White mythologies and anemic geographies: A review†

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Abstract. Robert Young’s book *White Mythologies* raises some critical questions of importance to geography. Amongst these are the significant links between the critique of Western historicism and the increasing use of spatial names and metaphors in arguments about cultural politics. Young’s sweeping criticisms of Marxism are powerful, but they lose sight of the value of work which attends to politico-economic processes while problematizing the limits of marxism’s metanarrative. Young’s writing is limited itself. It introduces work that breaks with Western-centrism, but, as it does so, it sometimes falls prey to a form of ‘new’ Orientalism that manipulates and represents such work in the interests of ‘the West’. These limits to the book provide an example of *anemic geography*. This reified and reifying geography fails to deal adequately with the questions of geographical complexity opened up by the displacement of Western History. Instead, it cloaks them beneath the use of a geographical vocabulary employed as a vehicle in the metaphorisation of political debate. Alternatives are possible.

“Metaphysics—the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own *logos*, that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason.”

*(Jacques Derrida, 1982a, page 213)*

“[Paradoxically, and almost by reverse ethnocentrism, Derrida insists that logos] is a property of the West.

My final question ... is plaintive and predictable: what about us? ... The splendid, decadent, multiple, oppressive, and more than millenial polytheistic tradition of India has to be written out of the *Indo-European* picture in order that the difference in this case between the White masculine West and the rest] may stand.”

*(Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1976, page lxxxii; 1988b, page 140)*

If white mythology is the term which Jacques Derrida uses to problematise the coincidence of logocentrism and Western ethnocentrism and which—put appropriately in the plural—Robert Young chooses to privilege in the title of his book, it is also a term

† *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* by Robert Young; Routledge, New York, 1990, 256 pages, $57.50 cloth, $15.95 paper.

(*Logocentrism*, as Derrida uses it, refers to the various yet monotonous attempts in philosophy to legislate the immediacy of the truth of the word of philosophy by demarcating its privilege over a constructed field of nonphilosophy. By tracing some of the consequent ‘debasements’ Derrida has endeavoured to unsettle (though not, it should be emphasised, dismiss) the resulting foundational claims of philosophy. In some cases he shows the ‘foundations’ to be parts of wider processes organised by politics such as patriarchy, or, as in the case of white mythology, Western imperialism. In the latter context it should be noted that Derrida distinguishes between a specifically *Western* logocentrism and a more general, global tendency towards phonoecentrism (a privileging of the myth of immediate vocal presence over the notion of writing as a context-bound, code-dependent, and interpretation-ridden form of communication). *(See Derrida, 1984, pages 115–116.)*
which raises some critical political questions in and about “the shadow of a geographical pattern” (Spivak, 1976, page lxxxii). Significantly, though, the blurb on the back cover of Young’s book announces his project in a way that leaves little room for this geography to become anything more than a shadow. Two tabloid style questions boldly ask:

WHAT HAPPENS TO ‘HISTORY’ IN POSTMODERNISM?
IS HISTORY A WESTERN MYTH?

Certainly a geographical concept-metaphor of ‘Westernness’ is employed here, but, because what is primarily at stake concerns the presumptuous nature of a Western History(9) pretending to describe all the world’s histories, the geography remains only a vehicle for the inquiry. This effective underplaying of geography is indicative of a broader tendency in the book itself and as such is what I want to describe and criticise in this review under the label of anemic geography. By comparison, the actual questions around Western History raised on the backcover are pursued by Young with a rare clarity and rigour in the pages within. Most valuably, his argument develops in such a way as to highlight the significance as well as just the existence of the interventions made by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha. He deals substantively with the differences of approach between these theorists, and examines with care what such differences might imply with regard to the particular question of Western historicism. At times Young’s zealous anti-Marxism gets in the way, but ultimately the book still is an important critique of the imperialising tendencies of Western thought and, as such, serves as a valuable lesson to all those—Marxists included—who want to be rid of such patterns of thought and the apologetics for oppression they license. In the course of this review, however, I want also to outline the apparent limits to the emancipatory politics stemming from White Mythologies, limits that relate in part to how the author fails to deal adequately with the questions of geographical complexity opened up by the displacement of Western History.

Covers of recuperation
The framework within which the book’s political limits are established can itself be described quite briefly. Like a shadow, the spatial shapes and edges of what might be called ‘the West and the rest’ stand out, but the detail is missing. In particular, the implications of the criticism of Derrida by Spivak—of logocentrism or metaphysics being assumed as a property of only ‘the West’—are left largely unaddressed by Young. In symmetry with this absence, there is a tendency in the book to generalise postmodernism as just a decentraling of ‘the West’. Poststructuralism itself is also locked into this reifying formula, its complex differences from postmodernism reduced to a simple matter of internal as opposed to external critique (page 19). More dangerously, these are arguments which Young sometimes begins to reverse with the result that vast multiplicities of postcolonial struggles against Western imperialism are collapsed into a single political justification for postmodernism. These, though, are rather synoptic points and in what follows I attempt to unravel their more critical implications.

For the moment, the back cover may once again serve as a summary illustration. Beneath the bold questions about Western History we are informed that Young’s account will demonstrate that “the ‘Third World’ appears as an unassimilable excess,

(9) I use History and Reason (with capitals) to signify their paleonymy (Spivak, 1990a, page 25).
(10) Such a conflation contrasts with identifications of affinity between postcolonial and postmodern movements that at the same time preserve the significance of their discontinuity (see for example, Appiah, 1991).
surplus to the narrative of the West”. Beneath this claim the résumé next introduces Said, Bhabha, and Spivak on whose work the book’s three final chapters will focus. This position towards the end of the book is significant because, contrary to Young’s disclaimer (page vi), *White Mythologies* has a distinctly evolutionary (and, indeed, canonically punctuated) narrative in which the foci of these same final three chapters are introduced as representing “the Third World starting a new history” (page 118). In the terms of the back cover, therefore, the work of the three named theorists is positioned by the book’s narrative as an example of what is ‘unassimilable’. Significantly, however, the back cover itself (whose authorship is anonymous) condenses the dangers inherent to Young’s production of these examples, and in the subsequent lines tellingly *assimilates* the so-called ‘efforts’ of Said, Spivak, and Bhabha as just “part of a larger project of a decolonisation of History and a deconstruction of ‘the West’”.

