

# POSTCOLONIAL FUTURES

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*Peter Sjølyst-Jackson*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Other Asias*, Malden US, Oxford UK & Victoria, Australia, Blackwell, 2008, 365pp; £14.99 paperback.

Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging*, London, Seagull, 2007, 121pp; £9.99 hardback.

Gayatri Spivak's major new publication, *Other Asias*, ties the future of postcolonial studies to questions of democracy, human rights, and new ways of imagining the heterogeneous spaces of 'Asia' as a single, yet pluralistic, region. If the postcolonial imagination is to be oriented towards the future, Spivak suggests, it will have to work for the re-invention of collectivities in relation to state structures beyond identitarianism, nationalism and national sovereignty. This point is reinforced in the critical dialogue between Judith Butler and Spivak entitled *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, a small volume that addresses the problem of statelessness in the age of globalisation, and calls for 'postnational forms of political opposition' (p41). Spivak and Butler's insistence on the 'postnational' as the horizon for postcolonial thought differs somewhat from some of the positions taken in a recent instalment of this very journal, a special issue of *new formations* entitled 'After Iraq: Reframing Postcolonial Studies'. In their combative editorial, Priyamvada Gopal and Neil Lazarus strongly oppose the view that 'the downturn in the fortunes of insurgent anticolonial movements in the later 1960s and early 1970s' should be viewed as 'the definite, once-and-for-all historical eclipse of progressive nationalist and anti-imperialist struggle'.<sup>1</sup> Pointing to Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia, Nepal and South Africa as current sites of 'resistance to imperialism', the drift of their rhetoric suggests an affirmation of nationalism in the name of liberation. A certain tension, then, remains over the question of the nation in the twenty-first century, of whether nationalism or, alternatively, some as yet unseen postnational form, will be capable of bringing about a situation where democracy and human rights may flourish.

For Spivak, the possibility of a 'postnational' future is tied up with existing state structures and nation-states; she wants, as it were, to detach (and do away with) the 'nation' from its hyphenated attachment to the 'state', since she regards the former as a predominantly malignant formation based on exclusion and 'identitarianism', whereas the latter is held up as the best guarantor of democracy, law and human rights. It is difficult to imagine, nevertheless, how state structures - however 'abstract' - do not also entail some form of identification and allegiance on behalf of their subjects, that is to say, another version of nationalism founded upon a more or less violent opposition between 'inside' and 'outside', 'natives' and 'aliens', 'citizens' and 'foreigners'. Spivak proffers what she calls 'critical regionalism' as the alternative to nationalist

exclusiveness, the contours of which emerge most clearly in the concluding chapter of *Other Asias*. The inestimable and unevenly divided space called 'Asia' is not to be 'explained', she says, in broad strokes fit for an encyclopaedia definition, but rather re-imagined 'as one continent in its plurality' (p214). 'Today more than ever, "Asia" is uncritically regionalist', she says. It is imagined 'metonymically in terms of its own region, and sees as its other the "West," meaning increasingly, the United States' (p213). Such a mindset - 'my country or region over against "the West"' (p214) - fails to comprehend its complicity with the dominant projections of global geopolitics, and is thus incapable of imagining alternatives. Critical regionalism addresses the largely ignored question of how an inclusive welfare structure of shared laws, healthcare and education can be combined with open frontiers (p245). It calls on readers to imagine the possibility of 'a position without identity', a situation where collective action, solidarity and citizen participation might be possible, whilst always guarding against, on the one side, the logic of exclusion characteristic of nationalism and cultural identity and, on the other side, the more recent logic of class division under globalisation, that is, the emergence of a new global managerial class which, despite (or, more precisely, because of) philanthropy and social responsibility programmes, remains unaccountable to any democratic state structure in the regions they affect. If critical regionalism, then, resists the withering away of democratic state structures in the face of neo-liberal globalisation, one might still wonder if Spivak's rejection of nationalism as 'identitarian' is too hasty and reductive, as if the logic of exclusion could be conjured away by means of, precisely, another logic of exclusion. Are not nations and national identities also sites of struggle, duration, movement and difference?

As Spivak points out, existing models of colonial discourse theory refer to the Middle East, South Asia and Latin America, the colonial adventures and conquests of single nations, underpinned by mercantile capitalism and followed by the growing market needs of industrial capital. In this context, the future of postcolonial theory, for Spivak, begins with recognising the limitations that become apparent in the intellectual expansion into 'other Asias', a field that reveals other histories and patterns of imperialism which have been ignored, not just across Asia but also in Europe, particularly in Eastern Europe where postcoloniality is negotiated as postcommunism, against the backdrop of 'the old multi-ethnic imperial formations, Ottoman, Habsburg, Russian' (p6). The cases of Afghanistan and Armenia, which Spivak discusses in two separate chapters, throw up yet other constellations, shifting multi-ethnic allegiances that exceed the postcolonial mindset, not least those 'produced from a US ideological position, minoritarian, identitarian, and left-liberal' (p99). Spivak evokes, towards the end of the book, the plethora of languages and spaces associated with 'Asia' by drawing up a list of over fifty geographical areas, parts that overlap or border each other (such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh), others which are 'absent', held in quotation marks or contested (such as Cyprus, Russia, Turkey), and still many others, indicating the mutability of maps, and the '[d]iversified subject-positions produced by shifting geopolitical lineaments' (p236).

