

## THE SUBALTERN ETHNOGRAPHER: BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES THROUGH AMITAV GHOSH'S WRITING

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Back in 1988, Clifford Geertz investigated into the ideological and legal transformation of the colonial subjects into sovereign citizens in the post-colonial era and the implications of the new order of things for the anthropological science, which for centuries served imperialism as one of its main ideological bases. Once the role of the ethnographer as objective witness to the Other was discredited, the very existence of anthropology as a realist science began to stumble in both its rhetorical and mimetic dimensions. This was due to both the emergence of an audience reluctant to continue to abide by the Self/Other dichotomy sanctioned by Orientalism and the dismantling of scientific descriptive language as mere discourse.

With this difficult background, voices such as Amitav Ghosh's emerge to re-locate the position of the anthropologist from the inside. If, as Geertz suggests, anthropology is more compartmentalised than ever in the post-modern world (1988: 140), Ghosh's self-imposed aim is to minimise the impact of such divisions through his double commitment as a researcher and novelist. Born in Calcutta in 1956, his training as a historian and anthropologist was soon transformed into a professional interest in creative writing, which bore his novel *The Circle of Reason* as first fruit in 1986. His current position as Visiting Professor in the Department of English and American Literature at Harvard is also proof of Ghosh's tendency to blur the boundaries between the ethnographic study and the literary narrative.

In his introduction to *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces*, a collection of miscellaneous articles and reviews, Ghosh recalls the time when he was writing *In an Antique Land*. Variousy regarded as a travel book, an ethnography and a memoir, its text delves into the life of a twelfth-century Jewish slave, and it also relates the experience of the author in Nashawy, the small Egyptian village where he pursued his quest, as well as the results of the research itself. Through his daily interaction with the locals, he discovers the strong social component that they ascribe to work:

Verbs denoting certain calibrations of social relationships [i.e., ‘co-operate’, ‘help so-and-so’] superseded verbs that referred to technical acts [i.e., ‘harvest rice’, ‘pick cotton’] —an order of preference that was directly contrary to my expectations. (Ghosh 2002: ix)

Definitely, work and social interaction reveal themselves as connected in the minds of the villagers. The activity of work, seen in the context of human relationships as fostering bonds of cooperation and friendship, is reflected in everyday language in a metonymic fashion, so that the linguistic concept of social activity, i.e., the context in which workers submerge themselves into their duties, acts as a referent to the productive act of working as a whole.

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This interest in replacing mimesis with metonymy in ethnographic description condenses the main aim of Ghosh’s project, as can be detected in both his research and literary production. Well aware of the weak verisimilitude of the anthropological representation of far-away cultures, Ghosh proposes instead a strategy based on metonymic threading which allows a connection to be made between apparently unconnected cultural instances under a single referent shared by all of them. At the same time, there is a thrilling irony in all his novels: it is very difficult to find a common string that threads them together. None of his plots seems to resemble one another, Ghosh never recycles his stories. And yet their parallelism lies in their total absorption in resemblance, for what they defy is the building of compartments and classifications to manipulate reality. They are all fuelled by the same drive: the art of establishing connections.

Without considering Geertz’s remarks on the current state of anthropology, it may seem that Ghosh, as an ethnographer, is faced with the unmanageable challenge of interpreting an unfamiliar culture and rendering it intelligible with claims to objectivity, a hardly attainable ethical task though classically inherent to anthropological practice. Notwithstanding, the writer adopts the position of a committed subaltern researcher,<sup>1</sup> unwilling to go into the realm of intellectual fabrication that fed the ideology of imperialist anthropologists. This is achieved through his search for connections and analogies away from dominant discourses so as to renew the role of ethnography in the era of ‘posts-’. *In an Antique Land*,

the non-fictional work from which the essay "The Imam and the Indian" is excerpted is sustained by this same rationale. The book, which was published in 1992 in London by Granta Books, is not easily classifiable within the frames of any category as far as genre is concerned. Frequent reflections about his research and his life in Nashawy are scattered throughout, giving it a metafictional air which should strike any reader looking for aseptic scientific distancing. At the same time, Ghosh mingles the ethnographic mode with the biographic one, the historical account of the life of the slave, the actual object of his research, with annotations from his own personal diary during the time he spent in Egypt. This overlapping of genres is definitely a strategy that Ghosh adopts to question the too-readily assumed construction of scientific discourse as objective, while transferring his thematic interest in connections to the level of genre and literariness.

