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## **MATERIAL GEOGRAPHIES AND POSTCOLONIALISM**

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**ABSTRACT**

While postcolonial studies have inspired new ideas, a new language, and a new theoretical inflection for a wide range of teaching and research in human geography, there have been few sustained discussions about what might constitute a postcolonial geography. This paper attempts to deal with this absence by exploring the possibilities of material geographies of postcolonialism. It suggests that geographers are particularly well placed to respond to criticisms of postcolonialism as remaining overwhelmingly textual, cultural and/or historical in focus by contributing towards a productive engagement between postcolonialism and the material realities of global inequalities and towards a revived political and ethical project. It explores how particular tactics might inform postcolonial methodologies within geography and makes some tentative suggestions on what a postcolonial political praxis might look like.

**KEY WORDS**

Postcolonialism, discourse, materiality, global economy, politics, ethics

## MATERIAL GEOGRAPHIES AND POSTCOLONIALISM

### INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial studies are intrinsically geographical and an increasing range of geographical teaching and research is located within a broadly postcolonial framework. Intersections between geography and postcolonialism provide challenging opportunities to explore the spatiality of colonial and neo-colonial discourse and the spatial politics of representation. Geography is one of the dominant discourses of imperial Europe that postcolonialism seeks to destabilise, to problematise the ways in which the world is known and to challenge the unacknowledged and unexamined assumptions at its heart that may be profoundly insensitive to the meanings, values and practices of other cultures (Spivak, 1990). Postcolonial approaches invoke an explicit critique of the spatial metaphors and temporality often employed in geography, insisting that the 'other' world is 'in here', rather than 'out there' and 'back there' (Chambers 1996: 209), and integral to what in the west is referred to as 'modernity' and 'progress'. Postcolonial theory reveals the situatedness of knowledge, and particularly the universalising knowledge produced in imperial Europe (Said, 1993, 1999), whilst simultaneously being conditioned by its places of formation (Clayton, 2000; Lester, forthcoming).

Postcolonialism, then, is a *geographically* dispersed contestation of colonial and neo-imperial power and knowledge and geography should lie at the heart of postcolonial critiques (McClintock, 1995; Jacobs, 1996; Loomba, 1998). Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the most powerful critiques of Anglo/Eurocentric geographies are being produced in Asia, stimulated by the growing intellectual traffic based around new centres and journals devoted to this purpose.<sup>1</sup> It is only in recent years, however, that geographers have begun to develop a critical engagement with the theoretical and substantive challenges of postcolonialism.

Despite a recent burgeoning of geographical research positioned within postcolonial frameworks there have been relatively few sustained discussions about what might constitute a postcolonial geography (Blunt and McEwan, 2002; Blunt and Wills, 2000; Clayton, forthcoming; Nash, 2002). At the same time, there have been a number of recent criticisms of postcolonialism, including its alleged failure to connect critiques of discourse and representation to the lived experiences of postcoloniality and its apparent inability to define a specific political and ethical project to deal with material problems that demand urgent and clear solutions. I wish to argue here that geographers are particularly well placed to respond to these criticisms by contributing towards a productive engagement between postcolonialism and the material realities of global inequalities and towards a revived political and ethical project.

In attempting to initiate thinking around these issues, the paper outlines briefly the major criticisms of postcolonialism – namely, that it is too focused on historical, theoretical and cultural concerns that preclude political and ethical responsibilities. I suggest that while these criticisms are perhaps overstated, geographies are well placed to respond to specific calls for a ‘rematerialised’ postcolonialism and to explore critically the lived experiences of postcoloniality. I also explore how particular tactics might inform postcolonial methodologies, with the potential to connect the discursive/textual strategies and insights of postcolonialism to macro-issues (globalisation, transnationalism and poverty) that have allegedly been absent in postcolonial theory. Finally, I reflect on what postcolonial geographies might contribute to the ethical and political considerations raised by criticisms of postcolonialism more broadly and offer some tentative suggestions on what a postcolonial political praxis might look like.

## **THE POVERTY OF POSTCOLONIALISM?**

Criticisms of postcolonial theory are now well rehearsed but they are useful in speculating about what geographies can bring to postcolonial analysis and what future directions postcolonial geographies might productively take. Cultural and textual approaches, including postcolonialism, have been accused of a tendency to overplay the cultural as a separate category of analysis (Marcus, 2000). Philo's (2000) reflection on the 'cultural turn' elaborates on how lived experience has effectively been neglected in favour of an over-zealous focus on identity politics, discourse, texts, signs, symbols and imaginings. Philo's concerns resonate with a growing unease within geography with what might be considered the proliferation of 'desocialised', 'dematerialised' and 'depoliticised' geographies through an over-privileging of the cultural (Barnett 1998a, Castree 1999, Gregson 1993, Sayer 2001, Storper 2001). Similarly, postcolonial geographies are being criticised for focusing on historical, cultural, theoretical and discursive concerns at the expense of the materialities and everyday experiences of postcoloniality.

