



## **Introduction: Places Post-Colonialism Forgot (and How to Find Them)**

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The four papers in this themed issue had their first public airing in a session titled “Places Post-Colonialism Forgot: New Examinations of Center and Periphery” at the 2009 Las Vegas AAG Meetings. The session was co-organised by Karen Morin and Tamar Rothenberg, and sponsored by the Indigenous Peoples Specialty Group, the Socialist and Critical Geography Specialty Group, and the Historical Geography Specialty Group; I was one of the discussants.

The papers’ thematic coherence as a set hinges on two similarities. Each piece focuses on something that its author or authors think post-colonial analysis has overlooked or excluded – ways that groups constitute themselves, experiences of subordination, diasporic identities, and ongoing peripheralizations. And each paper deals in its way with the effects of centre/periphery dichotomies. Pamela Shurmer-Smith provides a glimpse at the remembrances, lives and identities of former White Northern Rhodesians who now, in diaspora, find themselves in locations that are peripheral to what remain the geographical centres of their identity; Ian Baird argues that the core concepts of post-colonial studies peripheralize certain instances of colonialism; Ellis draws from her research on middle class political formations in Chennai, India, to criticize post-colonial scholarship on India for relegating class to the peripheries of its analyses; Karen Morin and Tamar Rothenberg draw attention to pervasive centre/periphery binaries



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in the social and spatial configuration of higher education. Within these loose thematic constraints, the papers trace quite different theoretical and rhetorical routes at varying scales and levels of abstraction, and through disparate objects of analysis. The representational chains that imagine particular somethings as *places*, and construct specific non-attentions as *forgetting* vary widely from paper to paper, as do *post-colonialism* and *centre/periphery* as concepts and ontological categories. Therein lies the attraction of publishing these brief papers as a themed issue: individually they engage provocatively with their own empirical and political concerns, together they offer a fascinating albeit partial contemporary sampler of geographers' varied efforts to extend and strengthen the relevance of a post-colonial analytic.

The issue begins with *Ian Baird's* piece, which calls the very concepts "colonial" and "post-colonial" into question by identifying the colonization of non-European people by other non-Europeans as a category of colonialism that post-colonialism forgot. He argues that the designations pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial have been applied too selectively to European domination of non-European territories, thus restricting understandings of the coloniality of many instances of territorially-based oppression and political domination that did not involve Europeans. Citing the perspectives of members of an indigenous group in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia to show that the victims of sustained territorial domination do not always understand or experience European colonialism as categorically different from other forms of external domination, Baird criticizes scholars for the Eurocentrism of their post-colonial perspective. Instead of recognizing clear periods pre-, during and post- European colonialism, his Brao informants recall consecutive stretches of more-or-less colonial subordination to external powers – Khmer, Lao, Siamese, French, Japanese, Vietnamese, American, Lao, Khmer. Baird encourages geographers working in a post-colonial frame to expand their conceptions of the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial more fully to include non-European forms of territorial domination that nevertheless satisfy Watts' (2000, 93) minimal definition of colonialism as "the establishment and maintenance of rule, for an extended period of time, by a sovereign power over a subordinate and alien people that is separate from the ruling power", and accordingly to rethink the linearity of how colonialism is conventionally periodized (i.e., before, during, after).

It is important for a critical-intellectual and political project like post-colonial analysis to critique its own exclusions, and Baird astutely identifies Eurocentrism as one of them. However, if the theory that underpins post-colonial analysis is as deeply and thoroughly Eurocentric as suggested in the article, then simply exposing a wider range of colonialisms to its analytical gaze might only make things worse. Baird argues sensibly that an expanded post-colonial geography must recognize the historical and cultural specificity – the exceptionalism – of *each* colonial formation. All instances of colonial control have their histories, ideologies, opportunity structures, governance techniques, novels, fantasies, identities, subjects

and objects; these need to be traced inductively, instance by instance, and in their appropriate intellectual, cultural and linguistic context. No doubt much of this is being done, in languages other than English, and using analytical frameworks other than post-colonialism. Engagement with this work – currently peripheral to English language post-colonial scholarship but central to its own context – could yield a post-colonial analytic that would nurture inclusiveness and specificity.

*Karen Morin* and *Tamar Rothenberg* begin their contribution with the observation that entrenched academic hierarchies among universities in the United States peripheralize many institutions – especially those located in the midwest, rural regions and inner cities – by under-valuing the degrees they grant and the knowledge they generate. The result is systematically to devalue the scholarship of people whose thinking and experience are shaped in these geographical contexts. The authors note how little the academy seems to have learned in this regard from one of the principal epistemological and political lessons of post-colonial studies: to attend to voices from the margins, to decentralize the production of knowledge. Indeed, they argue that post-colonial studies' successful efforts to 'centre' academic knowledge being produced (at certain institutions) in former colonies seem to have further peripheralized the knowledge being produced in the academic hinterland of the United States, which has become a place that post-colonialism forgot. Ironically, by ignoring or devaluing the knowledge generated in America's 'provincial' universities U.S. academic hierarchies actively ensure that metropolitan knowledge remains parochial, narrow and partial.

Drawing from the work of Robinson (2006) and Chakrabarty (2000), Morin and Rosenberg advocate for what they see as a more sensitively post-colonial understanding of the U.S. academy as comprised of a web of provincial knowledge locations, each offering its own specific counter discourses and practices to the pretensions of universalizing knowledge. They suggest that within the discipline a revitalized regional geography could offer a vehicle for dismantling these pretensions. The challenge, as they see it, will be to nurture myriad provincial knowledges without falling into the trap of associating particular points of view too exclusively with specific places. Morin and Rotherberg envision a range of *cosmopolitan* provincial geographies, each avoiding parochialism by engaging with and learning from the others. They note that the mobility of academics' careers favours such regional cross-fertilization.