My point is that if such theorists and their heterogeneous life struggles are subsumed into Young’s ‘larger’ stories of decolonisation and deconstruction, stories which themselves are subsumed in turn within his larger story of postmodernism, then so too can *White Mythologies* itself be read as reinstalling the centrality of ‘the West’ (albeit as a problem) through the very Hegelian arrogance to which Young otherwise objects. This pattern, I will suggest, results in part from the difficulties which Young inherits from Derrida. Yet, rather than openly discussing such difficulties, Young covers up the absence of a chapter-length analysis of Derrida by means of a bold repetition of the French philosopher’s terminology in the title. It is nevertheless Derrida (1976, page 80) who so well describes the resulting problem.

“[E]ach time that ethnocentrism is precipitously and ostentatiously reversed, some effort silently hides behind all the spectacular effects to consolidate an inside and to draw from it some domestic benefit.”

A shadowy exergue

At the start of his essay, “White mythology: metaphor in the text of philosophy”, Derrida (1982a) indicates how two fields of interrogation might be linked. On the one hand there is the question of European philosophy’s relation to metaphor, a question which extended as an inquiry into the (im)possibility of a general, or properly philosophical metaphorology becomes the central theme of the essay. On the other hand is the question of ‘the West’ and its relation to the world at large. In both fields there is a pattern of dissimulation. ‘The West’, though it has always been but a part of a complex global culture, and though it continues to owe so much and is hard-pressed to deny its links with whatever it defines as ‘the rest of the world’, nevertheless proceeds to do precisely this, erecting a myth of itself as the sovereign centre of History and racially casting itself as autonomous, uncoloured, as discreetly white. Likewise, although all its concepts remain utterly dependent on metaphor, philosophy pretends to a purity, a white-hot immediacy of brilliant thought, which it presents as uncontaminated by the work and clutter of figures and tropes. In the context of this latter argument Derrida’s project, contrary to a widespread misconception, is not simply to act the court jester, poking fun at the sovereign voice of Reason and revealing its concepts as dressed-up metaphors. This tactic already has its heroes (usually men), and Derrida chooses instead to comment on the exchange between such critics and those who remain blindly serious defenders of Reason. Analysing the shared assumptions as well as the differences between both these parties, he wants “to reinscribe them otherwise” (1982a, page 215; see

(6) I make the following claims on the basis of my reading of the English translation by Alan Bass.
also Gasché, 1986, page 293 ff.). To achieve this effect he works in part by beginning “to identify the historico-problematic terrain on which philosophy systematically has been asked for the metaphorical rubrics of its concepts” (1982a, page 215). It is by marking this ‘terrain’ that Derrida starts to indicate how the economy of philosophy’s difference from metaphor not only parallels but, to some extent, takes part in the dynamic of ‘the West’s’ difference from the ‘non-West’.

Derrida makes his argument by blurring the meaning of the words of Polyphilos in Anatole France’s Garden of Epicurus. He is thus able to move directly from this cynic’s claim that the output of philosophy is only a bloodless form of analogy, that is an ‘anemic mythology’, to the idea that the concepts of Western Reason have come in part from elsewhere, their non-West, metaphorical past glossed as such as nonwhite by a superseding ‘white mythology’ (1982a, pages 210–213 and 268–271). In other words, the process deferring/differing the metaphorical that enables logocentrism to get going is recoded as joining with, as well as thematising, the deferring/differing of the non-West, the geo-historical violence of othering, and silencing that establishes the authority of the West as an all-powerful, world-Historical centre. Having problematised this relation with the term ‘white mythology’, however, Derrida does not (at least in this account) embark upon an analysis of the racism that articulates the myth of whiteness with Westness, and nor, more significantly perhaps for a philosopher, does he deal in substance with the systems of native thought that imperialist projects sought to anthropologise away as quaintly pre-Historical. To be sure, his identification of the twin patterns of dissimulation and their relations one with another is useful, but to leave white mythology there and not examine other debates around the world concerning phonocecntrism, phallocentrism, and (what might perhaps be differential) logocentrisms is to partake of and reproduce the very same tradition of ‘the West’ that dissembled their existence in the first place. As Spivak noted in her preface to Of Grammatology, this recovery of Western philosophy as the sole object of criticism means that even as ‘the West’s’ priority is problematised the East remains “never seriously studied or deconstructed in the Derridean text” (1976, page lxiii). In what follows I want to keep alive the question of how Young’s account relates to this Derridean shadow.

Avoiding writing mythologies

Writing History and the West, the subtitle of the book and an adequate summary of its principal theme, clearly owes much to Derrida. The notion of writing to which Young adheres is therefore rather distant from the common misapprehension of deconstruction as a privileging of literal writing and literary texts. Such masterful claims abandon Derrida’s argument that writing as archer-writing as spacing “cannot occur as such within the phenomenological experience of a presence” (Derrida, 1976, page 68). After this departure, they are free to be used—and are freely used—to license a simple turn of the academic gaze from the previously vaunted ‘real world’ towards the similarly positivised but now seemingly more fashionable ‘real

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(5) I use this neographism (with an ‘a’, but unitalised and without an accent) to express the movement that, in this case, establishes the proper difference of concepts by means of the deferral of improper figures.

(6) “Writing Mythologies: Writing History and the West” is one of the ways that Young’s book has been ironically miscited (Dirks, 1992, page 78). Another erroneous citation has Young “Writing Histories” in the subtitle (Driver, 1991, page 64). Though trivial, it seems to me that both these mistakes can be reanalysed as symptoms of the very phonocentric recentrings of writing as literal writing that Young himself avoids.
book'.(7) By contrast, *White Mythologies* keeps alive the material political questions defining Western historicism, and thereby avoids such "spurious pleasure" (Spivak, 1976, page lxxii; see also Ryan, 1982, pages 103–104). Indeed, in this way Young might be said to join with Derrida in asserting that a "materialist insistence can function as a means of having the necessary generalization of the concept of text ... not wind up, (under the influence of very precise interests, reactive forces determined to lead the work astray into confusion), not wind up then, as the definition of a new self-interiority, a new "idealism" if you will, of the text" (Derrida, 1981, page 66).

Asserting that 'History' and 'the West' are written, therefore, is not even saying that they are only accessible to us through archival letters, books, and maps. Rather, it is the much more powerful suggestion that they are marked by a *structure of writing*. Like the work of a writer presented as if it did not depend on a language or on a context of uncountable personal relations, the facticity of 'the West' and 'History' demands and rests upon a form of successful amnesia about their heterogeneous beginnings, an effacement that licenses observers to present them as solely self-originating. In this way, writtenness refers to a very Derridean type of argument which, contrary to self-fashioning myths, posits 'the West' and 'History' as textual in the sense of being "woven by many, many strands that are discontinuous, that come from way off, that carry their histories within them, and that are not within our control" (Spivak, 1990a, page 120). The theme of *White Mythologies* therefore owes much to the analyses of dissimulation by Derrida. However, it also departs from this tradition in a number of significant ways. Not the least of these is its author's numbingly negative approach to Marxism.

