

Ambivalence and Security in the Anglo-American Empire: A Critical Dialogue with Professor Homi K Bhabha

Rahul K Gairola and Ashna Ali

We began this dialogue with Homi K. Bhabha accepting our invitation for an interview at the Mahindra Center for the Humanities at Harvard University on Friday, May 9, 2015. Bhabha is a theoretical pacesetter and rigorous scholar of Anglophone literature who requires little introduction. As the Director of the Mahindra Humanities Center, the Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of English and American Literature and Language at Harvard University, and the recipient of the 2016 Humboldt Research Award and the 2012 Padma Bushan Award for Literature and Education Studies from the Government of India, Bhabha has helped to create and subsequently shape critical theory for decades. His core concepts, like “mimicry” and “ambivalence” from The Location of Culture, have come to define post-colonial studies, particularly studies in the formation of the subject in imperialist discourse and its afterlife beneath the gaze of the “Janus-faced discourse of the nation” (3).

That phrase, which comes from Bhabha’s introduction to the edited collection Nation and Narration (1990), describes power relations and cultural orientation in the so-called twilight of imperialism, wherein ambivalence of the nation-state erupts in the present moment. The nation, always gazing backwards even while looking forwards, justifies the future in the

present moment by citing a stable past. Such slippery historical footwork places the onus on us to bring the apparatus of our thinking to bear on many types of social justice-oriented movements in the present: Black Lives Matter and other grassroots movements against institutionalized bigotry; global health and representation rights for queer and non-cisgender persons; transnational and Third World women's rights; ethical environmental consciousness; addressing the current crisis of migration in the European Union and beyond; and anti-Islamophobic resistance to xenophobia as exposed by the recent departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Brexit).

We herein call for an urgent re-engagement with Bhabha's works and their applications to a rapidly transforming, neo-imperialist globalized present, in which home/land, (be)longing, gender/ sexuality, and in/ exclusion are constantly and violently shifting. The 2016 election of Donald Trump, a friend of Wall Street and a force that has energized the so-called "Alt-Right" in the United States, will determine the new shape of the Anglo-American empire, which in turn will put pressure on the theoretical tools and languages necessary to reach from the hallowed hallways of the academy to unite and empower those far from it. The increasing interconnectedness of forces that reproduce colonial and neo-colonial oppression in the contemporary world compels us to seek new theoretical strategies. Like the Janus-faced nation, we learn from histories of resistance, as well as from the mentors who shepherd us through those histories in and beyond the classroom.

With this urgency in mind, we trekked from New York City to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to speak with a celebrated academic whom many affectionately call "Holy Homi." Our intention was to survey the location of postcolonial studies and transnational feminism critically, and to consider the future of the shifting fields of postcolonial and South Asian studies in light of decades of reprehensible militarism waged by the Anglo-American empire, continued violence surrounding race and migrancy, and the ongoing neoliberalization of academia.

We posed simple yet probing questions to a larger-than-life figure often cast as impossibly complex but whom we discovered to be astonishingly lucid as well as gentle and gracious. What ultimately transpired was a dialogue that overflowed from the initial meeting at Harvard into email and phone communications across two continents. Our hope is to illuminate

the enigmatic scholar behind the frequently cited hermeneutic lenses and concepts amassed through decades of thinking and working as a socio-cultural theorist in a rapidly changing, but still largely neoliberal capitalist, world whose colonialist roots are often veiled by (in)vested interests.

In this timely historical frame, Bhabha speaks with us about the comparative quality of curiosity, new cosmopolitanisms, the privilege of ignorance, possible new meanings of “third space,” “home,” and “ambivalence,”¹ and their critical gravity for considering security and the digital sphere as new frontiers in imperialist technologies that compel us to meaningfully reckon with postcolonial and anti-capitalist resistance in the twenty-first century. What follows, rather than a verbatim transcript of our initial hour-long meeting, is a mutually revised, consolidated, and sharpened archive of our yearlong exchanges that extended beyond the institutional confines of university space.

Rahul Gairola: You were born in Bombay following the departure of the British and the Partition of the subcontinent. Are there any social tensions that stick out to you when you recall your experiences growing up in post-colonial India or studying at Oxford?

