

## One American Narrative<sup>1</sup>

Lynda Stone

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

This paper in the 30th Anniversary issue of *ACCESS: Critical perspectives on communication, cultural & policy studies* is a personal account about the current state of the American nation. Following an introduction, it has three central sections followed by a conclusion. The sections are simply entitled “history”, “culture”, and “nation”. Throughout, writings and ideas from post-colonial critic, Homi K. Bhabha serve as inspiration. Philosophical and political viewpoints and even biographic illustration are not meant to be “post-colonial” nor representative of any other Americans. This is one American’s narrative.

### Introduction

I am an American, an outsider to the Australasian home of this journal. In what follows, I offer a brief view from an “other” on a current state of a nation-state. A premise is advanced: in a globalized world, the concept of nation remains entrenched in spite of so many ambiguities, blurrings, and excesses in its state of affairs. Two results have occurred: one is that in many locales including America, groups of persons are frenetically attempting to hold on to a specific nation. This mentality is what I call “circling the wagons” in which privilege protects and promotes mine and ours at all costs. The other, for me much more positive, is that some persons have come to understand themselves as necessarily interconnected to different others. This mentality is cosmopolitan and incorporates other-interest, generosity, and a sense of national humility.

Several writings from and about post-colonial culture critic, Homi Bhabha are inspiration for the essay. We share some intellectual interests in work by specific poststructuralists— Foucault, Derrida, and Kristeva among them. However, many of his cultural experiences and references are those very different from my own. Importantly as a white western woman, I am not nor can I be post-colonial but I can read from difference, be appreciative, and thus inspired.

This narrative works toward and emphasizes consideration of the concept of nation. It utilises a specific theorisation about “history” and, as well, attends to an element often constitutive of nation; this is culture. The title “One American Narrative” points to other features. One is that elements to follow are the view of one person, one philosopher of education. This statement is personal and claims no representative status of other fellow country-persons. In addition to turning to a context of an American nation, throughout from time to time I will incorporate a brief anecdote as illustration.

### History

In 2006, Bhabha wrote a catalogue commentary accompanying an exhibition of Islamic art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Entitled “Without Boundary”, the show features seventeen

artists whose multimedia art crosses forms and genres, east and west. All but three of the artists are born in the east and at the time of the show all reside at least in part in large western cities. From their cosmopolitan perspective, as one artist, Iranian born Y.A. Yami asserts, “art has no country” (Kami in Daftari, 2006: 99).

Bhabha’s essay concerns temporality in the exhibition, its “historicity”. This means that social life in any form is in part “determined” by a particular time and place, a particular discourse, a particular set of practices. It is a notion of strong context—and is central to the social theorising that I do. In his time, Bhabha employs a negative concept, writing against the tradition of western historicism of development, progress and the like. Naming a present age as one of “terror”, he writes:

The artists ... offer us a way out of the prison house of the culture of torture and “security.” They refuse the shuttered view in which “civilizational” polarities are set up to impede the free and fair representation of cultural differences, while political proscriptions interrupt enlightened conversations across diverse communities and societies (Bhabha, 2006: 30).

Among questions he asks this: “What are the connections between the time internal to the work, the historical time period, and the temporal or historical assumptions of interpretational discourses?” (30). In what follows, the historical time of a present America threads throughout as a specific historicity.

As I begin to write, the USA has just celebrated July 4th, Independence Day. In all parts of the diverse nation, family and friends celebrate with cookouts, parades, and fireworks in summer heat. For some years I have traveled to a lovely place called the Jersey Shore to visit an adopted family: we sit on a porch and watch a small town parade complete with old cars, fire trucks, school bands, and parade participants throwing candy to children. This year’s events reflect a moment in which communities cancel or reduce parades and fireworks. The current economy is cause—as at the same time cities are actually declaring bankruptcy. Many people, it seems, wonder about the financial bankruptcy of the nation itself.

