Introduction

Postcolonialism, or postcolonial studies, is a field of research that is most fully developed in literary studies and certain streams of history. It emerged strongly in the 1980s, amid a series of debates about the on-going cultural legacies of colonial and imperial rule in formally independent nation-states; debates about the relevance of Marxist theories of revolution and Liberal theories of democracy in post-colonial contexts; and epistemological and political debates about how best to think about the connections between concepts of agency, identity, knowledge and representation. In geography, these debates were critically translated into the discipline from the 1990s onwards (see Sharp 2009), influencing various fields – in particular development geography (e.g. McEwan 2009, Radcliffe 2005, Power et al 2006), but also fields such as economic geography (e.g. Pollard et al 2009), historical geography and the history of geography (e.g. Blunt and McEwan 2002) and urban studies (e.g. Jacobs 1996, Robinson 2006, McFarlane 2008). Current research agendas informed by postcolonial studies include work on the relationship between postcolonialism and climate change (e.g. Chakrabarty 2012); investigations of the relationships between nature, religion and the meanings of contested landscapes in colonial and postcolonial societies (e.g. Jazeel 2013); work on commodity histories and the long history of globalisation (e.g. Hazareesingh and Curry-Murchado 2009); and debates on the nature of comparative method in the social sciences and the politics of knowledge (e.g. Jazeel and McFarlane 2011, Robinson 2011).

Postcolonialism and the Critique of Historicism

The critique of colonialism and imperialism has a long history. It provides one of the most important ‘geographical’ strands of Marxist theory, in the work of Karl Marx himself, on through the ideas of Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, and onto David Harvey’s reconstruction of the geography of Marxist theory in the 1970s and 1980s. The idea that the legacies of colonial occupation and imperial rule continue to resonate after the end of colonial occupation or imperial rule pre-dates postcolonial studies. It forms an important
theme, for example, in theories of the ‘development of underdevelopment’ outlined by writers like Andre Gunder Frank, Samir Amin and Walter Rodney in the 1960s and 1970s. These are approaches that are strongly rooted in styles of political economy analysis. But the critique of the cultural dimensions of colonialism, racism and imperialism also has a longer history. The notion of ‘cultural imperialism’ is an important precursor to postcolonial theory, emerging in particular from Latin America to explain the ways in which formally independent states remained under the influence of powerful hegemonic actors through the medium of popular culture (see Tomlinson 1991). To understand postcolonial studies, and especially postcolonial theory, as a distinctive intellectual field we have to see it as emerging from these traditions but also departing from them in important ways; primarily, by having recourse to distinctive traditions of cultural theory drawn from poststructuralism, discourse theory and psychoanalysis.

As a distinctive 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; Amilcar 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.

First, each emphasised that colonialism consisted of more than economic exploitation and political subordination; colonialism also involved the exercise of cultural power over subordinated populations. They saw culture as having been wielded by colonialist powers to denigrate the practices of non-western cultures, and to celebrate the superiority of particular versions of western culture. Second, if these writers understood culture to be an instrument of domination, then regaining control over the means of collective self-definition was regarded as an important strategy in the political struggle for emancipation.

