

An Act of Bridging?

Shirley Brooks

Review Article

Text, Theory, Space:

Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia

edited by Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner & Sarah Nuttall

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In Rob Nixon's contribution to the edited collection, *Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia*, the writer Bessie Head is described as having been engaged in an 'iconoclastic act of geographical and historical bridging' (p. 252). In thinking about the collection as a whole, I have found this a fruitful phrase. Can the publication of *Text, Theory, Space* itself be said to constitute such an act? Is post-colonial studies itself not perhaps an 'iconoclastic act of geographical and historical bridging'? And if it is, what is the new position of the older disciplines that are gestured at in the phrase—that is, geography and history? Does post-colonial studies represent a meltdown of disciplinary boundaries, or is it more akin to a conversation between disciplines? How are these issues played out in the pages of the volume under review?

The project which emerged in the wake of the publication of Edward Said's (1978) book *Orientalism*—that of revisiting, reassessing and theorising the imperial and colonial experience which has shaped and continues to shape many of our societies—is necessarily an inclusive project. The post-colonial focus pulls together in new configurations concerns that used to be the subject material of particular academic disciplines. For example, because of the need to revisit the history of imperialism, scholars other than historians of the nineteenth century are now interested in this period. Similarly, people other than human geographers are now paying serious attention to space. Post-Foucault, it is widely recognised that mechanisms of spatial control are central to mechanisms of social control. Scholars like Said (1993) have pointed out that imperialism itself was an act of geographical violence which necessitated the control of space. More broadly, the plethora of new studies on space and spatial identi-

ties suggests that 'space' has become a central explanatory concept in contemporary social theory.

These new concerns are reflected in the key words included in the title and sub-title of the volume under review. Thus one finds the word 'history' in the sub-title of a book described as an 'unprecedented, landmark text in post-colonial criticism and theory' (inside cover)—a book in which the majority of contributors turn out to be, not historians, but literary theorists, or at least scholars of literature. Similarly, 'space' and 'land' are important markers in the title and sub-title of the volume. Both these concepts, like 'place' and 'landscape', are traditional concerns of human geographers and have engaged them for many years. Clearly, others are now interested in and working with these ideas too. The historians, historical geographers and cultural geographers whose work has traditionally focused on the intersections between history and geography in particular places, have been joined by a plethora of other voices.

This renewed interest, both theoretical and empirical, in the spatial and temporal nature of human experience, is all to the good. It should be welcomed rather than defended against by those of us trained in disciplines which have traditionally been centred on this problematic. For sub-disciplines like historical geography, which has tended to be empirically rich but theoretically poor, the injection of theory which accompanies the foray into post-colonial studies is an exciting development, long overdue.

However, I would argue that the melting-pot approach is neither desirable nor practicable. Rather like polka-dot underpants, disciplinary training tends to show through. This is a good thing: post-colonial studies can only be strengthened by the input of people who are sensitised to historical specificity, or who have thought deeply about space, place, and landscape. If I have a criticism of the collection *Text, Theory, Space*, it is that too little of this background—too few of the dots—show through. Despite the promise of the title, the editors have invited mainly literary theorists to contribute. Out of a total of sixteen contributors, it appears that only five are historians and, more troubling, only one (Sophie Watson) is a geographer.

This would not be an irremediable situation if writers showed themselves aware of work done in other disciplines. The footnotes of some scholars trained in literary studies show that a genuinely inter-disciplinary conversation has taken place. For example, David Bunn's fascinating paper on the Natal sugar baron William Campbell, who created and maintained a private game reserve, reveals a close reading of work by both historians and cultural geographers. Bunn's work consequently has a historical depth and sensitivity to spatial politics that is missing in some of the other contributions. Nhlanhla Maake, for example, writing on the changing politics of national symbols in South Africa over the course of the twentieth century, bypasses a rich historiography to cite a single history text. Thus while some contributors have come close to achieving a real bridging in their work, others have been less successful.

The remainder of the review considers the extent to which a cross-disciplinary conversation has taken place in this volume, and suggests ways in which 'post-colonial studies' has been, or could be, strengthened by an engagement with history and geography.

