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Mapping Communities and their Cultural Territories

by

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‘Mapping Communities and their Cultural Territories —
A Reflection’

No one today is purely one thing.

— Edward Said¹

The frontiers are there, the frontiers are sacred. What else, after all, could guarantee privilege and power to the ruling elites?

— Basil Davidson²

I

Although the wording of the title of this reflection is inspired by Alfred Korzybski’s observation, ‘The map is not the territory’,³ it is rather the remark’s pertinent intersection with the attention critics have given to cartography, for example Edward Said in his recently published *Culture and Imperialism*, that occasions it. Said writes that most cultural historians have failed to take note of what he calls geographical notation and the theoretical mapping and charting of territory (Said, 58).

First, it will not, I think, be out of place to outline the issues I had originally intended to discuss, especially following a couple of brainstorming sessions with my fellow panelists. Two things became clear at the outset: one, that I was not qualified to reflect on the ‘philosophical and theoretical considerations’ pertaining to multiculturalism, and two, that it might be useful, heuristically if nothing else, for us to identify key issues or keywords around which discussion and reflection might condense. This, I believe, explains why the panel was re-titled ‘Self, Otherness, Difference’. But it does not explain the re-titling of my own presentation which was to centre around the definition of ‘community’, the issue of ‘communalism’, and the responsibilities of the minority. I am still going to touch on those issues, but obliquely, and by drawing on the reflections of others about what identity, ethnicity, community, nation, minority and participation require and entail. In some ways, therefore, I have reverted to the reflection as earlier conceived; though I have no pretensions about its theoretical rigour, I have tried to be thoughtful, and hope to raise issues that are pertinent to a discussion of multiculturalism.

The imagery of map and territory, incidentally, has numerous adherents besides Said. The anthropologist Brackette Williams, for instance, subtitles

a 1989 article, 'anthropology and the race to nation across ethnic terrain'.⁴ And her illustrious predecessor Fredrik Barth, building on the work of his own predecessors, has developed a model for the study of ethnic relations that focuses on the boundaries which delimit ethnic groups rather than on the groups themselves or on their cultural baggage.⁵

If I have proposed a cartographic metaphor, my intention has been simultaneously to erect and to undermine the territory and its map, to deform, or re-form the domain of the community and of groups by stressing ties of affinity, sympathy, and compassion. As Said laments, in the new post-colonial international configuration, newly triumphant politicians, along with other authorised figures, the rulers, the national heroes and martyrs, the established religious authorities, always seem to require borders (Said, 307):

What had once been the imaginative liberation of a people — Aimé Césaire's "inventions of new souls" — and the audacious metaphoric charting of spiritual territory usurped by colonial masters, were quickly translated into and and accomodated by a world system of barriers, maps, frontiers... (Said, 307).

It seems to me useful, even imperative, to start to recognise (with Said) that "the logic of borders" are totalising, that conflictual, oppositional, territorial (warring) essences are totalising too, and thus, that the map of the world or of the nation or of the community "has no divinely or dogmatically sanctioned spaces, essences, or privileges" (Said, 311). We must move away from the need to perpetuate fiefdoms, guilds and manipulative identities — like India, America, Islam — and concern ourselves with "the improvement and non-coercive enhancement of life in a community struggling to exist among other communities" (Said, 312).

II

Cultures and communities eventually come to be associated aggressively with the nation, differentiating 'us' from 'them' and entailing the attendant xenophobia. Cultures and communities thus become combative sources of identity, occasioning 'returns' to culture and tradition, 'returns'

that accompany rigorous codes of behavior, that are opposed to the perceived permissiveness of relatively liberal philosophies like multiculturalism and hybridity, and that can produce religious and nationalist fundamentalisms (Said, xiii). Said writes:

In post-colonial national states, the liabilities of such essences as the Celtic spirit, *négritude*, or Islam are clear: they have much to do not only with the native manipulators, who also use them to cover up contemporary faults, corruptions, tyrannies, but also with the embattled imperial contexts out of which they came and in which they were felt to be necessary (Said, 16).

Indeed, I can only share in Said's uneasiness about the mobilising power of images brought forth from a pre-colonial past — fictional, romantic, fantastic images.

Renato Rosaldo has suggested that the opposition between 'us' and 'them' is effectively undone and undermined by the fact that often they are involved in universal human problems".⁶ Rosaldo argues further that it is "precisely those 'zones of cultural invisibility' that pose the most compelling questions for contemporary critics and theorists because that is where the transcultural process... manifests itself with clarity".

