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THE ANXIETY OF BEING POSTCOLONIAL: IDEOLOGY AND THE CONTEMPORARY POSTCOLONIAL NOVEL

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In a recent essay that begins by recording the joy of returning home, the Sri Lankan author Shyam Selvadurai talks about his decision to return, together with his male partner, for an extended visit to Colombo.¹ The description begins along conventional lines (large mansions, curious but well-meaning relatives, sumptuous meals), but the idyllic trip is interrupted one night by security forces, ostensibly searching for Tamil Tigers.² Selvadurai's instinctive response to the presence of the soldiers outside the house is to rush into his bedroom and remove all things that would indicate that he was sharing a room with his partner. Before the security personnel could enter the room, everything that pointed to his partner's presence in the room had been removed. "Defagging" is what he calls the process. It was for Selvadurai a moment of considerable anxiety, not because he was a Tamil or because he could be suspected of having links with militants, but because he was gay. In this instance, ethnicity and political opinion gave way to sexual orientation as a signifier of otherness. Someone who had written a novel that was clear about its political stance would normally expect a very different motive for the visit, a backlash from an unforgiving state. Given the political message of his first novel, *Funny Boy* (1994), it would have been totally reasonable for the author to fear some reprisal from the government.³ But the soldiers were not there to interrogate a subversive author. They were on a routine check or were investigating complaints about a gay couple.

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The moment drives home what has become increasingly common in countries where the author's role has taken on a new dimension. Selvadurai himself comments: "A home in Sri Lanka after 18 years in exile: I should have been euphoric. But this new home had come too late". His disappointment is personal, not political or ethnic. How this moment of anxiety would play itself out in his future writing is left to be seen, but this episode underscores the location of the writer, whose personal life may not necessarily be a metonym for collectivity or whose predicament may not correspond to familiar markers. As postcolonial nations respond to a complex historical legacy by adopting shifting and often paradoxical positions, authors too feel the need to respond in ways that are equally indeterminate. Selvadurai's moment of panic underscores the ambivalence of postcolonial authorship in recent years. Nationality, belonging, text, author, and individual intersect in significant ways to produce recognition, fame, and also, at times, a measure of anxiety. The author is not necessarily a marginalized individual, but it is no longer safe to assume that he or she reflects the voice of the majority. In fact, it is possible to go even further and claim that the notion of a majoritarian perspective is in itself problematic.

44 This paper is an inquiry into or a meditation on an aspect of postcolonial studies that has become increasingly apparent in recent times: a kind of anxiety that is a consequence of new positions and perspectives and has resulted in what might well be a sub-genre of postcolonial writing. "Anxiety" here refers to the state of mind that Ashutosh Varshney refers to as a fear of the unknown, or as a loss of absolute certainties.⁴ To be sure of one's convictions is to write in a particular mode: realism, satire, allegory and fable, for example, involve a corresponding socio-political context. The kind of ambivalence caused by anxiety has no corresponding mode. In such works, there has been no break with convention, no startling innovation that one might readily identify as new and experimental. But there has been, in certain contexts, and among certain authors, a shift in emphasis, a desire to rethink their own writing styles and their own subject matter in ways that signal to the reader a point of departure. The signs have been there-when, for instance, *The God of Small Things* (1999), was critiqued for its moral and political message, and when the author responded by defending her position and by writing a very different kind of book.⁵ When, a few years ago, Amitav Ghosh refused to be a contender for the Commonwealth Prize, the issue again was one of uneasiness, of being confronted with a new set of concerns within a postcolonial frame.⁶ It is anxiety rather than fear or defiance or subversion that defines this particular kind of otherness. Postcolonial anxieties take different forms, and their manifestations tend to be dissimilar. Neocolonial specificities are such that generalizations have become increasingly difficult. But authors, like critics and scholars, are confronted with conditions that result in a feeling of anxiety.