Using Hayden White's distinction between a "discourse that narrates" and "a discourse that narrativizes", Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* can be ascribed to the first category as it is "a discourse that openly adopts a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it", in clear contrast with "a discourse that feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself as a story" (White 1987: 2). The examples White gives to illustrate this opposition —Tocqueville, Burckhardt— all have in common their reluctance as historians to conform to the traditional patterns of narrativity, especially those having to do with chronological order and the observance of a well-defined structure concluding in a closed ending. Ghosh is similar in this respect, taking a step further: he also problematises the question of narrativity, even though he uses a different strategy. Instead of refusing to tell a story altogether, he chooses to narrate —and not to narrativise— not by avoiding any specific genre, storytelling in this case, but by mixing up genres so as to destabilise the popular assumption that truth should be conveyed through a single uniform narrative form. He replaces the pro-historical, anti-hi/storical dissidence of these earlier practitioners of history with a structurally multi-layered approach to historical account that allows for multiple vehicles of expression —the ethnography, the personal memoir, fragments from his own PhD thesis— while privileging none in particular, thus calling into question the omniscient descriptive precision of each one of them.

But the practice of challenging the linear narrativity of historiography for the sake of it would be extremely self-referential as well as intellectually sterile. Urbashi Barat has commented on the underlying rationale behind the use of this technique, drawing attention to "a corresponding rejection of the Western/Christian notion of "progress", especially in terms of an inevitable linear or chronological process "that is at the centre of this canonical conception of historical and scientific knowledge" (2001: 125). Ghosh refers precisely to this "Christianising impulse" of historical manipulation when asked about the nationalist instrumentalisation of

historiography in an interview in *Kunapipi* in 1997, while at the same time he mentions *In an Antique Land* as a breakthrough in his writing career and an eye-opener for his own perception of history and his role as a researcher:

I wouldn't have believed this before I wrote *In an Antique Land*, but once you see the ways in which history has become really a kind of battleground in the Middle East—well, not even a battleground; no-one even disputes the boundaries. Egypt is not interested in the Geniza documents and Western Jews see the fact of Egyptian Jewry as an aberration, an anomaly. Jewish history is profoundly tragic because it's a history that has been completely invented within the German academy in the nineteenth century. It comes out of the German scholasticism, and out of a pressure to systematize history; it's essentially a Christianizing impulse. More than two-thirds of the Geniza consists of magical documents and amulets, and none of that is ever dealt with. I think it's just regarded as non-Jewish. Similarly, all the Sufi stuff is traced back to a kind of proto-Jewish mysticism. I mean, the very fact of that interchange with Islam is completely disregarded. Increasingly, there are scholars working on this stuff. But Israel conceives of itself in such a Europeanizing way—basically that model of German scholasticism has become what Judaism is today. You can just see today the erasure of what existed in the Middle Ages—of what that period represented. (Silva and Tickell 1997: 175)

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Just as Ghosh is deeply interested in colonial history and orientalist ethnography as narrative constructions serving nationalist purposes, so his choice of spatial setting and temporal frame is highly relevant inasmuch as he describes a story of a multicultural society in medieval times. Pointing to the fact that cosmopolitanism in pre-colonial contexts has long been disregarded as mere myth, particularly in the case of Middle-Eastern history, he unearths the forgotten life of the Jewish slave Bomma, which had been carefully hidden for centuries by anthropology and history in their imperialist versions, the very sciences that he cultivates as a scholar. At the same time, this choice of setting entails a demystification of hybridity as an eminently post-colonial phenomenon, which is an added value to *In an Antique Land* in a time when the literary arena is pervaded with narrative recreations of multiculturalism almost exclusively set in post-colonial times. Padmini Mongia has drawn attention to this issue, pointing out that

by offering a glimpse into the cosmopolitan, humane circuit of relations prevalent in medieval India up to the moment when European dominance via colonialism enters its history, Ghosh poses a postcolonial challenge via the pre-colonial [...]. Although European colonialism and imperialism have been written as having a historical inevitability to them, Ghosh's precolonial world questions that inevitability. The world he creates reveals the possibility of futures and histories other than the one we have come to regard as inevitable. (2003: 84-85)