Homi Bhabha: I did not perceive any tensions whatsoever, frankly. It took me some time to see that many of the textbooks that we used came out of a social and cultural context which was European, and largely British. What I do remember, if anything, is coming from a wealthy, very well-placed Bombay Parsi family—and that is the context from which I came—and the ease with which the people whom I knew could move across speaking Gujarati, to speaking English, to speaking some Hindi—maybe not that well, but perfectly understandably. Could I read Hindi easily? No, but I could read it. Did I read Hindi novels or newspapers? I did not. Could I communicate reasonably in Hindi? I could. Could I give a lecture in Hindi? I could not. Could I understand any Hindi movie or song? Yes, of course I could. What I mostly remember—and I have written about this elsewhere—is the easy movement from language to language, the sense of cultural translation.

Much of this recollection comes from belonging to a class where I had a lot of ease and access, about which there is no secret. Funnily, Oxford seemed provincial to me. It was so much less multilingual, speaking

metaphorically. Of course, people knew many more languages than they knew in Bombay, but culturally, it seemed more stereotypical to me. The other thing that struck me had to do not with the variety of social, cultural, and linguistic experience, but, more vividly, living in a community where you were expected to relate to people who were mostly your own age, or in a range between 17 and 23. I remember feeling very strange because one's experience in India is so much more generous with respect to relationships. There are connections with your grandparents, your uncles, and your aunts. You liked some, you hated some, but even that tension in variety is somehow stimulating. In a large family, you learn how to maneuver your way. You actually learn how to handle a very difficult older person. You learn how to work strategically; the whole sense of the complexity of social and cultural experience, the ways in which you use different kinds of identifications and recognitions, the ways in which you have to interpret behaviors—all of these seemed to me much less interesting in England.

Generally, there is a truth in saying that Indian social contexts and cultures, particularly familial, are deeply multilayered and, in some ways, very ruinous because they can be terribly restrictive. Somehow in my family, I found it stimulating to have this range of experiences. That was one thing that made me look back on my own childhood and youth and feel that I had a very rich experience, which I later tried to describe in what I call “vernacular cosmopolitanism.”² The other experience that struck me very strongly was how much more curious Indians were about other people compared to the English.

Rahul Gairola: What makes Indians more curious?

Homi Bhabha: Sometimes, I am sure it is rather irritating to other people. One reason has to do with familial relations. Much of it may also be because of the way people live. For a long period of time, perhaps even more commonly now, it has been very difficult for younger people or single people to just move out and set up their own family. People tend to live in the family homes, apartments, *bastis*, or *kholis*. There is huge crowding. It is difficult to have a sense of one's autonomy, which only the liberal bourgeoisie or a well-to-do class can afford to feel. Even the Indian middle classes cannot afford the notion of privacy. Patriarchy also reduces the possibility of privacy. Indian society is patriarchal and, in that sense, quite

panoptical. The whole idea of respect for one's elders, or the respect for ancestor worship, also opens you out to the person who wields patriarchal power. This is usually the male but not always, as there are also very powerful women in Indian families. Yet through the notion of respect you make yourself open to them as much as you can. Other things you try to hide. To this day, my mother wants to know when I am going out, when I'm coming back; she would like to know who I'm going with, where I'm going. It is very difficult!

Rahul Gairola: "Indian culture" certainly lends itself to patterns of secrecy due to the intertwined patriarchal and postcolonial power relations that are also mired in formalities, traditions, and customs based in domesticity and family.

Homi Bhabha: Yes, probably so. We must be wary of speaking about "Indian culture"—a term that appears dangerously ignorant of the range of "differences" that constitute the diversity and heterogeneity of the subcontinent at almost every level. E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* is, amongst other things, a hymn to this heterogeneity. Patriarchy and masculinism had their own regional, cultural genealogies, but the political and pedagogical institutions established by British governmentality, which had a strong pastoral and patriarchal administrative lineage, also fostered them. Patriarchy is as much a normative issue to do with ethical and power relations as it is a legal issue to do with the authority of the state. "Secrecy," in an oppressed society, is a way of establishing subaltern solidarities; it is a way of imagining freedom in the conditions of unfreedom.

