

Daniel Clayton and Tariq Jazeel: 'Scratching the surface of the taken as given, as a process of unsettling': An interview with Tariq Jazeel about his book *Postcolonialism* (2019).

Introduction

I (Dan Clayton) commissioned this interview with Tariq Jazeel of University College London as co-editor (as I then was) of the *Scottish Geographical Journal*, to discuss Tariq's seminal book [*Postcolonialism*](#) (2019, and Figure 1), which, he notes, arose from his postgraduate course on *Postcolonial Cultural Geographies* (I have long taught a similar undergraduate course at St Andrews, on Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies, and in 2020, and again in 2021, used Tariq's book as an 'essential' seminar text). The book begins with two survey chapters, on the relations between geography and postcolonial theory, and the history of postcolonial geography, and a further eight topic- and question-oriented chapters that are organised in three sections, on "spaces," "Identity'/hybridity," and "knowledge."

The interview is a frequently used medium in postcolonial studies, and an important vehicle of cultural production, but one that is much underused in geography. The reasons for this latter (perhaps regrettable) eventuality are unclear, especially given critical human geography's core commitment to appraising context and dialogue, and its attentiveness to agency, voice and exclusion, and the promotion of new and diverse forms of cultural production and knowledge exchange. It is perhaps largely due to this disciplinary *mis-en-scène* that neither of us claim to be experts in the interview form, as such; rather, we felt our way, and in two formats and stages. I drafted a set of questions for Tariq (in December 2021) to respond to in writing, which he dutifully did in early 2022; and this written dialogue was then used as a springboard for an hour-long recorded conversation (in March 2022) between the two of us over Microsoft Teams, a discussion that sought to pick up on and run with just a few issues arising from the initial questions and responses. This manuscript layers the two – text and recording - hopefully in meaningful ways.

I Written questions and answers

DC Let's talk about your recent book, *Postcolonialism*, and as a means of asking about Tariq Jazeel and what he is working on today. As you show in this rich and important survey of the intersections between postcolonial and geographic thought and practice, postcolonialism revolves, in crucial ways, around matters of location, perspective, and belonging. So, in this vein, where does your book come from, and how does this 'where' imbue what you take postcolonialism and geography to be?

TJ One way to begin answering that question is to talk about the book's cover image. It's a black and white photograph, taken in 1952, of two South Asian women standing outside a Polling Station in West London having voted in the UK for first time. They are both dressed in their best saris, and both wear a look of pride, which I read as a certain satisfaction at having brought themselves into political representation in the UK, in London, for the first time. They are upper middle class Ceylonese migrants not long moved to the UK, in 1948 actually, so they grew up in British Ceylon believing London to rightfully be their capital city. It's a photograph that speaks to many of those issues that your question pushes at: their location in the post-imperial metropolis, their sense of belonging to post-imperial routed spatialities and the afterlives of those spatialities, and the politics of representation to which the very act of voting speaks, no matter how imperfect we know representative democracy to be. But anyone who's read the preface to my book will also know that

the photograph has quite a personal meaning for me, because the women in the photo are my grandmother and aunt, and this is a photo that my mother kept in her private album for 70 odd years. And in the preface, I write that their own routed histories, the traumas and struggles they faced along the way to becoming established and settled in London, have been key to my own location as a British born and educated Sri Lankan.

I guess what I'm saying is that the postcolonial – if one way of conceiving of that word is to mobilize the lingering effects of colonialism in the present – is inseparable from my own personal narrative, my own sense of myself. The spectre of coloniality is inseparable from my own life. So, it's a very personal book in some senses, at least many of my own preoccupations have gone into the writing of the book. It emerges from a desire to scratch the surface of the taken-as-given, and that desire is as personal as it is political or intellectual. In fact, that's a good segue into my current research project, which focuses on the recent history of British Asian dance music, or the so called 'Asian Underground', from around the mid-1990s to the late 2000s. I'm interested in this because this was the music I was into in my late teens and early 20s (still am actually!), and I think the music was an important vehicle, a mechanism, for bringing diasporic South Asian aesthetics into conversation with new and emergent notions of British public culture through the 90s. In other words, I guess I'm interested in that moment when people like me became slightly less 'uncool' and slightly more a part of the national conversation. (The music makes an appearance in Chapter 6 of the book as well incidentally!)

So, the book and my current work are both quite personal in these respects, but the other important answer to your question is that the book comes from the classroom. It emerges from my Masters level module, *Postcolonial Cultural Geographies*, which I have taught and developed over a number of years, both at the University of Sheffield and University College London. So, it's fair to say that what is in the book has also emerged from many inspirational conversations with some amazing students over the years. And to address the very last thing you asked – "how does this 'where' imbue what you take postcolonialism and geography to be?" – intellectually, I've always felt very comfortable taking some of these very personal explorations and queries into the classroom in a Geography department, because postcolonialism (at least in its literary theoretical instantiations, on which the class and book primarily focus) was always inherently geographical, all the way back. I'm certainly not the first person to make this point, but let's remember that the very phrase 'imaginative geography' comes from Said's *Orientalism* (1978).

DC There has been a lot of talk recently – and you have been very much part of this conversation – about the ongoing need to 'decolonise geography and geographical knowledges.' Why is there this need? *Inter alia*, postcolonial geography - the critical liaison you chart in your book – has been geared to this quest since the 1990s. So, does renewed insistence on the need (on multiple fronts) for 'decolonisation' mean that postcolonialism – and a postcolonial geography – has somehow failed, or at least remains radically incomplete?

