

# Chapter 5

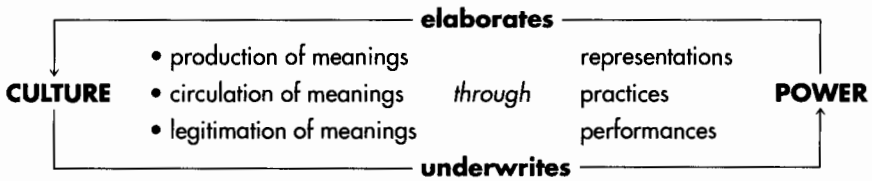
## (Post)Colonialism and the Production of Nature

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All three terms in my title are contested concepts, but in this short essay I have had to make choices. I begin by describing the characteristic emphases of postcolonialism, an intellectual approach and a political project that had its origins in literary and cultural studies but which has since spiralled out across the field of the humanities and the social sciences as a whole. One of its central concerns has been the production of what Edward Said calls 'imaginative geographies' as one of the enabling conditions and material effects of colonial rule. Its analysis of their construction and consequences has for the most part been concerned with productions of space and has had comparatively little to say about productions of nature. In this chapter I try to show how postcolonial theory might intersect with ideas about 'social nature.' More specifically, I identify two major constellations of meaning and practice that have been woven around culture–nature as part of the formation of a distinctively colonial modernity: the domination of nature and the normalization of nature. As we will see, each is at once elaborately imaginative and acutely material, embedded in and giving substance to images and texts, practices and performances.

### Postcolonialism and its Imaginative Geographies

'Postcolonialism' can mean many things. If, like the postmodern, it is used to identify an historical period, you might be surprised to find that many writers have argued that its beginning ought not to coincide with the end of formal colonialism. Such an approach not only runs the risk of concealing the ways in which colonial norms and forms extend into the present, but it also fails to account for the historical reach of the postcolonial once it is also understood, like the postmodern, as a critical strategy (in other words, it fails to explain *postcolonialism's* preoccupation with interrogating *colonialism*). The



**Figure 5.1:** Culture and power

most productive response to these concerns may be to trace the curve of the postcolonial from the inaugural moment of the colonial *encounter*. Moreover, there have been many different colonialisms, so that this arc is inscribed in different histories and different geographies. All have been made in the shadow of colonialism, but they have been made in the shadows of other formations too, which makes it important to avoid the sort of explanation that reduces everything that subsequently happened to the marionette movements of colonialism. Even so, its impositions and exactions have often been lost from view – suppressed or simply forgotten – so that one of the central tasks of postcolonialism is to recover the impress of colonialism: to retrieve its shapes, like the chalk outline at a crime scene, and to remind ourselves of the living bodies they so imperfectly summon to presence (Gandhi, 1998).

That act of recovery is difficult: it is partly for this reason that postcolonialism has accentuated (some critics would say aggrandized) the power of *theory*, because theory in its critical mode can challenge our ‘commonsense,’ taken-for-granted understandings. In this case, theory can help to reveal the ways in which colonialism is still abroad in the world. Postcolonialism theory, like any other sort of theory, is partial and situated, however, and no matter what some of its architects and advocates might claim, it does not offer a complete survey of the (post)colonial condition. In this essay I will be concerned with its characteristic *cultural* emphases, but this does not mean that I am indifferent to its points of connection and contention with other theoretical systems, most of all with political economy and political ecology.

A central concern of postcolonialism is to elucidate the relations between culture and power. It aims to do so in such a way that culture is seen not as superficial, or as a screen for supposedly more fundamental (which for its critics typically means politico-economic) relations, and above all not as a ‘reflection’ of the world. Culture is seen instead as a series of representations, practices, and performances *that enter fully into the constitution of the world* (figure 5.1).

Postcolonial theory often seeks to map the circuits through which culture underwrites power and power elaborates culture by working with the concept

of *discourse*. A discourse is a specific, collective series of representations, practices, and performances through which meanings give the world its particular shapes – their forms and norms. This implies that discourse is inherently productive, generative, and ‘object-constituting’: or, as Prakash (1995: 202) puts it more directly, “discourse does not restrict or distort knowledge but generates, encodes and arranges it in diverse forms and locations.” It doesn’t do so by magic. Discourses have their own rules and protocols about what can properly be regarded as knowledge, but these conventions are grounded. By this I mean that they are encased in apparatuses – in books and journals, in instruments and equipment, in interactions and procedures – which are produced and reproduced through interlocking networks of individuals and institutions, and their physicality, materiality, and durability help to naturalize particular ways of being in and acting in the world. This is extremely important because it means that discourse is always about more than the production of *representations*, and this explains why *practices* and *performances* appear in figure 5.1.

These are general characterizations. One of the preoccupations of a specifically *colonial* discourse is the production of imaginative geographies that construct and calibrate a distance between colonizing and colonized societies: constructions that “help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (Said, 1978: 55). What is crucial about this process is that it is *asymmetrical*. Said frames his critique of Orientalism with an epigram from Marx that says it all: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.” In other words, colonial discourse confers the power to represent upon the agents of colonizing societies, who are supposed to have the self-evident right, critical capacity, and even bounden duty to exhibit otherwise inarticulate or inchoate subaltern populations before the gaze of metropolitan audiences. Imaginative geographies are thus *orderings* in the double sense of both bringing an essentially external order to colonial societies – subaltern populations are defined by their nominal ‘lack’ of attributes which are present in and valorized by metropolitan societies – and of commanding their members to make themselves present as intrinsically colonial subjects. But there is nothing axiomatic or automatic about this, whatever colonial discourse might claim. Subaltern populations are neither silenced nor silent, and colonizer and colonized are drawn into a reciprocal and contradictory process of ‘transculturation.’ In consequence, the production of colonial knowledges *of* other cultures – through the spiral of representations, practices, and performances – also depends *on* the active involvement of those other cultures.

Seen like this I expect it is not very difficult to see how postcolonial theory intersects with ideas about ‘social nature.’ Here, for example, is the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss gazing down on the landscape of central India from an aircraft:

When the European looks down on this land, divided into minute lots and cultivated to the last acre, he experiences an initial feeling of familiarity. But the way the colours shade into each other, the irregular outlines of the fields and the rice-swamps which are constantly rearranged in different patterns, the blurred edges which look as if they had been roughly stitched together, all this is part of the same tapestry, but – compared to the clearly defined forms and colours of a European landscape – *it is like a tapestry with the wrong side showing*. (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 132–3; emphasis added)

This extraordinary passage captures the reflexes of colonial discourse with raw precision: the European gaze on another landscape from a distance; the uncanny reflection of the European ideal that yields to the imperfections of the alien landscape; and, finally this other ‘culture-nature’ revealed as an image in a mirror. To Lévi-Strauss this other ‘culture’ and its ‘nature’ lack the order and clarity of his own European landscape.

