



Theory stranded at the borders, or, Cultural Studies from the southern fringes

Bhaskar Sarkar

To cite this article: Bhaskar Sarkar (2019) Theory stranded at the borders, or, Cultural Studies from the southern fringes, Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, 16:3, 219-240, DOI: [10.1080/14791420.2019.1650195](https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2019.1650195)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2019.1650195>



Published online: 12 Sep 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

INVITED ARTICLE



Theory stranded at the borders, or, Cultural Studies from the southern fringes

Bhaskar Sarkar

University of California Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, USA

ABSTRACT

Isolating certain critical blind spots that one encounters in studying lifeworlds of the global South, this essay calls for: (1) a grasp of the irreducible singularity of each historical formation as an essential aspect of southern Cultural Studies, so that its lessons are not readily erased, dismissed as signs of failure, or bracketed as idiosyncratic exceptions to universalized standards; and (2) the recognition of volatile and illicit forms of popular agency—emerging in friction with the security-obsessed governmentality of the borderlands, the exclusionary institutions of civil society, and the normativities of citizenship—as legitimate heralds of a global political futurity.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 July 2019

Accepted 26 July 2019

KEYWORDS

Cultural Studies; Area Studies; global South; border; singularity; civil society

This essay rests on an understanding of the global South not as a stable hemispheric geography, but as a dispersed, mutable, and asymmetric space constituted through histories of dispossession. Common to these agonistic histories is the logic of extraction, whose global articulations—including slavery, colonization, and the more camouflaged biopolitics of capture and abandonment—have embodied insidious variations on primitive accumulation. Since the hemispheric South was the location, actual or figurative, for almost all the colonies,¹ the global South is often mapped directly onto it. However, this conflation has become untenable in the wake of decolonization and neoliberal globalization. Rapid but uneven development in the postcolonies has produced enclaves of great affluence within the hemispheric South that, for all practical purposes, seem like stranded outposts of the global North. Meanwhile, economic pressures and political volatilities in southern societies have led to large-scale population movements and the emergence of new immigrant communities in the so-called metropolises. To take one salient example from recent years, the large Turkish–Arab–Kurdish communities in the Kreuzburg and NeuKölln areas of Berlin. These inner cities and ghettos seem striking as incursions of the global South into the hemispheric North; however, the cool vibrancy of some multi-ethnic boroughs invites gentrification, inducing further dislocations. We are left with a global South (as well as a global North) whose convulsive historicity renders it patchy, amorphous, and unstable.

What follows is an attempt to explore the possibilities for a Cultural Studies of the global South.² Beginning with certain analytical knots arising from extant configurations

of knowledge, I try to identify potential pitfalls of such a “southern” project, and explore methodological orientations that might help circumvent such problems. What maneuvers are called for to recalibrate the very idea of the southern, to overcome its historical inscription within a semiotics of lack? Do such moves end up reifying identity and difference? What happens if we assess southern modalities of doing economics, culture, and politics in relation to the material lifeworlds within which they congeal, instead of criticizing, discounting, and reforming these modalities according to the standards of the global North? Northern idioms of sociability and professional etiquettes, legal frameworks and business arrangements, aesthetic principles and taste hierarchies—all forms of expertise whose inculcation requires considerable investments of money, time, and effort—place large segments of the world’s population at a disadvantage. Southern communities have to work around the explicit strictures as well as the tacit dispositions that effectively exclude them from established channels of participation. For southern agents of history, such protocols do not work as affordances: whatever people manage to do is done *in spite of* these institutionalized impediments. When subjects have to forge their way into participation, what performative gestures become necessary?

As Ranajit Guha writes of subaltern revolts in eighteenth and nineteenth century Bengal:

When a peasant rose in revolt at anytime or place under the Raj, he did so necessarily and explicitly in violation of a series of codes which defined his very existence as a member of that colonial, and still largely semi-feudal society.³

More close to our times, such gestures range from African American communities, angered by discrimination, police brutality, and abandonment, setting fire to property during the race riots of Los Angeles in 1965 and 1992, to the rural women of Plachimada, frustrated with red tape and legal obstructionism, demonstrating with empty water containers outside a Coca Cola bottling factory to protest its polluting effects on the area’s groundwater.⁴ While each of these interventions arrives with its unique historicity (comprising local histories, practices, modes of mobilization, affective dispositions toward one’s lived world, prospects about the future, and so on), they come together in one fundamental respect: as southern gestures, they all seek to offset disenfranchised subjects’ protocological inadequacies. Should we not see these desperate, often disruptive gestures as purposive acts of communication, which challenge and seek to change the social compact, as well as the structures modulating participatory cultures? If that is the case, what specific iterations of political agency emerge from these embodied instances of communication and action?

Drawing on a contemporary example from the India–Bangladesh border, where communities displaced by riverbank erosion resettle on the silt islands in the middle of the Ganga, I argue that such phenomenologies of precarity give rise to a gritty politics of survival, often eclipsing the rationality, civility, and social consciousness attributed to post-Enlightenment political theory’s idealized citizen-subject.⁵ When the state is experienced mainly as the enforcer of border security, rather than as the provider of social security, what is legal may not always seem legitimate to borderland communities. The singularity of this conjuncture—the midriver islands on which the displaced squat, happen to be on the international border between the two countries—puts to question standard notions of citizen, alien, and refugee. Smuggling rice and banned merchandise, or voting fraudulently

in India to gain the patronage of local political blocs: such clandestine acts intimate a sense of urgency by putting the body on the line; while flouting laws, they also pry open a portal for engagement.

Variations of this extreme scenario, played out all over the global South, foster risky agencies shaping informal “gray” economies, piratical cultures, and political arenas of raw opportunism. Instead of simply waiting for the ideal conditions to emerge, for the modernist fictions of Development and Progress to finally become realities, we may as well begin to ask: what do the motley agents operating at the borders of nation-states, of civility, or of the Law, teach us about the futures of politics? To put it more bluntly, what if we recategorize patently criminal activities like piracy, smuggling, and terrorism as desperate acts of communication and grassroots mobilization, arising as situated responses to specific historical conditions? How might such a shift affect the hegemonic shibboleths of modern political life—especially the trinity of citizenship, civil society, and the public sphere? And how should Cultural Studies attuned to the realities of the global South reorient its paradigms and methodologies? Such a reorientation should involve, at the very least, a partial retreat from the two influential Gramscian assumptions that the institutions of civil society foster democratic participation across all social groups, and that hegemony secured through the negotiation of consensus is a necessary condition for a political bloc to assume power within democratic systems.

But first, a bit of analytical space-clearing is in order. The next three sections address the relationship of a southern Cultural Studies to the more established North America-centered model of Area Studies; the problematic of southern singularity; and the ambivalence of intellectuals regarding the retreat of southern political agencies from civility, formal organization, and clearly articulated collective platforms.

