

The Explorer versus the Native: Discrepant Representations of Space

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Abstract

Space studies is relatively a new theme in the humanities. As late as the mid-twentieth century, space has been marginal in human science departments and research interests. It was with the French theorists Henry Lefebvre and Gaston Bachelard that this interest was ignited and given both a material and an aesthetic trajectory within which studies of space still carries on today. Though Postcolonial studies are centered on the discourse on modern colonial experience; the Western imperial takeover of territories from the rest of the world, space so far occupies a marginal interest in this field. This paper's aim is to extend the Postmodern theoretical efforts in spatial studies to the colonial experience. I argue here that representations of space in the shared experience of modern colonialism was not compatible among both parties; the colonizer and the colonized. That while the colonizer entertained a one-dimensional perception of the spaces he conquered centered on dominance and profit, that of the colonized was a much richer perception involving a wealth of symbolism and value.

Keywords: Representations of Space, Explorer, Native, Mental Topos, Colonial Experience

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“The European improving eye produces subsistence habitats as “empty” landscapes, meaningful only in terms of a capitalist future and of their potential for producing a marketable surplus. From the point of view of their inhabitants, of course, these same spaces are lived as intensely humanized, saturated with local history and meaning, where plants, creatures, and geographical formations have names, uses, symbolic functions, histories, places in indigenous knowledge formations.” (Pratt 61).

Is space a source of meaning? Does it encapsulate metaphors in its very being? Or is it an indifferent realm endowed by humans with meaning? Do we saturate each corner in our lives with metaphors, sensations, pleasures and repulsions? Isn't it true that these sensations we develop toward indifferent places our own? Is it not true that we project our feelings, attitudes and conventions unto rather careless spatial realms? In this paper I argue that the experience of space in colonial times involve both views.

Apart from the aesthetic experience of space, which often claims to be unmotivated there will always be politics involved in our representations of space to ourselves as humans. The former viewpoint is the crux of the American spatial aesthete Yi-Fu Tuan as it relates to most of his works, especially his *Romantic Geography* (2018). In this work Tuan banishes the political motives behind space exploration and foregrounds instead a perspective which valorises mankind's quest for beyond the knowable, as the chief motive behind the arduous task of exploring extremely hostile realms like “mountains, oceans, rainforests, deserts and ice plateaus.” (Tuan 30). Tuan stresses that voyages and journeys of this kind are often carried for the thrill these threatening realms present as well as the latent human need to explore within; for an explorer, and in parallel to his exploratory efforts outward, actually travels inward.

It doesn't take much however to demonstrate the opposite; that as much as exploration is a travel within, it is also a highly politically motivated task. For worldly bounty, if one searches enough, almost always lurks behind the overtly pronounced spiritual goal that explorers confess to. Tuan mentions Mungo Park and Columbus as

examples. But both were, admittedly, preoccupied with a mix of both spiritual and temporal aims that justified for them the overwhelming endeavour they undertook. The motives for Park's exploration troubles were not some sublime need in him to reach within as well as without. They were "to open West Africa to conquest, commerce, and colonization." (Basset 317). Columbus's account of the first journey, in turn, demonstrates a preoccupation with two preeminent tasks: first, to gather intelligence of the Indies, its whereabouts in the Ocean Sea and the state of its inhabitants' capacities for resistance to his planned dominion. Second, to locate the whereabouts of gold¹ and spices. Other motives Columbus lists are: plans for vice royalty over the Indies and gold-gathering the revenues of which he urges the king of Castile to "expend on the conquest of Jerusalem." (Columbus 128).

Otherwise, we are prompt to ask Tuan here: why is it that, throughout the Middle Ages; a period known for the domination of a spiritual institution over the affairs of Christendom, the grand projects of exploration were latent until European royal houses felt the need for further riches to secure their realms and expand beyond their respective domains, if not for the worldly threat of Muslims to the south and east and the appetite of these rulers for further dominions within the continent? Exploration is not a spiritual journey, save few solitary efforts human history boasts. It often goes hand in hand with conquest and worldly bounty. The French sociologist Claude Cahen, on reviewing the literature discussing the motives behind the First Crusade, argues that, despite the claims offered by some, that the Crusade was a spiritual redemptive campaign for Christendom, it was a mixture of motives in which spiritual and temporal powers united for different purposes to conquer Jerusalem. While spiritual redemption was proposed by Pope Urban II for the expendable masses of Christians, contends Cahen, worldly gain in the form of imagined fiefdoms in the East, trade monopolies and other motives down to less valuable gains that plunder promises lay soldiers entertain, were what lured the noble fighters to join hands with the church in this adventure.