Writing before, during and immediately after the end of European imperial rule after the end of the Second World War, this generation of anti-colonial thinkers all share 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. A shared concern with the conditions for the ‘decolonisation of the mind’ is the strong link between a generation of anti-colonial writers and the emergence of postcolonialism in the late 1970s and 1980s. 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 idea that colonialism involved the destruction of non-western cultural traditions and the imperialist imposition of Eurocentric cultural norms might seem to imply that the work of decolonizing the mind requires the recovery and revaluation of these traditions. This understanding of cultural politics in the ‘post-colony’ 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 (see Mamdami 1996, Mbembe 2001). The invocation of ‘authentic’ traditions has, in fact, been one of the most problematic ways in which post-colonial elites have continued to wield political
power over their citizens. And the critique of this sort of appeal to authenticity is one of the animating themes of postcolonial studies. A more complex way of understanding the relationship between the modern and the traditional is illustrated by the career of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, whose early novels were published in English under the name James Ngugi. In the 1970s, he became involved in the production of popular theatre using Gikuyu, the most widely used indigenous language in Kenya. Ngũgĩ 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 Ngũgĩ 1986). At the same time, however, Ngũgĩ’s strategy is not straightforwardly aimed at recovering a lost tradition of indigenous, authentic narrative. It is, rather, more an act of postcolonial invention, fusing together genres and forms from different narrative traditions, both western and non-western. His work is one example of an attempt 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 Front de Libération Nationale, or 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 people 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 marginalised 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 practising psychiatrist – an experience that infused his analysis of the personal and group psychologies of both colonizers and the colonized. Fanon was writing into an emerging line of critical thought, including work by Albert Memmi and Jean-Paul Sartre, which developed explicitly *philosophical* analyses of the relationships between European colonisers and their colonised subjects. Fanon’s 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. One important strand of postcolonial theory is concerned with rethinking the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism through vocabularies of subject-formation that draw on psychoanalytical theory. More broadly, the centrality of the struggle over Algeria is key to acknowledging the degree to which a whole wave of ‘French Theory’ most often associated with ‘postmodernism’ or ‘poststructuralism’ was animated in no small part by a concerted effort to interrogate the meaning of ‘western’ in traditions of western philosophy (see Young 1990).
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 legitimised 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 has two dimensions. On the one hand, it involves making a special claim about a particular culture, often by reference to the roots of European culture going all the way back to the ancient Greeks. On the other hand, this particular culture or tradition is meant to carry within it a truly universal set of values. The seeming contradiction between a claim for the superiority of particular cultural values which are valued because of their supposed universalisability is finessed by the projection of a linear model of historical progress onto the spaces of different societies. The core assumption of Eurocentric thinking, in short, is the idea 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 universalisation therefore works through the spatialisation of time: different parts of the world are ranked as being at different stages of a process of historical progress that assumed a single path of development, or modernisation. This pattern of thought is known as historicism.

The most important contribution of postcolonialism lies here, in its critique of the legacies of this historicist way of thought, which it finds to inhere not just in popular culture or even high art, but also in forms of philosophical reasoning and social scientific procedures for investigating global cultures (see Young 1990). This critique is extended to include left traditions of thought, including liberation nationalisms and Marxist accounts of working-class agency. The line of postcolonial theory associated with the Subaltern Studies-group of historians of South Asia provides the most thoroughgoing critique of the historicism of these critical traditions, and of their significance for politics in contemporary postcolonial societies (see Prakash 1994). This critique of critical theories of colonialism and imperialism is one reason why postcolonial theory is often controversial (Chatterjee 2013). It is the critique of historicism that Fanon presaged in his work, by arguing that the history of the west was a not a hermetically sealed story of secularisation, modernisation 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 (Chakrabarty 2007). In so doing, it brings into explicit focus the construction of white identities, for example, rather than assuming whiteness as a norm against which other forms of identity and culture take on meaning; it also means thinking of ‘postcolonial’
as referring as much to places like modern Britain or France or Belgium or Spain or the Netherlands – nation-states that were once the centres of global Empires – as to ‘far away’ places that were once colonies or parts of those empires (see Schwarz 2012). In short, in so far as postcolonialism challenges a 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.

The rest of this chapter will explore three aspects of postcolonial studies as a field of inquiry. First, it will consider the ‘origins’ of this field in the seminal work of Edward Said. Second, it will elaborate on what is perhaps the most significant contribution of this whole field. Postcolonial theory is responsible for developing a particular model of power, one that connects ideas about discourse and textuality to more worldly issues of institutions, organisations, economies and markets. Third, 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.

The Imaginary Geographies of Colonial Discourse

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) is the single most important reference point for the emergence of postcolonial studies. 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’ – the flexible geographical zone of ‘the East’, in relation to Europe, including India, China, the ‘Far East’ and the ‘Middle East’. These images could be negative and derogatory, or, just as often perhaps, positive and even romantic. Either way, they tended to draw on a supply of stereotypes and clichés about the qualities and character of non-western people – a stock of Orientalist ‘knowledge’ that stretched across scholarly and popular mediums. And, Said argued in this book – and in all of his subsequent work – Orientalism amounted to a stock of knowledge that continued to provide resources to be mobilised in support of contemporary western geopolitical strategies, an argument elaborated by the geographer Derek Gregory (2004) through the idea that we still live in ‘the colonial present’.

