well as the substantive purchase of the temporal scheme (post-postmodernism) the formulation presupposes. Are “we” to be persuaded that all thoughts and actions based on the illusion of self-consciousness should be adjourned while “we” figure out exactly how to think and act henceforth? And till when might this adjournment be expected to last; when, in other words, is “post-postmodernism”? The risk in a discussion framed in these terms is that, caught up in questions of how the subject should be theorized in order to serve our understanding of social practices, what may be occluded from view is the reality and shape of specific instances of subjectification that surround and impact us.⁴

The adventure of African letters constitutes a specific instance of subjectification in the realm of discourse, and should therefore be seen as a case of agency-in-motion. We shall see, in chapters 3 through 5, a process of self-construction, one that subsists on a number of conceptual leaps and discursive imagination of community. I shall be arguing that the achievement of African letters, its agency as an activity of human minds in concrete history, resides in these conceptual leaps and constructions. I shall be suggesting that as critics, we need to attain a more modest apprehension of what human agency involves in cultural as well

as political practice. We need to distinguish between agency as, on the one hand, a historical category tied to specific contexts and ends, and on the other, a formal abstraction. While the latter should have a place in cultural criticism, it should not be posed in ways that become covertly transcendental and prescriptive.⁵ Where cultural processes and discursive formations are concerned, our understanding of agency is at its richest if we work with the hindsight of history and context, rather than with normative (transhistorical) prescription or speculation.

A recent book that argues for a similar orientation in literary and cultural criticism is Satya P. Mohanty's *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*. In his book, Mohanty undertakes to reconsider positivism as well as relativism in order to show that one does not need the latter in order to transcend the former. In a critical climate where concern with such notions as "human nature," or a "real world" independent of discourse are seen as old-fashioned (except as signs of a repressive and deluded past) Mohanty urges that we cannot afford to give them up so easily. Mohanty uses hermeneutics and Anglo-American philosophy against poststructuralism, especially as the latter has blended with a broader postmodernist current in literary studies. His understanding of postmodernism as an epistemological position makes it synonymous with poststructuralist thought. In his account, this position characterizes an entire range of theoretical strands and self-identifications in literary theory, and so much is this the case that even the Marxisms of Louis Althusser and Fredric Jameson are presented as instances of postmodernism.

Mohanty argues for an approach to cultural criticism that begins with the premise that there is in what humans do a cognitive basis, a logic, and that this logic can be understood to varying degrees. The tools with which we seek to achieve this understanding can thus be made stronger, more refined. The real force of his contribution, then, is with regard to our commitment to developing finer methodological equipment, the language to describe and seek to understand cultural processes as they take shape on the ground. For him, it is in doing this that we will be better placed to recognize the agency of individual or collective adventures in the domain of culture. Mohanty's account of postpositivist realism grants (like poststructuralism) that cultural processes are contingent in a way that ontological facts of nature are not. However, historical and contingent though they are, Mohanty's point is that human affairs and cultural practices are not simply arbitrary or devoid of logic and pattern. Further, he is in agreement with the poststructuralist claim that such realities as identity or cultural change do not exist in a transparent realm where they can be accessed "directly," that is, without the

mediation of theory, inherited beliefs, or institutional ideologies. For him, the problem with postmodernism is that it too quickly gives up on this logic, preferring instead to dwell on the ruptures of pattern, the moments where knowledge comes up short against the dense opacity of contingent history.

Mohanty's argument hinges on the need for the building of communities, the need for communication and persuasion. However, a certain deployment of "we" anchors much of his argument without getting adequately specified. In arguing for a hierarchy of truths among competing languages and sites of truth seeking, he shifts between a "we," understood as a community of intellectuals who are trained and paid to look for truth in specific disciplinary formations, and a "we" that surreptitiously denotes human beings in their day-to-day confrontation with reality. We shall see in the next chapter that although he would set his version of community and persuasion apart from the notion of communicative rationality and consensus that Habermas is known for, Mohanty's account recalls the latter's on at least this count. I am persuaded that issues like identity, value, etc., can be rationally understood precisely because of (not despite) the mediation of theory. However, the idea of theory mediation implies that there could be a variety of such theories, such mediations. Seen from this perspective, we immediately grant the inherent relativity of each particular theory, insofar as each is mediated by such things as history, institutional, or disciplinary parameters. For Mohanty, cultural studies needs to go beyond this first-level relativism, so to speak, and entertain the possibility that the truths that different mediations generate can be hierarchically judged. If we judge one truth to be closer to reality, and if this judgement is well justified within the norms of the community making the judgement, then we can call the judgement objective. This definition of objectivity thus depends on a sense of institutional norms that Mohanty implicitly grants, but performatively brackets. And yet, it is this implicit subtext of institutions that requires explicit thematization, if the agency of African letters is to be fully appreciated.

