

## *Progress reports*

# Cultural geography: postcolonial cultural geographies

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## I Introduction

Cultural geography continues to be a productive subdisciplinary area and broad interdisciplinary perspective. This is marked by the volume of published work, including new collections of recent research and critical introductions (Cook *et al.*, 2000; Mitchell, 2000), and a new journal – *Social and Cultural Geography* – which supplements those already established. Much the same could be said of postcolonial studies, with its recent critical texts and introductory publications (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1998; Gandy, 1998; Loomba, 1998; Moore-Gilbert, 1997; San Juan, 1999) and new journals – *Interventions* and *Postcolonial Studies*. As with cultural geography, the boundaries of what counts as postcolonialism are also fluid. There are obvious crosscurrents between cultural geography, postcolonial studies and other work on cultural identities, processes, practices, politics and social divisions. Debates within postcolonialism, for example, intersect with recent work on whiteness (Bonnett, 2000), and wider discussions about the nature of the ‘cultural turn’. Following my thematic strategy in these reports, I want to consider recent intersections between cultural geography and postcolonial studies, though this is an inevitably partial account focusing only on one, albeit prominent, theme within cultural geography and limited to English-language publications. As James Sidway has argued, since postcolonialism has been marked by attempts to expose and challenge western imperial practices of survey, mapping and classification, ‘any mapping of the postcolonial is a problematic and contradictory project’ (2000: 592). Yet postcolonialism as a theoretical framework and substantive direction is a significant feature of recent work in cultural geography, and critical geography more widely (Blunt and Wills, 2000). My focus is on the material and cultural geographies of colonialism and on the spatially differentiated politics of postcolonial belonging.

Interestingly, both cultural geography and postcolonialism have been criticized along similar lines. Recent concerns about cultural geography’s ‘preoccupation with immaterial cultural processes, with the constitution of intersubjective meaning systems,

with the play of identity politics through the less-than-tangible, often-fleeting spaces of texts, signs, symbols, psyches, desires, fears and imaginings' (Philo, 2000: 33), and neglect of the material processes 'which are the stuff of everyday social practices, relations and struggles, and which underpin social group formation, the constitution of social systems and social structures, and the social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion' (Philo, 2000: 37), has been paralleled in the criticisms of postcolonial readings of colonial texts and discourses at the expense of engaging with the material consequences of colonialism and continued colonial relationships. As Jane Jacobs notes, while ideas of difference are central to postcolonial theory, its theoretical abstractions do not always adequately connect to the specific, concrete and local conditions of everyday life (1996: 158). Criticisms of the abstract and inaccessible character of some postcolonial theory also mirror recent arguments about the need for a more effective joining of theory and empirical research in archives and through fieldwork in cultural geography (Duncan, 1999; Smith, 2000). As rapidly expanding areas, both cultural geography and postcolonialism have also been viewed as superficial and modish, the latest trend. Cultural geography and postcolonialism are fashionable, yet not in a simply pejorative sense. Thinking of theories as fashion, as Clive Barnett suggests, allows theories to be seen as 'not merely fleeting, but marked by patterns of repetition whereby the succession of styles is always on the verge of rehabilitating what seemed to have been consigned to the past. "Progress" can be refigured as a perpetual process of returning to old styles and reworking them in the light of contemporary concerns'. Fashion, then, is both about the renewed interest in older questions – in the history of geography or the environmental impacts of colonialism, for example – and new directions shaped by 'multiple interests and myriad choices of numerous individuals and groups' (Barnett, 1998a: 389). The recent session at the annual British geography conference in Plymouth on postcolonialism and economic geography, convened by Ian Cook, Parvati Raghuram and Nick Henry, was an innovative exploration of the value of bringing together the predominately cultural focus of postcolonialism and the economic focus of development studies (see also Schech and Haggis, 2000), and began to redress the neglected analysis of the relationships between (post)colonialism and the uneven effects of global capitalism (Hall, 1996: 257).