There is another kind of secrecy to do with the desire for autonomy and choice—personal, sexual, ideological, religious—that is a reaction to the hierarchy and hegemony of social constraint and convention. Living in an extended joint-family imposes forms of conduct that do not permit the free expression of love, sex, or lifestyle. In Indian cities today, "secrecy" is as much a factor of social mores as it is a matter of high real-estate prices and the pressure to "live at home" for economic reasons, in order to provide home care for elderly relatives, etc. It is amazing how the urban fabric of society informs the idea of the "secrecy" of social life.

Rahul Gairola: You mention “home” and its domestic configurations. One of the fields in which your contributions are most respected, and one in which we both work, is postcolonial studies, which critiques colonialism’s impact on social, political, and cultural forms of life in contemporary nations haunted by the specters of imperial pasts. In your view, briefly, what is the impact of foreign colonizers coming in and dominating a country like India?

Homi Bhabha: The presence of an alien governing culture within your own society, a strange culture coming in and becoming an authoritative culture politically, institutionally, and economically, has the potential to open your mind up rather than closing it down. Of course, empire closely administered the “opening of the Indian mind,” and strategically shaped and surveilled it so as to make it safe, even docile. However, such projects are never entirely successful in exercising their constraint—there are always slippages, contradictions, erasures. And the indigenous, inherited structures and cultures of Indian society—its traditions and temporalities—may have been politically “subjected,” but they were intellectually and spiritually open to the agency of translation. And translation is a two-way street; you can direct the traffic but you cannot stop it.

The empowered may have had to close their minds to this potentially cosmopolitical traffic in order to maintain their authority—they had to be aware, if not fully then partially, as John Stuart Mill was, of their position in India. Whether it was through social Darwinism, the modernization project, or the myth of progress, there was a very clear sense that they had to justify their imperial presence. Often economic progress was one of the reasons for colonization, even with Karl Marx. The rationale was the construction of an industrial society that would bring a legal system, land reform, and a sense of good governance, whether liberal or utilitarian. The idea that Indian society had all of these princes running amuck, destroying their people, without a sense of industry, etc., led to a sense that the Protestant ethic of work and labor had to be imposed.

All of these ideas were part of the justification of empire. It is not as if empire was some kind of careless project. This power understood itself, in various ways, as bringing progress and authority to a situation where neither existed. I am not justifying that imposition, but describing the way in which the construction of the ideology took place. In order to accomplish

it, one must close off certain areas of thinking. Otherwise, one must question oneself to a degree that one's own authority falls profoundly in danger. On the other side, indigenous peoples, unlike the elites who had some kind of brush with a "foreign" educational system, were subject to an experience for which they were generally not prepared. They were suddenly taught in a language, in particular, that is not their own. That creates a sense of the world beyond. The colonized, much like the early generations of nationalists, are the ones who developed this vision of the world beyond. This makes for a very inquisitive and inquiring society.

Rahul Gairola: Do you believe that ability to question, then, is a form of agency and empowerment?

Homi Bhabha: It is a form of agency, though it may not be a form of empowerment. In order for agency to be empowered, you must have other forms of status. There needs to be a level of literacy, some financial independence, and a degree of choice that is political, as well as institutional support and access to the media. Agency, to be articulated as empowerment, demands a larger institutional, governmental response. This issue reminds me of one of the first times I ever went to an English family home. It was in a small village in the Lake District, idyllically beautiful, and the family treated me extremely well. Everything that I read—Wordsworth, Coleridge—came alive. It was a wonderful experience. However, I did remark to myself at the end of the weekend that the family had barely asked me any questions about myself, while on the other hand, very sweetly involved me in the local gossip about the postman, his wife, the policeman, and his sister, all of which they thought that I would find compelling. As it happened, I *was* interested, for the same reasons that I am interested in novels (novels are a lot about gossip!). And yet I did think, as I drove away from the Lake District, that they barely asked a question about my background.

Ashna Ali: The assumption was that the cultural education was for *you* only.

Homi Bhabha: Yes. It was not assumed in a patronizing way, but that may have been the structure of the ideology. People want to show you their

lives. They did not think, however, that doing so is some kind of dialogical experience.

Ashna Ali: In my experience in Italy, I found that what little inroads into dialogue that I could find often dead-ended in fetishization, or some kind of orientalist curiosity about my background that was not actually dialogical. Did you find that this fetishization also occurred in England?

