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**POSTCOLONIALISM**  
**Space, Textuality, and Power**

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### 1). Postcolonialism and the Critique of Historicism

As a field of academic inquiry, postcolonialism has its intellectual origins in the writings of a number of intellectuals who came to prominence in the middle part of the twentieth-century, the period of intense anti-colonial struggles against formal European territorial control, especially in Africa and Asia (see Young 2001). These include writers such as C.L.R. James, who recovered the forgotten history of Haitian rebellion in the French Revolution; Amílcar Cabral, the leader of the movement against Portuguese colonialism in Guiné and Cape Verde; and Aimé Césaire, a poet from French Martinique who became an important theorist of the Negritude movement, which asserted the value of previously denigrated African cultures. Each of these writers shared two common concerns. Firstly, each emphasised that colonialism consisted of more than economic exploitation and political subordination; colonialism also involved the exercise of cultural power over subordinated populations. Culture is understood to have been wielded by colonialist powers to denigrate the traditions of non-Western cultures, and to celebrate the superiority of particular versions of Western culture.

If these writers understand culture to be an instrument of domination, then regaining control over the means of collective self-definition is regarded as an important strategy in the political struggle for emancipation. One good example of the analysis of this relationship between culture, domination, and resistance, is James' account of the history of cricket in the Caribbean. In *Beyond a Boundary* (James 1963), the cricket field is refigured as an arena in which relations of racial superiority are asserted and subverted during colonialism, as well as one in which the continuing tensions between newly independent states and the former colonial power are played out after end of formal colonialism. This leads us onto the second emphasis that this generation of anti-colonial writers share, which is a premonition that in so far as relations of colonial subordination are embedded in cultural systems of identity and representation, then the formal end of European colonialism would not necessarily mean the end of colonial forms of power. The clearest link between a generation of anti-colonial writers and the emergence of postcolonialism in the late 1970s and 1980s is, then, this shared concern with the conditions for the 'decolonization of the mind'. This process of decolonizing the mind is concerned with working through the embedded modes of reasoning, thinking, and evaluating that secrete assumptions about privilege, normality, and superiority (Sidaway 2000).

The emphasis upon the destruction of non-Western cultural traditions during colonialism might appear to imply that the work of decolonizing the mind requires the recovery and revaluation of these traditions. But this understanding of the cultural politics of postcolonialism can easily re-inscribe a binary opposition between modernity and tradition that is itself a key ideological device used in the denigration of non-Western societies. The invocation of 'authentic' traditions has, in fact, been one of the most problematic ways in which postcolonial elites have continued to wield political power over their citizens. A more complex way of understanding the relationship between the modern and the traditional is illustrated by the career of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. His early novels were published in English under the name James Ngugi, but in the 1970s, he became involved in the production of popular theatre using the most widely used indigenous language in Kenya, Gikuyu. Ngugi was imprisoned because of this involvement, and out of this commitment emerged his decision to write original works in this language, rather than in English. In principle, this is an attempt to make his work available to local audiences, in a much broader way than is possible through the use of English (see Ngugi 1986). At the same time,

however, Ngugi's strategy is not straightforwardly aimed at recovering a lost tradition of indigenous, authentic narrative. It is, rather, more an act of post-colonial invention, fusing together genres and forms from different narrative traditions, both Western and non-Western. It is, then, a distinctive effort to inscribe an alternative modernity into global networks of cultural representation.

The most significant intellectual influence connecting anti-colonial writing to postcolonial theory is Franz Fanon. Fanon was born in French Martinique, and educated and trained in Paris. He spent much of his life working in Algeria at the height of the anti-colonial war between French and Algerian nationalists (the FLN) in the 1950s and early 1960s. Fanon came to identify strongly with the FLN struggle, and this infused his analysis of the psychological dimensions of colonialism. This is laid out in his two classic works. *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 1991), is an analysis of the impact of racism on the subjective identities of both dominant and subordinate groups. *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1967) is one of the classics of modern political thought, a manifesto for the liberation of oppressed peoples around the world. One reason why this book is important is because of its prescient critique of the ideology of anti-colonial nationalism. Fanon suggested that nationalist ideologies were an essential element of anti-colonial struggle, but foresaw that once formal, political independence was won, this same ideology risked becoming a new mechanism for elites to exercise power over dissenters or marginalized populations. This critique of ideologies of nationalism is one crucial link between Fanon's work and that of various writers central to the emergence of postcolonial theory since the 1980s. Another link is a more directly theoretical one. Fanon was not just a practicing psychiatrist, an experience that infused his analysis of the personal and group psychologies of both colonizers and the colonized. His writing was also informed by the main lines of modern Continental philosophy, including Hegel's account of the master-slave dialectic, Marxian analysis of political struggle, and psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity. It is this last dimension in particular that makes Fanon such an important reference point for postcolonial theory – this line of work is concerned with rethinking the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism through a psychoanalytical vocabulary of subject-formation.