Yet in practice postcolonial analysis of imaginative geographies has privileged the *production of space* and been drawn to the multiplication of enclosures and partitions that demarcate the colonizing from the colonized. These are immensely important considerations. But these geometries were not featureless planes: they were topographies rather than topologies – ‘geographies’ in the fullest of senses – and, as I want to show, it is important to explore how colonial productions of space were hinged to colonial *productions of nature* (as can be seen in the passage from Lévi-Strauss).<sup>1</sup> In considering these connections, it will be necessary to move beyond poststructuralism by investing not only nominally ‘cultural’ practices with the capacity to make a difference but also by allowing that nominally ‘natural’ organisms and physical systems also have the capacity to make a difference. This possibility assumes a special force in colonial discourse in which other natures are frequently endowed the gigantesque or monstrous powers that threaten to overwhelm colonial cultures and to exceed the space available for their presentations.

### Culture, Nature, and Colonial Modernity

From the sixteenth century the triumph of European modernity came to be represented as in some substantial sense the triumph of ‘culture’ over ‘nature.’ The scare-quotes remind us that this was an imaginative achievement: that both ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ here, whatever else they may be, are conceptual constructions, the product of imaginative cuts in the fabric of the world (see Demeritt, this volume). There were voices that dissented from the discourse of domination, to be sure, but in general ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ were prised apart within the modern European imaginary and the advance of European culture was usually measured by the distance it was supposed to have traveled from its own nature.



**Figure 5.2:** 'Culture,' 'nature,' and modernity

It was widely assumed that European nature has been forced to yield its secrets to the intimate probings of a new experimental European science – especially physical science and natural history – and to release its energies through the inventions of a new mechanical European technology. Other sciences and other technologies were by no means as inferior as these assumptions made out, but the achievements of the 'Scientific Revolution' and the 'Industrial Revolution' helped to create and calibrate an imaginative distance between a self-consciously modern Europe and the rest of the world (Adas, 1989). Modern cultures were supposed to have dissected nature so deeply and to have imposed themselves upon nature so forcefully that they were no longer at its mercy, whereas premodern cultures were regarded as creatures of their containing natures whose institutions, practices, and possibilities were conditioned and limited by the caprice of their local ecologies (figure 5.2).

This imaginary produced, and was in part produced through, a culture of nature in which 'nature' was constructed as an external and eternal domain lying *outside* the historical trajectories of 'culture.' Smith (1984) calls this an "ideology of nature" because it obscures the ways in which the restless dynamics of capitalism *enter fully into* the *historical* production of nature. In concealing these connections, Smith argues this culture of nature is so indelibly marked by class that it can be described as a bourgeois imaginary. Modern colonialism has often been described as a bourgeois project by its radical critics, so such a conjunction is scarcely surprising. But this culture of nature is marked in other ways that also bear directly on European colonialism. For 'nature' was not only dominated: it was also *domesticated*. This had two other dimensions of acute significance that further served to situate discourses about social nature produced under the sign of colonialism.

In the first place, these modern productions of nature were *feminized*: They were codified in an imaginary that was intricately gendered and sexualized. If appeals to 'Mother Nature' were a commonplace of European thought, however, they were by no means constants. Merchant (1980) suggests that in the course of the seventeenth century established "constraints against penetration" – taboos that derived from the Renaissance image of nature as a

beneficent, nurturing 'earth-mother' who busily provided for the needs of humankind in an ordered universe – were transformed, in large measure through the active elaborations of empirical, experimental science and technology, into what she calls "sanctions for denudation." These switched signals were not mute metaphors; rather, they helped to fashion a fluid and evolving 'rape-script' in which *Natura* was no longer able to complain "that her garments of modesty were being torn by the wrongful thrusts of man" (Merchant, 1980: 189). While Merchant's argument unfolds in a Europe riven by the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were close connections between the maps of nature made by that 'New Science' and the colonial mappings of the 'New World' (Albanese, 1996), and later and in a different register between the cultural authority of natural science and (post)colonial projects in South Asia, Africa, and elsewhere (Adas, 1989; Prakash, 1999).

In the second place, modern productions of nature were codified in an imaginary that defined European nature as *temperate* nature: a nature that was moderate, constant, and continent, without extremes of excesses. It was acknowledged that there were interruptions to its harmonies and cycles, like the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 that devastated much of the city or the volcanic spasms of Vesuvius that excited so many Victorian tourists, but a nature whose instabilities were chronic and generalized was located elsewhere (cf. Johns, 1999). The capricious eruptions, violent extremes, and monstrous deformations of nature at large were supposed to be removed from modern Europe either by the passage of time (the catastrophic floods and ice ages of the remote past) or by physical distance: Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment adventurers and explorers may no longer have feared remote regions and many-headed monsters, but their scientific journals and travel writings conveyed to an enthralled public a vivid sense of the *excesses* of other natures – wild, luxuriant, and tangled; harsh, empty, and barren – and hence produced those other natures *as* other. Through the emerging partitions and divisions of global space European nature was constructed as 'normal' nature, while other, nontemperate natures were diagnosed as abnormal, pathological, and even 'unnatural' natures.

This double discourse of domination and normalization presented modern colonialism with a dilemma. On the one side, it was possible to attribute the advance of European culture not only to the distance it had traveled from nature but also, paradoxically, to its embeddedness in its own, temperate nature. In his lectures on the philosophy of world history first delivered in 1822–3, the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel had this to say:

Man uses nature for his own ends; but where nature is too powerful it does not allow itself to be used as a means . . . The torrid and frigid zones, as such, are not the theatre on which world history is enacted . . . All in all, it is therefore the temperate zone which must furnish the theatre of history. And more specifically the northern part of the temperate zone.

These were not exceptional views in northern and western Europe. On the other side, however, it was possible to feminize non-European nature not as a nurturing mother but as a wild, seductive, and unruly siren, which implied not only that these other natures lacked the order that could only be brought to them from the outside by a masculinized Reason that forced them to submit to its will, but also that their excesses posed a real threat to the virile powers and integrities of European culture as it penetrated those other natures.

I want to bring this dilemma into sharper focus by considering the discourses of domination and normalization in turn. This analytical separation is for the purposes of exposition alone: both the powers and the predicaments that attended them derived in very large measure from the ways in which they were entangled with one another, and it will be impossible to keep them wholly separate.

### Colonizing Cultures and the Domination of Nature

Colonialism was involved in a distinctive cultural politics of nature, but this does not mean that the precolonial past was a 'golden age' of ecological equilibrium. "By making the arrival of the Europeans the center of our analysis," Cronon (1986: 164) warns, "we run the risk of attributing all [ecological] change to their agency" and rendering native inhabitants "as passive and 'natural' as the landscape." Famine, deforestation, and environmental degradation were not the exclusive products of colonial modernity. Neither did modern colonialism inevitably issue in ecological apocalypse: colonial ecologies were not always and everywhere exploitative and destructive and, at least before the 1870s, there was a space for what Grove (1995) calls a "green imperialism."