History and Colonial Comparisons

The editors of *Text, Theory, Space* should be congratulated on having attempted a comparative task which is long overdue. One of the obvious strengths of post-colonial studies is that it encourages comparisons between different contexts in which similar politics of conquest have been played out; between spaces in which the colonial experience has been roughly similar. For an English-speaking community of scholars, the spaces of the British settler colonies are an obvious focus. Thus the collection represents movement towards another kind of historical and geographical bridging, that between the pasts and scholarly traditions of Australia and South Africa. (It is worth noting that this volume can usefully be compared to another recently published comparative study focusing on South Africa and Australia, this time with an environmental focus—an edited collection entitled *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies*. (See Griffiths & Robin 1997.)

This bridging has not really happened before. At one level, it is puzzling, as Gillian Whitlock points out, that so

little attention has been paid to the settler states/invasor territories of Canada, South Africa and Australasia, although the 'white Dominions' were collectively important to imperialist thinking in Britain in the late nineteenth century (p. 65).

Whitlock suggests that the task has perhaps been avoided for political and strategic reasons. She is fully alert to the danger that in subverting political strategies (used, for example, in Commonwealth literary studies) which deliberately focused on processes of decolonisation rather than on the experience of colonial settler societies, one might inadvertently be repeating the initial act of silencing by rehabilitating the voice of the coloniser. Some of the contributors to this volume, including Whitlock herself, seek to avoid this trap by paying particular attention to the voices of white women, who were both part of and yet distinct from the 'masculine' colonial endeavour. The focus on women and the ambiguities of their gendered position in the colonial order, reflected in papers by Kerryn Goldsworthy, Michelle Adler, Kate Darian-Smith and Gillian Whitlock, is an important strength of *Text, Theory, Space*.

However, the danger I wish to highlight—one which links to my concern about the possible coalescence of disciplines in post-colonial studies—is that of glossing

differences between societies, of making broad generalisations about very different places. This is a danger to which historians perhaps are particularly alert. The papers in the volume which attempt a direct comparison between Australian and South African experiences (Gillian Whitlock, Liz Gunner, and Terence Ranger) are located on the knife-edge of this tension and are therefore most aware of it.

All three of these contributors handle this issue well. Liz Gunner is properly tentative about stretching comparisons between indigenous oral traditions across continents, from Zulu oral tradition to Aranda poetry: she places a question mark after the subtitle of the section of her paper which raises the possibility of 'cross resonances' (p. 125). Gillian Whitlock notes that one needs to proceed with caution when attempting to incorporate South Africa into comparative post-colonial frameworks. (Unlike Australia, South Africa is apparently only recently being looked at in this way, presumably because prior to the transition to democracy many overseas scholars felt it inappropriate to do research here.) The danger, as Whitlock sees it, is that post-colonial scholars become

raiders of the 'lost ark', turning to the 'new' South Africa to prove what we already know, seeking (and finding) evidence which justifies theories produced elsewhere (p. 68).

Terence Ranger's piece, which compares the symbolic history of two famous rock formations, the Matopos in Zimbabwe and Uluru (the former Ayers Rock) in Australia, is perhaps most sensitive to the dangers of comparison and is self-conscious in examining them. As an historian, Ranger is able to view the differences between the two places partly in terms of historiography—a perspective often missing elsewhere in the collection. In a fascinating reflection on the construction of academic knowledge, Ranger describes his thought process in researching and preparing the article. First, he was struck by the similarities between the two places. Later, he became increasingly aware of the differences. In particular, the history of the Matopos seemed far more dynamic than that of Uluru. There was an actively remembered black history and a much more active white history associated with the Matopos, whereas Uluru appeared to be associated with an ahistoric, dreamlike, Aboriginal past. Ranger came to the conclusion that these differences were differences in the way that history had been written, rather than in the histories themselves, and was able to caution the reader about this disparity in scholarly traditions. Interestingly, Ranger cites the work of a cultural geographer, Phillip Clarke, when suggesting how a more contested and dynamic view of Aboriginal relationships to the land could emerge (p. 164).