*Rowan Ellis* argues that since the 1980s post-colonial scholarship on India has opted for an almost exclusively cultural notion of class, where middle-class positioning depends on cultural capital, as constituted by particular identities, competencies and connections. More clearly economic aspects of class – income, occupation, labour and property relations – have been understood as less relevant to the Indian case, and have received little attention. She draws from her ethnographic research on transformations to middle class *political formations* in Chennai to advocate for an understanding of India's middle class as constituted in the relationship between cultural politics *and* political economy.

Ellis notes that whereas previous generations of the middle class protected their political interests by focusing on the state and party politics, the current generation wields political power at the local level through involvement with market-oriented urban governance NGOs. The reasons for this shift in strategy are simultaneously cultural, political and economic. First, the forms of cultural capital that ensured middle-class status and defined its boundaries for the post-independence generation have become less exclusive; participation in urban NGOs provides an alternative site of middle-class cultural identity and membership that reproduces some of this cultural exclusivity. Second, much of the young urban middle class rejects party politics as corrupt, and government as ineffective and uninterested in tackling issues of urban order that concern middle class urbanites. Participation in urban governance NGOs as an alternative political strategy responds to the declining power of the middle class vis-à-vis the state and reflects disillusionment with government. Third, the source of the middle-class's economic privilege has shifted from state to market. Its members are supportive of the contemporary neoliberal climate of decentralization and public/private partnerships. They see NGOs as innovative non-state actors that can "get things done" to create the sort of revanchist city that suits their class interests. Ellis uses interview data she collected from leaders of Chennai's various urban governance NGOs to detail "a tension between older forms of civil society premised on exclusive access to state power buttressed by elite claims to cultural capital and class privilege, and a newer form of elite civil society that draws their power from a politics of economic liberalization and appeals to the lure of the market". In so doing she contributes to an emerging body of scholarship that takes class more seriously and analyses its constitution more rigorously than has been characteristic of post-colonial scholarship on India.

Finally, *Pamela Shurmer-Smith's* paper, which begins by observing that "Northern Rhodesia isn't just a place that post-colonialism forgot, it is a place colonialism chose not to remember, if by remembering we mean laying down images and representations". Heeding Ricoeur's (2004, xv, quoted in Shurmer-Smith, this issue) call for "a just allotment of memory", she traces a delicate path through the quoted remembrances of middle-aged and elderly White former Northern Rhodesians, most of whom left in the decade after Zambian independence in 1964, and with whom she has communicated recently in writing. The quotations provide poignant glimpses at people who share a similar intense identification with the Northern Rhodesian landscape they remember, have lived elsewhere reluctantly and restlessly, and, as Shurmer-Smith says, "are conscious of their tenuous entitlement to the place that defines them." Shurmer-Smith infuses the piece with a gentle autoethnographic voice that reflects on her own ambivalent remembrances and identity as a White former Northern Rhodesian in relation to the project of gathering and interpreting the narratives of other members of the Northern Rhodesian diaspora.

I think the paper raises two important questions for post-colonial studies. The first is what to do with the memories of people “whose forfeited past might seem not to deserve the right of accountability” (Shurmer-Smith, this issue). Post-colonial scholarship has done much important work to recover the voices and experiences of the colonized, but has paid scant attention to those of colonialists, especially ‘ordinary’ colonialists in backwater places like Northern Rhodesia. Does this matter? I think it does. One of academic post-colonialism’s central mandates is to trace the lingering effects of colonialism on contemporary identities, geographies, and social relations. Shurmer-Smith’s piece demonstrates that the voices and experiences of former colonialists can be significant in this regard. The second important question is how to mobilize these memories and feelings of attachment – “the scents, walking in the long grass and taking the dust into one’s blood” (Shurmer-Smith, this issue) – in support of the current stewards of the former colonial territory. The piece ends by raising this issue in a personal register, but without addressing it directly.

The papers are all well-suited to *ACME*, a journal for *critical* geographies, in that each pushes against the boundaries of established academic convention by questioning core concepts (e.g., Baird), deconstructing outmoded habits of analysis (e.g., Ellis), resurrecting forgotten voices (e.g., Shurmer-Smith), and tracing unexamined complicities and exclusions (e.g., Morin and Rothenberg). The first two papers identify what their authors portray schematically as locations that post-colonial analysis has willfully forgotten to its detriment as an ethical, political and intellectual project. Baird challenges what he understands as post-colonial analysis’ Eurocentrism, and Morin and Rothenberg lament the complicity of post-colonial studies in perpetuating prejudicial hierarchies in U.S. academia that systematically peripheralize knowledge generated in certain geographical locations. The calls I hear in both contributions are for post-colonial studies to question its own exclusions, expand its field of analysis, and recognize a greater range of situated and specific knowledges as legitimate to its enterprise. The third and fourth papers, by Rowan Ellis and Pamela Shurmer-Smith, answer these calls with analyses of detailed self-narratives collected from specific groups of post-colonial subjects: leaders of middle-class urban NGOs and diasporic Northern Rhodesians, respectively. They exemplify – once again – the importance of detailed empirical attention to the voices of those whose lives have been shaped in specific ways by colonialism and its successors for reducing the scope of postcolonialism’s forgetfulness.

One final note. The articles are deliberately brief, solicited by the guest editors not to be the last word on their respective topics, but rather thought-provoking threads for further discussion, consideration and disciplinary self-questioning. I hope readers will find them stimulating in this regard.

## References

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