

MUSTAPHA MARROUCHI



The Fabric of Subcultures

Networks, Ethnic Force Fields,
and Peoples without Power



POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES 15

The Fabric of Subcultures reflects on the state of the postcolonial signature behind stylistic refinements—a world of letters relatively dependent on the West for economic and political realms, and in which language systems, aesthetic orders, and genres struggle for dominance. Rejecting facile talk of postmodernism, with its suggestion of a happy “melting pot” of literature, this book exposes an emerging regime of inequality in the world of letters, where minor languages and literatures are subject to the invisible but implacable violence (of the letter) of their dominant counterparts. Inspired by the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, the book develops the first clear model for understanding the real value of the republic of postcolonial letters (if it ever existed). It proposes a baseline from which we might measure the validity of the emergent, as opposed to residual, signature, while arguing for the importance of literary capital and its role in giving legitimacy to developing peoples in their incessant struggle for international recognition. Within its overarching theory, the book locates three main categories in the genesis of postcolonial literature—English, French, and Creolismo—and closely examines towering figures in the realm of postcolonial letters—Jacques Derrida, Homi Bhabha, Patrick Chamoiseau, Mahmoud Darwish, Jamaica Kincaid, and Caryl Phillips, among others. It also explores the significance of cultural practices related to food (couscous) and sports (soccer) represented here by the iconic figure of Zinedine Zidane, a Beur born and raised in la banlieue (the suburbs). In other words, the book examines from the bottom up the political struggle of the postcolonial subject in the era of postmodernity—one framed by sites of resistance and efforts at constructing a theoretical model for the “inventory of the present” at a time when words like “empire” have possibly taken on a new significance.

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The Fabric of Subcultures

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This is comparative literature at its unexpected best. *The Fabric of Subcultures* means to be about people without power, and demonstrates what it stands for, who is not in power?”

V-Y Mudimbe, Ph. D.

The Fabric of Subcultures



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PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
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For Bev and Jim Rogers

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My intention is to trace the postcolonial *sign* and/or *signature* in emergent literature, philosophy, and culture. In the midst of this exercise, I find myself bearing witness to an *event*, a monumental *event*; a redemptive story that took place two years ago, that is also postcolonial *avant la lettre*: the election of a ‘midnight child’, whose origin is steeped in a geographically and socially diverse black and brown and cream community—a nation within the nation, really—to the highest office in America.¹ I also soon realize that *The Fabric of Subcultures: Networks, Ethnic Force Fields, and Peoples without Power* was written mostly during the Bush era; an era of intimidation, shame, and mortification.² Assaulted by these dynamic forces at the rendez-vous of a victory of sorts, I raise the following questions: Can reality reclaim its rightful place in post-Bush America? From now on, do we hang out together, or do we hang out separately and how are we to understand the significance of this historic *event*, at least within the register of the thinking being that is Barack Obama, a ‘postmodern savage’ who has come of age to claim the US presidency and who has been hounded ever since he assumed power? What subtracts the sheer ‘what happens’ from the general determination of ‘what is’ at this “pre-emergent” fragment of history?³ After all, what composes an *event* is always mired in a *con-text*, in a people, and in a language.⁴ I have called this fragment of history “Barakamerica.” At one pole, it represents a shift in the eternal parliamentary struggle for a majority in spite of the ugly rise of the Right once again. At the other pole, it stands as a sign of something more: progress in the Kantian sense of the word (i.e. ethical progress, not just material development)⁵, even if the intervallic structure of the *event* is projected within a necessarily incoherent excrescence. That it has been lacking orderly continuity is true. After all, the void we witness two years after Obama was inaugurated transpires therein, in the unthinkable joint between the heterogeneous terms from which it is composed. That the *event* is made to look like a blot, this much can be deduced from what took place on November 2, 2010. That a new strand of rightwing populists in the US, represented by none other than the talk show host Glenn Beck and his Tea Party followers should reverse the tide is a lesson in politics. That it happened in a country where 44 million people live below the poverty line while 1%—about 3 million ‘happy few’—control half the nation’s wealth is no surprise, even if the thing the Tea Party regards as the greatest threat to capitalism is not *Al-Qaida* or communism but late capitalism itself.⁶ At this juncture, I am

reminded of a story told about Pablo Casals at the age of ninety-three, living in Puerto Rico with a woman many years younger than himself. A journalist sent forth from New York asked him why he practiced the cello every morning for four hours. Here he was, the most famous cellist in the world, no longer performing on the concert stage, at ease in the Caribbean sun. Why then the unnecessary labor? Because, so Casals is reported to have said, I'm learning something.⁷ We, too, are learning something, aren't we.

Still, the "pre-emergent" event I am discussing is an occurrence only insofar as there exists a *site* for it within an effectively deployed constituency (one that contains multitudes—composite America comes to mind). It is in this sense that the *event* becomes a rupture no matter what happens in the future, even if the rupture does not exonerate us from thinking about the *being* of the *event* in and of itself, what Alain Badiou aptly called "trans-being," and of which I have just said that it is in every instance a site of resistance.⁸ It is also an exorcism of the past and a signifying for a better future. And so, at this important juncture in our world's history, one is tempted to ask: Beyond the acknowledgement that the *event* is a site of struggle for social justice, does the trans-being account for being *qua* being? My position amounts to answering "yes." For, in order to probe the rupture, we must consider the *event* that is Barakamerica as a fold between extensive segmentation and the intensive continuum. Let me explain: Waking up to the drums of a victory followed by a defeat of sorts without illusions is like watching Ursula Mayer's black-and-white sixteen-minute *Memories of Mirrors*. The film, like the Obama story, holds up a mirror to the viewer, it accurately reflects the medium itself, as the light of the camera flashes toward us to make a connection between the past, the present, and the future; black, white, and brown; men, women, and transgender. It is in this sense that the *event* is a *trait d'union* between yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and seductive: this Barakamerica will end up coming in spite of all the hacks. The *revenant*, too, is going to come. It will not be long. But how long will it be, is a question in time answered.

"It takes time," Hélène Cixous reminds us. "It can take a long time, this *arrivance*."⁹ Yet it is because of the imminent suggestion that the "hour is near," that Barakamerica "smells like time."¹⁰ What the schism (with the past) also brings forward is the idea of Barakamerica as the gateway to futurity, open to expectation that "if it be not now, yet it will come."¹¹ For now at least, the figure of Obama, not as the policeman of the new world order but, rather, as the night-watchman on the ramparts of an exhausted America whose "time is off its hinges" enough for "poetic and thinking peepholes" to open on migrant meanings, is the image of hospitality; as the receptiveness of

his election to new and unintended interpretations is itself a model of a pluralism consisting of diverse constituents.¹² Derrida makes the point:

It is possible to gather under a single roof the apparently disordered plurivocality of these interpretations [...] it being understood this house will always be haunted rather than inhabited by the meaning of the original? This is the stroke of genius [...] the signature of the Thing [...].¹³

On this view, the *event* has a decisive role in our thinking about the peace to come, about our “paroxysms of delight,” as one poet put it; a preoccupation which directs our attention to a new sense of the political in America and the world. For Barakamerica brings to a close the age of Reagan, the era of conservatism, and the epoch of the southern strategy. The economics of greed, the culture of indifference to the poor, and the politics of fear have run their course once and for all. The war in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hurricane Katrina, and the Wall Street collapse were the three nails in the coffin of the age of illusion. For nearly thirty years, the elevating of deregulated markets, the glorifying of the lives of the rich and famous, and the trivializing of poor peoples’ suffering has shaped the climate of opinion. And like the American Hamlet Blanche DuBois, in white literary bluesman Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the world of make-believe in which we lived has been shattered forever by reality, history, and cool. Truth and justice crushed to earth do, at some point, rise again.¹⁴ In the meantime, has Obama’s grand ascension to the White House challenged him to translate symbol into substance? Change comes *from the bottom up*, not the top down, as Barak Obama himself said time and again during the election campaign. Granted, but our hope remains on a tightrope. And America and the World hang in the balance as witness the lack of any significant engagement for peace in Palestine, Iraq, or Afghanistan. Here we can only hope that Mr. President on whom so much depends will awake from his slumber and face up to reality. Otherwise, his tenure would have been nothing but a futile exercise in what Lacan aptly called “extimité” or “l’inquiétante étrangeté” of the times we live in.¹⁵

Still, we cannot help but tell the story again. The Obama victory is a sign of history in the triple sense of Kant’s *signum rememorativum*, *demonstrativum*, *prognosticum*.¹⁶ It is an act in which the memory of the long past of slavery and struggle for its abolition reverberates; a happening which now demonstrates a change; a hope for future achievements. The victory is also a *trace*, the timing of which could not be more perfect, in that postcolonial literature, like *local* agriculture, is kept in postcolonial dependence. Both have been integrated into the global economy. Crops are exported, peasants are thrown off their land and pushed into sweat-shops, and poorer countries

have to rely more and more on imported foods. At this juncture of history, we cry out loud that literacy, like food, particularly in the Third World, where soaring grain prices (caused in part by the use of crops for biofuels) have meant starvation from Haiti to Ethiopia, is not a commodity. As to the postcolonial writer, he or she has been absorbed by the global market to sing on; to sing praises of butterflies broken on racks.¹⁷ (Think of the way Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has been co-opted and the case will be clear enough.)¹⁸ In this way, postcolonial literature, like agriculture, water, energy, culture, health, and the environment, cannot be left to the Western market to decide what is good or bad for the rest of the planet. It is here that the question of the Left has to be raised again, if we are to maintain a minimum degree of social justice.¹⁹ After all, the West always takes great care to maintain its own self-sufficiency in food, and that includes literature, through financial support for its *terroir*.²⁰ That much we know.