The only objection one could make to Terence Ranger's piece is that it is not set in South Africa, but in another southern African space, namely Zimbabwe. The

title of the volume does specify South Africa, and one wonders why the editors did not broaden the title to 'Southern Africa', or alternatively include work by historians and historical geographers who are working on similar topics in South Africa itself.

Geography and Colonial Spaces

The bridging which has taken place in *Text, Theory, Space* between post-colonial studies and recent work in geography, is less impressive. This is disappointing because, at first glance, this bridging appears to be one of the most important contributions that the collection has to make. Geographical concepts like space, land, and so on are privileged in the title as well as in the description by the editors of what the book is about—in their words, issues of 'land, space and cultural identity in South Africa and Australia' (p. 2). Spatial metaphors also predominate in the categories under which the papers are arranged. Thus Part One is 'Defining the South'; Part Two is 'Claiming Lands, Creating Identities, Making Nations'; and Part Three is 'Borders, Boundaries, Open Spaces'.

Unfortunately, these categories do not work particularly well: the papers seem to be rather randomly inserted into the different sections. One wonders why the fascinating papers on women and travel are found in 'Defining the South', for example, and are not flagged more clearly under a specific heading. (Why, for that matter, is David Bunn's paper on the setting up of a private game reserve part of 'Defining the South'?) The second section in particular becomes something of a hold-all, with seven papers grouped together in a way which obscures the real compatibility between some of them. For example, Tony Birch's excellent analysis of the attempted renaming of the Grampians National Park in Australia resonates strongly with Ranger's writing on conflicts over heritage, space and place.

This randomness may reflect a wider failure to engage seriously with geographic concepts. Certainly the promise of a focus on space, suggested by the section headings as well as by the title and the editors' introduction, is not fulfilled. If the 'complex interactions between space and power' (p. 2) are a dominant theme in the collection, why do so few papers focus on issues which are being explored in contemporary geography? Why are the technologies of spatial control through which empires were actually established, so conspicuous by their absence?

I am thinking, for example, of work on mapping as an exercise in spatial control. Tony Birch is one of the few contributors who mentions the power of maps. Birch's reference is to J.B. Harley's (1988; 1992) work on maps and control. (Due to an editorial oversight, Harley is mistakenly rendered as Hartley.) In attempting to understand the competing histories and claims to the landscape being played out in the contemporary landscape, Birch also takes seriously some of Paul Carter's (1987) ear-

lier work on 'spatial history'. This work looked at how, through mapping and surveying of what had been constructed as an empty social space, 'the land was ordered and labelled, becoming a colonial possession' (p. 180). Birch revisits the role of Mitchell, a figure about whom Carter also wrote in *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987). Mitchell was the colonial surveyor who mapped the area in which Birch is interested, and he shows how through mapping, Mitchell gave the land a new, British history, expunging the histories of indigenous people.

Birch also points out that mapping is closely allied to naming, as the names that places were given on maps inscribed the landscape with new identities. Generally these identities were recognisably British. Even when indigenous place names were used, this did not represent any kind of lingering resistance, but rather the unquestioned authority of the imperial power to appropriate the indigenous and turn it into something 'quaint' (p. 177).

Before leaving the mapping issue, it is worth noting the absence of any actual map, deconstructed or otherwise, in *Text, Theory, Space*.

Another, related disappointment is the failure of most contributors to take seriously spatial concepts and practices which centrally shaped the experience of colonised peoples and, indirectly, that of their colonisers. An excellent example is the idea of the 'reserve'—a term which epitomises British efforts to control and order the conquered environment. Reserves were created not only for animals, as discussed by David Bunn in his paper, but also for people. In South Africa, the spatial division of land which created the 'native reserves' in the nineteenth century formed the basis for the apartheid policy of spatial separation and the core of the bantustan system (Welsh 1971; Christopher 1994). In other parts of the former British empire, indigenous people continue to live in 'reservations'. Both David Bunn and Liz Gunner refer to Aldous Huxley's ([1932]1977:37,115) metaphorical Reserve or Reservation in *Brave New World*; but this is the closest one gets to a discussion of reserves. The word does not appear in the otherwise quite useful index.