*Other Asias*, however, is not simply about the historical and geographical spaces that remain in the interstices of the postcolonial imagination. It is also about the epistemic disjunctions, or intuitive mismatches, that continue to produce regressive separations of class and gender. The opening chapter, 'Righting Wrongs', rejects any hasty criticism of human rights activists as

'Eurocentric', pointing instead to the conflicting sensibilities between these and the people they protect. Expanding on the epistemic and material disparities between the metropolitan elite and the rural poor, chapter two begins with a detailed commentary on Derrida's *Of Spirit*, and juxtaposes Derrida's reading of Heidegger's Nazism with a conference on the World Bank's Flood Action Plan in Bangladesh, in order to highlight complex questions of culpability, responsibility and political representation. Later chapters discuss the limits of colonial discourse theory in the cases of Armenia and Afghanistan, and the blind spots of globalisation theory and 'cyber literacy' in relation to the 'Megacity' of Bangalore, whilst the final chapter tracks the hazards of Spivak's own diasporic position in grasping the 'structure of feeling' of everyday goddess-worship in West Bengal. Gathering together six previously published essays, the oldest dating back to 1992 and the most recent to 2003, the foci of *Other Asias* profoundly disrupt and break apart the spatial and temporal markers ('after 9/11', 'after Iraq') that have come to dominate our era. Many of Spivak's revisions to the older pieces are marked as such, a strategy of self-reflexive commentary that often frustrates the expectation of a smooth experience of reading, but which has the merit of registering recent history ('after 9-11', 'after Iraq') without submitting to the coercive reorientation such markers impose: 'it is important for us', as she says, 'not to let the plurality of Asia be selectively studied according to the directions of US foreign policy' (p2).

The global proliferation of statelessness, which *Other Asias* registers in terms of 'internal displacement' in Armenia and Bangladesh, is discussed more fully in *Who Sings the Nation-State?* Statelessness, Judith Butler points out, is a condition actively *produced* by state structures. It is often states that persecute people and cause their displacement, within or beyond their own borders. In other cases, states receive displaced people on the condition that citizenship rights and obligations are not granted (p6). Extra-territorial prisons such as Guantanamo, or contested places such as Gaza, create the conditions of statelessness. Neither Gaza nor Guantanamo is classified as a state, 'though delegated state power controls or terrorizes the territory where its inhabitants live' (p7). The Southern Caucasus, Spivak adds, 'carries the heavy burden of internal displacement (statelessness) and military intervention as a result of the play between the multi-ethnic empires of the Ottomans and the Russians' (p72). Butler notes that statelessness 'is barely legible as an academic topic in the social sciences right now' (p13), a point that is borne out in a recent article by Philippe Rekacewicz in *Le Monde diplomatique*. Calling attention to the prevailing political, institutional and theoretical blindness towards statelessness, Rekacewicz establishes that the effects of globalisation and free markets on forced population movements are left largely unanalysed. It is not known, for instance, how many hundreds of thousands of Mexican farmers illegally enter the US every year as their businesses collapse in competition with (subsidised) American products. Although UN estimates suggest there are 25 million displaced people around the world today, and that 10 to 15 million people are displaced every year by large-scale development projects, such as dams, industrial centres and plantations, the people who are stateless are almost by definition invisible, Rekacewicz observes, 'either because the state is unable to come to their aid or because the state itself is their oppressor'.<sup>2</sup> Drawing out the implications of such issues, Spivak and Butler's title, *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, refers to street demonstrations in the spring of 2006 in California and Los Angeles when illegal residents, demanding equality and rights, sang the 'Star Spangled Banner' in Spanish,

momentarily subverting the monolingualism of the nation-state, whilst also raising questions of the meaning of nationalism amid global migration and shifting cultural allegiances. Here, Butler and Spivak present readings of Hannah Arendt's work and offer a critique of Giorgio Agamben, whose concept of 'bare life', in Butler's view, describes statelessness as a form of abandonment and destitution, thus ignoring that it is a state of existence embedded in and manufactured by contemporary relations of power and economy (p50).

Returning, now, to the 'After Iraq' issue of *new formations*, the differences around nationalism indicate certain divergences in the understanding of power, oppression and the possibility of liberation. Where Gopal and Lazarus express hope that immigration rights in the US 'might yet signal the rebirth of a massive labour and civil rights movement',<sup>3</sup> Spivak and Butler insist on the risky and open-ended nature of such protests. It is not in the 'rebirth' of national liberation movements that they invest hope, but rather, in the possibility of 'postnational forms of political opposition' (p41). Where Gopal and Lazarus evoke 'progressive nationalist and anti-imperialist struggle', Spivak regards national liberation rhetoric as anachronistic and treacherous: 'In the name of anticolonialism', she says bluntly, 'you get the kind of national identity politics that can lead to fascism' (*Other Asias* p248). Spivak's view of nationalism is startlingly reductive at this juncture and is clearly unhelpful for thinking about, say, the different histories of anticolonialism in South-Africa and Algeria. But her reduction is polemical and serves, so it would seem, to resist an equally reductive polemic against 'imperialism'. For, where Gopal and Lazarus cite the invasion of Iraq as only the latest example of how 'imperialism runs like a bloodied thread, unbroken, throughout the twentieth century',<sup>4</sup> Butler and Spivak are at pains to avoid evoking imperialism in such monolithic terms, pointing instead to the complicity of nation-states, and state structures, in the production of oppression. The reductions on both sides, then, reveal an interesting divergence in terms of their strategic emphasis, rather than the sense of absolute incompatibility their rhetoric might suggest. This view is confirmed by a closer consideration of some aspects of the 'After Iraq' issue of *new formations*.