The notion of the writer being an outsider is a commonplace in postcolonial writing. In the Philippines, in Singapore, in Sri Lanka and in South Africa, where there has been a history of violence and unrest, state-sponsored or otherwise, censorship has been a major factor. Inevitably, writers have responded by creating texts that circumvented state control. Writers who located themselves in diasporic contexts have been relatively free to write without inhibitions. Those who chose to remain had the choice of pretending that there was no cause for protest, or of subverting the dictates of censorship through means that gave them a measure of safety. Some form of allegory characterized much of the work that came out of the Philippines under the Marcos regime.⁷ Writing in Singapore continues to find ways of indirection to this day to avoid the possibility of offending the state. Those who choose not to comply, in Singapore or elsewhere, often pay the price for their foolhardiness.⁸ Either way, the terms of the opposition are clear: one is either inside the whale or outside it, as George Orwell and Salman Rushdie have shown, in different ways.⁹

The binarism that characterized such situations no longer applies in quite the same way in countries such as South Africa or Sri Lanka, where censorship does not announce its presence. Writers are free to write what they want without state intervention. And yet what was once relatively straightforward as political choice has become far more complex. The dichotomy between ruler and militant, for instance, in countries such as Sri Lanka, has become blurred with international intervention and some measure of legitimacy given to so-called secessionists. During the last few years, a peace process, brokered by Norway, has been under way in Sri Lanka, and the fact that Norway speaks both to the government and the militant group establishes the legitimacy of the latter. Very few contemporary writers would adopt a straightforward binarism to characterize the present context in Sri Lanka. In such situations, one almost feels the need for a new vocabulary, a new grammar of sorts, to address the new political reality. It is still possible for the author to adopt a specific stance, but he or she must do that with the awareness that such decisions are bound to be controversial. The issues have not lost their urgency, but positions have become more ambivalent. The anxiety is not always about reprisal but about a genuine difficulty in resolving the complexity of the problem. In South Africa, for example, the anxiety manifests itself in a particular way. The white author occupies an extremely problematic space within the new framework of power. Authority, legitimacy, subjectivity, and affiliation have become contested sites. Not only has the political situation become complex, but the author's identity as an individual does not stand outside the field itself. Where the boundaries of nation and race have not been resolved, the writers are painfully aware that to espouse any particular stance might well be counterproductive. Where their legitimacy is not a given, authors may choose a middle path, with the

knowledge that any one perspective is not likely to encapsulate the entire truth. In India, the anxiety might well take on a particular slant. Since the mid-1980s the rise of Hindu nationalism has been a major concern for the nation. The extent to which it has been addressed in literature would be an interesting area of inquiry. Thus the postcolonial predicament might well be a particular kind of ambivalence, caused as much by globalization and the need to withstand scrutiny by an international community, as by a shift in local conditions towards heterogeneity.

Diaspora is no longer a refuge for the authors in quite the same way it was years ago. While diaspora has facilitated access to major publishers and an impersonal readership, it is often important for writers to be able to return "home" in order to write about the countries they once left. Whether it is for research or to satisfy a yearning and nostalgia for home, some measure of legitimacy is associated with physical access to "home". Fijian writers such as Satendra Nandan routinely visit the country they fled from. Arundhati Roy and Vikram Seth have chosen to live in India. Rushdie has a house in India, even if he does not choose to live there. Vikram Chandra and Allan Sealy divide their time between India and outside. These writers may well publish in the West, but home certainly plays a constitutive role in ways it did not two decades ago. Governments too are now more mindful of international pressures and are less inclined to impose censorship than they did ten years ago. In any event, censorship tends to be less effective in a globalized world. But the writer is conscious that such privileges are carefully monitored, and to be seen as an enemy of the state or of a particular group that enjoys a measure of power is hardly a comfortable location. The middle space is not so much of compromise as ambivalence, of recognizing that moral and ethical boundaries are difficult to define. It is possible to argue that political and cultural contexts have always been complex. While one cannot dispute the truth of that claim, it does not negate the fact that the competing claims in the present make a moral high ground difficult to occupy.

The position is as urgent for writers as it is for scholars and journalists who are conscious of negotiating very difficult territory. The opposition to Romila Thapar's appointment to the Library of Congress is a case in point of how state ideology works in subtle or straightforward ways to drive home what is acceptable. Although she did get the appointment eventually and chose to accept it, the barrage of criticism she and the Library of Congress faced is a measure of changing perspectives. In this particular instance, there was no active national intervention, but a large number of people were unhappy that she was given the research chair.¹⁰ The university curriculum, the criteria for publications, reviews, are all part of an interlocking system that places the scholar in a curious situation of safeguarding freedom of writing and of being conscious that one's career in research is at least partially influenced by state ideology.

