Unrealized promises: the subject of postcolonial discourse and the new international division of labor

Aroch Fugellie, P.

Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter One

Metonymic Discourses and the Ideology of the Signifier

As the thinker immerses himself in what faces him to begin with, in the concept, and as he perceives its immanently antinomical character, he clings to the idea of something beyond contradiction. The antithesis of thought to whatever is heterogeneous to thought is reproduced in thought itself, as its immanent contradiction.


In this chapter, I address several key junctures in the debate I have summarized in the Introduction about the political implications of postcolonial criticism’s affiliation with the “linguistic turn.” I address certainly not deconstruction per se, but what I regard as its dysfunctional appropriation within the field. I contend that this (mis)appropriation is not innocent but, like any other epistemological activity, always already inserted in ideological frameworks. I draw on Jonathan Culler for my understanding of ideology. According to him, ideology is a narrative that justifies a cultural practice by “concealing [its] historical origins and making them the natural components of an interpreted world” (1973: 471).79

My critique builds up from the observation that contemporary discourses are increasingly guided by a radically literal impulse. This observation has been extensively elaborated, notably by U.S.A. literary critic and political theorist at Duke, Fredric Jameson (1991), and, in a more informal manner, by Slavoj Žižek.80 Unlike theirs, however, my endeavor does not aim at a comprehensive analysis of the cultural and ideological implications of these discourses as such, but is circumscribed by the implications of their appearance in postcolonial theory. If, however, following Foucault (2002), we think of discourse as an event that occurs in situated interaction with other discursive and social processes, then my analysis implicates not only a limited focus but also a qualitative difference. On postcolonial terrain, the hyper-literal impulse to take the part for the

---

79 I also draw on Paul de Man (1919-1983), a Belgian literary theorist for whom “what we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism,” while this “does not mean that fictional narratives are not part of the world and of reality; their impact upon the world may well be all too strong for comfort.” (1996: 206)

80 Here, I am referring to Žižek’s recorded lectures in Astra Taylor’s documentary movie Zizek! See esp. 2005: min. 14.
whole plays out as a major ideological obfuscation. Hence, I address the literal impulse not only as a mechanism in itself, but also with regard to the functions to which it is put. 81

To substantiate these arguments, here I introduce key concepts that reappear throughout this study, before moving to the exploration of their mobilization in postcolonial discourses in the following chapters. First, I develop the notion of “metonymic discourses,” taking off from the understandings of “metaphor” and “metonymy” as proposed by Jacques Lacan (1977a). Subsequently, I contrast my analysis of a passage in Theodor W. Adorno’s Negative Dialectics with metonymic discourses within postcolonial theory. My inclusion of a text by the Frankfurt scholar follows my desire not only to locate a particular problematic in the debate about postcolonial criticism’s (a)political affiliations after the linguistic turn, but also to intervene actively in that debate. I believe that the tensions that play out between the contemporary handling of difference as a concept and Adorno’s usage of difference as a stage in a procedure may help to reconsider the terms of the debate. Having delved into Adorno’s modus operandi, in the second half of this chapter I explore instances of metonymic discourses in the work of three major postcolonial theorists.

In contrast with the following chapters, this one does not revolve around one or two cultural objects, but focuses on several moments in the history of a debate. These selected instances are by no means representative. To that extent, my approach is styled in the same way as my object. For, as Jameson has argued,

the fundamental disparity and incommensurability between text and work means that to select sample texts and, by analysis, to make them bear the universalizing weight of a representative particular, turns them imperceptibly back into that older thing, the work, which is not supposed to exist in the postmodern. This is, as it were, the Heisenberg principle of postmodernism, and the most difficult representational problem for any commentator to come to terms with, save via the endless show, “total flow” prolonged into the infinite. (1991: xvii)

As a consequence, my own sampling of metonymic discourses is itself synecdochic. This being inevitably so, it is important I clarify the criteria guiding my choice of samples. I have not selected postcolonial authors according to the degree to which they indulged in metonymic discourse. Rather, I have chosen to focus on extracts of the work of some of the best known and most respected theorists who are today practicing scholars: Robert Young, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri

81 Synecdoche, as will be discussed below, is perhaps the most common form of metonymy associated with what I term “metonymic discourses.”
Spivak. This selection has forced me to read the texts in question, more often than not, against the grain. By bringing to the fore that which resists foregrounding, this reading is akin to what Jonathan Culler has characterized as the structuralist attempt to dismantle ideology (1973). Nonetheless, as Culler has proposed, “[r]ather than try to get outside ideology we must remain resolutely within it, for both the conventions to be analyzed and the notions of understanding lie within” (1973: 482).

Those words form the ending to a text in which Culler argues that deconstruction does not transcend ideology. He begins that article by establishing that, while structuralism aims at dismantling ideology, post-structuralism attempts to supersede truth-finding (1973: 471). However, he continues, post-structuralism fails in that attempt, being inescapably based on ideological assumptions. In uncritical poststructuralist theory, the attempt at self-transcendence is acted out by means of recursive self-referentiality. To subvert its representational tendencies, post-structuralism deconstructs its own statements (471-77). The ultimate aim of this approach, states Culler, is self-legitimization (480-81). In that sense, post-foundational discourses are still founded on what he has called the “ideology of the sign” (473). This central idea, which I develop into what I designate as the “ideology of the signifier,” forms the basis that underlies my conception of metonymic discourses within postcolonial theory.

The notion of metonymic discourses is also inspired by Rey Chow’s description of the mechanism through which linguistic otherness has been taken to stand in for the cultural other (1998). Chow claims that this mechanism is associated with the field that has come to be known as “theory” within Anglo-American academic circles (1998: xxii). Chow clarifies her usage of the term as follows:

By “theory,” I do not mean the comprehensive sweep of philosophy, hermeneutics, and traditions of literary criticism and interpretation that run from Plato to the present day and that continue to be taught in many graduate programs. Rather, I mean what is generally referred to as “poststructuralism” and “deconstruction,” terms that stand for ways of reading that have radicalized Anglo-American academic worlds since the 1960s. Needless to say, I am using these terms not in a nuanced, exact sense but instead as a type of widely circulated

---

82 While my “reading against the grain” counts for all the authors I consider, it is particularly so in the case of Gayatri Spivak. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, Spivak’s writing strongly resists analysis in the strict sense of the word. That is to say, it resists “analysis” as “to take to pieces, to separate, distinguish … to dissect, decompose.” *(OED)*

83 In a similar vein, Patrick Williams has pointed to the fact that critiques of ideology, rather than being outside it, are in fact oppositional ideologies, best described by the notion of “ideology-as-critique.” *(1999: 284)*
shorthand, in order to describe the general impact “theory” has had on intellectual work in the past few decades. (xiii)  

Chow argues that theory scholars, threatened by the advent of cultural studies, have sought to preserve both their positions and their image as the radical avant-garde within the academy through the metonymic displacement of “internal,” or linguistic, for “external,” or geo-cultural otherness (5).  

Timothy Brennan has argued that “theory leans on the postcolonial, and is even parasitical of it, in the sense that an occult subalternity is conceived as theory’s deepest and most irreducible value” (2006: 16). Contextualizing his statements, Brennan admits that similar critiques have a long history in the fields of cultural and postcolonial studies. The list of authors who have systematically located and analyzed contemporary Anglo-American theory’s inconsistencies and obfuscations is weighty, including names such as Edward Said and Raymond Williams (9).  

In my own exploration, I do not wish to demonstrate the existence of theory’s reductive tendencies within postcolonial studies, for that has been done, by Chow and Brennan among others. My contribution is limited to the dissection of isolated instances of the recent discussion, with the aim of offering a diagnosis of how the ideological presuppositions at stake shape the discourses’ methodological procedures and determine their epistemic frontiers. Only by offering such a close analysis can the limits of metonymic discourses be specified and eventually expanded. By redeploying the problem in and through the figure of metonymy, my attention is specified further by the analysis of a particular logic; a logic indivisible from the interests that structure it and the material support in which it is expressed.  

In both this and the following chapter, the idea of metonymic discourses is central. The first section below elucidates my usage of the term. It is distinct from – while drawing on – Lacan’s understanding of “metonymy” and its dialectic with “metaphor.” The section explains the specific and perhaps unconventional way in which I use these two tropes in the present study, and clarifies

84 My own usage of the term, in the restricted sense, follows that of Chow throughout this chapter.
85 For simplicity’s sake, I will use the terms “internal” and “external otherness” throughout. Nonetheless, I must clarify that although Chow herself does employ the term “internal otherness,” she does not use “external otherness.” My usage of the latter is achieved through logical extrapolation and follows Christopher Bush (2005) who, also in reference to Chow’s work, employs both terms.
86 Brennan’s definition of “theory” is even more confined than Chow’s. Brennan sums up his arguments: “Theory, then, as I mean it, is an American and British translation of French refinements of conservative German philosophy.” (2006: 9, emphases in text)
the reasons for which I employ them as tools of analysis in a literary, ideological and epistemic critique of postcolonial criticism that is not particularly concerned with psychoanalysis.

In the subsequent section, I contextualize the term regarding postcolonial criticism. I analyze the implications of Chow’s denunciation that certain academics tend to replace cultural with linguistic otherness. While here my “pretext” of departure is the rhetorical strategy of metonymic displacement that Chow addresses, in the next sections my pretexts of departure are rhetorical strategies practiced, rather than addressed, by given authors.\(^\text{87}\) Thus, for example, section three opens with an exploration of one sentence by Adorno. What was found to be characteristic of metonymic discourses in postcolonialism, namely, an approach to difference and deferral as content values, is now contrasted with a perspective in which difference and deferral act as structuring principles.

The pretext motivating the fourth segment is a parallelism that Robert Young establishes. It allows me to address the tensions that arise when considering the two previous sections in conjunction, and enables a situated discussion of the metonymic tendency within postcolonial theory. Section five delves into the foundational non-space that shapes metonymic discourses into a particular ideology. This time, the analogy that serves as my pretext functions on a much wider scale than Young’s and is authored by Homi Bhabha. The rhetorical strategy from which I depart in the last section is Gayatri Spivak’s figure of “the subaltern.” It helps funnel the issues I have brought up in the chapter into a question at the heart of “the ideology of the signifier”: the problem of the subject.

**Metaphor and Metonymy**

Psychoanalysis is of importance to understanding the postcolonial paradigm because of the way in which the discipline historically developed. In *Dark Continents. Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*, Ranjana Khanna, a literary theorist at Duke, makes use of the tools offered by the discipline while simultaneously “reading psychoanalysis symptomatically” to “understand it as a masculinist and colonialisit discipline that promoted an idea of Western subjectivity in opposition to a colonized, feminine and primitive other” (2003: ix). She explains that

---

\(^\text{87}\) Here and below, I refer to the rhetorical strategies on which I focus as “pretexts” not only because they are the motif that precedes and gives way to my own argumentation but also because, in a sense, I am using these excerpts as excuses to address much larger issues that are contained in the cases only synecdochically.
psychoanalysis could emerge only when Europe’s nations were entering modernity through their relationship with the colonies. The concept of self and the event of being that emerge in psychoanalytic theory … developed in relation to the concept of the European nation-state. This factor makes psychoanalysis crucial for the understanding of postcoloniality and decolonization. (10)

My endeavor is both more circumscribed than Khanna’s and has a shifted emphasis. I focus on the postcolonial response to the colonial enterprise, and on analyzing and historicizing the theoretical production of postcolonialism rather than that of psychoanalysis. Yet, following Khanna, I seek to explore the continuities she discovers between “the concept of self,” “the event of being” and the “nation-state,” the last of which, more often than not, turns into the question of “statelessness” in contemporary theory. Such continuities are explored at the end of this chapter with respect to the work of Gayatri Spivak, in Chapter Two with regard to that of Homi Bhabha, and in the last chapter with regard to that of Julius Nyerere. In this section, I focus on the single work in psychoanalysis to which I give substantial attention in this study: Lacan’s “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud.”

The lecture took place, as the French psychoanalyst himself recalls, “on 9 May, 1957, in the Amphithéâtre Descartes of the Sorbonne” (1977a: 738). To a significant extent, Lacan’s talk was determined by the particular nature of the audience that had gathered at the Descartes amphitheater on that day over fifty years ago: all had in common a literary training. In appreciation of his audience’s professional expertise, the lecturer’s key formulation was that the unconscious is structured like a language.

Lacan’s proposition that the unconscious is structured like a language is paradigmatic not only because it signals the great impact that linguistic theory has had on Lacanian and post-Lacanian psychoanalysis, but also because it points to the impact that psychoanalysis itself has had outside its traditional sphere of influence, that is, in literary theory, discourse analysis, and associated fields. French philosophers Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (henceforth, N&L-L ), in their book-long analysis of “The Agency of the Letter,” affirm that the text marks psychoanalysis’ passage from mere subordination to an actual intervention in the order of the theoretical, particularly regarding “theoretical jurisdictions other than its own” (1992: 6). Hence, Lacan’s influence on contemporary theory, and particularly his conception of the relationship

---

Although I do not approach this lecture as a cultural object, keeping Khanna’s historization of the discipline in mind, I subject Lacanian theory to critical re-configuration with the aid of two other authors in the chapter that follows, while keeping a distance from its ideological assumptions with the aid of Silverman (1983) in the present chapter.
between language and the subject, not psychoanalysis as such, nor the human subject in a psychoanalytic sense, are what concern me here.

As I indicated in the Introduction, my interest is to trace the subject of postcolonial discourse. I am concerned with that subject as (the access point to) a textual position in the context of the international division of labor. I investigate its literary dynamics, its epistemic value and its function as cultural capital. In contrast, psychoanalysis is traditionally concerned with the subject to the extent that its affects and psychic processes are concerned. Yet, as N&L-L argue in *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan*, Lacan’s essay is inscribed in a three-fold register, of which psychoanalysis is only one, the other two being an “academic discourse” on “literature,” and a “scientific discourse” on “the order of knowledge” (1992: 10). It is likely that Lacan shared this view, since it is one of the major propositions by N&L-L, and Lacan reportedly appreciated their deconstruction of his work. As a matter of fact, in one of his seminars, Lacan praised the authors’ analysis and, although he took issue with their conclusion, he recommended it to his pupils for what he considered its “remarkably explanatory value.” Lacan described the text as the best close reading of his work he had come across and he regretted “never having obtained anything that comes close to it from my followers” (Lacan qtd. in Raffoul and Pettigrew 1992: vii).89

There is a second reason why it is adequate to make use of “The Agency of the Letter” for a non-psychoanalytic enterprise. The abstract, structuralist aspect of Lacan’s writing, which in the humanities today is seldom taken as an engaging aspect of his work, may prove productive in the present context. Lacan’s reliance on algorithms, for example, allows for a swift translation of his ideas to other fields. Dany Nobus, a Belgian scholar in psychoanalysis at the University of Bristol (U.K.), reports that “Lacan confessed unreservedly to his faith in the ideal of mathematical formalizations, because he considered them to be transmitted without the interference of meaning” (2003: 65). Lacan’s attempt to cleanse his formulations of meaning gives those propositions independence from a particular semantic and/or disciplinarian field; it makes them applicable in principle to a number of different contexts and facilitates extrapolation.

Having given some pointers as to why I rely on Lacan’s work for a project of a non-psychoanalytic nature, allow me to indicate why I focus on metaphor and metonymy. Lacan develops the proposition that the unconscious is structured like a language by translating Freud’s concept of “displacement” as “metonymy,” and “condensation” as “metaphor.” Through these

---

89 *The Title of the Letter* was initially presented as part of a seminar led by Jacques Derrida, who also complimented the text. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew are the translators of that book. The references above are from the “Translator’s Preface.” See also 1992: vii-viii. Their citation of Lacan is from *Séminaire XX*. 
tropes, Lacan addresses not only literary dynamics, but also the constitution of the subject in and through language. Because of this double function Lacan’s understanding of the tropes will be helpful in my analysis of textual subject positions.