Concerns over three broad matters are manifestations: economy, war, politics. Of the first, the unemployment rate remains high, home foreclosures are common—in general the haves have it all and the have nots have little. Of the second, in spite of promised withdrawal, war continues unabated in Afghanistan, loss of limb and life, billions of dollars that could well be used at home, continued fear over security. The nation just never stops being warlike. Of the third, reported minute by minute across media, political stalemate is represented in a too long presidential campaign; a polarity in a largely two-party system means that there is almost no communication across ideological differences. While it appears that democracy functions, “super pacs” of enormous financial resources determine that a presidential victory rests from how much money from either side is spent.

As transition to the next section, a turn again to Bhabha is in order. In discussing “theory”, he offers two ideas that I find pertinent. The first is enunciation, a process “[splitting] the traditional culturalist demand for a model, a tradition, a community, a stable system of reference ... and the articulation of new cultural demands, meanings ... [and] strategies in the political present ... against both the right or the left” (Bhabha, 1989, 1994: 35). The second is cultural difference that denies cultural diversity as itself totalising. As he puts it, cultures, especially national cultures, have a tendency to “live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in the Utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity” (34, 36) As history shows, no utopia is possible.

## Culture

Bhabha, as is well-known, is one of the founding scholars of post-colonial criticism. After several university appointments in England and the USA, he presently holds an endowed professorship at Harvard. Many of his best-received essays date from the eighties and nineties and are collected in

*The Location of Culture* (Bhabha, 1994). Out of these contributions, a set of singularly conceived ideas have become identified with his name. Arising from colonialism and its influences, these include hybridity, mimicry, and stereotype. In a commentary on his work, David Huddart asserts that

Bhabha is very much a thinker for the twenty-first century ... [Recently he] has begun to explore the complexities of a world marked by colonial and neo-colonial wars, counter-globalization movements and widespread cultural confrontation (Huddart, 2006: 3).

While he does attend to all sorts of sub-cultural specifics, his primary occupation is with national culture and within it groups majority and minority. His project is not a modern reversal but of relationship and blurring within and across. Worth quoting at length, he writes this:

Culture becomes as much an uncomfortable, disturbing practice of survival and supplementarity—between art and politics, past and present, the public and private ... It is from such narrative positions that the postcolonial prerogative seeks to affirm and extend a new collaborative dimension, both within the margins of the nation-space and across boundaries between nations and peoples ... [We are forced] to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive “liberal” sense of cultural community ... [Instead] cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity ... [in which questions of race, cultural difference, sexuality, gender, and class are themselves] overdetermined (Bhabha, 1992, 1994: 175).

Once again I am inspired to the personal.

The USA is a diverse place of many cultures, theoretical, ideological, and experiential. A broad group of ‘critical’ theorists have for decades attempted to conceptualise a relationship for reform both socially and educationally. In the former, culture wars of a decade or so ago (are they still going on?) attempted to describe diversity in terms of race, class and gender in which race emerged as the principal factor determining equality and opportunity. And so went theory: from an under-theorised multiculturalism and multicultural education to an often misunderstood, but currently salient “critical race theory”. Ideologies and philosophies split theorists especially on the left as the country moved politically toward center and right: some reform occurred across decades—the emergence of dominant racial and ethnic minorities into the middle-class. However, millions today remain outside a mainstream economically, notwithstanding how the nation might be described culturally.

A key problem in considering “culture” in America is that the term has so many applications. The concept nearly but not quite loses its meaning as persons in specific contexts claim identity. Here are some: geographic cultures, spiritual cultures, occupational cultures, age-related cultures, and cultures of sexual preference. These are blurred, of course, by racial and ethnic sub-divisions, by poverty, and perhaps less so today by gender. Geographically the continent and additions that is the US is huge and regional. People live on the coasts, in the midwest or the south, in urban, suburban and rural areas, and then in specific states. Californians know who they are as do New Yorkers and do Texans. Spiritually although the country is largely protestant, first the growth of Catholic communities changed a spiritual landscape. Today religious minorities ranging from Jews to Muslims abound. Arguably in recent decades, religious affiliation seems more important than in the past—perhaps it always was but not so overtly. Occupationally cultures relate both to work traditions and practices but saliently to class—although most Americans name themselves as “middle-class”. While this categorisation has become more problematic in recent decades, still people identify as workers, as trades-persons, as professionals. Academic culture is returned to below. Age-related cultures do seem to bifurcate the population; this phenomenon emerged some fifty years ago especially with the separation and rise in influence of youth culture. Across the west, if not worldwide, generational cultures changed irrevocably when no one over thirty was to be trusted and thus adults also wanted to be young. Contributions to a culture of eternal youth, today, range from multiple forms of body enhancement to vast social networking. Finally a cultural category experiencing a great deal of attention and differentiation, especially among the young, concerns sexual preference. Significantly a “tradition” of sexual homophobia, often in the form of hate speech and action, is being attacked by recognition of a relatively recent strategic collaboration of LGBTQ individuals—lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and transsexual persons—itself engaged in