Geographers are presently engaging in comparative work within a broadly post-colonial frame. Recent examples of such work include the 1994 collection *Geography and Empire* edited by Anne Godlewska and Neil Smith, as well as a similar collection edited by Heffernan, Bell and Butlin (1995). Contributors to these volumes are attempting to come to terms with the history of their own discipline, which is of course closely associated with the building of empires. Geographers provided support through their role as cartographers and by providing a 'scientific' rationale for environmentally-based ideologies of racial superiority current at the time (see Livingstone 1992).

In the Australian context, the geographer Jane Jacobs has recently published a book entitled *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City*, which looks at spaces she 'somewhat unfashionably refer(s) to as the "real" geographies of colonialism and

postcolonialism' (Jacobs 1996:3). In her book, Jacobs takes seriously the ways in which British imperialism carved its way through space and uses this understanding to analyse the current spatialised cultural politics of post-colonial Australia, including current anxieties around land claims. (It is interesting to note that, in the South African material included in *Text, Theory, Space* there are very few references to the current land reform process despite the promised focus on 'land'. This may be a function of the fact that the papers emerged from a conference and thus were prepared some time before the Department of Land Affairs' land reform programme got underway.)

Perhaps the reason that Jacobs is not referenced in *Text, Theory, Space* is that the two books appeared contemporaneously. Equally, and more problematically, it could be a function of the fact that scholars working in a literary studies disciplinary tradition are simply unaware of related work in geography. It is unfortunate that the conversation which could have taken place between disciplines in *Text, Theory, Space*, has not really occurred.

As already noted, the only explicitly geographical paper in the book is an urban planning paper by Sophie Watson. Watson's piece is located within recent planning literature, which attempts a reconsideration of the modernist assumptions of urban planning. Watson concludes her analysis of planning for multi-culturalism in Sydney by stating that 'planning has to break out from its rational, comprehensive strait-jacket and formulate new possibilities' (p. 214). This is an important contribution, but represents only a small part of the broad spectrum of contemporary geographical work that might have enriched a volume on post-colonial spaces.

Conclusion: Iconoclasm and Anxiety

What the volume *Text, Theory, Space* does bring out beautifully is the anxious underbelly of colonial power. The triumphalist narratives of a rampant imperialism are balanced, in several of the papers, by the eruption of suppressed or displaced fears on the part of participants in the colonial project. This theme is less fully explored for the South African case, and would present a fascinating direction for further work. In the Australian material, the theme of underlying anxiety is quite well developed. For example, in Paul Carter's piece, a suppressed fear of 'groundlessness' manifests itself in the Victorian psyche through a fascination with spiritualism. In Sue Rowley's chapter, bush-induced madness overtakes those who try to inhabit the land they have apparently claimed and domesticated.

These concerns resonate with Jane Jacobs' analysis of the controversy over the old brewery site on the Swan River in Perth. (It is interesting to note that Tony Birch also refers to this case, albeit to make a different point. See p. 178.) In claiming the old brewery site as a sacred space, an Aboriginal group destabilised the apparently solid ground beneath the feet of the white citizens of Perth. Jacobs shows how the

uncanny appearance of an ... unknowable Aboriginal sacred in the secular space of the city of Perth set in train an anxious politics of reterritorialisation (Jacobs 1996:130; see also Gelder & Jacobs 1995).

This is a theme which could usefully be explored in the current context of land reform in South Africa.

Moving away from the familiar is always anxiety-provoking. To return to the phrase with which I began this review, anxiety is implicit in the 'iconoclastic act of bridging' which participation in the project of post-colonial studies requires. One is being stretched beyond the comfort of disciplinary traditions and boundaries. But this tension and anxiety ought to be productive. While not losing sight of the strengths of (and differences between) disciplines, the mid-1990s seem to be presenting us with a moment of engagement, a moment when the potential for cross-disciplinary conversations is almost unlimited. The collection *Text, Theory, Space*, while representing an important beginning, still feels like a rather one-sided conversation. It is up to historians, geographers and literary theorists to engage with one another, thus continuing and deepening the conversation.

Department of Geographical and Environmental Sciences
University of Natal, Durban

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