Furthermore, a focus on metaphor and metonymy helps to address my concern with ideology. N&L-L argue that “[t]he true function of the subject is one that can be analyzed into the following two elements of connotation: metonymy and metaphor” (1992: 71). The view of the tropes as elements of connotation is also held by Kaja Silverman, who works at the University of California, Berkeley as a cultural theorist. With reference to the French literary theorist Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Silverman argues that “connotation introduces into texts what might be called a ‘cultural unconscious’” and in this way “provides one of the chief vehicles for ideological meaning” (1983: 108).

The two tropes may similarly be understood to function as a “cultural code.” In her continued reference to Barthes, Silverman explains the concept:

a cultural code is a conceptual system which is organized around key oppositions and equations, in which a term like “woman” is defined in opposition to a term like “man,” and in which each term is aligned with a cluster of symbolic attributes … Cultural codes provide the basis for connotation. (36)

Metaphor and metonymy are less basic or popular oppositions than “man” and “woman,” so they cannot be treated as a key cultural opposition. Nevertheless, within the context of contemporary academic discourses that are the object of my analysis, they do function as a key set, each of them aligned with a cluster of socio-culturally established attributes. Metaphor is commonly associated with identity, closure, and proximate concepts connected with the epistemic paradigm of the Enlightenment. Conversely, metonymy is commonly associated with difference, open-endedness, the split subject, and other such notions associated with the post-structuralist paradigm. In

---

90 Silverman insists that “Barthes’s model also suggests that the relationship between a connotative signifier and a connotative signified can only be explained through reference to a larger social field, a social field which is structured in terms of class interests and values” (29). Yet, as Silverman goes on to clarify “[t]here are of course certain problems with this model, some of which Barthes himself attempts to resolve in S/Z and elsewhere. One such problem is the assumption that whereas connotation necessarily involves an ideological coercion of the reader or viewer, denotation engages that reader or viewer at an ideologically innocent level” (30). With reference to Althusser, Silverman further argues that denotation is not free of ideology either (30). The difference between connotation and denotation is ultimately only one of the degree to which the meaning produced by each of these forms is conventionally established (31-32). As Silverman suggests, Barthes’s revised understanding of denotation in S/Z posits denotation as ideological insofar as it is actually a hyper-naturalized form of connotation (32). Hence, the fact that metaphor and metonymy are elements of connotation makes them viable objects of ideological analysis.
contemporary works in cultural studies, such as those of Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner (1990: esp. 15), and Dan Fleming (1996: esp. 162), metaphor is criticized for its alleged tendency to freeze the flow of signification in identity and resemblance. In contrast, metonymy is celebrated as contingent, desire-inflicted, and open.  

Since I wish to address ideology through my analyses of these tropes, I will be more concerned with the cultural significations that they bear than with their technical definitions. Still, accounting for the latter will allow me to better address their ideological charge. Hence, I account for my definition of the tropes, with reference to the 1958 lecture where Lacan characterizes them (1997a). I also refer to a previous lecture, where he discusses desire. The reason for this is that, as Silverman suggests, desire marks “the inauguration of meaning” and the subject’s “entry into the symbolic” (176). In order to follow the semiotic possibilities of Lacan’s teachings regarding the two tropes, I thus turn to “The Mirror Stage.”

On the 17th of July, 1949, as a participant at the 16th International Congress of Psychoanalysis in Zurich, Lacan delivered a paper that was to become a classic: “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” (1977b). In it, he proposed that the subject is constituted in terms of desire. This desire marks the subject’s own impossibility, because fulfilling it would require the subject to occupy the place of the other, which is, by the laws of time and space, impossible. The core metaphor around which the lecture is woven is that of a child seeing himself in the mirror, for the first time. The child identifies with his own reflection. Given that this identification involves a displacement, a projection of the self into an outward, spatial dimension, this encounter marks the subject’s lifelong identification of the self in terms of the Other.

The reflection that the child beholds in the mirror forms a complete, autonomous whole. This image clashes with the child’s proprioception in the present, as he is not yet self-sufficient. His image also clashes with the child’s experience of himself prior to the mirror encounter. Facing the mirror, the infant’s previously undifferentiated, multi-sensory relation with otherness is now

---

91 Exceptions that rehabilitate the possibilities that “metaphor” may open up are Margaroni 2006, exploring the concept of “metaphoricity”; and Bal 2006, developing the concept as a verb: “to metaphor.”

92 I also address the question because, as Silverman elaborates, “desire has its origins not only in the alienation of the subject from its being, but in the subject’s perception of its distinctness from the objects with which it earlier identified. It is thus the product of the divisions by means of which the subject is constituted” (176). Furthermore, as Silverman states, the unconscious is “fully defined … by culture”; therefore, “[t]he desires it cherishes have not only been silenced, but produced by the censoring mechanism. In other words, they are mediated through those prohibitions that serve to structure society” (73). In sum, desire points to both the subject’s internal dynamics and to the external ideological conditions by which these internal dynamics are partially constituted.
recalled as a threat of fragmentation. Thus, identification is always already structured around the Other as threat of self-disintegration and around desire for the Other. This desire is the desire to become the autonomous whole that the image promises and, also, a desire to return to a state of undifferentiated unity with otherness.

In this way, “The Mirror Stage” describes the infant’s entry into the Imaginary, the realm that accounts for a primary sense of self, the first step in the constitution of subjecthood. But, for Lacan, the subject is only fully constituted in the realm of the Symbolic, the dominion of language in which the subject is inscribed. I now turn to the Symbolic to account for the importance of occupying the place of the Other, when metonymy and metaphor are concerned. That realm is dealt with in “The Agency of the Letter.”

Lacan’s stated aim in that lecture was to debunk what were then common misreadings of the work of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), in which fixed meanings were assigned to isolated symptoms. Instead, Lacan emphasizes the importance of syntax; hence his proposition that the unconscious is structured like a language (1977a: 739). In stating that the unconscious is structured like a language, Lacan is not saying that it is expressed by using the same material support as does, for instance, English or French. The signifiers by which the unconscious is expressed find their support in physical symptoms, slips of the tongue, dreams, and jokes. So, rather than referring to material support, the proposition refers to the notion that the unconscious operates on the basis of the same articulating principles as English or French. As in other languages, signifiers that correspond to the unconscious produce meaning by virtue of their combination along a signifying chain that is regulated by the laws of a closed order.

Lacan’s stress on the syntactic properties of language and, therefore, on the centrality of “place” in the production of meaning, has a major ontological implication. Inscribed in the Symbolic, the subject is to be understood, quite literally, as the place that it occupies in language. This is to say that the subject, in the ontological sense of the word, is none other than the subject in the grammatical sense of the term (745-46, 753-56). Therefore, in discussing metaphor and metonymy, Lacan is also discussing the constitution of the subject as such.93

---

93 In their “Translator’s Preface” to The Title of the Letter, Raffoul and Pettigrew explain: “The subject – that is, the subject revealed by psychoanalysis – is to be understood simply as an effect of the signifier, a subject of the letter.” They elaborate, quoting occasionally from Lacan: “The subject, then, as speaking subject, ‘is not subjectivity in the sense of being master of meaning,’ but rather is simply ‘the locus of the signifier.’ This is a reversal of roles, indeed, in which the so-called Lacanian subversion of the subject has been located and recognized” (1992: x, xvii). Yet, as the translators go on to explain, N&L-L question this alleged subversion. In Lacan’s “reinscription of the subject as a lack,” N&L-L find that “traditional metaphysics (of subjectivity, of meaning, of truth) is not so much destroyed or radically
To expand on this question, let me briefly recall Lacan’s earlier lecture, “The Mirror Stage.” There, he posited that the subject is constituted in terms of his desire. This desire marks his own impossibility, given that his full self-realization is situated at two equally impossible extremes. Desire is anchored in the hope of a return to the state of undifferentiated unity. But this possibility is lost by the very fact of the self’s awareness of its own selfhood. In addition, this desire is anchored to a displaced ideal image, initially as represented by the mirror and, subsequently, by other human beings. This second site of magnetism is also by definition unreachable, as reaching it would literally require the occupation of the same space-time as the other.

In “The Agency of the Letter,” Lacan offers a modified version of Ferdinand de Saussure’s diagram: “Signifier over signified,” visually represented as capital S and small s, separated by a bar: S/s. Metonymy is the displacement from signifier to signifier along the horizontal axis of language, an incessant sliding of signifiers above the S/s bar (740, 744). Through metonymy, the perpetual deferral that characterizes desire is enacted. The subject seeks to become fully satisfied, which is to become fully signified, which is to attain a perfect match between signifier and signified: a crossing of the S/s bar. But, as indicated in Lacan’s 1949 lecture, this match is an impossibility. The slippery chain of unsatisfied desire can never be fulfilled, and so metonymy is the place of the subject’s lack of being (1977a: 756).

Metaphor, however, offers a way out. Metaphor is the place where a signifier, quite literally, occupies the place of another. In metaphor, the signifier that is to be replaced is abolished from the material level of discourse but “only in order to rise again in what surrounds the figure of speech in which [it] was annihilated” (745). The incoming signifier is able to retain the absent signifier as its signified insofar as the rest of the syntactic unit indicates the place it occupies as that of the missing signifier. In metaphor, then, the displaced signifier transfers its meaning to the signifier that occupies its place at the stated level of discourse. The signifier that is absent at the written level of the text becomes the signified of the signifier that replaces it at the material level of language. The absent signifier thus crosses the S/s bar (745–746). By crossing the bar, the displaced signifier becomes fully signified, which is to become fully satisfied. Lacan poses that metaphor, while rarely occurring, is linked to the question of being (756). Thus, even when "being" is tainted with the

---

subverted as inverted and displaced in that very inversion. Lacan’s project then continues to inscribe itself in an ‘ontology’” (xviii, emphases in text). This question of Lacan’s alleged persistence in a traditional metaphysics of subjectivity is the single point with which Lacan took issue when recommending The Title of the Letter at Seminar XX.
Imaginary for Lacan (also in the sense of being illusory, untrue), its elusive realization in the
Symbolic occurs in metaphor.94

Here my account of Lacan’s understanding of the two tropes ends. Before making explicit
how this view of the rhetorical figures is beneficial to my own endeavor, I must engage in a
comparison between Lacan’s and more common definitions of the two figures. As may be
appreciated, Lacan offers an idiosyncratic understanding that differs from the classical rhetorical-
semiotic sense of the terms. As N&L-L indicate, even the two examples that illustrate these tropes
in “The Agency of the Letter” are only dubiously reconcilable with the classical definitions. N&L-L
point to the fact that in Lacan’s text metonymy “is introduced by the well-known paradigm of the
‘thirty sails.’ These sails are classified by Fontanier as a synecdoche of the part – and thus outside
metonymy” (72). A less strict but still classical definition of metonymy would also include
synecdoche as a kind of metonymy; yet, the point here is the conflation of the two in Lacan’s
definition. A similar irregularity is noted by N&L-L regarding Lacan’s illustration of metaphor,
which “seems hardly classifiable as an example of metaphor in the strict sense: at least two
metonymies can be discerned here, one of the instrumental cause … and the other of the effect”
(73). Let me return to the standard definition of the tropes to identify the reason for Lacan’s
divergence.

Since classical Greek antiquity, metaphor and metonymy have been defined in terms of
similarity and contiguity respectively. As Kaja Silverman argues, “metaphor is in essence the
exploitation of conceptual similarity, and metonymy the exploitation of conceptual contiguity”
(1983: 111). Silverman notes that even though metaphor and metonymy are

of course most familiar as verbal tropes … the definitions which are rehearsed and the
examples which are cited from Aristotle through the eighteenth century indicate that
language is not fundamental to either metaphor or metonymy, which are vehicles for
expressing nonlinguistic relationships. (110, emphases added)

94 In concentrating on the 1958 and 1949 lectures, I have only dealt with what is known as “the first Lacan (the Lacan
of the signifier and of desire …)” and not with “the second Lacan (the Lacan of jouissance and the objet a …)”
(Braunstein 2003: 114). Yet Braunstein views this opposition between Lacan’s earlier and latter work as Manichean.
He therefore focuses on the connections between desire and jouissance: “If desire is fundamentally a lack, lack in
being, jouissance is positivity, it is a ‘something’ lived by a body when pleasure stops being pleasure” (104). Desire is
“the metonymy of being”; while symptom is “a paradoxical satisfaction, the jouissance of denying jouissance” (103,
106). Jouissance itself cuts across the signifying chain: “the drive is a factor that, on finding closed the regressive path
to the encounter with the lost object – the object of desire – is left with no alternative but to press forward … In this
sense, the drive is jouissance, not because it has a calming effect, not because it achieves satisfaction or satiety, but
because it builds the historical, it establishes the memorable in an act that is inscribed, in relation to the order of the
signifying chain, as a deviation or even as a transgression.” (105)
This observation leads Silverman to conclude that “[m]etaphor … exploits the relationships of similarity between things, not words,” and “metonymy exploits relationships of contiguity between things, not words” (110, 111; emphases added).

This conception is distinct from Lacan’s, in which the literality of the word prevails. As N&L-L indicate, Lacan’s understanding of metonymy may be summarized as a “word to word” relationship, while Lacan’s formula for metaphor is “one word for another” (72, 75; emphases in text). Lacan is concerned with the relation between words, not things, his sole concern being the linguistic nature of the relationships. The first reason for this is that Lacan focuses not only on words, but on their literality. For example, when he mentions metonymy (which, as I have indicated, he conflates with synecdoche), he refers to a signifier as the part standing in for the whole of the “signifier over signified” relation, not so much to the relationship between the objects that the signifiers happen to represent. N&L-L indicate that in Lacan’s example of the thirty sails “‘the thing’ is not ‘to be taken as real’” because “it is the connection of the signs which produces the figure, not that of the referents.” According to them, Lacan “wants to eliminate meaning along with reality” from metonymy (72, emphasis in text). Leaving meaning (the signified) and reality (the referent) aside, metonymy for Lacan is a figure that almost exclusively concerns the sphere of the signifier, that is, the material support of language.

Moreover, Lacan writes that “[m]etaphor occurs at the precise point where meaning occurs in non-meaning” (2004: 150). N&L-L explain that “Booz,” the proper name erased from the material level of discourse in Lacan’s example of metaphor, disappears “not only as a proper name, but also as the name of a father, the one who must be killed” for the symbolic to emerge and signification to occur. The authors elaborate: “The signification of Booz as father in ‘his sheaf’ brings paternity of all signification to light here: it is engendered from non-meaning, that is to say, from outside of the signified and in the pure signifier” (75, emphases in text). Hence, a major peculiarity of Lacan’s understanding of the tropes is that he uses them to describe intra-linguistic relationships: to refer to the relation between signifiers and signifieds, or to that between signifiers

---

95 Taking my cue from N&L-L, here I have exceptionally chosen Fink’s translation. Sheridan’s translation reads “metaphor occurs at the precise point at which sense emerged from non-sense” (Lacan 1977a: 746). Sheridan’s choice of verb and verbal tense gives the phrase a teleological motivation which the original does not explicitly have. I choose Fink’s interpretation insofar as it reproduces the structural, rather than chronological, emphasis of the French phrase: “métaphore se place au point précis où le sens se produit dans le non-sens.” (Lacan 1966: 508)
and other signifiers, but always to elements that are internally constitutive of what he terms “the letter.”

As N&L-L explicate, “the letter … designates the structure of language insofar as the subject is implicated therein” (27, emphasis in text). They move on to suggest that to argue that the letter implicates the subject is also to take the subject to the letter. This literalization of the subject stems partly from the fact that “the subject borrows the material support of its discourse from the structure of language” (27-28, emphasis in text). The materiality of the signifier, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe continue, is defined by Lacan in two ways: “as its indivisible character,” and “as the signifier’s ability to be located, its ‘relation to place’ … but this localization is always, strangely, a ‘being out of place.’” Because of this misplacement and because it is unquantifiable, “[t]he letter is matter, but not substance.” Hence, N&L-L describe the letter’s materiality as an “odd” one (28, 29). They suggest that Lacan’s “odd materiality,” neither idealist nor materialist, falls into neither of the major currents in Western philosophy (28).

