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Geographies of Postcolonialism introduces the principal themes and theories relating to postcolonialism. Written from a geographical perspective, the text includes extended explanations of the cultural and material aspects of the subject.

- Exploring postcolonialism through the geographies of imagination, knowledge, and power, the text is split into three comprehensive sections.
- Colonialisms discusses Western representations of the 'Other' and the relationship between this and the European self image.
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- Postcolonialisms presents the core arguments about postcolonial theory and culture.

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Geographies of Postcolonialism

Sharp



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Joanne P. Sharp



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INTRODUCTION

Along with language, it is geography – especially for the displaced form of departures, arrivals, farewells, exile, nostalgia, homesickness, belonging, and travel itself – that is at the core of my memories of those early years.

[...]

... the overriding sensation I had was of always being out of place. Thus it took me about fifty years to become accustomed to, or, more exactly, to feel less uncomfortable with, 'Edward,' a foolishly English name yoked forcibly to the unmistakably Arabic family name Said. True my mother told me I had been named Edward after the Prince of Wales, who cut so fine a figure in 1935, the year of my birth, and Said was the name of various uncles and cousins. But the rationale of my name broke down both when I discovered no grandparents named Said and when I tried to connect my fancy English name with its Arabic partner. For years, depending on the exact circumstances, I would rush past 'Edward' and emphasize 'Said'; at other times I would do the reverse, or connect these two to each other so quickly that neither would be clear. The one thing I could not tolerate, but very often would have to endure, was the disbelieving, and hence undermining, reaction: Edward? Said?

The travails of bearing such a name were compounded by an equally unsettling quandary when it came to language. I have never known which language I spoke first, Arabic or English, or which one was really mine beyond any doubt. What I do know, however, is that the two have always been together in my life, one resonating in the other, sometimes ironically, sometimes nostalgically, most often each correcting, and commentating on, the other.

Edward Said (1999) *Out of Place: A Memoir*, pp. xvi, 3–4

I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that *tejas*-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape.

However, there have been compensations for this *mestiza*, and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being 'worked' on. I have the sense that certain 'faculties' – not just in me but in every border resident, colored or non-colored – and dormant

areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened. Strange, huh? Any yes, the 'alien' element has become familiar – never comfortable, not with society's clamor to uphold the old, to rejoin the flock, to go with the herd. No, not comfortable but home.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, p.vii

I was born in Palo Alto, California, into the lap of an Iranian diaspora community awash in nostalgia and longing for an Iran many thousands of miles away. A girl, raised on the distorting myths of exile. I imagined myself a Persian princess, estranged from my homeland – a place of light, poetry, and nightingales – by a dark, evil force called the Revolution. I borrowed the plot from *Star Wars*, convinced it told Iran's story. Ayatolla Khomeini was Darth Vader. Tromping around suburban California, I lived out this fantasy. There must be some supernatural explanation, I reasoned, for the space landing of thousands of Tehranis to a world of vegan smoothies and Volvos, chakras, and Tupak.

Growing up, I had no doubt that I was Persian. Persian like a fluffy cat, a silky carpet – a vaguely Oriental notion belonging to history, untraceable on a map. It was the term we insisted on using at the time, embarrassed by any association with Iran, the modern country, the hostage-taking Death Star. Living a myth, a fantasy, made it easier to be Iranian in America.

As life took its course, as I grew up and went to college, discovered myself, and charted a career, my Iranian sense of self remained intact. But when I moved to Tehran in 2000 – pleased with my pluckiness, and eager to prove myself as a young journalist – it, along with the fantasies, dissolved. Iran, as it turned out, was not the Death Star, but a country where people voted, picked their noses, and ate French fries. Being a Persian girl in California, it turned out, was like, a totally different thing than being a young Iranian woman in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Azadeh Moaveni (2005) *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran*, p. vii

These three autobiographies are all the products of a globalised world where home and identity are complex constructs emerging from cultural contact, mixing and mobility. Each experience is post-colonial, of a world after the colonial period in which these three people – like each of us – are created by the powers, connections and imaginations that were written into the world during Europeans' first explorations of the world and the making and remaking of these geographies ever since. Said's identity was directed by Middle Eastern politics and memories of place and belonging, and as a Palestinian his sense of self and identity was entangled with exile, dispossession and displacement; Anzaldúa's experiences are fundamentally structured by the size and power of the US-side of the borderlands she inhabits; and Moaveni's sense of self has been formed through her inherited imagined geographies of her origins in the exotic land of 'Persia'. Each is a postcolonial subject constituted through real and imagined geographical processes and identities,

through ongoing conflicts, stereotyping and the fantasising of different parts of the world.

The geographies that make up these people's experiences and identities reflect the fluidity of our contemporary globalised world, at the same time as recognising the continued existence of differences and barriers (of outside, exotic, alien ...) that were formed in previous periods and continue to shape our geographical imaginations. These identities are the result of cultural mixing and hybridisation – the processes of globalisation we hear so much about – but these are not free combinations. Certain parts of the mix have greater power to influence the direction of change (the power of English over Arabic as a global language; the greater constraints of movement over the US-Mexican border for Mexicans over citizens of the USA; the power of the western imagination to conjure up the exotic east). Postcolonial geographies then are this ambiguous mix of the fluid and the unchanging that shapes the identities of people like Said, Anzaldúa and Moaveni ... and all of us. Postcolonialism is structured through geographies of imagination, knowledge and power, and it is these geographies that will be at the heart of this book.