TJ As you well know, we work in a discipline whose history is inseparable from the colonization of more than half the world. The very foundations of Geography as a disciplinary branch of knowledge are inseparable from the cultures of 19th and early 20th century travel, scientific exploration, masculinity and 'discovery' that drove coloniality. For me, what that means is that our discipline as we know it has been built on politically – and thus intellectually – dubious foundations; that is to say, on histories of exclusion, extraction, dispossession, disenfranchisement, and the systemic marginalization of the geographical imaginations of many, many people. And if we take a look

around us now, we can't help notice the structural whiteness and traces of coloniality that still pervade the discipline in British universities. I don't just mean the obvious ethnicity gap in most British university Geography departments (North American, continental European, and Australasian universities follow similar patterns of course), but also things like the anglophone squint of our intellectual transactions, the EuroAmerican institutional affiliations of the vast majority of authors who publish in our major journals, the embedded and sticky intellectual hierarchies in peer and funding review processes, and the depressing forms of sexual abuse and misogyny that we know remain with us. This is why geography needs decolonization, which at its simplest I take to mean a process of opening, of making more space for difference, of pluralization. But I think this also connects to the challenge of weaving a much wider tapestry, or set of tapestries, of geographical knowledge. Everybody thinks spatially, everyone has a geographical imagination, so part of the intellectual and political challenge of being a geographer has, for me, been to try to create the conditions for more and more of those geographical imaginations to come into representation on their own terms.

I'm not sure I accept the premise of the question about whether the renewed imperative to decolonize geography means that postcolonialism has failed, mostly because I don't quite know that it ever set out to complete anything! As I said in response to the first question, for me one of the key insights that postcoloniality gives is that we live with the remains of colonialism. We cannot easily imagine away those remains, undo them so to speak. And I hope it doesn't come across as an apology for colonialism to say that some I wouldn't want to undo. For example, I've already talked about my own family's trajectory, which normatively speaking is not something I would want to 'undo'. But I think we can make more of these colonial remains visible, address their social and spatial effects, and critically and politically engage with them. In this sense, postcolonialism is for me a methodology, one amongst many with which critical geographers might usefully engage.

DC A follow-on question: You have positioned your work as postcolonial (as have I). But then, seemingly quite suddenly (about 5 or so years ago), the term 'decolonial' started to rapidly gain traction, and it now looms large in geography. The term 'decolonial' has seemingly supplanted 'postcolonial.' What is the difference between a 'postcolonial' and 'decolonial' geography? Is there an element of marketing about this shift – a repackaging of what 'the postcolonial' did before, or a new recipe? Or does decolonial herald the arrival of new voices and approaches – a new sense of ownership of, or purpose to, some of the issues that animate this critical domain? Do postcolonial and decolonial geographies come from different places and times – and if so, why might that matter?

TJ I want to carefully avoid any attempt to answer this question by providing any definitions! But you're right, the decolonial, the postcolonial, and let us also add into the mix a renewed geographical interest in the anticolonial (see Davies 2020), all jostle with one another. They intersect, they overlap, they bleed into one another as we deploy them today, and this is something I've thought about a lot because at times it can be a bewildering intellectual history and geography to get to grips with. I think for a long time the postcolonial has appeared to many to be a theoretical term (and often a quite scary one!) in no small part due to the trajectory of postcolonial literary theory from the late 1970s onwards, which of course has been routed through some quite complicated theoretical terrains like poststructural deconstructivism and psychoanalysis. Decolonial writing of course has its own perhaps wider and older lineages, from the anti-colonial Francophone writings of Fanon, Senghor, Césaire and others, through the Latin American M/C/D tradition, to work that variously emerges from Indigenous studies to remind us, as Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2021)

have put it, that for many 'decolonization is not a metaphor'. And my sense is that these practical inflections of decoloniality are important, because they signal an invitation to some kind of activism, to strategic and practical change and achievable goals that perhaps the postcolonial conceived as theoretical domain doesn't quite precipitate. So yes, my sense is that the decolonial does call into its orbit a wider array of actors because of some its more tangible and practical touchstones, like the call to decolonize the curriculum, dename or rename spaces, rewrite heritage narratives, remove an offensive statue or monument, or repatriate the spoils of conquest. However, as I said in my answer to the previous question, for me decoloniality at its core has to also be about pluralization, about opening and creating more space for difference. So sometimes I worry about the subtractive implications that the prefix 'de-' implies for an ongoing critical engagement with colonialism's lingering effects. But sometimes I worry too much!

DC In your book you argue (i) that postcolonial and decolonial dynamics of identity, power and belonging cannot be critically interrogated without the deployment of geographic ideas of place, space, environment, context, difference, and scale; and that (ii) matters are complicated in this regard by the fact that geography has been tool of empire *par excellence* (and remains so, in some quarters, today). How do you work through this tension as someone situated in the academic echelons of geography, and how is your activist and identity work related to this recognition?