On this score, the argument I make in my book is far-reaching and instructive. The focus is on the confrontation between the arrogant 'white' European and the stigmatized African, Asian, Caribbean, and Native American *Other*, a looking-glass in which the 'white' European sees him- or herself and in which he or she is observed. This personal *Other*, encountered among Indians in Bolivia, Berbers in the High Atlas, Irish in Ireland, is invariably brown. This Stranger must become our partner instead of the object of research. In a world where there is so much demagoguery, fanaticism, and ill-will; a world of mass culture, mass hysteria, and mass paranoia; a world in which the only hero on the world stage is the crowd, and the main feature of this crowd, this mass, is anonymity, impersonality, and lack of identity, lack of a *visage*, we have lost the individual, the specific Self with whom dialogue is possible. Instead of security walls and moats, my continuing argument calls for Silk Roads and agoras, markets and souks, malls and bazaars—a hybrid and heterogeneous culture of hospitality. In doing so, it otherizes the *Other* by opening a sort of Pandora's portal through which it is possible to access every imaginable *Other*: erotic and exotic, sacred and profane, sane and insane, to define the inchoate Self.²¹ It is in this sense that my book can be said to make a compelling case for a kind of humanism that is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. However, it is neither a definitive statement nor a call to arms. I shall, of course, let the pages that follow speak for themselves, but I would like to say that I have tried in a reflective way to discuss those aspects of my enormous subject that have meant the most to me. For instance, I have always wondered how and in what ways my Berber culture can be reduced to the colonial and/or postcolonial; how it relates to other cultures that have surrounded it for millennia; and where it will go from here.

A close circle of friends in the USA, Europe, and Africa, only a few of whose names appear in these acknowledgements, kept alive in me the belief that what I had to say made, on the whole, considerable sense. Such belief, in the resolve to say things which go against the grain, does not come easily and certainly cannot come if one is alone. The opportunity to speak from within a structure of camaraderie and solidarity, shared with filial love, is always a rare privilege. Pat McGee read the chapter on Homi Bhabha with astute and affectionate attention to each detail, giving me the benefit of his close readings with unswerving generosity, some minor disagreements notwithstanding. Gordon Collier performed the difficult task of deciphering my successive drafts with admirable patience and skill. Truly, the book would not have been what it is without his critique, advice, and guidance. I am very much indebted to him for his unstinting support, good humour, and intelligence. Among scholars and friends, I must mention my special debt to an old friend, Mohammed Ali Achour Ahmed in Algeria. My long telephone conversations with him about the plight of our part of the world heightened my awareness to a degree that is both worrisome and disturbing. Achour's magnificent knowledge of Arabic and French literature and language proved invaluable at times as he guided me through some difficult concepts, especially in Arabic. I am most grateful to him for his steadfastness, generosity, and, above all, friendship. My debt also goes to Fred Ivor Case, who did not live to see this book come to fruition. Fred was not only a mentor for an entire generation of graduate students at the University of Toronto in the 1980s, but also a father figure, who guided us through the maze up to the last day of his life. I, for one, feel orphaned by his untimely death. He, however, will continue to live in my memory.

On a purely scholarly level, I have benefited immensely from the company of my 'imaginary family': Homi Bhabha, Helen Vendler, Terry Eagleton, Stephen Greenblatt, Slavoj Žižek, Frank Kermode, Fredric Jameson, the late Jacques Derrida, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and the list goes on. I have not consciously used material taken from them, but I may well have done so, where there was so much read that was far too good to forget. To them, I am beholden.

I am also most grateful to Chris Hudgins, Doug Unger, and Richard Harp at UNLV, for their warmth and marvellous spirit, and to Bill Boelhower, Anna Nardo, and Carl Friedman at LSU for their extraordinary solicitude and practical help. For dear friends, Joan and Pat McGee, I scarcely have words suitable enough to express my gratitude for their hospitality during a time when my season of migration to the South was proving difficult, not to say impossible. Their company rekindled my heart over many private moments

during which we shared together red wine, scrumptious dishes, and good conversation in their lovely home. It is ironic that my book was completed during another season of migration, to the South-West this time around, where, too, all the laws of hospitality were strictly observed to make me feel at 'home'.

I also thank my assistant, Benedict J. Whalen, for working tirelessly on the notes and works cited. His eagle eye was instrumental in my completion of an otherwise incomplete manuscript. He is to be commended. I am deeply grateful to Carolyn Bryson for the extraordinary pains she took with the manuscript. Her vigilance was unblinking in its attention to the care that makes up the thing we call 'book' and its identity. She did it with style, humour, and flair. Erica Anzalone and Alexandra Leach performed the difficult task of formatting the manuscript. This they did with promethan authority, making sense in whatever they turned. Suffice it to add that I unabashedly availed myself of various tasks as I worked on this book. Those include keeping in touch with close friends who are also editors of journals in which some of these pages first appeared. Bill Boelhower (of *Atlantic Studies*), Kostas Myrsiades (of *College Literature*), Lynn Worsham (of *JAC*). I am also grateful to Hédi Alam (of *Hédi Alam Inc.*) who granted me permission to use "Scènes Algériennes" for the book cover.

Finally, among those of us who shared in making this book, Bev and Jim Rogers have a special place that must not remain empty. With their boundless curiosity about everything around them, they have helped create a rich atmosphere of learning at UNLV. I am deeply appreciative of their true generosity in awarding me the Rogers Fellowship in Postcolonial Literature in 2008, which enabled me to finish my book. To Bev and Jim, I offer an enduring thank you.

My major, most painful regret is that—as the dedication of this book indicates—my father died during its final preparation. It is to his own love of knowledge that I owe my earliest interest in learning. I am more sorry than I can say that, regardless of its flaws, he did not live to see it and tell me what he thought.

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INTRODUCTION

Davos? No, Porto Alegre

The art works of a class-based society, by transcending an oppressive present, allow us to imagine alternatives to it; but in playing this utopian role they also sublimate current conflicts into a specious harmony, and so repress the history of unfreedom in which they have their roots. In a grisly paradox, culture, which offers us a taste of freedom and happiness, is only made possible by their absence. And if such freedom and happiness were to be historically realized, culture as we know it would cease to exist.¹

I

The current literary and/or historiographic mind-set in the West tends to be suspicious of those who think they have found the key to everything; it is more comfortable with efforts that describe and interpret micro-historical archives where there seems to be some prospect of locally exhaustive accounting, with the big picture left as a task for a better-informed future. Arguments that depend upon a single grand idea tend to be the property of the writers of popular history; the best (or at least better) sellers grinding very obvious axes and telling of the upside of Empire and its revival, are rife.² But, of course, most Western histories are motivated by the desire to ignore, occlude, or otherwise negate the crucial constitutive role of the Colonial *Other* (by now a well-worn concept which, when not merely added mechanically onto some individual psychology, evaporates into Levinasian sentimentalism), although not all are partial to the same degree.³ And the idea of waiting patiently for a future big historical rupture cannot be comfortably entertained by those of us who would like to answer back, for highly motivated history can easily look like simplified memory, intact in its message and inattentive in its method to potential resistance. And memory does seem to play a larger than usual role in transnational narrative—it always has an individual as well as historical profile, because ideas about collective identity are among the materials passed down through culture from one generation to another. Memory also stands guard over our most inspired breathings and everything out of a deeper sky that touches us, that we love and cherish. It is in this sense that Freud compared the human mind to the ruins of Rome, and believed that “nothing which has once been formed can perish, that everything is somehow preserved, and that in suitable circumstances (when, for instance

regression goes back far enough) it can once more be brought to light.”⁴ This may be an extreme position, but, given a collective memory, it is by no means impossible to imagine that it cannot keep on brooding over what T.S. Eliot aptly called the “pastness of the past” in a way that neither dissolves historical transition into genealogy nor hypostatizes colonialism (and capital) into pure and opposed constructions.⁵ This it does by examining the post-colonial sign from different mental points of view until it eventually sees something in it. Only then is it able to *alter its whole aspect*. The impetuous ferocity that drives this process brings to mind Stendhal’s Henry Brulard, who must point and outstretch the lenses of his telescope in all ways, or retract them so that he can, by indirections, find directions out.⁶ Such is the case for *The Fabric of Subcultures*, which sets out, like a ‘missionary in reverse,’ to re-write not only history and literature but also theory, soccer, couscous, migrancy, belonging and its opposite, un-belonging, Aboriginal cricket, and culture *from the bottom up*. In doing so, it extends analysis to

all goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular formation—which may be ‘fair words’ or smiles, handshakes and shrugs, compliments or attention, challenges or insults, powers or pleasures, gossip or scientific information, distinction or distinctions.⁷

In short, it seeks to “balance the accounts,” as Bataille would have it.⁸ In this respect, its theory of expenditure is far more politically as well as conceptually consonant with the sociology of art and literature as Pierre Bourdieu conceived of and understood them.⁹

Meanwhile, the view that everything is hypothetical is itself a hypothesis, and at the risk of self-contradiction one must weigh this truth into its reckoning. For the ideology in question is not only that of literature, against which the scrupulous meanness of the postcolonial signature calculatedly sets its face, but more or less the spread of English (it could be French) throughout the world, via commerce and colonialism, popular culture and the new global order, which has spawned any number of fluent outriggers capable of contributing to English literature. Some, like most Australians and Canadians, write English with no thought of an alternative; others, like certain inhabitants of the Caribbean, Ireland, anglophone Africa, and India, write it against a background of native tongues or *patois* that are added, abandoned or suppressed in the creative effort—an effort that to a degree enlists them in a foreign if not “intimate enemy” camp, that of the dominant West. These writers belong to the roving, post-imperial impulse, which is shaking up English with rambunctious mixings of genres, learned mockeries of political power, and maximalist mergers of Western and Third-World aesthetics.¹⁰ Never is

'history' faceless in their work, never are individuals absolved from responsibility or guilt for their own action. As their divergent 'colonial' and 'post-colonial' histories—of poverty and injustice—circumnavigate the globe in opposite directions, they meet on the margins of nonstandard 'vernaculars' or hybridized orders of speech. These are twisted versions of the language of the master, alienating the syntactical 'eloquence' and international 'elegance' through which 'standard' English naturalizes itself as a national cultural norm. Their world cannot be reduced to the description of speech as an 'object' of linguistic study or a functionalist form of verbal communication without doing violence to the letter of the living tongue in which they write.¹¹ Besides, if one takes English at its most thoroughly purist, one can hardly have postcolonial literature and theory at all, only decor—verbal tableaux with men and women fixed in their stations: core pronouncing as core, margin as margin. But postcolonial literature and/or theory is precisely *indecorum*: improper persons in proper places—margin as core, 'cultural amphibians' suckling the breasts of Mother England. From this viewpoint, the world of the postcolonial is so disordered that it rarely generates decorum, narrowly defined. At its head is a master-narrative and no master-narrative, a *grand récit* and no *grand récit*; a *petit récit* and no *petit récit*—something resembling a "Nuncle" who, in the Fool's words in *King Lear*, made his daughters his mothers, his subjects victims or dispensers of justice, his courtiers exiles, himself a fool and madman.¹² This way of writing back has enabled a handful of postcolonial writers to break free of the Western mould and/or model and develop a distinctive way of narrating the experience of Empire.