Lacan’s concern with this “odd materiality” leads his attention away from what the words involved in the tropes mean, and towards their “signifiance.” As Nancy and his colleague explain, “signifiance” is “not signification itself” but “that which makes signification possible” and which operates “at the edge of signification” (62, emphasis in text). As a result, Lacan’s account of the tropes concerns the material support of language, and meaning only plays a part insofar as it relates to this material support. Yet this material support, as I have shown, is closely linked to the figure of the subject.

The letter, understood as the literalization of the subject, operates differently in each of the two tropes. As N&L-L contend, “[m]etaphor gathers in itself … the function of the subject and that of the word; it is the locus where the latter takes possession of the former and ‘literalizes’ it” (75). Conversely, metonymy, understood by N&L-L as Lacan’s “blow” to “Saussurean linearity,” points to both the limits and the possibilities of the “autonomization of the signifier” (73). Metonymy is “the twist which breaks the syntagma and pulverizes it into isolated signifiers”; yet, it indicates “that the ‘one word for another’ [metaphor] must follow the twists and turns of the ‘word to word’ in order to take place” (73, 76). N&L-L claim that metonymy is not only “the syntagmatic trope” for Lacan, as it is for Russian linguist Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), but becomes “the figure of syntagma” itself (72). In other words, metonymy refers to a trope, or twist, taking place at the

---

96 The other element from which the literalization of the subject stems is the fact that “the structure of language exists prior to the entry that the subject makes there.” (Lacan 1966: 495 qtd. in N&L-L 1992: 27)
operative, not at the representative level of language. The scale here is of much smaller – or partial – units than that involved in the usual understanding of the trope. N&L-L insist that:

Metonymy is thus not a figure in the sense of an ornament or a manner of speaking which would keep meaning safe. It is the syntagma as an axis or twist [tour] by which meaning is impoverished in the letter of discourse (73, emphasis in text).

In short, metonymy refers to a figure or twist that takes place in the letter of discourse, along the syntagmatic or horizontal axis of language.

As my account of “The Agency of the Letter” suggested, the traditional association between the syntagmatic axis of language and metonymy, on the one hand, and between the paradigmatic axis of language and metaphor, on the other, not only persists in Lacan’s own definition of the terms but is central to his understanding. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that he persists in the traditional association between metaphor and similarity, nor in that between metonymy and contiguity. Lacan’s break away from those associations is not surprising if we recall his interest in avoiding “the interference of meaning,” and in concentrating on the formal aspects of his objects or tools of investigation (Nobus 2003: 65). The paradigm vs. syntagm opposition, in contrast to similarity vs. contiguity, is more akin to Lacan’s interest in the formal dimension of language because “the former set stems from twentieth century scientific theorising in linguistics, anthropology, ethnology and the history of science,” while “the second set contains more traditional notions” (Dirven 2002: 86). In Metaphor and Metonymy in Comparison and Contrast, Belgian linguist René Dirven writes that “the opposition between the syntagmatic … and the paradigmatic is located at the more formal … level, and the opposition between similarity (or contrast) at the semantic … level” (2002: 86).97 As he goes on to explain, “the contiguity-similarity dichotomy was not first seen or formulated by Jakobson or other structuralists, but it has a long tradition going back a very long way in the history of philosophy, rhetoric and linguistics” (87). Furthermore,

On the whole, Jakobson himself is not very clear on the link between the two sets of oppositions; nowhere does he say how one could see a possible link between the syntagmatic vs. paradigmatic dichotomy and the contiguity vs. similarity (or contrast) dichotomy. (Dirven 2002: 87)

---

97 Although now formally retired, René Dirven is still active at the University of Duisberg (Germany), and at the Linguistic Agency University Trier (LAUD; Germany), which he founded.
The unstable inclusion of similarity and contiguity in Jakobson’s theory is practically abolished in Lacan’s appropriation. Nonetheless, Jakobson’s association of metaphor with paradigm and metonymy with syntagm remains central for Lacan, because this association puts emphasis on the syntactic or formal rather than the semantic or content related aspects of the tropes (see Dirven: 86).

I suggest that the diagrams explaining metaphor and metonymy in “The Agency of the Letter” lead us to think again of syntagm as the horizontal axis of language and paradigm as the vertical one. This presentation draws attention to the structural commensurability of the two axes rather than to their differentiated functions. This subtle shift of emphasis that I find takes place in “The Agency of the Letter” leads me to assert the following. The text may be interpreted as contesting the traditional definition of metaphor and metonymy in terms of similarity and contiguity respectively. Furthermore, the similarity vs. contiguity opposition is not akin with the formal logic of Lacan’s representation of the tropes because it is catachrestic. It conflates two other oppositions: similarity vs. difference and contiguity vs. discontiguity. In this opposition, metaphor is a priori associated with content and metonymy with structure.

The reduction of metaphor to semantic content has determined its frequent association with identity. Meanwhile, metonymy, as I have discussed above, is often associated with the structural aspect of language; with its performative (as opposed to its informative) register. Such an understanding disregards the fact that semantic content and syntactic articulation are two aspects of language that structure each other and cannot be isolated as localizable and discrete ontological entities. Thus, for example, to locate performativity in a particular rhetorical figure such as metonymy is to forget that performativity is a function of language and, as such, cannot be exempt from the workings of metaphor either.

Therefore, the classical association of metaphor with similarity and metonymy with contiguity (preposterously) obliterates Lacan’s emphasis on the structural (rather than semantic)
properties of both these tropes. In Lacan’s definition of the tropes, the literality of the letter prevails and, only as a consequence of this focus, semantics comes into play belatedly. This is because, as Silverman argues, “[a]lthough Lacan repeatedly emphasizes the linguistic status of the signifier – its formal properties,” the Lacanian signifier partially “encompasses what Saussure would call the signified,” resulting in a definition of the signifier that is actually “an elusive blend of idea and form” (164). Similarly, N&L-L argue that “the syntactic and the semantic are more conflated than distinguished” in “The Agency of the Letter” (73). The conflation that the two writers observe is a result of what they have described as Lacan’s focus on “the letter,” which is constituted by an “odd materiality” and has agency in “significance.” Lacan’s focus on the syntactic touches upon the semantic only insofar as meaning emerges from a play of differences within language as a closed system (see Silverman 164).

Lacan’s emphasis on the association of the two tropes with the vertical and horizontal axes respectively, reveals as a secondary trait the fact that the vertical axis of language is also where semantic similarity is found. Like metaphor, which, to paraphrase N&L-L, is the paradigmatic trope as well as the trope of paradigm, paradigm refers foremost to an axis, a structural alignment operative in language as a closed system. From this perspective, the similarity vs. contiguity opposition reduces metaphor to the semantic aspect of language before the fact. The reading of Lacan that I propose allows me to view the two tropes on equivalent terms, that is, without an a priori association of each with either form or content. This reading is pertinent for when I consider how “metonymic discourses” reduce metonymy to a substitution based on contiguity exclusively, and metaphor to one based only on similarity. Metonymic discourses surreptitiously persist in an opposition between form and content. As I have argued, they associate this opposition with the epistemic paradigm of the Enlightenment but claim to transcend it, since they are aligned with the historically undervalued “form” side of it.

The interpretation of metaphor and metonymy outside the opposition between similarity and contiguity is possible because Lacan, in defining metaphor as articulation along the vertical axis of language (across the S/s bar), emphasizes the particularity of the formal mechanism that eventually produces a discrete meaning (for instance, that of metaphor as the place of being). Metaphor is not a substitution based on similarity but a movement across the vertical axis of language. Coincidentally,
this is also the axis along which signification, that is, the correspondence between signifier and signified, takes place. This match produces “being” as a realization, the surfacing into the material support of language of something that had hitherto persisted unexpressed. Hence, Lacan’s metaphor vs. metonymy opposition does not entail a content vs. function dichotomy, but shows how these distinct meanings (content and function) are respectively associated with a rhetorical figure (metaphor or metonymy) by virtue of a particular form of structural articulation proper to each (vertical or horizontal transfer).  

Furthermore, I argue that in Lacan’s definition of metaphor place plays as central a role as it does in metonymy. This brings his conception close to the “two-domain approach” to metaphor, developed by linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson. They suggest that metaphor, in contrast to metonymy, involves two contexts: a target domain and a source domain, which are set in relation by the paradigmatic trope (1980). In other words, two discontinuous domains are put into relation with each other through the operation of metaphor. Although the Lacanian approach brings about a similar emphasis, the reasons for which this happens differ. To explain how so, I return to the standard view of the tropes.

Usually, and in accordance with Jakobson’s proposals, metaphor, as a paradigmatic operation, is associated with processes of selection and substitution, while only metonymy is associated with context. Metonymy, as a syntagmatic operation, is associated with “combination, i.e. each sign consists of smaller and simpler units and finds its own context in a more complex linguistic unit so that combination and contexture are two facets of the same operation” (Dirven: 76). Nonetheless, as Silverman suggests, this does not imply that place is irrelevant in paradigmatic relations, where it operates at a different level. As she explains, while syntagm determines a signifier’s discursive place, paradigm determines a signifier’s systemic place (103-104).

But even this differentiation becomes unstable when we take into account “[t]he Lacanian signifier [as] an elusive blend of idea and form” (Silverman: 164). Silverman calls attention to the fact that “whereas Saussure indicates that both signifiers and signifieds enjoy paradigmatic relationships, Lacan associates those relationships exclusively with the signifier” (163). Furthermore, Lacan connects the syntagmatic with the signified just as he associates the paradigmatic with the signifier. Actually, continues Silverman, “the signified is the syntagmatic element. Lacan thus denies the possibility of meaning inhering in any isolated unit, attributing

---

101 I have discussed an opposition between form and content, as well as one between function and content. Both are actually variations of the basic opposition between structure and content, “form” and “function” being derived from emphasizing different aspects of “structure.”
signifying capabilities only to the discursive complex” (163-64, emphasis in text). Both tropes participate in meaning production insofar as they demarcate relational places in “the two non-overlapping networks of relations that they organize” (Lacan 1977: 126 qtd. in Silverman 1983: 163).

Moreover, due to the fact that Lacan counter-intuitively identifies the signified with the syntagmatic and the signifier with the paradigmatic, he transcends the exclusive alignment between the syntagmatic and discourse, the paradigmatic and system. In contrast to system, discourse involves the material dimension of language, that is, the signifier. Lacan’s identification of paradigm and signifier entangles paradigm with discourse, giving rise to what N&L-L term “the letter” in its “odd materiality.” Therefore, although syntagm determines a signifier’s discursive place, while paradigm determines its systemic place, this distinction cannot be considered an absolute.

N&L-L indicate that Lacan understands the letter “as the signifier’s ability to be located, its ‘relation to place’” (28). Consequently, Lacan’s concern with “the letter” as that which “designates the structure of language insofar as the subject is implicated therein” in turn leads him to conceive metaphor as “the locus where the [word] takes possession of the [subject] and ‘literalizes’ it” (N&L-L: 27, 75; emphasis in text). Metaphor is the locus where “the text finally anchors itself” (141). As N&L-L clarify:

> This anchoring of discourse hence forms a system (through the privilege granted to metaphor …) with Lacan’s preference for the paradigmatic (vertical) axis of language over syntagmatic linearity. (147)

In the last section of their book, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe argue that this anchoring is to a large extent the anchoring of the subject as being in the signifier. They reach this interpretation by tracing a sub-textual reference in “The Agency of the Letter” to the question of being as depicted by German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976).

In sum, the ephemeral realization of the subject as signifier in metaphor destabilizes the otherwise clear-cut distinction between metonymy’s association with discursive, and metaphor’s association with systemic forms of contextualization exclusively.102 Recall that in Lacan’s account

---

102 Furthermore, as will be elaborated in Chapter Three through my analysis of the work of Canclini, “The Agency of the Letter,” especially when read with the aid of N&L-L, allows us to conceive of a third subject position. In distinction from the enunciating and enunciated subjects, this third position may be conceived as a “systemic subject,” which has
of metaphor, absent and stated signifiers attain resonance through each other insofar as the one is related to the set of relationships proper to the other. The incoming signifier is able to retain the absent signifier as its signified because the rest of the syntactic unit indicates the place it occupies as that of the missing signifier (1977a: 745). In Lacan’s words, the displaced signifier disappears from the explicit level of discourse “only in order to rise again in what surrounds the figure of speech in which [it] was annihilated” (1977a: 745).

Recuperating Lacan’s emphasis on structure, in this study I frame the opposition between metaphor and metonymy in terms of discontiguity vs. contiguity rather than similarity vs. contiguity. I have yet to make explicit a crucial factor for this choice: that since “simultaneity” is a form of “discontiguity” it is included under the latter category. Furthermore, simultaneity is a common form of discontiguity that presents itself in metaphor. As Lacan phrases it, like in polyphony, language produces meaning by the vertical superposition of elements and thus “all discourse is aligned along the several staves of a score” (743). This is to say that “discontiguity” refers not only to the target and the source domains that the trope correlates, but also to the expressed and suspended semantic elements that coexist at the same point in time in metaphor.

I should also clarify why I sometimes refer to these tropes as an “opposition”; as “formulas,” or “operations.” This language, which may sound rather schematic for a discussion of literary figures, responds to the fact that, following Lacan, I take them as referring to “words, not things.” More specifically, I take them as referring to the inner workings of words and the ways in which these produce meaning rather than that meaning itself. Since I take metaphor and metonymy as respectively referring to a realization and a displacement of the S/s relationship, the scale at which my analyses are situated is, by and large, that of the letter.

In the case of metaphor, if I explore similarity at all, I take it as a secondary trait. In the case of metonymy, more often than not, I persist in Lacan’s conflation of it with its subclass, synecdoche. In the context of psychoanalysis, this conflation serves the purpose of pointing to how metonymy is not only a displacement, but a specific type of displacement through which an issue too big or weighty to deal with consciously is substituted by a smaller and more manageable one. In that context, displacement is always already a matter of (not) dealing with an issue in its entirety by making it appear as a smaller one, by presenting the part for the whole. In the context of my own

the “status of a non-subjective subject – that is to say a plural, combinatory subject, neither present to itself (it is without consciousness) nor in a definite place (since it is reduced to a calculus of odds)” (N&L-L: 87-88). The systemic subject is equivalent to the position that, in the general Introduction, I described as the subject position at the root of postcolonial discourse: the structuring principle of a field.
project, I maintain Lacan’s conflation in order to address how some displacements in postcolonial discourses serve to cover up a weighty problematic by substituting it with one of its minimal constituent parts. Having defined the tropes, I now turn to how they connect to the cultural code I name “metonymic discourse.”

**Metonymic Discourses**

I have offered my understanding of metaphor and metonymy. But what relationship do these figures have with the central concept of my concern, “metonymic discourses”? I do not use that notion to refer to texts that employ the trope, but to refer to what Kaja Silverman describes as *a cultural code*:

> a conceptual system which is organized around key oppositions and equations, in which a term like [metonymy] is defined in opposition to a term like [metaphor], and in which each term is aligned with a cluster of symbolic attributes. (1983: 6)

I use the notion of metonymic discourses to describe texts in which the contemporary appreciation of values such as difference and deferral and the contemporary skepticism regarding questions such as identity and resemblance have degenerated into a more intricate version of precisely what they set out to criticize.

