

Beyond Imaginative Geographies? Critique, cooptation and imagination in the aftermath of the War on Terror¹

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Abstract

This paper considers the question of what it might mean to resist the 'imaginative geographies' of the War on Terror through a reading of the bestselling novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid (2007). Reading this novel against the claim that we are now at the 'end' of the War on Terror, the paper engages with how we might move beyond what Derek Gregory described as the split geographies of 'us' and 'them', 'civilization' and 'barbarism' that represent the violent return of the colonial past (2004). The paper argues that critical attempts at resisting the imaginative geographies of the War on Terror, such as we find in this particular novel, often assume and reproduce an understanding of time as linear and progressive, the idea of time which Gregory points out makes these imaginative geographies possible. The paper argues that this becomes problematic when critical interventions risk reproducing the very understanding of political life that they set out to confront. Whilst it is an important political move to reveal the imaginative geographies at work in the War on Terror, the paper suggests that this approach also risks operating by confirming to a critical readership that which it already thought it knew. We are too easily led to the conclusion that what is needed is better representations of 'others' in the world, as just as enlightened, cultured, reasoned as 'us'. The contention of this paper is that such critical responses fail to do anything to disrupt or trouble the split geographies of 'us' and 'them'; rather, they keep them firmly in place and entrench them further. The paper argues that we need to revisit and unsettle the concept of imagination at work in the idea of 'imaginative geographies' to explore a way of thinking co-existence in world politics that cannot be understood within a unifying temporal framework. It is suggested that despite the closures identified in this novel, postcolonial urban literatures also provide many openings for thinking the 'possibility that the field of the political is constitutively not singular' (Chakrabarty, 2000, page 148).

Introduction: at the end of the War on Terror

It's been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America.

- Barack Obama, Victory speech, Grant Park, Chicago, 4 November 2008

Barack Obama's election as the 44th President of the United States on the 4th of November 2008 was hailed as a signal of change in world politics. After eight years in which President George Bush's administration had stretched the United States' military ambitions to their limits, commentators in the British liberal press hoped that the election of Barack Obama might represent the end of the War on Terror (Freedland, 2008). Indeed, at the end of the first 100 days of Obama's administration, it was reported that a message had been sent to senior Pentagon staff stating that the phrase, 'Global War on Terror' should now be avoided (The Guardian, 2009a, 2009b). The very idea that we might be at the end of a war which we were told must be without end raises some questions about how we think about change in world politics, and what exactly would have to end for us to agree that we have indeed reached the end of the War on Terror.² This paper explores one significant aspect of that War: the 'imaginative geographies' that enabled and legitimated a diverse range of extremely violent practices, from the 'black sites' of extraordinary rendition, to detention camps, to the alleged complicity of the UK government and US administration in acts of torture (Mayer, 2009, The Guardian, 2010). In *The Colonial Present*, Derek Gregory argues that the War on Terror is epitomised in the 'split geographies of 'us' and 'them', 'civilization' and 'barbarism', 'Good' and 'Evil' (2004), and draws on Edward Said's argument that European, colonial powers construct a distorted, racist view of 'others' only to affirm their own position as enlightened and dominant. In reading these imaginative geographies through the linear and homogenous ideas of time which make them possible, this paper argues that we can begin to appreciate the banality and wide currency of this way of seeing, and the way in which it reflects an entrenched sense of how we understand who we are and our relationship to others in the world. For that reason, this paper claims that these imaginative geographies are also often implicit in *critical* attempts at revealing and resisting the dangers of a heightened US nationalism. In studying the ways in which critical work can become co-opted by Manichaean geographies, the paper argues that the task of rethinking political imaginaries is a challenge that remains important beyond the political climate of the War on Terror.

The paper proceeds through a reading of the bestselling novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, written by Mohsin Hamid (2007). Shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and translated into more than 25 languages, this novel is interesting because of the way it expresses a particular form of resistance to the imaginative geographies of the War on Terror in aiming to show

² This statement that the War on Terror is now at an *end*, whether it is made from a progressive or a conservative standpoint, keeps us tied in to an idea that the War on Terror somehow represents a break or exceptional departure from the dominant rhetoric and practices of world politics, rather than an escalation of ways of seeing the world that were already present and available. As Amoores (2008) and Neal (2008) have argued, the proposition that the War on Terror has now come to an end must be interrogated in the same way as the idea that the War on Terror *began* with the events of September 11 2001. On the possible shifts in discourse represented by the Presidency of Barack Obama, see Fregonese, Martin and Ramadan (2009).