**Demanding histories—without the value of critiquing political economy**

Young is a tutor in English at Oxford and, although his reading is very extensive, his focus seems to remain roughly within the provenance of literary criticism and cultural studies. This distinguishes him from Derrida's more philosophical idiom, but it also seems vital to understanding the context of literary-philosophical Marxism against which his all-dismissive anti-Marxism is ranged. In making this argument I do not want to be misunderstood. Young's critiques of the ethnocentric forms of historicism in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Louis Althusser are perhaps the most exacting examinations I know of how Marxism as a body of ongoing debate is implicated in a world view that privileges (and thereby sustains the myth of) Western History as the end of all histories. Young brilliantly charts how "Sartre's argument depended on a logic of history as totalization but broke down when he could not combine the praxis of the individual with the general logic of 'totalization without a totalizer' except through the proliferation of his own writing" (page 53). By proceeding to articulate this problem with the question of existentialism's ethnocentric humanism and Sartre's personal struggles against colonialism, Young allows these latter gestures to be understood as part of an ongoing politico-theoretical development rather than

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(7) I make this point rather briefly because it is not a form of crisis management in which Young indulges. Elsewhere, however, confusion and quietism bloom together. It is forgotten that Derrida's 'there is nothing outside the text' can also be rendered as 'there is no absolute extra-text', and thus his valuable debunking of attempts to establish foundations for debates exterior to what is actually debated is lost. Instead, radical critics and literary elites unite in an unlikely coalition as they together shrink deconstruction's 'writing' back to just its colloquial sense. Having achieved this reduction, they can then proceed either to dismiss it all or to revel in its license "as nothing more than another linguistic caper" (Spivak, 1990a, page 25). For a critical discussion of some of these questions see Jay (1991).
as the self-flagellation of a despairing old man. In his discussion of Althusser, Young just as powerfully underlines how the effort to detach Marxism from the legacy of Friedrich Hegel remains significant for any attempt to resist the call of an ethnocentric and holistic historicism. He enters into the thick of the Hindness and Hirst 'debate' about the status of history in Althusser and, in the process, introduces some much-needed clarity and a subtle rendering of the notion that history is a concept simultaneously impossible and necessary.

Overall Young's critiques indicate that Marxism must be brought into a form of theoretical crisis. They thus share with feminist and antiracist critiques the claim that Marxism's totalising presumptions can be unpacked as partly complicit with certain structures of a world it otherwise seeks to change. This means that arguments like those made by Karl Marx (1973) in “The Future of British Rule in India” can no longer be brushed aside as unfortunate discrepancies. The idea that imperialism was a necessary moment of destructive pain lifting a country from pre-History into the world-Historical story of class struggle and its hoped-for victories must be reanalysed as a symptom of a deep-rooted affiliation with Western History’s teleological narrative, an affiliation that must be brought out and made open to criticism. In the context of enabling such interventions the discussion in the book seems to me invaluable.

The problems emerge when Young enters into a narrower antagonistic with his contemporaries. In these contexts the prose style changes, taking on a more lofty and yet, I would argue, complacent 'cleverer than thou' tone. At the heart of the discussion Young’s basic coup remains his suggestion that what ‘the Marxists’ argue is missing from postmodernism—namely a strong sense of History—can alternatively be construed as an omission that is its best gift (page 19). With this argument Young can align himself with various postcolonial and feminist demands for multiple histories, at the same time as crafting a fine rebuttal to critics such as Terry Eagleton, Frank Lentricchia, and Perry Anderson. “The reproach”, he says, “that poststructuralism has neglected history really consists of the complaint that it has questioned History” (page 23). Yet although I am convinced by the serious political point being made here, I find the style with which it is reiterated both pompous and playful. The lines tracing the Marxists’ complaints about the abandonment of history (page 21), for example, are repeated from a previous article (Bennington and Young, 1987, page 4) not just as evidence, but also, it would seem, in the spirit of a rhetorical flourish that happily ‘works’ well.

In a different way, a number of interested exclusions in the book indicate a craftiness in the argumentation. There is a marginalisation to the footnotes (page 195) of Spivak's no doubt too Marxist analysis of how Michel Foucault’s studies of the prison, asylum, and all might be reinterpreted as “screen allegories” that foreclose a reading of the broader narratives of imperialism” (Spivak, 1988a, page 291). At the same time, although diverse feminist critiques are ignored in the chapter on Foucault, Young is not shy of using feminism instrumentally against Marxists (pages 91 and 103; as well as Young, 1988, page 137). Although the book elsewhere makes some other valuably feminist arguments (see page 154), I believe Young’s characterisation of Marxism as a place to build an ego and career that will ‘upstage’ the upstaging feminists represents an ugly and all too cynical gloss on the commitment

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This is a typical piece of a-disciplinary terminological borrowing by Spivak. Without invoking the whole Freudian apparatus, she uses the notion of ‘screen allegories’ to convey the idea of studies that like a dream rebue evade censorship (or, in Foucault's case, evade the possibility of enacting more far-reaching political criticism) by means of condensation and displacement (in this case, onto the analyses of power-in-spacing-in-Europe).
shared by many of these academics—feminists and Marxists alike—actually to improve certain aspects of people's lives. It is also a sign of an increasingly common 'wielding' of feminism by academics, especially men, who in the very same gesture refuse to examine how the agonistic style of debate is itself shot through by a masculinist will to power (see Jardine, 1986). Such instances of phallic feminism seem to me symptomatic of how Young's histories of theoretical change sometimes regress to power plays for academic authority. In these moments, a critique which could have represented an emancipatory opening up for new types of question starts to become instead just a coup of self-satisfaction.

Young is at his most critical and smug in the chapter on Jameson. Earlier on, he announces that "Marxist literary criticism has not produced a new theory in over twenty years" (page 21): a remark which serves to—and is presumably in part intended to—humble Jameson. The assault continues in the chapter "The Jameson raid" itself, where the author of The Political Unconscious is characterised as an omnivorous raider of the theoretical larder, someone who sublates all epistemological incompatibilities within the larger embrace of purified rhetorical persuasion (itself!). Again I want to emphasise that it is not so much the substance of the critique as its manifest condescension that I find unhelpful. Jameson's approach, not least his attempt to hybrideise Sartre and Althusser, seems riddled by contradictions. Its eschatological character—which Young indicates through a telling comparison with a quotation from Auerbach (page 107)—appears dangerously totalising. Most problematically, Jameson's massive generalisation of the metaphor of cognitive mapping as some sort of global solution really does look like a recuperative project simply reduplicating the History of European colonialism (page 113). However, as he generalises from this critique to a totalising dismissal of Marxism, Young remains silent about the ways other theorists have similarly critiqued Jamesonian arrogance by drawing on the very Marxist theory that White Mythologies would prefer to label bankrupt.