The central reason why I have devised the notion is that, referring to a formally, culturally, and ideologically specific practice that is relatively dominant within contemporary postcolonial theory, it helps me to locate the subject of postcolonial discourse, which I understand as a textual subject position that emerges relative to this discursive practice. To elaborate, let me turn again to Silverman’s *The Subject of Semiotics*. There, she is critical of Lacan insofar as “[t]he assumption of a primordial lack justifies him in locating the mirror stage prior to the symbolic order” (191). In Lacanian theory, Silverman argues, lack is thus naturalized as primordial, and seen as being merely reproduced in a cultural system of signification that takes further the originary alienation of the subject. Hence, “the continuity of lack from one regime [the imaginary] to another [the symbolic] ultimately overrides everything else, and makes impossible any real critique of the present cultural order” (192). As Silverman claims, the alleged anteriority of desire (motivated by lack) to its culturally specific production hides the fact that the desires that the unconscious “cherishes have not only been silenced, but produced by the censoring mechanism. In other words, they are mediated through the prohibitions which serve to structure society” (73).
To be “able to conceptualize that desire as belonging to a culturally and historically
determinate Other – to a particular symbolic order, and not to the universal or absolute,” Silverman
proposes to read the Lacanian model “in relation to the dominant discursive practices which defined
[its] immediate context, and which still largely prevail” (192). Likewise, she proposes to read the
mirror stage as only *retroactively prior* to the symbolic order. Once “read with these precautions,”
Lacan’s model can help us clarify “not only the relation of signification and subjectivity to the
present symbolic order, but the part played by … difference in the determination of each” (192).¹⁰³

Although Silverman is concerned in these passages with the subject in the psychoanalytic
sense, her precautionary reading of Lacan influences my approach to textual subject positions in a
number of ways. First, it allows me to read the realization of being in metaphor as the reconciliation
of a divide that is preposterously constituted. Likewise, it allows me to understand metonymic
displacements as motivated by a culturally instituted lack. Finally, it lets me regard the desire that
molds these discourses in specific ways as correlative with the ideological and socio-historical
structures in which it is embedded.¹⁰⁴

Before putting to test that approach, it is important to stress that metonymic discourses
should not be conflated with metonymy. I use “metonymic discourses” to refer to discourses where
metonymy is privileged over metaphor and, hence, *their mutual structural dependency is
understated*.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, I use the term to refer to discourses in which both metonymy and
metaphor are essentialized, conceptualized as respectively holding the *content* “difference” or the
content “identity.” With the help Adorno, below I propose that the excessive emphasis on difference
freezes the flow of signification it allegedly sets out to counteract. Once reified in metonymy,
difference is no longer something that occurs in dialectic tension with identity, no longer
performatively enacted in the logical dimension of a discourse, but only present as content or
rhetorical illustration. Hence, I conceive no negative property in metonymy as such. My concern is

¹⁰³ Silverman refers here to sexual difference specifically. I have edited out what is a crucial specification in
Silverman’s theory due to the different focus of my own analysis. Nonetheless, Silverman’s concern with the role of
sexual difference in the relation between signification and subjectivity informs my view of the part played by the
production of *cultural* difference in that same relation.

¹⁰⁴ In chapters to come, this will allow me to explore textual subject positions as cultural capital, since the alleged
possibility of separating “being” from “meaning,” as well as of declaring the former anterior to the latter, endows these
positions with culturally legitimate epistemic value. Regarding the relationship between being and meaning, see

¹⁰⁵ Because of this inequality, I tend to advance metaphor in my specific analyses, simply because it is what happens to
be lacking, not because of an intrinsic value. I consider that the mechanisms of difference and deferral that are usually
sought for by authors of metonymic discourses cannot operate outside the dialectic of both tropes.
rather with how difference has been reified by means of the trope. Similarly, I am concerned with the reification of identity in metaphor.

The metonymic tendency is a common trend in postcolonial discourses. South African literary scholar at Warwick University (U.K.), Benita Parry (2004), as well as Arif Dirlik (2007), have both addressed the textual idealism, commonly known as “textualism,” that dominates the field. In calling their reader’s attention to the need of seriously incorporating large-scale economic and historical variables into postcolonial analyses, both authors have exposed the shortsightedness of less inclusive endeavors. But it is Rey Chow who has ultimately, even if implicitly, framed the problem in terms of a metonymic displacement. She argues that U.S.-based post-structuralist academics use “internal otherness,” that is, difference as a function of language, to replace the actual other and, by addressing the former, obfuscate their neglect of the latter. In this simulacrum, argues Chow, linguistic difference stands in for a geo-political, historical, and economic reality that those academics cannot afford to acknowledge (1998: 3-5).

Chow claims that such scholars “tend to dismiss positions of otherness defined in positive, phenomenological terms,” instead grounding their claim to otherness on a differentiation that is “internal to the fundamental forms of logocentric signification.” This attempt “to blast open the generality of the Western logos with the force of an exotic species/specialization from within” has left in Western thought “the indelible imprints of an internal otherness.” Cultural studies, as it confronts Anglo-American theory with otherness “in the form of other – non-Western cultures,” has brought the substitution of internal for external otherness to a crisis (1998: xvii, emphases in text).

However, this act of metonymic substitution is denied by means of a chronological reversal. In Chow’s words, “the turn toward otherness that seems to follow from the theoretical dislocation of the sign is, strictly speaking, the very historicity that preceded the post-structuralist subversion” (1998: 5, emphases in text). This obfuscation is metonymic insofar as it presents the effect as the

---

106 I place the term in between inverted commas for, as I have mentioned in the Introduction, I do not believe postcolonial criticism’s lack of political positioning to be a problem of text versus reality, but a question of how this relationship is conceived. Actually, such a usage of the term “textualism” practically converts political inoperability and written discourse into synonyms, thereby transforming political questions into ontological ones.

107 Both Parry and Dirlik have highlighted the association between Homi Bhabha’s work and the contemporary tendency towards textual idealism. In Parry’s words “Bhabha’s essays, written over more than a decade and in circulation for some time before their publication in a collected edition in 1994, are a strong articulation of the linguistic turn in cultural studies” (2004: 55). Parry also comments that “Arif Dirlik, who is Bhabha’s most disobliging critic, has charged him with ‘a reduction of social and political problems to psychological ones,’ and with ‘substituting post-structuralist linguistic manipulation for historical and social explanation’ (‘The Postcolonial Aura’, p.333, n. 6).” (59)
cause. Moreover, two associated terms are also conflated: the cultural other and negativity as a logical function. Chow states: “the long-standing hegemony of Western thought has in part been the result of the successful welding together of otherness and negativity” (1998: xxi).

In light of the previous section, Lacan allows me to read Chow in a different way. The substitution of internal for external other is metonymic insofar as there is no vertical correspondence between the two. The metonymy described by Chow points to the inadequacy of the traditional understanding of metaphor and metonymy on the basis of the opposition between similarity and contiguity, because the metonymic displacement she witnesses relies entirely on the similarity between socio-cultural otherness and linguistic difference. The catch is that this similarity is limited to the proximity of elements within a common semantic field. Hence, the mechanism is extremely literal and can succeed only by ignoring the ways in which context disrupts the equivalence between the terms compared. In this sense, too, the strict association between metonymy and context becomes questionable, for only metaphor, if we recall the “two-domains approach” established by Lakoff and Johnson, operates by taking into consideration the source as much as the target context of the signifiers at stake.

What makes the phenomenon described by Chow a metonymy rather than a metaphor is that there is no actual analogy. Here, I employ the term “actual” in two senses. First, I understand it as: “in action or existence at the time; present, current” (OED). Metonymy, as opposed to metaphor, does not establish an actual analogy because the two terms of the equation (signifier – signifier) cannot co-exist at the same point in time. Metonymy implies transference along contiguous elements and is characterized by deferral. There is no actual analogy because the realization of meaning (understood as the exact correspondence between signifier and signified) is always postponed.

Secondly, I take “actual” to mean, “existing in act or fact … carried out; real; – opposed to potential, possible, virtual” (OED). When considering metonymy, the former sense is closely linked

---

108 In the classical rhetorical understanding of the term, the “effect for the cause” type of metonymy is clearly distinct from the “part for the whole” metonymy (synecdoche) visualized by Chow, and which I had been discussing so far. As argued above, in accordance with Lacan I do not distinguish between both sub-forms of the trope. Yet I do analyze the implications of the “part for the whole” substitution.

109 Chow contends that this conflation between the postcolonial other and negativity as such is preceded by the categories of class and gender, because “the critique of capitalism begins with a labor of negation … and ‘woman’ … has always been theorized as … the negative truth of man. Hence, class and gender, the two key players that have partaken in the dismantling of Western thought from within, both work negatively, as bearers or markers of differences that underpin Western language, metaphysics, work and sexuality.” (1998: xvii)

110 Here I refer to context in both the literary and historical senses.

111 The order of the definitions which I describe as “first” and “second” refer to their organization within my own discourse, not to the numbering of the entries in the Oxford English Dictionary - OED.
to this one because the lack of an immediate correspondence between signifier and signified interrupts the realization of signification. In this sense, metonymy is not actual, as in not “real,” because, in contrast to metaphor – where the outgoing signifier is realized as the signified of the incoming signifier insofar as the remainder of the syntactic unit indicates the place it occupied – metonymy does not rely on “what surrounds the figure of speech” to activate and actualize a signifier’s potential meaning (Lacan 1977a: 745). From another perspective, this is to suggest that metonymy is the place of a subject’s lack of being (see Lacan 1977a: 756).

The substitution of internal for external otherness thus takes away attention from an actual other by transference to a virtual other. To phrase it otherwise, the name of difference is made to stand in for difference itself. Here it is important to note that we are dealing with synecdoche, a metonymy whereby the part stands in for the whole. The change in focus from the external to the internal other is a matter of scale. This scale is also one of values: Chow is clear in arguing that scholars are not merely displacing attention from one place to another, but are attempting to cover up a large issue by focusing attention on a small one (1998: 5).

The metonymy in question denies the real, co-existing other by diverging attention to otherness in the abstract. But the mechanism’s rhetoric does not stop there, for the small issue is capable of covering up the large one. The part succeeds in usurping the place of the whole not because of its weightiness, but precisely because it is so unsubstantial. This brings me to the question of virtuality. In the following chapter, I elaborate on virtuality as that which usurps the name of reality by simulating its effects.\footnote{Virtuality is that which is so “in essence or effect, although not formally or actually; admitting of being called by the name so far as the result or effect is concerned” (OED, emphasis added). It is in following this definition that we may say that a particular virtual object seeks to appropriate the name of a corresponding real one by simulating its effects.} In the synecdoche that concerns me here, the part substituting for the whole is also a virtual category that seeks to take the place of its extra-linguistic counterpart.

This ontologically confounding move inverts the terms of the equation. In metonymic displacement, as denounced by Chow, the other as actual subject is deprived of his subjecthood and reduced to a signifier of otherness as an abstract function. The socio-cultural other is the signifier standing in for linguistic difference, which now appears to be the term reaching beyond the material support of language. Hence, the introduction of the virtual dimension simulates a metaphoric
relationship between the two terms. This simulation consists not in transcending language, but in allowing a linguistic category to occupy the place of the real.\textsuperscript{113}

Due to this naturalization of language I take the substitution of internal for external otherness to be typical of metonymic discourses. Let me substantiate this statement by recalling my unease with the contention that metonymy encapsulates the performatative aspect of language. Performativity is not a trait proper to, but the operative aspect of, any rhetorical device. Only as an effect provoked, as an apparent content or subject matter, is it characteristic of metonymy and not of metaphor. But the cultural code that appears to be subversive because it celebrates historically undervalued concepts, views metonymy as escaping identity. Yet identity persists through that code in two ways: in the recognition of performativity as a content value, and in the similarity between the internal and the external other.

Metonymic discourses take the metonymy’s comments on itself (that is, its effects) at face value, because they are themselves elaborated from a metonymic perspective that is guided by a radically literal impulse. I do not believe this hyper-literality to be an inherent feature of theory in the strict sense. However, I do believe that a juncture of historical and intellectual circumstances, converging in and around First-World academies today, have facilitated the disablement of some of the critical possibilities opened up by the post-structuralist intellectual inheritance, while simultaneously triggering its conservative potential. Hypothetically, as Gayatri Spivak (1994: 86-90) and Robert Young (2001: 411-426) have argued, concepts denoting difference and deferral, paradigmatically Jacques Derrida’s \textit{différance}, have much to offer to postcolonial studies.\textsuperscript{114} However, as with metonymy, such notions may easily become essentialized and thus be rendered ineffective. This is not to suggest that the provisional attribution of reductive identities is altogether foreign to the creation of concepts. What Adorno calls the identifying mode of thinking operates by default in any epistemological endeavor (1983: 147). Rather, it is to suggest that the tendency towards essentialization of terms that describe functions may not be as easily perceived as in the case of terms describing ontological qualities (such as “woman” or “black”).

The essentialist tendency in metonymic discourses may be associated with the exacerbation of spaces of articulation to the degree that they can no longer exert their function, having become

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item This is a naturalization of language, hence, an ideology, according to Culler’s (1973) and de Man’s (1982) cited definitions of the term.
\item As Derrida holds, “The two apparently different values of \textit{différance} are tied together in Freudian theory: to differ as discernibility, distinction, separation, diastem, \textit{spacing}; and to defer as detour, relay, reserve, \textit{temporization}.” (1982: 18, emphases in text)
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
things in themselves. Jameson has observed that the disregard for the syntagmatic dimension of language (and for temporal organization in general) is characteristic of postmodernism: “The crisis in historicity now dictates a return, in a new way, to the question of temporal organization … and indeed, to the problem of the form that time, temporality and the syntagmatic will be able to take in a culture increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic” (1991: 25). In the field of postcoloniality, I am similarly concerned with how the syntagmatic disappears de facto precisely in discourses that most celebrate the notion.

Adorno exploits the syntagmatic dimension of language logically and performatively. Hence, his writing may prove productive in view of the contemporary tendency to essentialize difference and ontologize functions. Another reason why this revisit is pertinent is that, as Dirlik has observed, the contemporary emphasis on difference has foreclosed the discussion of that which unifies, namely, “capitalist modernity,” which, as Dirlik argues, “thrives on the production of simulacra – including the simulacra of cultural difference” (2007: 8).

In the following section, I present a reader’s experience when confronted with a couple of sentences by Adorno. Some today would find the return to Adorno redundant, because contemporary discourses have already named, developed and stabilized into concepts that which are merely intuitions implicit in his modus operandi. However, I return to Adorno’s work precisely because there questions of difference and deferral are central only as operative functions. I also return to it because it focuses on how difference and deferral are products of identity. Finally, I contend that the conflation between the phenomenological other and logical negativity, highlighted by Chow, may be most pertinently addressed through Adorno’s characteristic process: the negation of the negation.115

The Identifying Mode of Thought

Let us suppose a reader. She reads:

As the thinker immerses himself in what faces him to begin with, in the concept, and as he perceives its immanently antinomical character, he clings to the idea of something beyond

---

115 “The negation of the negation” is the most succinct way to describe the methodological principle of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* (1983), first published (in German) in 1966. In the following section, I will only deal with the first two points mentioned above. This third point concerning negative dialectics as such will only be dealt with towards the end of this chapter.
contradiction. The antithesis of thought to whatever is heterogeneous to thought is reproduced in thought itself, as its immanent contradiction. (Adorno 1983: 146)

The reader is reading the passage at least for a second time. She reads it again and again because the more she tries to make sense of it, the more her understanding seems to be poked at rather than encouraged. But this reader is not easily discouraged; once again she dives into the first sentence. If the reader lets herself flow along the stream of words, time and again she reaches an impasse; a logical impossibility in the resolution of meaning. If she is to persist in her readerly duty, she has no choice but to return, and to turn to the structures that weld the parts together. The sentence makes her understanding hesitant. It simultaneously suggests and interrupts her half-formed thoughts; it does not lead her to a synthesis, instead forcing her to analyze.