Area Studies and Cultural Studies: a topological problem

A project of doing Cultural Studies from southern perspectives has to contend with a two-fold topological problem. First, posing the problematic as “southern” raises the specter of a global North as the locus of the field. The North/South dyad remains useful when pushed beyond ossified hemispheric imaginations: while facilitating a more nuanced cartography reflecting actual historical processes, it also skirts the connotation of negative space that stalks formulations designated as “non-Western” (with “non-Northern” not quite in circulation). And yet, the global South carries with it the whiff of a remainder, a supplement; in relation to universalized narratives of development and progress, it conjures a lagging or failed project, a *not-yet*. Notwithstanding the discursive shift away from *underdeveloped* societies, the center-*periphery* model, or the *Third World*, to the more affirmative appellation of *developing* countries, the sense of a relative backwardness persists; in extreme situations, disparaging epithets such as “basket case” and “banana republic” return. Within the domain of global knowledge production, the pre-eminence of Anglophone and Franco-German centers of intellectual work—and the currency of their analytical frameworks, methodological orientations, institutional protocols, and political commitments—help maintain the global North’s hegemonic centrality. Cultural Studies from southern perspectives runs the risk of being ghettoized from its inception.⁶

Southern intellectual projects have to contend not only with a need to mark the distinctiveness of their paradigms, methods, and stakes, but also with the concomitant impossibility of holding onto authentically indigenous philosophical frameworks. This reflexivity is a variation on the dilemma that Dipesh Chakrabarty characterized two decades ago as “the restless and inescapable politics of difference to which global capital,” and the stratified, discontinuous modernity it shapes through its operations, “consign[s] us.”⁷ Since the extent to which capital penetrates different lifeworlds vary quite a bit, it emerges as a default greenhouse for historical difference. Capital’s global operations open up a “site where both the universal history of capital,” shaped by capital’s urge to instrumentalize everything in its single-minded pursuit of accumulation, and the far more variegated local, lived experiences which animate a “politics of human belonging,” “can interrupt each others narratives.”⁸

For instance, in the realm of global media capital, Hindi-language Bombay cinema of the late twentieth century—with its informal industrial organization, its epic three-hour genre-bending narratives, and its musical interludes that draw on local precinematic narrative traditions—“interrupts” the hegemonic history of cinema with Hollywood at its core. Often dismissed as derivative, overwrought, and low brow, the popular-commercial cinema of Bollywood can be thought of as relationally southern.⁹ But in the three decades since India’s economic liberalization, global processes of standardization adopted largely from Hollywood have attenuated Bollywood’s uniqueness: nowadays, most films correspond to particular genres, unfold along a central narrative arc, eschew musical sequences where characters actually sing the songs, and come ready for multiplex screening with duration around two hours. Meanwhile, Bollywood elements have begun to infiltrate Hollywood: elements most spectacularly evident in *Moulin Rouge* (2001) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), but also operative at the levels of financing, production, and postproduction (e.g., the 2008 deal between DreamWorks and Reliance).¹⁰ Such mutual “interruptions” present opportunities for scholars to pry open the seemingly inevitable trajectory of capitalist modernity and to locate overlooked dimensions of human (and nonhuman) experience. Thus, local religious traditions shape Indian media industry practices like *muhurut*: marking the beginning of a project as auspicious by worshipping and making offerings to the gods. Likewise, local cosmologies prompt many world-class Indian scientists to consult an astrologer before embarking on significant life events such as getting married and buying property. Holding on to such practices does not make Indians less modern: it simply points to the different contours of an Indian modernity. The possibility of complicating universal accounts with chronicles of previously devalued and specifically southern experiences underscores the potential fecundity of Cultural Studies as an intellectual enterprise in/for the global South.

Which brings us to the second aspect of the topological problem. British and American Cultural Studies developed during the 1970s and 1980s, when western social theory and political praxis had reached an impasse. Signs of crisis were everywhere: in the trenchant critiques, anchored in material histories, of foundational thought; in the unraveling of various master narratives and utopian projects; and in the splintering of once-stable affiliations and the advent of contingent coalitions.¹¹ Widely referred to as the postmodern turn, this conjuncture witnessed the ascendance of imagination and culture as top-level productive forces;¹² a new respect for the popular; and a heightened awareness of the local determinants of social formations and circuits of power. Not surprisingly, the defining

hallmarks of Cultural Studies include difference and marginality as constitutive analytics; the celebration, with some reservations, of popular cultural expressions and grassroots agencies; the recuperation of subcultural practices and micropolitical emergences; and the archiving of quotidian ephemera. In the context of the global South, these analytical orientations bear resonance with some of the concerns of Area Studies, paralleling the latter's attention to vernacular languages and expressions, rooted mores and institutions, indigenous cosmologies and epistemologies. Once again, prospects of ghettoization loom large: because of its similarities with Area Studies, southern Cultural Studies risks being relegated to an outside or, at best, remain an extimate of Cultural Studies *proper*. Such marginalization is at work in all manners of institutions and practices of the North American academy: in the assignation of certain scholarly works as "of general interest," and others as serving niche readerships; in the insistence of many academic presses that volumes focusing on Africa, Asia, East Europe, and Latin America include the place (nation, region, or city) in the title, while being lax about such a requirement for books on North America or Western Europe; in departmental hiring practices, review processes, and the funding of research projects.¹³ With southern interventions, an additive model comes into play: while these contributions are celebrated for adding to the diversity of a global archive of cultural studies, they are not seen to have any fundamental effect on the general intellectual frameworks derived from Euro-American case studies, since the singular features and insights of southern cultural formations get framed as idiosyncratic exceptions to global norms. Like Area Studies, this emergent field of distinctive instances can then be mined for cultural data and expertise, to be instrumentalized for the North's geopolitical ambitions, while Anglo-European Cultural Studies continue to mint purportedly global theories.¹⁴

Before we proceed, it may be useful to clarify that when scholars in a particular region, say Asia, study their immediate lifeworlds, they do not necessarily think of their work as contributions to an area-based Asian Studies; nor do they think of themselves as Asianists. Ariel Heryanto makes precisely this point, and goes on to quote Reid: "[m]ost of our Asian colleagues ... are only 'Asianists' when they are outside Asia, but discipline-based social scientists [and humanities scholars] at home."¹⁵ A southern Cultural Studies paradigm offers an interdisciplinary home for all manners of scholarship produced across the planet, and a possibility of skirting the epistemological and institutional baggage of Area Studies.

Thus, one urgent question that arises from the agenda of this special issue is: what would it take for a Cultural Studies of the global South to avoid getting subsumed into an Area Studies paradigm whose roots are in Cold War era international politics (and whose antecedents go back to colonial knowledge production)? To adopt a more affirmative line of enquiry, in what ways might each intellectual enterprise help recast and invigorate the other? By way of provisional responses, I will pursue two lines of thought. The first has to do with the showcasing of difference in Cultural Studies, and establishing its constitutive role in sociocultural formations. Ironically, this preoccupation with difference tends toward its reification as an empty category, inducing an erasure of actual differences.¹⁶ Notwithstanding the problems of Area Studies, certain critical paradigms, widely understood to be part of area studies scholarship, have insisted on the irreducible singularity of each historical formation, pointing to possible pathways out of this conundrum.¹⁷

The second line of thought revolves around the misgivings, among social and cultural elites, about wayward populist energies that rarely add up to a coherent political movement, safeguard the institutions of civil society, or guarantee progressive outcomes. Fostered by liberal-bourgeois dispositions, such suspicions about southern manifestations of the popular—and of populisms in particular—foreclose the more radical potentialities for political emergence. If I appear to be suggesting that even the fear-mongering, fact-twisting populist political mobilizations that bring a Donald Trump or a Narendra Modi to power capture and incorporate radical potentialities within their project, it is because I am. The descriptor “radical” does not come with any predetermined political appeal, even though it is often conflated with the sense of a revolution or a rupture. More to the point, the pressing question is not so much about the nature—radical or otherwise—of the potentialities that inhere within such reactionary political formations, as it is about the kind of coalition-building efforts that might shift the terms of political debates and refresh the possibilities for more salutary political futures.