After this *Emanzipation* (a term used by the German jazz critic Joachim-Ernst Berendt), they asserted national distinctive identities.¹³ The *almost* English (Rushdie, Kincaid, Phillips) are louder, more ironic, and more humorous while the *almost* French (Derrida, Chamoiseau, Zidane) are collectivists with an aesthetic of "quiet anarchism."¹⁴ However, both are intense and sustaining in their quest to meticulously recount their experiences of being on the *outside* looking *in*. Their writing is in English (and/ or French), but not the English and/or French they had learned in England or France, or in the hallowed portals of the colonial classroom. Their English and/or French is a postcolonial invention, a language like a bazaar, a hybrid entity with many heads and arms, guardian goddess of an imaginary land that lives on and grows in the memory. In fact, it is a medium that may be said to resemble Gabriel García Márquez's "misbegotten creature with the head and ears of a mule, a camel's body, the legs of a deer and whinny of a horse."¹⁵ Its assault of words, syntax, tempo, pace, and even punctuation, all come together in the

writers' portrayal of London as Mother England or Paris as *Maman Fouance*: sometimes as nostalgia for colour, the meanings and goings of life, the goings-on; at other times, as an indictment of the monstrous colonial machine one cannot depend on to know what honour is, what trust is, what political responsibility means.¹⁶ With prescient voices and solo efforts, some of these writers have been ostracized for their flavour as well as for their avant-garde tendencies.¹⁷ Their explorations of social and literary trends extends to their own ideas, and their willingness to question their own theories about race, gender, ethnicity, East, West, North, South, class, the Sublime, God, the Unconscious, often results in valuable and imaginative scholarship. More importantly, they debunk the stereotype of Western narrative as overwhelmingly white and male and render justice to female writing and immigrants from the Third World.

Given the spectrum of contradictions inherent in the colonial capitalist project, it should come as no surprise that much of the present book bears the imprint of one insightful case by any measure—that of the *oeuvre* of Pierre Bourdieu, to whose work I am greatly indebted. Another influence is that of *Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, with its crypto-Augustinian model of globalization and its paeans to the “new barbarians” flooding the gates of the Western centres.¹⁸ Hailed by Slavoj Žižek as the “*Communist Manifesto* of our time,” *Empire* shows how the subaltern exists as a *longue durée* of theoretical innovation, from the early writings of Marx through Gramsci, Althusser, Said, and Žižek himself.¹⁹ At the same time, the intervention in my book sits on the border-line between the Third World where it originates and the West where it is thought, produced, packaged, exchanged, consumed, and digested. It performs this operation by policing the disciplinary boundary between the *grands récits* of historiography that locate modernity within bold narratives of social change and the *fragmentary* appropriation that can lend the postcolonial sign in particular an almost iconic resonance within a certain discourse of domination. Its aim is as avowedly theoretical as it is properly historical/ literary/cultural, for it captures how the postcolonial writer is about price, so much so that he or she has created a reification of cheapness, in which cheapness becomes a mystical quality, a *Ding an sich* or fundamental essence, separate from questions about utility or practicality. It boils down to the question of just how he or she achieves his or her control of costs—a world which, in a business context, to a large extent means ‘wages’, whether it be in the souk or at the market, in the bazaar or at the Mall. This labour of the negative, as Hegel called it, seems appropriate to *The Fabric of Subcultures*, which is meant as one *instalment*, of several already out there, on the complex question of Western power and hegemony in

a globally 'flat' world where the status of capitalism as the global ideology goes unchallenged.²⁰ (Think of Google, Wal-Mart, Microsoft, Shell, Nike, and Starbucks—the symbol par excellence for No-Logoism).²¹ Its main purpose is to tell, by some other way of telling, of the fate of the postcolonial artist, to witness seduction amid the flames, to enter the debate about the inquiry that is being conducted on the intervention of the West in the rest (of the planet), and to deconstruct the concept of the new global imperium, which is supposed to have followed the Cold War—not the American Empire, although it plays a part in the invasion of Iraq, but a wider settlement of which US supremacy is just one part.²² This imperium has generated resistance worldwide, as witness the anti-war movements, the events of Seattle, Genoa, Hong Kong, and especially Porto Alegre, which stands as a foil to its twin city of globalization: Davos, the exclusive Swiss resort where the global elite of managers, statesmen, and media gurus meets for the World Economic Forum under heavy police protection, trying to convince us (and themselves) that globalization is its own best remedy. After all, Porto Alegre is the subtropical Brazilian city where the counter-elite of the anti-globalization movement gathers, attempting to persuade us that late-capitalism is not our inevitable fate—that, as the official slogan put it, “another world is possible.”²³ The intention (and method) of the resistance movement is to bring about a radical change at the grass-roots level. Nowhere is the effort more pronounced than in the being of Porto Alegre itself, which stands as a beacon of opposition for what is known as *la gauche de la gauche*, which emerged in the 1990s, led by *les enfants terribles* of the Left: the moustachioed subversive farmer José Bové, the anti-philosopher Michel Onfray, the oppositional writer-critic Arundhati Roy, the dissident writer Antonio Negri, the new social movement known as the World Social Forum, with global utopian aspirations, but operating at the local level, the revolutionary *Presidentes* Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, and Daniel Ortega—though, in the case of Morales and Ortega and their Leftocracy, they still have plenty of opponents in and out of Bolivia and Nicaragua: the separatist white elite in the rich oil and gas regions, army factions, multinationals, and the government of the USA, who may intervene to change the course of action.²⁴ It would be not much of an exaggeration to say that, together, these working-class anti-heroes and intellectuals in opposition form a kind of *Internationale intellectuelle* who keep reminding us that the only thing we have to look at is the mirror. And when we look there, part of what we see is the global with its huge sheds, harshly lit, and the stuff on sale gives the impression of being crammed, stacked, and heaped, all to emphasize the overwhelming message of price. Even so, the irreparable damage done by the global is in the developing world, and it is

harder to document. Not all of it is illegal. Africa is probably the worst—I say probably, because it is not possible to know for sure. “Do you know why you can buy such a cheap toy?” a young Egyptian woman factory worker asks, and answers with equal aplomb in the documentary *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*: “That’s because we work all day, every day and night.” So: the global—bad thing *tout court*! Or, is there more to it than blinds the eye?

Another way of putting the matter I am discussing might be to call for a kind of interrogation of the ‘imagined community’ of the postcolonial text itself, one that would recognize the specificity of emergent formations in the period not as an era of stratified continuity but as a revolutionary paroxysm of inauguration. And this has something to do with what Benedict Anderson aptly called “print capitalism,” especially considered in relation to the production of imagined solidarities and kinds of being-through-time. If we were to say that the last twenty-five years have seen the implanting and diffusion of a “screen capitalism”²⁵—one in which print, image, map, and diagram are made available to individual users in what seems an equalized and immensely speeded-up field of symbolic production—would that lead us to make connections between the new technology (with its old driving force) and the coming into being of new imagined communities that put the postcolonial writer under pressure? What technologies of representation does he or she depend on and who does the representing? From what tribes do postcolonial writers come, and how do their particular interests and social styles inflect the great thing represented? What is their sense of belonging to a bounded people: the tribe or the nation? It is in this sense that *The Fabric of Subcultures* sets out to raise new questions rather than resolve old ones in its scrutiny of a postcolonial signature that today remains simultaneously archaic and residual.²⁶ In doing so, it expands the argument on the ‘long revolution,’ as Raymond Williams understood the formula, that never ends and muses upon what Virgil aptly called the “final age that the oracle foretold has arrived; the great order of the centuries [that] is born again.”²⁷ Even so, it is *de rigueur* to announce the following set of questions: “How can we remember what we do not know?”²⁸ What are some of the matters drawn on here and how can the subaltern resist the global? Does he or she have a choice in the sharing of the joy of coming together, the happiness of melting, shoulder to shoulder, into a consciously structured crowd? How can the “concept of the *envy of jouissance* . . . account for collective violence, racism, nationalism, and the like, as much as for the singularities of individual investments, choices, and obsessions: it offers a new way of building in the whole dimension of the *Other*,” whose existence can no longer be denied?²⁹ Was Goethe

mistaken when he spoke of a “world market of intellectual goods” two centuries ago?³⁰ Maybe so, but literature plays a crucial role in the formation of national identity. A great many ordinary men and women in Latin America know who Pablo Neruda is, in contrast to the participant in the BBC Radio phone-in quiz who thought Evelyn Waugh was Hitler’s mistress.³¹ Should the postcolonial realm be seen as its own republic, complete with frontiers, legislators, and rivalries? Do Western realism and tariffs hamper or encourage its development? Do its exponents have free access to the global cultural economy and are they really liberated from the constraints of Western canons and conventions so that they can make themselves up as they go along, in a curious marriage of avant-garde experiment and cultural deprivation? If it was true a century ago of James Joyce and Oscar Wilde, who left an indelible distinctive influence on the world of letters, can the same be said of Jamaica Kincaid and Salman Rushdie today? How far can the greatest revolutionaries of literature go to free themselves from the Enlightenment and get out from under an imposed colonial language? Are they truly capable of inventing any number of ingenious devices to answer back to the Republic of English and/or French Letters? What are we to make of translated men and women such as Caryl Phillips and Patrick Chamoiseau, Homi Bhabha and Jamaica Kincaid, Jacques Derrida and Zinédine Zidane, not to mention Mahmoud Darwish—adrift between cultures, adept at being homeless in a whole number of languages and contexts? What about the assimilators such as V.S. Naipaul, who eagerly identify with the imperial heritage that uprooted his own people in the first place? What is a foreigner and how (in)convenient is it to be born in Algeria or Nigeria today? How can we make a case for the geopolitical relations between emergent literature and critical theory as a kind of reception of the economics of Empire, the raw material of imaginative literature flowing from the periphery to the home country, there to be processed by the industrial centre (whether it be London or Paris; but it could be New York) of critical practice? And finally, how can there be an absolute difference, any more than there can be an absolute *Otherness*? Most critics have written as though the latter, too, were possible, lifting the rather dusty theme of the former from the rut of postmodern thought while neglecting the full context of the literary work—of *Orientalism*, say, which is never fully intelligible in itself; instead, one has to see it as belonging to a global literary space, which has a basis in the world’s political landscape, but which also cuts across regions and borders to form a discursive tribe of its own. After all, literary form is a politics in and of itself, or, in the words of Fredric Jameson, political criticism has a responsibility to come to terms with the shape of sentences.³²