How is it possible for Mohanty to hold the two positions indicated above—namely, (i) that truth does not reveal itself in lightning flashes sent by God, and (ii) that truth claims are objective to the extent that they satisfy prevailing norms of knowledge production? The answer lies in his use of scientific knowledge and its justification as an analogy for knowledge of human actions and sociocultural processes. There is an analogical parallelism set up between the natural and human sciences, and it is here that Mohanty's argument meets its ultimate limitation. Here is a good passage for isolating this limitation:

the fact that in a prescientific time all humans who cared to think about diseases might have held the “folk legend” explanation of them does not invalidate our current belief that we now have a better explanation, and one that matches the way the world is. To believe that we do, we do *not* need to subscribe to the idea that the world-as-it-is can be completely described once and for all in one neutral language, but we do subscribe to the very different idea that the external world exists and might reveal regular processes of functioning which could be identified as “lawlike” by our best scientific procedures of observation and systematization. (165, emphasis Mohanty’s)

The claim being made here seems to be that, for instance, the explanation that science has for the cause and progress of a disease may change with time and new evidence, but the objective fact and source of causation remain constant. However much our understanding of the causes of a disease changes or gets better, whatever it is that really causes it will always be “there.”

If we accept this, and I see no reason not to, we are still left with something unique to cultural processes as opposed to the object of the natural sciences. Human interactions happen in time, and so does our understanding of those interactions. In the domain of human actions, understandings, and representations, things are not just there or not there. We can use as an example a novel Mohanty discusses, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. One cannot understand slavery as history and culture, or Sethe as body and mind, by approaching her infanticide with any “either-or” problematic. Examples of the either-or propositions I have in mind include: is the attack she mounts on her daughter—ostensibly to protect the daughter from enslavement—“rational” or not; is Sethe’s sense of herself adequate to her situation or not, and so on. However one wishes to pose and answer these questions, the understanding of slavery as a historical reality with a “causal structure” has little to do with the ontological or moral status of the killing itself. So much is this the case that the killing is itself contingent: as the novel demonstrates, the second time she finds herself in what appears to be a similar situation, Sethe’s attack is directed outwards at the threat, not inwards at the child.

A similar logic would be applicable to an issue that continues to exercise the attention of philosophers, namely, whether or not one can validly evaluate the practices or norms of an alien culture, even when these appear to be entirely incommensurable with the evaluator’s own culture. A particularly instructive scenario is the practice of human sacrifice that used to be common in prescientific societies. It seems to be the

case that many such cultures also have a concept of human beings as essences—in other words, they have posed the question of why and how humans are different from stones, or why life is deeply numinous and thus to be nurtured and revered. Obviously, there is a contradiction between this view and human sacrifice, so one can say that the practice is wrong. But again in this case, the wrongness is exhibited in the fact that the culture itself has posed the question. Yet another clue may be found in the fact that our hypothetical prescientific peoples often appear to engage in the practice within powerful cults that exclude a sizeable number of the population. In other words, it would appear that the cultures tacitly recognize the contradiction but repress it by means such as exclusion.⁶ Approached in this way, it could be said that all cultures immanently carry the grounds and terms for their own critique. If I am right, a critique of “prescientific” culture that proceeds from the grounds and self-understanding of a scientific one can only be most persuasive if it relativizes its own motions. In this sense, Kant’s categorical imperative, or Althusser’s account of ideology and superstructures, equips us to *articulate* the wrongness of human sacrifice. But precisely because of this, our articulation is neither “objective” nor transhistorical. Rather, it is, as the case may be, “Kantian” or “Althusserian,” where both qualifiers designate products of specific human minds under specifiable cultural conditions and pressures.