Whether negative or positive, in Orientalist thinking, Said suggested, 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 what became a more general theory of cultural politics understood as operating through a process of ‘othering’. According to this understanding, cultural or personal 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 it 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. Crucially, however, the security of the identity of the Self is also vulnerable to disruption by this image of the Other. In short, this is an account of identity formation as a process riven by relations of power – secure identity depends on the constant, ongoing disavowal of those negative characteristics
against which it is defined, a projection that leads to the constant and ongoing denigration of other identities, who at the same time always appear as a danger or a threat. For geographers in particular, this theory of cultural othering is influential because it presents identity-formation as a process of controlling boundaries and maintaining the territorial integrity of communities and/or selves.

One reason why Said’s argument about the cultural dimensions of western imperialism proved so influential was that he made 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 – he showed how Foucault’s concepts, developed in accounts of eighteenth-century medical practices or nineteenth-century penal regimes and contained within a European field of reference, could be applied to the analysis of other cultural practices, in other places. Said, following Foucault, argued that ideas and images were not free-standing but were in fact part of whole systems of institutionalised knowledge production, through which people and organisations learnt to engage with the world around them – this is what he meant by calling Orientalism a discourse.

Said’s Orientalism has been so influential precisely because it is a text in which the critique of colonial and imperial knowledge is brought into uneasy communication with particular strands of cultural theory. Said provided a new vocabulary in which to analyse the cultural dimensions of colonial and imperial rule, and resistance. Orientalism therefore stands as an example of how new fields of academic inquiry emerge and are consolidated. One way in which postcolonial theory emerged was through increasingly sophisticated theoretical debates over concepts of representation, discourse, identity and power, in which Said’s usage of these and other ideas served as a constant reference point. Another way in which postcolonial studies emerges is through a process of empirical application of Said’s original emphasis on knowledge and power. Said’s analysis of Orientalist discourse suggested 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, opera – and the world of grubby politics, power and domination. Orientalism therefore provided a 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’, understood in turn as a crucial medium for the production of colonial or imperial subjectivity: scientific writing, historical documents, official reports, literature and poetry, the visual arts, as well as academic disciplines such as anthropology, geography or linguistics. Conceptually, Said’s book laid the groundwork for the reconfiguration of a vast array of activities as making up one huge ‘imperial archive’ awaiting critical analysis in terms of discourse, power and subjectivity. The interdisciplinary dynamism of postcolonial studies lies in the range of sites that are now revealed to have been instrumental to the construction of subjectivities of rule and resistance.

Geography is certainly one of the disciplines that could be, and has been, rethought in exactly the ways opened up by Said’s Orientalism – as already suggested, one of the ways in which postcolonial studies has been influential is by provoking a systematic
reconsideration of the history of the discipline as thoroughly wrapped up with the histories of colonial occupation and imperial administration (e.g. Clayton 2011). The wider resonance of Said’s work in geography depended, however, on Said’s very explicit argument that Orientalism should be understood as a form of ‘imaginative geography’. Said’s 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 that 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 knowledge was drawn upon to direct the actual course of European territorial expansion and appropriation. The presentation of these two dimensions, an imaginative one and an instrumental one, is the central theoretical tension in Said’s original account of Orientalism as a ‘discourse’. 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. This dimension is crucial to the critical, political meaning of his analysis. Yet on the other hand there is the suggestion that such misrepresentations could become effective instruments of colonial power and administration. A great deal of work in postcolonial studies follows up the question of whether Said adequately theorised the means by which imaginative knowledge about other cultures could also serve as an effective instrument in the exercise of power over those cultures. His only gesture in this direction was 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 imperial 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 bestowed two theoretical dilemmas upon the academic analysis of colonial and imperial discourse that it opened up. The first is the problem of how to account for the translation of ‘knowledge’ that is purely imaginative and non-empirical into knowledge that is practically useful in administering complex social systems like colonial bureaucracies or imperial markets. The second problem, and one that becomes crucial in the development of postcolonial theory following Said’s initial account of Orientalism, is how to conceptualise anti-colonialist agency from within this understanding of colonial discourse and imaginative geography. The idea that colonial discourses are entirely the product of colonisers’ imagination might seem to imply that there exists some pristine space, untouched by the experience of cross-cultural contact, from which authentic ‘native’ agency and resistance must emanate. However, Said consistently opposed this sort of nativist understanding of political agency, in both his scholarly work and his closely related writings as the best known Palestinian intellectual in the western world from the 1970s until his death in 2003.