Apart from destabilising post-colonialism's monopoly of multiculturalism, Ghosh not only rejects the inevitability that conforms the basis of the civilising mission undertaken by European colonialism, but also the sense of moral obligation and ethical commitment that has been traditionally associated with it. "*La mission civilisatrice*", as Said characterised it in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), is also justified by duty, in the sense that the Western master, as the sole custodian of truth, is obliged to the colonial through the task of enlightenment, which is considered as a mission, an act of intellectual charity towards the completion of a globally civilised world. Said also notes that this system of power and knowledge, of "culture and imperialism", is characterised by "the ability to be in far-flung places, to learn about other people, to codify and disseminate knowledge, to characterise, transport, install, and display instances of other cultures [...] and above all to rule them" (Said 1994: 130). Such imperialist efforts, which take on encyclopedic dimensions, are promoted by "the rise of ethnography", whose role is actively complicit with the colonialist enterprise.

This awareness of ethnography as a tool for past imperial conquests leads Ghosh to reshape the role of the ethnographer that he himself plays in *In an Antique Land*, displacing the omniscient, narrativising voice of the traditional historian from the centre to a shared position within a polyphonic discourse alongside other voices—real-life Others such as the imam, the peasant, and the slave—that would have been traditionally considered as marginal, and which are recognised as valid as his own. This is Ghosh's own way to "write back to the centre", by questioning the ethnographer's centrality underlying anthropological ontology. As a non-Western secular scholar, Ghosh is only too aware of the need to abolish the dominant dichotomy dividing East and West upon which Orientalism is based. He is the subaltern ethnographer that lays claim to his own agency in the construction of scientific knowledge.

This new perspective of ethnographic practice not only replaces the duty of the ethnographer to the civilising mission with a commitment to the agency of the subaltern, but also demystifies the image of the colonial subject as a naive uncultured individual in desperate need of Western enlightenment and guidance. This is further illustrated in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, an alternative history of malaria research where the renowned Sir Ronald Ross is miraculously led to the discovery of the malaria vector by a secret society of subaltern "researchers". Through the thick fabric of a science-fiction narrative, Ghosh unravels a story of scientific knowledge in which traditional roles are shifted, with official authority acting as a mere instrument in the subaltern's hands. Accordingly, the possibility of accessing research objects through pure knowledge is revealed as an illusion under the premise that "in knowing something, you've already changed what you think you know so you don't really know it at all: you only know its history" (1996: 105).

As in the case with *In an Antique Land*, the merit of *The Calcutta Chromosome* resides in its multi-layered nature. Taking the structure and plotting of a science-fiction novel as a basis, the author questions again the identification of knowledge and science through the fictive recreation of a “counter science” whereby the civil-service scientist Ronald Ross is conducted throughout his research by the subaltern Other. Again the omniscient angle usually reserved for the scholar is moved to marginality and the natives Laakhan and Mangala are raised to positions of power as manipulators of knowledge. In this sense, Mathur describes *The Calcutta Chromosome* as a “postcolonial science fiction that provides a re-visioning of science not only through an active blurring of the lines between science, social science, and fiction, but also by elaborating the contours of a ‘counter science’ that offers a fundamental epistemological challenge to the dominant discourse of science” (2004: 13).

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Ghosh manages to elude the easy dichotomy between science and magic, associated respectively with the Western and Eastern breach, by devising a plot in which the final results of scientific research are directed and produced by the subaltern. Tabish Khair has also highlighted the issue of subaltern agency in *The Calcutta Chromosome* as one of its essential constituents: “Such an intricate plot insists on not only the comprehensibility and agency of the subaltern, it also dismisses arbitrary and essentialist dichotomies between the West and India”. For Khair, agency allows the subaltern to regain his silenced role in the narrative of history, “for history can be seen as the plotting of human experience and agency” (2001: 309).

