Our Gandhi, Our Times

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This remarkable special issue of Public Culture is the product of several years of fruitful dialogue among the editors, Ritu Birla, Faisal Devji, and the late Carol Breckenridge. It thus exemplifies something of the spirit in which Public Culture was founded, less as an authoritative forum for the adjudication of intellectual taste than as a forum for debating emergent interpretations and the interpretation of emergence. All three of the individuals whose conversations led to this set of essays are historians, and so are several of the authors of the individual essays collected here.

In this regard, this special issue on Hind Swaraj is part of an evolving answer to a question with which the editors and editorial board of Public Culture have struggled from the very beginnings of the journal: did we care about history, or was the journal to be entirely about the sightings and sitings of the global present? Carol understood that this question concealed a false binary, a false opposition between the future of the archive and the archive of the future, but false binaries are not easily overcome. One part of the answer to how and why Public Culture could engage historical problems and topics without becoming also a professional forum for historians was an interest in the social lives of texts, especially those whose afterlife seems even more volatile than the circumstances of their original publication. Their conversations about textuality, circulation, and diaspora were one part of the reason that Ritu, Faisal, and Carol felt that the one hundredth anniversary of the publication of Hind Swaraj was a moment right and ripe for the pages of Public Culture, and the essays in this issue fully justify this intuition.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, of course, is the right figure to stimulate this engagement, for he had a famous disregard for history as fact, chronology, or destiny. Yet he is himself utterly unthinkable apart from his special history, which took him from Gujarat to England, from England to South Africa, and from South Africa back to India. It was during this last journey by sea that he wrote Hind
Swaraj. No modern leader was as fully a product of his times and yet as committed to changing what these times could be and become. And Hind Swaraj was his testimony to that transitional moment. The essays in this issue by Jonathan Hyslop, Isabel Hofmeyr, Keith Breckenridge, and Crain Soudien are brilliant studies of that contingent context in which this remarkable text was composed. The essays by Devji, Birla, and Uday Mehta reflect on Hind Swaraj to unsettle some tired views of Gandhi’s ideas about life, habit, violence, and virtue. Rachel Dwyer, Christopher Pinney, and Vyjayanthi Rao probe the afterlife of Gandhi’s imaging and self-imagining in Indian public life, and the essays by Pamila Gupta, Aishwary Kumar, and Shruti Kapila reopen the historiographies in which Gandhi’s political thought can more fruitfully be placed, even as the machines of Gandhi hagiography continue to churn out massive volumes in present-day India.

Each of these essays would surely have been a fine contribution in another scholarly context, journal, and debate. But in this issue they dwell and reflect together (having been circulated, exchanged, and revised in a collective conversation over a three-year period spanning New York, Johannesburg, and Mumbai). And in this togetherness they resemble and refract something of the diasporic journey of Hind Swaraj itself, a text of diaspora and a text about diaspora, which demands multiple archival rereadings and critical dialogues that need to be as transnational as Gandhi’s own life.

Like Gandhi’s own text, this collection is not only about illuminating the context in which great ideas are born, but, like Hind Swaraj, it intends to change the context of its own publication. And this may be seen as one hallmark of texts that become classics. Classics, in this view, are not only supremely felicitous in the contexts that give rise to them, but they change forever the conditions of their own future reading. Hind Swaraj, as a diasporic text, surely changed the context of emergent nationalisms across the whole span of the Indian Ocean. This collection too has every potential for changing its own contexts, the contexts of Gandhiana, of transnational studies, and of diasporic public cultures today.

I began by saying that this issue was the fruit of an engaged, loving, and critical conversation among the editors, Birla and Devji, and the late Carol Breckenridge. But there was another great voice in that conversation. That voice was the voice of Mahatma Gandhi, and this issue is a tribute to that spirit of patience, truth, and loving debate that marks Gandhi’s unrelenting presence in our midst.