The capture of the singular

This section interrogates an unintended consequence of the centrality accorded to difference in cultural studies methodologies: the loss of the singularity of historical experience. Throughout this article, “singular” and “singularity” are used in the conceptual sense that Giles Deleuze endowed the terms with.¹⁸ A philosophical concept pertaining to situations in which the same structure or event is repeated over time and space, the singular refers to the unique and irreducible properties of each actualization. In mounting his defense of difference and his criticism of all universalizing tendencies, Deleuze points to an ontological dimension within the identity–difference relation to insist on an autonomous basis for difference, to promote an understanding of difference-in-itself.¹⁹ Difference is not simply the antithesis or negation of identity; quite to the contrary, difference comes with its own material foundation and historicity, and its crucial function is to affirm the other and, thereby, the multiple. This constitutive and partly ontological role of difference has to be disavowed in representation in order to secure epistemological generalizability and to make way for a universal identity. But difference resists such reduction and capture. As Deleuze writes, the “empty identities” and “abstract universalities ... claim to draw difference along with them”; but difference “remains attached” to “a differential reality always made up of singularities.”²⁰ For every act of mediation or representation that asserts an absolute verity or universal identity, “there is always an *unrepresented singularity*” that plays spoilsport, that refuses to accept the universality of the representation.²¹ The singular attributes, in congealing into a challenge to universalization, do not negate identity as much as they affirm difference.

In a recent article interrogating popular and scientific discourses on the effects of excessive media consumption on the human brain, Thomas Lamarre argues that “the cultural studies of media use—cultural analysis based on reading the event as an expression of received cultural positions—tend to overlook and betray” significant aspects of such usage.²² First, when scholars assume media producers and audiences to be “pre-existing constituencies,” what gets left out is an account of the processes via which familiar and unfamiliar elements from diverse sectors of a social formation, sometimes even incommensurable elements, come into novel relations in the course of a cultural event. Since

these overlooked processes shape the event's singularity, that aspect remains illegible as well. Lamarre quotes Brian Massumi on this point:

As it is widely practiced, cultural studies falls short of singularity ... because it clings to the notion that expression is of a particularity. It realizes that expression is always collective. But it takes the collectivity as already constituted, as a determinate set of actually existing persons (in common parlance, a constituency).²³

It is not as if cultural studies scholars have not grappled at length with social and historical complexities: concepts such as overdetermination, articulation, and intersectionality have offered analytical perspectives and inspired research methodologies able to engage with the entanglements and contradictions, negotiations and realignments within a social field.²⁴ Nevertheless, an aporia about the constitution of constituencies persists: if collectives reify difference into a particularity, at the other extreme a fetishization of singularity leads to esoteric scholarship based on a sample size of one.

The presumed unity of a group or community on the basis of a distinctive shared trait (taken as the mark of its difference)—an epistemological simplification which critics like Massumi and Lamarre hold responsible for the occlusion of singularity—can be traced back to the roots of cultural studies approaches in political economy's classes, sociology's types, and history and anthropology's communities.²⁵ Such mass groupings around particular traits, which must ignore the singularities of the one to foreground the commonalities of the many, also lead to the attrition of what Massumi calls "processual specificity," as well as blindness to "the relational comingness of community and the qualitative contagion of collective life-movement," even as these elements remain central to the avowed project of Cultural Studies.²⁶ Perhaps more to the point of this article, the legacy of these liberal-humanist disciplines of post-Enlightenment modernity deliver much of Cultural Studies as yet another instrument of liberal and neoliberal biopolitics.

While the purported objective of modern governance is the regulation of biosociological processes to achieve a certain homeostasis at the level of the population, its hidden agendas often include the ongoing depredation of minorities—even necropolitics.²⁷ The propensity to aggregate on the basis of demographic categories gets more pronounced in southern contexts: the presumed disposability of entire populations renders them vulnerable to policies of abandonment. As Jon Beasley-Murray argues with reference to Latin American populist movements, Cultural Studies merely reproduces the populism that it analyzes, while the civil society rubric with its core political model of hegemony shores up neoliberal agendas.²⁸ In a similar vein, within the context of the academy as a ideological state apparatus, Toby Miller notes that Cultural Studies "has been revealed as a new administrative tool for universities in a time of scarcity": in seeking to deliver instrumentalized education with maximum efficiency, institutions of higher learning downsize or eliminate less popular humanities and arts departments, replacing them with interdisciplinary cultural studies courses that cover similar ground and, sometimes, the concerns of STEM disciplines (e.g., Cultural Studies of Risk, Cultural Studies of Genes).²⁹ To counter such pervasive processes of capture, Beasley-Murray stresses the need to learn from the impulses and energies of the multitude that escape increasingly deepening mechanisms of state control.³⁰ He seems to call attention to the more radical elements of Massumi's "relational comingness of community"—a point I explore in the next section.³¹

Lamarre's second reservation about the "cultural studies of media use" has to do with most scholar's inability to deal with the materiality of both media technologies and media users.³² In spite of all the attention to the body in Cultural Studies, the corporeality of media technologies and their users, as well as the embodied interactions between the two, are missing from most scholarship on media. For Lamarre, pursuing the effects of contemporary media usage on the human brain cannot proceed without attending to the role of neuroscientific findings in shaping the singularity of media experiences: "the cultural studies question 'what do audiences do with media or technologies?' and the sciences' question 'what do media or technologies do to audiences?'" must come together.³³

Inherent to Lamarre's argument is a conception of materiality that historical materialism cannot deal with adequately. This new focus on the ontological dimensions of everyday life, which Deleuze brought to the center of contemporary philosophy, has become more pressing in the wake of the digital revolution (with a fresh attention to technologies and infrastructures of reproduction, transmission, and storage), biomedical and neuroscientific developments (including prosthetics and biomonitors, chemical supplements and cognitive enhancers), and the environmental crisis (with its attendant existential precarity). In an overview of Cultural Studies in its first two decades, Miller reiterates Lawrence Grossberg's call to simultaneously politicize theory and to theorize politics, combining "abstraction and grounded analysis."³⁴ Miller ultimately hinges the potency of the field to its deployment of political economic analysis: hence his complaint that "the dominant strand of US cultural studies had lost political economy as its animator, in favor of some ghastly academic mirror of the post-welfare state," and his extolment of "work that understands the importance of material conditions in the formation and exercise of subjectivity."³⁵ In the intervening years, the grounds of "grounded analysis" have shifted from a narrow focus on political economy to include the concerns of new materialist epistemologies: nowadays, "politicizing theory" and "theorizing politics" often involve distinctly ontological dimensions.

What happens to culture as a site of power and struggle, the eponymous object of cultural studies research, in light of such ontological and epistemological shifts? Let us dwell on this question briefly in the context of the rampant "problem" of media piracy in the global South. After all, piracy seems to be a perfect example of the unsanctioned use of media technologies and forms by marginal groups seeking to wrest a modicum of cultural agency. But what do these southern uses of media entail? Besides the unpaid downloading and copying of media products, there is a long tradition of rewiring and repurposing equipment, salvaging and repairing discarded gadgets, recycling parts, and reassembling them into new contraptions; there is also the production of illicit versions—copies, spoofs, extracted samples, and so on. Such material practices upset media corporations for a host of reasons, the explicit one being the alleged loss of revenue from pilfered films, music, and software. However, as many analysts have demonstrated convincingly, even if media piracy were eliminated, large segments of the world's population would not be able to afford multiplex tickets, legal CDs and MP3 files, or the latest videogames. What these transnational companies do not express so publicly is the vexation they face from southern cultures of rewiring and recycling, which upstage the corporate strategy of planned obsolescence by extending the lives of electronic appliances, and enable jerry-rigged uses not envisioned in company plans. People participate in piratical activities

not only to make a living in the informal sector, but also for reasons of leisure and technophilia. Moreover, because of enduring local habits, southern communities evince rather divergent relationships to the notion of intellectual property rights. Media technologies, indeed, revolutionize people's lives, but in ways that far exceed both corporate hype and design. More unexpectedly, media consumers take control of these technologies, making them serve their everyday purposes, and complicating our understandings of "old" and "new" media. The local socialities that grow around repair shops, and the opportunistic salvaging of electronic parts doing double duty as southern homegrown practices of environmentalist care, are only two examples of the ways in which the scope of "culture" has expanded not only to include material practices (historical materialism) but also to produce ontological shifts (new materialisms).³⁶