how America might appear from other parts of the world³ and in exposing the crude and ‘mistaken’ identity formations that characterised the political climate of that War. My claim is that this novel (and not only this particular novel) emerges as a critical intervention that largely works in correspondence with the imaginative geographies of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and that plots its critique in a way that ultimately borrows from the imaginative geographies that the novel purports to expose, critique and resist. In doing so, this novel risks working as part of a liberal ‘resonating machine’ that reinvigorates and further entrenches a particular way of seeing the world as indeed composed of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Connolly, 2008). However, the novel also enunciates an important critique of heightened US nationalism and the paper will suggest that postcolonial urban literatures also offer important material for destabilising the spatio-temporal coordinates of Manichaean geographies. The paper considers how we might think the political in ways other than through a linear temporal framework and recover a ‘heterotemporal’ political imaginary (Hutchings, 2008). I therefore read this particular novel alongside the many important questions raised by Derek Gregory in *The Colonial Present* in order to reflect on the forms and discourses of critique. Assuming that we have now arrived at a different geopolitical context which remains to be unpacked, it seems to me that one of the challenges for critical work is to consider what a different kind of intervention might look like beyond an exposure of Orientalism at work.

Between ‘us’ and ‘them’

Many of the reviews of this novel seized on one passage in the book that was deemed to represent a controversial response to the events of 11 September 2001, and which led one reviewer to claim that the book ‘says things people don’t want to hear. [It] says dangerous things in dangerous times’.⁴ This is the moment when the main character, Changez, watches the twin towers fall on a tv screen from a hotel room in Manila and, in the immediacy of that moment, before any broader implications become clear, he smiles.⁵ ‘I stared as one - and then the other - of the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased’ (2007, page 72, my emphasis). The liberal press made big news of this extract, which was largely considered to reveal the view of America from other parts of the world.⁶ The novel follows the way in which Changez, a young man from Lahore, Pakistan, educated at Princeton and living in New York City before, during and after the events of 11 September 2001, shifts from being seen as an ‘exotic other’ to being coded as a ‘suspected terrorist’. The

³ The novel expresses a view of America from the localities of London-New York-Lahore. The author has lived and is familiar with all three localities. Whilst only NY and Lahore feature in this particular novel, each of these cities has formed an important nodal point in enabling some of the most violent practices of the War on Terror whilst also *hosting* coalitions of critical resistance.

⁴ Laila Halaby, ‘Return of the Native’, *The Washington Post*, 22 April 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/19/AR2007041903000.html>

⁵ Amer Hussein, ‘A jester among the jihadis’, *The Independent*, 23 March 2007; Karen Olsson, ‘I Pledge Allegiance’, *New York Times*, 22 April 2007. James Lasdun’s review of the novel (2007) is more interesting: he argues that the ‘classical orchestration of symmetries and reciprocities is both a strength and a weakness in the book’, a point that chimes with my argument here.

⁶ This passage may have also contributed to the novel’s remarkable success in the international literary marketplace. It made the *New York Times* bestseller list, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize as well many other awards including the Index on Censorship’s annual T.R. Fyvel Book Award. It has been translated into many European languages as well as Arabic, Brazilian Portuguese, Chinese, Hebrew, Hindi and Indonesian. Mohsin Hamid’s personal website includes full details. <http://www.mohsinhamid.com/>

novel exposes the deleterious effects of how, under the political climate of the War on Terror, we have been taught to be ‘on the lookout’ for ‘suspicious people’ (Amoore, 2007) and how some people were forced to incorporate a precarious position between the categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’. As the responses to the events of 11 September unfold, we find that Changez is less able to move unfettered and undisturbed through the city. The novel reveals how the markers of ‘Arab’, ‘Muslim’ ‘Asian’ were collapsed and conflated as the same and how Changez is repeatedly asked to explain his relationship and commitment to the United States:

‘What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?’ she asked me.
‘I live here,’ I replied. ‘That is *not* what I asked you, sir’ she said. ‘What is the *purpose* of your trip to the United States?’ (2007, page 75)

The novel expresses two important critiques of nationalism: firstly, it reminds us of the exclusions that accompany claims of inclusion. Secondly, it makes clear that nationalism is not a ‘Third World malady’ (Shohat, 2002, page 69) but an indispensable feature of the most powerful nation-states, serving as an implicit comfort blanket that occasionally erupts in insular and pernicious manifestations. However, in tandem with the powerful critiques of nationalism offered by the novel, we also find, paradoxically, that a nationalist imaginary is reaffirmed as the dominant frame we have available for making sense of global politics. The reason why the approach to critique expressed by this particular novel is important then, is because it expresses a broader challenge about the difficulties of thinking beyond a nationalist understanding of global politics.