### *Privileging the past and the cultural?*

Intersections between postcolonialism and geography have largely been historical in focus. This is understandable given that the interconnections between geography and empire shape the ways in which questions of postcolonialism have been interrogated within geography, but the critical return to the past has a tendency to re-focus attention primarily in western contexts and on areas formerly colonised by European powers. Much of this work has been extremely important, particularly in elucidating the relationship between power and knowledge and in revealing the historical agency of people oppressed by imperialism and neo-imperialism. However, this focus adds weight to the criticism that, like postcolonialism, postcolonial

geographies tend to be preoccupied with history and have failed to say much about postcolonial futures.

This criticism can be countered to some extent by recent work that uses the colonial past to cast the present in a new light, connecting radical revisionist histories with contemporary political claims for reparation and recognition (see, for example, Clayton, 2000; Harris, 2002; Jacobs, 1996). As Gandhi (1998) argues, postcolonialism ‘necessarily returns’ to the past in an ameliorative and therapeutic attempt to deal with the ‘gaps and fissures’ in the postcolonial condition (see also Chatterjee, 1997). I am not arguing here that postcolonial geographies should sideline the past – far from it given that relations between the past and present have not been fully disclosed. Rather, the impetus of postcolonial geographies ought to be in shedding critical light on how the past informs and shapes the present and in a broader range of contexts that do not necessarily begin and end western metropolitan space.

Apart from geographical work investigating postcolonial approaches to globalization and development (Corbridge, 1993; Crush, 1995; see McEwan, 2002, for an overview), intersections between postcolonialism and geography have also tended to revolve around cultural concerns. Although spatial images such as location, mobility, borderlands and exile abound, more material geographies of both past and present have often been overlooked. Postcolonial geographies are thus exposed to the same criticisms that have been levelled at postcolonial approaches more broadly. Realists accuse postcolonialism of ignoring issues of the human rights and freedoms of marginalised people. Concerns with representation, text and imagery are perceived as too far removed from the exigencies of the lived experiences of millions of impoverished people (Jackson, 1997). In dismissing the universalist assumptions of political economy, postcolonial approaches have also been accused of ignoring the material ways in which colonial power relations persist (Ahmad, 1992; Dirlik, 1994). As Jacobs (1996: 158) notes, the theoretical abstractions of postcolonial theory do not always adequately

connect to the specific, concrete and local conditions of everyday life and are not easily translated into direct politics. This apparent neglect of material concerns and political strategies has generated the fiercest criticism of postcolonialism, accusing it of ignoring urgent life-or-death questions (San Juan, 1998) and of solidifying the fundamental schism between western theorising and the practical needs of impoverished people globally.<sup>ii</sup>

The argument that postcolonialism is too rooted in discourse might have some credence but, of course, it also ignores the fact that discourse itself is intensely material. Indeed, geographers have demonstrated this with examples ranging from the ordering of imperial and postcolonial urban spaces, to the materialities of travel and emigration, to concerns with embodiment, identities, cultural politics and reconciliation (see Blunt and McEwan, 2002). Similarly, intersections between postcolonialism and feminism have had some influence in geography and have demonstrated the ways in which discourse informs lived experience in ways that are relevant to women everywhere, whether they are striving for economic empowerment whilst having simultaneously to renounce 'normality' or facing the conundrum of attaining citizenship whilst becoming alienated subjects (Quayson, 2000). This is also compounded for those women most marginalised by global inequalities. For example, Spivak (1985, 1999) draws out the connections between the silencing of 'Other' women, who are often spoken for, about and against, and their marginalised position within global economies. Postcolonial feminisms have made important contributions in exploring the links between the discursive and the material in creating possibilities for effecting change (Rose, 1987; Rajan, 1993). Clearly, it is not sufficient to confine analysis to texts alone but there are connections between the relations of power that order the world and the words and images that represent the world. The challenge for postcolonial geographies is to respond to the potential of 'mixing up conceptual elaboration with substantive detail' (Philo, 2000: 27) and of dealing simultaneously with the material and immaterial, the cultural and the political.



*Global capitalism and class?*

Postcolonial theory necessarily positions itself in critical opposition to global inequalities.