Spivak's work provides an example (see especially Spivak, 1988b, page 171; 1990a, page 163). For her it is precisely Marxism which helps delineate the manner in which the local is implicated in global economic and political processes. It thereby serves as a reminder of the ongoing constitution of a premodern world of poverty, famine, ill-health, and superexploitation, and it likewise helps focalise the capitalist linkages underwriting the parochial privilege of postmodernity in a Los Angeles hotel(9). In the context of such examples of Marxism's importance as a means for monitoring the violent differential effects of appropriating economically coded value in capitalism(10), Young's account of Spivak's Marxism appears increasingly contrived.

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(9) That Jameson, like others, sought to generalise to the whole world from his own experience of a special space in LA in the 1980s—in this case, the Bonaventure Hotel—also became the focus of other Marxist criticisms. Davis, for example, in a brief but well-argued essay drew attention to how Jameson's allegorisation of the Bonaventure space effectively decontextualised it from the wider sociospatial dynamics of the region: an effect of allegorising with spatial names that I refer to in this paper as anemic geography. Because, says Davis, "Jameson is primarily concerned to focus on the thing itself", he tends to ignore "the specific political and economic conditions", and likewise "misses the crucial point about contemporary capitalist structures of accumulation: that they are symptoms of global crisis, not signs of the triumph of capitalism's irresistible drive to expand" (Davis, 1985, pages 110 and 109).

(10) This rather clumsy clause is my attempt to convey the pedagogic impetus of Spivak's own sometimes paratactic discussions of value (see especially, Spivak, 1990b). Extending a style of inquiry also found in Elson (1979) and Harvey (1982), Spivak recalls the sensitivity and utility of the discontinuous reading of value that is available in Capital. This seems to me to be a sensitivity that is lost on Young.
He excludes to a footnote comment (page 213) the possibility of examining in detail any of her articles on the implications for Marxism of reading Derrida (Spivak, 1987; 1988b, pages 154–175). Instead, he portrays "the uneasy status" of Marxism in Spivak’s discourse (page 161) as some sort of uncontrollable ill-effect of a seduction that she "cannot resist" (page 172). Rather than do justice to how she uses Marxism in such a way as always also to call its metanarrative into question, in other words, her mobilisation of the regenerative unease found in the supplementary "nooks and crannies of Marx“ (Spivak and Young, 1991, page 244), Young just presumes guilt by association.

“For all the carefully constructed disparateness of her work, for all the discontinuities which she refuses to reconcile, Spivak’s Marxism functions as an overall syncretic frame. It works, in fact, in exactly the same way as Jameson’s—as a transcendentlalising gesture to produce closure” (page 173).

This accusatory conclusion completely misses a point reiterated not only by Spivak but also, in other contexts, by Young himself (for example, see pages 61, 171, and 175; Young, 1982, page 13). It fails to note how closure (contrary to nomadic or romantically inclined postmodern claims) cannot simply be abandoned, but instead has to be persistently critiqued from within, put into crisis as that which one cannot not want. This is exactly the sort of stricture within which Spivak’s Marxism operates. For her—as she reminded Young in an interview—“there is no base narrative" (Spivak and Young, 1991, page 245). Instead, there tend to be two moments in her argumentation. On the one hand—even if it is only through schematic gestures—she refuses to let her readers forget the ongoing macrological significance of economic and technological overdetermination. On the other, she is always calling into question such orthodoxies as the privileging of metropolitan bourgeois progress, the assimilation of women’s struggles under the umbrella of class, and the hallowing of the worker as the only agent of revolutionary change. Young, however, with a lack of reflexivity avoids analysing his own attempt to produce closure by shutting the door on Marxism and, instead, persists in translating Spivak’s sense of productive unease into his own more facile polemic of simple opposition. Yet it should be noted that Spivak’s work—however much translated—is still there in White Mythologies and as such constitutes an important distinction that raises again the question of Young’s difference from Derrida.

Spatial metaphors and anemic geographies
In contrast to the elusive spatial shadows in the exegue to Of Grammatology, White Mythologies brings out the geographical question with daring explicitness. Commenting on Derrida’s articulation of Eurocentrism with the philosophical problem of the centre, Young goes on to add a further claim to the effect that this analysis of the centre and the margin “can operate geographically as well as conceptually, articulating the power relationships between the metropolitan and the colonial cultures at their geographical peripheries” (page 18; and see also page 119).

Young notes that Derrida’s deconstruction works only by “exploiting the ambivalent resources of Western writing” and not through counterposing “another knowledge” (page 18). It is thus by way of contrast and following on from his description of the geographic as well as conceptual relations at play that Young himself attempts to introduce just such another knowledge: knowledge which, like Spivak’s, makes explicit its debt to another place.

There are both advantages and dangers that come with this approach. On the beneficial side it implies that debates, criticisms, and arguments long ignored or anthropologised away as non-Western can be introduced as the work of thinkers
that are party to (and no longer reduced to objects of) discussion. In these terms *White Mythologies* might be said to participate in a new type of dialogue. This not only takes the form of a commentary on the work of Spivak, Said, and Bhabha, but also of carefully argued references to critics as different as Frantz Fanon and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. However, the dangers accompanying such an attempt at discussion are immense and even become manifest in such a listing of names. Homogenised, voided of their original agency, the correctly postcolonial names on such lists are increasingly becoming a high-quality currency in contemporary academia. Although the content of the work they represent might always carry the promise of interrupting the smooth reproduction of Western authority, the metonymic contradictions that are the names themselves can become, in the hands of the already powerful, simply tokens of exchange in an economy whose only interest is what Spivak calls the “new Orientalism” (Spivak, 1990b, page 228). With respect to the losses accompanying this name-dropping form of Western profiteering, it is salutary to remember how Said’s paradigmatic description of the ‘old’ Orientalism pointed to its “imaginative geography” (Said, 1978, pages 49–73). The new Orientalism, it seems, is no less related to a geography. It is just that this time it is characterised not so much by magical monsters in faraway places, nor by the scientistic anatomisation of area data, but by an abstraction from any detail whatsoever. Cartographic and spatial references proliferate, yet most often serve as vehicles for metaphors rather than as subjects (or, more properly, tenors) to be elaborated on themselves. Relatedly, the intellectual debate becomes organised through grand spatial terms such as ‘the West’ and ‘the Third World’ in a way where the terms begin themselves—like the very metaphors turned concepts described by Derrida—to sustain an abstruse and bloodless discourse of privilege. As Bhabha puts it:

“having opened up the chasm of cultural ‘difference’ ... a mediator or metaphor of ‘otherness’ must be found to contain that difference. ... [T]he ‘Other’ thus becomes at once the ‘fantasy’ of a certain cultural space or, indeed, the certainty of a form of theoretical knowledge that deconstructs the epistemological edge of the West” (1988, page 16).