The essay by Neil Lazarus, which leads the issue, singles out Homi Bhabha in order to berate, as irresponsible and 'actively malign', postcolonial scholars who argue 'against binaristic modes of conceptualisation, against liberationist ideologies, against nationalism, against Marxist theory and socialist practice!'<sup>5</sup> Although Lazarus has discussed Spivak's work in more detail elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> he does not mention her work here, which might have something to do with the trouble it would cause for his polemic, given Spivak's longstanding intellectual engagement with Marx, along with her work as a teacher trainer at grassroots level in Aboriginal West Bengal. Despite Spivak's own reductions on the question of nationalism, then, her commitments do throw a spanner in the works of any reductive criticism of so-called poststructuralist textualism. The 'After Iraq' issue is, in fact, marked by a more general absence of engagement with Spivak, and there is no unanimity between the two contributors who do, however briefly, address her work: one endorses her work in the call to unlearn privilege,<sup>7</sup> whereas the other dismisses Spivak, along with Bhabha and Chakrabarty, as dealing in unhelpful 'culturalist abstractions' in which 'the subaltern is simply voiceless' and positioned as a 'victim rather than a subject *fully* capable of ethical existence and judgement'.<sup>8</sup>

The latter is not a valid argument against Spivak, but rather, an old misreading that ignores

the complexity of her argument and the significance of her work. *Other Asias* demonstrates not simply Spivak's unwavering commitment to the democratic potential of the subaltern, but also her thinking through *both* high theory *and* the realities that are supposedly divorced from it: the trajectories of imperialism, the politics of globalisation, the conditions of the rural poor. Starting with the premise that there are deep epistemic discontinuities between 'rights-based cultures', such as those of human rights advocates and metropolitan elites, and the 'responsibility-based cultures' of the rural poor in the global South, the opening chapter, 'Righting Wrongs', envisages a democratic role for humanities education at both ends of the social spectrum. The restricted utopianism expressed by the likes of Said and Rorty, that universities must work towards a truly global human rights culture by producing generations of thoroughly nice and 'other-respecting' students, will not, argues Spivak, shift these discontinuities without a supplementary focus on the schools of the rural poor in the global South (p17). Describing her work in literacy training in Aboriginal West Bengal, Spivak points to failures of rote learning, whereby children are expected 'to memorize incomprehensible chunks of prose', with no basic engagement at the level of meanings - the bread and butter of literary studies (p54). The teachers in the rural schools 'do not know the meaning of what they "teach", since all they have to teach, when they are doing their job correctly, is spelling and memorizing' (p55). Great difficulties arise, in Spivak's experience, from the fact that 'these teachers have been so maimed by the very system of education we are trying to combat, and are so much within the class apartheid produced by it, that they would blindly agree and obey, while the trainer was emoting over consciousness raising' (p51). To Spivak's way of thinking, then, the education system reproduces existing relations of subordination just as assuredly as human rights activists fail to grasp their own unwitting complicity.

Spivak does not reduce the rural poor to mere 'victims', but neither does she accept, to recall her critic in *new formations*, the designation of the subaltern as 'a subject *fully* capable of ethical existence and judgement'. The trouble with statements like this is that they presuppose the very conditions that make democracy possible in the first place; as Spivak has long insisted, a 'position' cannot be recognised without institutional validation (p117). As she puts it elsewhere, there 'must be a presumed collectivity of listening and countersigning subjects and agents in the public sphere for the subaltern to "speak"'.<sup>9</sup> Spivak *does* affirm the importance of recognising the 'long-ignored ethical imagination' of the rural poor, but maintains that those ethics are 'not necessarily operative' or directly accessible (p42). It is in the effort to find ways to reactivate the 'erased ethical script' (p38) of the rural poor that she envisages a role for humanities education - without, that is, forgetting the profound obstacles to such an endeavour. Spivak has elsewhere written of the impossibility of explaining human rights to schoolchildren 'in a place with no plumbing, pavement, electricity, stores, without doors and windows'.<sup>10</sup> In 'Righting Wrongs', she describes in more detail the prevailing obstacles, local and global, to any 'slow training into democracy' (p48). At district and national levels, she describes through personal anecdotes how administrators, corrupted by the hierarchies of caste politics, gender politics, class politics, are more interested in advancing their own positions than paying attention to the needs of poor people (p47). At a global level, she points to the structure of domination reproduced by human rights activists and impatient philanthropists, a structural relation whereby rights are handed

down from above and wherein the subaltern 'has no chance of becoming the subject of Human Rights as part of a collectivity'. It is necessary, she insists, 'to bring about a situation where the law can be imagined as the expression of a community, always to come' (p42).