We can gain some sense of what was distinctive about a colonial politics of nature by turning to the novelist Joseph Conrad. The protagonists of his short story 'An Outpost of Progress,' first published in 1897, are two agents of a European trading company in Africa:

They lived like blind men in a large room, aware only of what came in contact with them (and of that only imperfectly), but unable to see the general aspect of things. The river, the forest, all the great land throbbing with life, were like a great emptiness. Even the brilliant sunshine disclosed nothing intelligible. Things appeared and disappeared before their eyes in an unconnected and aimless kind of way. The river seemed to come from nowhere and to flow nowhere. It flowed through a void.

"Blind," "unable to see the general aspect of things," this nature appeared to both men as "a great emptiness," "a void." It was a nature without limits or boundaries, an unmappable and hence unmasterable space, where a river could come from nowhere and flow to nowhere.

Later the hapless pair chance upon a faded European newspaper containing an article on 'our colonial expansion':

It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilisation, of the sacredness of the civilising work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith, and commerce to the dark places of the earth. Carlier and Kayerts read, wondered and began to think better of themselves. Carlier said one evening, waving his hand about, "In a hundred years, there will perhaps be a town here. Quays, and warehouses, and barracks, and – and – billiard rooms. Civilization . . ." (Conrad, 1991: 42–3)

Here at last was the prospect of dominating nature through the production of a different, *differentiable* space, of bringing this unruly nature within the disciplined, regulated, and ordered perimeter of culture.

The same themes reappear in Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*. In this scene Marlow has just arrived at a trading station in the Congo:

When near the buildings I met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear necktie, and varnished boots. No hat, hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing, and had a penholder behind his ear.

I shook hands with this miracle, and I learned he was the Company's chief accountant . . .

This extraordinary European figure presented a stark contrast to what Marlow saw as "the great demoralization of the land" and the encroachments of its savage nature on the space of the trading station itself:

Everything else in the station was in a muddle – heads, things, buildings. Strings of dusty niggers with splay feet arrived and departed; a stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads and brass-wire sent into the depths of darkness, and in return came a precious trickle of ivory.

I had to wait in the station for ten days – an eternity. I lived in a hut in the yard, but to be out of the chaos I would sometimes get into the accountant's office . . . [where], bent over his books, [the chief accountant] was making correct entries of perfectly correct transactions. (Conrad, 1985: 45–7)

Marlow's overwhelming sense is one of disorder – and yet, in the middle of all this, he glimpses (and seeks refuge in) a space of rationality, of calculability, the space of capital accounting.

Here was the central predicament of colonial modernity: how could nature 'out there' – savage and undomesticated – be brought 'in here'? How could



such a 'nature' be made to submit to 'culture'? The immediate answer does *not* lie in the clearing of forests and the fencing of fields, the laying of roads and railways, and the building of barracks and barrages. These were concrete achievements – some of them spectacular signs intended to be taken for wonders – but to understand how *they* were possible, conceptually and imaginatively, it is necessary to understand the process of *enframing* through which the discourse of domination was articulated.

### *Enframing nature*

'Enframing' means both to set the world up as a picture and to treat the world as a picture. This looks deceptively simple, but its implications are so far-reaching that the German philosopher Martin Heidegger once declared that "the fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture." This is a large claim, so let me try to unpack what is involved. As a first approximation, we can say that the modern domination of nature depends upon the successful production of a space of constructed visibility within which three objectives have to be fulfilled: 'nature' has to be held at a distance, set up as an object, and structured as a more or less systematic totality. If we look more closely at what this involves, we can see that there is something theatrical about it. It's a sort of performance that involves a 'staging' – an artful 'organization of the view' – by means of which an audience is persuaded that the representations made available to it provide a privileged (or 'truthful') access to the real. The connections between power, space, and visibility here are complex, but Mitchell (2000) summarizes their diverse histories as so many stagings of 'the world-as-exhibition' or 'the world-as-picture,' each of which turns on a distinction between 'representation' and 'reality.'

You probably think there is nothing exceptional about this, but its obviousness is precisely the point that Mitchell seeks to sharpen: how is such an 'obvious' distinction brought about? Within this imaginative theater, he suggests, both actors and audience conduct themselves as though the world is divided in two. On one side, *reality* is taken to be 'an object that exists prior to any representation, as something given, material, fixed in its unique time and space'; on the other side, *representation* promises its practitioners endless, serial, replicable entries into the presence of the real which is thereby made available (or 're-presented') for them within a unified and fully legible space. Colonial modernity, Mitchell argues, "involves creating an effect we recognize as reality, by organizing the world endlessly to represent it." Hence, the real – in our case, 'nature' – is endlessly made available to us through multiple practices and performances, each of which is made to 'stand for' the objective, original, and enduring structure of the natural world (Mitchell, 2000: 16–24).

It is now possible to see why Heidegger, Mitchell, and others firmly believe

that 'the world-as-exhibition' is structurally (not accidentally) implicated in the *general* operations of colonizing power: in 'the conquest of the world as picture.' For the dualism put in place through the process of enframing endows the modern viewing subject, constructed as a disembodied and distanced observer, with the exclusive privilege and the extraordinary power to dis-cover the 'real' order of what will appear to other, nonmodern actors and audiences as an otherwise errant universe. Seen like this the modern enframing of nature is inherently colonizing no matter where it takes place: coercive, invasive, appropriative in all its sites, it makes nature available for inspection, codification, calculation, and regulation. And, as I've said, it is a central concern of Marxist materialism to identify the instrumentalities by means of which this ever more effective domination of nature under a restlessly globalizing capitalism sustained the ever more effective domination of one class by another.

### *Making colonial natures visible*

But in its *specific* operations colonial discourse trades on the dualism between 'representation' and 'reality' in such a way as to produce (and reproduce) a second dualism – *between 'colonizer' and 'colonized'* – that turns on more than class filiations and which thus prompts different questions. If colonial 'nature' is held at a distance, set up as an object, and structured as a totality, how does this enframing accommodate the double positions of colonizer and colonized? In what ways does the colonial domination of nature sustain the power of the colonizer over the colonized? And to what extent is the colonial will-to-power compromised, interrupted, even reversed?

To fashion a preliminary answer to these questions I want to examine two strategies by means of which colonial discourse attempted to enframe non-European natures as particular landscapes. The concept of landscape was focal to modern colonialism and imperialism (Mitchell, 1994), but I can discuss only symptomatic examples here, and it is extremely important not to homogenize colonial ways of seeing. Different travelers with different purposes had different perspectives and different priorities. More than this, enframing was not simply a matter of packing one's cultural baggage at home, unpacking it elsewhere and returning with its contents unchanged and intact. As Martins (2000: 21) remarks, representations, practices, and performances were always contingent affairs, in process as well as in transit, and freighted with the traces of their passage. Although my examples are drawn from nominally 'artistic' and 'scientific' registers, these should not be construed as opposites; each informs and even depends on the other. Still more important, their terminus is much the same. By these means nature is made to appear within a space of order and organization and, in the end, made available for calculation and commodification.