One of Fanon's strongest assertions was that the so-called 'developed' or 'First World' was, in fact, the product of the 'Third World'. By this, he meant that it was through the exploitation of non-Europeans that the wealth, culture, and civilization of the West were built. This was more than an empirical observation, however. It was meant as a challenge to a whole way of understanding the dynamics of historical development. One way in which European colonial and imperial expansion was legitimized was through a claim that European culture was the prime mover of historical progress itself. Non-European cultures were denigrated as being either historically backward, or worse, as being wholly outside of history. This same pattern of thought persists in central categories of twentieth-century social science, including ideas of *modernization*, of *development*, and of *developed* and *less developed*. All of these ideas presume one particular set of cultural values and practices as the benchmark against which to judge all others. In so far as they presume an idealized model of European history as the single model for other societies to emulate, these notions are often described as Eurocentric. Eurocentrism combines a strong sense of the particularity of one culture with a strong claim to the universality of these values. The seeming contradiction between the claims for the superiority of particular cultural values which are nonetheless held to be valued precisely because of their supposed universalizability is finessed by the projection of a linear model of historical progress

onto the spaces of different societies. On this understanding, the assumption is that Europe is the core region of world history, out of which spreads all important innovations – science, capitalism, literature, and so on (see Blaut 1993). This combination of cultural particularism and universalization therefore works through the spatialization of time – different parts of the world were ranked as being at different stages of a process of historical progress that assumed a single path of development, or modernization. This pattern of thought is known as Historicism.

The biggest challenge of postcolonialism, as a tradition of critical thought, lies in questioning the legacies of this historicist way of thought (see Young 1990). It is this critique of historicism that Fanon presaged in his work, by arguing that the history of the West was not a hermetically sealed story of secularization, modernization, and accumulation. Rather than thinking of colonialism and imperialism as marginal to the history of Europe and North America, postcolonialism asserts the centrality of colonialism and imperialism to appreciating the intertwined histories of societies which, from a historicist perspective, are presented as separate entities differently placed on a scale of progress. So, if postcolonialism challenges a particular normative model of linear historical progress, it does so by also challenging the geographical image of distinct, self-contained societies upon which this model depends.

On the basis of these introductory remarks, the rest of this chapter will explore three dimensions to the field of postcolonialism. Firstly, it will consider the ‘origins’ of this field of academic inquiry in the seminal work of Edward Said. Secondly, it will elaborate on what is perhaps the most significant contribution of this whole field. This is a particular model of power, one which connects ideas about discourse and Textuality to more worldly issues of institutions, organisations, economies and markets. Thirdly, the chapter will reflect on some of the broader moral and philosophical problems raised by postcolonialism, particularly as these concern issues of universalism, cultural relativism, and how to approach the task of cross-cultural understanding.

## **2). The Imaginary Geographies of Colonial Discourse**

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) is the single most important reference point for the emergence of postcolonial theory. In this book, Said argued that Western conceptions of identity, culture, and civilisation have historically been built on the projection of images of the non-West, and specifically of images of the so-called ‘Orient’. These images could be negative and derogatory, or positive and romantic. In either case, the identity of the West has been defined by reference to the meanings ascribed to what is presumed to be different from the West, its non-Western ‘Other’. Said provided one of the most influential accounts of a more general theory of cultural politics understood as a process of ‘othering’, an understanding that has come to define a whole range of academic research in the social sciences and humanities. According to this understanding, identity is socially constructed in relation to other identities, in a simultaneous process of identification with certain groups and differentiation from certain other groups. At the same time, this process of construction is hidden or disavowed, so that is common for identities to be presented as if they were natural. If identity is relationally constructed, then it works primarily by excluding some element that takes on the role of the Other, an image of non-identity that confirms the identity of the self or the collective community. For geographers in particular, this theory is influential because it presents identity-formation as a process of controlling boundaries and maintaining the territorial integrity of communities or selves.