further differentiation. There is an evident vibrancy to this effort that specially extends across institutions of secondary and higher education in the USA.

Returning to Bhabha's cultural difference, one wonders given such cultural complexity whether any unifying notion of "America" is theoretically possible or practical for that matter. The negative result has been an essentialising of categories and experiences that masks the open and shifting quality of social life and particularly preoccupation with identity. One memorable brief experience brought complexity and difference home to me. Twenty odd years ago I taught at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. I had grown up in California and thought I understood interaction of different cultures but I had never experienced the ambiguities of culture that are "Hawaii". Intrigued, in individual conferences I often asked students about their identities—who they were. In answer one day a young man, part Hawaiian and part Filipino, replied, "it all depends", meaning that he altered and blurred identifiers to fit different social situations. How enlightened and enlightening.

## Nation

To initiate this section, it must be noted that the USA occupies only part of the North American continent (how silly to point this out!). But "America" is typically its internal designation. Some, more sensitive to neighbours do refer to "The States". Continuing from above, Bhabha's enunciative process highlights difference rather than sameness and "diversity" between cultural visions and resultant materialities within modern nations. In his critique, as Huddart synthesises, Bhabha does not want to reject national identity but rather to keep it open. For him, this helpful commentator explains, "nations have been extremely important in discussions of colonialism, specifically forms of nationalism involved in anti-colonial struggle and post-colonial reconstruction" (Huddart, 2006: 101). So: perhaps no denial of an American nation. However, given Bhabha's inspiration, a first question arises. This is the state of the USA as a colonial and/or a colonized nation. An answer returns this narrative to history.

History now affirms across most ideological stances that at times and in some ways, the USA has been a colonial power. Returning to this point subsequently, interpretations probably differ over whether an early colonisation by England, and a revolution, names the nation among those colonised. Proud Americans see 1776 as the birth of the nation and an end to their colonial status. Two historical trends both support but complicate this national narrative. The first is that the continent has always been peopled by so many immigrants; "no colonialism here". Moreover, reception to newcomers was certainly mixed, less and less positive, given difference from a majority white, western, protestant population. Race enters this configuration and is taken up below. The second trend concerns the development of a distinct American intellectual tradition; the long view remains that separation had to be from British and French influences. Twentieth century science and technology seems strongly American in origin and development. Humanities disciplines such as literature, history, and philosophy are often more mixed as "Anglo-American" until the end of the century. Then comes the entrance of Continental, largely French and German influences across many disciplines that remain today.

In the same century or more, the nation's own colonisation began and in some respects continues. Categorisation is important: external and internal, immigrant and indigenous, military and economic. There is just so much to say; here is a brief sampling. Internally, minority Native Americans have been subjugated through military, economic, and interestingly educational dominance by a white majority. Externally, think Pacific and other imperialist incursions. Into the twenty-first century, colonialist tendencies constitute trends today that for many do not give America a favorable international reputation. One idea is that hubris results from an American "exceptionalism" especially in economic and military affairs. In the latter, manifestations are intensified since September 11 in legal, secret prisons and prisoner treatment and in revenge

killings. My view is that the larger failing has a relatively long history that across ideological differences in the nation ought itself be examined.

