

# Preface

*Subjects of Modernity* was conceived in maculate ways.

Stellenbosch is a beautiful town, held as though in a glass bubble. It is caught in an uncanny warp, a vortex even, of snarled space and twisted time, which turn upon each other. Stellenbosch is set amid the hills of the Cape Winelands, a mere fifty kilometers or so from the haunting (and haunted) Cape Town. The stunningly gorgeous region, which produces some of the finest wines in the world, has been home to slavery, indenture (formal and informal), apartheid, and what followed. It was in these terrains – which embody the contradictions of modernity, articulate the contentions of modernity, and express the contingencies of modernity – that this book was born.

Late in the Antipodean winter of 2013, I was a fellow for three months at the spectacular Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, commonly known as STIAS, aka the “Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Salads,” something of a measure of the local envy for the place. My principal project there had begun as a history and anthropology of my high-school class in New Delhi, only to expand into something wider, a curious account of contemporary India. The critical archives for the project were the digital recordings of conversations with my cohorts, collected as part of my “homework” (not mere fieldwork, for we are speaking of school here). These were contained on my laptop computer, a rather raggedy machine yet one with sufficient memory. Enthusiastic and excited about working through the recordings, I had begun to settle into the rhythms of STIAS and Stellenbosch.

But then, the laptop was gone. It had been filched from our heavily secured apartment, provided by the Institute, in central Stellenbosch. The deed was done on a weekend. We (my partner, Ishita, and I) were out for the day with friends driving around the coast of the Western Cape. On a whim we had gone to Cape Agulhas, the southernmost tip of the African continent, which is actually strangely uninspiring, at least at deepening dusk. After losing our way in the dark – and nearly

colliding with an enormous porcupine – our bedraggled party of four returned home late at night to discover something amiss: an overturned vase, a flowerpot askew, the immense dining table out of place, yet little that was obviously missing, except the tiny computer.

The pilfering had been quite a production. While locking up everything carefully, we had forgotten about a loose slat on a side window blind in the living room. It was this sliver that had been forced open, a thingamajig improvised from a long broom handle and wires lying in the patio had been used to pull the humongous and heavy dining table toward the window, and the laptop lifted. There was nothing else gone. The arrival of the Falstaff-like Stellenbosch police constables at midnight, and of the smart detective from Paarl the next day, are tales within tales best reserved for another time.

For all the effort, what had the thief gained? Did not a laptop with an operating system and keyboard in Spanish – in a principally Afrikaans- and Xhosa-speaking part of the Cape – seem a little pointless, whether for sale or as an acquisition? Even assuming the innards of the machine were unknown to the pilferer, why had its power supply, plugged in next to the window and thus terribly easy to pick up, been left behind? It all seemed very peculiar, beyond strange, until the concierge of the swishy hotel in front of our apartment block told us that the theft was not business as usual: no, not at all.

Rather, the laptop had been taken on a weekend that was ritually significant. It was at that time of the year, in those days, that Cape Coloured young women aged fourteen to sixteen were initiated into girl gangs, after a spectacular derring-do. The child, if I may, had pulled off the incredible, considering the weight of the table, the modus operandi, and the security/surveillance all around her. The theft of a computer with research materials on my cohort, intimating privilege and entitlement, led to a ritual initiation into a colored cohort, inhabiting vulnerability and worse. Here was testimony to the necessarily split yet ever entangled nature of modernity.

Now I was at a loose end, at least by way of a research and writing project at STIAS. Yet I was also footloose and fancy-free. Through long rambles in pretty Stellenbosch, disparate bits that had been delivered as

parts of talks and published as segments of essays, which had inchoately indicated a book ahead, now began to fall into place. For a work that approached modernity as being constitutively contradictory, thinking it through on Stellenbosch Mountain proved particularly productive. Here was a sentinel that gazed out toward the vineyards and valleys of God's own country, yet a spectator that stood mute testimony to the formative violence that was sown into the spirit and substance of the soil – here, there, and everywhere in sight. My endless long walks, communing with this magic mountain, have shaped *Subjects of Modernity*.

None of this should suggest a latter-day, postcolonial habitation of Walden Pond. Far from it, I was insinuated in the excitement that was STIAS, its existence of words and worlds, spirit and flesh – at long lunches, seminar sessions, wine receptions, and impromptu dinners. For all of this (and much more), I acknowledge the good denizens of the Institute, who are thanked ahead. Amid these scenes was the inimitable Athol Fugard, ethereal but immanent, floating yet grounded. He touched me with even more than his acute wit and immense wisdom. Alongside him, the anarchic aesthetic – comprising art, life, and friendship – of Aryan Kaganof made me live many lives in a handful of moments.

Actually, Stellenbosch Mountain was made incarnate for my companion fellows at STIAS – in 2013, as in spring 2014, when I visited again for a week – as we went for walks into its lap and embrace. During the first visit, as I climbed up with Walter Mignolo, one of the scholarly protagonists who is to be encountered ahead (especially in [Chapter 2](#)), he proclaimed while looking down at the green pastures and lush vineyards, “This is amazing, like Switzerland or something.” To which I could not contain my retort, since it echoed the mountain: “The incredible whiteness of being, Walter, the incredible whiteness of being.”

It followed, too, that my last meeting with Stellenbosch Mountain in 2014 produced twin tales. Through the long, rigorous hike, almost everyone, especially the runners, smiled or waved back at me. All the while, from the middle of a forest, a strange sound, human yet eerie, haunted my communion. It is the smiles and the strangeness

(and the joy and the horror), ever together, which bid goodbye to me from Stellenbosch Mountain, that make modernity so compelling. As William Mazzarella puts it, “Only those ideas that compel our desire as well as our resistance receive and deserve our most sustained critique.”