WHAT IS POST(-)COLONIALISM? THE IMPORTANCE OF A HYPHEN

Since the early 1980s, postcolonialism has developed a body of writing that attempts to shift the dominant ways in which relations between western and non-western people and their worlds are viewed ... postcolonialism seeks to intervene, to force its alternative knowledges into the power structures of the west as well as the non-west. It seeks to change the way people think, the way they behave, to produce a more just and equitable relation between the different peoples of the world. (Young, 2003: 2)

To understand how it is that relations have formed between western and non-western peoples, it is necessary for postcolonialism to have a historical vision. Before we can move on to post(-)colonialism, we need a definition of colonialism.

Colonialism always assumes the physical occupation of one land by peoples associated with another place. The colonists do not simply remove resources and wealth from the new land (as is the case with forms of **imperialism**) but actually occupy the territory, building settlements, and often also agriculture and industry. There have been many instances of colonialism through human history, for instance the Roman Empire witnessed colonies from Britain through to the Mediterranean and into the Middle East. However, in this book we will only be looking at the period of European colonialism which was

initiated with the 'Age of Exploration' where Europeans started to explore new continents, and which reached its high point in the nineteenth century.

This form of colonialism was distinct not only because of its unprecedented scale but also because of its establishment alongside a specific form of rational knowledge (called the **European Enlightenment**) which saw science emerge as the most important form of knowledge, and also witnessed the rise of mercantile capitalism which was driven both by the possibilities available in the new lands and also by the rise of scientific knowledge which objectified the world into measurable land to be owned and resources to be exploited for the colonisers' use. Thus, the way that European colonists came to know the world has been highly influential. The combination of scientific knowledge and capitalism within the context of superiority provided the framework through which the new lands and peoples became known to the Europeans and subsequently became the basis for European control of them. In many cases, this knowledge also became the way in which the peoples the Europeans ruled came to know themselves.

There are two different ways in which post(-)colonialism is understood as a term, differentiated by the use of a hyphen, although different authors have varying interpretations of what the hyphen does mean. Blunt and McEwan (2002: 3) argue that the "post" of "postcolonialism" has two meanings, referring to a temporal aftermath – a period of time *after* colonialism – and a critical aftermath – cultures, discourses and critiques that lie *beyond*, but remain closely influenced by, colonialism'. Thus, although the definitions are clearly related, the differences in meaning can be drawn out as follows.

Post-colonialism

When the hyphen is used in the term, it refers to the common-sensical definition of post-colonialism as the period following independence from colonising powers. Thus, it is both a geographical term (particular countries are post-colonial) and a historical period. Some see this definition as problematic, as it over-emphasises the break. In his analysis of the (geo)politics of contemporary Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq, Derek Gregory (2004) adopts the term 'colonial present' to emphasise further still the continuities in imagined geographies between the past and present.

Postcolonialism

However, postcolonialism is also a critical approach to analysing colonialism and one that seeks to offer alternative accounts of the world. The term is written without the hyphen to recognise the problems with the first, and more conventional, use of the concept. This recognises clear tensions within this

term. For, while it is a concept that seeks to challenge colonialism and the values and meanings it depended upon, the name ties it strongly to what went before. Rather than being a positive concept it is a negative one: it is *not* colonialism. As Anne McClintock (1995: 11) has put it, postcolonialism 'confers on colonialism the prestige of history proper ... the world's multitudinous cultures are marked, not positively by what distinguishes them, but by subordinate, retrospective relation to linear, European time'. This second definition seeks to play on the ambiguity of the concept, recognising continuities from the colonial period as well as breaks from it – and also recognising that while states might be physically decolonised, this does not mean that other effects of the colonial period have all disappeared. This is because postcolonialism also represents a shift from a form of analysis based solely around politics and economics (again the conventional way of understanding the impacts of colonialism) to consider instead the importance of the cultural products of colonialism, particularly the ways of knowing the world that emerged.

Thus, postcolonialists have argued that while political, and to a less extent economic, decolonisation might have occurred with independence, cultural decolonisation – what some call the decolonisation of the mind – has been a much more difficult process. Western values, science, history, geography and culture were privileged during colonialism as ways in which the colonisers came to know the places and peoples they colonised. However, as these knowledges and values were insinuated through institutions of education, governance and media, they also became (to a greater or lesser extent) the ways in which the colonised came to know themselves. The internalisation of a set of values and ways of knowing the world is much more difficult to overturn than the physical rule of colonial regimes, postcolonial theorists would argue.

Thus, postcolonialism is an analysis and critique of the ways in which western knowledge systems have come to dominate. It is a form of analysis that is focused around cultural productions in order that, as well as looking at the ways in which the world came to be represented in the formal documents of explorers, educators and as governors, it also looks at novels, songs, art, movies and advertising as forms of knowledge about the world, and as ways in which this knowledge is communicated. As we shall see later, however, postcolonialism is also a more positive project which seeks to recover alternative ways of knowing and understanding – often talked of in terms of 'other voices' – in order to present alternatives to dominant western constructs.