I argue that a nationalist imaginary echoes in this novel in two particular ways. Firstly, following Slaughter (2007, page 92), I want to claim that the literary codes and techniques operated in the eighteenth and nineteenth century European novelistic genre of the *Bildungsroman*⁷ resonate in this postcolonial novel, most specifically in the portrayal of a main protagonist that follows a linear temporal trajectory towards enlightenment. Secondly, and in concert with the first point, the novel operates a number of strategies of reversal which serve to re-affirm the spatial demarcations of ‘us’ and a ‘them’ even when the aim may be to expose the risks, dangers and exclusiveness of national belonging. Despite the fact that this novel became a bestseller on account of saying ‘dangerous things’ then, I argue that it is more dangerous for the ways in which it risks working in *tandem* with the imaginative geographies of the War on Terror, even when the aim is to be critical.

The novel and the time of imagination

Much has been written on the coeval relationship of the novel and the nation, and in particular, how the image of a knowable community in the literary realm developed alongside the possibility of understanding ourselves as belonging to an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1991; Bhabha, 2004; Cheah, 2003; Krishna, 2008; Shapiro, 2004, 2010; Williams, 1985). As Cheah has argued, this is carried onwards in the novels of early

⁷ The first example of this genre is cited by Lukács as Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, though this claim has also been disputed. For a broader discussion of the narrative techniques and history of the *Bildungsroman*, as well as its relationship to the philosophy of Bildung, see Slaughter, 2007. For a more detailed investigation into the relationship between decolonising nationalism and the *Bildungsroman*, see Cheah, 2003.

decolonizing nationalism which, even when they are more concerned with exposing the *violence* of national identity, nevertheless also narrate the story of a protagonist whose life mirrors that of the nation (Cheah, 2003, page 242). Many writers have therefore used readings of novels as a way of raising questions about nationalism and world politics. Some have addressed the elitism of the nation-space (Williams, 1985) whilst others have explored the imperial geographies and spatial imaginaries at play in different novels (Said, 1995; Bulson, 2007). Critical theorists of International Relations have engaged with the ways in which novels can expose the instabilities of identities forced into a statist geopolitical framework and remind us of the historical contingency (if not the absurdity) of this way of organising identities and cultures (Daiya, 2002; Krishna, 2008; Pervez, 2009; Shapiro, 2004). Following such work, I'm interested in the ways in which postcolonial novels offer some material for destabilising the spatial and temporal coordinates of dominant imaginative geographies. But I understand that potential for disruption to operate alongside another possibility - that postcolonial novels also reproduce the dominant view of the world expressed in Manichaeon geographies. Joseph Slaughter offers a powerful argument when he suggests that it may be because certain postcolonial novels reproduce views of the world that we already hold that they become well known and marketed to an international literary public hungry for stories that show the 'view from the global South' (2007).⁸ Postcolonial writers are of course conversant with the challenge of 'oppositional criticism' and with the risks of becoming coopted by the dominant forms and cultural discourses of Western Liberalism (Ahluwalia, 2007). In reading this particular novel, we can identify what might be involved in the broader challenge of formulating critical resistance to the heightened nationalism of the War on Terror.

A nationalist imaginary extends much further than the spatial differentiations of 'us' and 'them'; it is also animated by a particular understanding of freedom, which is expressed in the particular genre of the *Bildungsroman* (Cheah, 2003). This is the modern idea that we are autonomous individuals, in charge of our own destinies, capable of overcoming the burdens of the past and becoming more and more enlightened. It is a 'conception of freedom that is understood to emerge through time, and which is temporally progressive in its structure' (Butler, 2008, page 3). Significantly, this time of progress is understood as potentially restorative of something that has been lost and needs to be regained in the future. In the *Bildungsroman*, that which is understood to be lost or broken is the connection between the main protagonist and the world, which sends him (originally, predominantly, but not exclusively a 'him') on a search for meaning, moral purpose, or a relationship that can ease this broken bond of modernity. The *Bildungsroman* therefore mirrors the nation in that both seek to offer an antidote to modernity's upheavals (Cheah, 2003, page 243). In the context of this particular novel, the idea of restoring this 'broken' bond emerges in Changez's relationship with his occasional girlfriend, Erica (a play on Am-Erica). We hear that Erica is initially drawn to Changez because of his strong sense of home. She is searching for some

⁸ There is a much broader set of interesting questions to ask about how and why certain postcolonial novels travel. For an insightful discussion of how an author's marginality is politicized and commodified in the global literary marketplace, and the development of a 'marketable postcolonial self-consciousness', see Brouillette, 2007. For a further, excellent discussion of how novels circulated as part of the geopolitical framework of the War on Terror, and the case of the bestselling *The Bookseller of Kabul*, see Ware, 2006. I'm aware of earlier debates, such as that between Ahmad and Jameson, that to understand all postcolonial literatures as critiques of nationalism is to misrepresent the breadth of postcolonial literatures (1992). The questions I raise in this paper are different from Jameson's and Ahmad's however. For a critique of Ahmad, see Prasad (1997).