Human rights activism, then, must be supplemented by patient and sustained learning from the grass roots in order to 'access and activate the tribals' indigenous "democratic" structures' (p40). To do this, she argues, trainers must 'learn from below' in order to grasp 'the structure of the role of alterity at work in subordinate cultures' (p37). It is in alterity - the call of the other - that subordinate cultures base the agency of responsibility, and only via such structures that one might 'suture rights thinking into the torn cultural fabric of the possibility of responsibility' (p38). The potential role of humanities education in this context, Spivak suggests, is quite simply the development of 'an informed imagination' - which is, however, 'a task at which we have failed through the progressive rationalisation of education all over the world' (p2). As US education teaches corporatist benevolence and trivialises the humanities (p23); as big investment companies such as Morgan Stanley and Merrill Lynch deliver education programmes to foster entrepreneurialism in the Third World (p32); and as universities supplement these trends by going corporate, the emergence of the human rights model as the global dominant will not, argues Spivak, bring about a situation where democracy and responsibility can flourish (pp21-30). The redistributive powers of states have been severely restricted in the wake of globalisation and, as Spivak notes in *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, the so-called 'free market' has always been regulated by the interests of capital: 'The market is never going to throw up demands for clean drinking water for the poor' (p79). Although the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund began with 'an international socialist kind of mission', development 'quickly became an alibi for sustainable exploitation' (p80-81). The desire to redistribute, Spivak insists, proceeds neither from declarations of rights, nor indeed from economic growth or material plenitude: it has been forgotten that 'the impulse to redistribute is based on training, and that an education without the humanities cannot foster the redistributive impulse' (*Other Asias* p30).

*Other Asias* thereby suggests that it is more urgent than ever to affirm humanities teaching which, for Spivak, is about moving towards democracy and responsibility through 'accessing the other through deep language learning in the collectivity of the classroom' (p2). Humanities pedagogy, says Spivak, 'attempts an uncoercive rearrangement of desires' through the 'textured' work of languages. It is 'able to mediate upon gender and sexuality without the self-conscious arrogance of the gender-trained do-gooder' (p226). Literary fiction, she writes elsewhere, 'offers us an experience of the discontinuities that remain in place "in real life"'.<sup>11</sup> It does not offer models for social policy, but it is 'the terrain where the ability to think absent things has free reign' (p4). The task for the imagination, literary or otherwise, is to re-invent the abstract structures of the state beyond nationalism and national sovereignty - what Spivak calls 'critical regionalism'. Long-term solutions must be sought, she argues, in 'cleaning up the state through citizens' participation, critical regionalism, and the painstaking change in the quality of the education of the subaltern' (p129). *Other Asias*, thus, inscribes postcoloniality as a responsibility to the incalculable future. The implication, here, is that a rhetoric of national liberation can only act out in the future the already established patterns of the past. The question remains, however, of whether reducing the future of the national to 'identitarianism' precipitously forecloses other

possibilities linked to national identities, struggles and differences. As indeed Spivak herself puts it, the postcolonial is 'a warning, a reckoning, a responsibility' - 'always around the corner, a site of negotiations' (p118). The layered insights of *Other Asias*, numerous and provocative, should animate the postcolonial imagination for a long time to come.

## NOTES

1. Priyamvada Gopal and Neil Lazarus, 'Editorial', *new formations*, 59, (2006): 7.
2. Philippe Rekacewicz, 'The world on the move', *Le Monde diplomatique*, April, 2008, pp8-9.
3. Gopal and Lazarus, op. cit., p8.
4. Ibid.
5. Neil Lazarus, 'Postcolonial Studies After the Invasion of Iraq', *new formations*, 59, (2006): 21.
6. See Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*, Cambridge, CUP, 1999.
7. Crystal Bartolovich, 'History After the End of History', *new formations*, 59, (2006): 72.
8. Chetan Bhatt, 'The Fetish of the Margins: Religious Absolutism, Anti-Racism and Postcolonial Science', *new formations*, 59, (2006): 100-1.
9. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching', in *Diacritics*, 32, (3-4): 24.
10. Ibid., p27-8.
11. Ibid., p18.

# THE POLITICS OF TONTO

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*Vincent Lloyd*

William Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2008; 174pp, £11.99 paperback.

Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*, Eugene, Cascade Books, 2008; 378pp, £19.85 paperback.

The Lone Ranger, that masked hero of the American Wild West, once was riding through a valley with his Indian companion, Tonto. Suddenly, all along the ridges on both sides of the valley hundreds of Sioux appeared in full war dress. The Lone Ranger, alarmed, turned to his companion and frantically asked, 'Tonto, what are we going to do?' Tonto stoically replied, 'What do you mean "we", white man?'