If I assimilate culture and community to nation,⁷ it is not legerdemain or theoretical unsophistication but rather because the issue of community is related to the issue of nation, and because both are in turn related — we might say correlated — to the idea of boundaries, borders, frontiers. In the case of an island, the boundaries, territorial at any rate, appear predetermined. In this connection, Gillian Beer has pointed out that "the concept of nationhood which relies upon the cultural idea of the island" is no longer tenable.⁸ We might invert that proposition and posit that the concept of an island which relies upon the concept of nationhood, equally, is tenable only with difficulty.

Rejecting the impermeability or unviability of an island's borders is not so very radical. Indeed, islands with a constitutive history of immigration,

such as ours, undermine, or at least problematise, the entire notion of insularity. Immigrants and their descendants are eventually absorbed into the national culture. The attendant "loss of one's past — autobiography, history, heritage, language"⁹ results in a melting pot. As Françoise Lionnet points out, under such circumstances, the melting pot becomes either a *necessary* myth or an *enabling* metaphor.¹⁰

It is perhaps obvious, but bears repeating in a Mauritian context that can seem very removed from Subcontinental, European, and other experiences, that the lines between communities and ethnicities, are blurred at best; that these categories, like cultures, are to a great extent "humanly made structures of both authority and participation, benevolent in what they include, incorporate, and validate, less benevolent in what they exclude and demote"; that cultural, community, group experiences are not pure, essential, but "oddly hybrid... partak[ing] of many often contradictory experiences and domains, cross[ing] national boundaries, defy[ing] the police action of simple dogma..." (Said, 15)

There is a tendency, a dangerous tendency, to see culture as something proprietary, to see the cultural territory as one's own, as something always-already transgressed. But, as Said has very simply put it, "Culture is never just a matter of ownership" (Said, 217). Cultures are not impermeable and their boundaries are fluid at best.

III

I want to introduce another metaphor, that of contagion. James Snead has discussed contagion in the context of Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo-Jumbo*. I invoke his remarks here as I find them apropos. He writes:

Perhaps the most important aspect of cultural contagion is that by the time one is aware of it, it has already happened. Contagion, being metonymic (*con+tangere* = 'touching together'), involves... an actual process of contacts between people, rather than a quantitative setting of metaphorical value... Opposed to Dr Johnson's 'pedigree' that sought to discover lost, but recoverable differences, contagion represents the existence of recoverable affinities between disparate races of people...

Even as collection domesticates and organizes barriers and distances, contagion seems to have already made obsolete the barriers to its own spread.¹¹

Snead, who is concerned with African and Afro-American writers in the article from which this quotation is taken, goes on to criticise Africanists who compress variety into identity. He believes that this turns critics, and observers, into racists, nationalists or individualists. Racists purvey unproblematised compressed identities such as africanité — in our situation, this might perhaps be said about créolité or Indianness — wherein a black, African writer's work is obligatorily "an expression of négritude, a verbal manifestation of a particular soul". And the preoccupation of Nationalists is with "mapping the geography of... literature, a literature conveniently contained within... arbitrary territorial boundaries...".¹² Snead draws on the cartographic metaphor and calls these and other projections "flattened perspectives".

Indeed, cartography becomes less and less useful as we come to the realisation that the space occupied by communities has an 'interruptive' interiority; is one possessed of transgressive boundaries; is neutral; is an irredeemably plural modern one;¹³ signifies; and perhaps most importantly, is a space that must be shared, that necessitates overlap and affinity.

Among the many questions we must ask together, I would like to propose two. The first echoes Françoise Lionnet:

What are the preconditions under which the formulations of identity and difference do not risk becoming static categories used to polarize and fragment... communities?¹⁴

The second adapts Roger Toumson and Françoise Lionnet both:¹⁵

In view of the fact that... a system of thought that represents the 'other' as a variation of the 'same' cannot do justice to a multicultural environment, What... concept of difference can bear witness to

cultural particularity without... dependence on, colonial, imperial, or foundational models?