TJ As it has been for many, Said's *Orientalism* (1978) was a formative text for me, and that book contains a couple of rather brilliant epigraphs, one of which is a line from Benjamin Disraeli's 1847 novel *Tancred*, which simply reads: "The East is a Career." That epigraph has been a reminder that European disciplinary scholars are the inheritors of a long tradition of Orientalising discourse about the 'non-West'. As a geographer who for most of my career has worked on Sri Lanka, that has been a salutary reminder about the ethics of responsibility, accountability, and fidelity that I think are required when we engage in close and critical readings of any elsewheres. In fact, I wrote and co-wrote a series of pieces some years ago that tried to work through these ethical conundrums and double binds (see Jazeel 2011; Jazeel and McFarlane 2007, 2010), all of which emerged as I tried to get to grips with the difficulties of getting under the skein of the Sri Lankan spatial formations and politics with which I was trying to deal, and in which I felt it important to intervene. One of the things I realised quite early on in my career was how important my Area Studies community was for me in my work on Sri Lanka, by which I mean Sri Lankan Studies and South Asian Studies. And I guess I also realised how often the concerns of these communities diverged from those of my disciplinary community. In other words, some of the conceptual terrains that seemed so very important to discuss, debate, and muddle through at AAG or IBG conferences were just irrelevant and, to be blunt, a waste of intellectual and political energy in the context of Sri Lankan Studies! I mention this to stress that, for me, tacking between Area Studies and disciplinary Geography has always been a crucial way of negotiating the tensions about which you ask. I don't just mean intellectually, but practically as well. For example, it was important that my first two books, both of which focussed on Sri Lanka, were taken on by publishers who could make them available in Sri Lanka such that the ideas, provocations, and interventions might have a public and political life there.

But to be clear, I've never considered myself an activist. Like most academics, of course I want my work to be read, and to be part of the debates with which it seeks to engage, but there are many brave and fearless decolonial activists who regularly agitate, organize and take forms of direct action to whom it would be a disservice to call what I do activism. As an academic though, I can and do get involved in the more humdrum committee and institutional work that radical politics needs, I think, to articulate with. And let's not forget that we teach! I've often thought that one of the most

impactful things I can hope to do as an academic is to help students to think critically about the world in which they are immersed, to stimulate their desires to make change, to make the world a better place.

DC I have been particularly struck by the innovative use you make of three 's' words in your work: scale (meaning crisis and balance, as in scales of justice, as well as different spatial and temporal scales); a related word, 'singularity' (at once a profoundly locational and perspectival); and subaltern, the subject of another recent – edited – work of yours on *Subaltern Geographies* (Jazeel and Legg 2019). Comment?

TJ To be honest, I'd never really thought to explicitly engage with scale, so it's really interesting that this is a concept that you've read out of my work. And now I think about it, I can see how I've perhaps been grappling with scale without realising. What I mean is that both singularity and subalternity have been some kind of attempt to shift my scales of analysis, or at least frames of analysis, in order to think beyond the categorical taxonomies that modernity gives us with which to come to terms with difference. With regards singularity, it was really in the context of the recent and very exciting work in Geography, particularly Urban Geography, on comparative urbanism. It seemed to me to make sense to simply ask what are the kinds of unique spatial differences, the particularities, that comparison can unwittingly mask? Another word that becomes very important here is 'translation', or at least that which is untranslatable, which I think is an incredibly productive motif with which to think about the challenge to bring radical difference into representation on terms true to the singularity of its difference.

With regards subalternity, of course I've been inspired in this work by the Subaltern Studies Collective's writings that, after Gramsci, have encouraged us to think about that which is not represented in the colonial (or other) archive, except as either silence or problem. Methodologically, Gayatri Spivak's literary theoretical critique of the Subaltern Studies historical project (1988) has been equally inspiring for me insofar as it, first, pointed to the ethical and practical challenges of bringing subalternity into representation on its own terms, and second, showed us that subaltern difference necessarily always moves elsewhere (which connects to my previous point about the unavoidable incompleteness of postcolonialism). The book that Steve Legg and I edited (2019) was an attempt to think these concerns through Geography. What does a subaltern geography look or feel like? What methodological and spatial imperatives does that formulation offer us as a disciplinary community? And again, I think these questions are about what has fallen away from our view as geographers, what it is too easy to not see because of the scales and frames of analysis that are second nature to us -

DC I am struck today by how, on the one hand, we have a spate of new work (eg by figures such as Antoinette Burton, Priyamvada Gopal, Walter D. Mignolo, and Miles Ogborn in our discipline) that recovers long histories and geographies of resistance to colonialism, and auto-critiques of empire, from their generative origins/scenes - what Mignolo (2021) terms 'the colonial matrix of power' - through to the post-war age of decolonisation, and current decolonising struggles; yet how, on the other hand, and as Priya Satia (2020) shows in her recent *Time's Monster*, the re-emergence of 'history wars' and 'cultures wars' that stoke division, and, as Will Davies (2021) shows, are part and parcel of our social media age. Do these two forces constitute a kind of critical battlefield today?

Perforce, will there be a winner and loser, or a truce, or will we end up with an everywhere/forever war? Are we stuck in a kind of ground-hog day of decolonisation?

TJ With respect to the culture wars, at the moment I find it difficult to not be pessimistic about the concerted efforts of this government to shape public bodies in its image. I despair at its so called 'war on wokery', and its systematic attempts to criminalize and demonize meaningful anti-racist work just as it rolls out its own farcical and performative nods to a set of issues that matter to the majority (cf. the CRED Report). On the other hand, some of the responses across civil society and public and charitable bodies fill me with optimism. I think we are seeing something of a galvanization and coming together of many who want genuine change, including the re-narrativization of 'British history' to reckon with its colonial and slave trading past, a proper conversation about institutional racism and endemic whiteness in contemporary Britain, and the linking of climate justice with racism and social inequality, for example. Maybe I'm naïve to be optimistic, and it's interesting you mention social media in the asking of this question, because a lot of the positive that we see happens in the ephemeral and spectacular terrain of hashtag politics, whilst this government know well how to control the weft and warp of public debate with a few strategic interventions here and there. Nonetheless, I sense that decolonization is on the tip of many tongues at the moment, from the National Trust's membership (I joined in the wake of their 2020 report!) through the growing group of Geography schools teachers who since the summer of 2020 came together to organize as the [Decolonizing Geography Educators](#) network (they number over 170 now) and are now producing an amazing set of resources and platforms for the growing number of geography teachers interested in shifting discussion in their classrooms. I want to be optimistic, I think we have to be.