In light of this renewed salience of materiality in cultural analysis, what methodologies and insights might Area Studies, notwithstanding the limitations of the rubric itself, have to offer? After all, area studies scholarship has had an abiding interest in local cosmologies, and the cosmological tends to yoke the cultural to the natural. Recent area studies work has begun to look at cases that push beyond the cosmological to extend toward the ontological, embracing these dimensions as central to the cultural: for instance, tracking human-animal relations in the villages of the Central Himalayas in light of traditional animal sacrifice rituals and the contemporary cow-protection vigilantism of the Hindu right wing, or complicating the presumed illegitimacy of modern hydrological ventures by tracing back the roots of the Three Gorges Dam—the Chinese megaproject that has displaced some 1.3 million people, flooded archaeological sites, and increased the risk of landslides—to cultural and scientific imaginations of the Yangzi River basin dating back over a millennium.³⁷

Since the value and legitimacy of area studies research and scholarship are predicated on geographic and linguistic expertise, difference provides the organizing principle even as the underlying methodologies forge the impression of relatively uniform and stable cultural traditions (Asia Studies, Japan Studies, Korea Studies ...). The corpus of knowledge related to each region remains vulnerable to being folded within civilizational imaginations with their peculiar insularities and chauvinisms, and to being ideologically conscripted by nation-building projects and their politics of inclusion/exclusion. Not surprisingly, some of the most trenchant criticisms of the Area Studies paradigm have come from postcolonial scholars associated with the Subaltern Studies collectives of South Asia and Latin America, and working within transnational academic circuits. Since subaltern practices remain illegible to hegemonic perspectives, "culture" turns out to be an unstable figuration for contexts with subaltern presence, making attention to the historical production of power differentials an imperative. Insisting on subalternity as a relational analytic that indexes a subject position of radical negation, excluded from all lines of mobility, Gayatri Spivak refuses its conflation with concrete demographic types (the tribal, the untouchable, the refugee).³⁸ Such conflations, while offering up these abject figures as targets of national development projects and transnational humanitarian dispensations, at once reify and erase historically constituted difference. In a more affirmative vein, Walter Mignolo calls for the consolidation of decolonial subaltern reason as the basis for a more liberating modernity, even a new humanity.³⁹ While acknowledging the impossibility of salvaging any authentic indigeneity untainted by the colonial experience, Mignolo argues for a program of delinking from "the colonial matrix of power" and of

seeking to realize the potentialities of modernity vitiated by the narrow instrumentalities of European Reason. Mignolo looks to the multilevel interfaces produced by the colonial encounter—not only the conflicts, but also the innervations, negotiations, translations, and creative solutions—for instances of “border thinking”: local, conjunctural practices of the imagination and forms of knowledge that might serve as resources for a decolonial becoming.

Mignolo’s speculations on border thinking as the gateway to a decolonial modernity resonate with Chakraborty’s call to utilize the mutual interruptions between capital’s universalized history on the one hand, and all the local narratives about lived experiences of capitalist modernity on the other, to escape the relentless instrumentality and teleology of a Eurocentric History.⁴⁰ Both scholars attend to cosmological and analytical discontinuities, and to the underlying incommensurabilities across material lifeworlds. Chakraborty, for instance, dwells on the annual practice of worshipping Vishvakarma, the god of technologies, in Bengal’s industrial plant and factories.⁴¹ The day of the Vishvakarma Pooja is a public holiday in much of northern India, an arrangement that must have required some form of secular bargaining between the state, capital, and labor. On the other hand, religious rituals require devotional labor; hence the incursion of the annual festival into the production space of modern industry introduces kinks within secular categories/histories of work and leisure. Such considerations point to the necessity of a relational—even explicitly comparatist—approach in all research projects centered on the local. A comparatist approach allows researchers to attend to the irreducible frictions that mark contemporary collective formations born of encounters between incommensurate forces, as well as the acts of translation and mediation that manage to build bridges across the chasms. In engaging the noncorrespondences as well as the creative transfigurations which together shape local formations, such an approach seeks to account for the singular historicity of each formation. To stay with the example of Vishvakarma Pooja, how does it compare with other religious holidays such as Christmas and Id? Chakraborty points to the tendency on the part of secular scholars to subsume the *difference* of the event—the garlanding and worshipping of the machines and tools in the factories—under the universal sign of “religion” or “culture.”⁴² But is it precisely such universal categories that fail to take account of the difference, which is explained away by the functionalist logic that worshipping machinery is a form of “‘insurance policy’ against accidents and contingencies.”⁴³ In the face of such intellectual tendencies, it becomes necessary to recognize that the “redundancy—the huge and, from a strictly functionalist point of view, unnecessarily elaborate panoply of iconography and rituals—prove[s] the poverty of a purely functionalist approach”: only then can the universal “secular narrative” of labor and capital be put into crisis.⁴⁴

Finally, corollary to their apprehension of the singular, relational/comparatist approaches are better equipped to explore generalizable patterns without eliminating the granular specificities of local experiences. In a stunning mobilization of decolonial thinking, Anibal Quijano provides a critical reappraisal of the concept of “totality,” now widely dismissed in Europe and North America as a product of colonial modernity that leads to “theoretical reductionism” and “the metaphysics of a macro-historical subject,” as well as for its associations with “undesirable political practices, behind a dream of the total rationalization of society.”⁴⁵

Outside the ‘West’, virtually in all known cultures, every cosmic vision, every image, all systematic production of knowledge is associated with a perspective of totality. But in those cultures, the perspective of totality in knowledge includes the acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of all reality; of the irreducible, contradictory character of the latter; of the legitimacy, i.e., the desirability, of the diverse character of the components of all reality—and therefore, of the social.⁴⁶

Quijano concludes that while the critique of European rationality is “urgent” and “indispensable,” it is not necessary to negate all its categories or to insist on the “dissolution of reality in discourse.”⁴⁷ Published in the journal *Cultural Studies*, Quijano’s article calls for the “liberation of intercultural relations from the prison of coloniality” so that “all peoples” are free “to choose, individually or collectively, such relations: a freedom to choose between various cultural orientations, and, above all, the freedom to produce, criticize, change, and exchange culture and society.”⁴⁸

Such *coming into* intercultural relations—which will involve the production of impossible worlds and knowledge structures through the creative articulation of incommensurable cosmologies—is one of the main promises of a southern project of Cultural Studies. This potentiality, which stems from the double consciousness born of violent historical encounters, from the disorientation of being reduced to the other in one’s own environs, is intrinsic to southern experiences of modernity. A southern Cultural Studies will find its intellectual vitality by bringing to light the singularities of these uncanny modernities, and reflexively elaborating the insights that remain recessed within such singularities.

The following section explores what is at stake in exiting the post-Enlightenment realm of civil society, while keeping in mind the possibility of resuscitating notions of civility imagined otherwise, without activating an attendant mode of domination.

Uncivil energies

Because of its intrinsic volatilities, the domain of the popular remains an analytical enigma. Considered as a whole, academic discourse oscillates between, at one pole, idealist celebrations of popular spontaneity, ingenuity, resilience, and solidarity; and, at the other pole, skeptical denigration of popular reason and creativity, especially populisms that cynically exploit those very attributes to stir up collective anxieties and to instigate reactionary politics. It is a challenge to locate, let alone make sense of, the tensions and ambivalences that animate popular cultural figurations; it may be trickier still to predict the outcomes of popular political mobilizations. This counterintuitive intractability of the quotidian and familiar makes sense if we remember that popular formations—unlike critical, antiestablishment, avant garde projects, whose interventions come with a measure of cogency and conviction—are born of many random, discrete, and provisional negotiations between motley social forces.