roots, stability, and a stable core, and in Changez, finds something ‘solid’. When Changez can’t in the end secure Erica’s love, he blames it on the fact that he doesn’t really know where he belongs: in America or in Pakistan. Following in the trajectory of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel follows the progress of an individual ‘from youth to meaningful life, first through civil society and then through the state’ (Cheah, 2003, 243). As part of his journey towards emancipation, Changez gradually comes to reflect on the way in which he has been co-opted by the American nation. The invitation to access the exclusive cultured spaces of Manhattan, to enjoy the luxuries that come with a high salary and to date an American woman, turn out to be unreliable or disingenuous. He compares his situation to the Janissary, the Christian boys that were captured by the Ottoman army and re-educated as Muslims to become their most loyal fighters. We arrive at something of a Messianic moment in the novel, as the light shines for Changez, and he describes taking off a veil that had hitherto obscured his vision:

my blinders were coming off, and I was dazzled and rendered immobile by the sudden broadening of my arc of vision (2007, page 145).

In this theme of a protagonist coming-of-age, and becoming more and more enlightened, the novel affirms a quintessentially modern, Rousseauian understanding of freedom as a progressive journey towards greater autonomy, self-awareness and self-determination. In this sense, it mirrors exactly the trajectory of modern nationalism.

The *Bildungsroman* operates by charting the story of an individual who is socialized in the process of learning for oneself what everyone else (the reader) already knows (Slaughter, 2007, page 3). The key question to ask in reading this novel then, is, what is it that we are already assumed to know? It is assumed that we are already familiar with this account of what freedom must mean. And we are also, it seems to me, ‘reminded’ that national identities must ultimately (and perhaps especially at times of emergency) take precedence over other experiments in ideas of belonging. It seems significant, then, that Changez in the end returns to Pakistan. He forms no more than a passing interest for Erica, a stage in the process of coming to age. And it gradually becomes unimaginable that Changez might stay in New York City – that he might find alternative communities and expressions of agency in that city. The plot of the novel therefore corresponds to a Hegelian plot of alienation and return, as he moves away from but ultimately returns to his nation of origin (Slaughter, 2007 page 97), confirming the primacy of national belonging as what we would expect. In this way, the novel works to reproduce a notion of belonging that can be traced back to a point of origin (understood as language, race, ethnicity, or place).⁹ Whilst postcolonial novels such as this one may therefore become successful ostensibly because they satisfy a desire to get to know what people in other parts of the world think, their success may also be attributed to the fact that for a left-leaning, liberal reader, she or he is reassured of what we ‘already know’ – that despite the mixture of the global city, that national identities must triumph and that there is a fundamental gulf between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

⁹ This formulation stands in contrast to a ‘diasporic imaginary’ that is constituted through formations of temporality, affect and corporeality rather than through a definitive relationship to a homeland (Axel, 2002). Also cited in Puar, 2007.

Critical voices inside the United States were arguing in the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001 that it would be a crime ‘to rob us of the opportunity to see ourselves as others see us’ (Wideman quoted in Gregory, 2004). This novel forms just one expression of the fact that reading publics in the US and UK were indeed interested in learning ‘how others might see us’, and that this novel emerged as one answer to that question. Whilst Gregory is right to suggest that the question ‘Why do they hate us?’ accepts ‘the privilege of contemplating “the other” without acknowledging the gaze in return’ (2004, page 21), what we find in this novel is that the ‘gaze in return’ is indeed anticipated, and offered a platform. We are therefore invited to laugh along at the privilege and ignorance of Erica’s elite, metropolitan circle of friends. The reader is aware of the way in which Erica’s cohort of free-floating, cosmopolitan intellectuals consume culture and see Changez as *tied* to his culture (Mamdani, 2002). In this sense, the novel goes far to reveal how an ‘enlightened’ cosmopolitanism carries its own nationalism. But the form of this critique is also problematic because it operates according to a strategy of reversal that keep us tied within a political imaginary of ‘us’ and ‘them’. It conforms to a framing of political life as distinguished between the citizens and nations within and the enemies and others outside (Walker, 1993). Rather than trouble the question of ‘*why do they hate us?*’, and more importantly, trouble the spatial category of ‘America’ to unpack the plurality of responses and positions within, what we find is that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* works to confirm a form of anti-Americanism. It’s expected that we ‘know’ that this protagonist would come to hate America. The problem lies in how easily this assumption can slide into a further calculation, that this protagonist may ‘reluctantly’, but nevertheless inevitably, become a ‘fundamentalist’ - become someone who may want to hurt ‘us’. To be clear, I do think this novel tries to show the dangers of this kind of calculation. As the main character puts it, ‘It seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins.’ (2007, page 183). However, it ultimately doesn’t help us consider how there might be some *movement* and *change* in how ‘we’ see ‘others’. The very fact that this novel became a bestseller might suggest to us that in the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001, people *were* interested in asking: what other imaginaries of political life may be possible? However, it seems that we need different kinds of resources for thinking how imaginative geographies might be disrupted, when do they fail, and how might they fall apart.