Two other long-term cultural dimensions of an American nation deserve mention. The first is a positive history and the second is surely negative. In times of national as well as local crises, disasters and tragedies, Americans come together. And, this is more than just a voyeuristic attention via media, prayer vigils, or memorials. Persons of all groups—and here economic classes count—give of their personal wealth and possessions to assist others. A good example is that on a geographically diverse continent, weather disasters occur almost daily it seems: tornados, hurricanes, earthquakes, fires and floods. In my southeastern state, hurricanes bring out strangers who turn into neighbours over offers of temporary shelter and safety, sharing of water and supplies, and cooperative activities of rebuilding. Unfortunately this generosity becomes more complicated in smooth times and seems often to disappear.

The other cultural and continuous “thorn” is America’s history of racism. I do not know well how a tradition of slavery plays out in other nations nor how race figures today. In America, as indicated above, there have been advances on many fronts for racial and ethnic minorities to which a growing presence in the middle class and especially in access to higher education attest. However, and this is big, racial suspicion, denial of white complicity, and acts of hatred continue. Negative attitudes toward minority male youth are especially problematic and has led to “the school to prison pipeline” often for minor offenses. What is especially salient is first that violent crime and youth crime statistics are down and second that the major, tragic, killing sprees marking recent decades since “Columbine” have been committed by alienated white young men. This of course raises a further issue in the nation of attention to mental health.

A final pair of concepts from Bhabha summarises his position toward the concept of nation. It is pairing of the relationship of the pedagogical and the performative. A base is “the liminal figure of the nation-space ... [in which] no political ideologies could claim transcendental or metaphysical authority for themselves” (1990: 299). This produces what he calls for; this is another time of writing—recall that the centrality of enunciation is in play. The pedagogical encapsulates tradition, “the people”, “a moment of becoming ... [of a nation] designated by *itself*” (299, emphasis in original). For Bhabha, the performative then always intervenes, importantly not simply as an other, either any minority or nation, but as a linguistic shadow, an “in-between”. In more concrete terms, it signifies a continuous ambiguity and contestation within a nation. Unlike a dualism of majority and minority that fuels a totalisation and thus erasure of minorities, this liminality in Bhabha’s terms “provides a place from which to speak both of, and as, the minority, the exile, the marginal, and the emergent” (300). All voices are to be heard, but never entirely in concert. A point to close this section and to turn to conclusion: liminality, what I think of as openness is paramount. This is because “there resides” possibility, for language, for ethics and politics—justice—for specific persons in particular moments. The mistake made by some is misinterpreting Bhabha’s writings, theorisings, and inspiration in a need for closure by a dialectical, emancipatory end-point.

## Conclusion

In this narrative above, academic culture was mentioned and referred to subsequent treatment. As readers and contributors to ACCESS are well aware, the academy is clearly international today. I must confess that I think American academics, particularly in the arena of professional education that I inhabit, have been a little behind this significant trend. There are still institutions and sub-disciplines in which publication in a “nationally refereed journal” for tenure and promotion outweighs one housed someplace besides the USA. How provincial even as the last couple of decades have made a big difference.

Before turning to summarise this American narrative, I personalise once more. First, for all of its problems, the vast resources in the nation have afforded countless persons like me with

opportunity. I am a middle-class woman, early on with a public education who as many of my generation became a teacher. Little did I know that access, luck and thirty years of hard work later, I would be a senior professor at the oldest public university in the nation. Second, today too I am decidedly international: with a cross-cultural marriage and engaged in scholarly affiliations that I hope will continue to grow. I am most fortunate.

To close, the kind of fortune that I have had must surely be afforded to more and more persons in America. This is its hope, its ideal, as a nation. As my “one” narrative has emphasised I am concerned that perhaps this vision for the nation has become even more difficult to realise than in previous times. I may be wrong about this but the seemingly boundless optimism and unlimited resources that did characterise America no longer seem predominant. As I finish this writing, the 2012 Olympics are underway. America is doing well and I admit to a bit of national pride. But more important, the games point to youth and their potential for a world in which an “international spirit” might underscore the liminality of nations about which Bhabha has theorised. I am inspired for such a future—from the introduction—one of other-interest, generosity, and national humility across the globe.

## Note

1. Congratulations to ACCESS, editors, contributors, and reviewers, on thirty years of publication. I am honored to be a member of the Editorial Advisory Board and to accept an invitation to offer a brief anniversary contribution. Thanks also for conversation with Amy Senta over personal narrative.

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