

*Postcolonial Geographies*

Alison Blunt and Cheryl McEwan (eds.)

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Empire casts a long shadow over the discipline of geography and in recent years has become the focus of a considerable body of geographical scholarship. Critical energies have been focused on the formal disciplinary links between geography and imperialism - on the Eurocentric character and imperial sway of geographical tenets and practices (such as environmental determinism, diffusionism, exploration and mapping) that became central to geography's intellectual development and public image. Yet geographers now also use the term 'colonizing geographies' to convey the ideas that geography, empire and postcoloniality work into one another in myriad ways, and that we cannot find some great divide between a geography that was once complicit with colonialism and one that is now not. This, roughly, is the intellectual context in which *Postcolonial Geographies* is situated, and one of the great strengths of this volume is its coverage of the multiple ways in which geography's liaison with postcolonial studies conceives the putatively postcolonial world in which we live.

Edited by two talented British feminist geographers, and comprised of 12 essays by a group of British-based geographers, the volume raises important questions about what happens when a discipline like geography starts to take its imperial heritage into account. In the opening chapter, for example, James Sidaway ponders whether geography is a quintessentially Eurocentric and colonising science, and suggests that if it is, then the creation of an alternative postcolonial geography may be an ironic and even self-defeating gesture. Does work on geography's imperial past that finds its critical feet by dredging up demeaning and domineering representations of colonial lands and peoples herald some kind of enlightenment for the discipline? Is it meant to show that geographers now do things that are less harmful to the 'Other'? Such issues have made what we might call 'the return of empire' to geography a vexed affair, and in their introduction to the volume, Alison Blunt and Cheryl McEwan judiciously outline what is at stake.

However, *Postcolonial Geographies* is about far more than geography's

disciplinary imbroglio with empire. The wider critical purchase of the volume lies in its exploration of the broad implication of questions of geography and spatiality in the production of colonial and postcolonial knowledges, identities and relations of power. The diverse themes and problematics discussed include: (i) the spaces of knowledge and display (such as museums and world exhibitions) in which colonial and postcolonial meanings take shape and are given cultural authority; (ii) the geographical construction of colonial and postcolonial subjectivities at different scales; (iii) how metropolitan-imperial and colonial spaces and landscapes were sexualized and racialized; (iv) colonial and postcolonial urbanism; (v) the connections between global imperial networks and local colonial geographies; (vi) geo-graphic earth-writing projects of exploration, travel and classification; and (vii) the practices of domination and resistance embedded in contemporary processes of globalisation and development.

Six of the chapters have an explicitly historical focus, six focus on contemporary postcolonial dynamics, and the majority of the authors deal with the nature and legacies of British imperialism in different parts of the world. With the exception of Alan Lester's essay on Britain's Cape Colony, there is limited coverage of the regional make-up of colonialism in particular margins of empire. And with the exception of the essay by Haydie Gooder and Jane Jacobs on the politics of reconciliation with Aboriginal people in postcolonial Australia, native voices enter the critical picture largely through their representation in elite (usually white and male, and in many cases exclusively British) discourses and practices. Many of the authors view the colonial and postcolonial world from the (former) imperial center and through select spatial projects such as exploration and urban planning. As such, this volume does less than it might to assuage a criticism that some have of the recent postcolonial turn in geographical inquiry: that it struggles to escape the Eurocentric frameworks of thought and reference that it ostensibly seeks to de-center and subvert.

But let us not dwell on what the volume does not do. The biases and elisions I have identified do not detract from what, overall, is a spirited attempt to chart the contours of a postcolonial geography, and what constitutes 'a meaningfully decolonized geography' (p.6), in an ecumenical and reflexive manner. Blunt and McEwan should be con-

gratulated on organizing the gamut of themes tackled by the authors into three fairly coherent sections on “postcolonial knowledge and networks”; “urban order, citizenship and spectacle”; and “home, nation and identity.” They also comment incisively on what they see as a central component of a geographically sensitive postcolonialism: its emphasis on the materiality of discourse and power. The essays in this volume retain a much stronger concern with the corporeal and networked dimensions of movement, interaction and knowledge production, and the embodiment of power and identity in different places and projects, than much postcolonial work that emanates, especially, from the fields of literary and cultural studies. *Postcolonial Geographies* thus avoids one of the pitfalls of postcolonialism—its textualism—and augments the idea that geographical discourses are neither innocent nor free-floating constructions. Geography is treated as a historically shifting, socially constructed and power-laden set of academic and lay concepts and practices rather than as an immutable, self-contained or impartial knowledge domain and discipline.

Blunt and McEwan start their introduction by reflecting on Edward Said’s remarkable peregrination into the interplay between a sense of place and sense of identity in his memoir *Out of Place* (1999), and Said serves as more than a postcolonial authority figure for what follows. For what this volume does better than many postcolonial texts currently on the market is make us think harder about what, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993: 225), Said famously described as “the primacy of the geographical element” in the imagination of imperialism and anti-imperialism. One of Said’s basic postcolonial points, and one that is amply conveyed in this volume, is that critical engagement with the historical and contemporary spatiality of empire is too important to be left solely to geographers. Postcolonialism, of course, is infused by spatial images of mapping, marginality, exile and location. What *Postcolonial Geographies* adds to the spatial tenor of postcolonial studies is a more grounded understanding of how geographical ideas of place, space and landscape help us to talk about how colonial and postcolonial projects and experiences are worked in different ways in different periods and regions. The volume opens up a vibrant intellectual space in which we might start to tell more intricately geographical stories about what it means to find one’s place in a world that has been fundamentally transformed by

imperialism's core logic of de-territorialization and re-territorialization and ongoing landscaping of power.

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