DC Do you think there is a greater moral awareness and urgency to activism around questions of colonialism, empire, racism and decolonisation today than before? If so, what accounts for it, what has changed, and to what extent is this linked to a rekindling of interest in 20th-century anti-colonial and anti-racist thought (from Gandhi and Césaire to Du Bois, Fanon, Malcolm X and Angela Davis, and Cedric Robinson).

TJ In terms of politico-intellectual engagements in the continued work of decolonization, pressure and momentum have been building over the last decade or so in this country, and in Geography, through that period, I've certainly noticed a renewed interest in how our discipline deals with these issues. But I want to be careful to stress that colonialism's presence in the present is something that has concerned writers and activists in many different geographical contexts since coloniality and its pernicious effects could be identified. It's not a new struggle. But your question I think pushes at the emergent moral awareness within public culture of these issues, and we shouldn't underestimate the effect that George Floyd's murder had in terms of igniting something globally that had perhaps been latent within and across societies separated geographically, but united by global mediascapes and intertwined histories of imperialism, colonization and migration.

In the UK, since the summer of 2020 I think there's definitely been an emergent anti- or decolonial structure of feeling. Maybe that's my optimism again, but I think you can feel it. However, in public culture at least I think it's less inspired by the figures you mention, and more by contemporary commentators on the politics of racialization, policing, and whiteness in Britain. For example, if you're lucky enough to still have a high street bookstore you're likely to see books by Renni Edu Lodge, Akala, David Olusoga, or Nikesh Shukla on display, but you'd have to look a little harder or perhaps order online a copy of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, DuBois's *Souls of Black Folk*, or Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*. Perhaps that's because right here and now, there's a

greater concern with how imperialism and colonialism have shaped contemporary Britain (the writers your question mentions were, of course, not primarily concerned with British society).

There's lots more I could say here, particularly around the necessity for academic work on decolonization and postcoloniality to reach a broader audience, to tap into and speak to this structure of feeling, this conjuncture. However, I fear I might drift too much from your question. What I would briefly say, however, is that there is a generation of new scholars whose work excites me in this respect, and are publishing books that speak into this moment in all kinds of exciting and politically energizing ways. I'm thinking here of books like Luke de Noronha's *Deporting Black Britons* (2020), Maya Goodfellow's *Hostile Environment* (2019), or Gurminder Bhambra, Dalia Gabriel and Kerem Nisancioglu's edited volume *Decolonizing the University* (2018). These are the books I want others to find in my local bookstore!

DC In *Postcolonialism*, you track how questions of environment, nature, ecology and climate have assumed an increasingly central place in the critical interrogation of colonialism and empire, past and present. Are postcolonial and decolonial geographies now inescapably environmental and climate geographies too? If so, where does culture (a bulwark of postcolonial theory) fit?

TJ Yes! Or to put that slightly differently, environmental and climate geographies are also inescapably postcolonial and decolonial concerns. It's not controversial to say that colonization and environmental change are umbilically connected. What is more difficult is the action to think and work our way out of the impending, and current, climate crisis by tackling the ongoing legacies of colonization. And that I think is the point that needs to be clearly made, and is being made with increasing regularity and potency today. That said, having witnessed the political inertia dressed up as 'corporate climate activism' at COP26 in Glasgow, like many I'm not that optimistic.

As to the role of 'culture' in this relatively recent conversation between postcolonialism and environmentalism, for me it has always been postcolonial literary theory in its deconstructive variants that has productively troubled the implied separation of nature from culture that the very word 'culture' implies. As we know, the nature/culture binary has been one of the Enlightenment's foundational precepts, and thinking historically about the relationship between text and world we shouldn't underestimate how sticky, present and haunting that binary is. Historically, that imaginative cleaving of nature from culture – as if the environment and environmental change have nothing to do with cultures of colonization, exploration and extraction – has precipitated untold environmental destruction and land dispossession. But the binary remains with us in other ways too. For example, our own disciplinary separation between Human and Physical Geography follows that very same logic. And let us also be clear that some forms of 'environmental protection' and 'preservation' have resulted in the very same forms of dispossession. For example, the UK created a Marine Protected Area around the Chagos archipelago in the Indian Ocean in 2010 in order to prevent the UN General Assembly being able to order the return of native Chagosians that it forcibly removed in the 1970s at the request of the USA, to whom it agreed to cede Diego Garcia. The Permanent Court of Arbitration declared in 2015 that the MPA is illegal, yet Britain still boasts of its world leading marine conservation work in what it still (illegally, I believe) calls the 'British Indian Ocean Territories'.

As I've already said, decolonial geography should be about pluralization, about allowing many more geographical imaginations to come into representation on their own terms, and that I think is exactly what the expertise and debates around the Anthropocene and environmental change today

require; a realization that the Anthropocene is one narrative of environmental crisis and destruction amongst many others; that there is a world full of environmental and 'sustainability' expertise amongst communities who have lived at the sharp end of environmental change for generations. Cultural dialogue is what is required more than ever.