The question of subaltern agency is also related to the role that imagination plays in the construction of knowledge, which is an issue central to Ghosh’s project. This is also true of Ghosh’s earlier works, as is the case with *The Shadow Lines* (1988). The novel relates the story of a Calcutta-based Indian family and their relationship with the English Prices, which started in colonial times in India and survives through World War II and the Partition up to the 1980s. It is then that the unnamed narrator finally arrives in London, and for the first time in his life accesses the physical reality of the city that had only been formed in his mind as an imaginary construction nurtured by his uncle Tridib’s recollections of the time he spent there when he had been put up by the Prices in the months immediately preceding World War II.

Again the figure of the researching scholar emerges in the character of Tridib, who had been trained as an archaeologist. His understanding of scientific knowledge is a mere extension of his global insight into truth and reality, which to him is inevitably bound to individual perception. Tridib’s position is bent towards what Geertz (1973) characterises as “thick description”,<sup>2</sup> i.e., the difference between a

particular act as devoid of external meaning and the very same act when observed from different subjective positions and contexts which ascribe different meanings to it. To this he adds the use of imagination and creativity as liberating forces for the individual, who is free to use them at will in order to counteract the artificiality of cultural and ideological apparatuses. His view of scientific truth is consequently not based upon narrativity, which is the popular vehicle of knowledge and historical research among his contemporaries.

Nonetheless, Tridib's position towards reality cannot be simplified as pure relativism, for it constitutes the basis of a philosophy of truth that affects his practice as an archaeologist and researcher. Tridib the archaeologist constantly emerges in the memories of the narrator, who feels perfectly identified with his uncle's ideology. On his arrival in the metropolis, he is immediately haunted by a longing to know London "in her finest hour" (1988: 57), to be transported to pre-World War II London to relieve the frustration that he experiences when he realises that his perception of the metropolis will never correspond to that of Tridib's. As Brinda Bose has noted, "in Ghosh's fiction, the diasporic entity continuously negotiates between two lands, separated by both time and space —history and geography— and attempts to redefine the present through a nuanced understanding of the past". Through a rather Bhabhaesque interpretation of the novel, she describes *The Shadow Lines* as a "metajourney" that takes the protagonist "into that third space where boundaries are blurred and cultures collide" (Bose 2001: 239). It is within that hybrid context in which the narrator is immersed in London that he is finally confirmed in his refusal to accept any truth as definitive. Here the concept of imagination is understood as an equivalent to independence from ideological positions of any kind, whether they come from the colonial Centre or any other figure of authority. Furthermore, it represents the choice to configure the individual's vision of the world according to a selective and creative use of perception that is operated by multiple Others and not imposed from an omniscient Self.

In the context of the ideological bases that sustain nationalism, Ghosh also reappropriates imagination so as to contest the fiction of "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991) in which the nation is rooted. Thus, attempting a balanced portrayal of the agitated backdrop of pre-Partition India in which the novel is partly framed, Ghosh constructs the character of Th'amma, the narrator's grandmother, who acts as a foil to Tridib and his nephew's endeavours: Th'amma's own personal vision of the nation is constructed on war and bloodshed. This excludes those Indian expatriates in Britain such as her granddaughter Ila, whom she considers as "colonial", for only those participating in the tradition of warfare are to be considered active agents in the process of national configuration and deserving the endowment of nationality. In her view, the exclusive parameters of violence are the

basic constituents of a country, whose borders can only hold those who have contributed to their demarcation with their own blood:

Ila has no right to live there, she said hoarsely. She doesn't belong there. It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood [...]. That is what *you* have to achieve for India, don't you see? (1988: 76)

Consequently, Th'amma's conceptual mapping of the nation, which mirrors that of nationalism, is based upon the unifying effects of "Tradition" —represented in her mind under the guise of warfare— that constitutes the main ingredient of a country's territorial integrity.<sup>3</sup> This position perfectly illustrates Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation as "a deep, horizontal comradeship [...] [a] fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (1991: 7).