POSTCOLONIAL GEOGRAPHIES

Postcolonial theories seem to be very geographical in that the language used talks about spaces, centres, peripheries and borders. There were distinctive

geographies of colonialism, in terms of the different ways in which colonial policy was practised across the world. The way that the British treated Indians in South Asia was different from French policies in the Middle East. Both differed from the ways in which colonial administrators ran countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Such differences were the result of national approaches to colonialism, perceptions of the environments and the natives who inhabited these places, and even, to an extent, the influence of the individuals who had responsibility for rule. Despite this, postcolonial theory has suggested a coherence in conceptual approach that transcended these differences. What this means is that in this book we will be looking at the geographical outcomes of colonial and postcolonial processes (the influence on the landscape, representations of place and so on) rather than comparing the practices of colonialism and the postcolonial response to these in different countries. While this loses the historical detail of how specific colonial representations and policies played out in different places, it does allow us to look at the continuities in the construction of colonial knowledge (and resistance to it) which transcend conventional regional geographies (and the ways in which these processes continue into post-colonial practice).

Geography is very important to postcolonialism. On the whole, postcolonial theory has been dominated by scholars from the discipline of literature. Their focus has been on the texts of colonialism in terms of the books written by travellers, academics, colonial administrators, anti-colonial resisters, politicians and novelists, amongst others. These are important texts, all the more so because previous approaches to colonialism ignored such sources. The words on the pages of these texts have had a great influence on how we see the world and the various connections between its different parts. However, these texts are perhaps ideals – how colonial societies *should* be organised in an ideal world, the maps of colonial spaces or treatises for how the post-colonial world order *should* play out. But when texts turn into practices, all sorts of other things come into play. Most importantly, there are all sorts of questions of translation: how will texts translate into other languages and be read by those with different cultural backgrounds? How will buildings or agricultural practices translate into environments that are very different to those dominant in the countries where the texts were written? How well will colonial administrators or development workers be able to translate their instructions into day-to-day practice (will they be distorted by ambition, corruption or misunderstandings)? And how well did the natives understand the intentions of colonial practice? They may have believed in them, they may have gone along with them, they might have actively resisted them – or perhaps they just failed to understand what was intended. Each had consequences for the ways in which the colonial texts were translated into real outcomes. A geographical version of postcolonialism is attentive to the ways in which texts are changed as they are translated into practice in particular places around the world.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

I have split the book into three sections, following the first three terms introduced at the beginning of this chapter:

- 1 *Colonialisms* will consider the ways in which understandings of the rest of the world were incorporated into European knowledge, from the period prior to exploration of the lands beyond Europe's boundaries until the present. We will see how formal knowledge of the world was collected, how this was disseminated through society via education and popular culture, and how the knowledge of this world was translated (or mistranslated) into practice.
- 2 *Post-colonialisms* stresses the continuities existing between the colonial to the post-colonial periods. This section will consider the cultural similarities and differences that have emerged since the end of the colonial period, looking at the rise of the 'Third World', and development and globalisation as important post-colonial processes.
- 3 *Postcolonialisms* will think about postcolonialism as a critical theoretical project which challenges western assumptions, stereotypes and ways of knowing and offers its own alternatives. It will also look at the extent to which postcolonialism runs through cultural productions in wider society, and will finish up by examining the relevance of postcolonialism to some of the big questions about poverty and inequality faced in the world today.

As already indicated, one of the goals of postcolonialism is to include voices that have been previously excluded from academic discussions. Postcolonial writers tend to challenge the presentation of singular narratives and instead seek to include multiple voices in their works. Thus, in this book, alongside the story that I am telling about postcolonial geographies, are a series of boxes that include direct and sustained quotations from other authors, both academic and popular, so that you can see how others articulate the issues discussed in each section. These include extracts from the work of travel writers, academics, politicians, novelists and others writing at the times and, sometimes, in the places we are discussing. This means you will have the opportunity to read the original sources alongside my interpretation of them – you may not always agree with my version! I hope that you will not stop at reading these excerpts: although I have attempted to choose passages that represent these other texts well, I hope that these little tasters will encourage you to seek out the originals and read further.

When we are thinking about how the world is represented, when we think about the sources from which we each get our understandings of the world around us, we cannot only look to written sources but must also closely examine images – whether these are the paintings of nineteenth century Orientalists, film stills, illustrations from the *National Geographic*, or advertising images. Thus, there is a lot of illustrative material placed alongside my argument, like the text boxes mentioned above. Please give these more than

a passing glance – think about how they work; why the artist or photographer sought to create that particular image; how the meaning of the image might change over time, in different places, depending upon where the image was placed.

At the end of each chapter I have suggested a few sources for you to read up to find out more about particular issues. While these tend to be academic sources, I have also included films and works of fiction, both of which are important sources for finding out about the postcolonial world we inhabit.

Further reading

On postcolonial geography

Blunt, A. and McEwan, C. (eds) (2002) *Postcolonial Geographies*. London: Continuum.

Blunt, A. and Rose, G. (eds) (1994) *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies*. New York: Guilford Press.

Gregory, D. (2004) *The Colonial Present*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Jacobs, J. (1996) *Edge of Empire*. London: Routledge.

Sidaway, J. (2000) 'Postcolonial geographies: an exploratory essay', *Progress in Human Geography*, 24 (4): 591–612.