DC In *Postcolonialism* you track debates (and some in-fighting) within the ranks of postcolonial theory about how this body of theory is skewed towards questions of epistemology, and at the expense of a reckoning with issues of materiality. How do you read this debate?

TJ Well, one of the book's main arguments is that, epistemologically, postcolonial geography must centrally be concerned with the politics of representation to effectively and critically engage with colonialism's iniquitous afterlives. But I felt this kind of epistemological assertion required some qualification in our discipline, particularly in the context of a recent history of intellectual debates in British Geography around the centrality of representation to the production of spatial meaning. To be clear, these were never really *my* debates as such, but I think a generation of British cultural geographers grew up in the shadow of a very visible and often quite noisy set of transactions from the mid-1990s onwards between approaches to landscape, space and place that foregrounded the representational production of meaning and power, and non-representational critiques and pushbacks. For me, these were usefully tempered by Hayden Lorimer's (2005) motif of the more-than-representational, but I confess that I felt quite alienated by those debates. I think it was because I worked ethnographically and historically in a very different context, southern and central Sri Lanka, where I was centrally concerned with the politics of landscape experience, or affect, but had a heightened sense of the radically different metaphysical and aesthetic contexts in which experience and embodiment needed to be located and thus understood. In other words, I did not really want to choose between representation and non-representation, and it was that very postcolonial proclivity to always historicize difference, to locate it contextually, that really provided me with an epistemological way forward that seemed to bypass any need to make that pernicious choice that debates in Geography at the time seemed to be pushing me into.

In the book – which it's important to re-emphasize, is a book written from the disciplinary location of Geography – I guess I wanted to make the point that, in my reading at least, postcolonial literary theory has never really forced that choice between materiality and representation. Despite its preoccupations with textuality, context, voice, and who speaks for whom, its preoccupations have always been deeply materialist insofar as they are concerned with historicizing the real, the material, the taken-as-given, and its production. I try to make this clear in the book and I'm really pleased you picked up on this! For example in my reading of Said's *Orientalism* (1978) in Chapter 3, I try to emphasize that despite Said's deep engagement with repertoires of nineteenth and early twentieth century orientalist discourse, *Orientalism* is nonetheless a deeply materialist text. It is concerned with understanding how the meaning of the materially real is produced historically, and it thus epistemologically forces us to confront the inseparability of world and text. To this extent, I've found it useful to read Said's collection of essays *The World, The Text, and The Critic* (1983) alongside *Orientalism*, because it's there that he expounds on that ontological inseparability of world and text, materials and their meanings. I guess I simply wanted to make the point critical postcolonial geographical interventions don't need to choose between text and materiality!

DC Why, in your view, is the geography of the present a colonial geography of conflict (anger, violence, insularity, and division) rather than a more 'postcolonial' geography of co-existence (connection, diversity, common critical purpose)? What are the prospects of getting from the one to the other? Does the one inevitably hide in, necessitate, or will the other, as the dialecticians (Fanon, Sartre etc) have argued?

TJ I'm not sure I entirely agree with that characterization. Diversity, generosity and connection, and critical reflections on history are amongst us, and we've just talked about emergent de- and anti-colonial structures of feeling in public culture more broadly. But yes, undoubtedly it's fair to say that nationalism, insularity, discursive and physical violence, denial, and imperial nostalgia are very visible in our present, and furthermore that these are all articulating with conservative political power at an alarming spread. Why?

Well, I don't think these shifts are disconnected from the history and present of racial capitalism; in other words, paraphrasing Ruth Wilson Gilmore, we are at a global conjuncture where the state-sanctioned, extra-legal and discursive normalization of group differentiated vulnerability to premature death, incarceration, or immobility, is embedded in our institutions, our geographies, even our social imaginations. But still, why? It's worth remembering that the history of colonialism and imperialism isn't just a quirk of global history that historians can choose to deal with or not. Early on in *Culture and Imperialism* (1983, p.6), Said reminds us that by 1914 Europe held some 85% of the earth as colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions or commonwealths. That's astonishing! And it should bring home to us the simple fact that the history of colonialism is the history of the world as we know it, as we have inherited it. Undoing colonialism is simply not possible in as much as colonialism *is* the ground beneath our feet. To a point, I'm with Walter Dignolo here when he stresses that the world, or modernity, *is* coloniality. The question then is how we go on, and for me the hard work is to continually, critically and practically, intervene in those taken-as-given spatial and social forms of coloniality that we have inherited; to make that ground beneath our feet more equitable, more diverse, more just. Though there is a lot to be pessimistic about right now, I am an optimist and I think this is worth fighting for in whatever ways we can. But I guess mine is an optimism that fully recognizes that the struggle is permanent. Subalternity will always move elsewhere, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't work hard to bring subalternity into representation on terms true to the singularity of difference. That, for me, is the methodological and ethical lesson we learn from Spivak. To close then, it's perhaps worth me quoting my good friend and colleague, Sharad Chari (2020, p.186), who wrote the following in a review symposium on my book: "Unless every drop of water, every dream, and every form of life is free from domination by imperial (hence racial, gendered, sexual, capitalist) power, postcolonialism remains a dream, perhaps the only dream worth having." That, I think, is the point.

II Transcript

The work of unsettling

DC In true critical human geography fashion, I very much liked the way you not only sought to answer the questions I'd sent, but also, in places, interrogate their premises and take them in different and unexpected directions. One aspect of your answer to the first question raised, and imbuing your answers to many of the other questions too, concerns the 'inside and outside': of how, and, importantly, from where, we set up a critique of something that's dominant? As you know, and write about at length in Chapters 3 and 8 of the book, this concern is one of the conundrums of

Said's *Orientalism*, and also of subaltern theory. How do you know something well enough to say that it's pervasive, and is it then possible to stand outside it in order to criticise it?