Stanley Hauerwas, Christian theologian extraordinaire, likes to tell this story to advocate what he calls the 'Tonto Principle'. He argues that all too often when thinking about politics, Christians take for granted who 'we' are, submerging Christian identities in the secular world. But what ultimately motivates Christians to act in political life is totally different from what motivates non-Christians. This, of course, is most annoying to the Lone Rangers of the world, to secular politicians and political theorists, who want to be able to count on Christians to combat injustices and further the work of democracy. So it is surprising to find Hauerwas in dialogue with a secular political theorist, Romand Coles, and to find another secular political theorist, William Connolly, taking Christian thought seriously, including that of Hauerwas.

Groundwork for such engagements was laid in the recent work of Jeffrey Stout (*Democracy and Tradition*) and Cornel West (*Democracy Matters*), scholars at Princeton's Religion Department who are fluent both in the discourse of political theory and of Christian theology. Stout and West propose to put democratic theory on equal footing with Christian political thought by understanding each as a tradition: a set of practices, values, and styles of reasoning robustly supported by a community and its history. This counters the modern liberal understanding of religion as a supremely personal experience, and of democracy as supremely rational. To understand democracy (they are thinking particularly of American democracy) as a tradition Stout and West turn to those who explicate the values implicit in democratic practice: Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison. Through the voices of these figures, they argue, we find that the democratic tradition values equality, tolerance, dialogue, and perseverance in the face of tragic circumstances. Understanding democracy as a tradition means that Christians in the United States are participants in (at least)



two traditions, and neither receives the *prima facie* privilege implied by the Tonto Principle.

Connolly, Coles, and even Hauerwas are sympathetic to the theoretical move made by Stout and West, but they move beyond it in different directions. Coles and Hauerwas are interested in the concrete, everyday practices that embody values shared by both the Christian and the democratic traditions. Connolly can be understood to thicken the theoretical framework advanced by Stout and West through engagements with Continental thought and with economic theory. But there is a sense in which all three remain in the grip of the Tonto Principle, haunted by the underlying question – are you one of us or are you one of them?

A renowned political theorist and leading advocate of radical democratic politics, William Connolly wrote a book a few years ago titled, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*. It is the ideology of secularism, which he takes to be intimately intertwined with contemporary liberalism, to which he is opposed (he does not advocate organized religion). In his new book, *Capitalism and Christianity*, he looks for an ethos in American Christianity that is compatible with radical democracy. He finds it in a particular trajectory of Christian ‘spirituality’, beginning with the ‘most authentic’ sayings of the historical Jesus and stretching from Thomas Jefferson to Jimmy Carter. To this he opposes a darker trajectory having its origins in the Biblical book of Revelation and continuing through the Christian science-fiction series *Left Behind* and George W. Bush. ‘A care for the richness of life’ is opposed to a focus on revenge, resentment, and wrath. Connolly charges that contemporary Christians in the United States have aligned themselves with the latter (which is incompatible with radical democratic politics), forgetting about the former.

While Connolly’s presentation is similar to the project of Stout and West in that it recovers a certain Christian tradition, Stout and West offer rich engagements with the Christian tradition to motivate the changes they want to affect in a way that would make sense to Christians themselves. In separating the Christian ethos he likes from the Christian ethos he doesn’t like, Connolly sounds suspiciously similar to the Lone Ranger, confident that the pleasant, gentle, obsequious Tonto is a ‘good’ Indian as opposed to the hordes of savages that want to scalp him.

*Capitalism and Christianity* is at its most interesting when Connolly approaches the ‘spirituality’ he advocates from the direction of Continental theory. Drawing on Nietzsche and Deleuze as well as on evolutionary biology, Connolly outlines and advocates ‘immanent naturalism’. Although he disclaims the possibility of any supernatural intervention in the world, he also disclaims the possibility that the world can be fully explained through a ‘lawlike model’. It is only ‘as if’ laws completely explain the world; actually the world is ‘unruly’, ‘volatile’, and ‘traversed by surplus energies’. There is the world as it seems to us and the world as it actually is, and to acknowledge the difference is to have the kind of ‘faith’ that Connolly advocates. The ethics that complements this faith involves affirmation of and gratitude for the world as it actually is, in all its unpredictable flux.

Tragedy is too often neglected by political theorists, but Connolly uses his immanent naturalism to offer a provocative chapter on the theme. Because the world as it is cannot be captured by our laws and representations, our best efforts and plans will inevitably go awry, at least some of the time. This seems quite correct - but incompatible with the ethics that Connolly tries to extract from immanent naturalism. On his account of tragedy, we can know nothing about the world as it is other than that it is not possible to be correctly represented; on his

account of ethics, we can represent the world as it actually is: we can say that it involves ‘vitality and fecundity’ that we ought to be grateful for. This tension is crucial, for it allows Connolly to immunize from critique the kinds of values he commends by associating them with the world as it really is (in his ethics) while at the same time claiming that we cannot know anything about the world as it really is (in his account of tragedy). Even if Connolly can compromise by attributing relatively thin content to the world as it is, like ‘becoming’, it is not clear how this would get him to his normative conclusions, like the need to take action against global warming (indeed, Nietzsche might be quite enthusiastic about global warming!).