PART I

COLONIALISMS

Before engaging in any critical analysis of them, it is important to understand how geographies of the rest of the world were established in European culture prior to and during the colonial period. For instance, what did Europeans believe lay beyond the boundaries of known space before they set out to explore the unknown? This is significant, because people do not see the world entirely as it is, but always through the distortions of cultural values and expectations. Once new places and peoples were discovered, how were they incorporated into existing frameworks of knowing and understanding, and how were these knowledges challenged and changed by exploration? We will consider these issues in Chapter 2, and will discuss the most influential work on this topic, a book that many have argued marked the establishment of postcolonialism as an intellectual approach, Edward Said's *Orientalism*. In Chapter 3 we will see how European knowledges of the rest of the world came to power by looking not only at the rise of academic knowledge of new places and peoples, but also the ways in which these knowledges were popularised through travel accounts, advertising and World's Fairs. In the final chapter in this section, we will examine how European knowledges were made material in the remaking of colonial landscapes. Here we see things move from the realm of ideas into practices and the very physicality of the landscape, reinforcing the central argument of postcolonialism of the central importance of cultural values and knowledge to the enduring power of colonialism.

1

IMAGINING THE WORLD

And from that other coast of Chaldea, toward the south, is Ethiopia, a great country that stretcheth to the end of Egypt. Ethiopia is departed in two parts principal, and that is in the east part and in the meridional part; the which part meridional is clept Mauritania; and the folk of that country be black enough and more black than in the tother part, and they be clept Moors. In that part is a well, that in the day it is so cold, that no man may drink thereof; and in the night it is so hot, that no man may suffer his hand therein. And beyond that part, toward the south, to pass by the sea Ocean, is a great land and a great country; but men may not dwell there for the fervent burning of the sun, so is it passing hot in that country.

In Ethiopia all the rivers and all the waters be trouble, and they be somedeal salt for the great heat that is there. And the folk of that country be lightly drunken and have but little appetite to meat. And they have commonly the flux of the womb. And they live not long. In Ethiopia be many diverse folk; and Ethiopie is clept Cusis. In that country be folk that have but one foot, and they go so blyve that it is marvel. And the foot is so large, that it shadoweth all the body against the sun, when they will lie and rest them. In Ethiopia, when the children be young and little, they be all yellow; and, when that they wax of age, that yellowness turneth to be all black. In Ethiopia is the city of Saba, and the land of the which one of the three kings that presented our Lord in Bethlehem, was king of.

John Mandeville, Chapter XVII: 'Of the land of Job; and of his age. Of the array of men of Chaldea. Of the land where women dwell without company of men. Of the knowledge and virtues of the very diamond', *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, fourteenth century

A TEXTUALISED WORLD

Although, when travelling beyond the borders of Europe, explorers travelled to new places, this did not mean that these places were entirely unknown to them. There existed knowledge of what was beyond the borders of Europe. These knowledges came from what we can call '**imagined geographies**' based

on myth and legend – perhaps most famously, the travels of John Mandeville with which this chapter opened, producing a textualised world rather than one based on observation and experience. These imagined geographies were inhabited by imagined others, people who were very different from Europeans. Indeed, some have argued that it was the existence of these others beyond the borders of Europe that helped to define Europe itself. Edward Said famously developed this idea into his thesis of *Orientalism* to argue that the ‘rest’ of the world was necessary in order to define Europe. These imagined geographies described the world to people, and explained their place within it, and were thus very significant in shaping how people responded to the world. Although imagined, these geographies had real consequences for people’s actions: they were very important to people’s understanding of what they saw and experienced in their travels. In this chapter we will see how European understandings and images of the rest of the world emerged.

IMAGINED OTHERS

In the Middle Ages, tales and myths of what European travellers would find beyond known boundaries were common. These imagined others were regarded as monstrous because they were seen as being a transformation of the Europeans in one way or another. Friedman has argued in *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (1981) that medieval people took ‘known’ geographic locations and filled them with folk knowledge. These locations were usually just off the map of the experienced world (see Figure 1.1). These were particularly popularised by the writings of Pliny and Mandeville, who described monstrous races just outside of known geographic space.

The chief distinction of these races of people from Europeans then lay in geography. Those who were not European lay ‘outside’ in faraway, semi-mythological places like India, Ethiopia and Cathay, places whose names evoked mystery and exoticism for Europeans at the time. They were places that Europeans had heard of, but had neither visited nor fully understood.

Medieval scholars listed around 50 peoples. Many of them were frighteningly monstrous but not all. Some were just different in appearance and social practice from those who looked at them. Friedman argues that this difference emerges from a shift in one aspect of their being. Many were visual, for instance:

- *Transformation of body*: these people had huge ears, with their faces on their chest, and were giants or pigmies. For example, the *Amyctyrae* had a protruding lower lip which could be used like an umbrella to protect themselves from the sun. The *Blemmyae*, from the deserts of Libya, were men with faces on their chests.
- *Transformation of Gender*: these tales talked of hairy women, Amazons and androgens.



Figure 1.1 Medieval map depicting ‘monstrous races’ around the margins of known geographical space

Other groups of people were identified not by visual differences, but by their difference from European ways of doing things, for example:

- *Transformation of life cycle*. These people were said to rear children just once or to conceive at five years of age.
- *Transformation of social*. Such peoples may look ‘normal’ but had transformed social practices, such as the wife-givers who were reportedly an amiable race

who gave their wives to any travellers who stopped among them. Other common variants involved cannibals.