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 imaginatively prefigured in the various representations through which the Orient was first constructed as a knowable place. It is this strong
sense of projection and prefiguration that is most problematic about his account, because it seems to imply that colonial discourses were self-generating. And this tends to run counter to the strongest critical impulse of Said’s work as a whole, which focuses on the effort to decentre self-enclosed narratives of western progress by showing how apparently discrete societies, nations or traditions are the products of a constant traffic of cultural practices and ideas (see Said 1993).

As a way of moving beyond this impasse laid down by the attractive looking idea of ‘imaginative geographies’, it is worth noting that there are in fact two overlapping rhetorical schemas through which the relationship between culture, identity and space is presented in Said’s original formulation of ‘imaginative geography’. The first trope is the psychologistic 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 the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard to describe how distant places are invested with significance from afar by the ‘poetic’ ascription of meaning, Said presented Orientalist discourse 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 was 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 rhetorical schema at work in Said’s original account in *Orientalism*. This presents Orientalism as a discourse which stages its own performance, and through which Orientalist representations were produced for a European audience. Said uses this theatrical motif to underscore the predominant 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. So the theatrical motif remains subordinated to the emphasis on poetic projection.

Perhaps, though, reading Said ‘against the grain’ a little, we can free this second, dramaturgical trope from the overriding emphasis in *Orientalism* 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 production of colonial space is to be fruitfully understood as an analogy with a dramatic production, then perhaps we should not think of the scenes so produced as realisations of a single autonomous *ur*-script that is the model for each of its own performances. If these performances have a script, then perhaps it is one whose existence resides nowhere other than in the contingencies of its repeated (re)enactments. My point in suggesting such a rhetorical flight of fancy is to suggest that there may be other ways of apprehending the artefacts of the colonial and imperial archive. These do not necessarily rely on positing of a single coherent will animating each utterance or action, and which would be able to think of colonial discourses as the products of the contingencies and contestations of the ongoing reproduction of colonial and imperial relations. This way of thinking implies an approach to 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 approaching 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 about what they are practically used to do.

Approaching cultural materials in this way, by letting the full implications of the dramaturgical rhetoric used by Said unfold, helps to address one of the most important questions in postcolonial studies. A recurring complaint, indeed a criticism around which debates about the whole field of postcolonial studies revolve, is that this field tends to present colonial cultures as the coherent product of colonialising powers, more or less effectively resisted by colonised subjects. Such a view hides the mediations and relations through which colonialism and imperialism developed (e.g. Thomas 1994). In the development of postcolonial studies post-Orientalism, as it were, there is a shift away from a strong emphasis on irredeemable Manichean conflict between coloniser and colonised, towards concepts which focus upon processes of cross-cultural communication. For example, this was the task undertaken by Mary Louise Pratt’s (1992) work on colonial representations. Focussing on colonial travel writing as her example, she proposed that colonial space should be thought of as a ‘contact zone’. The relevance of this idea is that it relocates the site of the production of knowledge and ideas into an interstitial zone of contact, negotiation and contestation. This conceptual move enables acknowledgement of the constitutive role of non-western agency and knowledge in the production of colonial and imperial cultures. Pratt’s work was just one example of the shift in postcolonial theory towards fully relational understandings of the social relations of culture. Most influentially, this is an emphasis found in the work of Homi Bhabha (1994), who builds on Fanon’s work to present an account of colonial and postcolonial identities as formed in inherently ambivalent processes of emulation, mimicry and subversive trickery, giving rise to forms of hybrid selves rather than pure racial or national identities.