It is precisely this instrumental use of spatial referents in the staging of broader arguments that I want to call *anemic geography*. In the case Bhabha is criticising, the ‘non-West’ space is never examined as multiply inscribed itself, its heterogeneity is never marked (except perhaps by words like ‘heterogeneity’), because all the time it is being positivised and simply used as a marker in a debate about the limits of ‘the West’.

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(1) These monetary metaphors barely begin to approach the care Henry Louis Gates shows is important to analyses of the production of names such as Fanon (Gates, 1991). However, in the context of Derrida’s discussion (Derrida, 1982a, pages 214–219), the usare of the metaphor of money draws attention to how the interested circulation of fashionable names might also comprise another white mythology.

(2) To some extent my argument here parallels one made by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson vis-à-vis the ‘social sciences’ more generally. They suggest that as “space itself becomes a neutral grid on which cultural difference, historical memory and societal organisation are inscribed ... [i]t at the same time ... disappears from analytical purview” (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992, page 77). I should caution though that these criticisms of space as unexamined vehicle are vulnerable to a positivising reading in the discipline of geography, a reading to which I am opposed. Against it, I would argue that geographers do not have better access to some metaphor-free ‘real’ world, and that no lasting boundary can thus be drawn between a more referential treatment of space in the discipline and more metaphorical use outside. The lesson of the grammar/rhetoric blurring in deconstruction teaches that any such boundary drawing is interested. The point of my criticism is instead to urge a persistent analysis of how the use of spatial terms can gloss or reify the very spatial processes they claim to name.
The more general production of anemic geography can be better understood through the terms of Spivak’s discussion of Jashoda’s metaphorical fate in interpretations of Mahasweta Devis’s ‘Stanadayini’ (Spivak, 1988b, especially page 244). Spivak notes that this character’s positioning as subaltern becomes necessarily underplayed as she is read as metaphorising India. In the same way, the production of space as an ‘effect of the real’ appears to become downplayed in inverse relation to the development of ‘space’ as a new vocabulary for cultural politics. In the new Orientalism the result is that geographical categories such as ‘the Third World’ start to function simply to provide relief to the unease provoked by more radical postcolonial writing. They manage the crisis by homogenising, positioning, and, in Spivak’s terms, giving a “proper name to a generalized margin” (1990b, page 220). It is in this moment that “splendid, decadent, multiple, oppressive, and … polytheistic” traditions are again erased in another round of restoring “domestic benefit”.

At this juncture I should emphasise that Young himself is a better critic of many of these dangers than I am. So though I will go on to describe how White Mythologies seems complicit in the production of such an anemic geography, it is nevertheless imperative to do justice to Young’s serious effort at eschewing the new Orientalism. This effort, it could be suggested, is borne out in his careful discussion of the ‘Third World’s’ semiotic history (page 12), or in his use of “white mythologies”, the plural, in a title that is presumably meant to leave open the possibility that ‘the West’ too is not singular. However, these gestures seem to me to be less important—more akin, in fact, to the crisis management project of finding a correct newspeak—and it is to Young’s much more valuable contribution, his substantive discussions of Said, Bhabha, and Spivak, that I now want to turn.

Young on Said
The chapter about Said, entitled “Disorienting Orientalism”, strategically begins with a discussion of the links running between humanism and the violence of European colonialism. By noting after Fanon and Sartre how “humanism is itself already anti-humanist” (page 125)—that it can only imagine the Westerner as human by turning humans elsewhere into nonhuman slaves and monsters—Young neatly sets up the terms for what will be his later accusation of Said’s complicity with the Western mind-set. This strategy aside, however, he does not neglect the huge impact of Said’s work and attests to how it has opened up a diversity of new forms of engaged criticism. The account avoids any ‘hyperbolic admiration’ and enters into detailed argument with aspects of Said’s methodology that have elsewhere brought only misguided attacks. Most particularly, Young brings out the contradictions in Said’s alternating description of Orientalism as producing on the one side constitutive but misleading fiction, and, on the other, administratively useful knowledge. He carefully shows how Said’s various attempts to recuperate this ambivalence lead to an ever-more hegemonically inclusive characterisation of Orientalism that leaves no room for more complex positions of internal dissent. This criticism is the basis for Young’s subsequent charge that Said, by failing to articulate the possibility of hybrid positions, ultimately falls back on humanist-cum-heroist ideals as the final basis for his critique.

(19) Although I find this a useful way of summarising the anemic geography of new Orientalism, it presents a too crippling summary of spatial metaphorisation in general. As I will later indicate, different uses of spatial metaphors are possible. Indeed, some such uses are positively linked to anti-Orientalist projects that seek to undo previous rounds of spatial fetishisation.
I have learnt much from these criticisms. Not least of the dangers of positing a somehow more real ‘reality’ as *nameable* outside of discourse, but I feel there is a big jump between objecting to Said’s dependency on an assumption of humanist critical distance, and claiming that it indicates his embeddedness in Orientalist humanism (pages 131–133). Young’s other (and less problematic) conclusion speaks directly to the ways in which the contradictions in Said’s own writing can be said to internalise what are in fact the actual contradictions of Orientalism itself. This is a lesson which Young takes in part from Bhabha and it is thus that he proceeds to pursue the ambivalence of Orientalism in a chapter concerning “The ambivalence of Bhabha”.

**Young on Bhabha**

The chapter is, I think, one of the best in the book. It begins by underlining how Bhabha’s seemingly esoteric insistence on an ambivalence in Orientalist discourse serves as a powerful way of stepping beyond the totalisation of Orientalism found in Said. Young doggedly follows Bhabha’s various diverse leaps through the themes of fetishism, mimicry, hybridisation, and paranoia and is able to narrativise this jumping journey while preserving at least some of the significance of its original eclecticism. Nevertheless certain ambiguities are lost, and—to the extent that Bhabha’s elusive style is designed to disrupt a colonising project of mimeticism—this may in fact indicate a failure as well as a success in Young’s achievement. The chapter makes quite clear the significance of Bhabha’s formulation of the colonial stereotype as divided like the fetish, and it seems to me to make more comprehensible the concept of mimicry as a destabilising condition of (rather than just a description of) concrete resistance. Nonetheless, and just as with Said, the fact that Young attests to the value of Bhabha’s innovations does not mean that through some reverse ethnocentric benevolence he abjures from any criticism.