The writer's situation can hardly be discussed within a totalizing framework. Selvadurai's predicament arises out of his sexual orientation. J.M. Coetzee's situation, for example, is a racial one in which it is difficult to espouse certain positions without being scrutinized carefully for racial bias. The history of South Africa and the dismantling of apartheid have created a context in which certain issues have taken on a new resonance. It is possible to argue that his stance vis-à-vis apartheid has been clear from the beginning. He was always an outspoken critic of apartheid and injustice. In fact all his major works are about the inhumanity of an unjust political system. But his location has now changed. The cause he championed does not need the kind of endorsement that he provided. His emphasis on textuality and aesthetic distance might well appear old-fashioned and reactionary. Where he locates himself is often a more urgent question than what he stands for. Issues of subjectivity and agency have become important for complex reasons. For Michael Ondaatje and Romesh Gunesequera, both diasporic writers, the issue might well be one of wanting to participate actively in the political scene without stating a clear position. Here again, there is a difference between the two, although they are both Sri Lankan authors. Gunesequera has always been involved in politics, at least nominally in his works. Curiously enough, it is in his most recent novel, *Heaven's Edge* (2002), that the anxiety about what to say and how to say it becomes apparent. Ondaatje, on the other hand, stayed away from Sri Lanka, literally and otherwise, apart from a few visits and a very personal memoir of sorts.¹¹ Gradually he found himself drawn to Sri Lanka and in fact used the Booker Prize money to set up a fund for an annual prize for the best writer from the country. It is thus a logical step for him to confront the issues that have obsessed the country for two decades in his novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000).

It is a matter of considerable interest that *Anil's Ghost* has been looked at carefully by critics for signs of ethnic bias. Many of the articles written by Sri Lankan scholars have identified some form of communal bias that, according to the critics, place the author on one side or the other of the ideological divide.¹² Ondaatje himself has stated, both in an interview and in his Governor General's Prize acceptance speech that he was not interested in taking sides. To argue for peace was what he considered important. "'Pacifism', 'reconciliation', 'forgiveness' are easily mocked and dismissed words. But only those principles will save us" says Ondaatje.¹³ And yet, the novel itself appears to problematise the political issues in remarkably new ways. The presence of multiple narratives that intersect in the text signals a new consciousness in Ondaatje, as it does in a number of authors. It is possible to argue that the whole story of Palipana is an allegory for the dilemma of the author who must lie in order to express the truth. Palipana as epigraphist was valorized when he came across as anti-imperialist. The moment he shifts his perspective and "imagines" realities that history has suppressed, he becomes a traitor and an

impostor. Palipana's predicament is not unlike that of the author whose rise to fame is watched carefully, whose writing must negotiate a middle ground between essentialism and state ideology. The epigraphist chooses a Buddha-like withdrawal to avoid the public gaze, but that stance is hardly available to the author who cannot evade the issues or confront them with any degree of certainty.

Anil's Ghost does not distance itself from the realities of political unrest. In fact, it is quite graphic in its description of brutality and violence. But its mode allows for a measure of distance. Apart from the acceptance speech, the author inserts himself in the text with a prefatory note that is signed "M.O." The narrator, however, is not the author and the multiple narratives in the text destabilize the notion of a univocal narrative voice. Multiple perspectives are inserted into the text deliberately to preempt political bias. Ondaatje, one is inclined to think, is not interested in sitting on the fence. At the same time, he is aware that truth is a matter of perspective. It is possible to withdraw physically, as Palipana does, by retreating to the forest, but the retreat is never complete. Metaphors allow for multiplicity, but they cannot function without some link to the referent. The significance of *Anil's Ghost* is not that Ondaatje finally writes a novel about Sri Lanka, but that he writes in a manner that reveals a deep anxiety about its past and present history. It is possible to argue that *Anil's Ghost* is a profoundly truthful political novel largely because its political stance resolutely avoids didacticism.

For literary studies, the issue might be posed in the following manner: what kind of narrative mode would writers choose to adopt in situations that require political engagement without a clear bias? Literary history demonstrates that new forms and genres have emerged when new positions needed to be expressed. Does the contemporary scene necessitate a struggle with prevalent modes? Various "isms" such as postmodernism and magic realism have played a constitutive role in demonstrating the experimental gestures of contemporary writing. They often point to a kind of opaqueness in the material that needed to be sifted in order to perceive forms of corruption or oppression. Now the material itself poses problems.