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As a counterpoint to this, the narrator's voice is crucial for recovering the lost pieces of history that have slipped through the cracks of this selective nationalistic memory. Through his research in the faculty library, Tridib's nephew reasserts himself as a deserving heir to his uncle's memory, tracing back the connections between the riots that he witnessed as a child in Calcutta and the communal attacks in Dhaka which cost Tridib his life back in 1964. This turning point in the novel exemplifies the power of the individual's use of imagination, oriented towards the establishing of connections beyond the rigidity of ideological constructs already institutionalised, an effort that runs counter to any political efforts to construct a selective national history to serve the purpose of nationalism. In this way, Ghosh contributes with *The Shadow Lines* to the tradition of the "counter-narratives of the nation" that, according to Homi Bhabha, "continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries" and "disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (1990: 300).

The narrator's interest in material culture is not satisfied with the transcendental narratives that his grandmother Th'amma devotedly addresses. His use of imagination —which is not based upon narratives and is primarily oriented towards the search for connections with a deep anthropological interest that mirrors the author's— acts as a counterpoint to nationalism. The latter is mediated through the narrative of "imagined communities" that homogenises differences inside the nation while highlighting those that fall outside its boundaries. In consequence, imagination is represented as a liberating force for the individual, who is capable of retracing the links erased by the artificiality of nation.



The narrator reveals himself as having wholeheartedly assimilated his uncle's philosophy of truth. It is interesting to note how he and his cousin Ila associate totally different meanings with the word "freedom" in their respective discourses, even though they initially share the same contextual frame of reference. While the narrator relates it with the capacity to interpret and represent reality through one's own creativity, the word "freedom" can only elicit in Ila's mind reminiscences of independence from the British Raj, an anti-imperialist interpretation which is fostered by her unconscious self-perception as an immigrant living in the post-colonial era:

I tried to tell Ila and Robi about the archaeological Tridib, the Tridib who was much more contemptuous of fairylands than she would ever be; the Tridib who had pushed me to imagine the roofs of Colombo for myself, the Tridib who had said that we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly. And then, because she shrugged dismissively and said: Why? Why should we try, why not just take the world as it is? I told her how he had said that we had to try because the alternative wasn't blankness—it only meant that if we didn't try ourselves, we would never be free of other people's inventions. (1988: 31)

The narrator is able to perceive knowledge as not constrained by power because to him it resides within the imagination. This view entails a new perspective of the relationship between knowledge and power that drifts away from a post-colonial angle of interpretation. This self-image of the subaltern as subjects capable of reasserting their capacity to manipulate knowledge and join in the process of its construction is a narrative rendering of Ghosh's profound conviction that "the subaltern can speak"—to use Spivak's words—and that their speaking is an act of freedom in itself. Ila's idea of freedom, on the other hand, is strongly influenced by the dominant ideology that labels her as a migrant, and is too conscious of the position that she occupies within the periphery with reference to a centre and constructs her identity as "upper class Asian Marxist", thus boycotting her own individual freedom in the name of an ideology. Knowledge as an individual creative process that slips away from the constraint of ideologies mirrors what has been previously noted in the case of *In an Antique Land*, where cosmopolitanism is similarly untied from post-colonialism in the medieval setting of its plot.

It follows that this ethical stance sustaining truth as subordinated to individuality and subjective experience is ascribable to Ghosh as a writer and—inseparably— as an anthropologist and ethnographer. Though far from the disconcerting figure of Tridib as an unreliable narrator and advisor who readily dismisses gullible characters as deserving "to be told anything at all" (Ghosh 1988: 12), Ghosh also engages intellectual honesty by admitting that reality is inevitably filtered through individual subjectivity, considering that total detachment from the scholar's object of study

