

Postcolonial Discernment or was that Deceit?¹

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Postcolonial Studies began publication over a year ago. In the course of its production we, the editors, have come to see our initial enthusiastic and open agenda taking a shape we had neither imagined nor expected. With the preparation of each new issue we confronted problems that brought to the fore troubling questions of discernment, judgement and, ultimately, power/knowledge. It seems appropriate, therefore, upon the completion of a year's work, to devote some attention to these concerns, as we believe they speak to a wider range of concerns about the postcolonial and its attempts to broaden the parameters of knowledge. Let us begin anecdotally.

One of us was sitting with a Chinese friend the other day, trying to convince him to write for *Postcolonial Studies*. His work on law constantly questions the appropriateness of Western legal categories in China. Through an examination of the politics of the everyday, he is able to point to the radically different cultural and knowledge protocols that operate in China and the way in which these all too often subvert and reconfigure legal forms that appear to be mere imports from the West. His work would clearly fall within the parameters of the journal yet he refused to recognise this affiliation. His refusal to write for us was both a blow and a warning. This was hard to see at first for the refusal to participate in the journal was couched in a typically Chinese manner. A series of half believed objections and excuses designed to portray him as modest and unworthy issued forth.

Such objections, in the West, would no doubt be read as 'window dressing' covering the 'real motives', and while this is partly true it ignores the importance of such formulaic modesty in helping to constitute the speaking position of any Chinese intellectual. In his world such words were a sign of virtuousness. His effort to articulate his reluctance in terms of his own ostensible unworthiness was designed to save 'our face' for it offered an account of his rejection in terms of his own failings, not ours. Things, therefore, were not as they appeared and despite efforts to convince him that 'he could do it' the warning signals he offered were lost in the cultural translation.

Eventually the conversation drifted onto broader questions about the nature of postcolonialism. It was at this point, free of personal commitments or investments, that his 'real' objections could be articulated in terms of abstract concerns about postcolonialism. Postcolonialism, he insisted, spoke only to, and of, the West and had little to do with the intellectual concerns of the non-Western academy. Seen as such, it was simply the latest twist in a Western history of knowledge imperialism.

But these are familiar objections, and ones which this journal has consistently attempted to counter through noisy-----and pious-----assertions of its own commitment to the radical democratisation of knowledge. Indeed, in the inaugural issue of *Postcolonial Studies*, we took care to foreground our determination, in the context of the wider revolution within the 'new humanities', to engage 'with circuits of knowledge that are either marginalised, anthropologised or used as footnote fodder in the western academy.' Yet, we have found that our editorial decisions often belie the

¹ We wish to thank Tani Barlow for helping to clarify our thinking and our language as we

romantic intensity of this former contract with 'subjugated knowledges'. For, the effects of knowledge, as we have discovered, are tethered both to the content, and to the style, of any given epistemology. In other words, it is simply not enough to pronounce China, India, Kenya, Iran etc as knowledge, or, indeed, as *knowledgable*, but equally, it is imperative that we ask whether we are capable of receiving-----as theory, as thought-----the untranslated and unmediated diction and vocabulary of Iranian knowledges about Iran, Indian knowledges about India and so on. To put these confessional anxieties into cruder form: as editors of a 'refereed' and 'international' journal our selection criteria are fashioned by an inescapable cosmopolitan conceit. There is a harsh and contagious civility at the very heart of western epistemology. So, in our editorial capacities we have found ourselves unfree of epistemological embarrassment in the face of, say, the unsolicited and 'circular' article from China categorically rejected by reviewers for failing to make the academic mark.

Naturally, the editors concurred with these reports, but we did so with some unease, realising that a form of bias was operative in our assessments. After all, we were rejecting these works on a 'judgement call' which was invested in a take (albeit critical) on Anglo-American knowledge forms. Moreover, none of us are really capable of writing outside of these forms. Yet, the extent of our collaboration with certain codes of western epistemic 'manners', raised the issue of knowledge and colonial dependency in a new and novel way. Our ostensible pluralism, we were quickly discovering, was always set within these limits and our judgement calls constituted the border posts of those limits. There is no way to work outside this. Indeed, the basis

attempted to arrive at these conclusions.

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upon which any approach (postcolonial or otherwise) is built unconsciously and implicitly relies upon privileging the knowledge paradigm of the assessor. When that project is imbricated in a new knowledge/power imperialism, however, it seems that, at the very least, our role should be to unmask it. But where would we begin the work of this exposure? From which theoretical location *outside* this imperialism would we commence our heroic (self) critique? Is there such a place and could it really be called postcolonialism?

