Producing Knowledge(s): The University and the Postcolonial Subject

Natasha Himmelman

Center for African Studies, University of Cape Town
Private Bag, Rondebosch South Africa, 7701
nhimmelman@mac.com

Abstract

[I]nsofar as the academic discourse of history – that is, 'history' produced in the institutional site of the university – is concerned, Europe remains the sovereign theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call 'Indian,' 'Chinese,' 'Kenyan,' and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe.' (Chakrabarty, 1992:1)

Introduction

This passage, taken from Chakrabarty's "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?," calls into question knowledge production in the university, subtly implicating this institutional space in upholding Europe's (read: "the West") hegemonic discursive power.   However, as Chakrabarty demonstrates in this essay, discursive power dynamics are far more complex than the above passage suggests. Nonetheless, as a space constructed for the purpose of producing knowledge, the university must recognize its participation in what Antonio Gramsci calls "consent" (as cited in Said, 1978:7).   As a site for knowledge production the university possesses the power both to consent, in the Gramscian sense, and conspire.   Hence, assuming the university's simultaneous implication in, and engagement with, questions such as the one posited by Chakrabarty, the university, like the postcolonial subject[1], must come to terms with its "condition of being at once 'cursed' and 'blessed' with a double vision" (Korang, 2005:23).   But in what ways is the university "cursed" and "blessed"?

---

[1] The paper focuses primarily on Edward Said as postcolonial subject.

Michel Foucault's unforgettable reference to Borges' "certain Chinese encyclopedia" (Foucault, 2000:377) in *The Order of Things* enables

> an inquiry whose aim is to rediscover on what basis knowledge and theory became possible; within what space of order knowledge was constituted; on the basis of what historic *a priori*, and in the element of what positivity, ideas could appear, sciences be established, experience be reflected in philosophies, rationalities be formed, only, perhaps, to dissolve and vanish soon afterwards. (Foucault, 2000:382)

While Foucault's inquiry is certainly beyond the scope of this paper, his interrogation of knowledge and its establishment in society, does indeed, point to "the field of Western knowledge" (Foucault, 2000:383). As a space for knowledge production, the university is indeed a participant (consenting or not) in upholding the *tabula*[2]. The university confirms, questions, and/or contests whether or not "the umbrella encounters the sewing-machine" (Foucault, 2000:379) on the table[3], creating the "conditions of possibility"[4] (Foucault, 2000:382).

---

[2] In the Foucauldian sense, the *tabula* "enables thought to operate upon the entities of our world, to put them in order, to divide them into classes, to group them according to names that designate their similarities and their differences – the table upon which, since the beginning of time, language has intersected space" (Foucault, 2000:379).

[3] Foucault adopts two uses of the word "table." In this sense, "table" refers to Roussel's work – "the nickel-plated, rubbery table swathed in white, glittering beneath a glass sun devouring all shadow – the table where, for instance, perhaps forever, the umbrella encounters the sewing-machine" (Foucault, 2000:379).

[4] Foucault juxtaposes the notion of knowledge's "conditions of possibility" against its "growing perfection" (Foucault, 2000:382). In other words, established knowledge(s) do not come into being (i.e. become a significant component of discourse) because it sheds its defects or improves until it reaches a level of perfection. Rather, it is the extent to which knowledge(s) can link itself to a network of power.

Using Foucault's ideology, Edward Said analyzes and conceives of Orientalism, demonstrating how knowledge is charged by the political. He writes:

> What I am interested in doing now is suggesting how the general liberal consensus that "true" knowledge is fundamentally nonpolitical (and conversely, that overtly political knowledge is not "true" knowledge) obscures the highly if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced. (Said, 1978:10)

In other words, Said attempts to explain why Roussel's table (invoked by Foucault) can or cannot act as a space in which "the umbrella encounters the sewing-machine" (Foucault, 2000:379). There is always a reason or a motivation for how and why things are positioned on/in the *tabula*. Said reinforces Foucault by showing how an assumed *a priori* knowledge is always motivated by discourse. Juxtaposing an economic study of Russia against "a study of Tolstoi's early fiction" (Said, 1978:10), Said is able to exhibit how discourse pervades knowledge. As Foucault (2000:424) states, "Its question is unfailingly: what was being said in what was said?" The university must ask precisely this question. Implicated in a predetermined *a priori*, it is not directly responsible for creating the *tabula*, which privileges Western knowledge(s). Nonetheless, the university can be held responsible for its failure to interrogate the discursive and/or ideological motivations that enable the *tabula*.