TJ Yes, thanks, a great question. I guess what I'm saying about the postcolonial is that one way of conceiving of that word is to mobilize it, if you will, to recognise the lingering effects of colonialism in the present; they are inseparable from my own narrative; the spectre of coloniality is inseparable from my own life.

DC So, what we have also got with these inside/outside scenarios is the word 'lingering' and, with it, a sense of lived actuality. And this is something that always strikes me as a real tension, of living inside and with things that we'd like to change and step beyond; and such a sentiment becomes pronounced in recent decolonial thought, much of which starts in the premise of the actuality of colonialism in the present, making it difficult to ringfence – or extract for analysis - the question of what is a lingering colonial effect from the past, and what is not. The decolonial wants to put a lot of stuff in the here and now, and in ways – it strikes me - that the postcolonial does not quite. Your answer to the question, and dialogue here, is lovely, because it helps us to see that when the postcolonial talks about lingering effects, that lingering is about now as well. It is not something that's just a trace. It's not just something that's weak or faint. There's something that's visceral now.

And this relates to another answer that you gave, further along, about Said. There's a wonderful piece by Said, written not long before he died in 2003 [Said 2000], where he talks about how Western-colonial imaginative geographies are so pernicious because 'they run roughshod over the actuality of the geography of the inhabitants' (or something like that). His point was that you could have an imaginative geography of anywhere without necessarily having any specific knowledge of the actuality of what's happening on the ground in the places that the imaginative geography refers to (i.e. captures and contains – colonises), which is another way of putting that question of the lingering and the actual. So, I wonder what you make of this. It's an issue of temporality - one dear to my heart as the inveterate historical geographer – a question of where the past ends and the present starts?

TJ Later on in my answers I say something about the historical factuality of colonialism and colonial encounters; that we can't undo the world that colonialism made. That statistic from Said's *Culture and Imperialism* about how, by 1914, Europe held some 85% of the earth's surface as colonies, territories, or dominions – a statistic that has always stuck with me for two reasons: first, to affirm that the material facts of colonialism are geographical facts; and second in terms of contemplating just how much of the world or the earth has been written and produced through colonial encounter, and thus how expansive the lingering is likely to be.

So, in terms of your question here about the relationship between actuality and the past, I just find it very difficult to separate the two.

DC So is the way to go, here, with Walter Mignolo's argument (2021) that modernity *is* coloniality, that there is no outside?

TJ I am with Mignolo to an extent - there is no outside; yet I don't think this means that you can't engage in the practice and project of critique; I don't think that intervention is impossible, from the inside. One of the expressions I use quite frequently is 'scratching the surface of the taken as given' - scratching beneath the surface of the taken as given, it's a process of unsettling, isn't it? And I think that postcolonial critique gives us as a way of making strange that which is so familiar to us, that which we don't question, that we kind of naturalize, right? A lot of the book is about this unsettling of the taken as given, and how and why it can be quite disconcerting. It's deconstruction really, but

one of its effects can be that the ground beneath our feet is left very unstable. But out of all of this, I think what's really important is that one knows why one is doing it, this scratching and unsettling, and that's where the question of the political comes in. For the attempt to pluralise and unsettle is an attempt to make that ground beneath one's feet more equitable, right? And working historically on how what needs unsettling has emerged, how things have been accreted, is important.

DC I've just done a piece on Cole Harris's new book [*A Bounded Land* 2021; Clayton 2022], which is a collection of essays on settler colonialism in Canada. Some of my comments are very personal (he was my supervisor and mentor) but a more general maxim of his springs to mind: he repeatedly told me, as a student, to look at things as they are, and look at them closely, but knowing that they are never quite as they seem. There's a modern ethos at work here about the role of the intellectual.

TJ Yeah, I think so, and that's also why I think the conversations we have in teaching are really important, and this relates to a further question you had asked me about activism. I am careful to point out in my teaching that I don't consider myself an activist. But one of the things I also think, and I think I gesture towards in my answer to your question about activism, is that what often gets written out of what we do, in terms of accounting for our research work, our 'impact,' is the teaching we do, and the politics of the teaching we do. And of course the students in our classes are people who are probably going to go on and have far more exciting and politically active lives than me. So yes, encouraging them to do exactly what Cole Harris says, you know, open-up that critical potential in students. I think that's really important.

DC Harris is also acutely aware of the whole question of the politics of location and enunciation in Canada. He describes himself as a product of settler colonialism (his grandad was a colonist): who am I, he says, to tell indigenous peoples how to struggle or what to struggle for? Yet at the end of the day, he insists that there is still an onus on him to represent, which he does by seeking to unsettle both settler Canadian narratives of possession and entitlement, and the idea of some pristine or authentic decoloniality (in the sense, he insists, that Indigenous peoples in Canada have become sophisticated users of modern power – more sophisticated, in some ways, than settler Canadians). For him – as for me, his student imbibing this sentiment, and as you intimate in many of your answers - it's about pluralizing and unsettling at the same time.

TJ I think that's absolutely right in the sense, again, that the point of postcolonial work is to trouble the present and think historically about how we have got to where we are. So, you know, to paraphrase Foucault, a lot of this work is about doing a history of the present, right?