The Frankfurt School critique of the “culture industry” squarely equates mass culture to an industrial venture, enframing it as the domain not of spontaneous expressions of folk creativity, but of standardized, low-brow cultural commodities often complicit with the most venal ideologies. Populism remains a bad object in this influential exegesis, whose rigorous criticality is, in part, a traumatized response to the legacy of Goebbels and the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda.⁴⁹ Relatively

sympathetic frameworks find it difficult to embrace populist movements because of their propensity for tactics that are illegal, unruly, and sometimes outright violent. Marxist scholars have struggled with the political potentialities of the category of “the people”: ultimately, the vanguard Party has to step in to shape the peasantry and the working class into properly political entities. E.P. Thompson, a seminal figure for British Cultural Studies, rejects the blanket denigration of rioting crowds in what he describes as “a spasmodic view of popular history.”⁵⁰ Instead, he seeks to understand the bread riots of eighteenth century England in terms of a “moral economy” of rights, fairness, and justice. And yet, Thompson ultimately describes volatile popular irruptions as expressions of a prepolitical consciousness. The ambivalence that complicates Thompson’s attempt to rehabilitate the riotous mob within a genealogy of radical mobilizations, by investing it with a semblance of political rationality, continues to stalk cultural studies methodologies to this day.

Behind the distrust of rowdy crowds lurks a post-Enlightenment investment in civil society and its institutions. Since Hegel, civil society has been understood in distinction from the political state, as a domain in which citizens follow their (primarily economic) interests according to certain civil codes.⁵¹ For Marx, the separation is not as clear since the state, controlled by the bourgeoisie, acts as the protector of bourgeois capitalist interests.⁵² Gramsci, in reimagining civil society as the site for the consensus-building negotiations necessary for a hegemonic bloc to come to power, makes it a central category for democratic politics.⁵³ In contrast, he identifies political society as the realm in which the state rules by force. Of course, repression appears in many forms, not all of which involve force: the norms of civil society, which regulate participation in decision-making processes, take on a gatekeeping function that help exclude entire population groups from crucial deliberations. Irrespective of their own artisanal cultures and local cosmologies, proletarian communities require training via formal education and culture. The civilizing exercises that enable peasants and workers to join the negotiating table, also initiate their co-optation into the hegemonic order. Gramsci stresses the importance of developing a proletarian consciousness and culture, and nurturing organic intellectuals arising from among the subaltern ranks, in order to forge a counterhegemony as a challenge to the reigning order.⁵⁴ But his vision for such transformations remains circumscribed by the parameters of civil society. Having inherited this bounded horizon, Cultural Studies has mostly remained within it. The insistence on civil society values and modes, even when they are widely experienced as exclusionary, invites speculation about a persistent worry on the part of elite and middle classes regarding popular intransigence and impetuosity: what if plebeian groups rebel against or work around sanctioned political processes, realizing that hegemonic frameworks that purport to help them negotiate their own interests, actually tame those very interests?

The modalities of civil society work best for classes that devise them with their own class interests in mind. For the vast majority of people living in the global South, the institutions of civility and legality are imposed from elsewhere and operationalized from above, and do not reflect their concerns. Partha Chatterjee, in his influential work on “the politics of the governed” involving “well over three-fourths of contemporary humanity,” presents a recalibration of political society in terms of the exigencies that compel popular political practices to subvert, if not exit, the state’s juridico-legal firmament.⁵⁵ The apparent absence of an adequately evolved political consciousness, and the lack of fluency in the

codified languages and rituals required to enter civil-associational relations, keep large segments of the world's population outside civil society. What is referred to as the politics of the street arises in response to the effective foreclosure of the sites of democratic deliberation available to the masses, and to coercive state operations transgressing "rule of law" codes with impunity.⁵⁶ This politics from below seeks to recalibrate the relations and functions of governmentality via the opportunistic and uncivil exploitation of state dispensations such as land redistribution schemes and affirmative action. At stake is the definition-in-action of right-bearing citizenship as the foundation of popular political life, at a conjuncture in which "the universal ideal of civic nationalism," based on the equality of all classes, religions, races, cultures etc., has come into conflict with calls for the "differential treatment of particular groups on grounds of vulnerability or backwardness or historical justice."⁵⁷

One might locate in Chatterjee's analysis echoes of a Habermasian lament about the political vitiation of the rational structures and democratic norms that once enlivened the bourgeois public sphere. The replacement of political sovereignty with the logics of governmentality as the basis for democratic polities would suggest such an erosion. Chatterjee, however, gives vernacular expressions of popular will and agency a distinctly positive twist, arguing that these frequently delinquent practices are shaping a contemporary political modernity of great vitality. His orientation is shaped by the recognition that post-colonial governmentality in India, for instance, has actually opened up new lines of mobility for previously subaltern groups: reservations for *scheduled castes and scheduled tribes* have allowed such communities to "make strategic alliances with other oppressed groups in order to get a share of governmental power."⁵⁸ In the context of late twentieth-century popular politics in Bengal—so much of which has had to do with struggles over land rights, with squatters seeking to legitimize their claims to illegal colonies, and farmers fighting to stave off land grabs by a state-capital nexus for industrialization and real estate development—Chatterjee tries hard to recoup "the absence of a plan" as not necessarily "a bad thing," arguing that "[p]erhaps that is how vernacular resistance to global designs ultimately succeeds."⁵⁹ But in the end, Chatterjee too expresses serious misgivings about "the capacity of unselfconscious local practice" to forge a modicum of efficacious political agency, and "to beat back ... the new regime of globality."⁶⁰ In dragging various locals into the folds of flexible accumulation, the "new world order" has ravaged the working classes everywhere; the neoliberal extension of a calculus of the market to every aspect of life has delegitimized social security and the welfare state. For Chatterjee, the gradual privatization of the state's key functions limits even the cannily circuitous forms of democratic participation that the southern masses have been wresting for themselves by leveraging governmentality, often against its own logics.⁶¹ But as is often the case with semilicit, piratical activities (e.g., constructing a temple on illegally occupied land, to ward off eviction by god-fearing law enforcement forces) that straddle communication and hoodwinking, participation and criminality, a cat and mouse game ensues between, on the one hand, forces of surveillance and detention and, on the other, opportunistic cells representing subaltern interests.

With the rise of India's religious Right in contemporary times, and the effective dissolution of the Indian Left, progressive politics is on the wane in once-radical Bengal. Disfranchised communities of the province find themselves caught in the crossfires between the state and ultraleftist militant groups, and the opportunistic machinations of local syndicates

and private militia. But does this impasse push them toward civil society and its tempered modes? Or do the indirection, raucousness, and violence of contemporary Bengal politics index a groundswell of mobilization beyond a point of no return? Should we not look for new forms of political subjectivity, perhaps even agency, emerging from this inchoate churn? I pursue these questions in the context of communities currently displaced by river-bank erosion along the international border between Bangladesh and India.