Where Connolly can be understood to elaborate the framework presented by Stout and West by thickening its theory, Romand Coles and Stanley Hauerwas consider its hands-on implications. And their discussions are refreshingly hands-on: they discuss, for example, the (Christian) L’Arche communities in which healthy people choose to live side-by-side with the mentally disabled. Particularly poignant is their discussion of footwashing at L’Arche: they read both washing the feet of the disabled and having one’s feet washed by the disabled as political acts. It fosters an ethos of equality, humility, and peace - a ‘politics of gentleness’.

Coles is interested in moving radical democratic theory to the concrete, to engagement with what he calls the ‘radical ordinary’, and he finds in the work of Christian thinkers like Hauerwas critical reflection on just the sorts of concrete practices that he thinks should be of interest to radical democrats. Democracy, for Coles, does not mean a type of political system. It means a movement towards equality and social engagement: ‘Democracy is *democratization*’. Social movements, such as the civil rights struggle in the United States and community living wage campaigns, are where democracy happens. Coles suggests that discussion of, and theorizing about, the civil rights movement has been overly focused on Martin Luther King at the expense of grassroots organizers patiently carrying out political work on a small scale (he proposes Ella Baker as an alternative civil rights icon).

As a proponent of the ‘Tonto Principle’, Stanley Hauerwas might seem an odd interlocutor for Coles. But Hauerwas and Coles share an appreciation for the thought of Rowan Williams, the present Archbishop of Canterbury, as well as an intellectual spirit of charity, openness, and vulnerability - a spirit which Williams exemplifies. Hauerwas, a committed pacifist and an earthy Texan, is known for his colorful interventions on a broad range of topics: one of his recent essays is titled, ‘Why Gays (as a Group) are Morally Superior to Christians (as a Group)’. His contributions to *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary* are intriguing, though his distinctive voice is somewhat muted by his extensive engagements with other theologians and political theorists.

While Hauerwas shares Coles’ enthusiasm about hands-on projects like L’Arche, Hauerwas sees in them an irreducible, animating ‘Christological center’. For Hauerwas, L’Arche provides a foretaste on earth of heavenly peace. Although Hauerwas urges that members of L’Arche should wash everyone’s feet, even non-Christians’, he worries that abandoning its grounding in the Christian tradition would mean acceding to the problematic liberal politics of supposed rational actors - a politics none too friendly to the mentally disabled. For Coles, practices like living with the mentally disabled and footwashing can be pragmatically appropriated for radical democratic politics - without a Christian remainder. Moreover, Coles demonstrates the

usefulness of pragmatically appropriating Christian vocabulary for democratic purposes, from 'liturgy' to 'charity' to 'patience'. For example, Coles considers community organizing to be one of the liturgies of democratic life, where liturgy combines myth and ritual but also suggests a practice invested with the authority to alter the beliefs of a community. Widening the vocabulary of political theory in this way seems to be a very worthwhile endeavor, but it is easy to elide the different background commitments giving force to this language. Coles commends liturgy, for example, with a hypothetical imperative: in order to further democratic politics, we should use democratic liturgies. Hauerwas commends liturgy with the force of a categorical imperative: because God, through the Christian tradition, sanctions it, it must be done.

Coles might object to this distinction on pragmatic grounds. He might argue that we can simply bracket Hauerwas' 'God-talk', which does not do any work in the world that we live in. Once it is bracketed, the supposed categorical force of Hauerwas' thought evaporates, and the seemingly religious language that both Coles and Hauerwas use, such as 'liturgy', means exactly the same thing. Although this pragmatist prestidigitation has clear appeal, it elides what Connolly at least begins to grapple with: the iron grip of ideology. While Coles works with the raw materials he is given (the vocabulary, the practices, etc.), molding them towards the political ends he favors, Connolly and Hauerwas each in quite different ways protest against these raw materials. Connolly argues that the world as it seems to us is not the world as it really is, and Hauerwas argues much the same, with his 'God-talk' serving as leverage to move from the world as it seems to the world as it could be.

In 2001, radical democratic theorists (including Stout and West) vigorously supported campaigns to increase the wages of the lowest paid workers at university campuses in the United States. The next year, a campaign to limit university investment in Israel until the end of its occupation of the Palestinian Territories met with a tepid response by these theorists. While Stout and West acknowledged that the cause was just, for 'pragmatic' reasons they deemed it inadvisable to publicly support it. Perhaps this suggests an alternative reading of the Lone Ranger story. Perhaps it is the Christian (or 'immanent naturalist', or other thoroughgoing ideology critic) who is the Lone Ranger, and the pragmatic radical democrat who is Tonto. Riding along the open plain, the Lone Ranger and Tonto are the best of friends. But when Tonto is confronted with the combative forces of the world – forces that remind him so much of himself - the Lone Ranger is left companionless, girded only with the faith that his cause is just.