In what follows, I account for this virtual experience in reading the first sentence of “On the Dialectics of Identity” in Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* (1983). I take this single reader’s experience as characteristic of the experience I believe Adorno’s writing in general compels. Hence, my own approach, as I suggested in the introductory section, does not escape the synecdochic. Indeed, I take that passage as synecdochic of Adorno’s grammatical constructions, which tend to call the reader’s attention not only to contradictions, but also to the sum of contradictions and to the way in which their superposition allows them to simultaneously potentialize and cancel each other out. Thus, Adorno does not write: “As the thinker immerses himself in the concept,” but postpones informing his reader what it is the thinker immerses himself in, writing instead: “As the thinker immerses himself in what faces him to begin with.” Only then does he introduce a subordinate clause clarifying, “in the concept.” In this way, Adorno puts emphasis on the opposition, on the action of facing, before giving way to the idea of a concept as a fixed entity occupying that space in front of the thinker.116

Furthermore, Adorno is not explicative in his supplementary clause. He does not clearly phrase out something like, “and that which faces the thinker from the start is in fact the concept,” but simply allows the reader to reach that conclusion by placing the sub-clause in syntactic analogy. Adorno does not emphasize discrete, localizable entities, such as the thinker, the concept, or

116 I am leaving aside the whole question of translation that would, doubtlessly, alter my reading of Adorno, whose writing is particularly known for its untranslatability. I am using the only published translation in print of *Negative Dialectics* that is available in English, that by E. B. Ashton (a translation by Robert Hullot-Kentor is forthcoming with the University of Minnesota Press). Ashton’s translation has been charged with over-literariness, a fault that I find, nonetheless, most convenient for the present purposes.
singular words producing meaning in and of themselves, but the structures by which these entities are partially constituted, such as syntax, or the relationship between thinker and concept.

Two other questions emerge that again underscore the centrality of relation to the process of knowing. First, there is the question of the parts of speech the author favors. Conjunctions are notably absent. Oftentimes a word can be read as qualifying either a preceding or a following sub-clause. Hence, the author’s production of meaning, while forcefully thrust in a specific direction, resists finality and remains indeterminate. Curiously enough, adverbs appear with great frequency, as if qualitative differences in processes – as opposed to things – are important to define.

Second, emphasizing the importance of grammatical place in the production of meaning, Adorno uses what I term “placeholders” with great frequency. In the sentence above, the phrase “in what faces him to begin with” would be such a placeholder. Placeholders usually replace a noun, the introduction of which is postponed, retained, or simply implied. Sometimes the missing noun, without being present, is clearly localizable; at other times, it remains ambiguous. What remains constant is that these phrases retain the place of an absent entity to foreground the logic within which it is structured, taking attention away from the entity as an independent unit. 117

The reader has been confronted with one contradiction that, though perhaps difficult to come to terms with, is perfectly comprehensible: the thinker is immersed in a concept that was initially opposed to him. To this contradiction is now added another: one intrinsic to the concept itself that, as Adorno claims, is “immanently antinomical.” Transcending the initial distance that separates him from the concept, the thinker immerses himself in it to find that the entity is itself wrought by contradiction. Nonetheless, that contradiction may be logically resolved. However complex, Adorno is narrating a story, using words to re-present an idea, and so the reader may follow. The major difficulty arises when the third clause is introduced.

Grammatically, that third clause is supposed to contain a resolution. The first clause sets a condition, the second clause emphasizes and prolongs the expectation by insisting on a further condition, so the third clause is expected to relieve that tension by finally telling the reader what happens when the thinker “immerses himself in the concept” and as he perceives “its immanently antinomical character.” But, given that the reader is being told repeatedly that what the thinker encounters is ceaseless contradiction, the reader’s expectation is not so naïve; she thinks she already has quite a clear picture of what it is that the thinker will come to, in the end.

117 Other placeholders in the same paragraph would be “whatever is heterogeneous to thought,” to refer to “the concept,” or, “what it [the concept] covers” to refer to “the particular.” (146)
With this third clause, Adorno’s introduction of contradiction is most disruptive. The resolution is precisely the opposite from what the reader has been led to expect. The author does not phrase it explicitly, but his grammatical constructions confront the reader with the following insight: precisely because the thinker is placed in opposition to the concept, and precisely because the concept is itself contradictory, the thinker does not cling to contradiction, as the reader (teleo)logically expects, but quite the opposite: the thinker seeks to contradict contradiction itself. While previously Adorno narrated contradiction, here he performs it. In contrast to previous occasions, this contradiction is not handled as a concept to be discerned, but enacted as a disruption of the logic that the reader must follow.

Hence, the central concept here is that of contradiction, which produces difference, yet never names it. This is why Adorno’s passage serves as a good counterpoint for my analysis of metonymic discourses. Discursively and performatively, Adorno’s modus operandi is centered on the confrontation of entities, while metonymic discourses are concerned merely with the product of that confrontation. In them, the operativity of difference has become stagnated and transformed into a content value. Similarly, as will become clearer below, those discourses are characterized by skepticism of identity to the extent that the role of identity in the production of difference is entirely disregarded. Adorno (preposterously) recovers the operativity of difference by setting it in context of its dialectic with identity.118

Hence, in contrast to metonymic discourses, the recognition of the differences between the particular and the universal, as well as between the qualitative and the quantitative, are crucial to Adorno. I will discuss the conceptual weight of these relationships for his theory below. Here, I wish to account for the synecdochic presence of this principle in the sentence I have analyzed; I am referring to Adorno’s use of placeholders. These facilitate the introduction of qualitative difference. By keeping operative a place that indicates that a particularity should arrive, yet foregrounding the logical structure within which that particularity is located, placeholders enable the reciprocal

---

118 As I have argued, the obscured essentializing tendency of metonymic discourses rests on the reduction of metonymy to a substitution that is based exclusively on contiguity, and metaphor on similarity. This contrast relies on the binary opposition between form and content. The cultural code I contest simply inverts rather than questions that opposition. This suggests that, as deconstruction teaches, metonymic discourses are, like any other discourse, founded upon the structural logic of oppositions that may be made vulnerable as their mutually constitutive nature is exposed (See Derrida 1982: 10; Klages 2008: 2). However, in metonymic discourses the persistence of these foundations is not recognized; the mechanism of self-referentiality, in constantly exposing that foundational logic of language, allegedly subverts it. The radical self-referentiality of metonymic discourses also draws away attention from an external referential framework. Consequently, the situatedness of a metonymic discourse remains hidden, and appears to be its very condition of being. It presents and relates to itself as the structuring principle rather than as a particular construct.
questioning and actualization of the universal and the particular.\footnote{119} This dialectic, as the one that Adorno establishes between identity and difference, is not unlike the workings of metaphor, as envisioned by Lacan, Lakoff and Johnson. In all cases, the element of the enunciator’s concern is set into context through the correlation of a target and a source domain.

Furthermore, as previously discussed in relation to metaphor, placeholders recall the centrality of context in the production of identity. As Adorno puts it, “the thing itself is its context, not its pure selfhood” (1983: 162). When an analyst approaches an object, it is critical for him or her to be aware of the constellation in which it appears, because “the history locked in the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in relation to other objects” (163). Just as Adorno observes regarding the object that is analyzed in the constellation that situates it historically, a word in a sentence is diversely illuminated by the elements that surround it. Hence, the word or object realizes itself only as it opens itself up to exteriority, an exteriority which, in turn, “potentially determin[e] the object’s interior” (Adorno, 1983: 162). Each element of the constellation illuminating it from a particular angle, the word is realized just as it is contextualized. In the next section, I turn to this realization of language in context.\footnote{120}

Before I do so, let me return one last time to the first two sentences that appear under the subheading “On the Dialectics of Identity” in Adorno’s \textit{Negative Dialectics}. This time, I want to intervene in the text to introduce a qualitative difference, making use of Adorno’s placeholders in order to substitute one particular for another. Hence, I return to the fragment by way analogy; submitting different particulars in the same, overall logic.\footnote{121} The analogy would read: “As she immerses herself in what faces her to begin with, in the text, and as she perceives its immanently contradictory character, Adorno’s reader clings to the idea of (attaining) something beyond contradiction. The antithesis of her thought to whatever is heterogeneous to it – in this case, Adorno’s text – is reproduced in her own thought as its immanent contradiction.”

\footnote{119}{What I have called Adorno’s placeholders play a role equivalent to that of the zero in the mathematical mode of representation. Amongst mathematicians zero is often referred to as the “universal enabler.” This is because zero, while literally adding nothing, is capable of unlocking qualitatively different possibilities in articulation with the other digits; likewise, it enables the appearance of substantially different dimensions, such as the introduction of negative numbers. In the history of mathematics, zero initially appeared with the development of positional notation, in order to demarcate “nothing in this column.” In other words, zero came into being as a simple placeholder. See Kaplan 1999.}

\footnote{120}{This grammatical contextualization is not only spatial, but also temporal. As Adorno states “cognition of the object is cognition of the process stored in the object”; the constellational approach unlocks the object’s (or the word’s) “sedimented history.” (163)}

\footnote{121}{In so doing, I intend to probe Adorno’s universal proposition with the particular experience of his virtual reader.}
This analogy, implying a correspondence between thinker and reader on the one hand, and concept and text on the other, deals with a parallel logic on two distinct ontological registers. Grounding the concept at the level of its linguistic formulation and the universalized thinker as a gendered reader, my analogy emulates a parallel paradigmatic shift from Adorno’s moment to our own. This movement, although epistemologically productive and ethically pertinent, cannot afford to disregard its own reliance on the abstract underpinnings of its formulation.

To clarify this point let me further analyze the analogy. The process undergone by the reader in reading that first sentence of Adorno’s is best described by the second sentence: “The antithesis of thought to whatever is heterogeneous to thought is reproduced in thought itself, as its immanent contradiction” (146). In other words, Adorno not only describes, but also stages an encounter between a subject (whether it be the thinker or the person reading) and an externality. This externality, the concept in the case of the thinker and the text in the case of the reader, has the form, yet not the ontological status, of thought. The opposition between the subject and the specific externality in question is reproduced in the subject’s own thought.122

However, this reproduction of an external contradiction, precisely because it is a reproduction, is supposed to follow rather than precede the encounter. Yet, it must simultaneously precede the encounter since it is immanent to thought, and since thought is one of the two entities realizing the encounter. This chronological contradiction exposes identity as a by-product of confrontation that appears as immanent to the thing. Therefore, this understanding of identity contrasts with its implicit definition in metonymic discourses. In metonymic discourses, identity is associated with metaphor exclusively. This is to say that identity is associated with the immediate, unmediated realization of the signified in the signifier. Hence, the only contestation possible is unidirectional deferral along the chain of signifiers, a movement that, to borrow Arif Dirlik’s expression, may be described as delineating a teleology of space (2007:11). This binary opposition between fixation and movement reduces movement to deferral and forecloses the possibility of more complex forms of chronological contradiction, as the one proposed by the Frankfurt philosopher.

122 In this sense, the externality considered is similar to the “real abstraction” considered by Žižek who, in turn, borrows in his definition of the term from both Lacan and Sohn-Rethel. Žižek states that the real abstraction may be seen as “the form of thought external to the thought itself – in short, some Other Scene external to the thought whereby the form of the thought is articulated in advance. The symbolic order is precisely such a formal order which supplements and/or disrupts the dual relationship of “external” factual reality and “internal” subjective experience.” (1989: 19)

123 Adorno states that “after the unspeakable effort it must have cost our species to produce the primacy of identity even against itself, man rejoices and basks in his conquest by turning it into the definition of the conquered thing: what has happened to it must be presented, by the thing, as its in itself.” (48)
I do not use the adjective “complex” here lightly. I use it to refer to the degree of variety in a form of organization. Morin proposes that “in opposition to reduction, complexity requires that one try to comprehend the relations between the whole and the parts.” In complex epistemological approaches, he continues, “the principle of reduction is substituted for a principle that conceives the relation of whole-part mutual implication” (2005: 6). Furthermore, the principle of disjunction and of conjunction operate together in complexity (2005: 6). While in this section I have explored such a form of complexity in a fragment by Adorno, in the sections that follow I assess the implications of (lack of) complexity in the approach to otherness in some passages by Young, Bhabha and Spivak.

I draw this section to a close by pointing to why metonymic discourses tend to remain devoid of complexity. Adorno’s negative dialectic is characterized by its resistance to arrive at a final synthesis. Nonetheless, he recognizes the sine qua non need for thought to function through synthesis, or what he calls “the identifying mode of thinking” (147). Conversely, metonymic discourses rely on a purely analytic tendency. Their epistemological interest tends to be reduced to the simplest form of (linguistic) organization: mutually constitutive binary oppositions. Rather than incorporating the awareness of this structural basis into alternative constructs, they resist moments of synthesis at all cost. Paradoxically, they do not avoid freezing the flow of signification, but merely displace its site of coagulation from semantic elements to syntactic functions. This exacerbation of language’s structural traits and the concomitant disregard for its referential and enunciative situatedness is also the central tension at stake in Robert Young’s distinction between language and discourse, which I examine below.

The Constellational Actualization of Language

Robert Young’s *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001) shows the ways in which the intellectual tradition of postcolonial criticism has played a determining role in the configuration of socio-political agency. In its programmatic account of the historical ties between this tradition and social resistance movements in the Third World, the book can be read as Young’s effort to vindicate postcolonial criticism as politically pertinent. But, although Young insistently contests the accusations of textualism made on the field, one significant exception remains. It concerns his appreciation of the theory’s commitment to language in contrast to discourse.
In his differentiation of the two terms, Young relies on Michel Foucault. As Young argues, for Foucault “a discourse is an epistemological device which constructs its objects of knowledge …, the objects of reality and the ways in which they are perceived and understood” (2001: 388). A discourse’s molding force exceeds the subjective register of objects and events. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault writes that “the atom of discourse” is “the statement” (Foucault 2002: 90). Young explains, “the statement itself constitutes a specific material event, a performative act or a function, an historical eruption that impinges on and makes an incision into circumstance” (Young, 2001: 401-2)\(^{124}\). I conclude that for Young discourse is constitutive of both knowledge – the located and shared subjective register of objects and events – and history – the ontic dimension of objects and events as they unravel in time.\(^{125}\)

Discourse’s double bind in knowledge and history is what most clearly differentiates it from language.\(^{126}\) As I intimated at the beginning of this chapter, I associate the referent with the realm of history (and ontology), and associate the signified with the realm of knowledge (and epistemology). If we understand language as a series of signifiers producing meaning by virtue of their combination along a chain that is regulated by the laws of a closed order, then we may say that the trespass of language (in its purely formal capacity) into the realms of the referent (history) and the signified (knowledge) constitutes discourse. Young phrases it in the following way: “Discourse is language that has already made history” (2001: 400). Discourse is the actualization of language in the two senses of “actual” previously indicated. Language may be understood as a virtual category, as discourse in its potential state.\(^{127}\)

\(^{124}\) Furthermore, discourse “is primarily the way in which a knowledge is constituted as part of a specific practice whose knowledge is formed at the interface of language and the material world.” Young adds that “[t]he difficulty – but also the value – of his [Foucault’s] analysis is bound up with this desire to characterize discourse as a material, historical entity: Whereas language can be considered solely in the aesthetic realm of the text, and knowledge can be considered in the abstract, transcendental field of philosophy, discourse works in the realm of materiality and the body, in the domain of objects and specific historical practices.” (2001: 399)

\(^{125}\) In my usage of the term “knowledge” here, I rely on Foucault. What he terms savoir is “a domain in which the subject is necessarily situated and dependent” (2002: 202). Furthermore, situatedness is constitutive of knowledge because the latter is “defined by the possibilities of use and appropriation offered by a discourse,” that is, by “the totality of points of articulation on other discourses or on other practices.” (201)

\(^{126}\) Young does not define “language” straightforwardly, as he does “discourse.” Yet, there is a clear implication of what he means by the term in the way that he opposes it to that of “discourse.” I believe that implication to be broadly similar to Lacan’s (1977a), which is that which I follow most closely in the definition above.

\(^{127}\) Strictly speaking, language, while not covering the realm of the referent, does cover the realms of both signifier and signified, not that of the signifier alone. In other words, the signified is inherent to language. Nonetheless, in the spirit of Lacan’s provisional approach to language in its purely formal capacity, as a system purged of meaning, I presently align the realization of the signified in the signifier with “discourse,” rather than “language,” so as to best distinguish the hyper-literal tendency that concerns me here. My isolation of the signifier as something that can virtually, yet in and of itself, carry the weight of “language” is easier to maintain within a Lacanian framework because, as Silverman argues,
Young acknowledges that Foucault’s understanding of discourse could answer many of the fundamental objections leveled against postcolonial theorists, as the latter have never taken discourse seriously. As exemplified in Edward Said, the postcolonial tradition has rarely approached discourse as a material and historical entity. Young further comments that, in the tradition of Said’s *Orientalism*, colonial discourse analysis has only conceived of discourse as disembodied knowledge, a form of representation that misrepresents what is “really there.” This, Young argues, presupposes an “ideology-versus-reality distinction, or signifier-signified distinction, which Foucault’s analyses explicitly reject” (399).