If postcolonialism and cultural geography are the focus of similar anxieties, other criticisms are more specific to postcolonialism. Critics argue that postcolonialism is overgeneralizing and insensitive to the specificities of temporal and spatial contexts, that colonial discourse analysis legitimizes a renewed interest in the texts of the west rather than their displacement; that postcolonialism locates all the world in the traumatic but ultimately progressive trajectory of western development. Most problematic is its prefix 'post' which, it is argued, inappropriately denotes and prematurely celebrates a time after colonialism and so elides continued neocolonial processes, the endurance of colonial discourses, and the economic, political and cultural inequalities which persist long after the end of formal political colonization. Noam Chomsky's (2000) account of US military and undercover interventions in the name of free markets, international security and 'national interest' makes neocolonialism shockingly apparent. The imaginative geographies of colonialism both persist and are reworked in the name of globalization. Though the construction of the Asia-Pacific region in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, upsets the east–west binaries of orientalism and the cold war, it collapses sociocultural and economic differences within this region

and erases its histories of imperialism and colonialism in favour of neoliberal market forces and the free flow of capital (Wilson, 2000). Primitivism continues to be reworked and routinely commodified in the name of capitalist consumerism (Goss 1999). For some authors, bracketing or italicizing the 'post' in postcolonial signals their rejection of its meaning as simply 'after' the colonial. Yet the awkwardness of the 'post' in postcolonialism can be a useful irritant that inhibits a comfortable move beyond colonialism – a 'reminder of its very persistence and the need for an ongoing political engagement with its results' (Jackson and Jacobs, 1996: 3). Most usefully postcolonialism denotes a range of critical perspectives on the diverse histories and geographies of colonial practices, discourses, impacts and, importantly, their legacies in the present – critical engagements that often preceded and must continue long after formal political independence.

## II Colonial practices, identities and geographical difference

The influence of postcolonialism on cultural geography can be traced in work on imaginative geographies, the cultural fashioning of gendered, sexualized and racialized colonial identities, the cultural strategies that accompanied and enabled the extension of European power, colonial cultural impacts, forms of resistance to colonial cultural as well as political and material subordination, and new geographies of identity that challenge the fixities of nationalism as well as colonialism. Yet probably the most obvious impact of postcolonial studies on human geography has been on the historiography of the discipline. Recent critical engagements with western geographical traditions (Barnett, 1998b; McEwan, 1998) have been matched by detailed readings of the histories of institutional and popular geographical cultures of exploration (Driver, 2000) and travel (Morin, 1999b; McEwan, 2000), and the range of practices that in varied ways served colonial strategies of 'governmentality' (Blake, 1999; Chun, 2000) – the survey (Morin, 1999a) and mapping of geology (Braun, 2000) and topography (Clayton, 2000a; 2000b). Historical geographies (and anthropological histories) of colonialism both detail the material and discursive processes of colonization and signal lost opportunities for different kinds of relationships to emerge between Europeans and the people they encountered and in different ways colonized (Fabian, 2000; Kenny, 1999). Much of this research draws on work of Nicolas Thomas (1994), whose anthropology of colonialism challenges the model of a monolithic and universal colonial project by highlighting the complex, shifting and ambiguous social relations, mutating discourses and spatially and temporally distinctive modes of colonization. In recent work, colonialism is now widely understood as differentiated socially as well as temporally and spatially, contested in the 'centre' and resisted in the 'periphery', more ambivalent and less certain. Yet colonial discourses were effective precisely because they were enormously flexible and adaptable. The tensions and ambiguities of colonial representations speak of a less monolithic but no less problematic colonial project characterized by unequal exchange and partial understanding. Recent work negotiates between producing more complex accounts of colonial encounters, ambiguous identities and relations and retaining a critical perspective on the material and cultural costs of colonialism. Such work pays critical attention to colonial discourses without denying agency to colonized people or overlooking practices of resistance.

Yet, perhaps understandably, there has been more work in cultural geography on the continued legacies of colonialism than challenges to them. With some exceptions (Yeoh, 2000), strategies of resistance and constructive alternatives are relatively under-researched. Affrica Taylor's (2000) discussion of the film *The Coolbaroo Club*, made by and about Perth's Nyungah community, for example, explores the critical and constructive value of this representation of the Coolbaroo jazz club – an inclusive Aboriginal and white space – in the 1940s and 1950s when Aboriginal people were banned from entering the central metropolitan area. The film marks the importance of urban sites for Aboriginal people and is a reminder in the present of deprivation, poverty and discrimination coexisting with 'sunny' privilege and pleasure. Ian Cook *et al.*'s (2000) inspiring discussion of the possibilities of connective aesthetics across global structures of inequality in the art of Shelley Sacks is another challenging and constructive exception. Though colonial traditions of representation persist, they are also reworked and resisted. Postcolonial perspectives on cartography, for example, include the critical exploration of different historical geographies of colonial cartography, the persistent privileging of western cartographic forms of representation (Sparke, 1998) and attention to subversive appropriations and reworkings of colonial cartographic conventions to shape new versions of culture and location (Jacobs, 1996; Radcliffe, 1996).