It is perhaps ironic, therefore, that its most persistent criticism is that it has failed to consider the relationships and tensions between postcolonialism and global capitalism (Dirlik, 1994; Eagleton, 1994; Hall, 1996). According to Parry (2002: 78):

The sanctioned omissions in postcolonial criticism are a debilitating loss to thinking about colonialism and late imperialism. This dismissal of politics and economics which these omissions reflect is a scandal.

With respect to the more cultural issues of the politics of recognition postcolonial approaches might appear radical and progressive, but from the perspective of political economy and the politics of distribution they look less progressive, 'for they offer no means for challenging the economic system' (Sayer, 2001: 688).

The relative neglect of class in favour of identity politics in postcolonial analyses has also been criticised as a potentially serious omission, both in terms of the conflicting class interests within post-independence political formations and the international alliances forged by the new indigenous ruling classes. Yet without Marxism, some of the best ideas that postcolonialism has produced, from Fanon to Spivak, would be much poorer. As Parry (2002) argues, what Marxist critics such as Ahmad, Dirlik and San Juan actually achieve is a much more rigorous engagement of postcolonialism with the legacy of Marxism. Indeed, postcolonial theorists such as Said and Chakrabarty have consistently argued for a postcolonial criticism that is worldly and attuned to both discursive and material concerns. The two should not necessarily be seen as antagonistic as some critics of postcolonialism would suggest.

Despite this, with some exceptions (for example, the writings on post-development by Esteva (1987) and Escobar (1992, 1995)), postcolonialism has not easily been translated into action on the ground and its oppositional stance has not had much impact on global power imbalances or inequities. However, as Rattansi (1997: 497) argues,

[I]t is simply untrue to say that global capitalism has been ignored in postcolonial research, although... what postcolonial studies has been about is finding non-reductionist ways of relating global capitalism to the cultural politics of colonialism.

Much postcolonial research has been engaged with exploring the constitutive relation between imperialism, colonialism and global capitalism (see, for example, Chatterjee, 1986; Miyoshi, 1997; Said, 1993; Spivak 1987). While class relations are not often explicit, in many studies they are implied. Much of Spivak's work, for example, has been concerned with exploring connections between the micro-spaces of academe and the macro-spaces of the global economy/international division of labour, and between the discursive construction of gender and the doubly subaltern position of women in the former colonies.

As the absence of class relations is perhaps exaggerated, the failure of discursive approaches to engage with critiques of capitalism is also to some extent overplayed. As Ashcroft (2001) argues, despite the centrality of representation, the significance of postcolonial analysis is its insistence on the importance of the material realities or lived experiences of postcolonial life that are directly related to economic issues. He uses the example of the consequences of the rise to prominence of tropical sugar for Caribbean societies and cultures as a resonant demonstration of the link between the material and the discursive in the process of postcolonial transformation, and how political economy and cultural approaches might work in tandem to critique the dominant order (Perrons, 1999). Similarly, Young (2001: 428) makes a powerful case that while postcolonial critique challenges established, eurocentric knowledge in the cultural sphere, it also continues to work

in the spirit of anti-colonial movements by further developing its radical political edge to reinforce global social justice; its ‘politics of power-knowledge asserts the will to change’ injustice, inequality, landlessness, exploitation, poverty, disease and famine that remain the daily experience of much of the world’s population. As Yeoh (2001: 462-3; see also Hall, 1996; Slater, 1998) suggests, the task of interrogating the relationship between postcolonialism and global capitalism is a crucial one that ‘requires a more critical and simultaneous engagement with both registers’.

*Celebrating postcoloniality and transnationalism?*

Culturalist approaches have been accused of precipitating premature and inappropriate celebrations of postcoloniality. Parry (2002: 74) argues that a dismissal of political economy means that the imperial project is detached from its beginnings and inseparability from trajectories of capitalism. Thus ‘globalisation is divorced from capitalism, married to postcolonialism, and despite egregious inequality between and within centre and periphery, the promotion of transnational cultural flows is applauded’. As Loomba and Kaul (1994: 4, 13-14) argue, ‘diaspora’ has swelled ‘to demarcate the entire experience of postcoloniality’ and ‘the subject-position of the ‘hybrid’ is routinely expanded as the only political-conceptual space for revisionist enunciation’.