In stating that in *Orientalism* Said indulges in an “ideology-versus-reality distinction, or signifier-signified distinction,” Young is establishing a parallel between two relations, that of ideology vs. reality on the one hand, and that of signifier vs. signified on the other (399). In principle, these two relations refer more or less to the same phenomenon, but on a different scale: the former at the level of our lived experience, the latter at the level of the letter. However, this analogy is catachrestic, especially if we take into account Culler’s approach to the relation between reality and ideology, as well as Lacan’s approach to the one between signifier and signified. As Culler suggests (1973), ideology is the naturalization of a narrative; a narrative’s attempt to usurp the status of reality. Ideology and reality compete for the same place in the onlooker’s eyes: they cannot co-exist and attain their self-definition precisely in their prevalence over the other term. The mutually exclusive relationship that ideology and reality hold is at odds with the one held between signifier and signified, which consists of mutual dependency. Signifier and signified can each be defined precisely to the extent that they open up to articulation with the other term.

The word “signifier” designates an entity that represents a signified. But whether or not it seeks to obfuscate its own representational nature is alien to the competence of the term. In using the terms signifier and signified we recognize that in order for a single phenomenon (signification) to take place, it must articulate across different ontological registers. Yet, when we distinguish ideology from reality, our central concern is not the transference between two different ontological planes but the obfuscation of one by the other as a result of specific interests. Interests, entailing both agency and a specific order of power, are always implied in the question of ideology. Furthermore, as Benita Parry has implied, interests always point to the structural position occupied by a given agency (2004: x). In sum, the relation between ideology and reality, in contrast to that

the Lacanian signifier partially “encompasses what Saussure would call the signified,” producing a signifier that is actually “an elusive blend of idea and form.” (164)
between signifier and signified, cannot consider signification as independent of the enunciating agency, nor can it consider signification as untainted by extra-epistemological interests. To designate a specific narrative as an “ideology” is not only to describe it as something that names reality, but also as something that lays claim to reality. If we understand ideology as what organizes our mode of looking, but which we cannot see itself, then the distinction also positions the enunciator in a situation of exteriority to the ideology described and is, in this sense, a performative.128

The parallelism established by Young is effective for as long as we disregard these aspects of ideology in order to focus on those aspects shared with the signifier-signified distinction. But then, Young’s usage requires us to leave aside precisely that aspect of language he argues we should prioritize. I do not believe this slight contradiction to be anything more than that. However, precisely as a slippage it points to Postcolonialism’s ideology. The foundational blind-spot of Young’s book, I claim, is the conception that discourse is the “embodiment” of language, as opposed to what I call its “constellational actualization.”129

I describe Young’s conception of discourse as “the embodiment of language” because he only requires that we admit its ontic dimension, while minimizing the constitutive role of the structural position from which it is articulated. However, following Adorno’s claim that “the thing itself is its context, not its pure selfhood,” the ontological dimension of language cannot be considered independently of its positioning (162). Along with Adorno, and against Young’s understanding of the term, I take discourse to be the actualization of the contextual elements that potentially determine language.130

To conceive of discourse as the embodiment of language only requires that we admit its ontic dimension. To think of discourse as the constellational actualization of language requires that

---

128 I can only deem the distinction above to be a performative in principle, for, by definition, the constative and the performative nature of a given statement are the realization of a particular potentiality, contained in principle in any statement but realized or not according to context. As Jonathan Culler, following Derrida, concludes after discussing the work of J. L. Austin, there cannot be “a firm separation of constative from performative” for the constative “subsists not as an independent class of utterance but as one aspect of language use”; likewise, the performative is not a particular kind of utterance but a ‘dimension of all speech acts’” (2000: 506). A revised version of this article now also appears in Culler’s most recent book. See 2007: 137-165.

129 In what follows, I refer exclusively to Young’s ideology as metonymically expressed in his catachrestic parallelism. Only further below will I refer these claims to a more panoramic view of Young’s text. Regarding the concept of “constellation,” coined by Walter Benjamin, I adhere to Adorno’s (1983) development of it.

130 Adorno proposes that, “by gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts potentially determine the object’s interior. They attain, in thinking, what was necessarily excised from thinking.” That surplus historicity that was necessarily excised from thinking (i.e. that ideologically foundational blind spot) can only be unleashed “by the actualization and concentration of something which is already known and is transformed by that knowledge. Cognition of the object in its constellation is cognition of the process stored in the object.” (1983: 162, 163)
we also admit its structural positioning. The notion of position presupposes a structure because it is a particular place that can be defined only in terms of a wider configuration of relations. The sphere of the political refers precisely to such a configuration. According to Chantal Mouffe, the political is the potential antagonism inherent in social relations (2005: 16). Mouffe argues that this antagonism, as the tension configuring the field of the political, is ever-present, whether manifest or not; for, even when hegemony reigns uncontested, the possibility of an alternative persists as a structuring tension (9-13).

Mouffe further argues that the repeated claim that we have reached the end of the adversarial mode of politics serves the interests of the contemporary order of power (2, 10, 29). By relegating that model to the past, hegemony institutes itself as the uncontested, logical apex of history (32, 35, 83). Political questions are today being displaced and reduced into moral and juridical ones (5, 13, 72-76). In this way, she argues, the possibility of debate is foreclosed. Antagonism no longer finds an outlet in the domain of politics, traditionally a space for debate on the basis of a minimum consensus (18-21). Hence, Mouffe claims, antagonism is increasingly acted out in terrains that define identifications in terms of origins rather than positions (30, 72-76).

In these ways, Mouffe suggests that a metonymic displacement of the political (entailing macro-logical structures of power) to ontologized identities (whether of a moral, ethnic or religious nature) preserves today’s hegemony. Young participates in such a displacement. His project to depict postcolonial criticism as political paradoxically presents as a problem of origins what is in fact a problem of typically late capitalist co-optation. Two chapters in Postcolonialism, titled “Foucault in Tunisia” and “Subjectivity and History: Derrida in Algeria,” offer a sustained argumentation of how post-structuralism may be viewed as a non-European endeavor in its origins.

---

131 This Belgian political theorist at Westminster University (U.K.) also states that such an antagonism can take different forms but can never be absolutely eradicated. She also differentiates “the political” from “politics”: “If we wanted to express such a distinction in a philosophical way, we could, borrowing the vocabulary of Heidegger, say that politics refers to the ‘ontic’ level while ‘the political’ has to do with the ‘ontological’ one. This means that the ontic has to do with the manifold practices of conventional politics, while the ontological concerns the very way in which society is instituted” (2005: 8-9). She further clarifies that “by ‘the political’ I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by ‘politics’ I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created.” (9)

132 Mouffe associates this slippage away from the adversarial mode of politics to the end of the bipolar and the emergence of a unipolar world order, which has led to the dissolution of the political markers that used to structure the political imaginary, and to an alleged blurring of the frontier between the left and the right (2005: 2, 6-7, 31, 72, 76-82). She argues that today, for example, the question of human rights substitutes, to a large extent, standard political action. Since human rights are an unquestionable given, their predominance forecloses the political question of why things are as they are (83-89, 123-126).

133 Here and below, I follow Gayatri Spivak in her distinction of analyses based on “macro-logical structures along ‘Marxist’ lines” and those that are characterized by a “resistance to economics, and the emphasis on concepts like power and desire that privilege micrology” (1994: 85, 86).
Although Young does return to the historical context of French Algeria to make this point, his argument relies strongly on the non-Western origins of major post-structuralist theorists, notably Derrida’s mixed ethnicity and extra-European national background.134

This ethno-biographical approach is highlighted by Young’s concurrence with Spivak’s retort to Benita Parry, in which Spivak justifies her work on the basis of her ethnic provenance (Young 2001: 415). In Young’s own response to the critiques directed at him by Aijaz Ahmad, he reinforces the geo-ethnic binary implicit in the West vs. non-West opposition and forecloses the possibility of any political debate according to Mouffe’s understanding of the term. Against Ahmad’s charges, Young defends his own practice of a post-structuralist postcolonial criticism on the grounds that it is partially a product of the non-Western world. In reducing the problematic to a question of the theory’s geo-ethnic origins, Young side steps the political question – what interests does it actually serve? – as well as the macro-structural question: how does the theory relate to its own place of enunciation within the contemporary order of power?

This reduction has a major methodological consequence. It works in opposition to Young’s stated claims, since it is concomitant with the prioritization of language (understood as a virtual category) over discourse (understood as the historical, ontological and cognitive actualization of the former). I am referring here to Young’s defense of Derrida’s pertinence to the political struggle of postcolonial criticism as based on the stylistic similarity between the aesthetics of Derrida’s thought and the raids during the Algerian war. In Young’s words:

The very concept of “erasure” (rature) echoes and denies the violent razzias with which General Bugeaud first attempted to subdue the Algerian interior. Derrida, who was to attend the Lycée Bugeaud, constitutes the trace of that incursion that has now come home to roost in its own system. (418)

Young is not defending Derrida’s discourse for how it intervenes across language, or at minimum opens up the possibility, but rather exalts in how it mimics in a realist – nearly onomatopoeic – way a historical reality.

134 To exemplify, Young’s arguments are as follow: “Those who reject contemporary postcolonial theory in the name of the ‘Third World’ on the grounds of it being too western, however, are themselves in doing so negating the input of the Third World, starting with Derrida, disavowing therefore the very non-European work which their critique professes to advocate” (2001: 413). A couple of paragraphs before, quoting his own words from White Mythologies, Young argues that: “If so-called ‘so-called’ post-structuralism is the product of a single historical moment, then the moment is probably not May 1968 but rather the Algerian War of Independence – no doubt itself both a symptom and a product. In this respect, it is significant that Sartre, Althusser, Derrida and Lyotard, among others, were all either born in Algeria or personally involved with the events of the war.” (412)
Young’s rhetoric is metonymic because equivalence in content is suggested through the phonetic proximity of “rature” and “razzias.” Given that rature both “echoes and denies” the razzias, the Derridean concept of erasure appears as a product of a particular reality that it phonetically imitates to subsequently exclude it. Young’s formulation celebrates rather than confronts that procedure. He further profits from the metonymic displacement between “General Bugeaud” and “Lycée Bugeaud.” The fact that the school Derrida attended is named like the General who brought about the “violent razzias” is supposed to be of consequence for Derrida’s conceptual inventory and its relationship to the real. Specifically, it leads up to the claim that Derrida himself “constitutes the trace of that [General Bugeaud’s] incursion that has now come home to roost in its own system.” In this phrase, Derrida, the person, is read as a trace that stands in for a socio-politically relevant action while the proper realm of that incursion is implicitly defined as language, rather than history, because such is the place of its roosting.

In foregrounding formal resemblance over historical incidence, Young is validating Derrida’s writings as language while foreclosing its possibilities as discourse. Yet, his argument suggests that an intervention (preposterously) takes place between Derrida’s language and the history described. This false impression is attained by foregrounding the aesthetic similarity between language and history. To propose this coincidental similarity as an argument in defense of post-structuralism’s political pertinence is, once again, to confound the political with the ontological. For Young is implying that the fact of a connection between language and history is to be taken as political, independently of the order of the causality.

Young’s neglect to discuss the relation between language and discourse in terms of positioning may be explained by his determination to avoid narratives that, like Mouffe’s, take for granted that there is a clear, overall (geo-economic) structure “out there.” Yet Mouffe’s reading of the contemporary order of power points to the fact that “the political,” as the structural tensions inherent in social relations, has not collapsed with the fall of the Berlin Wall (2000). Rather, antagonism has been reduced to a potential that, as such, paradoxically serves to actualize hegemony. The elements in tension are so aligned that the structure itself cannot be seen.

135 In a more generous reading of Young, it could be argued that if the school was named after the general, his arguments here have historical pertinence, pointing to the indoctrination in colonial logic. Likewise, with the issue of onomatopoeia, it could be argued that Young is actually pointing to the possibility that there is linguistic agency below, lower that, the level of the discursive statement. While the first of these possibilities relativizes my critique, the second holds a potential that, if Young had phrased it out and developed in relation to postcolonialism’s distance from Foucault, could perhaps serve to rationalize the choice of postcolonial theorists for taking that distance.
Framing Scales

The slippage from ideology vs. reality to signifier vs. signified in Young’s text can be read as a miniature analogy of the shift from structuralism to post-structuralism. Both ideology vs. reality and signifier vs. signified are relations that constitute a structural unit. Because of the difference in scale, however, the constructed aspect of the relation between signifier and signified is more difficult to see. As Derrida himself emphatically indicates, language is a structure. But although that statement may come as no surprise, this fact is frequently effaced by the radically literal impulse of metonymic discourses.\textsuperscript{136}

In this section, I revisit a section in Homi Bhabha’s \textit{The Location of Culture} (1994: 303-319). There, Bhabha criticizes the approach of Fredric Jameson in the latter’s “Culture: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”.\textsuperscript{137} Bhabha contests the stable macro-logical structures that Jameson espouses as his fundamental analytical categories. These structures, Bhabha suggests, are connected with Jameson’s dogmatic belief in the opposition between ideology and reality. Reviewing Bhabha’s critique of Jameson, I intend to probe the structural commitment of Bhabha’s own discourse, in turn associated with the opposition between signifier and signified.

In “New World Borders,” Bhabha stages a dialogue between Fredric Jameson and voices articulated from a postcolonial perspective (1994: 303-19). He explores how each of them articulates cultural theory in the context of globalization and ultimately aims at a demonstration of how the latter overcome the limits of the former. The section begins with the establishment of a parallelism between Marlow (the character from Conrad’s \textit{Heart of Darkness}) and Jameson.

\textsuperscript{136} Derrida refers to language as the “structure of structures” (1978: 293). He poses that a structure is organized around a center, the function of which was traditionally to organize and to limit “the freeplay of the structure.” This center is akin to what I have discussed above as the foundational blind spot of ideology because “the center … constituted that very thing within a structure which governs the structure, while escaping structurality.” For Derrida, the history of metaphysics is “a series of substitutions of center for center.” The rupture in this history of substitutions came about “when the structurality of structure had to begin to be thought ... From then on it was probably necessary to begin to think that there was no center ... that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play.” Derrida clarifies that “[t]his moment was that in which language invaded the universal problematic ... when everything became a system where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences.” So although at this stage there is an “absence of the transcendental signified,” this very characteristic leads discourses that critique Western metaphysics to get “trapped in a sort of circle. This circle is unique. It describes the form of the relationship between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics ... We have no language, no syntax and no lexicon, which is alien to this history.” (1978: 278-281, emphases in text)

\textsuperscript{137} That chapter, the first in Jameson’s \textit{Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism}, is in fact a second version of his groundbreaking essay that goes by the same name. Although there are some modifications, they are slight. Jameson gives the reason for this: “I have reprinted my program analysis of the postmodern (“The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”) without significant modifications, since the attention it received at the time (1984) lends it the additional interest of a historical document.” (1991: xv)
Through this analogy, Bhabha presents Jameson’s encounter with postmodern architecture as a baffling experience through which the subject loses his guiding parameters at the point of convergence between two worlds. Bhabha depicts one of these worlds as structured by the stable teleology and binary dialectics that he associates with classic Marxist criticism. The other world, contrary to the logic of telos, does not pre-exist but is produced by the clash itself. It exists in the interstices of superimposed frameworks of reference, at their boundaries, and at other in-between and third spaces, all associated with what Jameson encounters as the split consciousness of the postmodern subject. This second world is also that of the hybrid postcolonial subject, but, Bhabha emphasizes, this subject position is not of “an ontological cast where differences are effects of some more totalizing, transcendent identity to be found in the past” (1994: 313).