Homi Bhabha: It does happen in England, obviously, but it happened much less often because of the long, profound involvement of British culture with South Asia. Many of the great Sanskrit works were translated. Many of the great scholars of Hinduism were Europeans, largely British or German. In a way, there was a deeper understanding. It is true that, in many other ways, there was no dialogic relation. However, Italy, by comparison, has no long tradition of that kind.

Ashna Ali: Yet Italians have developed a long, agonistic relationship with African migrants from the countries that they formerly colonized, antagonism which has some resonance with that of the British Raj.

Homi Bhabha: This is true, but for the British people, India was their life and *destiny*. Many, though not all, were deeply enmeshed in India experientially, if not at an ideological level. Some of their positions may have been repugnant, but they saw themselves as really having a stake in the country. Italians, perhaps in Libya, share this experience with colonized people, but not quite to the same extent.

Ashna Ali: You have discussed England and the difference between English curiosity, or attitude, intellectually and culturally, versus Indian curiosity during an earlier period of your life. In *this* period of your life, you are living in the American empire. How would you comment on American curiosity by comparison?

Homi Bhabha: The United States is, like India, a very big country of profound ironies and paradoxes. It has sites of the most sophisticated, incisive knowledge, quite remarkably coupled with locations of ignorance and disavowal—there are people who do not know, and do not want to know, the

world around them. Some of the productive tension in living and working in this country comes from being caught between those two sites. The American Dream is a dream of empowerment, not of entitlement, because class privilege plays out so differently in the States than in Europe, but it is, in the main, a myth, which is why people find it so attractive.

To the extent that American exceptionalism fuels this dream, it is a sense of privileged ignorance too. That is the most dangerous empowerment. Coupled with exceptionalism, empowerment blinds a great country to its own problematic, unresolved historical pasts and presents. American domestic life is riven with large pockets of poverty, racism, injustice—as is too obvious to bear repeating—and the American dream, despite its great utopian horizons, has a way of becoming a means to disavow the harsh realities of everyday American life. The foreign policy of the United States has often pursued a narrative of seduction and abandonment, which, because of the place that the country occupies in a unipolar world, can exonerate its worst excesses.

Rahul Gairola: How so?

Homi Bhabha: What comes predominantly to my mind is the destruction of the antiquities in Iraq. It is a comparatively small issue—what happened in Iraq should not be judged by the condition of its museums—but I bring it up to illustrate a point about the importance of knowledge, on the one hand, and on the other hand the privileged ignorance and disavowal that exists in this country. In private or public ways, the United States has a way of respecting museums and of having resources for museums, elite though they may be, and an enormous depth of experience. Yet notwithstanding the detailed knowledge available to Bush officials about the danger to cultural treasures if the military marched into Baghdad, they did nothing about it. The administration called the specialists—I know some of them who went—but the privilege of ignorance is such that the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, could turn around and say, in effect, “Shit happens.” After the theft of thousands of years of history and artifacts, the destruction of great museums with memories of the entire world, Rumsfeld could only say, “Shit happens.” The privilege of ignorance in the United States is a very dangerous thing.

Rahul Gairola: We currently live right around the corner from where Eric Garner was choked to death by the New York City Police Department on July 17, 2014. Despite many other cases of police brutality, such as the April 2015 death of Freddie Gray at the hands of Baltimore police, I have been getting a lot of resistance to exploring the issue in the classroom. When you say “the privilege of ignorance,” it occurs to me that, in American urban spaces themselves, people are polarized by class difference in ways justified through racial distinctions. This polarization translates pedagogically into a strange unwillingness to undertake these types of conversations in the classroom.

Homi Bhabha: I am quite appalled by the treatment of African Americans generally. After 9/11, many Sikh men encountered similar treatment because it was thought that, if you wore a turban, you were a follower of Osama bin Laden. Perhaps as tragic is the recent account of the Gujarati gentleman, Sureshbhai Patel, who was assaulted and permanently paralyzed by a police officer while visiting his son in Madison, Alabama. Someone reported a strange person of color and the police paralyzed him, which is unforgivable. There is enormous ignorance. Yet it is less that these police officers do not know than that they do not *want* to know—the whole system does not *want* to know. There is a profound institutional disavowal of issues of race, issues of gender, etc. I hate mentioning these mantras, but they happen to be true. India has its version of institutional disavowal, and Britain certainly has its version of it, as Brexit has recently amply demonstrated. This is why the struggle for equality, justice, and fairness is really a global struggle. The privilege of ignorance and power makes for a configuration of diverse conflicts and antagonism.