In recent work on the construction of colonial imaginative geographies and colonial identities the emphasis has been on the complex circuits of discourse and representation through which hierarchical but also differentiated colonializing and colonized identities were shaped in the 'metropole' and 'periphery' (Blunt, 1999; Lester, 1998). These inverted commas reflect postcolonialism's far-reaching challenge to deeply enshrined colonial and Eurocentric ways of categorizing the world. Provincializing Europe, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992; 2000) has argued, means relocating western narratives of progress in their wider colonial histories and rethinking the 'centre' by resituating it in its complex web of colonial interconnections. Postcolonialism interrupts the smooth historiography of modern European capitalism developing in the 'centre' and spreading to its 'peripheries' by making global colonial interconnections central rather than subordinate to a story of European development (Hall, 1996: 250). Though postcolonialism is founded on the critique of *European* colonialism, postcolonialism also entails the critique of eurocentric models of modernity, progress and development in which all other histories are irrelevant or subordinated (Blaut, 1993; 2000). Postcolonial arguments about the inseparability of economic, social, cultural and political change in Europe from the complex encounters and mutual flows of culture, capital, objects and people between Europe and the colonized world decentres Europe, while retaining the critical focus on European colonization. Postcolonial generalizations are undermined by focusing on the different scales of imperial and colonial processes and their geographies; by paying attention to the ways in which colonialism and its legacies have shaped economic, political, social and cultural geographies differently in different places; and by tracing the interconnections between different postcolonial locations. This critical attention to geographical difference, interconnection and the spatial imaginaries of 'progress', 'civilization' and 'development', at best, also foregrounds the material geographies of colonialism and their legacies.

### III Real geographies of colonialism and postcolonialism

Deconstructive readings of colonial discourses and postcolonial cultural strategies has been one avenue for cultural geography. Yet recent work on colonial architecture, urban form and the built environment challenges the neglect of the material in postcolonialism (Chatterjee and Kenny, 1999; King, 1995; 1999; see also Nalbantoglu and Wong, 1997). Jane Jacobs' *Edge of empire: postcolonialism and the city* (1996), which traces the legacies of imperialist ideologies and practices in contemporary first-world cities, remains an inspiring and exemplary text. The focus on the real here borrows from her deliberate concentration on what she 'somewhat unfashionably refer[s] to as the "real" geographies of colonialism and postcolonialism' (1996: 3). This attention to the discursive and material legacies of colonialism has recently focused on ideas of nature, wilderness and natural environments. This work both returns to older traditions of research on the environmental changes wrought by European settlement and draws on more recent work on the materiality and discursive nature of nature. It explores the ways in which, as Lesley Head has commented, 'myth and imagery are woven into very grounded environmental and social processes and outcomes' (2000: 166).

In his work on the politics of nature in (post)colonial British Columbia, Bruce Willems-Braun (1997) has argued that in comparison to the attention paid to colonial space, geographers have paid little attention to the rhetorical and material production of nature and its role in the colonization of particular social environments. Though he is clearly concerned here to draw attention to the discursive construction of nature as a commodity that is defined through the absence of culture and the erasure of native people, this overlooks the long and always critical tradition of research on the environmental impacts of colonization within cultural geography and environmental historical geography. This work is less overtly theorized; nevertheless it often offers an extremely effective empirical critique. Andrew Sluyter has argued that the myth that 'precolonial landscapes lacked dense populations and productive land uses, and therefore native cultures lacked the rationality to use their lands effectively' continues 'to define the conceptual parameters for postcolonial land-use options to the degree that postcolonial development models continue to promote the often detrimental diffusion of institutions and technologies from the west to the non-west, continue to define success according to western measures, and continue to devalue non-western alternative to modernization' (Sluyter, 1999: 378). The work of reconstructing precolonial environmental histories and colonial environmental impacts through observation of relict fields and archival sources provides important evidence of precolonial productive and complex agricultural systems often sustaining dense populations, and empirical tools for dismantling persistent colonial discourses. It often also reveals more complex stories of recovery, change and accommodation than simply dramatic and immediate colonial environmental destruction (Endfield and O'Hara, 1999), which parallels recent work on colonial cultural encounters which challenge discourses of precolonial cultural stasis while tracing their destructive and resisted effects. Again colonial environmental (and cultural) impacts varied in their nature and intensity in different colonial contexts. Andrew Sluyter (1999: 381) locates his work challenging the myth of empty land and pristine nature within a long tradition of cultural geography initiated by C.O. Sauer's work on the material transformation of precolonial and colonial landscapes of the Americas. Like Peter Jackson's (2000) suggestion that a focus on material culture in