This failure to interrogate can indeed be the result of complacency with Western hegemonic power(s), but it can also be the result of discursive interpellation. Within the context of interpellation, the university is "always already" an institutional subject of Western ideology (Althusser, 2000:300-302). It seems that the only way interpellation can be challenged is through the Other. For instance, Said's *Orientalism* confronts Orientalist discourse through his own experience as an Oriental subject. He writes:

> Much of the personal investment in this study derives from my awareness of being an "Oriental" as a child growing up in two British colonies. All my education, in those colonies (Palestine and

> Egypt) and in the United States, has been Western, and yet that deep early awareness has persisted…In none of that, however, have I ever lost hold of the cultural reality of, the personal involvement in having been constituted as, "an Oriental." (Said, 1978:25-26)

Herein lies the paradox of the colonizing mission – what Partha Chatterjee (1993:18) calls "the rule of colonial difference." In *The Nation and Its Fragments* Chatterjee (1993:18) demonstrates how colonial power existed as "a modern regime of power destined never to fulfill its normalizing mission because the premise of its power was the preservation of the alienness of the ruling group." In other words, although the colonizing mission claimed to have worked towards "civilizing" and "modernizing" the Other, its power and authority existed in upholding this goal as an impossibility – keeping the Other other. This rule of colonial difference is evident in Said's "awareness of being an 'Oriental'" (Said, 1978:25), and it is precisely this awareness that enables him to challenge Orientalism.

Said is extraordinarily forthcoming in acknowledging his roots in Western knowledge, but he does so alongside an identification with the Other. Chatterjee's rule of colonial difference carries over into the present (1993:18). After all, in spite of Said's education and nationality, he remains Other. In *The Location of Culture* Homi Bhabha (1994:86) acknowledges this rule of difference stating:

> [C]olonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference…[M]imicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. (emphasis in the original)

While Said is positioned as a mimic – "almost the same, but not quite" – his inability to become "the same" produces a crack in discursive (infra)structure(s). It is this crack that enables the Other to question his/her interpellated position as an ideologically constituted subject.

While an institution is constituted differently than an individual, Said's experience as postcolonial subject can be applied to the university. Although the university has been discursively constituted as a space of privilege and authority, it is also a space of subversion and idealism. The institution must uphold and support the terrain in which it has been established, but it must simultaneously act as a site for innovation. The very definition of the university disables its capacity to reside wholly within a discursive master narrative. As an institution of hegemonic power(s), the university differs (defers) from other discursively constituted institutions, such as prisons and schools, because it retains authority through a discursive dependency on the innovation it produces. Like the rule of difference, innovation is regulated by the very hegemonic power(s) that insist upon its production. Something of the ambivalence of mimicry is present in the university's ambivalent position. Innovation defers the sameness the university shares with other institutions, allowing it to "emerg[e] as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (Bhabha, 1994:86). This emergence, or crack, reflects the significance of knowledge production and its interrelationship with power. Returning to Foucault, we can study the significance of the emergence that is part of Said's mimicry. Foucault (2000:424) writes:

> In fact, the systematic erasure of all given unities enables us first of all to restore to the statement the specificity of its occurrence, and to show that discontinuity is one of those great accidents that create cracks not only in the geology of history but also in the simple fact of the statement; it emerges in its historical irruption; what we try to examine is the incision that it makes, that irreducible – and very often tiny – emergence.