Of course, the examples of Toni Morrison’s Sethe, or prescientific peoples immolating fellow human beings in the name of culture, are extreme cases. I raise them mainly to indicate that there is something to be said for the poststructuralist suspicion of truth claims that seek to hide the mode of operation through which the particular truth is apprehended and represented. Mohanty shares this general suspicion, granting as he does that much wrong has been perpetrated, conceptually and concretely, in the heyday of Eurocentric positivism. The most important difference between him and his object of critique, then, is to be found in where he wants us to invest conceptual and analytical energy at the present time. Where poststructuralist criticism focuses on the obstacles to knowledge as a way of avoiding the naive confidence of foundationalist epistemology, Mohanty insists that we should hold these obstacles as the threshold, rather than the culmination, of our inquiries. Posed this way, his position holds some promise. But as Mohanty himself grants, poststructuralism proceeds from a salutary attempt to avoid the ethnocentrism of much of Western theorizing about culture and civilization. Although he grants this much, Mohanty does not confront its implications as squarely as is necessary. It is on the strength of this evasion that he is able to categorize the anti-ethnocentric impulse as a sign of liberal

pluralism, one that can only culminate in sophisticated (but no less unacceptable) relativism. I should like to suggest, however, that a lot depends on how the relativist perspective presents itself in particular analytical situations. On this view, if Mohanty's commitment to incremental knowledge marks, at least in principle, an advance over post-structuralism's focus on opacity, his impatience with cultural relativism may generate a regression.

Our approach in this book is to retain Mohanty's caution regarding the excesses and lacunae of some *deployments* of poststructuralist insights, while purging his own "postpositivist" alternative of the possibility of ethnocentric regression. In order to spell out how this purging might be achieved, I should like to return to one of the figures Mohanty identifies with poststructuralism/postmodernism, Louis Althusser. In the next section, I want to show that one can use Althusser's theory to account for agency within the parameters and concepts of poststructuralist theory.

SUBJECTIVITY, AGENCY, KNOWLEDGE

We have already noted that Mohanty's reading of Althusser is tendentious. We also suggested that his position is not well served by the turn to the philosophy of science, and the notion of postpositivist realism. There is a sense, indeed, in which his postpositivist realism can be transcoded into a Foucauldian or Althusserian register; that is, the position he wants to elaborate can be elicited from within the logic of post-structuralism itself. It is this line that I wish to explore here with reference to Althusser. As is well recognized, practically every strand of contemporary theory and cultural studies proceeds from a broadly Althusserian frame. In the late 1980s, Michael Sprinker claimed that "[t]o the extent that the current horizon of understanding [in literary theory] is demarcated by the relationship between the aesthetic and the ideological, it can be said with justice that we remain determinately within the Althusserian problematic" (2). I want to argue that this seemingly old-fashioned claim remains valid even now.⁷ Implicitly or explicitly in the course of this book, we shall be encountering the ghost of Althusser, specifically his theory of ideology and the epistemological position it entails. Of course, Althusserianism has been declared dead for some time now. The fact indeed that it suffered this fate in our poststructuralist climate may index the possibility that, against Mohanty's reading (wherein Althusser is cast as a full-fledged poststructuralist), the latter's theory retains a dimension that not all poststructuralists recognize in themselves.

For example, to compare Althusserian theory in its “raw” form to the work of post-Marxists such as Ernesto Laclau is to see that, at the least, what the former offers cannot simply be subsumed under post-structuralist social theory and cultural criticism. Althusser’s theory rewrites the Marxist totality as a structural, rather than expressive, totality, and he saw his project as a direct onslaught on the idea of a self-sufficient subject that is at the heart of, for instance, Sartre’s existentialism or Lukács’s account of proletariat consciousness. But if these strike us as familiar postmodern themes, his deployment of relations of production as the analytical category that underpins all others marks a dimension that is not necessarily postmodern. This dimension leads to a rather remarkable situation where Althusser’s theory draws formally similar criticism from ideological quarters that are otherwise opposed on substantive issues. Thus he is attacked—as Mohanty does—for proposing a concept of the subject that is ultimately too determinist, too skeptical, to be truly useful for an explanation of human agency.⁸ From what Mohanty will call a postmodern standpoint, however, Laclau and Chantal Mouffe fault Althusser for the same limitation; indeed for them, a good account of agency requires a deeper deconstruction of the subject and subjectivity, deeper, that is, than Althusser’s tentative gesture in that direction. For the post-Marxist theorists, Althusser cannot go the required distance because he also operates with a traditional Marxist tool, namely, a reductive subordination of social relations to economic determination. On this view, his notorious “last instance,” or the insistence on a pure theoretical realm that transcends ideology, betray a view of the process of knowing that flies in the face of his own flirtation with Lacanian psychoanalysis. On this score, both Marxists and post-Marxists or, in Mohanty’s terms, realists and non-realists, fault Althusser on the same grounds, but for antithetical reasons. Where for Mohanty Althusser goes too far with the decentring of the subject, for Laclau and Mouffe he doesn’t go far enough. We need, then, to consider the possibility that Althusser’s theory may be useful precisely because it invites and sustains the pulling and shoving bestowed on it by mutually opposed ideological interlocutors.