While the lineaments of the work were clear, *Subjects of Modernity* had to be substantialized, made of the world, as it were. From the earliest days through to the immediate present, senior scholars and brilliant editors, who are also friends, have supported and provoked me. In no particular order, let me thank here Sharad Chari, Michael Herzfeld, David Brent, John Comaroff, Debjani Majumdar, Ajay Skaria, Ken Wissoker, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. No less salient has been the belief and friendship of my former research assistants, Eduardo Acosta and Lucía Cirianni, who are surely on their way to becoming formidable scholars.

This book was destined to find place in the Theory for a Global Age series. Its editor, Gurminder Bhambra, has been an extraordinary presence: forceful and forthright, decisive and supportive, imaginative and sharp, quick and critical. Having read the final version of the manuscript, there was a key question that she put to me gently, concerning the absence of women authors in the text, as distinct from the notes. The question turns on the politics of gender, citation, and knowledge – taken together – and I would like to respond to it, as a tiny token, too, of the fabulous editorship and graceful friendship that Gurminder has provided me.

On the one hand, citational economies structure discipline(s) and knowledge(s), often reproducing male, racial, class, caste, ethnocentric, and hetero-normative privileges. And the struggle for the opening up of the academy, as part of wider endeavors against entitlement, has to precisely query such citational structures and practices. On the other hand, if the struggle is shifted principally to the arena of citational economies, it is that distinct “margins” and “minorities” not only simply cite each other – and maybe a few other intersecting critical ones – but can do so in ways that tend to mirror the exact hierarchies they are questioning, albeit on alternative terms. If there are resonances here of Joan Scott’s “only paradoxes to offer,” it is equally the case that

also overlooked is the exact embedding of the academy in the wider force fields of power and privilege, which shore up, structure, and toss around the university. I hope it is clear that mine is not a clarion call for a more truly radical struggle out there, somewhere – although it would help if academics joined democratic struggles (wider and immediate) with a greater sense of modesty – and much more a suggestion toward querying carefully the hierarchy, privilege, and entitlement in which the tenured professoriate is embedded. To interrogate entitlement and privilege is to unlearn privilege and entitlement, laughing hard, especially at oneself. In relation to the vexed matter of citational economies, this can mean finding different, critical ways of writing.

Now, authors, works, and perspectives that are “minor” and “marginal” in the academy have featured prominently, if distinctly, in my previous writings – always alongside more certified critical doxas and radical traditions – most of which I draw upon as well as question. (Polemic has never been my strong point and, besides, it has little place in the sort of work that I do.) However, this book adopts a particular tack in its style of argument, writing, and citation. As I critically engage dominant delineations of subaltern, decolonial, and postcolonial studies as well as of modernity, anthropology, and history, all of which I learn from yet carefully question, especially attentive to their underenunciated and little-appreciated meanings and resonances, it is more male protagonists than women authors (although there are some) that appear in the text. At the same time, the critical doing and undoing of these understandings, disciplines, and knowledge(s) is embedded in the notes, where women and men, non-Western and Western, black and white crucially sustain the heavy lifting. On offer, indeed, is an entangled interchange between the text and the note, which allows me narrative continuity in the former (text) alongside the securing of arguments in the latter (note). Of course, this is only a tiny, provisional incision in a dense corpus of questions. But then, we must try to repay our debts.

I do not know how successful I will be in even attempting the task of repaying debts as I return to the formative site in the making of this book, STIAS, and the people who populated its magnificent environs

and graceful sensibilities. Again, in no particular order, I thank Hendrik Geyer (and his wry humor); Duncan and Tracey F. Brown (“Yes, I have had my water,” T and D); Christofer R. and Carina G. Edling (and Carl, Tove, and Axel); Edgar Pieterse and family (for lessons in imagination and struggle); and – considering friendship, warmth, stimulation, and care – Karin Brown, Bernard Lategan, Gudrun Schirge, Gerhard Mare, Christoff Pauw, Philippe Van Haute, Leonard (Lenny) Katsokore, Gladys Lechini, Ryland Fisher, Maria Mouton, and Maggie Pietersen.

The materials and arguments that shore up this book have been presented at talks, conferences, and seminars – in institutions too numerous to mention here – spread across Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Germany, India, Mexico, Singapore, Taiwan, the UK, and the US. I thank the organizers, participants, and interlocutors on those occasions. Needless to say, such prior transcripts, quite like previous publications (for all of which I hold the copyright), which intimated *Subjects of Modernity* stand transformed in their new avatar, their second coming. The editors and designers at Bloomsbury and Manchester University Press have facilitated the final version. I offer my sincere thanks.

At the end I move (closer) toward home. Miraculously, Savi Sawarkar came back into our lives as this book was being finalized. His art and warmth, friendship and persona have not only taught me how to listen to what pictures want, what images desire, but have provided me with lessons on life, history, and theory. I am grateful to him also for allowing me to reproduce the images that appear in the middle of this book.

Ishita Banerjee-Dube has been around, as always, shoring up my worlds while listening to every new paragraph as it was written, also providing me water and sustenance along the way. Needless to say, without her this book could not have been imagined and articulated a year after the death of my mother.

Prior generations pass and newer ones come around. Earlier this year, I wished happy birthday to Anurati Tandon, whom I had seen when she was quite the babe in arms, only a few months old. By way of a gift, it seemed to me, dedicating *Subjects of Modernity* to her might

be in order, an apposite gesture. And so this book is dedicated to a modern subject who is also a subject of modernity, Anurati Tandon or, simply, Anna.

Kolkata/New Delhi/Mexico

March 2016