II

The effort to understand the postcolonial republic, with its frontiers imposed from above, provinces, exiles, legislators, parliaments, migrations, subordinate territories, and an unequal distribution of resources, is paramount. To comprehend why it is important, it helps to know how it performs in the international literary sphere. Because it is a *minor* literature in the Deleuzian sense of the word, postcolonial literature is subject to the invisible but implacable violence of the literary world system. Its newness, however, may redeem it from extinction. In this sense, the importance of postcolonial literary capital and its role in giving it *value* in the world market of goods is vital. It is a share of sorts in the structure of intellectual commerce very similar to what Paul Valéry aptly termed “spiritual economy”:

I say that there is a value called “spirit,” as there is a value [assigned to] *oil*, *wheat*, or *gold*. I have said value, because it involves appreciation and judgments of importance, as well as discussion about the price one is prepared to pay for this value: *spirit*. One can *invest* in this value; one can *follow* it, as the men at the Bourse say; one can observe its fluctuations, in whatever quotations reflect people’s opinion of it. In these quotations, which are printed on every page of the newspapers, one can see how it continually comes into competition with other values. For there are competing values. [...] All these values that rise and fall constitute the great market of human affairs.³³

Or, to put it in yet another way, a culture is, after all, a kind of capital whose “increase may continue for centuries, like that of certain other forms of capital, and which absorbs into itself its compound interest.”³⁴ For Valéry, all this is proof enough of a “wealth that has to be accumulated like natural wealth, a capital that has to be formed by successive strata in people’s minds” and hearts.³⁵ In fine, it is a commerce in which the postcolonial signature is negotiated and circulated, banked and transferred from one tribal currency to another in the act of *translation*. It is also racked by struggle, rivalry, and inequality between the literary haves and have-nots. There are ‘peripheral’ or ‘impoverished’ literary zones (Malawi and Tchad come to mind) which have yet to muscle in on the international literary market through prizes, translations, eminent artists, venerable traditions, and canonized genres. Such underdeveloped pockets are poor in literary capital, lacking publishers, libraries, journals, writers, and lettered constituencies. Dominating their cultural resources is Old Europe with its literary capital located firmly in Paris or London—Europe being a continent that is rich in “cultural capital” and prestige, and whose chief literary executives (symposia, critics, reviewers, academics, publishing houses, journals, constituencies, audiences, markets, prizes, awards, consumers) largely determine what is to count as artistic *val-*

ue for the rest of the globe. They are, so to speak, the central bankers of the transnational literary republic. More importantly, the republic has need of its own grand narratives of fame, just as it fashions its own myths of xenophobia toward and hostility to the foreigner, who must await his or her turn to cast (if ever) his or her vote. This reality is nowhere more obvious than in the case of Naipaul, who, despite all the suffering, discrimination, and rejection to which he found himself exposed on account of his background, his culture, and the colour of his skin—an ineradicable reminder of his distance from the centre—realized long ago the importance of being one of its honorary members. He explains:

At a very early age—in all the poverty and bareness of Trinidad, far away, with a population of half a million—I was given the ambition to write books. [...] But books are not created just in the mind. Books are physical objects. To write them, you need a certain kind of sensibility; you need a language, and a certain gift of language; and you need to possess a particular literary form. To get your name on the spine of the created physical object, you need a vast apparatus outside yourself. You need publishers, editors, designers, printers, binders; booksellers, critics, newspapers, and magazines [...] and, of course, buyers and readers. [...] This kind of society didn't exist in Trinidad. It was necessary, therefore, if I was going to be a writer, and live by my books, to travel out to that kind of society where the writing life was possible. This meant, for me at that time, going to England. I was traveling from the periphery, the margin, to what to me was the center; and it was my hope that, at the center, room would be made for me.³⁶

Born on the outer edge of the Empire, without a literary tradition in his native country, an ex-colony, Naipaul, who, in becoming “Sir Nightfall,”³⁷ made a terrific entry into the world of English belles lettres even if his success has caused him to be stranded: an outcast of sorts who is neither completely English (despite his knighthood) nor completely Indian/ Trinidadian, for he has written his way out of his people, upon whom he has, with painful insight, poured so much scorn.³⁸

For Naipaul, only nations like England can pass definitive judgment on *la dernière chose*; but he forgets that these acknowledged legislators also get to decide that some languages are more inherently ‘literary’ than others. “Paramount among the favored tongues is French,” Eagleton observes, “which is the language not of a nation, but of culture as such. Paris is the capital of international art, not of France, which is why artistic exiles have historically taken shelter in its polyglot cafés.”³⁹ True, insofar as the literary circle in Paris teems with foreigners. “Literature written in these prestigious tongues then becomes ‘classical’ or ‘canonical,’” Eagleton goes on to add, “transcending its national basis to constitute a timeless, universal lingua franca.”⁴⁰ He quotes Pascale Casanova as saying “A classic is a work that rises above

competition and so escapes the bidding of time.”⁴¹ Eagleton then concludes his argument thus: “Critics may be regarded as prime creators of value, while literary foreign-exchange brokers (translators and publishers) export valuable texts from one territory to another.” He ends by saying that the only place where “culture really matters these days is in politically oppressive, economically dire conditions.”⁴² Put differently, what is in jeopardy is not the fact of poverty or the effects of colonial and/or global disruption but the implication that creating is a question of both individual talent and accessibility (to the world market), and, indeed, of exactness, internal as well as external, to the problematic of artistic daring. There is no prescriptive procedure to be applied mechanically; no recipe to follow, and no model to emulate. In this sense, each passion, each effort, each event materialized bears with it its own exemplar. And yet: walking the streets of Paris is to live always anew the postcolonial condition; which is not quite an imposition or a choice, but a necessity. The work-space and the space of creation are where the postcolonial artist confronts, and leaves off at the same time, a world of named nooks and crannies, of street-signs and market regulations, of beaten paths and multiple masks; in short, of assumptions, prejudices, and limits.⁴³ What is at issue here is the other side (a dark one) of the republic of *belles lettres* that Casanova speaks about with brio. It is one understood by those who sit on the margin and struggle daily to produce value in a ‘symbolic’ economy, but fail constantly not because their work is not up to the standard of excellence, but because their goods are deemed to be worthless: they are mere print on a page or code on a disk or strokes on a canvas. What makes them unvalued is the lack of recognition that they are valuable. “This recognition is not automatic,” Tim Barrus reminds us, “it has to be constructed. A work of art has to be circulated through a sub-economy of exchange,” similar to the one Nairpaul speaks about, operated by “a large and growing class of middlemen” and women: “publishers, curators, producers, publicists, philanthropists, foundation officers, critics, professors,” students, universities, departments, learned meetings. “The prize system, with its own cadre of career administrators and judges,” prizes and awards, highs and lows, “is one of the ways in which value gets ‘added on’ to the work.”⁴⁴ A fact no one can deny, let alone ignore.

Of course, we tend to assume that the recognition of artistic excellence *is* intuitive. We do not like to think of cultural *value* as something that requires the same middlemen and women—people who are not artists themselves—in order to emerge. We prefer to believe that truly good literature or music or film announces itself. But it seldom happens that way. Two examples will

illustrate what I have in mind: That Derrida was never elected to teach in the Collège de France was not an accident. Catherine Halpern puts it trenchantly:

The French philosopher who is the most quoted and commented on in the world, is otherwise completely ignored or at least excluded in France. Whereas he teaches in prestigious American universities, neither *Le Collège de France* nor *La Sorbonne* will have made room for him. And indeed, if he was elected to teach at the *EHESS*, everyone will acknowledge that this to be an atypical institution, well-suited for this atypical philosopher. The same goes for *Le Collège International de Philosophie*, another anomaly of the French university landscape.⁴⁵

Reviled both in the colony (Algeria, where he was born) and in the *métropole* where he lived most of his life, Derrida was expelled from school for no apparent reason, except that he was a Jew. The operation was planned and indeed meant to keep him in *his* place (i.e.) in a subaltern state within *La République*. The episode is eloquently narrated in *La Carte Postale*:

France now, the French University. You accuse me of being pitiless, and above all unjust with it (scores to be settled perhaps): did they not expel me from school when I was 11, no German having set foot in Algeria? The only school official whose name I remember today: he has me come into his office: “You are going to go home, my little friend, your parents will get a note.” At the moment I understood nothing, but since? Would they not start all over, if they could, prohibiting me from school? Is it not for this reason that I have forever ensconced myself in it in order to provoke them to it and to give them the most urgent wish, always at the limit, to expel me again?⁴⁶

Another case of ostracism paraded itself in 1987, the year Toni Morrison was a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction, and *Beloved* had been widely regarded as the favourite, but lost in the end to *Paco’s Story* by Larry Heinemann. One can assume that she was terribly disappointed, as were her friends, who, after *Beloved* also failed to win the National Book Critics Award for Fiction (which went to Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife*), forty-eight of them published a statement that read:

Despite the international stature of Toni Morrison, she has yet to receive the national recognition that her five major works of fiction entirely deserve: she has yet to receive the keystone honors of the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize. We, the undersigned black critics and black writers, here assert ourselves against such oversight and harmful whimsy. The legitimate need for our own literature can no longer be denied.⁴⁷

A few months later, *Beloved* won the prize. Five years after that, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize.⁴⁸ All this, to be sure, is beautifully captured in

the following instance, where Morrison does an excellent job of reminding us just how unafraid she is of the margin:

More often than not, as much as I feel rooted in my family and the history of a community, I also feel estranged from an authentic citizenship, even though I was born here. I have always felt marginalized, which was painful and destabilizing, but (perhaps thanks to my culture of origin) also put me in a position of strength: an interesting, even noble one. Because it is the margin that has always produced artists, and it is off the center where they choose to stay. The core is what they analyze, criticize, and at times succeed in displacing. So this marginal position has been an asset for me as an adult, but as a child, it was a handicap.⁴⁹

In one sense, life off the centre is the inevitable truth of existence for many of us in an increasingly uniform world. And like any other life, it has its roots in reality. To view it as no more than a false off-the-edge perception is to risk emptying it of substance. How far can one deduce reality from appearance is a question in time answered.