A notable feature in Bhabha’s discourse (and in his quotations of Jameson) is that the encounter between worlds is frequently described in terms of spatio-temporal disorientation, the clash of coordinates, and incommensurability. Furthermore, the postmodern world is described in terms akin to those of quantum physics, emphasizing ontological indeterminacy, spatial (dis)continuity, non-linear time, and microscopic scales. His description makes allusions as literal as “quantum leaps” (314). In contrast, Bhabha describes the teleological, binary world(view) as “infrastructural mapping,” and characterizes Jameson’s attempt to hold on to it as follows: “Jameson steadfastly maintains the ‘frame’, if not the face, of the subject-centred perceptual apparatus” (316, 314). Because this frame operates on the anthropomorphic scale of the “subject centred perceptual apparatus,” because of its stability, and because it is set in opposition to the quantum world, Jameson’s Marxist world(view) is presented, by way of inverse analogy, as that of classical physics.138

As a writer, Bhabha profits from the familiarity that his readers are likely to have with one of the most cited Anglophone literary texts within postcolonial criticism, Heart of Darkness. In that

---

138 Bhabha’s analogy here works only by means of poetic implication. Performativity theorist Shoshana Felman, however, establishes the analogy explicitly by referring to J.L. Austin and Karl Marx. She postulates that Marx “like Austin, was preoccupied with the disparity between ‘saying’ and ‘doing’ ... Austin and Marx can thus both be seen as materialists of the speaking body.” However, their type of materialism differs, “the model of contemporary physics is doubtless the most apt account for both the specificity and the originality of Austinian materialism. What Austin analyzes are in a way the ‘atoms’ of language.” In contrast, Marx’s “traditional antithesis – materialism / idealism” may be aligned to “the traditional physics of matter.” Felman implicitly admits the ontological turn that this change of scale entails: “In Austin’s case, however, it is no longer, as with Marx, a reference to economy that materialism exploits, but a reference to the physical.” Furthermore, like Bhabha, Felman emphasizes the teleological and epistemological superiority of quantum over classical physics, rather than the relative pertinence of each system according to scale: “history no longer proceeds so much, as it did for Marx, from a logic of contradiction (of contradictions between classes or contradictions inherent in the discourse of the ruling class), but rather from a logic of the scandal.” (2003: 107-109, 108, 110; emphases in text)
way, the ambivalence between the inner and outer voyage that is perhaps the crucial mechanism of Conrad’s short novel plays into Bhabha’s text to characterize the two worlds he presents as reciprocally constituted. Though stating the incommensurability of the two worlds, Bhabha’s modus operandi exposes how one world is implicitly structured by the laws of the other.

Another contradiction between the informative and performative registers is to be found in Bhabha’s provisional conclusion. Bhabha states that Jameson has, like “no other Marxist critic … so dauntlessly redirected the movement of materialist dialectic … towards the wayward, uncharted spaces” associated with the postcolonial condition (306). However, he argues, Jameson departs exclusively from an ontic understanding of the hybrid subject (besides reducing the hybrid condition to ethnic diversity within Western cities). Bhabha argues that, while being receptive to plurality, Jameson is led time and again to reduce diversity to the base/superstructure division, teleological time, and/or the category of class. But his own criticism of Jameson’s persistent use of “class” is based on the fact that he disregards the possibilities that the term opens up as an analytical category, equating the category with what it (most often) designates: discrete socio-economic groups and, in this way, over-emphasizing the concept’s ontic dimension. The ontic qualities of Jameson’s world are thus as much a result of its constitutive properties as they are a result of Bhabha’s own conception of them.

Bhabha concludes that a revision of global space from the postcolonial perspective is pertinent. It alone can account for hybridity beyond the realm of the ontic and access the strategically and methodologically operative interstices of “borderline negotiations of cultural translation” (319). Thus, Bhabha presents Jameson’s world as the realm of the ontic and his own world as that of the interstice, which, being a non-space except in virtual and logical terms, is deployed as the position of the operative and of the critical per se.

Describing the world of the Marxist critic as a “frame,” Bhabha frames postcolonial criticism as situated “in the in-between spaces of double frames” (314, 309; emphasis in text). Lying outside frames, even framing frames, interstitial spaces escape accountability.139 In this way, Bhabha’s arguments benefit from a strategy akin to what Walter Mignolo describes as the epistemic privilege of modernity, in which the hierarchically superior element in a binary opposition has the double advantage of being at once “part of the totality enunciated and the universal place of enunciation … mak[ing] believe that the place of enunciation [is] a nonplace.” (2002: 935). Only

139 In exploiting the term “framing” as “being set up,” I borrow from Bal’s systematic development of the double sense of the term and, more generally, from her understanding of it as a “traveling concept” (2002: 133-173, esp. 141-155). The concept is developed in the following chapter.
this time, the non-place is not located in the overarching stratosphere of a meta-narrative, but in the equally transcendental infra-space of micro-logical worlds.

In their respective spheres of influence, “frame” and “ideology” can both be defined as that which structures our vision but into which we cannot see. Bhabha situates himself in the non-space “between frames” in an attempt to look into the frame itself, and thus supersede ideology. But, to do so, Bhabha must leave aside the insight that the frame is not a thing, but a condition of seeing. As Bhabha stares at what functioned as a frame for Jameson, (mis)taking it for the frame per se, his own vision must necessarily rely on another structuring framework.

That infra-ontic place that Bhabha deems the site of enunciation of postcolonial discourses is the cornerstone on which most metonymic discourses are founded. This micro-logical no-place is a virtual space that can only open up when the text calls attention to itself. But because, by definition, this space escapes language, language’s self-referential effort must be repeated in a ceaseless rhetorical cycle. The foregrounding of language as a structure in and of itself – that is, the back and forth sway between language as being and as non-being – underscores both the literariness and the virtual potentiality of language, while leaving aside its vertical articulations. In other words, language as a system is exacerbated while its dimension as discourse is evaded and ignored. Metonymic discourses rely on the signer alone, not on the sign.

Due to the lack of attention to the mutual implication of language and discourse, signifier and signified, small and large scales, metonymic discourses are ultimately not complex approaches in Morin’s understanding of the term. Above, I described the dialectic at work in the sentence by Adorno as complex in that very sense. Then, I did not mention another aspect crucial to the complexity of Adorno’s negative dialectics. In his theory, the micro-logical dimension is indivisible from the macro-structural one. The indivisibility between the two scales stems from the fact that, for Adorno, no act of knowing, however small, however abstract, or however virtual, is purely epistemic. For him, concepts are miniature ideologies. Identity, “the primal form of ideology,” is a condition of thinking. The will to identity in which thought invests itself, with every act of synthesis, and the identity that the concept seeks to stabilize are the building blocks of ideology at large (148).

If Bhabha can be seen to balance on a tightrope between quantum and classical physics, then Adorno proposes a Unified Field Theory. His is a meta-narrative, founded on ideological assumptions. But neither can narrations founded on the infra-structural escape ideological accountability. As we have seen, metonymic discourses take the signifier as their founding
principle. The signifier, outside its correlation with the signified, is made to function as the micro-
logical no-place that allegedly escapes the ontic and opens up difference as such. But, as I will
elaborate in the following section, difference can only occur if there is a unified whole, an identity,
from which to differ.

**Difference, Identity, and the Ideology of the Signifier**

For Adorno, synthesis is a necessary stage in the thought process, abstraction is essentially
synthetic, and concepts are provisional stabilizations of such syntheses. Hence, identification is
constitutive of any epistemic effort. At the same time, Adorno demonstrates, that act of synthesis,
that will to identity in which thought invests itself, abuses the reality it alleges to account for, since
it is inevitably an act of exclusion (1983: 146-48). Therefore, a critique of ideology is always
already a critique of our mode of knowing. To proceed, such a critique must employ the tools it sets
out to criticize. Taking into account that every concept and every ideology is a violation, in the
sense that it excludes and at the same time negates its own act of exclusion, critique must negate
that very negation. This negation of the negation is brought about by *realizing* within the concept or
the ideology that which the concept or ideology promises and yet denies (Adorno 1983: 147).

Let me explain this with reference to Adorno’s account of the barter principle, a principle
intrinsically linked to bourgeois ideology. Through the barter principle, different individuals and
different sorts of performances are made commensurable and identical. Barter negates the existence
of qualitative difference and, in so doing, allows for the appropriation of the surplus value of labor.
Exploitation is made possible because the irreducible qualitative difference between human labor
and other commodity forms is not taken into account (146). However, Adorno cautions, it does not
suffice to do away with the barter principle altogether. As a rational abstraction, the barter principle
still contains the promise of equality, an equality that is not *realized*. If this equality were indeed
realized, if no one had any part of their labor withheld from them any longer, then society would
have transcended the identifying mode of thought. The barter principle would not be a misnomer,
since it would no longer violate the qualitative difference at stake (146-147).

Metonymic discourses, while foregrounding difference as a structural function and as a
logical necessity, negate qualitative difference. Qualitative difference can only be taken into
account by admitting a historically specific and epistemologically accessible — not merely virtual or

---

140 Barter is the “social model” of the principle of identification (Adorno 1983: 146).
potential – externality to language. As I have previously argued, metonymic discourse presents and relates to itself as the structuring principle rather than as a particular construct. In principle, metonymic discourse does imply an understanding of the need for what in mathematical Set Theory would be called the “Language Complement” (L’), that is, an exterior to the set “Language” (L), within a given “Universe” (U = L + L’). However, this otherness is nothing more than a necessary requirement for self-definition. Maintaining its position as the exclusive site of subjective enunciation, metonymic discourse precludes the possibility of dialogue with a particular other subject. While it accepts otherness as an abstract function, there is no actual external referent to delineate its finitude.141

Furthermore, the ignorance of qualitative difference and the hyper-emphasis on difference as abstract function paradoxically freezes difference as a particular identity. This is exemplified in Young’s defense of Derrida’s contribution to the political project of postcolonial criticism. The quote below comprises a single sentence. The predicate is succinct. The subject of the sentence, however, consists of a long list of forms of difference:

Force and its traces in language, from which there must be emancipation or which at the very least must be subject to resistance, madness as the excluded other of the operation of reason, inside/outside structures, the same and the other, the reign of violence in the difference between the same and the other, the ethical relationship to the Other, alterity, difference, differences in identity, identity that is different from itself, translation, displacement, the destabilizing encroachment of the marginal, the subversive subaltern, the constitutive dependency of the centre on the marginal or the excluded, dissemination and the concept of a diaspora without the end point of a final return, and above all history as violence, ontological, ethical and conceptual violence – all these formed the subjects of Derrida’s earlier books. (Young 2001: 418)

Semantically and (teleo)logically, the listed items scarcely add anything apart from what the reader may bring to bear by prior knowledge or free association.142 This lack of added complexity, interest and/or logical progression as this long sentence develops is stressed by the deflating nature of its

---

141 As will be discussed in Chapter Five with reference to Nyerere, to acknowledge the other as subject requires an understanding of otherness not only as trace, as consequence and by-product of the self, but also as an effect on the self. 142 In Postcolonialism, the paragraphs preceding the quote convey a parallelism between Derrida’s circumstances and his philosophical critique. Young establishes that Derrida came from (geographically) marginal origins and that French colonialism had a strong tendency towards centralization. These factors, according to Young, would lead up to his critique of logo- and phallo-centrism (417). Hence, I have said that the listed items in the quote above rely strongly on the reader’s prior knowledge in order to add anything significant, for they are not the culmination of a previously discussed set of nuances.
ending. The value of the listed items that together occupy the grammatical place of the subject appears to be only that they increase the overall number of components.

The key question here is the sentence’s predicate. Young suggests that all these elements are important, or at least relevant, at this stage of his argument because they “formed the subjects of Derrida’s earlier books.” Situated in the context of his wider defense of Derrida’s political pertinence to postcolonialism, the statement implies quite literally, but also discursively, that Derrida’s contribution to the cause has been to displace the traditional subject of Western discourse. However, when read against the grain, Young’s sentence stages the dangers of and the failures in the realization of that potential. The displacement of the Western subject is not complemented (let alone supplanted) by an actual other. The subject remains the same, but his conscience has been divided. Now, difference as an abstract function, paradoxically essentialized in concepts denoting difference, occupies the (grammatical) place of the subject in metonymic discourses within postcolonial studies.

Thus, I return to one of the major issues I had introduced above: the question of the subject. As I have stated earlier, the problem with uncritical post-structuralism for Culler is that it does not recognize that it persists in the distinction between ideology and reality, while trying to hide this fact by diverting attention to the micro-logical relation between signifier and signified. This metonymic displacement is what Culler terms the “ideology of the sign” (1973: 473). Taking from his idea, I have claimed that metonymic discourses are based on an “ideology of the signifier.” This specification has allowed me to distinguish between language as a virtual category and discourse as its historically specific realization.

Metonymic discourses based on an ideology of the signifier do admit to the existence of the subject, but purely as a logical and structural necessity, reducing the subject to the grammatical function. Hence, the metonymic tendency within postcolonial studies forecloses the possibility of dialogue, for it admits one single subject position: that of the text’s enunciator. Traditionally, postcolonial criticism has been concerned with discourse articulated from places other than the First-World academy. Yet the reduction of the historical subject to the grammatical one forecloses any dialogic possibility and makes these discourses schizophrenic ones, for there is but one subject (position) possible.\textsuperscript{143}

\textsuperscript{143} Hence, the reluctance to commit to any other existence besides that of language as a system of differences cannot elude the problem of the subject for, grammatically, language requires a subject position. The reduction of discourse to language not only limits the subject to its structural site but limits the possibility of subjectivity to a single, uncontested and uncontestable position. With the help of Adorno, this subjectivity could thus be described as qualitatively
The reader will probably recall Fredric Jameson’s renowned diagnosis of postmodernism as schizophrenic (1991). Postcolonial studies exhibit a similar tendency. In both cases, the materiality of the signifier is threateningly at stake. Yet, there is one major difference. Jameson follows Lacan to describe the pathology as a break in the chain of signifiers (1991: 26). In contrast, metonymic tendencies within postcolonial discourse exhibit a displacement. As opposed to schizophrenia proper in Lacanian terms, metonymic discourses are not so much a break away from normality (the socio-symbolic order as represented by the chain of signifiers), but rather the condition that structures that normality.

Jameson’s description of the contemporary condition as schizophrenic makes use of a personification, imagining the present era as a single, though split, subjective consciousness. By contrast, the pathological element of the metonymic tendency in postcolonial studies is not something inherent in or essential to an abstract subjective consciousness, but a problem of where and how that subjective consciousness is positioned. As illustrated in Gayatri Spivak’s “subaltern,” the slash splitting this single consciousness may be identified as the international division of labor (IDL). Through Spivak’s legendary figure, the West is marked as the place of the signifier and the non-West as the place of the signified. This displacement negates the non-Western subject as a subject, while reducing the Western universal consciousness into a schizophrenic subjectivity, reified in the material irreducibility of the signified.