The rupture instantiated by the postcolonial-----the significant moment of its prodigal departure from the western episteme-----inheres its evocation of the 'real'. The postcolonial departs into the scheme of an altered cartography because it is, as we tell ourselves incessantly, decisively 'political' But, could it be possible that the political in the postcolonial is itself a mask for the smug features of western metaphysics? Or rather, once we begin to entertain fears and suspicions about such a masking in the postcolonial we must also engage with a host of other related concerns. For, the tactics of masking are characteristic-----are they not?-----of the very condition, the typology, of western epistemology.

Western theory, as Slavoj Zizek seems to suggest, is marked by certain historically acquired habits of dissimulation. In the opening pages of his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, for instance, he reveals a scandal. Recent Western social theory, it seems, preaches its message, not only in the rarefied and sometimes obscure language of high theory, but, more importantly, in the coded tongue of deceit. Like a theoretical Cabbalist, Zizek turns his language wheel to tell of the 'real' meaning behind the charade. So, there is a repression

when we speak of Habermas and Foucault. For while we do so, he notes, we all too often, murmur the names Althusser and Lacan under our breath. Whatever happened to Louis Althusser? A life that ended so scandalously seems to have produced a theoretical apparatus that disappeared as quickly. After the scandal of the life, Žižek perceptively observes, this 'traumatic kernel ... had to be quickly forgotten'.² This 'theoretical amnesia' was a form of repression and as Freud notes, repression never leads to eradication, only encryption.³ It requires a Žižek to unearth and decode it. It requires an examination not only of the 'other' names through which such theory now surreptitiously operates but ultimately an appreciation of the new theoretical formations that are brought forth under the shadow of the long silenced name, Althusser.

Arguably, postmodernism was born on the back of this repression. It became the 'knowledge effect' of a process that buried the body of Althusser but secretly stole the soul of his work. How fitting, then, that as this Faustian character, postmodernism, trailed into those domains that were once the preserve of the Area Study specialist-----that is to say, concerns about a geographically situated and culturally specific form of difference-----it too theoretically faded from view as we renamed its concerns postcolonial.

To claim a postmodern 'repression' within postcolonialism may appear strange if not downright bizarre. After all, it is a 'repression' that is 'masked by' or hidden behind the overt appearance of the thing it is said to occlude. This mask of postmodernism is not hard to see. Indeed, postcolonialism lives, in part, through the references it makes to the postmodern 'names' it flaunts,

2 Slavoj Žižek (1989), *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London, 1

celebrates and claims kinship with. Yet in a strange way, this act of claiming kinship, enables the repression of a more incestuous side to this relationship. Were this to be acknowledged, however, the nature of the debt would seriously threaten some of the more politically liberating, but possibly pretentious, claims of postcolonialism.

How much of the theoretical core of the postcolonial agenda is reliant upon a renaming of postmodern theoretical concerns as geographical or physical problems that can be addressed politically? Homi Bhabha's work, for example, cites Lacanian psycho-analysis endlessly, yet if one examines closely the nature of his argument about hybridity, one cannot help but notice how it is constituted in a manner not dissimilar to the Lacanian notion of the unconscious.⁴ Far from being a hostage of its etymology, as Young seems to suggest⁵, we would speculate that it is but a clone of a Lacanian difference. Yet Bhabha is not alone in this urge to borrow deeply and acknowledge partially.

The great Saidian divide between Europe and its other-----which, as Said himself admits, is an ontological and epistemological 'style of thought'⁶-----is explored as though it were entirely an effect of the raw discursive power of imperialism. Yet, if we read it alongside theoretical texts from Western philosophy, can we not recognise that part of the power of Said's description of these acts comprising the European politico-geographic silencing of Others runs along a familiar epistemological track within Western philosophy. After

3 Sigmund Freud (1933), *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, Random House, London, 288

⁴ Thanks to John Cash for helping point out this unarticulated connection.

⁵ See Robert Young (1995) *Colonial Desire; Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, London.

⁶ Edward Said, (1978), *Orientalism*, Penguin, London, 2

all, as Chakrabarty notes⁷, Europe is the only place 'we' can know theoretically. It is this 'hyper-real' Europe of the mind that imposes its style of thought upon a 'real outside' of the Other. It is, in other words, theory (Europe as hyper-reality) designating the means by which the 'real' (the other, the non-West) is appropriated into thought. Read in this way, one could conclude that irrespective of any political intent (and there was plenty of that) Europe would and could only misrecognise its other in this formulation, for as Althusser's oft used Spinozism tells us, 'the concept sugar is not sweet'.⁸ Said's position, then, is bolstered, in part at least, by an epistemological impossibility (of knowing the real, theoretically) being rendered as a political inevitability.