The privileging of migrancy, in particular, in postcolonial discourses can be considered deeply problematic. As Sharma (1996: 29) argues:

The logic of contemporary global racialized capitalism is to (re)produce new forms of exploitative social relations, at the local, national and transnational level. The recent turn, in the avant-garde sectors of the Western academy, to the study of marginal culture, has failed to engage adequately with the oppressive dynamics of this mode of reorganised capitalism... Devoid of any progressive political agendas, the project of

celebrating hybrid ‘ethnic’ cultures obscures the epistemic violence of Western intellectual knowledge..., reduces ‘Other’ cultures to essentialist and ‘traditional’ fixities – as ‘victims’ of progress, as objects of tourism, as the labour of migration and the colours of multiculturalism – and then valorizes hybridity as their encounter with the emancipated West.

This encounter of ‘Other’ cultures with the west becomes the framework through which ‘non-western’ cultures are interpreted. Hybrid ethnic cultures are celebrated, but this further marginalises ‘traditional cultures’, the colonial encounter remains privileged and the global domain of cultural capital remains unchallenged. As Parry (2002: 72) argues:

Perhaps the time has come for postcolonial studies to promote empirical investigations of these unsettled diasporas, and undertake the dissemination of the experiences spoken by scattered, impoverished, and despised populations stranded in temporary and exploited employment as contract workers, casual labourers, or domestic servants in Europe, North America and the Gulf States.

Studies of transnationalism that explore the success of overseas business communities, the vibrancy of ‘ethnic’ industries, and the success of some migrant groups in securing space for themselves within popular cultures need to be balanced with an understanding of the harsh realities facing immigrants all over the world (Lipsitz, 1997) and the fact that many multi-ethnic economies around the world are still characterised by low wages, poor working conditions and racism. In what follows, I explore how geographers are already beginning to respond to criticisms of postcolonialism to undertake precisely this kind of work. I also propose a number of tactics that might enable a more critical engagement between material geographies and postcolonialism.

## **‘REMATERIALIZED’ AND ‘REPOLITICISED’ POSTCOLONIALISMS**

Geography and geographers have a central role to play in what Chakrabarty (1992, 2000) has referred to as provincialising Europe, relocating western narratives of progress in their wider colonial histories and rethinking the 'centre' by exploring the complex webs of interconnections between 'metropole' and 'periphery' (Hall, 1996). However, I want to suggest that postcolonialism can also play a part in the necessary but difficult project of disrupting entrenched Cold War narratives that pervade area studies, in particular. As recent critiques demonstrate (Miyoshi and Harootunian, 2002), area studies have failed to come to terms with the epistemological challenges posed by postcolonialism. Contributions from corporations and foreign governments, especially in East Asia, put pressure on scholars to rein in critical approaches lest they lose funding. The possibilities of postcolonial approaches, therefore, are not only to provincialise Europe but to disrupt Cold War narratives and Eurocentric understandings of the world that have a global presence. Focusing on Japan, Miyoshi and Harootunian (*ibid.*) explore how a dramatically reconfigured area studies can help further an understanding of a rapidly changing world characterized by fluid interchange between cultures. Geographers are also beginning to engage with this project.

Postcolonial geographies are responding to the need to connect discursive and material realities and to intersect with critiques of global inequality, which has implications for a revived political and ethical project. Some of the most exciting current work in economic geography, for example, is exploring attempts by workers disempowered by the conditions of postcoloniality - emigrant status, lack of citizenship rights, seasonality and informality of employment and fragmentation in terms of language and nationality - to empower themselves through organisation. These forms of subaltern resistance to the marginalising effects of global capitalism lend themselves to postcolonial analysis.<sup>iii</sup> Some feminist geographers, working within broadly postcolonial theoretical frameworks, are producing work on translocal and transnational geographies and the experiences of diasporic groups of women (Pratt, 1999;

Yeoh and Willis, 1999; Blunt, forthcoming), contributing to the exploration of the ‘messiness of... race politics’ (Jackson and Jacobs, 1996, 3) and their material geographies. Drawing on these developments, I now wish to consider the possibilities of postcolonial practice, politics and ethics.