The sleight of hand here is to affirm that there is a great deal more to power and authority accruing to those who succeed in it, and this despite their marginality. One figure in particular towers above all others in the literary market-place because it has retained its *value* in the symbolic economy despite the ostracism he had to face in France, and that is Derrida, who may, after all, stand as *the* president of the world republic of postcolonial letters insofar as his method of reading (otherwise called deconstruction—born *not* in France, but in an ex-colony—namely, the USA—means not destroying ideas but scrutinizing them to the point where they begin to come apart and expose their latent contradictions at home and away from home. He clarifies the point for us:

The idea behind deconstruction is to deconstruct the workings of strong nation-states with powerful immigration policies, to deconstruct the rhetoric of nationalism, the politics of place, the metaphysics of native land and native tongue. [...] The idea is to disarm the bombs [...] of identity that nation-states build to defend themselves against the stranger, against Jews and Arabs and immigrants.⁵⁰

His influence as the foreigner or *translated* philosopher—critic par excellence is not to be de-valued, in that he stood as one of the preferred few, as distinct from the hapless many, who read works of literature, art, and philosophy that possess a stunning originality and intricacy beyond that of most of his peers or critics.⁵¹ Today, we know he was right, and we know why. The adolescents of my generation, greedy for life, forgot in body and soul about the hopes for the future he anticipated for us until reality taught us that tomorrow was not what they had dreamed, and we discovered nostalgia. Nevertheless, I

hope it is not inappropriate of me to say that, with his untimely death in 2004, one is reminded of the end of an era that was intense and radiant when it first dawned on the world stage. It happened after 1964, the year Sartre refused the Nobel Prize. It was also in that otherwise (in)famous decade that

Lévi-Strauss became the world's most celebrated anthropologist; Fernand Braudel established himself as its most influential historian; Barthes became its most distinctive literary critic; Lacan started to acquire his reputation as the mage of psychoanalysis; Foucault to invent his archaeology of knowledge, Derrida to become the anti-nomian philosopher of the age; Bourdieu to develop the concepts that would make him its best-known sociologist. The concentrated explosion of ideas is astonishing. In just two years (1966–67) there appeared side by side: *Du miel aux cendres*, *Les Mots et les choses*, *Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme*, *Système de la mode*, *Écrits*, *Lire le Capital*, and, of course, *De la grammatologie*, not to speak – from another latitude – of *La Société du spectacle*. Whatever the different bearings of these and other writings, it does not seem altogether surprising that a revolutionary fever gripped society itself in the following year.⁵²

True, insofar as the vitality of era lay in the artistic creation of one *éminence grise* after another: Bataille, Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze, Bourdieu, Cixous, and, of course, Derrida, who stood supreme. “All these thinkers,” Alain Badiou observes,

were bent upon finding a style of their own, inventing a new way of creating prose; they wanted to be writers. Reading Deleuze or Foucault, one finds something quite unprecedented at the level of the sentence, a link between thought and phrasal movement that is completely original. There is a new, affirmative rhythm and an astonishing inventiveness in the formulations. In Derrida there is a patient, complicated relationship of language to language, as language works upon itself and thought passes through that work into words. In Lacan one wrestles with a dazzlingly complex syntax which resembles nothing so much as the syntax of Mallarmé, and is therefore poetic—confessedly so.⁵³

At the risk of drawing an inventory *à la* Prévert, one could make a list of the pretenders to the throne Derrida guarded jealously for nearly half a century. The number of scholars who owe him nearly everything in claiming their place in the sun is so large that a cull is in order. Think of Shoshana Felman, Barbara Johnson, Drucilla Cornell, Eve Sedgwick, Geoffrey Bennington, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Christopher Norris, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and, of course, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom, and Paul de Man—the gang of four who formed the Yale School. One must also mention those who sat on the opposite side of the fence from him: John Searle, Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, Fredric Jameson, Jürgen Habermas, Terry Eagleton, and Edward Said come to mind. To all this, we must add the list of universities that associated their names with his and ended being contami-

nated by the scourge that is Deconstruction: Yale, Cornell, Johns Hopkins, New York University, and Irvine, where he deposited his archives the year before he died. As there is a fortress Freud, so is there a fortress Derrida; Derrida his own castle. For admission, a certain high seriousness must be deemed essential—indeed, insofar as, for Derrida, everything was open to discussion and interpretation. The night he died it was whispered that he would one day be a great prince of originality in reading great works of philosophy and literature. The murmur did not take long to materialize ... he was *always already* one who played the “role of a modern-day Moses, not in the guise of political leader, but as a spiritual, prophetic guide whose great gift to us was the imagining of beginnings, and liberation from the obsessions with origins.”⁵⁴ That, at bottom, is his legacy—a legacy wrapped in an optimism of the will.

There is another indication that the cultural diet that was prescribed for Derrida was, to say the least, exclusionary. However, he, like Faulkner before him, the first *local* writer from the South who demonstrated to novelists (Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Rachid Boujedra, Juan Benet, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and Toni Morrison, to name but a happy few) how to represent a marginal community in an advanced literary style, a style that could gain the respect of ‘Paris’, gave birth to a narrative that tells us in so many ways about a more democratic form of humanism—one that aims to incorporate, emancipate, and enlighten. For him, self-knowledge is the highest form of human achievement and the true goal of humanistic education. Casanova has plenty to say about how communities with no previous literary standing, and writers from those communities, have sought international validation.

All writers from countries that are remote from literary capitals refer, consciously or unconsciously, to a measure of time that takes for granted the existence of a literary present. Determined by the highest critical authorities, this moment confers legitimacy on certain books by including them among those works judged to be contemporary. Thus Octavio Paz [...] spoke of Latin Americans as “inhabitants of the suburbs of history [...] intruders who have arrived at the feast of modernity as the lights are about to be put out”—people who “were born when it was already late in history.” In his 1990 Nobel Prize acceptance speech—significantly titled “*La búsqueda del presente*” (*In Search of the Present*)—Paz described his discovery at a very young age of a curious dislocation of time, and his subsequent quest—poetic, historical, and aesthetic—for a present that his country’s separation from Europe (“a constant feature of our spiritual history”) had deprived him of contact with.

She quotes Paz as saying:

I must have been about six. One of my cousins, who was a little older, showed me a North American magazine with a photograph of soldiers marching down a wide

avenue, probably in New York. "They've returned from the war," she said [...]. But for me, the war had taken place in another time, not here and now [...]. I felt dislodged from the present. After that, time began to fracture more and more. And space, to multiply [...] I felt that my world was disintegrating, that the real present was somewhere else. My time [...] was a fictitious time [...] that was how my expulsion from the present began [...]. For us Spanish Americans this present was not in our own countries: it was the time lived by others—by the English, the French, the Germans. It was the time of New York, Paris, London.⁵⁵

Casanova also challenges the conventional 'shock of recognition' idea of influence, which imagines literary history as one soul giving voice to another across time and space. The soul may speak, but the international context is the reason it is heard. She, however, fails to observe how the appeal that Faulkner had for García Márquez had everything to do with the place Faulkner occupied in the global literary system, and with the one García Márquez has held as well. Even so, for the postcolonial writer, this means that he or she is *nobody*, unless, of course, he or she is published in Paris, London, or New York. For him or her to be *somebody*, he or she must first break through in the West—only then will he or she be celebrated in the rim of the world. And this despite the standard practice, which is to understand works of literature as products of a national tradition—French or English, say. But what happens when there is no tradition? The answer to the question posed here may be found in the *value* accruing to the postcolonial signature, which has been challenged on several fronts: its competence, location, and will to power (if any) over other kinds of resistances, many of which have been established for much longer than has postcolonial literature itself. It may also be clothed in another question: How can one arrive at an understanding of what has been called the 'colonial cringe' and at the same time be adept at analyzing the self-serving myths of the Colonial *Other*? Deprived of a stable heritage, the postcolonial writer has to pillage, to parody, to make it up as he or she goes along, so that experience and experiment go together like Laurel and Hardy. This reality escapes Casanova, who is otherwise enlightening in discussing how every ambitious writer from the margin aspires to be recognized for meeting the standards of the *métropole*. In her provocative, sustaining, and brilliantly constructed book, *The World Republic of Letters*, the *métropole* is Paris, the eternal centre of the literary universe (she is, after all, French); but it could be London or New York instead.

It is true that 'Paris' is the place where art and literature are always truly modern and up-to-date, and the standard by which the rest of the world measures its lateness. But Paris was also *the* locale of the first permanent display of the 'primitive.' One exhibition followed another in the famed city during the colonial period, and today questions abound: How can France, the

rest of Europe, and indeed the West as a whole come to terms with what human zoos say about their culture, mind-set, and collective subconscious? And how could it have happened? After all, ethnological exhibitions, where ‘strange natives’, mixed in with animals, were paraded in cages or enclosures to a sensation-seeking public, are proof of the gap between words (Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité) and deeds (pillage, annexation, appropriation)—all in the name of *le devoir civilisateur*.⁵⁶ This raises complex issues, which Casanova does not address, for a country that proclaims the equality of all human beings. The issue of Paris as a site for displaying ‘exotic’ peoples is a source of outrage for those of us who sit on the other side of the fence. We still remember the 1878 Exposition Universelle de Paris designed and led by the Orientalist Pascal Xavier Coste, an expert on Arab architecture, who had this to say on the Egyptian pavilion:

The *Okel* or the caravansary of Cairo, its ateliers of Arab locals, including embroiderers, weavers, turners and other trades in their boutiques, are well represented. The stables, the baths, the little mosque, the pavilion displaying models of the drawings and details of the panorama of the Suez canal, the general map of Egypt and other details are quite odd.⁵⁷

The degree of irony in the passage is quite telling, insofar as it shows a curious way of paying tribute to “ce petit bout d’Orient,” as he termed it.⁵⁸ The 1878 exhibition was followed by the 1889 and 1900 Expositions Universelles and the 1931 Exposition Coloniale (dubbed “Le Tour du Monde en un Jour”), which demonstrated once and for all the extent to which *les indigènes* were an accessory to the Empire, which could use them at will in order to further its own interests both at home and abroad.