Columbus's purpose of the journey shows clearly in his initial contact with the Indians: "I was attentive and labored¹ to know if they had gold." Upon the instructions of the goldless natives, Columbus decides few lines later: "so I resolved to go to the south-west, to seek the gold and precious stones." *Ibid.*, 26. In a sense, Columbus's effort throughout the Caribbean had to do with gold. His constant seafaring, meetings with the natives, the flora and fauna were distractions for his relentless search for gold. See pages: 70 – 82- 82- 82- 84- 102- 03 – 125 .

It is hard to study modern colonization without coming across the highly different representations of native space as seen by both the explorer-cum colonizer and the native. Both envision certain use or uses for a given place, but they differ in that the colonizer entertains what I call here a ‘uni-dimensional’ conception of space, while representations of the same domain is richer in the case of the native. Let us deal with the explorer’s first here, and then we proceed to the counter/corrective vision of the native. When Columbus reached the Americas, mistaking the place for an East Asian territory, in the autumn of the year 1492, his journal demonstrates an obsession with two inter-related preoccupations: First, conquest of land through sword, or wholesale natives’ conversion, and, second, acquisition of Gold again through violence or trade. Meeting the natives, the sublime appeal of the landscape and the sailing difficulties are obviously, for Columbus, distractions that merit passing words only, he notes during his initial contact with the natives that “I was attentive and labored to know if they had gold....” (Columbus 26). Upon the gold-less natives’ instructions Columbus resolves, few lines later, that he will head “south-west to seek the gold and precious stones.” (Columbus 26).

In his account of the paradigm shifts of how Europeans saw the Caribbean landscape from Columbus’s arrival there in 1492 to the early twentieth century, the American historian Jefferson Dillman argues that not only did the English inherit the Caribbean from the Spanish, but that they also took over the legacy of Columbus and the later Spanish explorers’ ‘way of seeing’ the Caribbean. Delighted early on by the Caribbean’s good weather, the ever-green pastures, the sweat and plentiful springs of water and the fertile soil, Columbus was subsequently repulsed by, in his view, the natives’ idolatry, the vengefully tempestuous seas and the unpredictable nature of the region. The strangeness of the area and its differences from known realms to Europeans widened their spatial scope, but their ways of seeing the new lands kept their locale’s references. This shows clearly in Columbus’s lore of religious nomenclature, which he chose for the several islands, rivers and capes he came across during the voyages, though they had native names. These developments, i.e. exploration on a planetary scale, in the experience of modern colonial Europe had ingrained in its people what Pratt calls ‘planetary consciousness’; a wider awareness of space than earlier smaller identifications with a tribal, clannish or even classic imperial domains.

Coming recently out of victorious *Reconquista* Spain, which had “cleaned” its realm from the “filth” of Jews and the “heretic” Moors, Columbus’s orthodox Catholicism shows clearly in his view of the Caribbean as both Edenic and Satanic. The play of both themes of vision continues with the arrival of the English to the Caribbean in the 16th century. In 1555 the British Richard Eden writes urging the English to follow in the footsteps of the Spanish: “is it not to be lamented that men can be so valiant ...and in manner desperate for their own private matter...yet are so...cold, negligent and fearful in God’s cause against Satan?!” (Dillman 40). [ellipses mine]. Praising the work of God the Spanish were carrying out in the Americas Eden contends: “now thank be to God, by the manhood and policies of the Spaniards, this devilish generation is so consumed.” (Richard 50). The play of the themes of the Paradiseal and the Satanic was taken over by English explorers for the rest of the 16th century. Here’s Walter Raleigh, an English explorer writing in 1555 about Guiana: “if there be anything of that nature, beauty, and delight that Paradise had, the same must be found within...” the tropics “be best compared to the Paradise of Eden.” (Raleigh 22- 27). Balancing his Edenic description Raleigh refers to the Satanic aspect of the Caribbean, here he describes a race of people he calls the Mandevillian nation “whose heads appear not above their shoulders” and who are “reported to have their eyes in their shoulders, and their mouths in the middle of their breasts, and that a long train of hair grow backwards between their shoulders.”(Raleigh 27). This polarity that shaped European way of seeing the Caribbean was transcended only by the instrumental uses to which the region could be put; profit and dominance.