Similarly, could one not suggest a similar operation taking place in relation to the question 'Can the subaltern speak?'⁹ After all, if one momentarily breaks from the tautology of subalternity-----they are subaltern therefore they cannot speak-----and moves onto the general question of representation, one is forced to ask, can anyone 'speak' in an unmediated fashion? Like Said's Europe and its Other, the tautology of subalternity works to mask the general dilemma of representation, and proceeds to present it as a specific puzzle that is, in the main, political. It is not a general question of representation (of speaking for others) it seems to suggest, but of class (of subaltern repression). The subalterns are silenced, it appears, not by the tautological nature of the definition given to specify their existence, but by a class repression that enforces their silence. The tautological is, thereby,

⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992), 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?', *Representations*, Winter 1992, 1-26.

⁸ Louis Althusser (1976) *Essays in Self Criticism* (Trans. Grahame Lock), NLB, London, 192

⁹ Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (1988), *Marxism and the Intrepretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana.

politically invested with meaning, and our search for a way around the question becomes a moral necessity.

Yet, here we are asked to settle for the consolation prize of 'knowledge effects'. These, it is claimed, flow from the (doomed) attempts to lift the veil of subalternity. This, of course, in a very different setting becomes what Derrida once called responsibility.¹⁰ But in this different setting of Derrida's work one also discovers the impossibility of realising a true voice of subalternity which might then be reconfigured as an attempt to escape the domain of logocentric knowledge. At best, we can turn the 'old machinery' of Western rationality on itself----tactically, critically, and momentarily.

In all three cases----- Bhabha's postulation of 'hybridity', Said's elaboration of Europe and its Other, and Spivak's interrogation of representation and subalternity-----there is cause to suspect the surrogate-like nature of the non-Western Other. And in all three cases, there are doubts about whether we have even departed from the West. If there has been departure, we suspect it is merely a 'knowledge [side] effect' of certain theoretical operations that have taken place firmly within the canon of Western knowledge and diction.

Thus, in pursuing the chimeral 'outsideness' of the postcolonial we stumble upon the burial ground of western epistemology. Finally, as part of this exercise in exhuming its buried past, we would like to propose-----at least for now-----that postcolonialism could be another name for the western pastoral. It is the newest version of a genre which has consistently supplied the hiding place and rehearsal ground for Europe's perverse and nostalgic unconscious.¹¹ Built, in its many variants, upon oppositions of the

¹⁰ See Peggy Kamuf (1991), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* [ed. Peggy Kamuf], Harvester-Wheatsheaf, New York, viii.

uncultivated/natural world, rich/poor, manifest/latent energies, manners/instinct, the form gradually perfects the complex task of western self-othering. Its 'green' world and ever untutored inhabitants are harnessed as remedial agents against the corruption and artifice of 'civilisation.' Thus, as it evolves from a simple type of escape literature into a genre capable of social comment, its great fictional characters turn to nature/poverty/instinct for reinvention and reformation. And while some receive health in the open spaces of rusticity, others, going native, lose self and soul for an incoherent wisdom.

For, above all, the western pastoral, travelling as it does from the *Idylls* of Theocritus to the dreams engendered by the postcolonial, is ultimately the place where one encounters different knowledges, repressed knowledges within the secure confines of the Same. Despite its flirtation with alterity, the geography and information delivered by the pastoral are, thus, carefully and vigilantly contained within, and annexed to-----or, dare we say, colonised by-----the governing tropes of western epistemology. What the pastoral and its accretions teach us, in the end, is that Europe has always provincialised itself best. Or, rather, that it has always already monitored its most successful departures from itself.

Faced with the unsolicited unpublishable article from Africa, Asia etc., we cannot but find our responses and choices severely scripted in advance: to idealise or to patronise. But this is clearly not good enough. Perhaps the pastoral itself has a repressed past, a moment of departure where postcolonialism might learn to exempt itself from the mincing mannerliness of its epistemic inheritance. Is there, then, a recessive place where we might find the other of Europe's other? And could we call this place postcolonial?

Any journal that takes up an engagement with postcolonialism, no matter what its intentions, desires, or statements to the contrary, will, in some ways, be shadowed by the kinds of dilemma's and limits we have discussed in this essay. We can work within a Derridian fold and try to extend the limits of what constitutes acceptable knowledge but our benchmark, our market, our constituency will always place limits upon such radical operations. Can one ever really and fully break with Anglo-American knowledge protocols, agenda's or ways of seeing from within? Or does the 'postcolonial deceit' of Said, Bhabha and Spivak offer a way to tactically edge forward?

Surely the one political question posed by postcolonial scholarship must be how best to operate within the institutions to which we are so intimately connected and yet produce the necessary side effects that will broaden the terrain that enables and allows for different forms of authoritative speech? Postcolonialism can never be about recovery, it will always be about invention. Yet, a major part of our inventiveness must be about ways to cheat, steal and pickpocket the knowledge formations of the Western academy. However, as we know, the process of stealing the cultural capital that enables enunciative modalities to operate, and, simultaneously, using it to make intellectual sense of other ways of seeing is always going to be a herculian task.