A politics of the churn: between legality and legitimacy

In the 1960s, in the heydays of Nehruvian India's program of planned development, construction work started on a barrage across the mighty Ganga at Farakka, just upstream from the point where the river entered East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The project, whose stated objective was to provide the port of Calcutta with a new lease of life by channeling a larger volume of water along the Bhagirathi-Hooghly distributary in West Bengal, was undertaken without any study of its long-term environmental impact. Whether the barrage, operational since the mid-1970s, helped the navigability of the river at Calcutta remains an open question; far more indisputable are the disastrous hydrological effects it has had on the surrounding districts of Malda and Murshidabad in West Bengal, Rajshahi in Bangladesh, and even parts of Bihar and Jharkhand provinces. While experts track the shifts in fluid pressure and directionality inducing massive riverbank erosion, local folks liken the river to a large snake held by its neck, flailing its tail in fury.⁶² This entanglement of scientific knowledge and cosmology—of seemingly incommensurable forms of expertise—indexes the difficulty of comprehending the unfolding disaster. Thousands have lost their homes and arable land on both sides of the Ganga along its stretch that coincides with the international border between India and Bangladesh.⁶³ This remains an ongoing problem. Over time, the silt from the washed away banks forms islands, locally known as *char*, in the middle of the river.⁶⁴ Although these *chars* are wont to disappear in the next round of floods, tens of thousands of displaced people have moved to these sandbars and islands, imagining them to be a natural restitution of their lost land.⁶⁵

Once the displaced settle on the islands along the international border, the proverbial no man's land, they are rendered stateless, their existence a vexation to normative ideas of territory, law, and citizenship. In sharp contrast to the everyday interactions these marooned communities continue to have with borderland inhabitants, both Bangladeshi and Indian governments disown them, treating them as an archipelago of aliens, a potential threat to the security of each territory and its citizenry. Because of this official attitude, the displaced are placed under round-the-clock surveillance, with border security forces on both sides subjecting them to all manners of harassment. Barbed wires, check posts, patrol boats, public address systems, and searchlights comprise a highly visible security apparatus intent on detecting every border infringement, every attempt at illegal passage.⁶⁶

A project of studying these stranded populations might begin with their demographic composition, point to the impossibility of demarcating them according to their origin, and dwell on their hybrid cultures drawing on elements not only from both Hindu and Muslim communities but also from local syncretic denominations (for instance, Sahajiya and Sufi communities) and Dalit groups such as the Matuas. Some scholars would focus on the

migration of working age men to the big cities (Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai), leaving the women, children, and the elderly to fend for themselves, largely by picking up odd jobs in the informal sector often bordering on the illicit (including the smuggling of rice, pirated media, and cough syrup that produces a buzz). Others could focus on the ways in which these *char* communities become pawns in local political games on both sides of the border: for instance, casting votes with faked identity cards or fraudulent ballots during elections, being paid to attend political rallies to inflate popular turnout, and even risking their bodies as mercenaries in demonstrations and riots.⁶⁷ Still, others might choose to document the precarity of these groups as they move from island to island within this *terra infirma*, by drawing on satellite imagery showing the long-term movements in riverbanks, water flow, and midchannel silt formations.⁶⁸ All these approaches belie the clarity and certitude that cartographic borders exude in their performative underscoring of geographic stability and territorial sovereignty; instead, the borderland emerges as a bustling zone of everyday interactions, negotiations, and transformations. A properly southern cultural studies approach would seek not only to foreground these material complexities, but also to debunk once and for all the imaginative conceit and juridico-legal power of the international border. Instead of reiterating a stable, definitive boundary, such an approach would embrace a processual understanding of the border.

It should be clear that my proposal for an experience-based conception of the border owes a great deal to an earlier spate of border thinking some two to three decades ago, in the seminal works of scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Homi Bhabha, and José Saldívar.⁶⁹ Responding to a historical conjuncture in which the forces of globalization appeared to transcend national borders, these critical thinkers questioned the idealization of a borderless world; simultaneously, they called attention to the emergent, interstitial zones of contact and creativity, hybrid selves and communities, mixed cultures and aesthetics. Even as these scholars recorded the material aspects of everyday lives lived at the margins, their focus was primarily on questions of subjectivity, belonging, and culture in the diaspora. In Anzaldúa's autobiographical work on growing up in the Mexico-Texas borderlands, the border takes on a metaphorical charge as the space of liminality, marginality, and hybridity. There is a general sense of the violence of borders, but that violence is not adequately parsed into its material components. Border-living gives way to border-thinking and border-writing all too quickly. I am primarily interested in the material processes that constitute the borderlands, processes whose violence not only violates subjectivities and marginalizes people in terms of their social and cultural location, but also tries to wring the life out of its victims according to an all-consuming logic of extraction.

Mezzadra and Neilson propose that we explore the border itself *as method*.⁷⁰ For these scholars, far from promoting a borderless world, globalization has led actually to a proliferation of borders: their role in the regulation of various flows—of labor, commodities, ideas—has become more crucial, more pointed. Approaching the border as not so much a predetermined structure as a methodology allows us to understand the precise operations of its power in relation to local forces. Such an approach compels us to attend to the ways in which proliferating borders have led to the multiplication of differentiated labor forms, and thus to more extensive expropriation and more intensive extraction. Thus on the *char* islands at the Bangladesh-India border, with the grown up males migrating to distant

cities in search of livelihood, women as well as boys and girls in their early teens become the target of exploitation: they end up smuggling goods, or get initiated into sex work.⁷¹ Border experiences differ from one instance to another: just in terms of infrastructures and salient modes of passage, boats are critical in the Mediterranean, while tunnels and desert convoys are significant along the US–Mexico borders. It is possible to generalize about certain structures and attributes: for instance, the presence of a border control regime with its surveillance and deterrence mechanisms, or the conduits of piratical activities such as smuggling and human trafficking. But these common aspects cannot erase the singularity of each borderzone, much of which is shaped by the ecology of the place itself. With the *char* refugees at the Bangladesh–India border, one has to contend with the ineluctably material aspects of lives saturated with water, sand, and silt, amidst some of the most populated areas of the world. Mezzadra and Neilson call for an ethos of translation across singularities, so as to forge coalitions from below.⁷² How might we articulate the plight of a drug mule at the Mexico–US border with that of a woman smuggling cough syrup at the Bangladesh–India border? How do arid landscapes, overrun by boulders, sand, and desert plants, stack up against an amphibian terrain in a state of constant churn? While acknowledging the need for translocal epistemologies and interventions, southern Cultural Studies has to hold on to the singularity of historical experiences.

What is the historicity of the displaced communities along the Bangladesh–India border? The infamous Radcliffe Line, which divided up South Asia into two separate countries overnight in August 1947, did not pay heed to local communities. There are stories about how the line literally cut across homesteads and localities, so that cousins, neighbors, and friends woke up in the morning to find themselves citizens of two different countries. Riots have broken out in the region time and again, and full-fledged wars have been fought between India and Pakistan in 1948, 1965, and 1971, the last one leading to the birth of Bangladesh and the movement of several million refugees into India.

The Farakka Barrage, which exacerbated the erosion of riverbanks along the Ganga, was commissioned by the Indian government in the early 1960s, when India–Pakistan tensions were running high: the project was clearly a case of the upper riparian side flexing its geographic muscle. After the liberation of Bangladesh with Indian help, the single biggest source of tension has been the issue of water sharing, with Farakka at the center of multiple controversies at the international level. Some of that tension is, no doubt, displaced onto the *char* communities, who provoke suspicion on both sides because of their stateless status. Oddly, the alienness of these communities becomes such a point of obsession precisely because of the impossibility of telling them apart from legal inhabitants on both sides: failing to ascertain their affiliations beyond doubt, both Bangladeshi and Indian officials categorize them as trespassers. The situation is aggravated by widespread practices of cross-border traveling without legal visas: for instance during festivals, seasonal peaks in agriculture, or local elections. These ground-level exchanges—all historically condoned transgressions—point to a thick, buzzing, and dynamic borderland whose communities have long depended on each other. And yet, the stateless status of the people on the sandbars and silt islands along the international border marks them out as a security threat.