DC Indeed. One thing that crept up on me as I was reading your answers was how you read the uncanny, or unsettling, nature of the postcolonial injunction to question domination and injustice, and question it by calling it alien, by making it seem 'not given'

TJ That's exactly what I mean by scratching beneath the surface of the taken as given, and I'm glad you draw attention to the uncanny and unhomey. A lot of the book is about questioning given ideas, of nature, society, cities, of whether there are ways of thinking about self and society that bypass concepts of identity with a capital I, for example; whether there might be other ways of thinking about forms of spatial organization that exceed 'cityness', as another example; other ways of conceiving of environmental worlding that the binary implications of the word 'nature' don't capture [see Chapters 2, 5, 6 of the book]. How do we make concepts that are familiar to us strange? And there are many similarities here between postcolonial theory and queer theory. There's a lot to talk about here with respect to that effort to make strange when you think about queer as a verb and not a noun.

Changing postcolonial times?

DC Let's turn a little to the relationship between history and theory, as a way into the postcolonial present as you set out in the book and in your answers. As you know, postcolonial theory has tended to trade on two key moments (cluster of centuries, concepts, and prospects, really): the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Much that we regard as the 'destructive legacy' of colonialism is traceable to the aspirations and failures of these moments: Renaissance faith in the idea of humanity and civility, and yet denying it to the peoples it colonised; the contradiction of the Enlightenment in promising freedom and liberty but delivering it by means of extortion, slavery, wanton violence and destruction (the contradiction pinpointed in Susan Buck-Morss's *Hegel and Haiti* (2009)). What was fluid and potentially auspicious about imperial connections and colonial encounters, as promising a "universal history" geared to reason, emancipation and betterment, soon soured and became permanently deleterious.

Where am I heading with this? I guess to my next question, which is about whether you think we live in a fundamentally different time now, in terms of what needs to be unsettled, than the Enlightenment. I mean, look, categories of the state, civilization, race, a lot of these things that are still the focal points of activist destabilization and critique are still very much Enlightenment products, aren't they, in various ways? So are we still 'of' this time? Are we, in the sense these categories are also the products of an Enlightenment project of reason that gives activism and struggle their unsettling mission, it gives struggle and critique a way of articulating this by saying 'we're doing this in the name of reason but it's all being very unreasonable, the way things have panned out, yeah?

I mean, one of the things that I've been talking with students about a lot of this last year is about the idea that we live now in an age of impunity, that nothing holds anymore, that democratic ideals don't hold, that ideals of liberty have been shown to be bogus. We're here in the realm of Achille Mbembe's (2019) argument in *Necropolitics*, that 'we' in the West live in a world characterised by a constant and escapist production of an outside world upon which we project all badness while trying to immunize ourselves from the horror that is going on within 'our' worlds. So, I wondered whether you think we are in a different age, with different benchmarks for activism now than before? An age of impunity that is fundamentally different to an age of reason? Can activism and critique still revolve meaningfully around Enlightenment or Renaissance categories of modernity, of system, of nature, of culture, of civilization? Or should critical work proceed in different ways?

Apologies now for going on a bit, but I'm thinking here of Mark Lilla's (2016) *The Shipwrecked Mind*, which relates the thesis that the idea of revolution, of emancipation, that quintessentially modern project of struggle and progress that comes from the Enlightenment, is over because people no longer believe that revolution does anything, because history does not now appear to head in any particular direction (that makes any sense any more), but is caught in a vicious loop or cycle, bringing us back to an almost Hobbesian world, a populist world in which all the reactionary (supplanting the revolutionary) sees is the detritus of history flowing past and hope (however forlorn) for the restoration of some golden land or mythic order (which is the world of Trump, Johnson, Putin, isn't it, a world of bogus promises)? So, are postcolonial politics, activism, teaching, scholarship aligned with this present, this reactionary present, if you will, or something else, some other, different, time or space?

TJ What a question, and I guess I'm trying to work out whether you're asking whether I still believe in politics, or whether this is a question around the post-political?

DC OK, let's assume you do still believe in politics – some sense of the political; let's keep the term.

TJ I think it would be churlish to seek to be in age that makes a conscious break from the Enlightenment and some of the Enlightenment ideals that we would want to hold onto, right? And many of those Enlightenment ideals that you've mentioned – so, democracy, liberty, emancipation, revolution – I think that much of the postcolonial project seeks to reconfigure those terms and think our way out of their colonial baggage in what the context of what you are referring to as a kind of age of impunity.

We still hold on to the idea, in some sense, for example, of *progress in human geography*, or *progress in physical geography*, right, and we still want to hold on to notions of liberty, freedom and democracy. But still, we are also acutely aware that such terms and ideals have been manufactured, historically, in specific kinds of ways, and more to the point, in such a way that they can mean and do anything, actually. So, I guess I don't want to argue for or signal some kind of severance or break from all that we want to hold dear about the Enlightenment project, but I do want to critically engage with some of the trajectory of some of what the Enlightenment gave us.

DC I guess one way of reading the current moment would be to say that, if anything, it reaffirms just how crucial these Enlightenment values are – as you say at the end of your book, these are projects we need to keep dreaming of. In this age of impunity, as the lid is blown off so many things, is it not the force of these critical ideals that we need to harness?

TJ There is a major issue here, about speaking truth to power. For example, we can over romanticize contemporary mediascapes in this country [UK], the role that social media plays. But I think there has been a surge, a certain kind of opening-up, of the media landscape to make it able to do critical work a bit more effectively, even though I'm suspicious of social media in the sense that it's so easy to live in our own socially mediated echo chambers. I make this point in my written answers to you. The government knows how to control public discourse, and yet there is a critical sensibility in society today and a nurturing of debates via social media which is a good thing. The work of articulating with power, how radical politics articulates with power and powerful institutions, is hugely important in this respect.