In other words, the paradox of the rule of colonial difference enables the postcolonial subject to see the "discontinuity" of Orientalist discourse. It is this moment of emergence that enables Said to contest the knowledge(s) which upholds Orientalism. The emergence is an event which inspires new knowledge(s), because it contradicts the closed hegemonic system upheld by discourse. The emergence also shows how "power is in reality an open, more-or-less coordinated (in the event, no doubt, ill-coordinated) cluster of

relations" (Foucault, 1980:199). Nonetheless, the emergence is merely an opening and cannot in itself access the complex network that is power. Rather, it is "the relation between the surfaces on which [knowledges] appear, on which they can be delimited, on which they can be analyzed and specified" (Foucault, 2000:426) which has the capacity to access power. As a discursively constituted institution and site for innovation, the university possesses the necessary components for creating master narratives. In "African Histories and the Dissolution of World History" Steven Feierman interrogates the discursive power(s) of history, a discipline that contributes to knowledge production. Feierman (1993:167) writes:

> [H]istorians have become acutely aware that their own writings, their ways of constructing a narrative, conceal some kinds of historical knowledge even while they reveal others, and that their choice of subject and method is a product of their own time and circumstances, not an inevitable outcome of the impersonal progress of historical science.

Said (1978:16) acknowledges these complexities stating:

> The idea of beginning, indeed the act of beginning, necessarily involves an act of delimitation by which something is cut out of a great mass of material, separated from the mass, and made to stand for, as well as be, a starting point, a beginning…

Additionally, Said's experiences with Orientalism (as "Oriental") reinforce Feierman's assertion that what one writes is "a product of their own time and circumstances" (1993:167). These assertions demonstrate both Feierman and Said's acknowledgment of discursive power. Nonetheless, Feierman's chapter demonstrates how, unlike Said, many historians fail to investigate the experience of the Other, or their own Otherness, in order to interrogate master narratives. New approaches to spatiality attempt to retrieve the Other in an effort to subvert hegemonic narratives. In *"A Man for All Seasons and Climes"?* Reading Edward Said from and for Our

African Place" Kwaku Larbi Korang (2005:35) explains Said's spatialized geopolitics stating:

> Late-modernist cosmopolitanism also casts the 'time' of 'the political' in a state of emergence/emergency. As such it proffers a neohumanist politics defined in transition and in process, a politics in which Becoming displaces Being, in which we see Self and Community processually and unceasingly becoming other than/in – becoming Other of – themselves.

Such spatiality replaces teleological ideologies. Feierman (1993:171) stipulates that the *Annales* school of history writing also used spatiality in order to account for new historical patterns. However, the spatiality developed by members of *Annales*, such as Fernand Braudel, was unidirectional. It seems that although Braudel, among others, sought out to create a dialog between and among varying discursive powers, his failure to recognize the Other through spaces of emergence rendered his analysis closed rather than open. As Korang stipulates, it is in "Becoming" that one is able to remain open to new knowledges.

This spatiality of "Becoming" is an inherent component of the university, which must remain open to new knowledges in order to satisfy its responsibility as a site for innovation. The university must always be "in transition and in process" (Korang, 2005:35) because the hegemonic discourse in which it is constituted will not allow it to exist in another capacity. The university must constantly be in communication with its institutional Otherness – its difference that is innovation – which enables emergence. Nonetheless, just as Feierman acknowledges the problematics inherent in constructing a historical narrative and as Said confronts the complexities of beginning, so must the university realize its discursive relationship with knowledge production. As Foucault reminds us, the emergence is merely an opening in which new knowledge(s) may be produced. Power can only be accessed through a relationship with the discursive terrain in which it is enmeshed. The university, an institution constituted by hegemonic forces, occupies a privileged space in which such relations can be accessed.

The university's privileged space inherently implicates the institution in its discursive hegemony. In "*Orientalism* and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said" Aijaz Ahmad condemns Said for succumbing to Orientalism. He writes, "It sometimes appears that one is transfixed by the power of the very voice that one debunks" (Ahmad, 1992:173). Herein lies the seeming impossibility of unraveling discourse as a hegemonic superstructure. Referring to Said, Korang writes:

> Must not the addresser in this situation more or less have taken on the culture/power characteristics of the addressee? That is to say, must not the Oriental subject thus have become *in himself* and *in his place* a bearer and a sharer of the culture/power of the Orientalizing subject?" (Korang, 2005:32).