While Columbus might actually have been dazzled by the Caribbean landscape, in perpetuating his vision, the English, for Dillman, had other purposes in mind: relating to their countrymen the promise the Caribbean held for them. The late 16th century witnessed a fierce competition between Europeans vying for overseas dominions replete with promises of gold, diamonds, silver and the agricultural cargo the Americas promised. However, the process of establishing settlements for further plunder, trade and the intra-national gold rush the hardships of the soil and climate hit the settler-colonial project hard. Added to the unpredictable nature of the Caribbean and the short arm of the colonial law, which rendered control of the arriving ‘pioneers’ an impossibility, settlement faced a stalemate. Accounts of capsizing ships in Bermuda, earthquakes sacking entire settlements

and the lawlessness of both the greedy and criminal pioneers and runaway slaves re-emphasized the Satanic perception the Caribbean represented for Europeans. Surviving accounts of buccaneers, freebooters, pirates and privateers, along with accounts of colonial lawmen of the times paints the grim picture the area became notorious for in Western culture. Here's a passage from Daniel How, an English army officer describing, with abundant despair, the acquired habits of the mutinous pioneers: "I suppose they only came [from England] to see the gold mountains and to plunder... being good for little [they are] for the most part such old beaten runaways as that they know how to do little else except plunder." (Venables 40).

It wasn't until the 18th century that the British regained control of the area. Regrettably for the British however, independence movements of the Creoles had by the time already started independence revolutions in some countries. Despite this, the two themes of the Edenic and Satanic that define the Caribbean for the Europeans continued to exist. The following passage shows, in contrast, the inherently Satanic Caribbean for another Englishman; this is Anthony Trollope writing in 1860: "the negro's idea of emancipation was and is emancipation not from slavery but from work. Such idleness consisting of lying in the sun eating breadfruit and yams...Jamaica, as it now exists, is still under a Devil's ordinance." (Trollope 90). This view gradually gave way in time to a more greedy vision that saw in the Americas a land of promises of wealth. As the need for markets and resources increased the Europeans found in the Americas both. Mary Louise Pratt quotes Joseph Andrews, a British mining engineer looking at a valley in the Chilean Andes, simultaneously visualizing what use it could be put to: "We saw in imagination a crowd of workmen moving like busy insects along the eminences, and fancied the wild and vast region peopled by the energies of Britons from a distance of nine or ten thousand miles." (Pratt 150).

There is not much difference in how Europeans viewed Africa either. The same concerns trouble them since the aim is always conquest and profit. Joseph Conrad, a highly cited author in colonial studies, writes in the late 19th century about arriving by ship to the river Congo. The dense primeval forest, the beguiled pre-Adamite natives, unbelievably staring at him and his crewmen make up a recurrent scene: "Still, I had also judged the

jungle of both banks quite impenetrable— and yet eyes were in it, eyes that had seen us. The riverside bushes were certainly very thick; but the undergrowth behind was evidently penetrable...” (Conrad 17). A few pages later Conrad is describing the enslaved natives toiling for their white masters:

“A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking... All their meager breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages.” (Conrad 28-29).

This recurring one-dimensional ‘way of seeing’ space and the people inhabiting it, on the part of Europeans, is what Mary Louise Pratt aptly calls “imperial eyes” in her work with the same title. Pratt develops in her work a set of concepts that aid her readers in gaining access to this elephantine edifice. ‘contact zone’ is one such concept; in explaining what she means by the phrase Pratt states that contact zones are “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination –like colonialism, slavery and their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today.” (Conrad 4).

Native representations of space: the corrective vision.

The contrast is clear. The native does not share in the ‘pioneer’s’ representations of space as a-therely-available place for domination and profit. Instead, the realm he inhabits is symbolically richer. Many native accounts emphasize this; that prior to the onset of colonization place for the natives meant innumerable things: there were sacred and profane

spaces, feminine fertile soils and barren realms reserved for evil spirits, there were territories upon which clan blood was spelled defending it against intra-tribal aggression and realms of a given distance that account for primal scenes when Gods assigned the territory to some tribe's nomadic ancestors and confirmed their right to it in verbally-ordained words. Most of the natives in the Americas and in Africa, by the time of the arrival of the white man, were leading a nomadic or sedentary lifestyles. They had a rich cultural lore consisting of cosmogonies, legends of heroic deeds, nomadic exploits carried over a much smaller territory than the 'planetary consciousness' the more witty and cruel Europeans had.