This brings back to me a piece I did a few years ago (for the 2017 RGS-IBG conference) on decolonizing geographical knowledge, about 'mainstreaming' decolonial geography, about how to mainstream something that was and still could be deemed marginal. I guess I worry, sometimes, about whether efforts to decolonise geography want to remain on the margins rather than become pivotal, transformative. But I also worry about virtue signalling and not getting distracted from a fulsome thinking about radical politics and how or whether it is able to shape the mainstream.

Activism and cultural production

DC A final set of reflections, one that I know head into matters that are very dear to your heart (and comes up in a number of your written answers), and one close to mine, too (in the guise of my own interest in the tropicity movement in Brazil): it is about flight and infusion – of having roots, but of those roots moving around, and recombining and taking different shapes elsewhere. I have in mind Robin Kelley's (2013) fine study of the Black American jazz musician Thelonious Monk, where he shows how anti-racism has been prosecuted and sustained through the non-essentialist form of

music and artistic production. I am thus intrigued by the Asian dance music that is part and parcel of you and your career, and how it fits your wider unsettling postcolonial project.

TJ That's a great question. One of the essays that has been hugely influential to me, for me, is Stuart Hall's (2006) 'New Ethnicities' essay, which is effectively a critique of Salman Rushdie's review of the *Handsworth Songs* film, as well as *The Passion of Remembrance*, made by members of the Black Audio Film Collective. Hall's critique of Rushdie's somewhat unfavourable review runs along the lines of ... this is a review that is written from the comfortable position of a Guardian film reviewer; and yet these films, emerging from this collective are so new in terms of form, in terms of film language, Hall insists, that we don't yet really have the tools with which to engage with them properly, to appreciate what they're doing, and thus critique them properly; part of what Hall's saying is that, artistically, these forms of cultural production are giving birth to social and cultural newness, right. They're productive. They are doing that unsettling work. They are the vehicles through which society is being unsettled in the here and now. So, you know, in part that's why I'm really drawn to expressive culture and forms of cultural production, as political vehicles, if you like, and that, in part, is why I'm interested in the British Asian dance music, which brings us back to the part of your question about the relationship between the personal and the political. As I think I mentioned, it's also because this was a form of cultural production that was important in my life as well – the music that was emerging during my late teens and early 20s, and at a moment that, as it became pervasive in public culture, seemed to unfold Britishness a little bit, into something that was just a little bit more brown, where the South Asian presence in Britain was no longer just an object of fetish or ridicule but was actually something that was part of popular culture, part of modernity, and of the avant garde.

But I don't think this is just a story that is specific to Asian cultural production. More widely it is about how the arts produce critical space and what might be done in those spaces. This also links back to the question of what political work looks like, and part of the challenge here is of working into the mainstream the sense that artistic and cultural work is always political (Said was always insistent about this; that there is no distinction between pure and political knowledge).

DC Tremendous thoughts. We might also put another of Stuart Hall's great essays, 'When was the postcolonial?' (1996), into this mix. Especially the lines that: "while holding fast to differentiation and specificity, we cannot afford to forget the over-determining effects of the colonial moment, the 'work' which its binaries were constantly required to do to re-present the proliferation of cultural difference and forms of life, which were always there, within the sutured and over-determined 'unity' of that simplifying, over-arching binary, 'the West and the Rest.' (This recognition goes some way to rescuing Edward Said's 'Orientalism' from the critique that it fails to discriminate between different imperialisms.) We have to keep these two ends of the chain in play at the same time – over-determination and difference, condensation and dissemination – if we are not to fall into a playful deconstructionism, the fantasy of a powerless utopia of difference."

This passage has lost none of its power. I picked up many echoes of it, and very strongly, from the answers you gave around pluralization (which is why I came with the quote today): this tension between differentiation and over-determination, and how it is not just, or ultimately, depressing, demoralising (thinking that the latter will win out over the former), but rather a question of challenge, a form of critical vigilance, and a question of how to stay optimistic as one shuttles between the personal and the political. Dance or not, it's about how to how to stay upbeat.

TJ I've been thinking about that a lot recently, particularly now right, with what's going on at the moment. I was one of few people who attended the RGS-IBG Conference in-person last summer, and thus was able to listen to David Olusoga give one of the keynotes in person. One of the questions that was posed to him was about whether he's optimistic or pessimistic at the moment, and his answer was quite categorical - he's pessimistic. That surprised me, I guess because what I see going on at the moment, in spite of everything, is a sort of proliferation of talk in public culture about the importance of thinking about Britain's imperial past and the ongoing importance of decolonisation, even as it is betrayed in the Government's very public war on wokery. These are issues that are now in the public domain. But maybe that's just still kind of glass half full response to the question; maybe it's just an answer that is brushed with optimism rather than any kind of introspective engagement with where my optimism comes from. But I guess I would say that despite everything that you know about with regards to our sector at the moment, working with students remains a key source of that optimism. Working with the critical ambitions of many of our students, the kind of desire and energy they have to try to create a better world. It's really quite energizing. That's also a bit of an echo chamber, perhaps. But, coming back to what you said about Stuart Hall, the two things that I really have always taken from him are about the importance of thinking conjuncturally, and his diagnosis of the way that ideology works in contemporary popular culture. What kinds of articulations and interventions are possible in particular times and places?

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