*Postcolonial practice: hearing, speaking and writing tactics*

As Nash (2002: 222) suggests in her discussion of postcolonialism, the ‘critical attention to geographical difference, interconnection and the spatial imaginaries of ‘progress’, ‘civilization’ and ‘development’, at best, also foregrounds the material geographies of colonialism and their legacies’. Geographers are particularly able to link discursive and textual strategies to material concerns because of their understanding of local scale analysis that can reveal localised resistances and re-appropriations. They can employ tactics through which to ‘hear’ voices of resistance, such as reading archives against the grain to reveal historical agency (Barnett, 1998b; McEwan, 1998), or analysing different forms of resistance writing that reveal the lived experiences of people otherwise silenced by hegemonic relationships of power. These include autobiography and *testimonio* by people marginalized by poverty, which provide a rich site for postcolonial analysis because they demonstrate the way in which individual lives are affected by a global system of capital initiated as the economy of the empire of modernity (see Barrios de Chungara, 1978). Postcolonial reading strategies can work *for* and *with* poor people so ‘that the law of genre will no longer dominate the representation and expression’ of people from different parts of the world (Kaplan 1998: 215). They allow for the appropriation of the dominant language ‘for the purpose of re-inscribing place to produce a regional, or localised, worldview, and thus disrupt one of modernity’s most pervasive effects – the emptying out of local space by colonialism and neo-imperialism’ (Ashcroft 2001: 30-1).

The role that academics can play in creating spaces for the articulation of voices of resistance through textual production is important, since very few marginalized people are able to make their voices heard within the global economy of publishing. Artist and academic Shelley Sacks's work on social sculpture is particularly inspiring in this regard. The significance of her exhibition *Exchange Values* (an installation of stitched dried banana skins, each corresponding with an oral testimony by the Windward Islands farmer who grew them) has been explored by cultural geographers (Cook *et al.*, 2000). It attempts to use art to connect the largely voiceless people at one end of the commodity chain (in this case the Caribbean), whose labour remains invisible, to consumers at the other end, using the product itself (bananas) to make this connection. This is a radical critique of the effects of 'free trade' with the potential to empower people at both ends of the commodity chain: producers by giving them a voice through which to engage with consumers and facilitating connections that the functioning of the global economy often mitigates against; and consumers, who may not realise that the choices they make can have a direct bearing on the lives of people elsewhere. This project blends art, discourse and materiality to connect different places and the peoples within them, breaking down the boundaries between core and periphery, former imperial metropole and former colonial hinterland. It suggests ways in which postcolonialism might be translated from a sometimes dense and obfuscating theory into a methodology, breaking down boundaries, creating connections and alternatives, facilitating participation and empowerment and giving voice to the previously voiceless.

These examples suggest ways in which geographers might respond to the challenges of postcolonialism, employing a number of methodological procedures for producing a postcolonializing discourse. As Quayson (2000: 21) argues, postcolonialising is meant to 'suggest creative ways of viewing a variety of cultural, political and social realities both in the West and elsewhere via a postcolonial prism of interpretation'. Sometimes this involves a

rigorous analysis of existing theories; a careful analysis of conditions governing particular subject positions in the modern world; an interdisciplinary reading of the cultural and the political; or finding creative ways beyond the dominant modalities of analysing particular social issues. In this way, procedures censured as ‘facile textualist thought’ that contrive to block ‘the appeal to any kind of real-world knowledge and experience’ (Norris, 1993: 182) can be avoided, and the ‘politics of the symbolic order’ do not displace the theory and practice of politics (Parry 2002: 67).

### *The politics and ethics of postcolonial geographies?*

Broadly speaking postcolonial perspectives can be said to be anti-colonial (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1995; Radcliffe, 1999). The politics of postcolonialism, however, often diverge sharply from other perspectives and its radicalism rejects established agendas and accustomed ways of seeing. Postcolonial critical agendas in different places are shaped by the different nature, form and timing of colonialism and anticolonial resistance, different levels of social division, and new forms of neo-colonial domination and transnational connections. As Nash (2000: 227) argues, these differences ‘work against postcolonialism becoming a set of impressive theoretical tools that are never challenged by the particular, complex, messy material of social relations in different places’. They also work against the positing of a singular postcolonial politics or set of political strategies. Therefore, in raising questions about the ‘politics’ of postcolonialism, I also want to signal that these are always positioned within different and interconnected colonial contexts and legacies.

Connecting the discursive to the material inevitably involves thinking about what the political might mean for postcolonial analysis in geography. It could be argued that political imperatives have driven postcolonialism from its beginnings because of its anti-colonial stance. However, as Quayson (2000) argues, there are also tensions between an activist



engagement with the real world and a more distanced participation through analyses of texts, images and discourses. The pretext for postcolonial criticism – the desire to speak to western paradigms of knowledge in the voice of otherness, to show how the constitution of western subjectivity depended on interactions with subjected others, to destabilise centres and peripheries (Stoler, 1995; Bhabha, 1994; Ong, 1999) – is that it is an ethical enterprise, pressing its claims in ways that other theories such as those of postmodernism and poststructuralism do not. Paradoxically, however, the idea of a postcolonial politics is also problematised by a constant reluctance to take radical ethical standpoints. Thus postcolonial theory and criticism is riven by a contradiction that has attracted much criticism:

...social referents in the postcolonial world call for urgent and clear solutions, but because speaking positions in a postmodernist world are thought to be always already immanently contaminated by being part of a compromised world, postcolonial critics often resort to a sophisticated form of rhetoric whose main aim seems to be to rivet attention permanently on the warps and loops of discourse. (Quayson, 2000: 8)

As Quayson and Goldberg (2002) suggest, however, it is difficult if not impossible to separate postcolonial discourse from an ethical project, even though the means by which its ethical ends are to be achieved remains a highly contentious issue. Of course, it is still possible to speak and to indicate an existential tentativeness in whatever has been spoken (Katz, 1995; Storper, 2001) but questions remain over what the ultimate objectives of a responsible postcolonialism should be. What, for instance, is the use of a discursive analysis of the language of development when this does not address the economic and social disjunctures produced in developing countries by the imposition of structural adjustment policies? What is the use of undermining discourses of power when ‘we never encounter any specific scenario of injustice, domination, or actual resistance from which we may gather intimations of the passage through the postcolonial ordeal’ (San Juan, 1998, 2)? To return to a question raised

earlier, what do academic postcolonial studies contribute to the *experience* of postcolonialism in the contemporary world?

Although these questions remain somewhat rhetorical, Spivak's (1993) interrogation of the role of academics in a global context and her model of a continuing politico-intellectual global activism is useful. Throughout her work, Spivak alludes to the significance of the unlearning of privilege as loss. In terms of educational opportunity, citizenship and location within the international division of labour most academics are privileged. Privileges, whatever they might be in terms of race, class, nationality, gender, and so on, may have prevented us from gaining access to Other knowledges, not simply information we have not yet received but the knowledge that we are not equipped to understand by reason of our social positions. Spivak's 'unlearning' of privilege involves working hard to gain knowledge of others who occupy those spaces most closed to our privileged view and attempting to speak to those others in a way that they might take us seriously and be able to answer back. This is especially important in provincialising geography and postcolonialising praxis.

Spivak also outlines a formulation of ethics in which she posits the ethical relation as an embrace between parties who learn from each other, which has implications for thinking about hearing and writing tactics. This embrace is not the same thing as wanting to speak *for* an oppressed constituency. When Spivak (1985) argues that the subaltern (those formerly colonised peoples oppressed by the international division of labour and especially by the super-exploitation of female labour in 'developing' countries) cannot speak, she means that s/he cannot be heard by the privileged in both 'developed' and 'developing' countries. Or as Jacobs (2001: 731) puts it, 'It is very common nowadays for the postcolonial politics of not speaking for the other to override an alternative postcolonial politics of listening to the other'. The latter only cease being subaltern when, to use Gramsci's terms, they become organic intellectuals or spokespeople for their communities. Such a change will not be brought about

by intellectuals attempting to represent oppressed peoples or by merely pretending to let them speak. However, interactions between academic and non-academic researchers in disparate locations can generate new languages and social representations that can become ‘constituents of alternative social visions and practices’, as well as ‘enabling new political identities and initiatives’ (Gibson-Graham, 2002: 108). Despite the problems of the inevitable partiality of the privileged academic view, recognising the effectiveness of knowledge ‘creates an important role for research as an activity of producing and transforming discourses, creating new subject positions and imaginative possibilities that can animate political projects and desires’ (*ibid.* 2002: 105;1994).

A further dilemma for a postcolonial politics is the fact that postcolonial theory seems to locate itself everywhere and nowhere. As Quayson and Goldberg point out, it borrows from a wide range of social theorists (for example, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Adorno, Deleuze and Guattari) and can seemingly be deployed in any historical period (for example, Cohen’s *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*). For geography, however, this can be both theoretically and politically productive. Various theories, seemingly with no connection with postcolonial issues, have generated new discourses of postcolonialism. The tensions and dilemmas in new ways of conceiving cross-cultural feminist politics, for example, have produced postcolonial feminisms with the potential to contribute to the critical exploration of relationships between cultural power and global economic power and towards a radical reclaiming of the political. The conceptual alliances between postcolonialism and feminist, gay/lesbian, ethnic and disability studies, drawing on similar theories to address issues of representation, hegemony and othering, have been particularly productive within and beyond geography, even though it is not always clear that this has effected unified political agendas within universities and outside.