No words, I think, could demonstrate the representations the two parties, i.e. the settlers/colonizers and the natives, entertained concerning space better than Chief Seattle's in a by-now iconic speech. Seattle was a Red Indian tribal chief, and a resistance icon in the area of modern day Washington in north-west America. The speech was committed to print on the occasion of Seattle's decision to cede the Washington territory to governor Stevens in 1887. Chief Seattle's words:

“There was a time when our people covered the whole land as the waves of a wind-ruffled sea covers its shell-paved floor, but that time has long since passed away with the greatness of tribes now almost forgotten. I will not dwell on nor mourn over our untimely decay, nor reproach my pale-face brothers with hastening it. We are two distinct races. There is little in common between us. To us the ashes of our ancestors are sacred and their final resting place is hallowed ground, while you wander far from the graves of your ancestors, and, seemingly, without regret. . . . Every part of this country is sacred to my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove has been hallowed by some fond memory or some sad experience of my tribe. Even the rocks, which seem to lie dumb as they swelter in the sun along the silent seashore in solemn grandeur, thrill with memories of past events connected with the lives of my people. The very dust under your feet

responds more lovingly to our footsteps than to yours, because it is the ashes of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch, for the soil is rich with the life of our kindred.” (Tuan 155-156).

Chinua Achebe, responding from Africa, presents a complex picture of the relations between the colonizer and the colonized. His 1958 iconic novella *Things Fall Apart* is made up of 25 chapters. Half of the novella is devoted to an account of the typical sedentary life of the tribe of Umoufia. There are feasts celebrated on occasions of harvests, inter-clan wrestling contests, marriage ceremonies called *uri* and rituals of mourning which involve frenzied dances and gun-firing in celebration of handing over a tribal soul to the ancestors.

The tribe’s spatial reach is only as big as the place occupied by the nine clans of Umoufia. Life in the tribe consists temporally of cycles of plowing lands and harvesting crops, in between lie seasons/ occasions of variable levels of sanctity to the people of the tribe. The temporal and the spiritual confirm each other, and life is calm and serene. The sky for the natives is a place peopled by several Gods. “Amadioha” is the God of Gods; “Ani” is the Goddess of fertility and is appeased by sacrifices on the occasions of sowing and harvesting. The sacrifices need the intervention of the deity’s priest or an oracle. At a lower level and of lesser potency and sanctity lie Gods like “Egwugwu”, representing deities of the nine clans. Rites of appeasing these Gods involve frenzied dancing in masks carried out by honorable members of the nine clans. At a still further lower position in this faith hierarchy lie the “Chi”, or personal God. This God is assigned the domain of harmony between mind and sentiments. To placate the “Chi” the ritualistic occasional worship of Gods must be respected, ancestors’ spirits must be sought and placated in prayers, worship rituals must be carried out in time and according to the revered ordinances of the deity’s priest/ interpreter. In this cosmology evil spirits are assigned a place, the Evil Forest; an un-treaded taboo bush committed to spirits of evil, and where the potent fetishes of the medicine men *Dibias* are thrown after their death.

This complex hierarchy is in tandem with man’s action as long as prayers to the intermediaries reaches and placates the higher ones. And both realms the here and the

beyond are kept close through these rituals. A passage from the novella illustrates this point better:

“The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man’s life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors.” (Achebe 85).

As in the realm of Gods life in the tribe is organized hierarchically along lines of worldly gain, bravery and skill in communal activities of peasantry, hunting and defending the tribe in times of conflict. Okonkwo, the protagonist, a fierce worldly figure is a prosperous, hard working clansman, a titled wrestler, a brave fighter and a relentless hunter. Part of the misfortunes befalling him is his own doing, and the other is the work of his wholehearted devotion to the ordinances of the Gods and land. First, he angers the Gods and displeases the people and the priest of Ani, the Goddess of fertility, by committing *nso-ani*; beating his wife (committing violence) during the Week of Peace; a sacred week devoted by the natives to the fertility Goddess during which they abstain from any form of violence against anything that lives.