The shift conceptualising identity, geography and power around figures of hybridity (see Young 1995) is also evident in Said’s own work. After Orientalism, Said’s work on culture and imperialism focused more and more explicitly on the interconnections and entwinements of different societies and cultures (Said 1993). The critical impulse of this work lay in showing how these interconnections and entwinements were denied, disavowed and marginalized by dominant cultural formations. In his scholarly work, but also in his political writings about Palestinian–Israeli politics, Said constantly emphasised the moral imperative of asserting that different cultures, peoples and societies both did and could co-exist in the same spaces and times (see Gregory 1995). For him, the guiding 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.

Looked at in the round, Said’s work is significant not so much for providing a model for understanding representations of space, but for its consistent focus on thinking of colonialism, imperialism and their legacies as revolving around issues of land. The crucial dimension of Said’s original argument in Orientalism was the importance of knowledge in staking claims to territory. After Said, colonialism and imperialism were rethought as thoroughly cultural processes, in so far as relations between European or western colonisers and non-western ‘native’ subjects were 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, at best, as
untended. Such representations 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. Exclusivist conceptions of ethnic, cultural or national identity are often associated with exclusivist claims to territory and space. This geographical imagination of identity leads to the persistent understanding of colonialism in terms of simple oppositions between colonisers and colonised, which can easily lead to styles of postcolonial politics that reproduce exclusivist, sometimes violent forms of identity politics. 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, messed up and compromised than this simple opposition suggests.

I have dwelt at length on Said’s work, and in particular Orientalism, because it is difficult to underestimate the significance of this work in the development of postcolonialism as a strand of interdisciplinary work in the humanities and social sciences. 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. ‘Edward Said’, as a writer and figure of the exemplary public intellectual, is nothing short of what Michel Foucault once called ‘a founder of discursivity’ – postcolonial studies is a field formed by working through a series of empirical and conceptual issues that his work on Orientalist discourse first laid out, and which it continued to refine. I now want to look in a little more detail at perhaps the key issue in understandings and misunderstandings of the relevance of postcolonial studies – the question of how the power of representation is understood in this field.

**Representation 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. First, should practices of representation be conceptualised in zero-sum terms? Second, should cultural difference be conceptualised according to an image of discrete spatial entities? I will look at the first of these questions in this section, and then move on to the second in the following section, ‘Geographies of Understanding’.

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, partly thanks to postcolonial theory. Theories of the social construction of identities depend on an epistemological argument about the active role of representations in constituting the realities they purport to represent. The critical, ‘political’ force of this sort of claim, when deployed as a critique of racist stereotyping or of patriarchal gender stereotypes, for example, actually depends on an 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, there is the specific argument that some representations are misrepresentations, implying that certain representations are actually better than others. This is a tension we have already seen, for example, to be at work in Said’s account of Orientalist discourses.

In geography, debates about representation have tended to be caught up in interminable debates about whether cast-iron accurate descriptions of the world are actually possible – this was the driving concern of debates about ‘postmodernism’ and the ‘cultural turn’ in the 1990s. More recently, and in part out of exhaustion with such issues, there has been an embrace of so-called ‘non-representational’ approaches, which seek to recuperate embodied, experiential conditions of practices without passing through the mediating loop of representation. These debates tend to persist in thinking of representation as a name for a secondary layer of imagery or ideas that mediates between minds and worlds. In this respect, the full force of postcolonial studies remains to be registered. Postcolonialism asks us to keep in mind the intimate relationship between representation in an epistemological sense – as a process of knowing about things – and representation in a political sense – as a set of practices of delegation, substitution and authorisation. The thrust of the postcolonial 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 and speaking as. In a great deal of cultural theory, it is common to think of the latter as more legitimate, and increasingly common to look with deep suspicion at claims to speaking for others. Postcolonial theory disrupts this easily assumed economy of judgment. From this perspective, the act of speaking as – for example, speaking as an Englishman, or as an Indian, or as a Kenyan – depends on a claim to authority on the basis of identity. It thereby implies a complete substitution by the speaker for others in that category; it implies a claim that the speaker is representative of that identity. It is a register in which the authority of the speaker is based on claims of authenticity.