- *Transformation of needs.* Here, peoples had entirely different ways of existing. For example, the *Astomi*, apple-smellers, who lived near the headwaters of the Ganges, were said neither to eat nor drink but existed by smelling roots, flowers and fruits, especially apples. It was claimed that they would die if they smelt a bad odour.

It is clear to see how these peoples worked out as Europe's 'other'! The transformation of their physical or social life produced monstrous races as a transformation of the normal order of things, so linking the otherness of non-Europeans to European identity based on normality. Their main characteristic was their **difference** from Europeans. Europeans were always seen as the reference point, Europeans always represented what was right and normal. There were also less bizarrely different peoples. For example, Ethiopians – black men in the mountains of Africa – were understood to have been burnt black because of their close proximity to the sun. Clear empirical evidence (the fact that Europeans could see people with dark skin) seemed to prove the truth of this worldview to the Europeans. The mix of the believable with the incredible made the incredible seem more believable.

The other dominant pre-modern view of Europe's place in the world similarly reinforced a geography of difference. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle posited a spherical Earth. This was a theoretical belief rather than something based around experience or empirical evidence. The ancient Greeks had not travelled around the world but they believed the sphere to be the most perfect shape, and thus believed the Earth must be spherical. Aristotle argued that the Earth was split into a number of zones (see Figure 1.2). Greece lay in the 'temperate zone' in the northern hemisphere. To the north, Aristotle posited the existence of a 'frigid zone', and to the south, a 'torrid zone' around the equator. The southern hemisphere, he believed, would be a perfect reflection of the north.

The ancient Greeks believed that life was concentrated in the two temperate zones; the frigid and torrid zones were uninhabited because of the extremes of cold and hot that each place faced. There appeared to be some evidence for these beliefs. From African travellers, the ancient Greeks knew of the existence of desert to the south which seemed to prove the increasing heat towards the equator, and, once again, the travellers themselves, with their skins apparently burnt black by the sun, were further 'evidence' for Aristotle's cosmology.

Cosmologies such as these had a hold on the popular imagination for centuries, long after science had developed new understandings. History records show that in the early fifteenth century Iberian explorers began to seek a

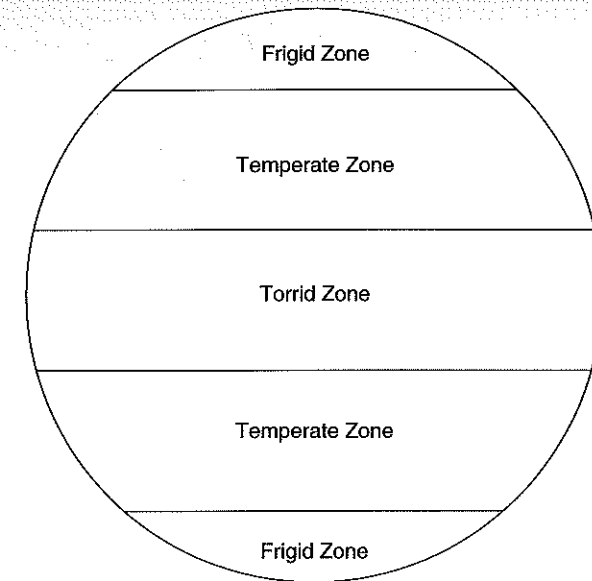


Figure 1.2 Aristotle's cosmology

route around Africa, but were often made to turn back at Cape Bajador where the sea was particularly agitated. While the scientifically educated captains knew this to be a tidal phenomenon, the uneducated crews feared this was the effects of the heat of the torrid zone boiling the water.

It would seem reasonable to assume that with initial travel these monstrous races would disappear. But this did not happen straightforwardly and a belief in the existence of monstrous races persisted. This may have been for two reasons. The first reason was that Europeans had a psychological need to mark their borders with the unknown and different because the demarcation of difference is key to identity (see the box on the following page – we will explore this further later in the chapter). Second, the stories of monstrous races persisted because they did in fact exist! Practices of lip stretching and yoga could seem like distorted bodies to the first travellers; warriors' use of colourful shields might look – from a distance – like faces on their chests; and non-European languages could sound very alien to travellers. Thus, ironically, initial travel may have *reinforced* these mythologies. However, once Europeans started to travel more extensively these stories became less convincing. Gradually there was a greater move towards observation and so the location of the monstrous races changed to being always just beyond the horizon of the known world. However, knowledge of the rest of the world has never escaped textual conventions. We do not see the world innocent of the cultural baggage of our upbringing. It is this idea that lies at the heart of the most important explanation of the way in which the west views the rest – Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

IDENTITY/DIFFERENCE

It is conventional to think of identity as something that unites people who have something in common: a connection to a particular place (national identity), an adherence to the same beliefs (religious identity) or particular attractions (sexual identity). However, identity can be reconsidered as something which is connected to difference. Our national identities are as much about who we are not as who we are (we are not like the team our national football side is playing, we are not like the people just over the border or with whom we are at war). Many theorists suggest that identity is primarily about excluding difference and so it is a process rather than a pre-existent condition. Our identities are formed through the repetition of acts that mark us as different from others, whether these acts are flying flags or waving political banners, listening to particular music, or even wearing particular fashions.