Despite these developments, debates persist about what precisely postcolonialism is in geography and what it is meant to do. In considering how postcolonial geographies might develop, it is perhaps helpful to think of postcolonialism as an ‘ethico-politics’ of becoming (Ferguson, 1998), a ‘process of postcolonializing’ (Quayson 2000: 9) or an ‘anticipatory discourse’ (Childs and Williams, 1997: 7), recognising a condition that does not yet exist, but working nevertheless to bring that about. Postcolonial geographies have the potential to provide a careful grounding of the specificities of the local and to embed phenomena in a variety of social, cultural, historical and political contexts through which ‘a transfigured and better future might be brought into view’ (Quayson and Goldberg, 2002: xiii). Postcolonialism is a viable way not just of interpreting events and phenomena that pertain directly to postcolonial contexts, but as a means by which to understand a world thoroughly shaped at various interconnecting levels by ‘the inheritance of the colonial aftermath’ (Gandhi, 1998: x). Thus the ‘process of postcolonializing’ should refer to the critical process by which to relate modern-day phenomena to their explicit and implicit relations to this heritage.

Drawing on these insights, we might more carefully consider what the ‘political’ might mean for a meaningfully postcolonial geographical knowledge. Ashcroft (2001: 19) argues that ‘a theory which may more faithfully engage the actual practice of post-colonial subjects... is a poetics and politics of *transformation*’. On the one hand, a poetics of transformation is concerned with the ways in which writers and readers contribute constitutively to meaning, the ways in which formerly colonised societies appropriate dominant discourses, and how they interpolate their voices and their concerns into dominant systems of textual production and distribution. Transformation recognises that power is central to cultural life and resists by adapting and redirecting discursive power, creating new forms of cultural production. On the other hand, a politics of transformation works constantly within existing discursive and institutional formations to change them. Through taking hold of

writing itself, in political discourse or political structures, in educational discourse and institutions, conceptions of places, peoples and even economics are transformed; ‘ultimately, a poetics and politics of transformation effects a transformation of the disciplinary field’ (*ibid*: 19).

Postcolonial geographies might also provide a more reflexive understanding of the complexities of postcoloniality. Rather than ‘sort out postcolonialism once and for all’ (Nash 2002: 228) and devise theoretical or political frameworks that are all-encompassing, settled and complete, it might be more productive to keep the notion of a postcolonial politics within geography as provisional and constantly under review, able to respond to different spatialities of the postcolonial but constantly in question. What is apparent in this is the continuing centrality of culture to a transformative postcolonial geography and the recognition that underlying all economic, political and social resistance is the struggle over representation, which occurs in language, writing and other forms of cultural production. The potential of postcolonial geographies is to discriminate between the continuing reality of imperial power and subject peoples and to resist the submergence of the neo-colonial subject within global power relations. Whereas globalism erases differences between people on the basis that they are all consumers, postcolonialism works to reveal the gaps between peoples that still remain, revealing that people belong to a society as well as an economy, and that society is still controlled by a cultural hegemony established by imperialism (Ashcroft 2001).

Transformation of representation is crucial because such practices are situated in a material world often with critical material implications.

Central to this is an understanding of the importance of place-based and local/global machinations of postcoloniality. Critical reflections on the geographical dynamics of postcoloniality also need to herald a clear and coherent ethical and political position on the present. Whilst postcolonialism is an eclectic and provisional field of critical enquiry an

ethical and political imperative ought to underpin a properly geographical understanding of postcoloniality and postcolonialism as a disciplinary project. With this in mind, we might draw on the philosophical and historical referents to the importance of place, the local, the grounded and the performative in colonialism and postcoloniality. Chakrabarty's (2002) elevation of the notion of 'dwelling' in modernity and with the colonial past to an ethico-political principle is instructive, as are the more recent writings of Derrida (2000, 2001) and Spivak (2002) on dilemmas of hospitality and cosmopolitanism as they relate to transnationalism and the lived experiences of migrants and asylum seekers. These issues are important globally and not least in countries of the South and in Southeast Asia, where transnational flows of people are increasingly significant. We might also consider empire's unethical neglect and destruction of the colonial other's locational attachments (see, for example, Mehta, 1999) and how this informs contemporary geopolitics and geoeconomics. Exploring the ways in which native sovereignty is expressed, lived and performed in specific locales can also foreground the agency of native peoples in contrast to the erasures of dominant western cultures and romantic representations of victimry, tragedy and nostalgia (Vizenor, 2001).