Althusser is most notorious, perhaps, for his notion that history and social processes unfold in a multilevel structure that is somehow ultimately determined, “in the last instance,” by the economic level. At this point, I am not concerned with whether or not this claim is correct. What I should like to do for now is to focus on the epistemological side to Althusser. In the section that follows, I elaborate the sense in which, whatever other problems his theoretical system contains, Althusser’s account of ideology and subjectivity retains two crucial promises for

postcolonial cultural criticism. First, it opens up a way of thinking and talking about human agency and cultural practice that accommodates Mohanty's reservations about the temptations of simplistic relativism. Second, it does so in a way that can survive the force of the "post-Marxist" critique of such poststructuralists as Laclau and Mouffe. I do so by locating Althusser in a nexus that takes off from Antonio Gramsci and leads onto the project of radical democracy associated with the post-structuralist theorists Laclau and Mouffe.

But first, a couple of qualifications. My discussion is based primarily on the famous ISAs essay, and my interest is in the *logic*, rather than argumentative tightness, of its claims. Put differently, I begin with the premise that the essay is neither timeless in its substance, nor watertight as a piece of argumentative exposition. As Warren Montag has suggested, however, to the extent that it is subtitled "Notes Towards an Investigation," we can from this temporal distance learn from it despite, or indeed, because of, its weaknesses.⁹ For our present purposes, the promise of the ISA essay lies in its account of how we know what we claim to know. Whether or not Althusserian theory fails as a Marxist theory of capitalist society and socialist struggle, my contention is that its account of ideology offers, first, a valuable materialist epistemology, and second, a basis for thinking through the dynamics of struggle—be this in the discursive or the concrete political domain.¹⁰

The crucial term to begin with is, of course, hegemony. Gramsci's use of the notion of hegemony is geared towards a conceptualization of the workings of society in its totality, insofar as society is seen as a relational structure composed of distinct and diverse, but interactive units or levels. For Gramsci, society at the height of capitalist production is based on a logic of hegemony. Gramsci worked and thought against a background of liberal political science and economics. In the terms of the liberal framework, the State is the arm of society created by society for the welfare of society. The process has a passive, agent-less provenance: the development of society via the economy ("its needs") finds expression in the order and organization of civil society; civil society, in turn, consummates its development in the establishment of the State, which then functions to keep civil society in order.¹¹

Into this narrative, Gramsci introduces agency and conflict. First, the development of society itself feeds on contradiction and intersubjective conflict, and second, this conflict, resulting in a war of interests, accounts for particular configurations in the evolution of state and civil society apparatuses. In the well-known military metaphor, a society with a well-entrenched bourgeoisie and state apparatuses represents that phase of the war when the dominant class has a hegemonic control of

the apparatuses that serve its interests. In his words, “the massive structures of the modern democracies, both as State organisations, and as complexes of associations in civil society, constitute for the art of politics as it were the ‘trenches’ and the permanent fortifications of the front in the war of position” (243). Civil society therefore denotes the site where hegemony can be glimpsed, where domination, or the dominant view, exerts its hand such that reality appears given—just the way things are or, the best of possible worlds.

Thus in the passage below, Gramsci is discussing what he called the “educative and formative role of the State”:

[The state’s] aim is always that of creating new and higher types of civilisation; of adapting the “civilisation” and the morality of the broadest popular masses to the necessities of the continuous development of the economic apparatus of production; hence of evolving even physically new types of humanity. But how will each single individual succeed in incorporating himself into the collective man, and how will educative pressure be applied to single individuals so as to obtain their consent and their collaboration, turning necessity and coercion into “freedom?” (242)

In one sense, the question Gramsci poses in this passage may be said to constitute the point of departure for Althusser’s theory of ideology. As is well known, Althusser’s reading of Marx insists that the latter’s conception of society is spatial, and the base-superstructure idea works as an architectural metaphor.

But Althusser sees the classical Marxist formulation as being limited by its descriptiveness. On the one hand, it may encourage an occlusion of Marx’s fundamental break with Hegel, namely, the difference of his conception of society from the Hegelian totality. Further, its spatial formulation, and the metaphoricity of that formulation, makes it incapable of accounting for the workings of society as a structure. To this end, Althusser contends that we cannot know the internal workings of the structure unless we look at it from the perspective of *reproduction*. His notion of the state apparatus and its complementarity with the ideological state apparatuses is his way of looking at society from the point of view of reproduction. The social machine needs a mechanism that will ensure that the worker, first and foremost, perceives his cycle of walking through the factory gates every morning as an instrumental positioning, necessary to the natural, pragmatic course of things. Where the state repressive apparatus keeps him in line through force when necessary, the ideological state apparatuses (churches, schools, philanthropic/patriotic clubs, etc.) keep him in line by inducing his consent to stay in line.