Young asks what is left of the specificity of the colonial situation for Bhabha if, as he reads colonial texts, he “only demonstrate[s] the same properties that can be found in any deconstructive reading of European texts” (page 153; but see also Loomba, 1991, pages 173–174). Perhaps it is as a response to this sort of criticism that Bhabha himself has more recently reemphasised how “the rule of Empire must not be allegorised in the misrule of writing” (1990, page 208; but see also Bhabha, 1983, page 197). *White Mythologies* nevertheless also outlines some other dangers associated with moving back and forth between the semiotic and the social. Most notably, Young queries the symptomatic blank about gender that results from Bhabha’s ambiguous use of psychoanalytic sexual categories as vehicles (again, not tenors) in the metaphorisation of the colonial scene. Perhaps, though, this marks a more general problem of arrogance associated with Jacques Lacan’s phallus-privileging economy of lack. Characteristically this is an arrogance in which feminist interruptions are ignored. Instead, it narcissistically generalises from a heterosexual male and putatively clinical experience to claim authority for a description of the whole world’s situation vis-à-vis the all-embracing ‘symbolic’. Given the dangers of this normative patriarchy, the question for Bhabha would concern why he avoids questioning a so obviously imperial trend and thus stops short of explicating problematising the masculinity in “the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body” (Bhabha, 1984, page 133). Young himself, however, emphasises the problems around the use of a Western tradition of psychoanalysis to investigate colonialism’s dynamics. He critically points out that although these are mitigated by using it only as a metaphor, such a tactic then demands an answer as to “how can you talk about structures of desire in psychoanalytic terms outside the structures of sexuality?” (page 154).
Young on Spivak

It is again in relation to questions of sexuality that Young makes some of his most interesting comments about Spivak. His discussion usefully preempts the ever-more common nativist and/or populist reactions to the claim made with serious irony by Spivak that “[t]here is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak. ... The subaltern cannot speak” (1988a, pages 307–308). Much of the reaction to these lines seems to depend on misconstruing them as somehow ‘antisubaltern’. It calls for amnesia about how Spivak is criticizing and attempting something different from the complacent abdication of responsibility to speak for others evidenced in Deleuze’s claim that “[t]here is no more representation; there’s nothing but action” (quoted in Spivak, 1988a, page 275). Moreover, the misreading also demands a blindness to Spivak’s cautions running in the opposite direction: her argument that ‘speaking for’ always carries the risks of epistemic violence inherent to ‘speaking of’. In other words, the critics have to forget the processual or epistemological meaning with which Spivak invests the term ‘subaltern’ after her deconstruction of the Subaltern Studies Group’s counterdisciplinary/positivistic usage: that it is “no more than a theoretical fiction to entitle the project of reading” and much more as an “allegory of the predicament of all thought” (Spivak, 1988b, page 204). It is by way of countering some of these misreadings that Young’s discussion valuably underscores that “[t]he problem is not that the woman cannot speak as such, that no records of the subject-consciousness of women exist, but that she is assigned no position of enunciation ... she is not allowed to speak: everyone speaks for her, so that she is rewritten continuously as the object of patriarchy or of imperialism” (page 164).

The way Spivak turns the subaltern into an allegory for all thought illustrates a tendency in her work that has more recently been described by Sylvia Tanecliarz as an “attention to heterogeneity [that] seems to lie [only] in one direction—as a check on the careless application of theory” (1991, page 80). This rather rough criticism seems to me to be already anticipated by Spivak herself, and, to the extent that she has highlighted for cultural studies substantive debates such as those around practices like sati, it does not hold true. However, Ania Loomba has more significantly suggested that this same example as it is presented by Spivak unhappily makes the sexed subaltern bear all the burden as a vehicle for generalising the force of deconstruction (Loomba, 1991, page 184).(4) These, however, are criticisms which Young does not develop. He instead emphasises how Spivak’s work serves to dislodge positivist and individualistic accounts of political agency by urging her readers to monitor and be responsible about their own complicity in the structuring and assignment of subject positions. By summarising Spivak’s demand for fuller examinations of the diverse-worlded worlds in which people live and are positioned,

(4) More recently Amanda Anderson also criticised Spivak for using the negated subaltern to allegorise the general critique of autonomous deliberative consciousness. “In my view”, she argues, “to read historically disempowered or negated subject-positions as figures for an abstractly decentered subjectivity is to distort our understanding of both the decentered subject and the conditions of specific oppressed groups” (Anderson, 1992, page 73). Although I sympathise with these arguments, I do not believe they prove that a scientific theory/practice split exists in Spivak’s work and I am certainly not persuaded by the refashioned Habermasian model of intersubjectivity Anderson presents by way of an alternative. The fact that she is unable to indicate the critique of the absence of the ‘concrete other’ from this model is significant. It exposes the limits of her foundational discourse, and, in the process, presents a compelling case for retaining the very discontinuity between deconstruction and engaged critique that it was her purpose to contest in the first place.
Young introduces her critique of the production of the 'Third World woman' as a monolithic subject. He describes how, by emphasising the heterogeneity and complexity of subject construction, Spivak has criticised the new Orientalist tendency in Western feminism to fashion such a singularly precious but silenced object. Young notes—although in an awkwardly contrived way—that this same alertness to heterogeneity distances Spivak from the strawman Marxist who reduces all subject positions to those of class (page 163). Equally contrived, however, and quite unnuanced, is Young’s conclusion to this section in which he asserts that “the paradox of Spivak’s own work remains: it seems as if the heterogeneity of the Third World woman can only be achieved through a certain homogenization of the First” (page 167).

I do not think that homogenising the ‘First World’ is a problem for Spivak. She has recently remarked on how the “‘West’ is not monolithic” (Spivak, 1990b, page 240), and would, it seems to me, join with Mohanty in making the more subtle case that although Western feminist discourse is neither singular or homogeneous, “it is possible to trace a coherence of effects resulting from the implicit assumption of ‘the West’ (in all its complexities and complications) as the primary referent in theory and praxis” (Mohanty, 1991a, page 52). Yet if the paradox of what might (in this case) be called Occidentalism is not a paradox for Spivak, it almost certainly is for Young. Just as he confuses her emphasis on the subject as a nameable effect underwritten by multiple determinations—on “identity ... as flashpoints” (Spivak, 1990b, page 226)—for a form of individualism (page 170), Young appears unable to see a dynamic to argumentation in which names such as ‘the West’ are used to trace the coherence of a set of effects. He undoubtedly is aware of this suggestion, but in his own writing seems immobilised by questions which lend such geographical categories a misplaced and preemptive sense of concreteness. This, I would contend, is part of the problem of anemic geography.