One reason why Said's argument proved so influential was his use of Michel Foucault's notion of *discourse* to explain the power of cultural representations in laying the basis for colonial and imperial domination. Said provided one of the first fully worked out applications of Foucault's ideas, arguing that ideas and images were not free-standing, but were part of whole systems of institutionalised knowledge production, through which people and organisations learnt to engage with the world around them. *Orientalism* has come to act as the focal point of discussion precisely because it is a text in which the critique of colonial and imperial knowledge is brought into uneasy communication with poststructuralist theory. One way in which postcolonial theory emerged was therefore through increasingly sophisticated theoretical debates over issues of representation, identity and power. Another is through a process of empirical application of Said's original emphasis on knowledge and power. Said's original analysis of Orientalist discourse implied that a whole array of institutions produced different forms of knowledge through which the non-European world was discursively produced for Europe. Colonial and imperial power was inscribed in and through administrative and bureaucratic documents, maps, romantic novels, and much else besides. The critical force of Said's book was to make a strong connection between the ideals of high culture and learning – literature, theatre, science, and so on – and the world of grubby politics, power and domination. *Orientalism* provided a theoretical template through which a diverse set of institutions and representations could be given coherence as objects of analysis – as examples of colonial discourse – by being subjected to interpretative protocols loosely drawn from literary studies. All sorts of things could be understood in terms of discourse and the production of colonial subjectivity – scientific writing, historical documents, official reports, literature and poetry, the visual arts, as well as academic discourses such as anthropology, geography, or linguistics. The range and diversity of sites through which colonial subjectivities were constructed and contested is the condition for the interdisciplinary impulse of colonial discourse analysis.

In *Orientalism*, Said referred to Orientalism as a form of 'imaginative geography'. His claim was that Orientalist representations were really self-generating projections of Western paranoia and desire, and were not based on any detailed knowledge of different cultures and societies. As Said describes it, Orientalism has two dimensions. There is a store of ideas about the Orient which have been produced over centuries through which the Orient was staged for the West. In turn, from the late-eighteenth century onwards this reservoir of images and knowledges is drawn upon to direct the actual course of European territorial expansion and appropriation. Young (1990) identifies this as the central tension in Said's account. On the one hand, Said holds that the 'Orient' is essentially a misrepresentation, which reflects projections of fear and anxiety but which bears little relation to the actualities of complex societies it purports to name and describe. Yet, on the other hand there is the suggestion that such misrepresentations become effective instruments of colonial power and administration. Said does not adequately theorise the means by which knowledge about other cultures becomes effective as an instrument in the exercise of power over those cultures. His only gesture in this direction is the distinction between 'latent' and 'manifest' Orientalism, the latter presented as the means by which a static and synchronic essentialism is narrated into practical historical situations. In such a formulation, Europeans always find what they expected in the Orient, and the actualities of colonial contact and administration do not fundamentally interrupt the structures of understanding that frame any encounter with the 'real' Orient.

Said's original formulation of Orientalism as a form of imaginative geography therefore bestows two theoretical dilemmas upon the analysis of colonial discourse. The first is the problem of how to account for the translation of 'knowledge' which is purely imaginative and non-empirical into knowledge that is practically useful in administering complex social systems like colonial bureaucracies, markets, and so on. The second problem is how to conceptualise anti-colonialist agency from within this understanding. The idea that colonial discourses are entirely the product of colonisers' imagination implies that there exists some pristine space, untouched by the experience of cross-cultural contact, from which authentic agency and resistance must emanate. But it is precisely this sort of 'nativist' understanding that Said has been consistently opposed to. Both of these dilemmas can be traced back to the theoretical model of colonial discourse sketched in *Orientalism*, and specifically to the unresolved problems inherent in Said's original formulation of Orientalist discourse as a form of 'imaginative geography' which produces the Orient as the projection of a Western will-to-mastery. Said argued that colonialism is discursively prefigured in the various representations through which the Orient as an imagined location is first constructed. It is this strong sense of projection and prefiguration that is most problematic, because it implies that colonial discourses were self-generating. And this tends to run counter to the strongest critical impulse of Said's work, which is the decentering of self-enclosed narratives of Western progress by showing the ways in which societies are the products of a constant traffic of cultural practices and traditions.