In framing the politics of difference within an understanding of time as progress, as something that takes us from here to there, we don’t get a glimpse of ‘another culture’ as the novel seems to suggest, but an affirmation of the persistence of a modern nationalist framework that understands world politics as a battle between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Taking this framing as a given, critical work can only then suggest the need to *stretch* or *extend* our ways of seeing – either to show how others see the world differently or to see the world for what it really is. Both positions imply that our pictures of the world might be improved with more and better vision and knowledge about how people in other parts of the world see and think differently. The quotation that refers to Changez taking off his blinders affirms exactly this assumption: critique is enunciated as a process of unveiling and extending what it is we are able to see.¹⁰ To be clear: this is not an aim I feel we can easily dismiss. More importantly,

¹⁰ Chakrabarty offers a discussion of Rabindranath Tagore’s use of the phrase ‘piercing the veil of the real’, which forms an interesting juxtaposition to Hamid’s use of the metaphor of the veil. For a further critique of an account of modern, western knowledge as a process of ‘unveiling’, see Seth (2009).

this novel also enunciates a critique of this work of *stretching* the spaces of privilege to ensure that they keep on operating rather than risk their collapse. For example, the novel is very good on the point that one needs to conform and appear the same *in order* to gain the recognition of ‘difference’. The risks of making any claim to inclusion are exposed: ‘Two of my five colleagues were women; Wainwright and I were non-white. We were marvelously diverse...and yet we were not: all of us, Sherman included, hailed from the same elite universities – Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, Yale; we all exuded a sense of confident self-satisfaction; and not one of us was either short or overweight’ (page 38). It is not insignificant that in this novel, it is a heterosexual, privileged, articulate, slim and well-dressed minority that is invited to plot a claim towards becoming a full universal subject. However, although the story of the novel describes the *precariousness* of this journey towards belonging to the American nation, the novel’s plot further consolidates a choice between becoming American or retreating to origins, to whatever it is that makes us outsiders. In this sense, the intervention risks collaborating with the formulations and codes of the imaginative geographies of the War on Terror, working ultimately (albeit perhaps not intentionally) to solidify them, ensuring that they travel further and resonate more loudly. My point is that critique must go beyond extending our knowledge, images and representations of ‘them’ ‘over there’ – as *just as* cultured, enlightened, sophisticated – such as President Obama sought to do in his ‘new beginnings’ speech in Cairo (2009). The problem with *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is that despite its understanding of the shortcomings of well-intentioned liberal multiculturalism, I think it is ultimately too far steeped in this liberal imaginary to be able to offer a robust critique of the politics of the War on Terror.

The totality of imagination

the novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality

(Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, quoted in Cheah, 2003, page 242).

Derek Gregory, Judith Butler and Barry Hindess all concur that the task of unpacking and resisting the imaginative geographies of the War on Terror must begin *by* interrogating the temporal narratives that underpin them and how the rhetoric of friends and enemies, good guys and bad is made possible by an understanding of time as linear and progressive (Gregory, 2004; Butler, 2008; Hindess, 2007).¹¹ Butler takes this argument a step further by emphasising that the problem lies not so much in the identification of the terms of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ but in that we might disagree with this framework of options as one we must accept for making sense of politics. As Butler puts it, there is more than ‘competing notions of freedom [or progress] at stake’ (2008, page 19). What Butler emphasises is that the task must go further than correcting our ways of seeing: it must also subvert the terms of the debate. Derek Gregory concurs that the problem is not linear time *as such* but the way in which it works to present a view of the world as a *totality*. For Butler, thinking beyond the homogenous empty time of progress requires thinking beyond ‘that teleology that violently installs itself as *both origin and end of the culturally thinkable*’ (2008, page

¹¹ For a more detailed analysis of the dominance of this philosophy of history in theories of International Relations see Hutchings (2008), Blaney and Inayatullah (2004).

19, my emphasis).¹² Her point is that we need to refuse the teleology that marks out both the *origins* and *limits* of what we are able to *imagine*. Similarly, Gregory states that his aim is not to adjudicate on questions such as ‘why do they hate us?’ (a question which was also asked in Iraq, as he points out) but that ‘it is the dichotomy reproduced through [the question] that I want to contest’ (page 24). The problem in not making this additional leap is that imaginative geographies are presented as if they are all-encompassing and as *the* definition of racism at work.