Ashna Ali: As you talk about the privilege of ignorance, I cannot help, as a doctoral student of Comparative Literature facing a job market that looks increasingly dire, asking whether you believe that the state of academia at the moment has something to do with the privilege of ignorance in this country? Do you think that we no longer value knowledge in the way in which we once did?

Homi Bhabha: This is a viral condition, particularly in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. The humanities barely exist in India. Now private

universities are trying to resurrect them. In Britain, there has been a slaughtering of the humanities and the arts. In America, the loss has been relatively less extreme. You do not have whole departments being shut down. I am not saying that it is easy, but that the problem is worth examining on a global scale.

Of course, the opportunities for younger scholars in academia, particularly in these areas, are scarce. We still have our searches, and there are failed searches though we search very hard. We have people who come and speak; however, the composition of a department may be such, and the democracy of a department may be such, that the field specialists may think very well of somebody to whom the whole department does not respond. That has more to do with hiring practice and tradition. I do think that certain areas are generating more jobs and at a faster rate.

Ashna Ali: Such as?

Homi Bhabha: The whole technology arena. We only need to think of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg leaving Harvard, or Microsoft founder Bill Gates dropping out, to discover areas of work where the academic experience, the pedagogy of academia, seems not to be that relevant. These people have been very innovative and creative. You may like their politics, or not. You may think that they represent an economic class which you would want to contest, but frankly it is interesting that a kind of creativity is sought and valued beyond even the best institutions. These people actually left the best institutions *in order* to be creative.

Rahul Gairola: That leads us to the question of digital culture. You pioneered the concepts of “hybridity” and “ambivalence.” How do you see your concepts meshing with the turn to the digital and/or complicating the euphoric ways in which digital culture is globally perceived and privileged?

Homi Bhabha: A couple of months ago, in the spring of 2015, I spoke by invitation of the Minister of Culture of Portugal, the Secretary of State for Culture. We were invited to talk about cultural values and issues having to do with minoritization, the humanities, and the difficult conditions for the humanities, though the forum was hardly purely academic. On this occa-

sion, I took it as my obligation to engage with some of these issues. Their invitation was for me to use some of my concepts in this respect. I will only bore you with one application that I thought was useful to which they responded warmly and wanted to know more. Regarding the concept of ambivalence, on which I work and continue to work, and on which many people now work in different fields, I wanted them to understand how what I call “moments of global cultural ambivalence” represent something about the complexity of the world in which we live. We often use the concept of contradiction, which has a Marxist lineage, to try to think about global inequality, the lack of global opportunity, the paradoxes of progress.

In the digital revolution, there is no question whether computerization—the very fact that we have Facebook or virtual resources of that kind—allows us to have global networks, dialogical interaction. However, the claims for the democracy of the digital are overplayed. We know that computer hardware is often produced in the Global South, in conditions which are akin to the workhouses of the Victorian period: no proper health protection, labor protection, ventilation, or rights. The very instruments which enable this flourishing international global network—the new technologies and devices, prosthetic to us like extensions of our bodies, which give us access to these digital dialogues—are produced in ways and in conditions that may be two hundred, one hundred, or fifty years out of date and that are profoundly harmful! Those who produce the hardware have very little agency, although they themselves may have cell phones or live similarly as those for whom they make such products.

Rahul Gairola: It seems absolutely crucial for us to avoid fetishizing technological devices or ignoring Global South labor, lest we miss the bigger picture of ongoing economic and epistemic violence in the enduring crucible of colonialist racism—the birth, decline, and transformation of a whitewashed empire. Ambivalence today thus seems fitting.

Homi Bhabha: I use the concept of ambivalence not simply because I want to suggest that it represents the great contradiction of world capital, or that somehow, if we got through that contradiction, we would have a new utopia—not at all. Rather, I use it to make people aware of the fact that in such a situation, ironic and paradoxical though it may be, you cannot stop technological progress, nor can you say that technology itself only

produces inequality, which is not the case. You cannot question the progress of technology. You must acknowledge everything that it does. At the same time, you have to acknowledge the actual production values, the physical, material values that are vested in the production of these instruments.