It is worth noting that there are, in fact, two overlapping overlapping tropological schemas through which the relationship between culture, identity and space is presented in Said's original formulation of 'imaginative geography'. The first trope one finds is the psychologicistic one of the West projecting its anxieties and paranoia onto another spatial realm, through which the 'Orient' is constituted as the fully-formed mirror image of Western self. This suggests that the essentials of colonial knowledge are formed prior to and in the absence of the actual event of colonial contact. Invoking Gaston Bachelard to describe how distant places are invested with significance from afar by the 'poetic' ascription of meaning, Orientalist discourse is presented as producing meaning from a 'here' about a 'there' in advance of actually going 'there'. In his eagerness to stress that colonial discourse involves a misrepresentation of complex realities, Said is forced to posit a core of Orientalist knowledge which escapes the principle of inescapable entanglement of peoples and places. The Orient thereby emerges as the fantasy projection of an autonomous will-to-power.

There is, however, a second tropological schema at work in Said's original account. This presents Orientalism as a discourse which stages its own performance, and through which Orientalist representations were produced for a European audience. It underscores the sense that actual colonialism is prefigured at the level of culture, in such a way that the actual encounter with the 'real' Orient appears as a carefully directed and minutely orchestrated *mis-en-scene*, involving a pre-established script faithfully followed by each and every actor. Such an understanding still requires that the texts of such a 'discursive-formation' be read as the expressions of a paranoid group psychology produced wholly in a metropolitan context and having no purchase on any 'real' Orient at all. The theatrical metaphor thus remains subordinated to the emphasis on poetic projection. However, perhaps we can free this second, dramatic trope from this overriding emphasis on the imaginative pre-figuration of actual events. Rather than thinking of colonial practices as more or less perfect performances of already highly rehearsed scripts, we might instead read the colonial archive as made

up of the traces of extensive exercises in improvisation. If the discursive production of colonial space is to be fruitfully understood on analogy with a dramatic production, then we should not think of the scenes so produced as realisations of a single autonomous *ur-script* which is the model for each of its own performances. If these performances have a script, then it is one whose existence resides nowhere other than in the contingencies of its repeated (re)enactments. Such a metaphorical flight might lead us towards new ways of reading the textual artefacts of the imperial archive, ones which do not rely on positing of a single coherent will animating each utterance, and which are able to think of colonial discourses as the products of the contingencies and contestations of the ongoing reproduction of colonial and imperial relations. This implies reading textual materials not as a reflection of an imperial will-to-power, nor of the popular mood, nor of the intentions of ruling powers. Rather, it implies reading them as traces of the wider practices, institutions, and routines of which they are often the only surviving remnants. It is an understanding that directs attention away from the contents of texts, towards a concern to what they are practically used to do.

The reason for thinking of colonial discourse along these more 'performative' lines is that this answers to an important criticism of the standard model of colonial discourse derived from *Orientalism*. This is the complaint that colonial discourse has too often been theorised as a coherent product of colonialising powers. This tends to hide from view the mediations and relations through which colonialism and imperialism developed (Thomas 1994). This criticism implies the need to shift away from a strong emphasis on irredeemable Manichean conflict between coloniser and colonised, towards concepts which focus upon processes of cross-cultural communication. This is the task undertaken by Mary Louise Pratt's (1992) work on colonial representations. In her notion of the 'contact zone', one finds a strong empirical and theoretical argument for relocating the site of production of knowledge into an interstitial zone of colonial contact, negotiation, and contestation, which enables the constitutive role of non-Western agency and knowledge in the production of such discourses to be acknowledged. Pratt's work is just one example of the shift in colonial discourse analysis and postcolonial theory towards a strong emphasis on the fully relational constitution of representations and identities. In Homi Bhabha's (1994) work, the emphasis is upon colonial subject-formation as an inherently ambivalent process of emulation, mimicry, and subversive trickery, giving rise to forms of hybrid subjectivities.