One could ask, who is truly afraid of the stateless (since legal denizens of the borderlands on both sides seem to accept them)? Who is the real threat here? The *char* dwellers are abjectly poor communities, holding onto precarious land that may disappear in the next storm. The palpable reason for their misery is a misbegotten state project. Yet,

unlike victims of flood or cyclones, these displaced groups do not qualify for official assistance. There is no social service on the islands: the *char* dwellers' primary experience of the two states is in terms of security measures directed against them, and legal structures that seem only to stifle them. Moreover, as Nicholas de Genova has argued with respect to the Mediterranean refugees, for all their spectacular performativities, border control regimes are strikingly porous: the real scandal at the border is not the illegal passages of unauthorized aliens, but the numerous ways in which they can actually cross over.⁷³ The illegality of these infiltrators renders them vulnerable to obscene forms of exploitation, often by the enforcers of border security. In the Bengal borderlands, this translates into the conscription of the *char* people into various illicit activities organized by local gangs and border security forces on behalf of syndicates and political parties: ration card fraud, electoral fraud, land distribution fraud, smuggling, and human trafficking (with the displaced as commodified objects).

As Ranabir Samaddar, Paula Banerjee, and others working on the Bengal borderlands have demonstrated, people in these frontier regions encounter "the state" mainly in its regulatory officiousness; they have to figure out their own quotidian lifeworlds, often spanning communities across the border, not with the help of the state but *in spite of it*.⁷⁴ For example, landless laborers from both sides routinely cross the border during the harvest months to find jobs as seasonal workers. A gap opens up between what is legal, and what is experientially felt by these border communities to be legitimate. I have argued elsewhere that in the gap between legality and legitimacy, a range of activities emerges to comprise the realm of the *piratical*.⁷⁵ These include piracy, smuggling, counterfeiting, assorted fraudulent schemes, and, in extreme situations, terrorism: activities that, in their felonious attributes, mark an exit from the realm of civil society. Opportunistic and calculated maneuvers, these are signs of a vernacular *intellect* intently engaging the here and the now (as opposed to more benign signs of a vernacular *imagination*, such as boatmen's songs along the area's many waterways, worship of local deities, and other cultural practices that stabilize a granular lifeworld). Unlike reformists who seek to change the laws to improve and perfect the Law, these uncivil agents in the borderlands—who find the legal firmament to be not only imperfect but also fundamentally unjust—put pressure on legal structures to disrupt and displace them. However, this is not done with an explicit desire to resist or rebel: in fact, these outlying communities would rather have a stable welfare state providing them with the basic affordances that citizens expect. The act of exit, of rebellion, happens by default, as disenfranchised groups seek simply to survive, to make do, to improvise a way of living in spite of all the official strictures that block them.

This instinctual opportunism, this indirection and lack of self-reflexive opposition, bothers scholars looking for categorical signs of political will and agency. Those who celebrate the multitude as the ground of endless potentialities—Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, among others—take a more utopian view of piratical formations.⁷⁶ Exploring contemporary conditions that potentiate possibilities for global democratic futures, other than the attenuated structure of political sovereignty that is imposed by the forces of neoliberal globalization, Hardt and Negri zero in on the role of new media technologies in destabilizing the very concept of private property.⁷⁷ What is novel about these technologies is their power to reproduce and disseminate media products easily, rapidly, and almost without any additional cost. But these strengths also weaken the notion of intellectual property, allowing for the use of media objects by many without depriving the original owner or

depleting the object. For a global order that approaches every aspect of life in terms of market logics, this destruction of private property—the axiomatic pivot of market economies—by digital media affordances that helped establish this order globally, is a crisis-inducing conundrum. No legal framework will be able to resolve this problem, unless it takes into account the fundamental shifts in the social category of property, and the global reality of a *common* of creative labor and products.⁷⁸ For the “global political body” is not simply “a national body grown overlarge,” but it “has a new morphology” with pirates supplying a part of its “flesh.”⁷⁹ Other scholars, facing currently available evidence, offer a more contemplative view of such volatile ontologies. Dilip Gaonkar notes that the “poor,” the “governed,” or the “people” usually “engage the political in the language of poverty that fluctuates between patience and violence.”⁸⁰ Therefore, “imagining and positioning the people through the mediatory category of citizenship” plays the distinct “ideological function” of disavowing volatility.⁸¹ Gaonkar concedes that the people do not reject citizenship as such, but mobilize the concept’s constitutive rights and responsibilities selectively, in light of their actual material needs: “citizenship with its promise evacuated by corruption and neglect, is no longer the hallowed point of political arrival, but a portal through which they pass, time and again.”⁸² But if that is the case, how can we hold on to the assumption that the “telos of a people as a collective identity” is to emerge as law-abiding, “rights bearing individual citizens?”⁸³ Toward the end of the article, Gaonkar offers a sobering image: as the elite hold onto the fiction of citizenship circumscribed by the values and institutions of civil society, “the multitudes keep mulling about in increasing numbers in streets, squares, and slums.”⁸⁴

Both sides agree on one thing: it is probably among such inchoate and illicit emergences at the borders that our political futures are taking shape. A southern project of Cultural Studies has to locate, embrace, and nurture such subaltern, decolonial emergences.

Notes

1. Some colonized spaces—India and the settler colonies of North America, to take the largest examples—were located, strictly speaking, above the equator. But the colonial imagination produced the former as a “southern” land (stagnant yet exotic, supine yet intractable), while the latter were reframed as sovereign nations carved out of *tabula rasa* territory, thereby erasing their genocidal origins.
2. Throughout this essay, when “cultural studies,” “area studies” etc are used as nouns, the first letters are capitalized (e.g., the field of Cultural Studies); when they are used as adjectives, the terms are in small letters (e.g., cultural studies approaches).
3. Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 45.
4. Bishnupriya Ghosh, “Looking through Coca Cola: Global Icons and the Popular,” *Public Culture* 22, no. 2 (2010): 333–68, doi:[10.1215/08992363-2009-031](https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2009-031).
5. For a more detailed exploration of the case of the *char* inhabitants, especially in relation to documentary mediation, see Bhaskar Sarkar, “On No Man’s (Is)land: Futurities at the Border,” *Transnational Cinemas* 9, no. 1 (2018): 47–67, doi:[10.1080/20403526.2018.1472828](https://doi.org/10.1080/20403526.2018.1472828).
6. The emergence of Delhi, Johannesburg, and Manila as new sites of global knowledge production has much to do with their success in adapting and internalizing northern modalities.
7. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Difference: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 70.
8. Ibid.

9. Significant examples of such narratives include *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* (1977), *Mr. India* (1987), and *Dil Se* (1997). For a discussion of the musical numbers, see Anna Morcom, *Hindi Film Songs and the Cinema* (Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2016); Bhaskar Sarkar, "The Mel-lifluous Illogics of the Bollywood Musical," in *The Sound of Musicals*, ed. Steven Cohen (London: BFI, 2011), 30–40.
10. Tatiana Siegel and Anne Thompson, "DreamWorks, Reliance Close Deal," *Variety*, September 19, 2008, <https://variety.com/2008/film/features/dreamworks-reliance-close-deal-1117992505/> (accessed July 18, 2019).
11. See Dick Hebdige: "Staking out the Posts," in *Hiding in the Light*, ed. Dick Hebdige (Routledge: London, 1989), 181–207.
12. See Arjun Appadurai's memorable argument about "the imagination as a social practice" and as "the key component of the new global order" in Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 31.
13. Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc, eds., *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) seeks to represent Anglophone Cultural Studies 2.0 as practiced by a new generation of scholars, focusing on North America, Europe, and Australia. But the volume's subtitle, "The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture," suggests a far more general scope, unreflectively reproducing an all too common academic tendency.
14. See Rey Chow, "The Age of the World Target: Atomic Bombs, Alterity, Area Studies," in *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work*, ed. Rey Chow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 25–44.
15. Ariel Heryanto, "The Intimacies of Cultural Studies and Area Studies: The Case of Southeast Asia," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 3 (May 2013): 303–16, doi:10.1177/1367877912474541; Anthony Reid, "Studying 'Asia' in Asia," *Asian Studies Review* 23, no. 2 (1999): 141–51, doi:10.1080/10357829908713227.
16. Cultural Studies scholars who have similar arguments include Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural Studies and/in New Worlds," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10, no. 1 (1993): 1–22, doi:10.1080/15295039309366846; Alberto Moreias, *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); and Raka Shome, "Space Matters: The Power and Practice of Space," *Communication Theory* 13, no. 1 (2003): 39–56, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2003.tb00281.x.
17. Here I have in mind rigorous attempts, mainly by historians and anthropologists working within Area Studies, to pluralize various global—even universal—categories by insisting on linguistic and cultural specificities: for instance, critical attempts to conceptualize traditions of cosmopolitanism as situated, rooted, or vernacular. See, for instance, Carol Breckenridge and others, eds., *Cosmopolitanism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); and Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
18. Giles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum, 2004).
19. Ibid. The entire first chapter of *Difference and Repetition* is an exposition on "difference-in-itself."
20. Ibid., 63.
21. Ibid., emphasis added.
22. Thomas Lamarre, "Your Brain on Screens: Neuronal Risk and Media Addiction," in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Risk*, eds. Bishnupriya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2019).
23. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 253, emphasis in original.
24. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1977), 83–88; Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, ed. UNESCO (Paris, France: UNESCO, 1980), 305–45; Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,"