contemporary human geography returns with new theoretical tools to the traditions of 'old' cultural geography, this continuity of interests in the material transformation and cultural construction of colonized environments counters more divisive historiographies of cultural geography. Lesley Head's (2000) critical fusion of postcolonial theory and palaeoecology, as well as more traditional techniques of landscape reconstruction, also suggests that postcolonial cultural geographies of 'nature' can also find important, if not necessarily easy, connections with the environmental sciences.

Drawing on her expertise in cultural theory, archaeology and environmental science, Lesley Head traces the coincidence between the early histories of evolutionary biology, anthropology and geography and European exploration and settlement of Australia and the ways in which this encounter structured these disciplines and produced accounts of Aboriginal people and cultures as 'timeless', 'fossil' or 'relict' and soon to naturally disappear. She explores the persistence of colonial models of empty land and wilderness and their implications for debates about land management, development and conservation in contemporary Australia – 'a country coming to terms with prior occupation [...] of the land' (2000: 7). Despite evidence of Aboriginal agricultural practices and socially negotiated land-ownership systems, the land was seen as both empty and awaiting development and idealized as untouched and unchanging nature. Despite the ways in which ecological theory, anthropology and palaeoecology have challenged ideas of pristine nature and the increasing recognition of the complexity of Aboriginal people's environmental interventions, the idea of empty land persists especially within conservation and environmental groups, leading to a focus on 'wilderness' at the expense of urban and suburban environmental problems. The development lobby has, in contrast, been much more ready to harness the language of environmental change, long histories of human intervention, and ideas of the construction of nature to support continued development. Her work suggests that postcolonial models of settlement and occupation of land in the past and the present by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people need to avoid the celebration of 'untouched' land while at the same time being alert to the environmental and social implications of human actions. In tourist redevelopment and environmental restoration projects the celebration of prehistoric Aboriginal signatures simultaneously dismisses contemporary Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people's attachments to land in all their complexity (Head, 2000: 191). The making and remaking of places through conservation or development is bound up with less tangible but no less real questions of belonging and attachment to places.

#### **IV Postcolonial belonging: unsettling the nation**

The material and political implications of different modes of belonging, place and identity – national, transnational, indigenous, settler, diasporic – shaped by the long and continued processes of migration, displacement, settlement, dispossession and the growing recognition of the rights of indigenous people, have clearly been central to cultural geography, cultural studies and postcolonialism. The recent reworking of relationships between territory and identity also returns to the question of postcolonial temporality. Clearly, the world has not simply moved beyond colonialism, yet at the same time neither have colonial relations and discourses survived unchanged. This is

an obvious observation. Yet the attention to the degree of continuity and discontinuity between colonial relationships and structures of power and privilege in the past and present varies in different accounts. In some, colonialism continues in the present through modern systems of law and government, silencing or severely restricting the ability of first nations and indigenous people to contest their dispossession. Challenges to loss of land, for instance, must be articulated through the language and value system of the state. Government policies in the name of indigenous self-determination can be strategies for fragmenting, containing and absorbing indigenous challenges to the hegemony of the capitalist/colonial state (Gibson, 1999). Here colonial systems of knowledge and structures of authority seem relatively undisturbed. The continuities of colonialism are foregrounded. Yet other work suggests that the 'post' in postcolonial registers neither a celebration of the end of colonialism nor the simple reproduction of the colonial in the present, but the mutated, impure and unsettling legacies of colonialism. While some authors argue that indigenous people are silenced in modernity, others explore unequal but also deeply unsettling dialogues. Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs (1998) analyse the unruly, unpredictable and unsettling effects of claims for Aboriginal sacredness in Australia. The contrast 'between tradition, authority and possession on the one hand, and "modern-ness", loss of authority and dispossession on the other', they argue, 'sets up a structure that simply does not speak to the modes of empowerment many modern Aboriginal people are actually experiencing' (Gelder and Jacobs, 1998: 51). Those who present an 'image of Aboriginal people in court unable to sustain themselves' locate 'them as a residue which is increasingly out of place in modernity. But Aboriginal people do sustain themselves in court, often with great success: the relationship between sacredness and modernity, far from being incommensurable, is continually under (re)negotiation. [Here] the Aboriginal sacred exists only in the form of a monologue; but in postcolonial Australia it is produced and reproduced through a process of dialogue' (1998: 20). The ways in which Aboriginal sacredness is manifest in the public domain of the nation, they argue, registers a postcolonial predicament – one that is not simply in reaction to the gains in Aboriginal political power over the last 20 years, but reflects the strange and disturbing effects of the Aboriginal sacred on ideas on authority and (majority/minority) status, home and belonging in Australia.