This shift in the ways in which identity, geography, and power are conceptualised is also evident in Said's own work, which after *Orientalism* came to focus much more explicitly on the interconnections and entwinements of different societies and cultures (Said 1993). Said constantly emphasises the moral imperative of asserting that different cultures, peoples, and societies both did and could co-exist in the same spaces and times, and that the critical task was to find routes to this form of non-exclusivist accommodation as a means of reckoning with the shared histories of colonialism and imperialism.<sup>1</sup> A crucial dimension of Said's original argument in *Orientalism* was the importance of knowledge in staking claims to territory. Colonial discourse can be understood as revolving around a three-way relationship in which relations between European or Western colonisers and non-western 'native' subjects is mediated by representations of land, space, and territory. Characteristically, this relationship involved representing non-Western spaces as empty, or inhabited only by ghostly subjects, or untended, in ways that legitimised colonial and imperial intervention in the name of proper stewardship of people and land. One of the strongest legacies of colonialism, Said argued, is a clear connection between ideas of



exclusive possession of territory and exclusivist conceptions of cultural identity. Authentic and essentialist conceptions of identity are often associated with exclusivist claims to territory and space. In turn, this geographical imagination of identity leads to the persistent understanding of colonialism in terms of simple oppositions between colonisers and colonised. It is a consistent theme of Said's academic and political writing to contest both the connections between identity and territory, and simple notions of coloniser and colonised. The postcolonial world is, in his view, much more messy, missed up and compromised than this simple opposition suggests.

I have dwelt at length on Said's work, and in particular *Orientalism*, because it is hard to underestimate the significance of this work in the development of postcolonialism as strand of academic interdisciplinary work. Said's work has offered an important route through which geographers have been able to engage in broader cross-disciplinary debates with historians, anthropologists, cultural theorists and others with similar interests in questions of space, territory and identity. As a central element of postcolonial theory more generally, theories of colonial discourse analysis have contributed to the process of 'decolonising the mind' by challenging the self-image of the West as a self-determining, self-contained entity which is the unique origin of a universalising history and culture. I now want to turn to a consideration of what is perhaps the most misunderstood issue in postcolonialism, namely the question of how the power of representations is theorised in this field.

### 3). Representation, Subjectivity and Power

Said's critique of Western representational systems raises a fundamental issue of whether and how it is possible to represent other cultures, other identities, or other communities. The answer to this question depends on two related questions. Firstly, should cultural difference be conceptualised according to an image of discrete spatial entities. I shall address this question in section 4. Secondly, should practices of representation be conceptualised in zero-sum terms, which I shall address in this section. If colonialism and imperialism involve the denial, denigration, and negation of the cultural traditions of subjugated groups, then political opposition to these processes can be characterised in part as a set of struggles for the right of communities to represent themselves. But the concept of representation has become a recurrently problematic theme in cultural theory. Social constructionist arguments depend on a particular epistemological argument about the active role of representations in constituting the realities they purport to represent. The critical force of this sort of argument – as a critique of racist stereotyping, or of patriarchal gender stereotypes, for example – actually depends on a rather unstable combination of two related arguments about representation. On the one hand, there is the *general* epistemological position that all knowledge is constructed through representations. On the other hand, there is the *specific* argument that some representations are misrepresentations, implying that certain representations are actually better than others.