is factually unattainable. In this respect, Shirley Chew has pointed to the anxiety that the author experiences as a side-effect associated with the role of the narrator as an ethnographer in *In an Antique Land*. As the narrative progresses, Ghosh becomes increasingly aware of the fact that Lataifa and Nashawy, the Egyptian villages where he carries out his research, prove to elude any scientific description, reluctantly accepting that his definitions of both places are simply a personal approach mediated through his own position as an observer. Being a non-Western intellectual writing from the metropolis, the author sees himself, Chew observes, as “subverting the conventions and the main concerns of his narrative”. Chew cites, among others, “the recurrent intrusions of the personal into the descriptive fieldwork” as well as “the gaps of knowledge left unfilled” as the main causes for such anxieties (2002: 113). But through the philosophy of subjective truth underlying “thick description” and his awareness of the illusion of omniscience, the author as ethnographer is then reconciled to his anxiety for objectivity, and the validity of history as infallible is questioned once again.

Nevertheless, Ghosh does not hide his rather pessimistic view of the real possibilities of subaltern agency in everyday life. The conversation between the Imam and Ghosh on which his essay “The Imam and the Indian” is centered serves to exemplify this undertone of pessimism:

At that moment, despite the vast gap that lay between us, we understood each other perfectly. We were both travelling, he and I: we were travelling in the West. The only difference was that I had actually been there, in person: I could have told him about the ancient English university I had won a scholarship to, about punk dons with safety pins in their mortarboards, about superhighways and sex shops and Picasso. But none of it would have mattered. We would have known, both of us, that all that was mere fluff: at the bottom, for him as for me and millions and millions of people on the landmasses around us, the West meant only this —science and tanks and guns and bombs.

And we recognized too the inescapability of these things, their strength, their power —evident in nothing so much as this: that even for him, a man of God, and for me, a student of the ‘humane’ sciences, they had usurped the place of all other languages of argument. (Ghosh 2002: 11)

Again, this idea of “travelling” echoes the plot of *The Shadow Lines*, where the narrator travels imaginatively to London before he does so physically. Something similar happens between the Imam and Ghosh, since the author had actually been to the West, whereas his interlocutor has just second-hand appreciations of the West to support his arguments. Here the effects of the civilising mission can actually be seen in a post-colonial —and fiercely neo-imperialist— world where the subaltern —though unconsciously— still replicates the ideology of those in power. In other words, the agency of the subaltern is possible as well as necessary, but the language

through which it is exerted still belongs in the monopoly of the West. The only solution for Ghosh is for the individual to adopt a self-critical attitude, inviting readers to exert individual power over knowledge, by producing “thick descriptions” that displace the universalising cultural discourses which have survived the civilising mission in our world today. It is precisely this single thread of language tying up the margins around a centre that has to be cut.

## Notes

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1. My use of the term subaltern must be interpreted in a broader sense than that proposed by Gramsci with reference to the peasantry and the working class, and that would be later adopted by Spivak, Bhabha and other post-colonial critics. It is clear that Ghosh, as academic, essayist and novelist, can hardly be counted among the oppressed. It is his contribution to the Subaltern Studies Group that matters here, as Ghosh himself joins in the effort of contesting dominant interpretations of colonial historiography underlying this intellectual stance. Thus we can say that Ghosh practices a subaltern ethnography insofar as he counteracts the traditional views and interpretations contained in the imperial project of political and cultural “improvement” to which anthropology contributed for such a long time.

2. Geertz borrowed the term “thick description” from the philosopher of language Gilbert Ryle, who first proposed it in 1968 in a conference entitled “The Thinking of Thoughts:

What is *Le Penseur* doing?” delivered at the University of Saskatchewan, in Canada. In it he exemplifies the “thin description” of an eye movement such as a wink as opposed to the different interpretations ascribable to it, i.e., its “thick descriptions”. In other words, a “thick description” of a human behaviour is one that explains not just the behaviour, but its context as well, such that the behaviour becomes meaningful to an outsider.

3. But Th’amma’s aspirations for Indian national unity—which rely on the homogenising effect of a “Tradition” of warfare—prove to be hopelessly sterile, for they are based upon the Western British model which is not easily transposable to so culturally variegated a society as India’s. As Mondal points out, “in the case of large nations such as India which have substantial minority cultures this has led to increasing problems as the totalizing figure of the ‘nation’ seeks to subsume all of its heterogeneous identities into one” (2003: 26).

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