One must also speak of the multiple shows that were mounted by the Ashanti Troupe at the Jardin Zoologique in 1895, Les Zoulous at Les Folies-Bergères in 1878, Raymond Roussel’s *Impressions of Africa* (1911), Josephine Baker as Fatou and/or Aïsha in *La Revue Nègre* designed by Waléry in 1925; Baker again in “Banana Skirt” in *Le Tumulte Noir* (1925), in films such as *Dans l’Ombre du Harem* and *Le Sheik dans l’Immense Sahara*, *Schéhérazade* (1927–28), “Black Birds” from *L’Art Vivant* (1929); Paul Robeson as Emperor Jones in 1933; the list goes on.⁵⁹ These displays of the subaltern, at times portrayed as noble savage and at others as primitive “scum,” bring to mind disquieting questions: How can the so-called enlightened Europeans come to terms with their history of racism, misrepresentation, and trade in human cargo? Doesn’t this raise complex issues for a country (and continent) that calls itself ‘modern’? Not at all; for if one were to consider the literature of the time, one would cite the following example: “Male and female Australian cannibals. The one and only settlement of this

strange and savage race, the most brutal ever brought out of the wild interior. The lowest order of humanity.”⁶⁰ That the identity of Western civilization is built on horrid images of the Native Other which, by virtue of their mirroring effect, enabled it to develop a portrait of itself and define its place in the world, is not new. It goes back to Ancient Greece with the division of the free population into ‘citizens’, ‘metics’ (resident aliens), and ‘barbarians’.⁶¹ The concept also informed the Crusades and the first phase of colonial exploration and conquest in the sixteenth century.⁶² However, before the nineteenth century these images of the Ethnic *Other* were not central to Western culture and do not seem to have penetrated deeply into the psyche of the European society. It was greed, Empire-building, and rivalry within Europe itself in a period of unprecedented expansion that created a very different political climate. Colonialism meant the need to dominate and domesticate distant lands and peoples, hence to create an ideological image of them.

The issue of Eurocentric theme parks, aided by the press, and how they became a backdrop to colonial conquest and domination which sought to ground European superiority in some definitive method, is tough going indeed. That the displays took place in Paris is no accident. After all, this is where the idea of *la mission civilisatrice* was born, nurtured, and acted upon. Colonialism meant the need to subjugate and domesticate distant lands and peoples, and thus to create an ideological image of them. Earlier representations had been ambivalent, coloured by myths such as Montaigne’s “cannibals” and later Rousseau’s “noble savages.”⁶³ They were replaced by an uncompromisingly negative view of exotic peoples as the colonial mechanism for degrading them through imagery was set in motion. The fate of the Savage *Other* and his or her domestic counterparts—helots, slaves, witches, whores, the poor, the insane, the mob, and those figures who have sometimes simultaneously combined the roles of alien and home-grown pariahs, particularly the Irish, the Jews, the Arabs, the Gypsies, and the Africans—was sealed forever. They were later placed in human zoos (if not in concentration camps), which was probably the most vicious means of creating prejudice. ‘See for yourself’, the crowd was told. ‘They look like savages, live like savages, think like savages. They therefore are savages’. It is an irony of history that those natives who travelled about Europe (and even crossed the Atlantic), often remaining away from their homelands for long periods, were coerced into taking part in these masquerades for money (albeit very little). It is dialectical to say that this apprehension is and is not confirmed.

Today, although Paris stands for a *cité-refuge* for some, it still is an inhospitable place for all those ‘postmodern savages’ from the Third World who sought recognition of one kind or another. For centuries, meeting the

standard of the city meant escaping the provincialism of one's own culture—the constraints imposed by the Church or Mosque, or the state, or the Party, which all desire literature to serve their interests—and making art for the sake of art. James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, James Baldwin and Richard Wright, Tahar Ben Jelloun and Milan Kundera, Gertrude Stein and Danilo Kiš, Patrick Chamoiseau and Édouard Glissant—all went to Paris in order to escape the fate of being national writers. They assimilated, not to Frenchness (Joyce and Beckett, although they lived in Paris for much of their lives, had no interest in French literary life), but to the universal modern idea of the artist. For the rest (writers and artists who originated in the Southern Hemisphere), Paris, unlike London, the scope of whose cultural jurisdiction depended mainly on its stock of literary capital and the extent of its linguistic territory,

never took an interest in writers from its post-colonial territories; or, more precisely, it long despised and mistreated them as a species of extreme provincials, too similar to be celebrated as exotic foreigners but too remote to be considered worthy of interest. France has no tradition of cultural consecration on purely linguistic grounds, and what is called *francophonie* is only a timid political substitute for the influence that Paris once exerted (and to some extent still exerts today) in symbolic terms. Indeed, the few national literary prizes that have been awarded to writers from the former French colonies or from the margins of the Francophone area have been motivated by transparently neo-imperial considerations.⁶⁴

Even so, Casanova, who drives the point home, falls short in noting how, today, the strategy for acceptance has shifted from assimilation to differentiation, and differentiation means *not* being modern, chic, or even Parisian for that matter. As a result, the challenge is to combine elements of indigen-ousness with those that metropolitan readers recognize as 'literary'. A sub-national novel—say, *La Nuit sacrée*, winner of the 1987 Prix Goncourt—must be what James English shrewdly calls "world-readable."⁶⁵ By this standard, Tahar Ben Jelloun's saga fits the bill, for it is a hybrid of postmodernist heteroglossia (multiple and high-low discursive registers, mixed genres, stories within stories), premodernist narrative (conventional morality, the simulation of an oral storytelling tradition), and postcolonial tale (raw, self-reflexive, experimental, and scathingly critical of issues pertaining to culture, politics, and the society it seeks to paint). In fact, it is a prototype of world literature: a trauma-and-recovery story, with magical-realist elements, involving abuse and family dysfunction, castration and excision, malaise and mutilation. The mélange of these incongruous elements plus a high level of technical and intellectual sophistication makes a pretty accurate generic description of a novel by Toni Morrison—*Beloved*.⁶⁶ Such works of art are ul-

timately more treasured because they represent more cultural capital, than, say, *Jealousy* or *The Information*. As a result, we attach a high *value* to *Beloved* and *La Nuit sacrée* because they speak directly to us (readers) and, in doing so, challenge the system in which they were produced, circulated, and ingested. To figure out how this event comes about and, indeed, *happens* is to be aware of their worth, which is determined by all the things that make them different from a *Mansfield Park* or a *Kim*, for example. It is a relational system: the *value* of a cultural good is relative to the *value* of another cultural good insofar as each one defines its own reality—creating its own consumers, and market for them, by sheer act of will. That most of us on planet Earth deny that competition and rivalry have anything to do with the esteem that we, as individuals, confer on a particular book or painting or song or movie or toy does not mean that others are wrong. Our denial is just one more thing that needs to be explained.

III

If there is much in *The Fabric of Subcultures* to stir the reader, there is also quite a bit to lend him or her comfort, insofar as the book is the site of interrelations between the Rest and the West. Its poetics, too, assumes this double movement where reflections on its inability to isolate itself, to participate in the flow of social life, and to engage in other forms of resistances are clearly set. The method does away with certain dialectics; it depoliticizes the tools of creation. What is left aside is the insight of reading the postcolonial signature, which rests upon an historical fact: the unearthing of Western prejudice and typecasting that manifested itself in displays and exhibitions in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth century is a stark illustration of Fredric Jameson's dictum that we may forget about history, but history, for better or worse, will not forget about us.⁶⁷ In any case, once one begins to spell out why one wants to promote a certain critique, it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid a certain frame of order. The argument I develop in the book does precisely that: it rightly sets its face against the very concept of eurocentrism by re-affirming the view that

The irony of colonialism is that it cannot help flirting with cultural relativism at just the point where it needs to affirm the superior worth of its own way of doing things. Since this includes plundering other cultures, it is unavoidably confronted with the scandalous truth that these cultures are at once profoundly alien and in ostensibly good working order. Indeed, in order to impose its political rule colonialism often enough relies on the fact that its underlings have their own coherent values and institutions. Genuine savages could not be governed, since they would lack all concept of authority and subjection. The fact that you can conquer another society suggests

that you shouldn't, since for this to be possible the natives must be sufficiently like us to render it morally dubious. If, on the other hand, they are incapable of our own level of civility, you can use this fact to justify exploiting them, but will be forced to give up trying to rationalize that exploitation as a part of a civilizing process.⁶⁸

I hasten to add that one of the functions of telling the tale is not to bring cultural difference under the sway of Western identity without thereby abolishing the exoticism which made the Berbers or the Tartars worth writing about in the first place. For if there is much talk of *value* in postcolonial writing today, it is not just because it is the product of colonialism; it is also an attempt to imagine a condition beyond it. Such *value* (if it exists) is much concerned with the harm done by privilege and taste, by the assumption (and reality) that it is acceptable to finance the pleasures of the rich by cheating the poor, and by the failure of our society to understand that writing should take its place among other legitimate human interests such as social justice, the equitable distribution of wealth, and the protection of the environment. Modern attitudes to these and other related matters are based on selfish fantasies and expressed in self-serving, affected singsong. For this reason alone, one must begin at the beginning. Since we attach so much importance to the idea of privilege, what, in fact, constitutes an ordinary work of art—*For Bread Alone*, say, written by a no less *ordinary* writer, Mohammed Chokri, a dilettante of sorts? It is a newfangled notion—nobody could have asked such a question before the birth of Pop Culture. Since then, it has been a major cause of trouble, much of it stemming from Immanuel Kant—a man who spent his life in a backwater of East Prussia, cared little for the common people, and knew nothing about them. No wonder Bourdieu takes him to task and opts instead, in his *Méditations pascaliennes*, for Pascal, who declares what is patently untrue—namely, that the beautiful may be so called only if the speaker believes that everybody else shares his or her opinion, and also that standards of beauty are absolute and universal. From the same unreliable source came the notion that objects of art must be of no practical use, provoke no emotion, and offer no sensuous pleasure. The beautiful can give pleasure only as a symbol of the morally good. After all, taste is a personal matter. Not so, Bourdieu would reply. For him, the site of the dispute is Culture, where taste means one's observance of a code of manners, but since the code was not written down as law, it permits a certain freedom in practice. One can gain a reputation for good taste, like the French *mondains*, not by adhering to the code, but by infringing it with élan and style. Besides, some people may have good taste as a gift of nature or inheritance rather than having acquired it the hard way—by education, experiencing, and comparing a wide range of objects and events. "I would have a man know everything," the