## ABOUT A BOY

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*Jon Cairns*

Carol Mavor, *Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D. W. Winnicott*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2007; 536pp, £19.99 paperback

How does one read Carol Mavor's *Reading Boyishly*? The very title begs the question of what sort of reading this might be. Most of us know the feeling of curling up with a good book, particularly a novel, to savour the solitary and absorbing pleasures of character, narrative, style. Almost without realising it, I found myself imitating this procedure, accidentally playing out the book's topos - *Reading Boyishly* is one of the few academic books I have read *in bed*. Annoyingly it's too heavy to hold open in one hand while lying down - its weight impinges on it being fully subsumed into the category of comfortable read. Nevertheless, Mavor's book calls up the illicit night-light thrill of reading after bed-time when I was meant to be asleep ... Perhaps I'm getting too intimate, too nostalgic, too soon. Yet this is not an inappropriate way into what Mavor is attempting to do in this thoughtful study. My pleasurable confusion over how and *where* to read the book chimes in with Mavor's explicit category confusion of novel and philosophical work, set out in her introduction, and sustained in a seriously playful way throughout the more than 500 pages of its length. Following Barthes - himself a student of Proust - Mavor opts for a 'novelesque' confection of the literary and the theoretical. The text weaves adeptly between literary analysis, historical biography, art history, autobiographical anecdote, child psychology, fictive reconstruction and copious imagery. Her extraordinarily peripatetic, yet deeply involved, method of reading her sources becomes the model for a writing that asks questions about what is proper to cultural theory and its modes of interpretation.

Much as Gilberte Swann's elusive hand gesture is a 'mysterious', empty sign, not fully revealed until Marcel Proust's final volume of *In Search of Lost Time* (after having been shown to the reader in the first) (p338), I wasn't fully sure what was being revealed to me during my reading of Mavor's rather thick book. The elusiveness of what the book is *about* - which re-reading has helped tease out - is linked not only to the stylistic conceit of the book, but its conceptual framing of the overt subject matter too. Like Proust I'm apprenticing to something not yet *known* (p318): to echo Mavor's words as she strives to be 'betwixt and between' (one of her main thematics), 'every time I think I've got it, it slips out of my hand, every time I think I see it, it vanishes' (p175). This turns the book's 'aboutness' into a central and intriguing concern rather than a nagging problem as it both teaches us something and helps us to unlearn our ingrained habits of reading and writing.

Ostensibly, *Reading Boyishly* is about the boyish, about Mavor's boyish men - Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Marcel Proust, and D.W. Winnicott, and one actual boy: the young photographer

Jacques Henri Lartigue. They are 'her boys' (as she calls them, after Barrie's claim on the Llewellyn-Davies children, which Mavor discusses at length) who variously implicate childhood with nostalgia and the maternal tie. The members of this cast of characters are 'neither man nor boy', but '[a]ncient boys, aged children, adolescent gentlemen' (p5). The historical setting ranges from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, with a convergence on the Edwardian era (the work of Proust, Lartigue and Barrie that Mavor considers is roughly contemporaneous), but the periodisation isn't clear-cut - Barthes and Winnicott move us outside this time-frame, as does Lartigue (who lived to a ripe old age), yet all are cleverly synchronised with it. This is in keeping with the book's sense of childhood as something continually made and re-made across differing historical, analytical and artistic fields (and in our everyday conceptions), subject to a constant 'stacking, knocking and splitting' (p125). Boydom isn't a definitive category. The book's boyish turns - from clinging to the proverbial apron strings to fantasies of escape and independence through flight - alert us to the varieties of boyishness. As a figure, the boyish is *like* a boy, and behaves in the way that actual boys might. Significantly, however, the boyish might pertain to the demeanour and actions of someone not a boy, but imitating one, like Mavor herself. She has a deep critical sympathy with the work of the men she writes about, who track their own boyish experiences, longings, and anxieties: Barthes in his quasi-autobiographical late writings; Proust in the endlessly nostalgic circularity of *The Search*; Lartigue's boyhood photographs of a relentlessly sunny home and family life; Barrie's real-life and fictional relationship with the Llewellyn-Davies boys; Winnicott's analysis of the String-Boy's over-attachment to the mother.

In each, the work of boyishness is revealed to be an inescapably nostalgic endeavour, albeit a curiously recursive one. Mavor 'seek[s] to rescue nostalgia' (p34) from easy critical dismissal of it as backward-looking and inauthentic state and her own nostalgic readings invite us to embrace the fetishistic structure of our relationship to history and (our) childhood, one that cuts betwixt and between joyous return and total irretrievability. Nostalgia is not a dirty word in this enterprise and Mavor is unafraid to risk sentimentalism with her boys, happily admitting that '[Her] Book has a Disease' (chapter one) but a disease that acknowledges its symptoms rather than disavowing them. Nostalgia is part of the constant reiterative labour - like that of a bird building a nest - needed to forge childhood, to meld it into an image, a memory. It takes work to stave off forgetting and loss and this is the 'travail' of Mavor's book, modelled after that of her 'boys' (as well as a few others on the way, including Joseph Cornell and Chantal Akerman).