In her critique of the 'imperial eyes' deployed by European cultures of exploration and travel in the nineteenth century, Pratt (1992) has drawn attention to what she calls 'the monarch-of-all-I-survey-scene.' Here, in an exemplary passage originally published in 1860, is the British explorer Richard Burton describing his first view of Lake Tanganyika:

Nothing, in sooth, could be more picturesque than this first view of the Tanganyika Lake, as it lay in the lap of the mountains, basking in the gorgeous tropical sunshine. Below and beyond a short foreground of rugged and precipitous hill-fold, down which the foot-path zigzags painfully, a narrow strip of emerald green, never serene and marvellously fertile, shelves towards a ribbon of glistening yellow sand, here bordered by sedgy rushes, there cleanly and clearly cut by the breaking wavelets. Further in front stretch the waters, an expanse of the lightest and softest blue, in breadth varying from thirty to thirty-five miles, and sprinkled by the crisp east-wind with tiny crescents of snowy foam. The background in front is a high and broken wall of steel-coloured mountain, here flecked and capped with pearly mist, there standing sharply pencilled against the azure air . . . [The landscape], like all the fairest prospects in these regions, wants but a little of the neatness and finish of art – mosques and kiosks, palaces and villas, gardens and orchards – contrasting with the profuse lavishness and magnificence of nature . . .

Nature is here visibly made over into a picture, and in this passage pictorial imagery achieves several things.

First, Burton's ability to deploy the picturesque was a triumphant affirmation of what Ryan (1996: 60) calls "the portability of [European] visual taste." Just think: an aesthetic popularized by an English country parson was seemingly able to contain the vastness of the African landscape and to render it in familiar terms.

Secondly, once the landscape is framed as a painting, constructed as a sketch, and filled in with a palette of watercolors (the 'steel-coloured mountain sharply pencilled against the azure air'), the scene of visual mastery becomes almost palpable. "If the scene is a painting," Pratt (1992: 205) remarks, "then Burton is both the viewer there to judge and to appreciate it, and the verbal painter who produces it for others."

Thirdly, Burton not only organizes the view, he also orders the *landscape* as a composition of elevations, planes, and colors: an order which turns out to be necessary if the landscape is to be seen at all. During his travels through central Africa, the French novelist André Gide (1929) was once driven to despair at "the impossibility of differentiation." Looking out over a wide stretch of country, "everything is uniform," he wrote, so that "there can be no possible predilection for any particular site . . . From one end of the horizon to the other, there is not a single point to which I wish to go." Without 'points' there

was nothing to see: no particular 'sights' and so no particular 'sites.' But those 'points' had to be produced. The land had to be summoned to presence, made to submit itself as a series of 'points' to the observing gaze in order for it to appear *as* a landscape.

Fourthly, this order is not static. The scene is a 'prospect' partly because the view unfolds before Burton's uninterrupted gaze but partly too because it allows him to present an unobstructed vision of its future: a vista of palaces and villas, gardens and orchards, whose cultivation will at once contrast with and complement the abundance of an undomesticated nature. The picturesque not only invited this sort of correction; it positively required it. If the landscape did not conform to the protocols of the picturesque, the artist was given license to 'improve' the prospect. But the explicitly *colonial* picturesque vested the power to do so in the totalizing dispositions of the colonizer alone. If local people left only "scratches on the face of the country," feint "traces on the landscape," these were superficial signs to be taken for vacant possession, tacit invitations to colonial possession and appropriation (Pratt, 1992: 60).

Science made many of the same discursive moves, and often enrolled art in order to do so. In the course of the eighteenth century the maps, sketches, and illustrations that were folded into the projects of natural history, topographical survey, and cartography made visible a colonial 'order of things' by means of a thoroughgoing spatialization of knowledge that brought various non-European natures within the sovereign grid of European scientific culture. Those 'natures' were dis-placed in order to be re-placed within a taxonomy: "One by one," Pratt (1992: 31) remarks, "the planet's life forms were drawn out of the tangled threads of their life surroundings and rewoven into European-based patterns of global unity and order." Plates in books and journals, specimens in botanical gardens and zoos, displays in museums and exhibitions: "nature and its geographies were enframed in these ways for a variety of audiences" (Withers, 1995: 148). In their turn these orderings made possible a second dis-placement and re-placement that confirmed the power of colonial productions of nature. A spectator at the zoological gardens in Regent's Park, for example, was able to occupy a dual position: at once physically in London, where 'the natural world lay at John Bull's feet,' and also figuratively elsewhere, each exhibit standing for the place from which it originated. "The Zoo works metaphorically here as a moment of transportation," Jones (1997: 8) explains, "while simultaneously acting metonymically to condense the globe into the space of the gardens." It is this double passage – from 'there' to 'here' and back again at will – that marks the operations of colonizing power.

But these condensations and displacements revolve around individuals – plants or animals – whereas science, like art, also worked to produce other, aggregative kinds of 'natural objects.' Consider geology. In the eighteenth century European explorers had noticed the morphological particularities of the coast of the Pacific North West, but these were represented as individual

profiles or idiosyncratic sites. It was the achievement of nineteenth-century geology to read them instead as signs standing for a larger structural order:

In the span of less than 100 years a dramatic shift had occurred, from collecting specimens and viewing the physical outlines of landscapes, to 'seeing geologically.' What was visible in nature had changed irrevocably: one no longer attended to scattered mineral samples or other curiosities, but to the 'inner architecture' of the earth. (Braun, 2000: 22).

This process of scientific enframing was generalizing in another sense too. Braun (1997: 16) argues that it was only after the land was staged as a "theater of nature" in this way that it could be made available to political and economic calculation. As soon as it became possible to convey the fixities and particularities of solid geology in a general calculus of private property and speculative valuation, this 'nature' was able to enter a world where 'all that is solid melts into air': the circuits of global capital where it could be endlessly transformed. "From London, New York or Montreal, it was now possible to view the 'true structure' of Canada's nature without having to be there in person; the circulation of one inscription, the geological map, permitted the circulation of another, money" (Braun, 2000: 25). This process of commodification was underwritten by the colonial state which structured systems of property, lease, and concession, and systems of regulation, surveillance, and enforcement, so that individuals would be compelled to follow the script of rational accounting.

But to stage colonial governmentality through such a theatrical production of the state's 'vertical territory' required some of the principal actors to withdraw to the wings. When George Dawson, a surveyor for the Geological Survey of Canada, made his way through the Pacific Northwest in the 1870s and 1880s, he routinely relied on the assistance of the Haida people. Although his journals describe their cultural practices in great detail, these ethnographic inscriptions are separated from his parallel inventory of the physical landscape. In effect, Dawson's texts detach indigenous 'culture' from 'nature,' and thereby stage "the unveiling of nature's 'plan,' a plan which both *preceded* and *lay external to* a native presence" and which for this reason could be fulfilled through "the judicious mixing of European (Canadian) capital and labor" alone (Braun, 1997: 14).