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. From this perspective, the model of speaking as is seen as working in zero-sum terms: the claim to be authentically speaking as a representative is akin to usurping other people’s voices as one’s own. But this does not mean that postcolonialism rejects the value of representation completely, stepping back in the name of allowing the ‘voices’ of other people to be heard. Far from it: postcolonial criticism is deeply suspicious of the wholehearted disavowal of representation in the name of the expressive presentation of authentic identities or realities (see Miller 1993). Rather, in postcolonial theory, the practice of speaking for is partially redeemed as a practice that keeps in view the contingent authority upon which such delegation depends for its legitimacy. Now, this suggestion that postcolonialism involves a partial affirmation of representation as speaking for might come as a surprise, since postcolonial theory is often thought of as a thoroughgoing critique of the impertinence of speaking for others in any circumstances. To understand why this is not quite the right way to think about postcolonial theory, we need to look a little more at how this field picks apart the concept of representation in order to reassemble representation as a complex set of actions.
The redemption of representation in postcolonial theory can be gleaned by careful attention to one of the other foundational texts of this field, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1988) dazzlingly difficult essay entitled ‘Can the subaltern speak?’. Among other things, this essay explicitly takes its distance from a straightforward critique of the impertinence of speaking for others in the name of letting the authentic voices of the oppressed be heard, via an engagement with an influential political disavowal of representation by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. In this essay, Spivak 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 for a landscape it depicts; a Member of Parliament stands 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 MPs faithfully represent the wishes of the voters? Representation in this sense is not a zero-sum game, but a process of proliferating claims and counter-claims (see Saward 2010). Spivak’s argument is that these sorts of questions also pertain to representation in a depictive sense. The point is not that one can never have accurate depictions – of landscapes, or of voters’ preferences – but that there is a degree of partiality involved in any representation that is thought of in terms of error or lying. Rather, it marks a space of difference in which questions of authority, accountability and legitimacy proliferate (see Barnett 1997).

The implication of this re-conceptualisation of representation is that critical attention should be focused on questions of who speaks, or – to put it another way – on questions of agency. Now, agency is not just a synonym for individual free will. It is, rather, a term that implies a set of relations of delegation and authorisation. 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 when it comes to theorising the possibility of agency. 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. In cultural theory, it is true that 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, best captured by the literary theorist Henry Louis Gates Jr: ‘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). Now, it should be acknowledged that in part 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 the oppressed or silenced. On these grounds, postcolonial theory is expected to offer a theory of resistance, gleaned from the evidence of colonial sources and archives. 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 cultural representation do in the world. Or, to put it another way, it invites us to think of discourse as a concept of action.
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’. Either opposing discourse and materiality, or suggesting that the two need to be coupled together, is an unfortunate conceptual habit in geography and elsewhere. Invoking figures of the ‘material’ world has a sort of magical cachet in the social sciences. Assertions about ‘materiality’ have an unfortunate way of securing claims about causality while closing down debate about those claims behind a rhetoric of the primacy of material stuff, things, or processes. We should be a little wary of this sort of knock-down criticism that postcolonialism needs to be improved by a heady dose of clear-headed materialism, whether the argument is made in the name of a Marxist style of materialist political economy or in the name of ontologies of matter. For one thing, postcolonial theory’s critique of representation should lead us to be suspicious of arguments that appeal to some sort of immediate access to the materialities of the world that does not have to pass through the loops of particular idioms, vocabularies and rhetorics. Furthermore, the argument that postcolonialism pays too much attention to texts and representation is an argument that fails to acknowledge that postcolonial theory’s focus on textuality and representation is neither an index of being interested in ‘just texts’, nor of a grander argument that the ‘world is like a text’, nor even primarily part of a standard argument about constructive role of representations understood as images or ideas. 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. And, not least, it is interested in the claims of representation, in the sense elaborated by Spivak and others, that are facilitated by such apparatuses.

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. No doubt partly for disciplinary reasons, postcolonial theory has certainly 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 are used to enact particular effect in a broader web of social relations; for example, used to make friends, to train experts, to convert people, to monitor conduct and calculate possibilities. The geographer Miles Ogborn (2007) goes so far as to reconstruct the pre-histories of British imperial rule in India in terms of an analysis of how global networks of trade, administration and migration were held together and coordinated through webs of print culture. In short, 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: the attention to issues of textuality is above all shaped by a focus on the uneven social relations of literacy and, by extension, by unequal access to vocabularies of self-definition, practices of comportment and rituals of distinction. It is concerned with how people are made and make themselves into 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 enactment of textually mediated practices, postcolonial theory 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.