Colonised geography in the present times
In his discussion of Said, Young himself already observes and criticises the difficulty which I would suggest also clouds White Mythologies. He notes that the all-embracing logic of contamination argument detracts from Said’s critique of more equivocal Orientalists such as Marx. The problem in Said, Young thus suggests, is that there are no spaces of betweeness, “[y]ou can only be for or against” (page 138). However, it is precisely this same tendency to reify the argument about collusion with Orientalism that detracts from Young’s own writing. The chapter on Said is a case in point.

As I have already suggested, Young makes a dubious jump from effectively describing Said’s humanism to suggesting that this represents a grand complicity with Orientalism. Part of Said’s difficulty, he says, “is that his ethical and theoretical values are all so deeply involved in the history of the culture he criticizes” (page 132). To be sure, this argument is part of a more cautious attempt simply to trace the contradictions in Said’s own statements about experience, positioning, and critique. Nevertheless, although Young’s descriptions of Said’s debt to Western culture may be accurate, there is a problem with the way the narrative seems in the same moments to slide in an insidious suggestion that ‘the West’ holds a monopoly on the values of ‘humanism’, such that the two, ‘the West’ and ‘humanism’, serve as mutual signs for each other. It is this geographical-category error which underwrites how Young, in the words of Alistair Rogers (1991, page 140) “makes Said guilty by association”. This, it should be recalled, is the same sort of assumption that Spivak
was criticising in Derrida’s reverse ethnocentrism. As I noted in that context, the problem is that the shadowy shapes of geographical concept-metaphors are mentioned but without any attention to specific and complex processual detail. Were such details investigated they might very well point to experiences and processes that constitute moments of affinity as well as of difference between what the dualistic frameworks otherwise demarcate as wholly other.

Instead of investigating questions about experience located in hybrid contexts, Young prefers to wield grand slogans of the sort: “as ‘History’ gives way to the ‘Postmodern’, we are witnessing the dissolution of ‘the West’” (page 20). Here, though the scare quotes fly, the key words nevertheless call on meanings Young’s narrative has already begun to harden out in the shape of an abstract map. It is in fact on page 1 of the book that this anemic geography begins. Here Young makes the interesting observation that many of the theorists associated with French post-structuralism had some personal experience of the Algerian war of independence. In other words, he underlines how they shared experiences born on the edges of Western imperialism. The suggestion of these sentences is that contrary to grandiose histories that depict poststructuralism as a result of the single date ‘May 1968’, the philosophical ‘movement’ is more adequately described in relation to events in which ‘the West’ as such is brought into question. The problem, though, is that it is left unclear as to exactly what sort of causal links are being made. On the one hand, there is a somewhat positivistic gesture in operation, one that implies a direct connection between the war and the philosophical developments that were later to follow in France. On the other hand, the suggestion may be read as only a metaphor, an illustrative anecdote that simply portrays the general shape and not the specifics of the beginnings of poststructuralism. This ambivalence might be seen as productive, but in the context of increasingly abstract references to ‘the West’ and the like, it is also dangerous. Left as uninvestigated metaphorical illustrations, such stories simply use the ever-shadowy non-West space as a vehicle to mark the limit of ‘the West’. This means that, in Bhabha’s words, “[t]he place of otherness is fixed in the West as a subversion of Western metaphysics and is finally appropriated by the West as its limit-text, the Anti-West. ... Such a position cannot lead to the construction or exploration of other discursive sites from which to investigate the differential materiality and history of colonial history. It functions, instead, as an alibi” (1983, pages 195–196). I would suggest that it is just such a spatially coded alibi that constitutes anemic geography.

When the story of concrete experience in Algeria is metaphorised, the space specificity of the war is treated only as a vehicle for staging the drama of a theoretical debate abroad. As a primary result, the space, the complex geography of Algeria’s struggle for independence, is itself left unexamined. At the same time, however, the actual story about this context is retained. Its narrative appeal to concrete experience is left intact in order to shore up the rhetorical power of the argument and to lay the foundations for the subsequent claim about geographical relations. I am not denying here the force of Young’s argument that the analysis of centre and margin can operate geographically as well as conceptually, but a good deal more work on the complexity of space-specific subject construction is necessary before it can be made responsibly. At the very least, it would seem incumbent on Young to chart some more of the complex links running between the experiences in Algeria and the theoretical criticisms of Eurocentrism. Instead, White Mythologies tends to crush the multiple possibilities for deconstructions of various process of truth production into one general question which is then glossed by a geographical catachresis. When Young has “to answer, therefore, the general question of what is
deconstruction a deconstruction of, the answer ... [is], of the concept, the authority, and presumed primacy of the category of ‘the West’” (page 19, my emphasis). This simplifies earlier, less geographical descriptions by Young to the effect that “[d]econstruction is nothing less than a critique of specularity, of autoaffection” (1982, page 13). Much more harmfully though, I think, it also does grave disservice to the actual questions about geographical complexity that are at once raised and silenced through his use of geography as a vehicle for the argument.\(^{(15)}\)

**Building for differences with reification**

I want to conclude here by pointing to some alternatives. Too often, it seems, anemic geography transforms the opening up of debate into a return to dull paralysis. ‘The West’ and an ‘anti-West’ are seen as the only spaces available and Occidentalism is posed as the only alternative to Orientalism. In a symptomatic statement of this logic, Young, in his interview with Spivak, directly takes up the question of how he sees new Orientalism effecting research on issues such as neocolonialism and concludes:

“If you participate you are, as it were, an Orientalist, but of course if you don’t then you’re a eurocentrist ignoring the problem” (Spivak and Young, 1991, page 227).

Spivak, by contrast, presents a clear alternative to this form of paralysis. She replies:

“I don’t think that I have made myself clear. It’s not just if you participate you are an Orientalist. If you participate in a certain kind of way you are an Orientalist and it doesn’t matter if you are white or black. ... [T]his is completely different from a chromatic argument—you have to be the right colour, a nativist argument, you have to be from the right place—it just says either you do it as carefully as you do your own work or don’t do it” (Spivak and Young, 1991, pages 227–228).