There were other ways in which scientific discourse allowed the colonial domination of nature to extend the power of the colonizer over the colonized. When the British annexed the Punjab they chose to work *with* local populations and local rulers, respecting their knowledges and working to enhance existing systems of irrigation. Although the results were deemed successful, however, neither the East India Company nor the Presidencies quite knew how to measure their effect or estimate the results of future irrigation schemes (Headrick, 1988: 181). For this, water had to be 'disenchanted' so that "all

mystery disappears from its depths, all gods depart, all contemplation of its flow ceases" (Worster, in Gilmartin, 1995: 211). This involved not only filtering cultural residues from 'water' *but also replacing them with others*. Thus, in the second half of the nineteenth century a new discourse of hydrology and hydraulic engineering emerged which translated 'nature' into mathematical formulae. In these there would be no place for 'local' knowledge and the hydraulics of irrigation channels and the mechanics of dam construction could be made the same world over.

Crucially, the production of nature through the production of ever more abstract spaces raised other possibilities for the consolidation of colonial power. If movements of water and sediment could be made visible and literally brought to account through cascades of equations, was it possible to bring 'culture' within the same calculus? Was it possible to enframe *both* culture *and* nature – a colonized 'culture-nature' – within a system of *simultaneous* equations? One answer sought to reduce culture to nature by treating local actors as so many (other) objects to be controlled with the same dispassionate efficiency that calibrated flow models and turned valves. Accordingly, rules of conduct were published setting out penalties and punishments for infractions of the irrigation code. As Gilmartin (1994: 1139) observes, this was "an attempt to impose individual 'discipline' within an irrigating 'machine.'" But the colonial order was vested in collectivities rather than individuals, and the state's powers of surveillance and sanction were hopelessly inadequate to the task. An alternative solution was to naturalize 'culture' within the calculus of equilibrium economics by modeling local people as self-interested actors whose transactions were governed by the abstract and instrumental rationality of the market. This too erased the collective, communal world of local cultivators, but it proved to be problematic for the colonial state on quite other grounds:

If the model of market rationality promised theoretically to integrate irrigators on a micro-level into a system of colonial environmental control, it also threatened to undercut the theoretical separation of the British, both from the environment *and* from Indian society, that was so central to their position as a ruling community. Indeed, the alliance between large-scale government control of the environment and profit-maximizing individuals held the potential to define political foundations for a community *linking* the state and society, a community forged through a common relationship to the environment. But this was not a vision of community for which colonial rule provided a structural foundation. For the British, the scientific definition of the environment served to legitimize the state's separation not only from the natural world that it sought to control, but also from the customary, community-based structure of Indian society. (Gilmartin, 1995: 226)

It should now be clear how the process of enframing enabled the conversion of other 'natures' into more or less domesticated 'landscapes.' By the turn of

the twentieth century the concrete forms made possible through these transformations often amounted to spectacular stagings of the power of colonialism to dominate other natures – mines and plantations; canals and railways; barrages and dams – and, through these practices and performances, other cultures. But colonial enframings were not always as secure or stable as they seemed. Not only could colonial stagings of a supposedly domesticated nature be interrupted by unforeseen side-effects and by extreme physical events like flash-floods, but they could be subverted through everyday acts of resistance and collective protests (Guha, 1989). These grandiose projects could also be co-opted by political movements that reactivated indigenous knowledges, in concert with modern Western traditions, to redirect colonial technoculture to avowedly *anticolonial*, nationalist ends (Prakash, 1999). More recently still, postcolonial states have been obliged to confront demands from marginalized populations over their complicities in technocultural dominations of nature that have licensed multiple forms of resource-based repression (Moore, 1997; Watts, 1997). Postcolonial theory has had much less to say about any of these counter-possibilities than political ecology or subaltern studies but, as I now want to show, colonial discourse – still the main object of postcolonial critique – could itself confound the process of enframing through its *own* contradictions and ruptures.

### Colonizing Natures and the Normalization of Nature

In her analysis of “tropical nature as a way of writing,” Stepan (1991) reminds us that “nature is not ‘natural’ but is created *as* natural.” But the converse is equally true. In rendering temperate nature as ‘normal’ nature, colonial discourse simultaneously constructed nontemperate nature as radically other and thereby established an essential distance between ‘normal’ nature and its excesses. This distance was essential because it was a gap that was *necessary* for the formation of metropolitan-colonial identity and for the privileges colonialism accrued to itself. ‘Nature’ was enrolled as another register within which colonial discourse could map the space between colonizer and colonized as a surface of difference. Writing tropical nature as ‘other’ thus conveyed “its discursive differentiation from home and the familiar,” and in doing so helped to establish the ‘superiority’ of the domestic over the exotic (Stepan, 1991: 496–7). That distance was always precarious, however, for if those ‘unnatural natures’ remained *undomesticated* there was then the ever-present possibility of transgression: the hideous threat that these monstrosities would break out from the ‘place’ that colonial discourse had assigned to them.

In response to these ideas I want to consider two questions. How did colonial discourse represent these other natures *as* ‘other,’ as in some sense *pathological* natures? And if these distinctions simultaneously shored up *and*

*undermined* the foundational divide between the space of the colonizer and the space of the colonized, how were these instabilities inscribed in the practices and performances of colonizing powers?

The central representational predicament was to find a way of conveying the otherness of other natures (and other cultures), of bringing them within a European project of a universal 'earth-writing' that would make them intelligible to metropolitan audiences without at the same time destroying the very signs that marked them *as* other. Europeans embarked on the early modern voyages of discovery found the (multiple) terms for this dilemma in the problematic of 'wonder,' a sort of radical passion that careened between ravishment and repulsion and which effected what Greenblatt (1991: 135) sees as "the crucial break" with an-other world that could only be described "in the language of sameness." There were several ways to traverse this paradoxical space of rupture and connection. One was to search for affinities and parallels that would recognize and validate the presence of each in the other. There were thus European representations of North America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that portrayed it as "an Old World in the rough," producing an uncanny sense of "strange familiarity" through an imaginative ordering of the land as an almost-but-not-quite European landscape (Dickenson, 1998: 127). Another strategy was to refine and heighten the sense of radical difference, to develop the reflex of estrangements, so that the distance from the other would be accentuated in ways that could license its colonial appropriation and transformation on quite other terms. But this distance did not remain an uncharted abyss: it was artfully and imaginatively mapped so that, over time, the discursive production of other natures established its own protocols and conventions. Explorers and travelers underwrote their observations through a whirlwind spiral of citation and cross-reference that installed and naturalized imaginative geographies whose canonical forms were reproduced and elaborated in successive accounts. By these means, through a colonial discourse that gradually widened its horizons of meaning and thickened its contours, the strangeness of other natures eventually became *familiar in its very strangeness*.