For the most part, such texts seem to work with some version of realism, although realism *per se* is probably less conducive to the kind of ambivalence that such narratives seek to express. In this respect, *Disgrace* (2000) is probably a useful text to consider carefully. It is a novel that is framed by another text that is presented as a version of realism. The previous text, namely *The Lives of Animals* (1999), then, serves as an intertextual frame for a text that shifts emphasis away from the social context to the character. *Disgrace* is a character-driven novel that only intermittently touches on the political scene. The novel provides enough by way of information to remind the reader that the concerns are larger than that of straightforward social realism. But its ambivalence is a measure of the anxiety of

the author and the predicament of the Afrikaner in South Africa. It is the anxiety of realizing that the middle position is not tenable, although that is probably the position that is available. *Disgrace* is often misread—that in itself is a sign of a nascent form that has not been adequately identified. Quite often Coetzee's lectures are in the form of narratives, where critic and author seem to merge. And the lecture/fiction may well take the form of a dialogue that displaces traditional certainties.

It is important to recognize that *Disgrace* is primarily concerned with the misdemeanor of a professor who abuses his power by having sexual relations with a student. While it would be absurd to overstate the point, it is nonetheless relevant that the author is himself a professor. In a distant manner, the relation between author and character is established in the novel. While the inquiry that follows the accusation of rape can be related to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it is equally important that it should provide the occasion for Professor Lurie to discuss the pitfalls of assuming that truth can be arrived at through conventional means. Lurie is willing to accept guilt, but he refuses to admit repentance. As he puts it, "repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse" (58). As Lurie struggles not only against the University, but also against the world that his daughter inhabits, the moral binarism of the novel becomes destabilized and complex. Lurie as stand-in for the author figure expresses the anxiety of involvement and detachment. He resigns his post to avoid a lengthy inquiry, but finds himself involved in a situation that is no less difficult to resolve. Lurie's recognition that narratives are difficult to articulate echoes the postcolonial author's struggle to find an adequate narrative mode. The very fact that Lurie's daughter is reluctant to relate her tale of rape is a metaphor for the multiplicity of the context. The ostensible simplicity of *Disgrace*, compared to Coetzee's previous fiction is, in a curious way, a manifestation of an anxiety that cannot easily be understood.

Ondaatje's position is similar with some important differences. If he occupies a position of privilege, it is because he is a diasporic author championed and sustained by the West. When he first wrote about Sri Lanka, he retreated to a private space by talking about his own family. *Running in the Family* (1982) is satirical, irreverent, apolitical and even impressionistic. Critics have blamed the author for appropriating and essentialising Sri Lanka in order to cater to a Western readership. Twenty years later, such a book would have been far more difficult to write. To engage directly with the political scene would be to take sides and reveal a bias, which probably does not exist in the author's mind. Although *Anil's Ghost* has encountered a fair amount of criticism for its political stance, the fact remains that the author is more interested in staging, in laying bare the subtleties of history and historiography than in suggesting an unalterable truth. The teleology of the novel

is in striking contrast to some of his previous works, which are more self-consciously counterrealistic. *Anil's Ghost* works with structures only to destabilize them, and in the process show that there are many sides, all equally valid. The novel carefully steers clear of elitism in order to project a vision that is deeply troubling.

Gunasekera's *Reef* (1992), which was short listed for the Booker Prize, was distinguished by its capacity for detail, for the meticulous care with which certain motifs were projected in the novel. Sri Lanka in the novel is a real presence, and the author/narrator's stance regarding politics and the environment is equally unequivocal. Compare that with his recent novel *Heaven's Edge*, and the two books might have been written by two different authors. The latter is ostensibly allegorical, with the difference that the allegory is constantly interrupted by a form of signposting that reminds the reader of the referent. The notion of an outsider who can no longer remain on the outside but is equally troubled by the terms within which the local operates is crucial to the novel. The fact that reviewers have identified *Heaven's Edge* as fantasy, fable, magic realism, and science fiction underscores the contention that a new form may well be emerging in postcolonial writing. It is even possible to argue that despite its obvious merits, *Heaven's Edge* has lagged behind *Reef* in popularity precisely because its form is unfamiliar and its political stance deliberately unclear. Ondaatje and Gunasekera deal with the same context but in two different ways. But both depict characters who feel the need to intervene, who must undertake a quest, and what they do has consequences that make a safe middle ground impossible. Gunasekera's work is much closer to allegory than Ondaatje's novel, but the allegory remains on the edge of referentiality to the point that the reader recognizes similarity without direct equivalence.

All these novels that are framed by a measure of anxiety appear to have characteristics that one might identify as experimental, postmodern or counterrealistic. They serve the purpose of drawing attention to the artifice of the text. In Gunasekera it might well be more apparent than in Coetzee, but both employ strategies that suggest a movement away from conventional realism. However, it is possible that these strategies tap into the subjectivity of the reader and serve the function of drawing the reader into the experience rather than providing a distance. In a curious way, the postmodern impulse of defamiliarization is employed to reinforce the urgency and emotional investment of the text. If we were to think of this body of writing as a possible sub-genre, then one of its defining characteristics might well be this curious juxtaposition: the impulse to distance and to remain subjectively involved. This marks a movement away from the experimentation of writers such as Rushdie or the realism of earlier writers such Chinua Achebe.