In refusing to trouble the *origins* and *limits* of what we are able to imagine, critical interventions risk suggesting occasionally that there is no alternative to Orientalism, and that this system represents a ‘totality’. This is a problem that Edward Said encountered, and as such, it is no surprise that it is a risk that hovers at the edges of Gregory’s *The Colonial Present*. As Robert Young has argued in his reading of Said’s *Orientalism*, we’re caught in a puzzle that revolves around the relationship between representation and its ‘real’ object (2004, page 168-171). On the one hand, for Gregory as for Said, there is no relationship between representations and the real (these representations are fabrications), but on the other hand, we’re told that these representations work to control and dominate their objects (they are ‘made to absorb everything’. ‘This culture (which is to say ‘their’ culture) is closed and stultifying, monolithic and unchanging – a fixity that is at the very heart of modern racisms’ (Gregory, 2004 page 22). As Young points out, whilst there is no ready answer to the question of how representations connect (or not) to the real, what we’re presented with is a closed system. For Young (as for Clifford, see Ahluwalia, 2007, page 264), the problem of closure is ‘fundamental’ to *Orientalism*, and leads Said to the only possible conclusion: that what is needed is a change in enunciation (2004, page 175). Gregory occasionally arrives at a similar conclusion. Consider for example the questions Gregory puts forward for critical examination:

First, who claims the power to fabricate those meanings? Who assumes the power to represent other *as* other, and on what basis?...This attempt to muffle the other – so that, at the limit, metropolitan cultures protect their powers and privileges by insisting that ‘the subaltern cannot speak’ – raises the second question. What is the power of those meanings? What do those meanings *do*? (2004, page 8)

This first set of questions indicates that the problem with these imaginative geographies lies with the ways in which *some* people *see* the world and suggests that what is required is to tweak, adjust, improve or correct that which we are able to *see*. It immediately leads us back to a subject that portrays the other (wrongly or rightly) as other. It assumes a straightforward relationship between agency and representation, and that we might disrupt these imaginative geographies by following one of three strategies – i) replacing the agents, ii) highlighting the ‘fabricated’ nature of the agent’s enunciation, or iii) disputing the authority of certain agents in representing others. However, as the change in agency represented by the Presidency of Barack Obama moves us to consider, neither of these strategies seem sufficient for disrupting the imaginative geographies of the War on Terror. But more importantly, as this reading of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has argued, the problem does not necessarily lie with

¹² This point resonates with my earlier point about refusing to engage with the question of whether we are at the *end* of the War on Terror when that means accepting some agreement on the *origins* of the War on Terror.

attempts at *'muffling the other'* either, but precisely with attempts at *inviting the other to speak*. Racist practices operate through techniques of *recognition* as much as through the denial of difference (see for example Puar, 2007). The second set of questions that Gregory provides are for this reason more useful - what is the power of those meanings and what do they *do*. This question detaches the problem from one of enunciation and enquiries into the ways in which these imaginative geographies circulate. This second question is also more important because it opens up the question of how these imaginative geographies travel and resonate in different *critical* interventions.

Gregory is of course acutely aware of this dilemma, as Edward Said was (see Ahluwalia, 2007, page 265). As Gregory states clearly, 'every repertory performance of the colonial present carries within it the twin possibilities of either reaffirming and even radicalizing the hold of the colonial past on the present *or* undoing its enclosures and approaching closer to the horizon of the *postcolonial*' (2004, page 19). The temporal question becomes all-important then, as we return to the question of what it might mean to go 'beyond' the imaginative geographies of the War on Terror. As we have explored, to reveal monolithic understandings of culture (by exposing or reversing them) is inadequate if this means we're constrained to working within the same categories. More worryingly, it seems to me that the risks with this kind of critical intervention is that it ultimately asks nothing of a liberal and left-leaning literary public in the global north that already understands itself to have an 'open' understanding of 'others'. A 'critical' audience can congratulate itself on identifying essentialising views of 'others' at work, confirming what we already thought we knew. But the more difficult questions persist beyond the particular context of the War on Terror: how do we begin to think co-existence in a way that goes beyond an ability to recognise 'them' but only in relation to 'us'? How do we think critically about our place in the world without assuming in *some* way that we are more *advanced* than others? Might this involve raising the question of imagination as more-than-representation (Anderson and Harrison, 2010)? If so, at which universities in the world, and in which locations, can critical work enjoy the luxury of 'moving on' from the work of Orientalism? Or is it the case that the critique of Orientalism was only ever a 'privilege invented by a totalizing Western liberalism' (Ahluwalia citing Clifford, 2007, page 264)?