You cannot just say this ambivalence will resolve itself in some kind of Hegelian or Marxist sublation—it won't. Nor can you say that there will be some kind of utopian sublimation. Utopian thinking will not somehow open the world up to the New Jerusalem and give you total control of a new form of progress. Rather, you must work with this tension. Working with it makes for the most grounded and conceptually challenging form of ethical, political, and aesthetic work that needs to be done. Thinking about this issue critically in terms of ambivalence helps us understand the complexities of our responses. Nobody is going to give up their cell phone because the conditions of its production are problematic. Moreover, balancing the conceptual progress in research necessary to produce the new technologies with equitable conditions of production worldwide will never be possible.

Fundamentally, there will always be imbalances of knowledge and power with which we must deal. Recognizing these imbalances and how they are socially articulated in different domestic and geopolitical contexts is very important to me. There was never a mean between two extremes of a "good" and "bad" knowledge/ power dyad that was somehow destroyed. It is by fighting tyranny that we know what freedom is. It is by fighting poverty that we know what equality is. Negative politics precedes normative politics, yet, when we speak, we tend to assume that we know what the norms are that forms of injustice violate. That is the kind of move that I am trying to avoid in my recent thinking with respect to moments of what we could call "moments of global cultural ambivalence" with respect to digital culture.

Ashna Ali: In a similar vein, I have a pressing concern about transnational and Third World feminism. The latter put a lot of effort and energy into the local and the regional, and addressing the material conditions of the subaltern woman, much like those producing hardware in the global south. Transnational feminism's methods, in my view, are more concerned with strategies related to your concepts of mimicry and cosmopolitanism in *The*

Location of Culture. I wonder if these methods drown out the local, and whether we can use genre and an ethics of writing to deal with these material realities, while simultaneously acknowledging the privilege and complicity that we must have in order to even begin such work.

Homi Bhabha: I do not think that self-flagellation gets us anywhere. I am never more irritated than by those who feel the constant need to rhetorically justify their privilege. To liberally paraphrase Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, bourgeois guilt is the least interesting thing. The first step in earnestly interrogating privilege is to accept that there are different modalities, different kinds of work in the world, and different forms of agency and intervention. What is most important for scholarship is not to question its "relevance" continually, which can become a narrow, self-defeating measure of education. The utilitarianism, even instrumentalism, accompanying the criteria of relevance makes me uneasy. An instrumentalist perspective could easily be summoned to argue for the decision to abolish many areas of the humanities in favor of science and technology—and one might even be able to adduce reasonable and respectable reasons for making such a decision.

Instead of relevance, which can be a slippery slope, I would argue for the four R's: Recognition, Representation, Revision, and Redistribution. As scholars, we must labor hard to unearth neglected subjects and obscured archives, and give them a degree of *recognition*. Then we must find the appropriate modes, genres, and discourses with which their claims to knowledge or experience are best *represented*. Such a process leads us to practices of *revision* and reinterpretation so that we can participate in transforming canonical values and introducing new voices and visions. Finally, as public intellectuals, we must actively participate in making *redistributive* claims, in establishing new rights of representation and interpretation using the forms of communication available to us.

This account is all too brief, I know, but it is clear that a democratic and dialogic project will increase our bodies of knowledge while, in a very productive way, enlarging our circle of doubt.

Rahul Gairola: What role does the academy play for academics, students, and the public?

Homi Bhabha: The academy, and particularly the radical academy, often authorizes itself by working on areas of under-privilege, giving visibility to people without a history or giving voice to people in a subaltern situation. What is needed in this context is for the scholar who produces that knowledge—the scholar who is representing and relating to that condition of under-privilege, whether it involves peasant society or oppressed women, the world of prisoners, unemployed populations, minorities, or refugees—to be responsible and self-reflective about what s/he is doing, and to not think that somehow s/he carries the burden of representation on her shoulders.

As soon as authors make that assumption, an unreflective structure of the inequality from which they benefit is introduced at the very level of production of their work, however informative, theoretically sophisticated, or conceptually adventurous it may be. The knowledge that authors produce should, at some level, illuminate something about the experience as the experience itself, not simply as it concerns academic knowledge conditions or the frameworks of knowledge production—although their work may do that too. Making an intervention within the protocols of the academy through ethnographic work is good. That is how you get your Ph.D.: you say that you are producing some new knowledge within the conventions of your field.