### *Pathologizing nature*

By the middle of the nineteenth century European natural historians and travelers could draw on a deeply sedimented imaginative geography of 'the tropics,' for example, and those who failed to satisfy the expectations of their audience usually met with little popular success. The dominant discourse of 'tropicality' was structured by two major thematics (Arnold, 1996: 141–68). The first represented the tropics as an Acadia, a sort of Garden of Eden before the Fall. This rhetorical space was most closely associated with the islands of the Caribbean and the South Pacific. In the eighteenth and on into the



nineteenth centuries the production and reproduction of such an emphatically *exuberant* nature was sustained by an intimate cross-fertilization between luxuriance and sexuality. Although there was nothing new in engendering 'nature' as feminine, the production of a distinctively tropical nature as sultry and seductive had a genealogy of its own. This cultural formation derived in part from what Livingstone (1991) calls a 'moral climatology' that asserted a causal connection between the heat and humidity of the 'torrid zones' and the supposed moral lassitude and intemperance of their indigenous populations. But it also derived from a botanical discourse whose taxonomies fastened on the reproductive anatomy of plants, and from the subterranean diversion of those classifications into a vernacular discourse of elite eroticism (Bewell, 1996; Browne, 1996). And it owed much to philosophical and aesthetic discourses of primitivism that were preoccupied with 'nature' as much as 'culture' and which were eventually modulated in complex ways by a *fin-de-siècle* modernism that continued to remark the object-lessons to be learned from contemplating both 'noble savages' and the lush garden of delights that they enjoyed (Barkan and Bush, 1995). It was through *all* of these routes, through the constitution of what I prefer to think of as a more general 'moral economy of nature,' that somewhere like Tahiti became such a complex mythical symbol that intermingled "pastoral innocence and threatening libertinism" in powerfully unsettling ways (Bewell, 1996: 184).

In the course of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries these imaginative geographies were overwritten by a second thematic, inscribed most vividly in South Asia and Africa, that constructed the tropics as pestilential rather than paradisaical. Here abundance became excess and, at the limit, *excrescence*: tropical nature was produced as a brooding, duplicitous, and enervating monster. Moral climatology played a central role in this "pathologization of space" too, but its rhetorical atlas was dramatized by a biomedical discourse that constructed the tropics as "the pathological site par excellence" (Naraindas, 1996). By the early nineteenth century it had become common for European writers to identify the tropics with putrefaction, decay, and decomposition, and with fevers produced by 'bad air' ('malaria') that supposedly spread in a particularly acute form as a 'miasma.' The baseline for mapping South Asia as part of this tropical zone was laid down by the British East India Company in Bengal, where the tripartite regime of heat, humidity, and overabundant nature was assumed to be symptomatic of the subcontinent as a whole, and to flag it as a distinctive and dangerous space. These diagnostics were projected onto local populations whose bodies were folded into this pathologized tropical nature by the racialized and sexualized discourses of environmental determinism. In the early nineteenth century, India was thus constructed as "the kind of place, subject at once to indolence and passion, where disease and sexuality alike flourished," and its indigenous inhabitants were elaborately feminized by a masculinism that identified the people of the humid and marshy plains with

“physical and moral weakness” (Metcalf, 1995: 171–3; Arnold, 1998: 7). Even when environmental theories of disease yielded to bacteriological theories in the late nineteenth century, the connective imperative between tropical nature and tropical culture was retained; “One now sought to avoid not ‘miasmatic fluxes’ but Indian bodies, the filthy carries of contagious disease” (Metcalf, 1995: 177).

By the end of the nineteenth century these two versions of tropicality had become entangled with one another. Consider the two views of the city of Chandrapore with which E. M. Forster opens *A Passage to India*:

Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely . . . The very wood [of the houses] seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving. So abased, so monotonous is everything that meets the eye, that when the Ganges comes down it might be expected to wash the excrescence back into the soil. Houses do fall, people are drowned and left rotting, but the general outline of the town persists, swelling here, shrinking there, like some low but indestructible form of life. (Forster, 1971: 9)

Inland, however, “the prospect alters.” Viewed from the rise beyond the railway, where the European civil station is laid out,

Chandrapore appears to be a totally different place. It is a city of gardens. It is no city, but a forest sparsely scattered with huts. It is a tropical pleasaunce washed by a noble river. The toddy palms and neem trees and mangoes and pekul that were hidden behind the bazaars now become visible and in their turn hide the bazaars. They rise from the gardens where ancient tanks nourish them, they burst out of stifling purlieus and unconsidered temples. Seeking light and air, and endowed with more strength than man or his works, they soar above the lower deposit to greet one another with branches and beckoning leaves, and to build a city for the birds. (Forster, 1971: 10)

These two views are common motifs of the later colonial imaginary; they construct three sights/sites. In the first place, they set up two exhibitions of nature. One presents tropical nature as fallen, wretched, and rotting – a nature of excrescence – while the other presents tropical nature as a heterotopia, a prospect of delight and desire – a nature of abundance. In the second place, these views enable Forster to assimilate colonized culture *to* tropical nature. Seen from within, accordingly, the city of Chandrapore is part of a hideous, disfigured nature of excrescence. Seen from without, where the distance between the native city and the civil station is scrupulously established, the city can be recomposed as part of a nature of abundance. But Forster (1971: 10) makes it clear that this is a powerful yet precarious fantasy: “Newcomers cannot believe it to be as meagre as it is described, and have to be driven down to acquire

disillusionment." In the third place, therefore, moving from one view to the other establishes an opposition between the culture of the colonizers and that of the colonized. The fantasy of a tropical heterotopia is possible only when the point of view is removed from the landscape, only when it is recognized that the civil station, with its regular geometry and its red-brick club on the brow, "shares nothing with the city": which is all another way of saying that the civil station is *apart from* rather than *a part of* tropical nature.

### *The limits of colonial imaginaries: nature as menace*

In these ways tropical nature was enrolled to sustain a colonial geography: "a world cut in two," "a world divided into compartments" (Fanon, 1967: 29), not only by built forms and other architectures of colonial power, as Fanon emphasized, but also by colonial productions of nature. If 'seeing the tropics' required them to be made visible in the 'right' way, and if these imaginative geographies circulated through metropolitan audiences and were re-exported to travelers in the field in an endless spiral, then it is easy enough to understand Gide's (1929: 25) relief as he ventured deeper into the Congo to find that "the scenery is beginning to be more what I expected; it is becoming *like*." And yet: in becoming 'like,' tropical nature was simultaneously required to become *unlike*. Gide marked this transition when, "homeward bound," he wrote that "the landscape is less vast and less vague; it is growing more temperate and more organized" (p. 207). That sense of other natures as *disorganized* was a goad to the ordering projects of natural history and natural science, but it also marked the perimeter of their powers, which explains the undertow of menace running through my characterizations of tropicality.