As well as appreciating the pretty-but-painful patina of boyish nostalgia, Mavor also values the femininity of boyishness, particularly the effeminising - and decidedly queer - relationship with the mother. Barthes, Mavor's intellectual mentor, provides the template for a prolonged umbilical link to the mother, lovingly tracked through Proust, Lartigue and Barrie, with the aid of Winnicott's theory (the latter is not really considered in terms of his own childhood and connection to the mother but rather emblematises a normative analytical take on boyhood development). The boy's love affair with the mother is a 'specific and beautiful production' (p30) - which Mavor knows must be torn apart and examined, but not at the expense of a reparative stance, so that, after Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'boys can love their mother, can repeat the maternal attitude, without fear of retribution' (p56) from an effeminophobic culture. This

offers a queer alternative to the paternalist model of boyhood, to which end, mothers are strategically glorified in the book. Un-shaming the boyishly nostalgic connection to maternity not only queries heteronormative constructions of masculinity but it also helps yield a different paradigm for the labour of cultural theory - to own-up to the affective ties between the scholar and her objects, in the boyish fashion that keeps Proust waiting for his Mamma's bed-time kiss; that takes Barthes's mother to his inaugural lecture; that turns childish Barrie into a surrogate mother to his adoptive 'lost boys'.

This is the critical work of the book, but it is performed through myriad detailed formations of the boyish, forged at the intersection of Mavor's key texts and images and the numerous recurring tropes and figures that she lavishly deploys. Given the immense amount of material that *Reading Boyishly* incorporates, the answer to the question of what the book is about is more hard-won than my bed-time read might suggest, and more complex than my exposition of some of its 'overt' content. How the book is stylistically and formally *wrought* is integral to what it achieves, and how it engages the reader in its project.

More than most, Mavor relishes the risks of taking seriously the injunctions of the performative, which are everywhere in cultural theory but seldom taken into the heart of its methods and processes. In this respect she carries on with what she did in her previous book, *Becoming*,<sup>1</sup> and joins forces with other cultural theorists (for example Lauren Berlant, Gavin Butt, Ann Cvetkovitch, Jennifer Doyle, Erica Rand) in re-evaluating sentiment, popular affect, the 'non-serious'. Mavor's boyish closeness to the texts she reads means that we not only get a nostalgia 'acceptably' freighted with bleakness and death, but also, as her writing shifts with the tone of her objects, we get a lightweight cutesiness too. The chapter on Barrie and *Peter Pan* and sections on Lartigue in particular, are the most cutely wistful - even the Cottingley fairies get a look-in! - as she gives them the 'mushy-stuff pass' (which Adam Gopnik confers upon Saint-Exupéry, p190) and refuses to balk at the more 'twee' elements of her study. As her culinary comparison of the book to a 'gravid soufflé' (p22) suggests, she wants to be serious and heavy without sacrificing frivolity and lightness. If her writerly labour also performs a kind of nest-building, in response to another major trope of *Reading Boyishly* (domesticity, figured through flight and birdliness), she does so by constructing it out of diverse materials, often bringing the same things back again and again. Flitting from one image to another, she mimics the collectomaniac Joseph Cornell (really her fifth boy, rather than Winnicott, but for the fact he doesn't fit the European focus). Like a bird, and like Cornell, Mavor alights on things that catch her eye, that help to bind her nest, to make a more complex weave. Like her hero Proust, and his Narrator, who must postpone interpretive understanding, the reader, *reading boyishly*, is joyously carried across a metonymic trajectory of objects (nests, string, kites, balloons, boxes, seashells, rumpled sheets), images (too many to mention) and affects (melancholy, bliss, boredom, maternity). (In)appropriate connections promiscuously abound as one thing is likened to another (some of these convince more than others, for example the kite-string of the Brownie camera-boy in an early advertisement, tied to Lartigue as Winnicottian 'string-boy' (pp231-2); the rather odd, passing invocation of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (p244) in the midst of a discussion of *Peter Pan*). This poetically elaborate accumulation of details shifts the ground of conventional scholarly thinking and presentation and unsettles established hermeneutics.

Even the proprieties of art-historical referencing are tested, as when Christo's *Running Fence* puts in an appearance next to the unfurled bed-linen that Lartigue's brother Zissou would use to stretch over the wing-struts of his glider (pp272-274).

The reader has to involve him/herself in the work of montage, forging critical affinities and questions out of the countless juxtapositions (Proust, after all, wants *his* readers to be 'readers of their own selves', p317). Mavor doesn't do this for us, at least not in the routine sense. There is no adversarial pitching of 'positions' vying with one another as we might expect from cultural theory, but rather, a subtle – if determined and sustained – advocacy of an alternative approach. This is occasionally frustrating, but only because that's not what we're used to: why, for instance, doesn't she take Barthes's orientalism to task more stridently? (she allows him the excuse of a self-conscious and figurative exoticism, doesn't go for the critically 'easy' option of condemnation, pp51-52). Elsewhere, Wilde acts as a critical palliative for Proust and Lartigue's lack of social conscience: but blink and you'll miss it (pp306-310). Mavor is a mother who won't chastise and dismiss; instead she loves the whole child, whether he's testingly naughty, or cringingly adorable. By the end of the book, I've become a boy, one of 'her boys'. I want Carol Mavor to be my mother.

## NOTES

1. Carol Mavor, *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden*, Duke UP, Durham and London 1999