But he does more: his definition of *ideology* marks another significant contribution. To get at this significance, let us look again through Gramsci. Gramsci relates the workings of state apparatuses clearly to ideology—the latter being the most effective and insidious weapon of the former. He saw full well that ideology is a representational category: an objectification through practices, norms, etc. of the specific network of social configurations. Gramsci went far enough as to posit that ideology exists only as practice, in and through which historical entities—individual and collective—perceive their world and their relation to that world. For Gramsci, classical Marxism erred insofar as it viewed ideology as being external to the structure of society, an externality which is then taken to mean that ideology is “off the mark”; that is to say, illusory and mired in false consciousness as far as the true structure of society is concerned. On the contrary, ideology is in Gramsci’s view very much a necessary coordinate of every social system; it needs therefore to be analyzed “historically, in the terms of the philosophy of praxis, as a superstructure” (376).

On this score, Gramsci made a distinction between what he called “historically organic ideologies, those, that is, which are necessary to a given structure,” and those “that are arbitrary, rationalistic, or ‘willed’” (376–77). Two consequences derive from this. First, Gramsci’s distinction between organic as against arbitrary ideologies presupposes the precision of the one, as against the imprecision, the relative error, of the other. “To the extent,” wrote Gramsci, “that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is ‘psychological’; they ‘organise’ human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc. To the extent that they are arbitrary they only create individual ‘movements,’ polemics and so on (though even these are not useless, since they function like an error which by contrasting with truth, demonstrates it)” (377). Gramsci’s notion of ideology implicitly maintains the true/false binarism central to the classical Marxist conception. The difference is that, whereas classical Marxism worked with the “scientific versus ideological” schema, Gramsci redesignates the categories. The result is that he admits ideology as necessary to the structure but inscribes a distinction between “organic” versus “arbitrary” ideologies—thereby leaving us with a true/false dualism.

According to Althusser, ideology is a representational category. It is representational because it exists as practice—in beliefs, norms, rituals, etc.—in and through which subjects represent to themselves their world and their relation to that world. However, what is represented in ideology is not the “real” relation between subjects and their world.

Althusser grounds this proposition in Lacan's schema of the imaginary, the symbolic, and their relationship to the "real."¹² For Lacan, the real is that sphere which lies beyond the subject's grasped reality and which therefore eludes absolute apprehension. As Alan Sheridan has observed, Lacan's real "is not to be confused with reality, which is perfectly knowable: the object of desire knows no more than that, since for it reality is entirely phantasmatic" (*Écrits*, x). That knowable reality, however, comes to us only through the "imaginary": that is to say, only through perceived "images." In other words, we grasp reality only by means of image and concept.¹³ The symbolic, on the other hand, denotes the realm of language, of relational activity; it is the order wherein the reality of every given thing establishes itself in differential relation—and, by definition, only as such—to every other thing.

If we combine these two planes, the situation we get goes something like this: the individual who grasps reality via the mechanism of the imaginary does so because the symbolic order confers on him or her the sense of self (i.e. the subjectivity) on the basis of which he or she can then delimit, in the very act of grasping, the object that is being grasped. Consequently, while the imaginary denotes a site where perception itself occurs; and while the symbolic facilitates the mechanism of the imaginary because it is only through its (i.e., the symbolic order's) differential effects that the subject registers what it will thenceforth take to be the substantiality of reality, the real is the order that the symbolic cannot reach. The real, in other words, is constitutively precluded from the cognitive mastery of the imaginary mechanism: "the real [is] that which is lacking in the symbolic order, the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached, but never grasped: the unbilical cord of the symbolic" (*Écrits*, x).

By couching his account of ideology in psychoanalytical terms, Althusser seeks to rearticulate Marxism such that ideology remains integral to the structure of society while also transcending the true-false binarism. Bearing the Lacanian schema in mind, it becomes easy to see that the representation of reality in and as ideology necessarily belongs to the imaginary plane, and the representation achieved on this plane is enabled by the symbolic order. As Jane Gallop has argued, "If the difference between the imaginary and the symbolic is understood as an opposition between two identities, we can be sure we have given an imaginary reading of the terms. It could be said that the symbolic can be encountered only as a tear in the fabric of the imaginary, a revealing interruption. The paths to the symbolic are thus *in* the imaginary. The symbolic can be reached by not trying to avoid the imaginary, by knowingly being *in* the imaginary" (60).