To fix this more precisely, consider this passage in which Alexander von Humboldt recalls his arrival in South America in 1799:

When a traveller recently arrived from Europe steps into South American jungle for the first time he sees nature in a completely unexpected guise . . . With each step he feels not at the frontiers of the torrid zone but in its midst; not on one of the West Indian Islands but in a vast continent where everything is gigantic; mountains, rivers, and the masses of plants. If he is able to feel the beauty of landscape, he will find it hard to analyse his many impressions. He does not know what shocks him more: whether the calm silence of the solitude, or the beauty of the diverse, contrasting objects, or that fullness and freshness of plant life in the Tropics. It could be said that the earth, overloaded with plants, does not have sufficient space to develop . . . The same lianas that trail along the ground climb up to the tree-tops, swinging from one tree to another 100 feet up in the air. As these parasitical plants form a real tangle, a botanist often confuses flowers, fruit and leaves belonging to different species. (Humboldt, 1995: 83-4)

This is not the colonial picturesque but the *tropical sublime*, forcibly reminding its European viewers of their inability to distinguish, differentiate, and identify. The superfluity of the tropics threatened to overwhelm the space of its representation, and to mock, even challenge the sovereignty of the 'monarch-of-all-I-survey.' Tropical nature seemed to demand a different mode of traveling: episodic, tactical, improvisational; a different way of seeing: sensual, corporeal, 'haptic'; even a different form of writing: overwrought, palpating, ambivalent. Colonial discourse thus produced a sort of 'tropical Gothic' which, even as it sought to *confirm* that necessary distance between the tropical and the temperate, simultaneously threatened to *collapse* metropolitan-colonial culture into tropical nature.

Deserts, too, confounded Europeans abroad. When Florence Nightingale traveled through Egypt in 1849–50 she saw the western desert fringing the Nile as "a great dragon, putting out his fiery tongue, and licking up the green, fertile plain, biting into it, and threatening to encroach still more" (Nightingale, 1987: 63). The desert not only exceeded its proper place but it appeared to this young Englishwoman as nature *in extremis*, exhausted and hollowed out, a space of inversion that mocked the harmonies of a temperate nature: "A lifeless desert would be far less frightful than this dead desert, the idea perpetually recurring of an awful evil at work, making this kingdom his own, overwhelming everything by some monstrous convulsion" (Nightingale, 1987: 49). The desert was not only an unfamiliar nature but, as she said herself, an "unnatural nature" that lay outside the space of Reason itself.

These textual gestures were more than the field responses of an amateur; they were part of a much more pervasive normalization of nature that affected the culture of science too. When the American physical geographer W. M. Davis proposed his 'ideal' cycle of erosion at the very end of the nineteenth century, he described it as the 'normal' cycle and modeled it on temperate regimes. Moving towards the poles or the tropics, he noted "significant departures from normal geographical development" and these prompted him to propose "special" cycles of erosion to accommodate them (Davis, 1899, 1904). Likewise, in *The Physics of Blown Sand and Desert Dunes*, Ralph Bagnold (1941: xix) attempted "to explain on a basis of experimental physics some of the many strange phenomena produced by the natural movement of sand over the dry land of the Earth." In deserts, he continued,

Instead of finding chaos and disorder, the observer never fails to be amazed at a simplicity of form, an exactitude of repetition and a geometric order unknown in nature on a scale larger than that of crystalline structure. In places vast accumulations of sand weighing millions of tons move inexorably, in regular formation, over the surface of the country, growing, retaining their shape, even breeding, in a manner which, by its grotesque imitation of life, is vaguely disturbing to an imaginative mind. (Bagnold, 1941: xxi)

Bagnold's mind was doubly imaginative. He sought to bring its formations within the calibrated spaces of Reason by disclosing a "geometric order" to their strange topographies. But, as his image of the dunes "breeding" in a "grotesque imagination of life" suggests, Bagnold was also fascinated by the topologies of the monstrous and the uncanny.

In fact, in his travel writings Bagnold had transformed the regular geometries of Egypt's seemingly lifeless Western Desert into a trickster landscape imbued with stealth, cunning, and even agency. At first, he wrote, the dunes "had seemed quite friendly, without evil intent, too big to bother about such a tiny invasion of their empire. They had let us crawl over them without much hindrance once we had got to know them." But as Bagnold and his companions traveled south into the Great Sand Sea, the dunes became "hostile, resenting our presence" (Bagnold, 1935: 155–6). Undeterred, Bagnold and his party pressed on, driving between two sand ridges which became steadily higher until – the horror! – they began to close in. The next morning all three cars sank to their axles in the sand, and the party was trapped. "The dunes had selected this of all places for their second attack." Bagnold recalled, "the exact centre of a lifeless circle of country 360 miles across." The group retraced its tracks for 12 miles and finally broke through, cresting the ridge "as fast as the going would allow, intent on nothing but escape from the fiery dunes" which at last began to break up "amongst groups of friendly solid hills." "But for many miles farther," Bagnold continued, "we could see them still pursuing us in long persistent tongues of gold, dodging between the purple hills, keeping abreast of us like a pack of wolves." Bagnold did not feel safe until he had reached "real rocks that breathed a restful permanence" with no sign of "the monstrous elusive organism of the dunes" (Bagnold, 1935: 160–4).

If colonial discourse required the land to submit to the demand that its language offer what Carter (1987: 63) calls "a more coherent rhetorical equivalent, a more logical arrangement of what was to be seen" than any local language, then in moments like these the project of "replacing local difference with universal intelligibility" seems to have been underwritten by something approaching panic. For example, deserts could be seen as landscapes of redemption or as landscapes of retribution, but common to these discordant thematics was a chronic loss of words, a failure of language itself. Florence Nightingale (1987: 89) had fretted that it was "useless to try to describe these things, for European language has no words for them." "How should it," she demanded, "when there is no such thing in Europe? All other nature raises one's thoughts to heaven: this sends them to hell." Other travelers resorted to Arabic transliterations: *barchan*, *seif*, *wadi*. Yet to most of their audience these strange sound-shapes must have been utterly unintelligible, marking the desert as at once exotic *and* obdurately unyielding to European language. If the limits of our language mark the limits of our world, then recourse to these alien words confirmed that such forms were beyond the limits of any European

language – that they were literally ‘un-worldly’ – and, if Nightingale is any indication, their recuperation often involved a language of fantasy, monstrosity, and inversion (see Greogry, 2001).

Finally, the tropical rainforest could effect its own paralysis of colonialism’s imaginative geographies. The British and French derived the word ‘jungle’ from the Hindi *jangla* to produce “a metaphorical contrast between the orderliness of temperate woodlands and the tangled, menacing, malarial vegetation that constituted tropical nature” (Arnold, 1998: 8). But this very contrast was so unstable that it could undo itself: as the distance between ‘there’ and ‘here’ was torqued, so the metaphor slipped and meaning itself became dis-placed. The anthropologist Michael Taussig captures what I have in mind when he described the efforts of the German film-maker Werner Herzog to represent the Amazon rainforest as “a nature conceived as pitting extremes of meaning, a deconstructing tropicality *that implodes oppositions* in the profusion of their rank decay and proliferating disordered growth” (Taussig, 1987: 79; my emphasis). For Herzog, for the colonizing powers that he represents in *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*, the jungle appears as “a text that frustrates all hermeneutic efforts from the outside,” all attempts at translation and interpretation, and its seemingly “chaotic diversity” exposes with extraordinary force what Koepnick (1993) calls “the systematic inappropriateness of Western routines of cognition and ordering.”