IV

I want to add an observation about being part of a Muslim minority, something I have been everywhere I have ever lived. In so being, needless to stress, a fair amount of accommodation to majority demands is required. As Syed Abedin writes, "within the framework of the unquestioned primacy of our allegiance to Islam, we need to determine what should be our proper attitude towards this social reality. We need to... see how some of the political and social effects of this stance can be softened and mitigated, and learn to live with those that cannot".¹⁶

The struggle is to face conflicting needs. On the one hand, to encourage Muslim communities to strengthen and reinforce their cultural identity in a multicultural society so that they may not be absorbed and assimilated. On the other hand to somehow make the same group realise that physical traits, cultural traditions, dress, food, customs, and habits are subordinate or subsidiary to their main identity, that the true identity is determined by the manner in which an individual of any community — and by extension the community too — uses her faculties, and selects ends and means as she approaches the business of living.¹⁷

When we accept configurations of overlap and interdependence, and when we accept, with Sarah Kofman, that communities are and can be founded "not on a specific difference or a shared essence... but on a shared power of choice, of incompatible, although correlated, choices... power to preserve the incommensurable distance, the relation without relationship"¹⁸ — then can history and geography be transfigured in new maps, and then can the exilic, migratory experience of "crossing boundaries and charting new territories in defiance of... canonic enclosures" become truly enhancing (Said, 317).

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Notes

- 1 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994 [1993]), 336; hereafter, cited in the text. I have drawn extensively from Said for a number of my formulations.
- 2 Basil Davidson, 'On Revolutionary Nationalism: The Legacy of Cabral,' *Race and Class* 27/3 (Winter 1986), 43.
- 3 Cited by David Fideler in *Parabola* 20/3 (Summer 1995), 102.
- 4 Brackette Williams, 'A class act: anthropology and the race to nation across ethnic terrain', in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18 (1989), 401-404. Writing about nationalism, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity & Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London and Boulder: Pluto Press, 1993), 106, observes that the map "is a metaphor appropriate to the political and cultural developments leading to [it]".
- 5 Fredrik Barth, 'Introduction', in idem (ed), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organisation of Culture Difference* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969), 9-38.
- 6 Renato Rosaldo, 'Ideology, Place, and People without Culture,' *Cultural Anthropology* 3 (February 1988), 77-80, quoted in Françoise Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: women, literature, identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 75. I am indebted to Lionnet for numerous ideas and references.
- 7 As anthropologists have noted, the nation-state, unlike many other political systems, draws on an ideology proclaiming that political boundaries should be coterminous with cultural boundaries. Cf. Eriksen, *Ethnicity*, 109.
- 8 Gillian Beer, 'The island and the aeroplane: the case of Virginia Woolf', in Homi K. Bhabha (ed), *Nation and Narration* (London and NY: Routledge, 1990), 266; cf. Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (London: Batsford, 1938), which Beer cites.
- 9 Rosaldo, 'Ideology', 87.
- 10 Lionnet, *Representations*, 12 (emphases mine).
- 11 James Snead, 'European pedigrees/African contagions: nationality, narrative, and communality in Tutuola, Achebe, and Reed', in Bhabha (ed), *Nation and Narration*, 245.
- 12 All quotations from Snead, 'European pedigrees/African contagions', 238.

13 For Homi Bhabha, the modern nation, and I oversimplify him here, consists in a continual displacement of its plural space into a signifying space that is archaic and mythical. "The liminal point of this ideological displacement is the turning of the differentiated spatial boundary, the 'outside', into the unified temporal territory of Tradition." Freud's concept of the 'narcissism of minor differences' reinterpreted, then provides a way of understanding how easily the secure, cohesive limits of the boundary turn into a contentious internal liminality that provides a place from which to speak both of, and as, the minority, the exilic, the marginal, and the emergent. See Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation', in Bhabha (ed), *Nation and Narration*, 300-301. (In this connection, Yannick Lahens has asked, "What if we were to open up the territories of our imaginaire by first accepting exile, and thus the otherness within us?" in 'L'Exil: Entre écrire et habiter', in *Chemins critiques* 1 (December 1989), 183, quoted in Lionnet, *Representations*, 70.)

14 Lionnet, *Representations*, 2.

15 Lionnet, *Representations*, 34, and Roger Toumson, 'The Question of Identity in Caribbean Literature', in *Journal of Caribbean Studies* 5 (Fall 1986), 134, whom Lionnet cites.

16 Syed Z. Abedin, 'The Study of Muslim Minority Problems: A Conceptual Approach', in *Muslim Communities in Non-Muslim States* (Islamic Council of Europe, 1980), 21 [17-29]. Cf. my 'Islam in a Plural Society', in *Le Mauricien* (18 January 1996), 7.

17 Paraphrasing and adapting Abedin, 'Minority Problems', 24-25.

18 Sarah Kofman, *Paroles suffoquées* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 79, quoted in Lionnet, *Representations*, 83.