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed a particular kind of writing exemplified in the works of, say, Achebe, Patrick White, V.S. Naipaul and Anita Desai. There were significant differences among them, but there was also a consciousness about the end of Empire. It was thus possible for critics to speculate about their work along holistic lines. In some of the pioneering critical studies such as W.H. New's *Among Worlds* (1975) and *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft et al., there is an implicit acknowledgment of common ground, despite shifts in emphases. In the 1980s with Rushdie there is a point of departure. *Midnight's Children* borrowed from many different sources, but it was in some senses an Indian text, responding to trends that were identifiably Indian. Admittedly, Alfred Yuson in the Philippines, Peter Carey in Australia and Ben Okri in England wrote along similar lines, but the differences between them were clearly discernible.¹⁴ Now political concerns and literary histories have moved further apart, requiring a critical practice that is mindful of specificities. The present time is one in which a greater anxiety confronts authors, particularly in countries where the fault lines are more difficult to detect. What does it mean to belong to a particular race, ethnic group, or religion within the framework of an ambivalent national imaginary? One consequence, in literary terms, is the forging of new modes that respond to complex anxieties.

A further example of this phenomenon might be a recent novel entitled *A Hamilton Case* (2003) by Michelle de Krestler. Apart from the specificities of the novel itself, it is possible to argue that among some of the diasporic writers, particularly second-generation authors, the anxiety is likely to manifest itself in yet another way.¹⁵ For them, home is defined at least partially by memory rather than lived experience. In their writing, the root metaphors (to use Dipankar Gupta's phrase) are often absent.¹⁶ What they know, they have learnt in a particular kind of way. And when they write, something of that is reflected in the shape of the narrative itself. It does not necessarily relate to de Krestler's novel, but it certainly has a bearing on the general argument of this paper.

de Krestler's novel moves to the 1930s, a maneuver that suggests a measure of guardedness about the material. The present is invoked regularly to announce the novel's relevance, but the narrative itself goes back in time. More significantly, it is structured in a manner that brings together multiple narratives that both defamiliarize and absorb the reader. The otherness of the text stops short of exoticising the material while remaining on the margins of mainstream political or cultural life. The characters are depicted in minute detail but they are not by any stretch representative. There is a newness about this mode of writing that is both reminiscent of the past without imitating what is now seen as essentialist or exotic. The text itself quotes Friedrich Durrenmatt: "Reality can only be partially attacked by logic" (91), thereby drawing attention to the limitations of the mode of detection that furthers the plot of the novel.

The notion of anxiety is not peculiar to writing in English. In various ways it manifests itself in vernacular writing, although for vernacular writers geographical dislocation is not a factor in the writing process. For the most part, vernacular writers tend to be local rather than diasporic, although it is possible to argue that the situation is beginning to change. And it is not only fiction, but poetry and drama that are affected by the kinds of pressures that problematize the role of the writer. It is conceivable that as writers confront and resolve the anxieties of this new space, a new poetics for this body of writing will emerge. Suffice it to mention that some of the tropes that we are familiar with—the writer as chronicler, as teacher, as critic or even as trickster—may not be the only ones that are adequate for contemporary times. A new anxiety may well define what writers write and how they write them. Some measure of anxiety did exist, in one form of shape, in literary history, but it is necessary to recognize and contextualize contemporary postcolonial experience in order to reflect on what could well be a sub-genre of writing. As W.H. Auden puts it, appropriately, in the poem, “The Age of Anxiety”:

The Primary Colours
Are all mixed up; the whole numbers
Have broken down, the big situations
Ceased to excite (328).

Notes

1. The essay entitled “Coming Out” appeared in 1993 in *Time* magazine. For the text of the article see http://www.time.com/time/asia/2003/journey/sri_lanka.html

2. The Tigers is a popular term for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a major militant group among the Tamils in Sri Lanka that has been involved, for the past two decades, in a struggle for some form of secession or regional autonomy.

3. The novel has two major foci: the narrator's growing consciousness about his gay sexuality and the violence against the Tamils during the riots of 1983. The author is candid about his condemnation of the government that turned a blind eye to the violence.