ORIENTALISM

*Ship me somewhere east of Suez
Where the best is like the worst
Where there ar'n't no Ten Commandments an' a man can raise a thirst*

Rudyard Kipling, *Mandalay*

Edward Said's 1978 book, *Orientalism*, has probably been one of the most influential texts in the social sciences and arts in the latter part of the twentieth century. Orientalism is conventionally understood to be the scholarly study of the languages and traditions of the Middle East. However, Said argues that Orientalism is not so innocent a form of knowledge as this. Instead, he redefines Orientalism as the ubiquity of a sense of the division of the world into two spheres in aesthetic production, popular culture, and scholarly, sociological, and historical texts. In other words, he is suggesting that the concept of difference between east and west is a geopolitical difference which is written up throughout the texts of western culture whether through travel writing, political texts, paintings, or in academic discussions. To Said, any or all of the cultures of northern Africa, east to southeast Asia and the South Seas could be encompassed by the western geographical imagination into a singular 'Orient'.

For Said, Orientalism is an imaginative geography for two reasons. First, Europeans projected a *single* culture into the space of the 'Orient' that was at odds with the diversity of peoples, cultures and environments contained within the space of the Orient, and second, this space was defined by texts and not by people from the Orient itself. These texts *preceded* experience, so empirical evidence was included but was fitted into the categories that were already constructed. Travellers saw what they expected to see. For Said, this

is particularly important because of the link between this imaginative geography and European power. This imaginative geography was made manifest over space as it was built into colonial policy, into the institutions of governance, and more recently, into the practices of aid and development. The imaginative geography of Orientalism shaped the real geographies practised in the space of the Orient.

IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHY – SAID'S ORIENTALISM

... Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious 'Western' imperialist plot to hold down the 'Oriental' world. It is rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of 'interests' which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it is, rather than expresses, a certain *will or intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in a direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what 'we' do and what 'they' cannot do or understand as 'we' do). Indeed, my real argument is that Orientalism is – and does not simply represent – a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world.

[...]

Our initial description of Orientalism as a learned field now acquires a new concreteness. A field is often an enclosed space. The idea of representation is a theatrical one: the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe. An Orientalist is but a particular specialist in knowledge for which Europe at large is responsible, in the way that an audience is historically and culturally responsible for (and responsive to) dramas technically put together by the dramatist. In the depths of this Oriental stage stands a prodigious cultural repertoire whose individual items evoke a fabulously rich world: the Sphinx, Cleopatra, Eden, Troy, Sodom and Gomorrah, Astarte, Isis and Osiris, Sheba, Babylon, the Genii, the Magi, Nineveh, Prester

(Cont'd)

John, Mahomet, and dozens more; settings in some cases names only, half-imagined, half-known; monsters, devils, heroes; terrors, pleasures, desires. The European imagination was nourished extensively from this repertoire: between the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century such major authors as Ariosto, Milton, Marlowe, Tasso, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and the authors of the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Poema del Cid* drew on the Orient's riches for their productions, in ways that sharpened the outlines of imagery, ideas, and figures populating it. In addition, a great deal of what was considered learned Orientalist scholarship in Europe pressed ideological myths into service, even as knowledge seemed genuinely to be advancing.

Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (1978), pp. 12 and 63

It is important to realise, however, that Said did not consider that Europeans had simply made the Orient up. As he explained, '[o]ne ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away' (Said, 1978: 6). He did not oppose the Orientalists' images of the world outside of Europe to reality, but instead understood that they were constitutive of reality because of the way in which knowledge and power were related.

Said developed this idea of the interrelationship between power and descriptions of places from the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault. For Foucault power and knowledge are always and everywhere intertwined. He used the term **power/knowledge** not to suggest that power equalled knowledge, but to emphasise the fact that power and knowledge are always and everywhere inseparable. This challenged conventional accounts which suggested that knowledge was repressed by power. In the case of Orientalism, power emerged through institutions and practices used to name and describe the Orient. Those resident in the space of the Orient were not allowed to speak for themselves. They were always described by others, and characterised by others. There is then a power of naming. European taxonomies – the ordering and making understandable of the new world they were exploring – simplified the Orient and, by making it known to Europeans, made it possible for them to control it. The best example of this is the use of maps. Europeans drew maps of new lands with boundaries inscribed to identify territories claimed by different nations. The names given to places by indigenous people were ignored, their claims to ownership or rights of access were similarly discarded, and instead European words and meanings were written onto the maps. Once these European maps had been created and accepted, they started to influence the nature of the actual space they represented. Places took on their European names, reflecting European ownership.

Orientalism was made up of a series of discourses that explained the nature of the Orient and Occident, and the relationship between these two

geographical areas. Said argued that is impossible for people to understand the world except through discourse. He is not suggesting that the world is made up only of our imaginations of it, but that we cannot access the real world except through the cultural structurings of discourse (see the box on discourse below).

These discourses were based around a series of binary pairs. At the heart of this, the imaginative geography of Orientalism was a binary geography of the Occident (west) and the Orient (east). However, in western thought, binaries are never different but equal; there is always a hierarchy of values. Thus, Said (1978: 72) insists that Orientals 'are always symmetrical to, and yet diametrically inferior to, a European equivalent, which is sometimes specified, sometimes not'. Taxonomies of difference in the history of western thought have not allowed the existence of 'different but equal'. Western knowledge always imposes a value on the binaries which privileges one term over the other. Sometimes the Occidental value is identified and the Orient is shown to deviate from it; at other times, the Occidental value is universalised, it is 'the' way of doing something and the Oriental equivalent is simply seen as wrong.