The jungle rejects any attempt to be read, mastered or even represented. As it reduces human beings to insignificant receptacles of what will always escape their grasp. Herzog’s rainforest delineates a unique training ground for sentiments of sublime terror. (Koepnick, 1993: 136)

Gandy (1996) complains that Herzog’s imaginary eviscerates ‘culture’ and hypostatizes the agency of ‘nature’; yet, for colonial discourse, that was all too often precisely the point. As I’ve repeatedly emphasized, colonial cultures, with their fears of miscegenation and creolization, were riven by fears of a different sort of hybridization too. The colonial project required European culture to penetrate another nature, but there was also the unspeakable possibility of inversion, of another nature penetrating what Duncan (2000) calls the ‘moral masculinity’ of colonial culture.

In the Amazon rainforest, the usual signals were indeed reversed; the green of the rainforest stood for danger:

It is out of this green that hostile Indians, wild animals, insects and diseases emerge. It is this green which prevents the eye from finding easy riches to plunder. It is this green which fills the sites reserved for the sugar-cane plantations. It is this green which hides and protects a population whose fate it is to serve. Relief comes in the form of a red signal: fire in the forests, to

open up the horizon as far as the eye can see, and when it gets there, fire again. (Sevcenko, in Martins, 2000: 20)

There were certainly sites where the horizon was opened up, where 'nature' was beaten back by the colonial economy and its political and military apparatus: the construction of roads and railways, mines and plantations, barracks and towns. By the end of the nineteenth century, Manaus had become the nerve-center of the Amazonian rubber economy, shipping 20,000 tons downriver each year. It was also the shock city of the province of Amazonas, a site where the excesses of unrestrained capitalism and its production of a social nature – a 'normal nature' – were revealed with unusual clarity. A vast new harbor was completed, and there was a regular steamship service across the Atlantic to Liverpool. A gridiron of cobbled streets had been blazed across the rainforest, paved in Portuguese stone. Boulevards were bordered with serried ranks of exotic fig trees, jacarandas, and eucalyptus, punctuated by electric lamp standards and festooned with a canopy of telephone wires. Trolley-buses clattered through the streets, and high over the city rose the ornate dome of the Opera House (Collier, 1988). Here, surely, colonialism's 'culture' had visibly triumphed over 'nature.'

Upriver, however, these polarities were reversed. Agents of the Peruvian Amazon Rubber Company, backed by British capital and a board of directors in London, worked out of trading-posts and encampments in the high Amazon to collect wild rubber through the enforced employment of indigenous people. In this 'Devil's Paradise' what Taussig (1987: 40) calls "a massive staging of punishment in a theatre of cruelty" took place, "a spectacle in the proscenium of the open space cleared in the forest." Thousands of Huitotos – men, women, and children – were systematically tortured, violated, and killed. A subsequent British committee of inquiry put the burden of these atrocities on the back of political economy: on the capitalist logic of extracting low-grade rubber using scarce labor. There is no doubt that the wild rubber industry involved high transactions costs and risks; no doubt too that indigenous people were trapped in a system of debt-peonage whose bonds of credit and debt wound round their bodies "like the vines of the forest around the great rubber trees" (Taussig, 1987: 68). And yet: can any of this explain the ferocity, the sadism – the *savagery* – of the company's agents? Taussig suggests that this "theatre of cruelty" was intimately related to colonialism's staging of a 'wild,' tropical nature. He argues that the rubber traders and their Barbadian militiamen feared a 'brute' and 'animal' nature which they saw surrounding them, advancing, threatening to engulf them; and that they identified this 'unnatural nature' with the indigenous people who inhabited the rainforest (Taussig, 1987: 97). Colonial discourse constructed a space of terror, therefore, in which 'wild Indians' were figured as deviant creatures of a deviant Nature: "hostile elongations of the disorganized natural environment" (Koepnick, 1993: 141). As these

traders and militiamen constructed a landscape of wildness and savagery, so they *themselves* became wild and savage: the violence of their actions mirrored the violence of their fears. "The only way they could live in such a terrifying environment," Taussig (1987: 122) concludes, was "to inspire terror themselves."

I doubt that this really was "the only way." Other responses were possible, at least thinkable, because agency is always conditional and contingent. In postwar Malaysia, for example, the 'jungle' was assigned its own agency, its own code of violence ('the law of the jungle'), and constructed by the state and its military apparatus as "an uncontrollable space providing refuge to an uncontrollable population." But the response there was large-scale deforestation, not genocide (Sioh, 1998). Still, the salience of Taussig's argument does not lie in the particular circumstances that he describes – which were surely exceptional – but precisely in the way in which such an extreme case establishes much more general *limits*.

For if his explanation is difficult to comprehend, Taussig believes that this is because we insist on clinging to the distinction between 'reality' and 'representation.' On his contrary reading, and conforming to the arguments I have been developing throughout this essay, the dilemmas of representation – revealed here through the monstrous deformations brought about by the discourse of normalization – are never 'merely' philosophical: they also constitute a powerfully charged means of domination. In trying to make sense of the insensible, the extraordinary brutality of the agents of the Peruvian Amazon Company, Taussig claims that "the terrors and tortures they devised mirrored the horror of the savagery they both feared *and fictionalized*" (Taussig, 1987: 121, 133). My added emphasis underscores what I said at the very start: imaginative geographies are never 'merely' representations because they have *practical, performative force*. More than this, Taussig's reading also shows that the discourses of domination and normalization are duals of one another. In their connectivity – in their contradictory combination – it becomes clear that separations between 'culture' and 'nature' are fabrications too, and that they come undone precisely because they have always been conjoined.

### Acknowledgments

I owe a particular debt to Cindi Katz for insisting so patiently and with such critical intelligence that I take the politics of nature seriously. Many thanks also to Bruce Braun and Noel Castree for their exemplary patience.



## Notes

- 1 It should be clear by now that I do not use the term 'the production of nature' in the economic sense of several Marxist theorists (see Castree's chapter 10, this volume). Rather, I want to focus attention on the 'productivities' of discourse and culture in, quite literally, making 'nature' visible and available for transformation within colonizing societies.

## Further Reading

Arnold's (1996) *The Problem of Nature* is an excellent introduction to productions of nature under colonialism. A special issue of the *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* (vol. 21, March 2000) is devoted to 'Constructing the Tropics' and contains a number of useful (and brief) essays. Sawyer and Agrawal (2000) address many of the themes discussed in this chapter and illustrate their importance for a contemporary cultural politics of nature. Blaut (1999) shows how assumptions about European nature continue to inform present-day polemics about modernity. For useful case studies see Gilmartin (1994) and Braun (1997).

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