French nobleman Antoine Gombaud said, in a passage Bourdieu quotes in *La Misère du monde*, “and yet, by his manner of speaking, not be convinced of having studied.”⁶⁹ Most people have to acquire taste by what Kant calls the “slow effort to improve the mind.”⁷⁰ Taste manifests itself mainly by being disgusted by the ‘good’ taste of others: one’s own tastes quickly come to feel instinctive, whether we think we have them by nature or have arrived at them by hard slog. Judgements of taste, then, do not come under the regime of morality or law.⁷¹

On this view, writers and artists from the periphery whose work satisfies the Western requirements of taste are called “évolués.”⁷² The rest of us are nobodies, or ordinary, or common, or “cancers,” as Jacques Prévert once put it. There may even be a sense in which this devaluation is the postcolonial’s personal alternative to the rather less attractive totality that goes by the name of globalization. Aimé Césaire understood its importance best when he co-founded *Les Étudiants Nègres*, which was born out of an act of desperation he describes thus:

One day as I was crossing a street in Paris not far from La Place d’Italie, a guy shouted to me from his car: “Hey, you nigger!” He was French. I shouted back: “This nigger says ‘fuck off!’” The following day I suggested to Senghor that we and Damas edit a newspaper called *L’étudiant noir*. Leopold replied: “I wouldn’t go with that. We should call it ‘*Les Étudiants Nègres*’.” It hit us like an insult. Then I decided to deal with it head on. And so was born “*négritude*,” out of provocation.⁷³

It is strange that this farrago of xenophobia and unsubstantiated assertion of superiority that Césaire speaks about so eloquently should have achieved a position of dominance in Western thought, leading to a kind of anti-humanism, the thrust of which lies today in the assault on higher education, as witness the diatribe launched by the Conservative Right in America, who continue to engage in academic cross-dressing. Deprived of their stagecraft, they face the full frontal reality of the idea of ‘Culture’ itself—the very concept of whose mastery we thought we had dissolved in the language of signifying practices and social formation. This is not our chosen agenda; the terms of the debate have been set for us by Lynn Cheney/Lieberman Inc. But in the midst of the “culture wars and culture whores,” to use a phrase from Homi Bhabha, and the manoeuvres of this canon we can hardly hide behind the apron of aporia and protest historically that there is nothing outside the text. Wherever we look these days we find ourselves gazing into the eyes of a recruiting officer—sometimes he looks like Czar Bennett, at other times she looks like Dame Cheney, sometimes like Article 215 of the PATRIOT Act, at other times like HR 509—who stares at us and says ‘Western Civ. Needs You!’ At the same time, a faint little voice within us also whispers, ‘Cultural

Theory Needs You Too!’ For what is at issue today is not the essentialized Arnoldian notion of ‘culture’ as an architectonic assemblage of the Hebraic and the Hellenic, but how can we “maintain the ideal of a world culture, while admitting it is something we cannot *imagine*,” as Eliot notes, adding: “We can only conceive it as the logical term of the relations between cultures.”⁷⁴ In the midst of the assailment on higher education we find ourselves up in arms once more against conservative misrepresentation of what goes on in college classrooms. It would be pleasant to linger over these and other matters and to tease out the doctrines they illustrate, but what finally interests me about them can be summed up with one case in point. The intention of Cheney/Lieberman Inc., meant to silence those of us who do not toe the line or dare to cross some (in)visible boundary, lies at bottom in the effort to curtail the range of what can and cannot be said to a rote of patriotic discourse—cheerleading rather than serious thought. This is, in fact, the naked thesis of *Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism* by former Secretary of Education—and author, at least by his own claim, of all the Virtues—William Bennett. In his book we learn that the problems not only of the current moment but also of the last half-century stem from the cultural ascendancy of those “who are unpatriotic” but who, unfortunately, are also the “most influential among us.” The phrase “among us” is a peachy illustration of the double game Bennett plays throughout his narrative. On one reading, the “diversity mongers [and] multiculturalists,” mistaken though they may be in their views, are part of “us”; that is, they are citizens, contributing to a national dialogue in ways that might provoke Bennett’s disagreement but contributing nevertheless in the spirit of deliberative democracy.⁷⁵ On another reading, however, these cultural relativists are “among us” as a fifth column might be among us, servants of an alien power who prosecute their subversive agenda under the false colours of citizenship. That the second is the reading Bennett finally intends (though he would like to get moral credit for the first) is made clear when he charges these peddlers of “relativism” with *unpatriotism*, and in that instant defines a patriot as someone who has the same views as himself. It is one thing to believe, and believe fervently, that someone has got something wrong; it is quite another to believe that the someone you think to be wrong is by virtue of that error *unpatriotic*. Perhaps Bennett thinks that those of us who sit on the opposite side from him ought to study the Book of Bennett, rehearse its lessons, and recite its values, lest they be drummed out of the republic of letters he presides over and cast into the wilderness.⁷⁶

Even so, what Czar Bennett and the rest of the Right are at pains to demonstrate is that the circulation of a cultural good in the “market [...] of gen-

eral intellectual commerce” lies in the complexity of its multiple layers, which goes after the claim that for “high art” there always lurks this assumption that what I feel is more valuable than what you feel. Powerless to enter into the inner experience of others, we are all barred from valid comment on any claim many of us make about the status of this or that object as a work of art. Anything can be a work of art. (Andy Warhol’s reproductions of familiar everyday objects are good examples of what I have in mind.) What makes them works of art is that someone thinks of them as works of art. On this view, there can be no rational grounds for believing that ‘high art’ is superior to mass or popular or ordinary art. The maintenance of the pernicious myth—high art does you good morally—costs money. One can imagine the well-dressed audience leaving the opera-house after an evening of pleasure, made possible by colossal injections of other people’s money, and languidly returning to their chauffeurs, gardeners, maids, and other unlettered characters. All this wickedness and folly can be balanced by the conception of the ordinary fostered by Walter Benjamin, C.L.R. James, and Pierre Bourdieu. It is also fair to add that what really infuriates most of us who are “ordinary” or “sans distinction,” as Bourdieu perceptively put it, is the coexistence in our world of a class that can afford the already heavily subsidized seats at Carnegie Hall or Covent Garden and the myriad fellow humans who live on less than two dollars a day. Insofar as we condone this state of affairs, high art seems to be making us worse, not better. I agree with Bourdieu that having a taste for art is more a mark of class than anything else, although one has to remember that working-class people have been known to enjoy *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, and that some middle-class folk admire *La Bohème*. But for Bourdieu (and for the rest of us, ordinary people), the most important question is still the apparent lack of connection between sensitivity to art and sensitivity to human suffering.⁷⁷ In this sense, his view brings to mind a comment made by Marghanita Laski, who asked how many people who have achieved ecstatic experiences through art have been induced to do charity work that involves “personal contact with people” who are “physically disgusting.”⁷⁸ Probably very few.

In addition, if art can play a role in bettering our condition as humans, we must embrace it with open arms. I can think of one example, but there are others. Drama and painting in prisons have been shown to have therapeutic results and consequential social benefits. More generally, we could rethink our own assumptions in the light of what is known of other cultures. There is ample anthropological evidence that art can be communal, uncompetitive, accessible to everybody. We might try to think of ourselves as what we in fact are—lonely left-over hunter-gatherers who long for community and

common sense. We might get a much more helpful response to our loneliness from soccer (an ordinary game compared to polo or golf), though there the male bonding, valuable in principle, sometimes ends in violence. The very fact that Bourdieu chose to deal with what he aptly called “ordinary art” makes sense. It is the only one capable of reasoning and the only one that can criticize itself or, indeed, criticize anything; it is also the only art capable of moralizing. It is no accident that he settles on Conrad’s *Victory* as an example. Lena’s vision strikes a blow for ‘low’ popular art, and for the masses who have no knowledge of great literature, and it shows they are capable of supreme courage and pure, selfless love. Unlike the figure of the maniac with the bomb and the shattered body of Razumov in *The Secret Agent*, Lena’s courage can impinge on the heroism of ordinary life as well as on its commonplace tales of sorrow and disappointment, and its unexceptional pleasures. In the same vein, Bourdieu has a yearning for the *utile*.⁷⁹ For him, whatever may be said about literature-snobbery and the obscenity of spending millions on paintings (*Les Iris*, say, by Vincent van Gogh, who could not even feed himself), while around the world the poor are starving, experiences of art and literature are not uncommon; they may contain an element of self-congratulation, even of guilt at the thought of their inaccessibility to the deprived. One can ponder on the transactions with poems, paintings, and music that involve the unaided imagination, as witness the kind of music created out of the figure of the *tympanum*—a word that denotes both the drums that make menacing, martial sounds and the fragile whorls of the ear that receive these rhythms. “It has been observed,” Derrida wrote in the gorgeously elusive “Tympan,” “particularly in birds, that precision of hearing is in direct proportion to the obliqueness of the tympanum. The tympanum squints.”⁸⁰ Following Derrida, one can reinvent the *tympanum* on a smaller, trickier scale. The performance would look something like a black splat—resembling an ink-dot that might be the base of an exclamation point—which rests coolly alongside a black miniature cyclone that could be made of wood, fiber-glass, and paint. The viewer then sees his image flattened, pushed back, and whooshed into the bottomless quagmire of the untitled. It is impossible to come away from reading Derrida on the *tympanum* without feeling that the high-flown metaphysics of this globally lauded philosopher-critic of the “presence of absence” have been subsumed, intentionally or not, by baser concerns—that is to say, a graphically rendered bodily anxiety that makes each of our performances a sickening, visceral punch in the breadbasket.