Rather than getting caught up in interminable debates about whether cast-iron accurate descriptions of the world are actually possible, postcolonialism asks us to keep in mind the intimate relationship between representation in an epistemological sense and representation in a political sense, where this refers to a set of practices of delegation, substitution, and authorization. The real thrust of the critique of representation is to throw into question the modes of authority through which particular styles, forms, or voices come to be taken as representative of whole traditions, communities, or experiences. When thought of in political terms, there is

an important distinction between thinking of representation as *speaking for* others and *speaking as* another. The latter notion supposes complete substitution for the other, a claim to authority on the basis of identity. In this second model, representing is understood in zero-sum terms – speaking on behalf of others is akin to usurping their own voices as one’s own. The critique of representation in postcolonial cultural theory is primarily animated by a deep reaching critique of identity thinking, and of associated norms of immediacy, authenticity, and spontaneous expression. In this respect, the former practice – speaking for others – keeps in view the contingent authority upon which such delegation depends for its legitimacy. In postcolonial theory, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1988) essay, ‘Can the subaltern speak’, takes up precisely this set of arguments. It makes a clear distinction between two senses of representation: representation as *depiction*, and representation as *delegation*. Both of these senses of representation imply a process of substitution between the represented element and the representative intermediary – for example, a painting in a gallery stands in for a landscape it depicts, and a Member of Parliament stands in for the constituents who elected him or her. But the second example immediately raises a set of questions about the authority of delegative representation – who voted for the MP, and to what extent do MP’s faithfully represent the wishes of the voters. Representation in this sense is not a zero-sum game, but one which proliferates claims and counter-claims. Spivak’s argument is that these sorts of questions also pertain to representation in a depictive sense. The argument is not that one can never have accurate depictions – of landscapes, voters’ preferences, and so on – but that there is a degree of partiality involved in any representation that is not an error, but marks the point at which questions of authority and legitimacy proliferate (see Barnett 1997).

The implication of this re-conceptualisation of representation is that critical attention should be focussed on questions of who speaks, or to put it another way, on questions of agency. Now, agency is not simply a synonym for individual free-will. It is, rather, a term that implies a set of relations of delegation and authorization – it combines a sense of self-guided activity with a sense of acting on someone else’s behalf, or as their agent. Postcolonial theory’s close association with the idea of discourse is often thought to be a limitation. The idea of the ‘discursive construction’ of subjectivity seems to imply that people’s agency is wholly determined by the systems within which they are placed. Ideas of discourse are often associated with ‘entrapment models’ of subjectivity, in which people are seen as either wholly determined by discourses, or else as heroically resisting their placement within them. In postcolonial theory, this contrast leads to an interpretative dilemma: “You can empower discursively the native, and open yourself to charges of downplaying the epistemic (and literal) violence of colonialism; or play up the absolute nature of colonial domination, and be open to charges of negating the subjectivity and agency of the colonised, thus textually replicating the repressive operations of colonialism” (Gates 1991, 462). This dilemma derives from different ideas of just what the purpose of academic analysis is. Some people consider the aim to be one of recovering and asserting the ‘voices’ of oppressed or silenced voices. On these grounds, postcolonial theory is expected to offer a theory of resistance, gleaned from the evidence of colonial sources and archives. Now, this is a perfectly legitimate aim, and even a rather noble one. But it is not the only purpose that can guide analysis and interpretation. I would argue that what is most distinctive about postcolonial theory is that it is less interested in reading representations as evidence of other sorts of practice, and more concerned with the actual work that systems of textual representation do in the world.