DISCOURSE

Discourses define the parameters of what can be known and understood at any point in history and in any place. They can be thought of as a lens through which people interpret the world, which is not unchanging but is temporarily and spatially specific. Discourses do not simply structure knowledge but also what is included as knowledge, such as what are the reasonable questions to ask. For instance, in pre-modern times, religious and mystic discourses dominated understanding. In order to understand an event, people would turn to the Bible or other religious texts, and would look for evidence of God's hand in the world. Scientific discourse sees truth not via faith in God, but in rigorous scientific practice. Scientists look to texts written by other scientists and the laws generated by previous research. Not only do these discourses have different explanations of how the world works, they also look to very different parts of it to justify their beliefs.

There are a number of different themes – or discourses – through which the Orient is marked as being different from Europe (see Figure 1.3).

- 1 **Development and time.** This discourse could be articulated in a number of ways. Sometimes the Orient was represented as backward while Europe was developed. Alternatively, the Orient was seen as unchanging while Europe was dynamic, as evidenced through the Enlightenment, the drive of mercantile capitalism, or the Industrial Revolution. Some versions of this discourse insisted that cultures were in different stages of development. This discourse recognised

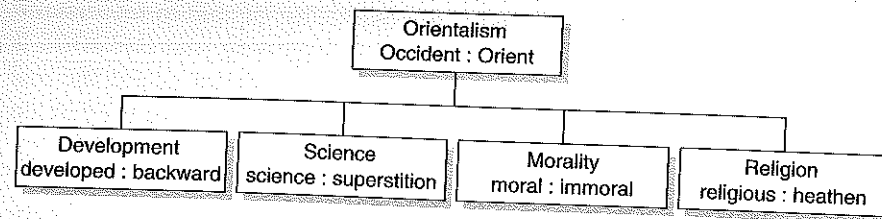


Figure 1.3 Orientalism as a form of representation made up by a number of discourses

that the Egyptians and Chinese had great societies before Europe had developed but that these civilisations were now seen to be in decline. Asia and North Africa were represented as old, decrepit, decaying civilisations. Europe was dynamic yet mature, but sub-Saharan Africa was seen as undeveloped and child-like. This version legitimated European intervention, as it was argued that Europe had come to maturity just as old civilisations like Egypt and China were in terminal decline, so that it was the duty of Europeans to rule the 'immature' peoples in Africa because they were not sufficiently mature to govern themselves.

- 2 **Morality.** In the discourse of Orientalism, the Orient was immoral and it was the 'white man's burden', as Rudyard Kipling famously put it, to improve the Orient's morals. The discourse of morality was invoked in a number of ways. Moral discourses were used a good deal in assessments of other cultures, of religious practices, even in terms of order and hygiene, which were regarded as expressions of morality. It was sometimes also expressed through sexuality, with the Orient often seen as a place of unrestrained sexuality. This was particularly important during the Victorian era in Britain, when there was considerable sexual repression at home. Oriental women were seen as sexually available whereas men were either seen as hypermasculine with a kind of animal sexuality, or were emasculated, impotent in comparison to the power of western culture. Morality was also encoded through discussions of laziness. Orientals were not considered to be so productive as westerners and travellers often noted that during the day they saw native peoples 'lazing around' rather than working. This was especially important in the moral sense of the Protestant work ethic, where there was value given to hard work with laziness regarded as immoral.
- 3 **Rationality.** Orientals were seen as irrational, not accepting of European science, and instead turning to animistic beliefs and magic. This notion was particularly important and cross-cuts many other forms of Orientalism, particularly in the eighteenth century onwards where notions of science and reason came to dominate European knowledge, apparently differentiating European views from the 'backward' views of people in other parts of the world.
- 4 **Religion.** Orientalism did not accept Hinduism, Islam and other non-Christian religions as true religions, and instead saw them as myths or beliefs. Thus, Europeans believed that Orientals were not religious and should be converted to Christianity.

- 5 **Science.** This seemed to provide 'proof' of western superiority. European science had allowed people to conquer nature (in that the landscape was made productive, minerals were mined from the earth, and science offered explanations of how nature worked), time and space (in the power to travel distances relatively quickly using trains, ships and air travel), and the body (in that medicine was providing power over illness). Africans and others were seen to be living with nature. Indeed the fact that they had not created cities and settled cultivation meant to Europeans that natives were unable to exploit natural resources and transform nature: they should thus be seen as part of nature rather than separate from it. Neither did natives understand science, and thus were unable to control their environment. Furthermore, the apparent ease with which European diseases killed many indigenous peoples visited through exploration was 'proof of Europeans' superior knowledge of the body. That a relatively small number of Europeans were able to take territory into colonial possession seemed to demonstrate the power of European technology and weapons and the superiority of their knowledge. Thus, this 'proof' could be summed up as follows:

- Medicine conquered illness.
- Travel conquered time and space.
- Mining extracted resources from nature.
- Morality controlled natural bodily desires.