The place of the imagination in the work of reader and writer is therefore to be taken into account at all costs.⁸¹ To grasp the argument developed by Carey, and to try as I do to suggest that my book sets out to articulate the

conceptual imperative and political constituency of matters such as the Self, the Other, the Sublime, Authority, the Unconscious, is no easy feat. Indeed, for at its root, the book springs from a new way of seeing and/or telling, and, in doing so, centres not only on what Thomas Browne in *Religio Medici* called the pursuit of reason into *O altitudo*, a love of losing oneself in a mystery but also on the ordinariness and “indistinctness” of the global, whether it be metropolitan couscous, Aboriginal cricket, *banlieue* soccer, or ‘postmodern savages’ such as Kincaid, Darwish, Zidane, Dao, Derrida. For this reason alone, it wants *everything*, insofar as everything is a naked thought that hits home. Kant says “everything” exists only in our mind, attended by a movement of pleasure and pain that throws itself back and forth in us.⁸² To this claim one is tempted to say nothing, which is not, I think, the opposite of everything. Even so, my intention (and method) in raising the problematic of the poetics of subculture in the West will, I hope, remind the reader of how hard it is to cultivate the wavering shade of the postcolonial signature merely for its *value* as my earliest glimpse of any circumstance of the colonial order as well as disorder face each other head-on.

Or, to put the matter in simple terms, much of this negotiation with the postcolonial is intended to provide me with an auspicious background for an inquiry into the relevance of literature as a *public institution* in contemporary life as Derrida understood the formula.⁸³ It also indicates how rich and how contested either one is. My argument is therefore designed to yield a comprehensible thesis on the matters I discuss while presenting the reader with yet another question: Can it be true that literature alone has such powers, such an obvious appeal to both imagination and reason, on the one hand, and yet be *ordinary* and distinct, on the other? Maybe, in that we experience literature from the other side of the looking-glass. Of course, as Bourdieu would agree, books are read on *this* side of the looking-glass: the *margin* where the Real Thing happens, as Lacan would have formulated it. Needless to add that literature is conventionally taught as a person-to-person aesthetic experience: the writer (novel, play, or poem) addressing the reader. Instructors must deny the economics of cultural *value* in order to preserve the aesthetics. But, once we are outside the classroom, how rigidly are these conventions adhered to? How many people today really imagine ‘art’ and/or ‘literature’ as a privileged category, exempt from the machinations of the marketplace?” Louis Mendard asks and answers with equal aplomb:

The latter has always been a theme of literature: *Tristram Shandy* reflects on its own status as a cultural good, *The Clouds* by Aristophanes is a satire on literary competition. Since the 1960s, the constructed nature of the art experience has been one of advanced art’s chief preoccupations. Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s-soup-can paintings

are all about art as commodity. The frenzy of prize-creation in the 1970s and 1980s that James English describes with flair in *The Economy of Prestige* may have been a panicky middlebrow reaction to the demystification of culture that was already under way, or it may have been a symptom and agent of that demystification. At any rate, it is difficult to see it as a reinforcement of the ideal of autonomous art. That ideal disappeared a long time ago.⁸⁴

It is precisely Mendard's strength as a critic that his unguardedness can be as illuminating as is his perspicacity about the subject. For, as he in his tolerance remarks, and surely rightly, if you aim for a standard of perfection, that standard has vanished. In point of fact, it has become a fancy, a chimera.

This, I believe, is where the relevance of fathering a counter-narrative is essential to the world we live in; a world of heightened animosity, exacerbated by the conflict between what have been called the 'West' and 'Islam', labels I have long found both "misleading and more suitable for the mobilization of collective passions than for lucid understanding unless they are deconstructed analytically and critically."⁸⁵ Such counter-narrative must take into account the massive role the subculture plays if it is to make sense at all. This is an estimable task in itself, of course, but one that by its own inventive energy sets the tone for what is to come: resistance. In this sense, what distinguishes the present book from other endeavours on the subject is the resolute displacement from the theoretical to the imaginative, from the literary to the philosophical, from the cultural to the subcultural.⁸⁶ Far from confirming a certain prejudice that the periphery is averse to abstract thinking, this displacement springs from historical conditions. Among them is the concern of marginal intelligentsia with immediate political struggle rather than the *longue durée* of theoretical reflection. It is thus that there is no pathos in its way of telling, no reverberating tremolo of complaint. Censured and censored, the Arab (Adjani), the Berber (Zidane), the Jew (Derrida), the Indian (Rushdie), the Palestinian (Darwish), the dissident Chinese (Bei Dao), the Caribbean (Chamoiseau, Phillips, Kincaid), and other 'new barbarians' have been made to look, at best, like writers from the Fourth Estate. For a long time, even their admirers were reluctant to press their claims. The contingency of truth, the incoherence of the Self, the limitations of Enlightenment: their preoccupations *are* postcolonial.⁸⁷ Their multiple narratives, too, in which events are told from multiple perspectives, and oral tradition confronts the authority of print—are subversive and painful.

There is also a case to be made for their raw (almost primitive) talent. To grasp the limits of the claim is to distinguish between two categories of such writers: for some, reality seems a secret novelty; for others, it is a shared habit. In the *first* category—which would include Derrida, Darwish, Rushdie, nothing is entirely recognizable, everything seems to have been burnt out of

recognition by the difficulty of its entry into the world. This is the unbearable strangeness they offer, and which we enjoy. In the *second* category (Caryl Phillips, Patrick Chamoiseau, Zinédine Zidane, David Dabydeen, Jamaica Kincaid, Bei Dao), reality is born in an open ward. It makes its appeal to a known world. It is not that the writer's reality is necessarily familiar to the reader, but it is familiar to its characters—Beloved, say, in *Beloved* or Zahra in *La Nuit sacrée* or Xuela in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. We learn to judge oddity by seeing it through them. Unsparing in their treatment of their early life, they cut grotesque figures in the narrative and/or poetic line. In the end, they find that they no longer know how to shape some of the characters and have to cobble their missive together with an incomplete alphabet. The negative, as T.S. Eliot has it in his essay on Dante in *The Sacred Wood*, “is the more importunate.”⁸⁸ Which perhaps explains why their narrative remains a challenge to taste: either their work is too rich, or our palates are too delicate.

Like many other postcolonial writers, Kincaid and Co. tell of their experiences with one foot in the present-day West and the other in the lost world of their childhood: the Third-World cultures with their languages, scents, coasts, floras, faunas, sounds, noises, humours, food, games; with their Indian, Caribbean, African, Jewish, Arab, Berber influences. Among them, one finds writers for whom lost homelands and hyphenated identities appear inspiring, even funny—Salman Rushdie, for example; but for others, perhaps inevitably, some of their experiences seem to have been sustaining, to say the least. The regrets and guilt of exile, the divided loyalties of colonial education, prejudice, and alienation in a West that is more than ever poised to keep them in the cold: these are the constant themes of their works, along with a nostalgic and sometimes lyrical attempt to re-create the life of ‘back home’. To a certain extent, the strangeness of their new life “intensifies the sense of a life left behind, of people casually and thoughtlessly abandoned, a place and a way of being lost to [them] [...] for ever, as it seemed at the time.”⁸⁹ Most of their works, appropriately enough, are meditations on loss and abandonment conveyed in the form of a quest that can be summarized in one set of questions: How to bring a locale to life without pandering to cheap exoticism? How to be political without descending into agitprop? How to write for a metropolitan audience while remaining loyal to the world left behind and described? Even basic technical questions: such as which *P’tit Nègre*, patois, *Queenjee*’s English, Ebonics, *Charabia*, words to translate, and which to leave to the reader? On the whole, they make these choices wisely, and tactfully. And, though it may be difficult, there are rewards such as coming to the realization that their own stories, of being from one place

and living in another, are worth telling, in part because they are of their and our time.

IV

In much the same way as there is no literary work without a reader, so power lives only in the response of its victims. The same goes for the argument I make in this book—that the logic of cultural exchange of goods between the First World and the Third World is both lopsided and asymmetrical. For not only coffee, cotton, sugar but also the postcolonial writer, Aboriginal cricketer, and soccer player obey the logic of difference in *value* between seller and buyer for what has come to be called cultural capital.⁹⁰ As Marx noted in *Grundrisse*, “the tendency to create the world market is directly given in the concept of capital. Every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome”⁹¹—indeed, insofar as, structurally, capitalism must break down its own boundary to avoid collapse. This it does by seeking new markets. In this sense, the periphery has played a massive role in the formation and success of capitalism, because it is *there* that the *surplus value* could become profit. It has also provided new sources of capital, in terms both of cheap labour and of raw materials, that have made it easy for European (and now American) industries to further expand their power, influence, and wealth. Robina Akther, a factory seamstress, drives the point home: “If you made any mistakes or fell behind on your goal, they beat you up.”⁹² Akther is one of 189,000 Bangladeshi workers employed by Wal-Mart in Dhaka to sew pockets on the backs of women’s pants. She earns thirteen cents an hour for a fourteen-hour day, has a target of 120 pairs an hour, and has ten days off a year. Her quest for survival leaves us with the overpowering sense that to tell a story in its awfulness and complexity—a story very largely of defeat—is to live to fight another day. To each case its particular woes, all told in a looping narrative that starts at the end and goes back to the beginning—the trademark of each postcolonial signature. At the same time, the signature refuses to fasten down positions—North/South, Self/Other, global/local, transgressor/victim—or assign virtues and vices according to which side a storyteller is on. This has led it to be commodified in so many ways—as writer (Jamaica Kincaid), soccer player (Zinédine Zidane), exotic dish (couscous), philosopher-critic (Derrida)—to suit Western taste. In this respect, *The Fabric of Subcultures* attempts to give as good as it gets: it sees that the problem is to steer between a break so radical that we could scarcely recognize ourselves on the other side of it, and those images which mirror our desires only because they are bound to a painful past and/or present. In doing so, it accomplishes a tradeoff