Instead of being incommensurable categories, the modern and the sacred/traditional, they argue, are intimately entangled. State bureaucracies attempt to locate and restrain the sacred but in doing so give it greater significance. At the same time modernity reformulates the context in which the sacred manifests itself: 'the sacred under modern conditions simply cannot remain intangible, exclusive, prohibited and absent: something must be said about it' (Gelder and Jacobs, 1998: 101). In their discussion of the ways claims to Aboriginal sacred are treated by writers, film-makers, politicians, pastoralists, mining personnel, anthropologists, museum curators and others, they trace the uncanny effects of the 'modern sacred' that make the familiar strange, and the never-settled implications of the sacred for both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people. Though sacredness implies the exclusivity and secret nature of a place, it has radiating effects. Even attempts to regulate or restrain these claims, or to dismiss them, amplify their significance.

Rather than search for a resolution to identity and belonging, Gelder and Jacobs explore the productive, activating function of the sacred in Australia. Claims about

Aboriginal sacredness and the official recognition of Aboriginal land claims based on the sacredness of specific sites have complex and contradictory effects. Regulation locates the sacred, but, in recognizing specific sites, sacredness enters a national bureaucratic system and public consciousness. Its exclusiveness is at once preserved and compromised. Attempts to respect the secrecy of the sacred within the legal system intensify both anxieties about the power of uncontested claims for sacredness and their effects. Disclosure of sacred sites can create new coalitions between, for example, Aboriginal groups and environmentalists, and loss of control of their meaning. Recognition of the sacred status of Uluru both makes it an exclusive place of sacred significance and a 'promiscuous place' – the object of love and longing of so many. The effects of these new affiliations, they suggest, is uncertain. As Nicholas Thomas has argued in relation to European engagements with indigenous art and its presence within the contemporary art world, 'Appreciation and appropriation have been intimately connected, and are essentially double sided processes' (1999: 158). But respect for Aboriginal culture can, Gelder and Jacobs argue, be a feature of a postcolonial racism that sees Aboriginal people as having both too little and too much at the same time – lacking opportunity, equality, health care, etc. and having too much power, influence, spiritual belief, culture. Postcolonial racism is structured paradoxically by guilt and resentment (1998: 65). The desire to decouple spiritual belief and property rights is a particular form of primitivism that celebrates the premodern spiritual at the expense of recognizing the modern sacred of Aboriginal claims to land. Postcolonial racism is illustrated, they suggest, in claims by the majority for an embattled minority status in reaction to the effectiveness of the Aboriginal sacred. The uncanny effects of the sacred unsettle accustomed senses of authority, possession and place (Gelder and Jacobs, 1998: 138–39). Instead of advocating new models of 'settlement' for a postcolonial 'settler nation', or of resolving the tension between ideas of national unity and division, Gelder and Jacobs explore the 'possibility of producing a postcolonial narrative which, rather than falling into a binary that either distinguishes "us" from "them" or brings us all together as the same, would think instead through the uncanny implications of being in place and "out of place" at precisely the same time' (1998: 139). They refuse the language of reconciliation and resolution, of polarized difference or national unity.