This argument is likely to raise some eyebrows. It has become common to argue, particularly in geography, that postcolonial theory spends too much time with texts and representations, and that more attention needs to be paid to ‘material practices’. Invoking figures of the ‘material’ world has a sort of magical caché in the social sciences, but we should be a little wary of this sort of knock-down criticism of postcolonialism, and for two reasons. Firstly, postcolonial theory’s critique of representation should lead us to be suspicious of arguments that appeal to some sort of unmediated access to the ‘material’ world that does not have to pass through the loops of particular idioms, vocabularies, and rhetorics. Secondly, it is an argument that fails to acknowledge that postcolonial theory’s focus on textuality is neither an index of being interested in ‘just texts’, nor of a grander argument that the ‘world is like a text’. Rather, this tradition of thought is concerned with thinking through the quite specific sorts of power that can be deployed by the use of textual apparatuses like books, printing presses, reading practices and so on. In this respect, what is most distinctive about postcolonial theory is a particular conception of power. The combination of terms such as representation, discourse, and textuality all converge around a shared sense that knowledge is a critical resource in the exercise and contestation of political authority. Perhaps for disciplinary reasons, postcolonial theory has tended to focus on particular sorts of knowledge – ‘soft’ knowledge contained in literature and other aesthetic forms. But it is worth noting that this focus has helped to transform literary studies itself. It is hardly adequate to present it as a discipline concerned only with intensive readings of the hidden meanings of texts. It is just as likely to be concerned with the economics of publishing, the politics of education policy, or the social relations of reading. In each of these sorts of critical endeavours, the interest is with the ways in which texts get *used* to particular effects in a broader web of social relations – used to make friends, to train experts, to convert people, and so on. The ‘work’ that texts, or discourses, or representations do is not, from a postcolonial perspective, imaginary or ideological – it is not about making people think certain things, believe in certain values, or identify with certain subject-positions. It is rather, practical: above all, it is about uneven access to literacy, and by extension, to vocabularies of self-definition, practices of comportment, and rituals of distinction. It is concerned with how people are made and make themselves into subjects and agents who can act in the world. Embedded in wider practices, texts enable certain sorts of agency, in the double sense described above, by providing a mediated source of knowledge through which people can act as subjects of their own actions. In this focus on the power of textually-mediated subject-formation, postcolonial theory therefore acknowledges the density of representations and the durability of texts – it does not look through them to another reality or inside them for layers of meaning, but takes seriously the weight that they carry in the world.

#### **4). Geographies of Understanding**

In concluding, I want to consider the other question that was raised at the start of the last section – the question of how to conceptualise cultural difference with the aim of fostering cross-cultural understanding, or what David Slater (1992) has called ‘learning from other regions’. Understood as a version of social constructionism, postcolonial criticism leaves us with a dilemma: in so far as its critical edge comes from arguing that representations of non-Western societies are just that – representations – then the question arises whether it is possible to ever accurately describe unfamiliar cultures and societies. A strong social constructionist would appear to deny this possibility, in so far as all description is held to be context- and

culture-specific. But the question of cross-cultural interpretation remains central to the postcolonial project. The strong impulse of Said's work is to affirm the value of robust empirical knowledge as a basic premise of interpretation and evaluation. Similarly, Spivak has consistently asserted the importance of empirical knowledge to the work of interpretation, and has gone so far as to affirm the importance of a revived area studies.

This call for robust area-based knowledge is interesting precisely because geography is one of the disciplines associated with the production of area-specific knowledge of regions, cultures and societies. But what is notable about the encounter between postcolonialism and geography is the extent to which the critique of colonialist paradigms and legacies, when made through epistemological arguments about the construction of truth-claims, has reinforced an interpretative turn in the discipline that promotes a general aversion towards values of objectivity, empirical validity, and explanation. This interpretative turn, marked by a set of scruples about representing other cultures and societies, is in danger of jettisoning one of geography's most enduring popular legacies, which is a sense of worldly curiosity: "any sense of Western scholars claiming to represent, claiming to know, 'other societies' has become dangerous territory" (Bonnett 2003, 60). The problem with this seemingly impeccable respect for the particularities of other traditions is that it threatens to install an oddly indifferent attitude of tolerance towards other perspectives. By supposing that any judgement as to the validity of knowledge-claims is itself suspect, the common-or-garden variety of social constructionism invests specific persons, styles, or practices from other places with the status of being representative of whole cultures. It therefore promotes a style of cultural relativism that, in its suspension of judgement, makes cross-cultural learning impossible by presenting any and all forms of geographical curiosity morally suspect (see Mohanty 1995).

My argument is that this style of tolerant indifference or cultural relativism manages to miss the real challenge of postcolonialism. If one of the ways of 'postcolonialising geography' is to address a set of embedded institutional practices of teaching, writing, and publishing (see Robinson 2003), then another is to follow through on the implications of the postcolonial critique of historicism for the ways in which we imagine the geographies of cultural difference. In particular, postcolonialism should not be understood as a simple, all encompassing dismissal of the universalistic aspirations of modern humanistic culture. In large part, writers like Said and Spivak criticize Western traditions for their failure to be adequately attuned to the forms of communication through which a genuine pluralistic universalism might develop – these forms involve developing an ear for other ways of apprehending the world, opening up to other ways of knowing.