Minor literatures and the city

We do encounter glimpses of an alternative understanding of what it might mean to live together in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, through the portraits of New York City and Lahore. On arriving in New York City, Changez says: 'I was never an American. I was *immediately* a New Yorker' (page 33) He describes traveling unseen and unhindered through the city's landscapes, blending in at 'the middle of the colour spectrum' (ibid), and feeling 'at home' in 'the fact that Urdu was spoken by taxi-cab drivers; the presence, only two blocks from my East Village apartment, of a samosa- and channa- serving establishment called the Pak-Punjab Deli' (ibid.) New York City is presented as a site that host difference and multiplicity in a way that offer a reprieve from the nationalist geographies of 'us' and 'them'. In this sense, we're presented with an idea of community which refuses the principle of a common identity (see Coward, 2009; Author, 2010). This being-in-common in the city is based upon a sharing in and of different cultures and languages. Community is not in this sense understood as a way of establishing (or resurrecting) security, certainty and order in the midst of the turbulence of political events around us but as a way of coming to terms and

living with fragmentation, difference, incompleteness. As Jasbir Puar puts it, ‘the protection of life granted by national belonging is a precarious invitation at best’ (2007, page 10). Life in this city serves as a home for someone who ‘isn’t sure where he belongs’ but lives with and through the synergies, overlaps and intersections between worlds and cultures.

The portraits of Lahore also offer some potential openings – less so when they serve as the basis of oppositional critique (‘Four thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus River basin, had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers, while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians’ page 34); more so for the fact that it is in Lahore that Changez reflects that he cannot ‘be made whole again’: ‘try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us...’ (page 172-3) We are presented with a brief suggestion of subjectivity as something that now works against the principle of totality, and which refuses the search for completion. The city serves in this case as another kind of port in the midst of the upheavels of modern life, which seeks to accommodate brokenness rather than enable redemption. In Lahore, Changez can allow himself to be a ‘divided subject’ (Shapiro, 2010).

This alternative idea of community refuses to understand that ‘we’ all share in a common timeframe and that ‘others’ are somehow behind or even outside of the time of humanity. Cities also form sites that encourage us to imagine community through a ‘heterotemporal’ frame, that is, where people are not defined by their commonality but by the way in which they are involved in trajectories that clash, juxtapose and overlap. This is exactly why Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel were drawn to writing about European cities, in order to think *alternatives* to the idea that social life can be understood through a homogenous empty time of progress (Frisby, 1985, Shapiro, 2010). Through their works and others, we might unfurl an ‘urban’ idea of time that is discontinuous, splintered and understood as moving in more than one direction. This can inform a different understanding of co-existence to a flat and ahistorical model of multicultural identity politics. For example, Lahore is ‘layered like a sedimentary plain with the accreted history of invaders from the Aryans to the Mongols to the British’ (page 7): this reminds us that differences are not elements that make us more ‘interesting’ but are formed through layers of political histories, clashes and injustices. The pictures of Lahore also suggest that urban dwellers are not composed of a mixture of ‘identities’ but of a plurality of beings: bats and other urban animals share in navigating the city landscape (page 63). Lest this suggestion that cities form sites that encourage a more pluralist understanding of what it means to live together seem overly romantic, it is important to remember that cities have of course also served as central battlegrounds in the operation and dissemination of the imaginative geographies of the War on Terror (Graham, 2010) and as key sites from which campaigns to homogenise populations are carried out (Coward, 2009). Nevertheless, they also work as sites of resistance, and cities therefore offer the ‘twin possibilities’ of reaffirming and/or radicalizing the hold of the colonial past on the present – to echo Gregory. In the images of Lahore, we find that the colonial past cuts across the city’s present. It is ineradicable and unforgettable: the past cannot simply be cast out to establish a ‘new beginning’ and straightforward declarations that we have arrived at a ‘new era’ cannot easily hold when we are everywhere reminded of the historical contexts of many contemporary practices of violence.

Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel's urban writings offer some rich material for rethinking coexistence through the site of the city (Amin & Thrift, 2002; Shapiro, 2010). But they also have their limits, in that they were writing about typically European cities in what is by now another time. Both also have a tendency to be swayed by the possibilities of redemption. This is why I suggest that urban, postcolonial writings potentially offer some richer resources. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* reads the geopolitical context from the localities of New York and Lahore; but what would it mean to think our 'throwntogetherness' (Massey, 2005) through reading the cities of Mumbai, Nairobi or Istanbul?¹³ The connection between the possibilities for thinking differently offered by modernist, urban literatures and postcolonial literatures is made by Deleuze and Guattari who argue that they all draw on different registers of time and space, and therefore offer some routes for thinking heterogeneity. Twentieth century, modernist, European writings about cities and postcolonial literatures therefore form expressions of what Deleuze and Guattari have described as 'minor literature' (1986; see also Bogue, 2003). This concept of 'minor literature' (developed by way of a close reading of Franz Kafka's works) offers an useful starting point for rethinking what it might mean to think critically. This is because minor literatures suggest an understanding of the relationship between present and future that doesn't unfold as more of the same but rather breaks out in different and unexpected directions. In linking the postcolonial and the idea of the minor, Deleuze and Guattari insist that minor literatures don't derive from minority languages necessarily. Rather, they work by disrupting or subverting a major language (page 16).¹⁴ We don't need to go 'outside' or 'over there' to retrieve the possibility of alternative understandings of space, time and politics: in Deleuze and Guattari's discussion, the possibility of disruption is already present.