Next, Okonkwo commits a “female” crime; an inadvertent killing of a person by a gunshot during the rite of a chieftain’s burial, the male of which being pre-meditated murder. The custom dictates that the penalty for such an act was excommunication/ exile from the tribe for 7 years. The arrival of Christian missionaries announces the imminence of the inevitable clash between this world view and the white man’s. The missionaries ask the clansmen to give them a place where to build a church and begin the work of God; conversion of the natives. Umoufians agree to hand over the Evil Forest to the Christians. Conversion begins and things start to fall apart. The conversion effort works better with the young and rabble and dispossessed of the clan. Tension keeps building on both sides for a time as the white man assigns a court commission to adjudicate cases and assign penalties for grievances, thus overriding both the spiritual and temporal authority of the titled elders. The grip of white authority gets tighter and the privileges of the tribe elders is

giving way from underneath their feet, until a peaceful gathering of theirs in the market place is disrupted by the commission messengers. In fiery mood against the disruption Okonkwo kills a commission messenger superintending the meeting ban and commits suicide thereafter.

These counter narratives of how natives experiences space are often suppressed by colonial narratives in favor of the victors' narratives. Achebe refers to this epistemicidal tendency in the colonial discourse on the rest of the world. He ends his narrative with a thought-provoking passage about the colonial commissioner committing to book form Okonkwo's death and similar events taking place under his authority. He writes:

“As he [the commissioner] walked back to the court he thought about the book [he intends to write]...the story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter, but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.*” (Achebe 48).

Conrad's Congo river ridges, with his novel's symbolic reference to Africa at large, as dark, mysterious and deadly, inhabited by dark, unhappy and equally mysterious races, was an emphasis that carried Columbus' motif of the Satanic non-European realms higher up in time to the late 19th century. In response, the Kenyan author Ngugi Wa'Thiongo wrote a novel in 1965 he titled *The River Between*. In the opening lines of the novel Wa Thiongo reverses the narrative. Now the threatening, deadly and mysterious are the white men, not the inhabitants of the river Honia. As if breathing life into dead land, Wa'Thiongo writes:

“The two ridges [of the river] lay side by side. One was Kamen, the other was Makuyu. Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life...a river flowed through the valley of life...the river was called Honia, which meant cure, or

bring-back-to-life. Honia river never died...Honia was the soul of Kameno and Makuyu. It joined them. And men, cattle, wild beasts and trees, were all united by this life-stream.” (Wa’ Thiongo 1)

That life in Africa not only exists only when white men are gazing, but that it has existed in the river of life since eternity is Wa’Thiongo’s prerogative here. Life not only exists now around the ridges of the river Honia, but has existed since eternity. For place acquires more mystique when it has been lived on as long as life in the place itself. Invoking the mythic past Wa’ Thiongo writes that the tension, existing between the two villages making up the tribe on the two shores of the river, was about clan leadership. Both parties claimed that their founding parents/ancestors Gikuyu and Mumbi, who first settled in the area by ordination from the God of Gods Murungu, left them the right to lead. Both clans repeat the words of Murungu saying to the founding couple: “this land I give to you, O man and woman. It is yours to rule and till, you and your posterity.” Soon after this introduction, again, the arrival of the white men disrupts the serenity of life, and the rest of the story is already known to us.

Conclusion

What these African responses reveal is the critical nature of the need to tell one’s narrative. It is a question of life and death. Moreover, native narratives stress multidimensional aspects of space experience richer than that of the profit and dominance oriented Europeans. For the modern paradigms of dominant motifs and interests in European thought ingrained in Europeans this instrumental view of space both within the continent and without. So much so that European literature on space ordering to suit the whims of man reminds us of architectural figures like Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, which dominated the construction of institutions like prisons, factories, army training bases, hospitals...etc. Beyond the shores of the continent spatial arrangement formed a material discourse of hard line discrimination against natives, who were thought of as creatures of lesser humanity underserving of humane and civil treatment. Colonial realms

and their people were usually uni-dimensionally thought of as reified domains for profit and dominance.

The corrective view of native spaces, on the part of natives, often cite richer human values, fecund symbolism, and a life of ease with earth and climate. From the actual inhabited realms to the mental topoi of representations of the earth, we experience a usually more entrenched, authentic and at-ease-with-life representation of space. Earth is usually seen as motherly, life giving and a womb that embraces the living and the dead. It is a constitutive element in the web of narratives making up the identity of those living on and in it. It is rife with meaning encapsulating within its soil, flora and fauna native narratives of ancestry, history and events so rich that, for the native, life elsewhere is impossible.

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