I rely for this brief diagnosis on “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak 1994). That essay, one of the most influential texts in postcolonial theory, centrally deals with the question of the omnipotent, for it is not absolutely omnipotent, but specifically omnipotent, omnipotent within its species. Furthermore, this omnipotence of the subject within metonymic discourses (disguised under the banner of “non-being”) inhibits dialogue. As Freire holds, as praxis, language can only be dialogic. (1972: 75-76)

Jameson describes his own usage of the term schizophrenia with reference to Lacan: “Lacan describes schizophrenia as a breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning” (1991: 26). After extensively quoting from Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl, Jameson observes that in the schizophrenic condition the “present suddenly engulfs the subject with undescribable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming, which effectively dramatizes the power of the material – or better still – the literal signifier in isolation.” (27)

This is because, in the “normal” condition of the psyche, identity persists as a sense of coherence between past, present and future, a coherence that is broken in schizophrenia, but not so in metonymic discourses. As Jameson explains, “[t]he connection between this kind of linguistic malfunction [the breakdown in the signifying chain] and the psyche of the schizophrenic may be grasped by way of a twofold proposition: first, that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one’s present; and, second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time. If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of unrelated presents in time.” (1991: 26-27)

As may be appreciated, I am exploring a catachrestic parallelism between the Lacanian barred subject and Spivak’s slashed subject. The relation between both will become clearer below.
subject.\textsuperscript{147} Its first sentence reads: “Some of the most radical criticism coming out of the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject” (1994: 66). Spivak then states that two contemporaneous European intellectuals, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), are not as radical as they may seem. Not only does their focus on power and desire shove aside ideology theory and a sustained analysis of macro-logical structures, but they also surreptitiously reintroduce the undivided subject (1994: 68-69).\textsuperscript{148} Furthermore, while not recognizing their own historical situatedness, they represent the (politically unrepresented) oppressed subject as analogous to concrete experience as such (1994: 69). Spivak also finds that, in Deleuze’s work, the conflation between political representation and linguistic representation leads to an essentialist utopian politics, which assumes that the oppressed can speak – through the words of the transparent First-World intellectual (1994: 70-75).

In a second section of her article, Spivak analyzes the taxonomical categories employed by the Subaltern Studies group to show how “the subaltern” can only be defined in opposition to something else. It is an “identity-in-differential” (1994: 79). Spivak also demonstrates how other categories employed by the Subaltern Studies group are defined in terms of their difference from an established ideal (1994: 78-79). In contrast, Foucault’s understanding of the West (which in turn is the “Subject of Theory”) is always self-identical (1994: 69). Foucault’s staging of the West as self-contained ignores how the West is produced by the imperialist project. Foucault’s “West” admits no external referent. Subsequently, Spivak proposes the work of Derrida as a more useful alternative to be taken up by postcolonial criticism (87). Given that the West-Subject equation is an unavoidable fact, she proposes that the only ethically and epistemologically productive move for the intellectual in the First World is, following Derrida’s example, to recognize one’s own limits (87-90).

Spivak’s last section addresses the question that gives her article its name. She claims that the Third-World woman is the ultimate example of the subaltern, because her exclusion is threefold: in terms of class, race and gender (90-94). However, Spivak does not approach the Third-World woman in general terms, but focuses on the specific example of a subaltern group associated with

\textsuperscript{147} The transcendence of the article within the fields of postcolonial and cultural studies has been such that Chow declares that, only after Said’s \textit{Orientalism}, “‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ emerges as the second prominent type of analysis in cultural studies” (1998: 2). The essay was originally published in 1985 and has been extensively reprinted (and revised – see, for example, Spivak 1999: 198-311); the most well known version probably being that in Carry Nelson and Larry Grossberg (eds.): \textit{Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture}, 1988.

\textsuperscript{148} As Spivak claims, this is firstly due to the fact that power and desire presuppose a subject as an irreducible methodological necessity. Secondly, the two authors centrally discussed by her pose themselves as transparent subjects and, in such a way, deny their own contribution – as First-World academics – to the consolidation of the IDL (1994: 69).
the practice of sati (widow self-immolation) in colonial India (94-103). The reference is further reduced to a single woman within that group: Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri (103-104).

Spivak denounces how sati was ideologically cathected by the nativist patriarchy as well as British imperialism to serve the narratives that justified their respective chauvinist practices. While apparently opposites, these two narrations legitimate each other (96-103). Spivak finally describes a third rewriting of sati: Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri’s suicide. But, from the subaltern position, the hegemonic text may only be rewritten in blood and at the cost of one’s life (103-104). Even at that cost, Bhuvaneswari’s rewriting “cannot be heard or read” (104). A hegemonic reading of her suicide is immediately imposed after her death. Spivak ends the article with the following short paragraph:

The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with “woman” as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish. (104)

The circumscribed task for Spivak concerns the limited sphere of action proper to the Western academic as such. This sphere concerns the agencies involved in the text’s production: that of writer and reader. It also involves the author’s capacity to infiltrate, modify, and redeploy the philosophical canon.\(^{149}\)

This conception of the political sphere proper to the academic is underpinned by an exclusive understanding of the subject as his place in language. Spivak’s alignment with Derrida (and, to a lesser extent, her distance from Foucault), at this stage in her career (1985) leads her to conclude that the most radical political intervention possible, for the West-based academic, is the recognition of his own limits. The fact that, as I will argue in Chapter Three, Spivak’s statements in this regard should be taken as strategies rather than at face value, does not alter her discursive positioning.

Hence, as Spivak criticizes the persistence of the undivided subject in critical Western theory, her own intervention is restricted to slashing that subject. Meanwhile, Bhuvaneswari

---

\(^{149}\) In the article presently under consideration, Spivak redeployes the Western canonical inheritance by indirectly commenting on Freud’s “A Child is Being Beaten” (1974 [1919]). Spivak’s strategy resides in reproducing Freud’s sentence constructions and thought structures, but in different contexts and to different ends, in such a way that the chauvinistic bias of the original is exposed while also lending itself to criticize the British and native patriarchal approaches to sati that are Spivak’s overt theme of analysis.
Bhaduri, understood as an “identity-in-diferrential,” is to stand in for pure difference.\textsuperscript{150} The subaltern develops throughout Spivak’s text from an analytical category (taken from the Subaltern Studies group) to a representative (anthropomorphic) figure. Paradoxically, this figure represents unrepresentability. In a similar paradox, we are to recognize in this figure not a particular identity, but a paradigmatic “identity-in-diferrential” (1994: 79). In blunt contrast to this plea, Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri is brought forth to us in all the crudeness of her raced and gendered corporeality.\textsuperscript{151}

Although British imperialists and Indian patriarchy on the one hand and Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri on the other are all involved in symbolic practices, these practices are qualitatively different. The possibility of these three narrative intents to be read as narrative acts resides in the structural positions their enunciators occupy as particular social agents. These structural positions, in turn, determine access even to something as primary as the letter as the material support of language. Without access to the signifying chain that constitutes the symbolic order, Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri cannot be heard, that is, she cannot access the subject position. Hence, the hegemonic subject occupies the place of the signifier (that is, of the letter as the reified, hegemonic material support of language) and Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri takes up the place of the signified. Although symbolic practices are attempted from both sites, they run eternally parallel to each other. By definition, the subaltern subject ceases to be the moment she accesses the position of enunciation.

I have proposed that the schizophrenic condition associated with postcolonial criticism is a matter of the match between signifier and signified rather than a rupture in the signifying chain. In my reading of the metonymic tendencies associated with Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, I only account for her as a paradigmatic figure in postcolonial studies. Initially Spivak’s creation, over the past twenty-five years the figure has been written and re-written, acquiring autonomy of sorts. The great metonymic potential of the figure is hardly realized in Spivak’s own text. As I will elaborate in Chapter Three, Spivak’s writing strongly resists reduction: the text for her is an action and a battlefield, the place where the Western unified subject is to be slashed, complexified and contested.

Nonetheless, as I hope to have demonstrated, the metonymic possibilities brought forth by the figure persist. A crucial factor is that the material support of language in the case of the

\textsuperscript{150} Spivak would later criticize her own conception of the subaltern as a mere “identity-in-diferrential” and propose to redeploy the term in a more historically concrete manner as encompassing all those “without access to the lines of social mobility.” (2004: min. 12:30)

\textsuperscript{151} In Spivak’s figure of the subaltern, there is an entanglement of the analytical and the ontological. It is difficult to distinguish whether the subaltern is indeed a subject or a subject position. The feminist theorist goes to the extent of declaring that “the constitution of the female subject in life is the place of the différend.” (1994: 97, emphasis in text)
subaltern is bodily rather than literary.\textsuperscript{152} Hence, I have suggested that in other academic fields, the metonymic tendency is limited to taking the part for the whole or the signifier for the thing; it is expressed only as a reductive mechanism. Yet, in postcolonialism, the reductive mechanism is displaced onto partial, individual or collective \textit{subjects} who are reduced to their signifying functions as objects, that is, to their function as the bodily support of language. The structural potential of the signifier – the letter as part of a system – is confounded with its phenomenal dimension – with socio-culturally significant traits of race and gender.

In this case, then, the schizophrenic element is not the expression of a pathological condition as it was in Jameson’s analysis of the postmodern, but the unexpressed structuring principle. Borrowing a concept that Jameson employs elsewhere (1981), it can be described as its “political unconscious.” The West is the place of the signifier and the non-West the place of the signified. This displacement negates the non-Western subject as an actual subject. Gayatri Spivak introduces difference to question the hegemonic subject. However, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” does not attempt to introduce qualitative difference into the equation.

As the structuring principle of hegemony, difference reaffirms rather than questions totality. This totality can only be addressed by negating its negations. Just as the barter principle may only be resisted by engaging with it, confronting it with what it excludes, totality too, as Adorno states, “is to be opposed by convicting it of nonidentity with itself, of the nonidentity it denies, according to its own concept” (1983: 147). This critique of totality, of capitalism, of ideology at large, must work in and through, as well as against, the identitarian mode of thinking, because it is immanent to thought. Hence, Adorno claims that the critique of ideology “is a critique of the constitutive consciousness itself” (148). Further, he proposes that, insofar as identity is constitutive of our own consciousness, thought will always tend to synthesis and definition in an attempt to reconcile itself with the I (148). Rather than resisted, its persistence should be acknowledged and incorporated into critiques that attempt to transcend, or perhaps to realize the withheld promise of, the ideology of the signifier.

Spivak’s slashed universal subject allows for the existence of otherness as an abstract function but does not admit the possibility of a subject that is both other and capable of accessing the symbolic order. So, in Adornian terms, Spivak’s contestation remains within the same ideology

\textsuperscript{152} The rift between the body and the letter as the material support of language is parallel to that between the unconscious and the symbolic order. As I have discussed with reference to Lacan, the unconscious is based on the same structuring principles as Spanish or Dutch are based but finds its material support in physical symptoms, slips of the tongue, dreams and jokes rather than in speech or writing, the paradigmatic material support of the symbolic order.
it contests, for it does not negate its constitutive negation. Negating the negation implies working against the denial of a historical reality that a given ideology has as its basis. The only way in which one can negate the negation, according to Adorno, is by realizing that which it negates. In Spivak’s case, and in postcolonial criticism in more general terms, negating the negation would require the realization of discourse as an actual dialogical praxis.

Conclusion

The ideology of the signifier is symptomatic of a wider phenomenon in contemporary culture. I refer to the exacerbation of the tool of representation, whether in the scripted letter or, as I will explore in the following chapter, in more intricate technologies such as virtual images online. In both cases, the tool is foregrounded to the degree that it is too close to see and, hence, susceptible to being co-opted as a transparent site of enunciation. In this chapter, I have addressed the question of how the renewed claim at transcending historical specificity is reified as a rhetorical trope, namely in metonymy. As the perpetually postponed promise of realization, metonymy is contrary to the negation of the negation, which seeks to transcend epistemological violence by realizing that which a particular ideology promises and yet denies.

However, as a comparison of my analyses of Young and Bhabha might suggest, no particular trope or rhetorical style is a guarantee of politically or intellectually pertinent interventions. Young’s style, in contrast to Bhabha’s, is not self-referential: it flows according to traditional conventions for the construction of sentences and broader argumentative units. Nonetheless, Young’s discourse is also metonymic; insofar as it simulates an intervention of language into reality. One of the ways in which it does so is by disregarding historical teleology and, consequently, by taking the cause for the effect. In Young’s propositions, a discourse’s or concept’s stylistic imitation of extra-linguistic reality is as good as its actual intervention across language and in history. This chronological confusion, like the one denounced by Chow, obfuscates the historical responsibility that the discourse in question holds in relation to its surroundings.

Just as a self-referential style in itself cannot be held accountable for an author’s commitment to the ideology of the signifier, neither can metonymy as a rhetorical form. In principle, analogy is opposed to metonymic displacement, as it transfers not the same trait to a different place (which allows for an ontological confusion), but the same set of relationships into a parallel context. However, as my analysis of Bhabha’s analogy showed, analogy may as well serve
metonymic purposes. Hence, in this chapter – unlike the following one – the ideology addressed and the tools through which that ideology is propagated are at odds with each other.

Even my own rhetoric has become entangled with the phenomenon I have described. I have not only addressed the logic of metonymy, I have also worked in and through it, from my own ideological standpoint and according to my own purposes. Likewise, I simultaneously employed and criticized the usage of devices such as parallelisms, analogies, personification, synecdoche and oppositions. Metonymic discourses cannot be reduced to the representational tools they employ. However, this does not cancel out the fact that, as qualitatively specific mechanisms, all those devices hold a particular potential and withhold a specific promise. Their political and epistemological productivity depends on how their potential is realized, or not, within the historical specificity of the contexts that exceed them. While metaphor, analogy or the negation of the negation are no guarantee in themselves, I consider the actualization of their promises to be the most pertinent procedures in the context of the present hegemony; for the present hegemony relies strongly on simulation, on an all-disempowering rhetoric that perpetuates the system by staging resistance to it.

Even though no technological particle can guarantee the use to which it is put, the ideology of the signifier, exacerbating the materiality of the smallest units of technological mediation, would have us believe that there is no subject behind the signifier and no history around it. By displacing belief onto the signifier as such, it declares to have done away with the subject altogether. This simulacrum can be maintained because the signifier has a self-reflexive effect, which is not a self-reflexive function, but merely an effect achieved through a self-referential mechanism. The self-reflexive signifier is a simulacrum not only because it is an externality emulating thought without having its ontological quality, but also because subjects can only be constituted through intersubjective praxis. The deployment of the West as the place of the signifier and of the postcolonial-as-subaltern as the place of the signified thus stages the (dis)articulation of a slashed, schizophrenic, single universal subject.

Hence, the universal subject persists, but the macro-structural division of the world may now be held accountable for the slashes in his personality. In this paradigmatic sign of the postcolonial predicament, where the West is the place of the signifier and the non-West the place of the signified, the slash stands in for the international division of labor. This metonymic displacement, based on the graphic and conceptual similarities between the S/s bar and the IDL, at their respective scales, would have us believe that by getting across one line, we have also crossed the other. Even
more problematically, it would have us believe that if the micro-logical slash cannot be resolved by
definition, neither can the other. Read in and through the S/s slash, the IDL does not appear to
delineate a particular order of power, the recognition of which would open up the field of the
political, but is naturalized as the very condition of being, as the principle necessary for
participation in the symbolic order.

Because of that naturalization, the move is ideological. The way in which the naturalization
is brought about is akin to the alleged anteriority of the subject’s alienation (in the Lacanian
imaginary order) to the introduction of that alienation by a historically determinate configuration of
the symbolic order, which Silverman denounces (191-92). Silverman’s denunciation, like that of
Chow, implies a metonymic substitution of the effect for the cause. For the substitutions of internal
for external otherness or of the S/s slash for the IDL to operate unobserved, one must have one’s
faith placed in the slash, the IDL, or any other mark as the smallest particle of a self-sustained and
self-legitimizing virtual structure. The ideology of the signifier deems the qualitatively
incommensurable historical specificity of the S/s slash in relation to the IDL redundant: a mirage,
an effect of the signifier. Thus, the history of imperialism that still today participates in the world
and structures its future through the IDL is obfuscated.

The withheld promise of the ideology of the signifier is the transcendence of ideology.
However, as Culler, Adorno, and my own analyses indicated, ideology as such cannot be
transcended. Yet, taken in their qualitative specificity, particular ideologies can. I have thus focused
on the ideology motivating metonymic discourses to address an elusive yet formally, culturally and
politically specific practice within contemporary postcolonial theory. In Chapter Two, I move from
this panoramic exploration of a paradigm to a situated analysis of concrete rhetorical devises,
demarcating the interaction between and within words, not things. That analysis will in turn lead me
to question whether, or in what ways, a symptomatic reading of culture is the most pertinent
approach for a critique ideology in view of the reigning mode of logic in contemporary society and
the prevailing technological context.