This is one of the most significant recent attempts to write postcolonial spatial narratives of location and identity. There are also other, not necessarily incompatible, alternatives, suggested by those more willing to risk harnessing the appeal of belonging to forge critical but also constructive senses of, in this case, settler location. Lesley Head argues that non-Aboriginal people need to historicize their presence in Australia; she does so by weaving together her own family history and accounts of the impacts of European settlement and Aboriginal dispossession. Despite the damaging impacts of non-Aboriginal settlement and development, she suggests that the 'backyard' environmental and social histories of Australia need to be recovered, rather than dismissed in favour of the wild, remote and untouched. She offers the term 'country' as a constructive alternative to wilderness, since it evokes Aboriginal understandings of the country as a sustaining and nourishing terrain, white Australians' affection for the rural and familiar, local places, and the scale of the nation. 'Its multiple meanings', she writes, 'flag the many ambiguities that attend the human presence in Australia, and it also provides the ground for a meeting of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal aspirations'



(Head, 2000: 232). Critical, politicized but also sustaining senses of location, rather than comfortable, belonging may emerge by locating family histories of settlement within larger histories of dispossession. But postcolonial politics of belonging are very different in different places. While it may be more politically progressive in one context to suspend senses of settler claims to belong, in other contexts (I am thinking here of Northern Ireland) the resolution of political conflict depends on the creation of positive senses of settler location and attachment to geography (Graham, 1994). Claims to be native and rooted have significantly different implications in different places, challenging depoliticized discourses of multiculturalism in some contexts (Jacobs, 1996) and, in others, Cameroon for example, strategically used by political leaders to feed antagonistic versions of autochthony and ethnic conflict between groups already mobilized and divided as labour sources by colonial capitalism (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, 2000). The postcolonial work of tracing diasporic geographies and hybrid identities – the interplay of gender, ‘race’, geography, nation, memory and migration – challenge national discourses of purity and origins (Fortier, 2000; Ifekwunigwe, 1999). Yet they still persist, with painful consequences. Transnational adoptees’ accounts of their searches for belonging illustrate the often traumatic impact of ‘powerful narratives that compel us to situate ourselves in one place or another’ (Yngvesson and Mahony, 2000: 78). Ethnic conflict is their more bloody outcome. The ways in which anticolonial models of cultural purity and cultural recovery are mobilized in resistance to the cultural legacies of colonialism and continued forms of cultural domination (Herman, 1999) or revised in complex alignments of authenticity, plurality, modernity and tradition in different places (Nash, 1999) reflect the different geographies of postcolonial cultural politics as well as different theoretical perspectives.

## V Postcolonial locations

The specific character of postcolonial critical agendas in different places are shaped by the different form, timing and nature of colonialism and anticolonial resistance, specific patterns of privilege and social division, continued relationships to former colonial powers and new forms of neocolonial domination, and different transnational networks that link as well as bypass the ‘centre’. These differences work against postcolonialism becoming a set of impressive theoretical tools that are never challenged by the particular, complex, messy material of social relations in different places. Rather than conceptualize the postcolonial as a bounded set of attributes or characteristics that is used as a yardstick to measure the degree of postcoloniality exhibited in different places – for example, in discussions of the degree to which Ireland (Howe, 2000) or Australia (Schech and Haggis, 1998) can be described as postcolonial – recent work suggests that it is more useful to allow the term to signal, without occluding, different but also interconnected colonial trajectories and legacies. Instead of locating the postcolonial only in the non-white non-European world, which displaces the tainted histories of colonialism to racialized peripheries, postcolonialism includes critical attention to the colonial histories of white settler colonies and metropolitan colonizing countries. As Catherine Hall has argued so strongly, formative periods in the making of Englishness and the British nation state, for example, cannot be understood outside a colonial framework (Hall, 2000). Again, this does not negate the continued hierarchies

of power or privilege *within* settler colonies nor *between* former colonial powers and former colonies, but it opens up the complexities of these different postcolonial contexts and the complexity of their interconnections. Postcolonial geographies work through the tension between understanding colonialism as general and global, and particular and local, between the critical engagement with a grand narrative of colonialism, and the political implications of complex, untidy, differentiated and ambiguous local stories. Rather than try to sort postcolonialism out once and for all and decide on absolute winners in the controversies surrounding its use, or devise a theoretical framework or descriptive model that is all-encompassing, settled and complete, it would be better to keep this a contested and provisional term, constantly under review and in question. Unsettling effects and partial understandings are, after all, more in the spirit of postcolonialism than security and old certainties. Yet, as ever, the implications of this depend on who exactly is being unsettled. As Jane Jacobs (1996: 29) has written: 'the sheer uneven materiality of the lives of people affected by imperialism must inform the moral and ethical function of critical postcolonial studies', and, by extension, postcolonial cultural geographies.

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