Ironically, this answer that demands more questions and study, this insistence on doing one’s homework and achieving something different from efficient information retrieval, is already there in evidence in Young’s detailed discussion of Said, Bhabha, and Spivak. Likewise, it is Young himself who notes how “it is salutary to recall Foucault’s scepticism with regard to the perilous ease with which politics quickly assumes positions that provide the intellectual guarantees rather than specific analyses of particular relations or transformations” (page 89). It is just such an emphasis on doing the hard work of specific analyses that interrupts the reifications of anemic geography. This, furthermore, is how I would seek to interpret and enact a demand like Benita Parry’s for “a cartography of imperialist ideology more extensive than its address in the colonialist space” (Parry, 1987, page 45).

An insistence on doing detailed analyses of space-specific subject production is quite different from entrapment within a nostalgia for the real native. Gates, for example, having criticised the production of Fanon as a special name, argues that

\(^{(15)}\) In his review article, Philip Corrigan also refers to this problem in Young’s book. He describes it as a “cartographization whereby the system of ordination/symbolization come to stand for those thus subordinated” (1991, page 314). Although I clearly agree with the direction of this critique, I do not feel that ‘cartographization’ is necessarily the best term. After all, Young himself enacts a symptomatic reading of mapping as imperial (though not as masculinist) in his critique of Jameson. More importantly though, such disparaging references to cartography forget at their peril the possibilities of a decolonising project of cartographic resistance (see Huggan, 1989).
such an exemplary native must be contextualised in her or his own heterogeneous and historical particularity.

"It means not to elevate him above his localities of discourse as a transcultural, transhistorical Global theorist, nor simply to cast him into battle, but to recognize him as a battlefield himself" (Gates, 1991, page 470).

Similarly, Mohanty has noted how work about space and identity by writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa has led to a far more complex sense of the pluralities of self inhabited by women of colour. She argues that although Anzaldúa's consciousness is located in a theorisation of being on the border, this is not just "any border—but a historically specific one: The U.S./Mexican border. Thus unlike a Western, postmodernist notion of agency and consciousness which often announces the splintering of the subject, and privileges multiplicity in the abstract, this is a notion of agency born of history and geography. It is a theorization of the materiality and politics of the everyday struggles of Chicanas" (Mohanty, 1991b, page 37).

It should also be emphasised that this form of theorising specificity does not represent a return to an empiricism that is blind and nonreflective about the power relations within which knowledge is produced. Such blindness is more the mark of a new Orientalism that would simply turn the model for imperial-data collection from the world as exhibition to the equally homogenising world as immigrant (see Spivak, 1990b, page 228). Against such a trend, it is precisely an insistence on the specific and differential contexts of struggle that enables bell hooks to point out the danger a project like James Clifford’s risks of whitewashing the map of all the world’s cultures under the simple and simplifying title of “Travelling cultures”. She agrees that “[t]heorizing diverse journeying is crucial to our understanding of any politics of location” (1992, page 343). However, having reminded her audience of the terror she herself has faced while travelling, and of the violence done to people such as those taken from Africa as slaves, hooks also highlights the possible covering up of such horribly specific sorts of experience.

“Listening to Clifford “playfully” evoke a sense of travel, I felt such an evocation would always make it difficult for there to be recognition of an experience of travel that is not about play but is an encounter with terrorism” (hooks, 1992, pages 343–344; but see also Lugones, 1987, page 16).

The passage is urgently critical and I have deliberately cited hooks in this way in an attempt to emphasize both the direction and the force of her critique. This approach, I think, is quite different from the voguish tendency to co-opt quotes from token others in a silencing manoeuvre Trinh Minh-ha (1989, page 89) calls “planned authenticity”. In other words, focusing on the critical intervention itself, its dynamic and implication, provides at least one way of eschewing the chromatism, ethnicist, and genialist logics that tend otherwise to freeze difference and make a fetish of identity. Clearly my references to ‘specificity’ and ‘detail’ in this review are imagined in the terms of this same critical dynamic. Nevertheless they remain endangered in two ways that I should briefly note. First, the use of a word such as

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(10) Talal Asad has also criticised the recent tendency to turn antinationalist claims for hybridity into a new universalism of their own. “[A] popular culture”, he notes, “may indeed not be a unified whole, but that is something to be demonstrated, not made into an essential truth about culture per se” (Asad, 1990, pages 472–473). Likewise, David Slater has drawn attention to the dangers of decontextualisation following the hyperbole about hybridity. After Yudice, he notes that “the post modernist has taken the old negative myths of marginality and turned them on their heads endowing them with a subversive and positive sense”. However, he continues, “this can divert analytical attention away from the different contexts in which subaltern groups are forced to survive” (Slater, 1992, page 303).
'specificity' can become itself either a form of substitute alibi that covers up a lack of attention to the detail of a context, or, worse still, a code word that ends up licensing arrogant claims concerning a situation being 'fully known'. Second, and more serious, the referencing of specific examples of lived experience may still put them at risk from a co-optive use "as fodder for the constitution of another’s epistemology" (Suleri, 1992, page 766). To avoid both these pitfalls it seems to me necessary—as with the quotation from hooks—to remain attentive to the critical moment itself. It means listening and learning from the knowledge production of agents that were previously silenced. At the same time, it means doing so without falling prey to the moral mapping that haunts identitarian thinking.

For geography, hooks’s sobering reminder of the pain and suffering that differentiates certain of the world’s historical geographies from others should also halt any bonanza of disciplinary self-justification predicated on the explosion of spatial metaphors in cultural studies. Instead, I believe it ought to be the disciplined task of geographers to listen for such interventions, and to follow their lead in the serious task of interrogating the specific-reality effects too often elided when geography serves only as a vehicle in the ‘politics of location’. Rather than complacent finding in such useful slogans sanction for what ‘we have always done anyway’, geographers could instead begin by interrogating their own positions. Our disciplinary, ‘we’, it must not be forgotten, was also the same ‘we’ of the terror-mongers themselves. It was the ‘we’ of the likes of Douglas Freshfield, who, in his 1904 presidential address to the Geographical Section of the British Association in Cambridge, proudly asserted that: "we should, I believe, think imperially to more purpose if we took pains to think geographically" (1904, page 446). This miserable heritage is only one of the many privileged power/knowledge relations that define the place of geographers today. This place, though, is not fixed, it can be unlearned. It is condensed out of historical, geographical, and politico-economic dynamics that must be brought out, critiqued, and changed. After Marx and Engels (1938, page 6), who questioned the dissimulated Germaness of German Ideology; after Rich (1986, page 213), who demanded that we begin with the specific sex-gender of our own body geographies; and, in the end, after Derrida (1982b, page 136), geographers too must continue asking with Young ‘who, we?’

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