4. Varshney uses the term in a slightly different manner, but his essay is a valuable attempt to look at the political situation in India through the lens of anxiety.

5. Roy's book was critiqued for many reasons, but not for her treatment of caste, as one would normally expect, since the novel is predominantly concerned with inter-caste relationships. The critical responses, an example of which is the review that appeared in *Frontline*, objected to her treatment of the Communist Party of Kerala. Another charge against her was for producing obscene material. Roy's response was to write a book that established her social activism. It is also significant that she has not written another novel after her first work of fiction. The determination to pursue her social activism,

her movement to another genre of writing, and even her failure to write another novel may well be reflections of a kind of anxiety that one did not encounter when positions were more clear cut.

6. After having won the regional prize, Amitav Ghosh decided to withdraw his name from the contenders for the Commonwealth Prize. In a letter to the Commonwealth Committee, he expressed his reservations about the exclusivity of the prize that considered only writing in English and also about the political overtones of the term “Commonwealth”. Here the anxiety of complicity is personal and to some extent abstract. See <http://www.ezipangu.org/english/contents/news/forward/3/2.html>

7. Literature was one of the major casualties of the Marcos regime. A number of writers chose not to write while the others sought out ways of getting their message across indirectly.

8. Salman Rushdie and Richard de Zoysa (Sri Lanka) for instance, were affected by their failure to conform. Rushdie had the *fatwa* decreed against him and de Zoysa was murdered.

9. For an interesting discussion read “Outside the Whale” in Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* (1992).

10. For a comprehensive account of the different perspectives, see http://www.himalmag.com/2003/june/analysis_2.htm

11. The memoir entitled *Running in the Family*, written in 1982, adopts an irreverent, apolitical stance that is a far cry from the political engagement of his recent novel. If one were to think of *Anil's Ghost* as a “sequel” to *Running in the Family*, then the

difference between the two becomes increasingly apparent.

12. Qadri Ismail, for example, argues forcefully that the minorities have been completely ignored in the novel and that in the final analysis, the novel serves the cause of Buddhist Sinhala nationalism. Ranjini Mendis argues that the novel blames the government for violence when in fact it is the Tamil militant group that has caused much of the destruction in the country. The two critics stand at two ends of the spectrum, indicating through their perspectives that stances that appear objective may well be flawed.

13. The full text of his acceptance speech appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, 15 November, 2000: R 2.

14. Yuson's well-known novel is titled *The Great Philippine Jungle Energy Café* (1988); Carey wrote *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and Okri's novel is titled *The Famished Road* (1991). All three are experimental works, but they are also identifiably “national” in their concerns.

15. De Krester is not, strictly speaking, second-generation, but her work reveals characteristics that one often encounters in the work of “new” authors.

16. For a valuable discussion of the concept, see pages 31-40 in Dipankar Gupta's *Culture, Space, and the Nation State* (2000). Root metaphors imply a particular kind of recognition that comes from shared cultural space. According to Gupta's argument, diasporic communities do not necessarily have access to that world view. It is possible to argue that second-generation authors, despite their hyphenated identity, are likely to be alienated from that feeling of commonality.

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MAKING VISIBLE THE INVISIBLE: REVERSING THE CODES OF DOMINANT CULTURE IN MADONNA'S VIDEOCLIP *DON'T TELL ME*¹

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Like many of Madonna's earlier works, her album *Music* became a world hit when it was released in 2001. After so many years of chameleonic transformations, she again startled the public with a new image; as can be appreciated in the song and clip *Don't Tell Me*, Madonna has begun mixing tecno music with country aesthetics.²

In an article on Madonna published just after the release of *Music* it has been argued that she is turning more conservative with age, both in her artistic career and private life; she has even been nicknamed *Material Mom*, instead of *Material Girl* (Rodríguez, 2001: 3). *Don't Tell Me* could be taken as an example of this new 'moderate' image. It is apparently a love song addressed to an implicit male lover, but this is simply a conventional model that can commercially serve to maximize the appeal of the song. Even so, Madonna's songs should not be taken too literally. On the contrary, ambiguity has always been a major element in her prolific hits. With this in mind, a straightforward reading of the chorus lines as a love song is problematized by the rather enigmatic ending: "But please don't tell me to stop". Madonna herself declared that what attracted her about the song was its rebellious aspect in spite of its romantic content (in Sischy, 2001: 34).

Madonna's new image as a rebel cowgirl may acquire more relevance if the cultural and political context of the United States at the beginning of the 21st century is taken into account.³ The release of this album coincided with the election of