- University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–65, <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>.
25. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*; Lamarre, “Your Brain on Screens.”
 26. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 253.
 27. Michael Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975–76* (New York: Picador, 2003), 246–50; Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Achille Mbembé, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming 2019).
 28. Jon Beasley-Murray, *Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
 29. Toby Miller, ed., *A Companion to Cultural Studies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), xvii.
 30. Beasley-Murray, *Posthegemony*.
 31. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 253.
 32. Lamarre, “Your Brain on Screens.”
 33. Ibid.
 34. Toby Miller, *A Companion to Cultural Studies*, 3.
 35. Ibid., xvii, xx.
 36. Padma Chirumamilla, “Remaking the Set: Innovation and Obsolescence in Television’s Digital Future,” *Media Culture, & Society* (June 2018), doi:[10.1177/0163443718781993](https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718781993). Recent popular discourse has shifted to the daunting problems of e-waste management posed by the massive new electronic markets in Brazil, China, and India, with little awareness of the longstanding local practices that, contrary to North America or Western Europe, have helped recycle discarded electronic equipment. See Syed Faraz Ahmed, “The Global Cost of Electronic Waste,” *The Atlantic*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/09/the-global-cost-of-electronic-waste/502019/> (accessed July 19, 2019).
 37. Radhika Govindarajan, *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India’s Central Himalayas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Corey Byrnes, *Fixing Landscape: A Techno-Poetic History of China’s Three Gorges* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2019).
 38. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular,” *Postcolonial Studies* 8, no. 4 (2005): 475–86, doi:[10.1080/13688790500375132](https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790500375132).
 39. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
 40. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Difference*.
 41. Ibid., 77–78.
 42. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Difference*.
 43. Ibid., 78.
 44. Ibid.
 45. Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 176, doi:[10.1080/09502380601164353](https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353).
 46. Ibid., 177.
 47. Ibid.
 48. Ibid., 178.
 49. Of course, the essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” from the mid-1940s, included in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, remains the most significant statement from the Frankfurt School. The historical context that instigates Adorno and Horkheimer’s damning critique of the culture industry is obvious:

Culture is a paradoxical commodity. It is so completely subject to the law of exchange that it is no longer exchanged; it is so blindly equated with use that it can no longer be used. For this reason it merges with the advertisement. [...] Advertising becomes

simply the art with which Goebbels presciently equated it, *l'art pour l'art*, advertising for advertising's sake, the pure representation of social power.

- See, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007), 131–2.
50. E.P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past & Present* 50, no. 1 (February, 1971): 76. doi:10.1093/past/50.1.76.
 51. This understanding draws on a central tenet of the Westphalian international order and presumes its applicability within each sovereign territory: peace and legal covenant as the bases for commerce and other pursuits.
 52. This idea is ubiquitous across Marx's writings. For instance, “The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.” Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York City: International Publishers Co., 2014) 3.
 53. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and eds. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York City: International Publishers Co., 1971), especially 445–557.
 54. *Ibid.*, 134–61.
 55. Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 3.
 56. In writing about the Occupy Movement, Judith Butler has brought the phrase to the center of academic discourse. But what I have in mind is a more explosive and less civil arena, “the street” being the decidedly southern spaces of the inner cities, the slums, and the shanty towns, marked by raw opportunism, desperate making do, and an endless struggle for survival. Judith Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, ed. Judith Butler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 66–98.
 57. Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*, 4.
 58. *Ibid.*, 25.
 59. *Ibid.*, 146.
 60. *Ibid.*, 146–7.
 61. Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*.
 62. Kalyan Rudra, “The Encroaching Ganga and Social Conflicts: The Case of West Bengal,” <http://gangawaterway.in/assets/02Rudra.pdf> (accessed July 19, 2019); Rajiv Sinha and Santosh Ghosh, “Understanding Dynamics of Large Rivers Aided by Satellite Remote Sensing: A Case Study from Lower Ganga Plains, India.” *Geocarto International* 27, no. 3 (2012): 207–19, doi:10.1080/10106049.2011.620180.
 63. Rudra, “The Encroaching Ganga.”
 64. Arati Kumar-Rao, “The Nowhere People,” <http://peepli.org/stories/the-nowhere-people/> (accessed July 19, 2019).
 65. *Ibid.*
 66. ... *Moddhikhane Char*, directed by Sourav Sarangi (2012: India), documentary film; Sarkar, “On No Man's (Is)land.”
 67. Press reports leading up to the 2019 general elections claimed that the BJP had focused on the populous Dalit group, Matua Mahasangha, as a strategy of chipping away at the electoral strength of the locally invincible Trinamool Congress party. See for instance, Shoaib Daniyal, “Why Hindu Immigrants from Bangladesh are a Key Component of the BJP's West Bengal Expansion Strategy,” *Scroll.in*, August 10, 2017, <https://scroll.in/article/845354/why-hindu-immigrants-from-bangladesh-are-a-key-component-of-the-bjps-west-bengal-expansion-strategy> (accessed July 19, 2019).
 68. Rudra, “The Encroaching Ganga”; Sinha and Ghosh, “Understanding Dynamics.”
 69. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York City: Routledge, 1994); José Saldívar,

- Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).
70. Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, The Multiplication of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
 71. Paula Banerjee, "Bengal Border Revisited," *Journal of Borderland Studies* 27, no. 1 (2012): 31–44, doi:[10.1080/08865655.2012.687208](https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2012.687208).
 72. Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border as Method*.
 73. Nicholas De Genova, "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality': The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 7 (2013): 1180–98, doi:[10.1080/01419870.2013.783710](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2013.783710).
 74. Ranabir Samaddar, "Who is Afraid of the Migrants in Bengal?" in *Passive Revolution in Bengal, 1977–2011* (New Delhi: Sage, 2013), 63–72; Banerjee, "Bengal Border Revisited."
 75. Bhaskar Sarkar, "Media Piracy and the Terrorist Boogeyman: Speculative Potentiations," *Positions: Asia Critique* 24, no. 2 (2016): 343–68, doi:[10.1215/10679847-3458649](https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-3458649).
 76. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).
 77. Ibid.
 78. Ibid., 158–88.
 79. Ibid., 162, 181.
 80. Dilip Gaonkar, "After the Fictions: Notes Towards a Phenomenology of the Multitude," *e-flux* 58 (October, 2014): 13. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/58/61187/after-the-fictions-notes-towards-a-phenomenology-of-the-multitude/> (accessed July 19, 2019).
 81. Ibid., 12–13.
 82. Ibid., 13.
 83. Ibid.
 84. Ibid.

Acknowledgements

I thank Bishnupriya Ghosh, Somak Mukherjee, and Raka Shome for their comments and insights.