Geographies of Understanding

In concluding, I want to consider the second 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’. When it is interpreted as a version of social constructionism, postcolonial criticism generates a seemingly interminable 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 possibilities of cross-cultural interpretation are a central political concern of postcolonial studies. Interestingly, 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 she has gone so far as to affirm the importance of Area Studies as a field from which such knowledge might emerge.

The call from postcolonial theorists 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. Yet 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 tended to reinforce 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, 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 as morally suspect (see Mohanty 1995).

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 criticise western traditions for their failure to be adequately attuned to the forms of communication through which a genuine pluralistic universalism might develop; 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 focused 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. First, perhaps we could just stop thinking of cultures or societies as if they are tight, bounded, 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 placement along multiple routes and trajectories, and exposure 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 territorialised ways – in terms of them and us, inside and outside, here and there. The master tropes of postcolonial theory – of hybridity, syncretism, diaspora, exile – are not just geographical metaphors. They are, more specifically, all metaphors of impurity and mixing. They certainly encourage 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 understood to be the very condition of their possibility.

Second, one of the key insights of postcolonial criticism is that ‘the west’ is not a self-enclosed entity, but 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 (see Sen 2005). 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 and many of its detractors therefore needs to be contrasted to an interpretation at once more radical and more liberal in its implications. Such an alternative interpretation starts from the observation that postcolonial theory has engaged in a sustained criticism of a dominant imagination of space, one that renders cultures and societies as territorially enclosed 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 is coordinated
through practices of textual inscription and circulation. But another reason why we need not accept this criticism at face value cuts to the 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 itself – opens up to view a set of spatialities that are much more fluid, mobile, tactile, and differentiated than the ones that social scientists often favour.

As an academic field, postcolonial studies has 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. As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, it is not the first or only field to problematise the colonial, imperial, racist histories of the present. Indeed, one feature of debates around postcolonial theory revolves around the history and geography of this academic field itself; it is, for example, a field in which scholarship from and about certain places, above all India and to a lesser extent Africa, has often tended to dominate, although it has also opened up a truly global conversation (see Young 2001). The emergence of postcolonial studies has helped open up intellectual spaces in which the non-western world is no longer seen as an empirical ‘field’, subjected to the gaze of western theory and evaluated in terms of scales of development or modernity. Increasingly, in the wake of the postcolonial critique of the politics of western knowledge, non-western contexts are acknowledged to have robust intellectual traditions of their own, from which ‘we’ in the west might have much to learn. Slater’s call more than two decades ago to listen to theoretical voices from ‘other regions’ is now being answered in the development of what has been called ‘Southern Theory’ (Connell 2007), or ‘Theory from the South’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011), or ‘epistemologies of the south’ (see Santos 2007).

In conclusion, there are three reasons why postcolonial theory, a field of work most strongly developed in the literary humanities and history, is not only relevant to geographers, but is relevant precisely because of its animating concern with issues of textuality and archival memory.

First, it teaches us important lessons about the ways in which power operates in the modern world: that power operates through the modulation of possible subject positions for people to identify with and that power often does work like a ‘writing machine’, not metaphorically, but quite literally, through the circulation of textual artefacts and recording devices and other material technologies of inscription whose ‘storage capacity’ acts as a significant resource for control and regulation of populations.

Second, by problematising what are seemingly neutral practices such as reading, writing and interpreting, postcolonial studies opens up questions about the ways in which cross-cultural understanding depends not on the mastery of meaning but on openness to difference, on developing an ear for the other and on relations of translation.

Finally, in its focus upon practices through which meanings and representations are produced and circulated, postcolonialism opens up an alternative conceptualization of spatiality that is not ‘metaphorical’, and therefore certainly not in need of being beefed up by some added ‘materiality’, but which emerges from a careful attention to the *textures* of communication itself.
References