Moreover, whatever authors do, the knowledge that they produce should be deployable, usable, and in the right pedagogical conditions, acceptable to the group to which they are trying to relate it. Not having the right pedagogical conditions—say, because there is no way of communicating what authors are doing to those communities that are illiterate or uneducated, or that lack teachers to relay their work—reveals much not only about the new protocols required for the academy, but also about the new conditions required for the ethnographic subject and its set of social relations. Scholarship must increase understanding; it is about changing the knowledge life world. There must be some attempt on the part of authors, whether it succeeds or not.

Finally, at the end of the process, there must be a level of recognition by the ethnographic subject that the work has increased the dialogic condition. This does not mean that there is to be agreement, but that the terms of the conversation and carrying it on are affirmed. If people say, “The way you represent my life really does not conform to the way I experience it,”

scholars do not have a responsibility to rush off and rehash their work. However, they do have a responsibility to continue the conversation, to ask the right questions about those differences. That dialogism, which has to be part of scholarship, is one way to make the regional, the context, the specific part of the discussion.

Ashna Ali: What advice could you offer struggling graduate students who are working as adjuncts, particularly in this moment of increasing neoliberal corporatization of higher education?

Homi Bhabha: I look at the problem from a very biased perspective. Less instrumental forms of knowledge, such as the arts and humanities, are suffering. What should I say? You can be a scholar whether you are an academic or not, but you can only be an academic if you have an institution. My advice is, first, that you must survive. If you are burning with the desire to get a doctorate, that is a good thing, a great thing even, but see that it does not consume your whole life. There is much more to living, to thinking, and to thinking originally than allowing any institution to take you in its maw, to crunch you up, and to spit you out. One must be very careful to avoid that. It can make the thing that you love—literature, cinema, poetry—become the thing that you hate, even though communicating something very special to you, and building a basis for communication with the world and with other people.

If the conditions of adhering to the profession are such that they destroy you, if they shape your life and send you to a place where you do not want to go (separate from your lover), if they demand of you that you play a role that you cannot sustain, then I say all find these gifts of the mind outside of the teaching profession. In a time of ascendancy for utilitarian, instrumental, operationalizable professions, you must keep your passion alive so long as you can, provided that you can also keep your own life alive. I have seen a number of extraordinarily gifted, perceptive, intelligent people destroyed and losing passion for their work because the conditions were so bad. Do not let that happen . . . [Sighs].

Ashna Ali: You are often cited as one of the “Holy Trinity of Postcolonial Studies,” along with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Edward Said, to the extent that you have earned the nickname “Holy Homi” . . .

Homi Bhabha: [Chuckles]

Ashna Ali: Where do you see the field heading in the future, and where would you like to see it go? What do you think are some of the most pressing concerns that today's scholars should attend to?

Homi Bhabha: I have been thinking about this quite a lot. There was one moment when the question of multiculturalism and race emerged from my postcolonial work in such a way that I thought a lot about cosmopolitanism. I took the Third Space in a very different direction to enter into a discourse of cultural rights and the notion of security—not just surveillance but security. “Security” might well be the framing of twenty-first-century cultural, social, and political values, just as “progress” was for the nineteenth century. In the age of Empire, progress or modernization was the paradigm; in our time, it is security, meaning not just surveillance but also privacy. Is privacy always a good thing? There is a lot of work, a lot of aesthetic production, in the area of surveillance in art.

We must understand that people need their security if they are going to be able to use their freedom of expression to write books, to teach, or to live with a certain sense of flourishing. At the same time, we know that the discourse of political security is often an impediment to our freedom. The ambivalences of security in our time are what I am interested in, particularly in the field of culture. How do they affect cultural expression, and cultural production? What is the context of affective security? How does it deal with the anxiety of expression? With aesthetics and ethics? In some ways, security relates to rights. In others, it relates to an area of interest to my dear friend Dipesh Chakrabarty: climate change.³ Security is just as much about ecopolitics, or the politics of environment, as about academic and artistic expression.

Tracking the direction of the whole field of postcolonial studies is very difficult, but I do think that is evolving and transforming. The most important contributions of the field are what influenced its inception: its interrogation of the notion of progress, particularly the notion of evolution and linear progress, and its interrogation of the concept of modernity. It asked whose progress or modernity was at stake, and what the different modalities were of such phenomena.