There are two points worth making in respect to this challenge of reconstructing a pluralist universalism, an attitude which would be less focussed on the scruples of representing other cultures, and more open to the styles of sharing that comes from a re-worked style of geographical curiosity. Firstly, it is worth reminding ourselves that cultures or societies are not arranged as if they are tight, concentric circles (Connolly 2000). Postcolonialism teaches us that coming from one place, belonging to a particular culture, or sharing a specific language does not enclose us inside a territory. Rather, it implies being placed along multiple routes and trajectories, and being exposed to all sorts of movements and exchanges. The tendency to conflate the affirmation of cultural pluralism with an assertion of incommensurable values in fact misses the real force of postcolonial criticism, which takes as its target ways of

thinking about difference in territorialized ways – in terms of them and us, inside and outside, here and there. The master tropes of postcolonial theory – of hybridity, syncretism, diaspora, exile, and so on – are not only all geographical metaphors. They are, more specifically, all metaphors of impurity and mixing. They therefore retain a strong sense of the importance of thinking about the geography of identity, but do so without modelling this geography of identity on an image of clear-cut and indivisible demarcations of belonging. Difference is not a barrier to relating and understanding, but is their very condition.

Secondly, one of the key insights of postcolonial criticism is that ‘the West’ is not a self-enclosed entity, but that it is made ‘from the outside in’. This is one of Fanon’s key arguments, but taken to its logical conclusion by postcolonial theorists, it implies that supposedly ‘Western’ forms (democracy, or rationality, or individualism) are not straightforwardly Western at all. Rather, they have multiple origins and pathways, and are formed out of the amalgamation of various practices and strands of thought. This is a fundamental issue, because it indicates the way in which postcolonial criticism takes as its target not just Western paradigms, but also the dominant critical paradigms of modern anti-colonialist nationalism, which still often appeal to images of authentic culture, and thereby reproduce forms of ‘nativism’ that can be deployed by authoritarian regimes to justify the authoritarian usurpation of power.

The relativist interpretation of postcolonial theory promoted by both some of its champions as well as by many of its detractors therefore needs to be contrasted to a reading that is at once more radical and more liberal in its implications. This alternative reading starts from the observation that postcolonial theory has engaged in a sustained criticism of a dominant imagination of space, one which renders cultures and societies as enclosed, territorialized entities with clear and tight boundaries. It is from this image of space that all the dilemmas, scruples, and reassurances of cultural relativism arise. It is no accident that an alternative imagination of space – in terms of movement, mobility, translation, and porosity – should have arisen out of a field of work that is prevalently populated by literary scholars. As we have already seen, postcolonial theory is often taken for task for being *too* textual. I have already suggested that this criticism might be missing an important point about how power works through institutionalised practices of subject-formation. But another reason why we need not accept this criticism at face value cuts to heart of geography’s favoured subject matter – conceptualisations of space, place, and scale. Rather than presuming that postcolonial theory needs to be supplemented by geography’s robust materialism, we might acknowledge that we have something to learn from literary theory precisely because a concern with the *material* things that literary scholars are traditionally concerned with – books, the printed word, the formal qualities of textuality – open-up to view a set of spatialities that are much more fluid, mobile, tactile, and differentiated than the ones that social scientists often favour

Here then, in conclusion, are three reasons why postcolonial theory is not only relevant to geographers, but is important precisely because of the fact that it is predominantly a variety of literary theory concerned with issues of textuality. Firstly, it teaches us important lessons about the ways in which power operates in the modern world, through the mediated production of subjectivities. Secondly, by problematizing seemingly neutral practices like reading, writing and interpreting, it opens-up questions about the ways in which cross-cultural understanding depends not on the mastery of meaning but on openness to difference, to developing an ear for the other, and on relations of translation. And finally, in the focus upon practices through which textual meaning is produced and enforced, postcolonialism opens-up an alternative

conceptualization of spatiality that is not ‘metaphorical’, and therefore not in need to being beefed up by some added ‘materiality’, but which emerges from a careful attention to the *textures* of symbolic communication itself.

### Notes

1. This is one of the themes which connects Said’s cultural theorising with the other facet of work for which he is best known, namely his strong advocacy of the cause of Palestinian independence (see Gregory 1995, 2004).

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