The interpellation always already exists, and as such, an individual is always already constituted as a subject within the existing discursive terrain. He/she cannot conceive of existence outside of ideology and is always already subject to the rules of formation[5]. In *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters* Olakunle George (2003:83) reinforces the pervasiveness of discourse stating, "The subject is, only by being in ideology." George interrogates conceptions of agency, stipulating that agency as well as resistance never exists outside of discourse. Hence, agency can only exist as "discursive agency" and resistance as "discursive resistance" (George, 2003:74). In other words, discourse is an inevitable component of how we identify ourselves. This reality is particularly complex for the postcolonial subject because he/she has been historically defined against or in direct opposition with this (read: Western) discursive master narrative. As Korang (2005:39) writes:

> [T]o be "postcolonial," in Spivak's terms, is to be in a place where one finds oneself caught in empire's orbit and aftereffects, in that situation having reluctantly to embrace – or say "yes" to – that

---

[5] "The rules of formation are conditions of existence (but also of coexistence, maintenance, modification, and disappearance) in a given discursive division" (Foucault, 2000:425).

> which one finds it also necessary to oppose – or say "no" to…"Postcoloniality" is African philosophy's condition of having to be, in a gestural doubleness, impossibly other-than-African.

This doubleness or duplicity is evident in Said's *Orientalism*, a "self-implicating mode of knowledge production in which the intellectual's entanglement in the travails of existence produces a deep-seated commitment to the mitigation of those travails" (Varadharajan 115). Said is indeed implicated in Western discourse, but with a crucial difference. It is this crucial difference that the university must seek out in order to retain its dynamism in spite of its privilege. Just as Said forges a relationship with Western discourse in order to access its power in a way that empowers new knowledges (evident in *Orientalism*), so must the university manipulate its own relationship with its hegemonic discourse(s) in order to access its privilege for the purpose of establishing new knowledges.

Returning to Chakrabarty's assertion, we can see how the university is indeed implicated in maintaining Europe as "the sovereign theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call 'Indian,' 'Chinese,' 'Kenyan,' and so on" (Chakrabarty, 1992:1). As long as Western discourse prevails, the university, an institution constituted by this discourse, will inevitably be "entangle(d) in the travails of existence" (Varadharajan, 1995:115). However, like Said, the university can be implicated, but with a crucial difference. This difference interrogates the *tabula* and "what was being said in what was said" (Foucault, 2000:424); confronts its Otherness, enabling it to see the emergence, the cracks; and uses these openings to create new knowledge(s) which are spatially open, always "Becoming" (Korang, 2005:35), always striving towards innovation. Nonetheless, this crucial difference cannot access power without "the relation between the surfaces on which [knowledges] appear, on which they can be delimited, on which they can be analyzed and specified" (Foucault, 2000:426). Until a new hegemonic discourse is established, this crucial difference must always link itself to "the surfaces" (discourses) in order to access power.

Works Cited

Ahmad, Aijaz. 1992. "*Orientalism* and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said." *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso.

Althusser, Louis. 2000. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 1992. "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations*, 37 (Winter), pp. 1-26.

Chatterjee, Partha. 1993. "The Colonial State." The Nation and Its Fragments. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Feierman, Steven. 1993. "African Histories and the Dissolution of World History." Ed. Robert H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr. *Africa and the Disciplines*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon.

---. 2000. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. pp. 421-428.

---. 2000. *The Order of Things*. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. pp. 375-384.

George, Olakunle. 2003. "The Logic of Agency in African Literary Criticism." *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Korang, Kwaku Larbi. 2005. "A Man for All Seasons and Climes? Reading Edward Said from and for Our African Place." *Research in African Literatures*, 26.3 (Fall), pp. 23-52.

Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.

Varadharajan, Asha. 1995. *Exotic Parodies: Subjectivity in Adorno, Said and Spivak*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.