Most importantly then, the notion of the minor is not based on a quantitative calculation. As Deleuze and Guattari note, 'man' holds a majority even if he is less numerous than the mosquito; women, regardless of numbers, are a minority (2008, page 118, Bogue, 2003). Women, postcolonials or urban subjects don't represent a revolutionary position by 'regionalizing' or 'ghettoizing' *against* the majority and subscribing to the same, dominant understandings of how we might organise politically. Rather, the minor only represents a subversive political force when it deviates from rather than aspires to the standard model: 'this is why we must distinguish between: the majoritarian as a constant and homogenous system; minorities as subsystems; and the minoritarian as a potential, creative and created, becoming' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2008, page 117). What might this mean for how we think about critical political interventions? In contrast to reproducing the terms of debate that we already have available, the challenge is to contest and reimagine ideas of subjectivity, community and freedom and to try and think these concepts beyond what we already think we know: to think these concepts are active and metamorphous. As Kimberly Hutchings has argued, becoming more sensitive to a multiplicity of times and temporalities involves 'a willingness to bracket what theorists already think they know, based on their interpretation of their own present' (Hutchings, 2008, page 165)

¹³ For examples of 'writing the world through an African city' see Opondo on Nairobi (2008) and Mbembe and Nuttall on Johannesburg (2004). On reading the political through the site of the city, see Magnusson, 2000; Isin, 2002; Coward, 2009; Shapiro, 2010.

¹⁴ They cite Prague German (a 'deterritorialized language, appropriate for strange and minor uses', page 17), Joyce's use of English and Beckett's use of French as some examples (page 19). For more on how the idea of 'minor theory' has been taken up in Geography, see Katz, 1996.

John Berger in his recent collection of essays, *Hold Everything Dear* (2007) responds to the political climate of the War on Terror from the urban localities of Jerusalem, Istanbul, London, Baghdad, Washington and Paris, and in doing so, insists on pluralist understandings of political intervention, because as he puts it, ‘the desire for justice is multitudinous’ (page 2). He tells us that struggles against injustice and for survival cannot be understood as a movement of people collectively progressing towards a common goal, but should be read through those ‘incidental moments’ that form ‘experiences of freedom in action’ (Berger, 2007, page 2). In contrast to accounts of resistance which have the journey towards freedom already mapped, this suggests an idea of transformation that lies beyond the control of those revolutionaries who seek it (Grosz, 1999, page 19). Such an approach carries its risks, certainly. But it is open to the possibility that we may think the political in ways we may not have imagined previously. That may involve giving up on some of the ideas that are most dear to us. But what this paper has sought to expose is the parallel danger of critical interventions which don’t ask us to rethink or *give up* on anything, and which suggest that we already know the right course for redeeming world politics.

Beyond imaginative geographies?

Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that the concept of the imagination is a ‘curiously undiscussed category in social science writings’ (2000, page 149) and that it remains a ‘subject-centered category’ (page 175). It continues to suggest a subject that stands apart from the world and that can (re-)order the world in his (sic) vision. Chakrabarty draws our attention to the heterogeneous practices of seeing that are often collapsed into this European word, ‘imagination’, and cites Walter Benjamin as someone who would have appreciated this argument. Rather than seek to bring different points of view into ‘imagination’, Chakrabarty attempts to ‘breathe heterogeneity’ back into the concept. Crucially, his aim is not to *extend* the space of the political to *include* different voices but to allow for the ‘possibility that the field of the political is constitutively not singular’ (page 148). This requires raising the question of imagination as a problem of ontology rather than enunciation. It also involves aiming to understand world politics as plural and ‘heterotemporal’ (Hutchings, 2008). This is a different form of recognition to that which seeks to *appreciate other civilizations* or recognise that *different people have competing notions of progress*. However progressive such aims appear, they also resonate too closely with well-intentioned nods to a liberal multiculturalism. Whilst there is certainly a difference between explicit attempts to posit international politics as a ‘civilizational mission’ and a new political tone that announces a ‘new beginning’ between the United States and Muslims around the world (Obama, 2009), it is worth reminding ourselves that the challenge of thinking beyond the imaginative geographies of ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘civilized’ and ‘backward’ was always a broader challenge than the by now redundant hobby of Bush-bashing. Obama relies heavily on attempts to bring all differences into a common timeframe and into an united community, as we found in his victory speech when he congratulated those that ‘put their hands on the arc of history [to] bend it once more toward the hope of a better day’ (BBC News Online, 2008). Although the foreign policies pursued by the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George Bush were often in unison, liberals (in the global north at least) often found it much harder to criticize Blair’s (Ali, 2005, page 19). I think this is worth keeping in mind as we support and gently keep a watch on the Presidency of Barack Obama.

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