Concerns such as these are beginning to inform critical postcolonial geographies, casting light on what a politically and ethically informed understanding of postcoloniality might look like. The tactics for the political project of postcolonialising geography posited by Robinson (this volume) are also interwoven in these concerns since they demand an engagement with debates and practices from 'the margins' and, in so doing, work against a divisive geopolitics of knowledge.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted to outline the major debates over and criticisms of postcolonialism and to suggest ways in which geography might respond and add to their potentially radical insights and effects. It has argued that this might be achieved by, first, exploring the possibilities of a more productive engagement between material and discursive concerns; second, related to this, by developing the intersections between postcolonial approaches and issues of global inequality and the diverse lived experiences of postcoloniality; and third, by developing the political and ethical possibilities of postcolonialising geographies. Despite the caution surrounding progress narratives within geography, particularly about avoiding universalising statements of progress, any kind of politics needs some notion of what progress is (Rorty, 1998). As with anti-sexism and anti-racism, for example, we need to be able to ask, and keep asking, what a meaningfully postcolonial geography might look like.

Postcolonial approaches demonstrate how the production of western knowledge forms is inseparable from the exercise of western power (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1990; Young, 1991, 2001) and reassert the value of alternative experiences and ways of knowing (Fanon, 1986; Thiong'o, 1986; Spivak, 1987; Bhabha, 1994). They articulate some difficult questions about imperialist representations and discourses surrounding lands and peoples 'beyond the west' and about the institutional practice of western disciplines. They share a social optimism with other critiques, such as feminism, which have helped generate substantial changes in political practice (Darby, 1997, 30). While transforming unequal global relations by politics of difference and agency alone is seemingly impossible, postcolonialism is a much-needed corrective to the Eurocentrism and conservatism of much of western geographical thought. However, postcolonial geographies perhaps need to engage with more material considerations since, as Dirlik (1994, 356) states:

...neglect of these renders impossible the cognitive mapping that must be the point of departure for any practice of resistance and leaves such mapping as there is in the domain of those who manage the capitalist world economy.

If the neglect of global economic inequalities and the lived experiences of postcoloniality undermines the political imperatives of anti-colonialism, the potential of postcolonial geographies lies in their abilities to interrogate the interconnections, and complex spatialities of postcoloniality and to give proper attentiveness to dialogue and difference.

The latter is particularly important given that one of the central paradoxes of postcolonialism is the charge that it has become institutionalised, representing the interests of a western-based intellectual élite who speak the language of the contemporary western academy while perpetuating the exclusion of the formerly colonised and continually oppressed (Ahmad, 1992; Loomba, 1998; McClintock, 1992; Watts, 1995). There is, of course, an inherent possibility that postcolonialism might become a new colonising discourse and yet another subjection to foreign formations and epistemologies from the English-speaking centres of global power. This is certainly how many critics in Latin America, for example, have viewed postcolonialism (Klor de Alva, 1992; see also Ashcroft, 2000). As Ashcroft (2000, 24) argues, however, rather than a new hegemonic field, we might see the postcolonial as a way of talking about the political and discursive strategies of formerly colonised societies and peoples. Again geographers are ideally placed in this regard and in more carefully viewing the various forms of anti-systemic operations of global capitalism. As Spivak (1990) argues, however, there is still a need for greater sensitivity to the relationship between power, authority, positionality and knowledge. The paradox for many scholars writing within a postcolonial framework about people outside their own cultural milieu is that they are inevitably located in the global hegemony of western scholarship; in other words,



western domination of the global economy of the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas.

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Indeed this journal has been at the forefront of many of these debates (see Driver and Yeoh (2000). Several innovative projects are also in progress in Asian universities; teams at the Department of Geography (NUS), for example, are researching how cultural and social geographies are taught and practiced in the region, how the region has been produced through Cold War area studies and development discourses and imagining new theoretical frameworks for understanding Southeast Asian geographies (Bunnell, pers. comm. 2002). Explicitly postcolonial geographies are also being written from Southeast Asia (see, for example, Bishop *et al.* (2003); Kusno (2000)).

<sup>ii</sup> This raises questions about where postcolonial geography (which has its origins in an engagement with the representational) ends and critical ‘development geography’ (alert to global inequalities) begins. This is worthy of further debate, but I argue for now that a concern for material practices and spaces need not be disconnected from discourses, texts, imaginings and counter-imaginings since there are fundamental entanglements between the two.

<sup>iii</sup> Research on the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) union in Las Vegas is particularly instructive (Rothman and Davis, 1999); see also Sherman and Voss (2000) on immigrant unionisation in the San Francisco hotel industry. There are also new forms of organisation emerging in many post-independence countries to ensure that the interests of previously marginalized workers are placed on national agendas.