More will be said about science in the next chapter, however it is important to note here that scientific discourses were often in conflict with religious discourses. Whereas religious discourses privileged Europeans because of their Christianity, the only true religion, scientific discourses criticised Oriental peoples for their continued reliance on religious beliefs rather than science. Said argues that while the individual discourses comprising Orientalism might be contradictory, the overall structure of the geographical imagination – of the Orient being entirely different from the Occident – remained the same, and therefore reinforced this binary geography of east and west.

- 6 **Race.** This was not a component of Orientalism until the nineteenth century, when the 'scientific' category of race was used to explain European domination. Through this discourse measurable biological facts (such as head shape or brain size) were used to explain western superiority. We will consider this in more depth in the next chapter.

NATURALISING DIFFERENCE

Even nature was seen as being fundamentally different in the Orient. Consider the following excerpt from Henry Morton Stanley's (1878) account of his travels in Africa, *Through the Dark Continent*:

(Cont'd)

On the whole, Nature has flung a robe of verdure of the most fervid tints. She has bidden the mountains loose their streamlets, has commanded the hills and ridges to bloom, filled the valleys with vegetation breathing perfume, for the rocks she has woven garlands of creepers, and the stems of trees she has draped with moss; and sterility she has banished from her domain.

Yet Nature has not produced a soft, velvety, smiling England in the midst of Africa. Far from it. She is here too robust and prolific. Her grasses are coarse, and wound like knives and needles; her reeds are tough and tall as bamboos; her creepers and convolvuli are of cable thickness and length; her thorns are hooks of steel; her trees shoot up to a height of a hundred feet. We find no pleasure in straying in search of wild flowers, and game is left undisturbed, because of the difficulty of moving about, for once the main path is left we find ourselves overhead amongst thick, tough, unyielding, lacerating grass.

ORIENTALIST ART

One of the main ways that the Orient was made available to Europeans was through art. The ways in which the lands and peoples beyond Europe were represented in painting are instructive of the ways in which the west viewed the rest. Paintings are interesting because of their broad appeal and the fact that at the time, for the majority of Europeans, paintings were the only insight they had into the Orient. Such paintings often presented incredible detail, convincing viewers of their authenticity through the 'reality effect' of lifelike details.

Much of Said's analysis was based upon the written accounts of travellers, academics and politicians. However, we can see a number of the discourses that Said identified encapsulated not only in written descriptions of places, but also in visual representations of them. Indeed, this was one of the central arguments in Said's thesis – that Orientalism cuts across different forms of knowledge, whether textual or visual, academic or popular culture. It is through the resonances between the different types of cultural production (the fact that the message about this geographical difference could be found throughout culture) that Orientalism has developed its influence.

Writing about his painting, *The Fanatics of Tangier*, for the brochure for the 1838 salon, Delacroix stated 'their enthusiasm excited by prayers and wild cries, they enter into a veritable state of intoxication, and, spreading through the streets, perform a thousand contortions, and even dangerous acts'.

He claimed they reached a state of ecstasy which allowed them to walk on red-hot coals, eat scorpions, lick red-hot irons and walk on sword blades, all apparently without noticing their injuries. This image of impassioned religion, steeped in mysticism and secret rites, stood in stark contrast to the restrained and orderly practices of religion in Europe of the time.

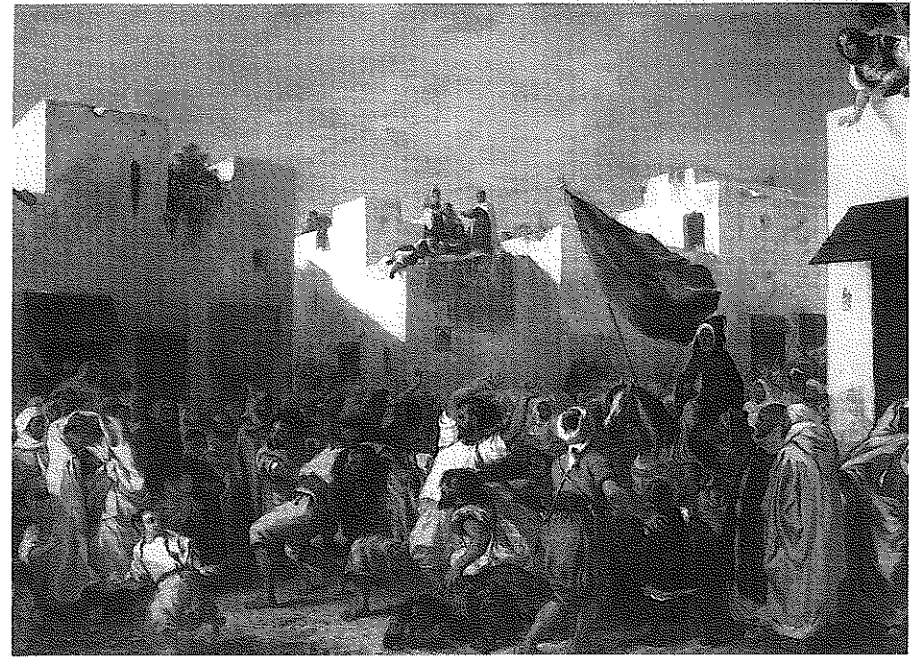


Figure 1.4 *The Fanatics of Tangier*, Delacroix, 1838



Figure 1.5 *Dance of the Almeh*, Gerome, 1863