

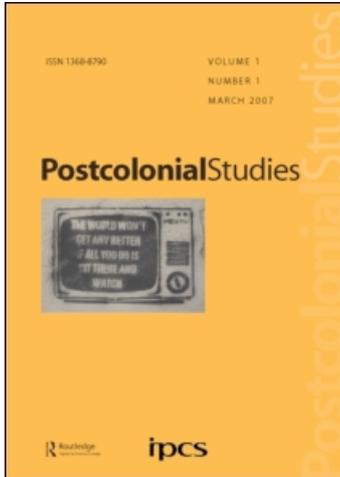
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Self and similitude: translating difference (modern colonialism and renaissance conquests)

VANITA SETH

Self and other: figures of modernity

It has become an increasingly common feature in contemporary writings on European colonialism to articulate the relation between the coloniser and the colonised in terms of self/other; west/non-west. While the narrative I allude to will no doubt be familiar to the readers of this, it is a narrative, nevertheless, that requires unpacking.

Simply put: when we speak of the self in opposition to the non-European other are we appealing to a metaphysical rendering of the west as an entity that, following Nietzsche, can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, or are we to understand the conceptual grid of self/other as a historically bounded reference to modernity—one that locates the west-as-self within the context of the post-Enlightenment?

If it is the former, if it is a metaphysical category that we are in fact appealing to, then implicit in our understanding is a recognition that the west/non-west binary has always, already inhabited the conceptual geography of self/other—at least as far back as classical antiquity. In other words, the west has always, already been a self-referential subject.

Alternatively, if we seek to subject the self/other narrative to historical specificity, if we wish to situate it within the world of the modern, our premise, by necessity, has to presuppose that the oppositional apparatus of the west/non-west binary was indebted to a particular set of historical conditions: capitalist economic relations and Enlightenment universalism; the emergence of nation states and a distinctively modern form of governmentality; the ascendancy of science and reason and the catch cry of secularism.

It becomes apparent therefore, that when we speak of the self/other we need to be alert to the fact that, from this point of reference, we can traverse two radically distinct theoretical terrains—one that is organised around the transhistorical sign of the west, and the other that subjects the west to historical specificity. As I will go on to argue, the distinction drawn is an important one and yet, in some of the contemporary literature engaging with the production of the western self and non-western other, there often appears an ambiguity, a ‘collapsing together’ wherein metaphysics and history intermingle in a confused interchangeability.

Illustrative of my point is Edward Said’s seminal text *Orientalism*.¹

Said's 1978 work provides a now canonical reading of European colonialism through the conceptual grid of Self/Other; the Occident/Orient. In so doing, he renders a more complex appreciation of power wherein power is not simply identified with bullets, governance and wealth extraction, but with the very production of knowledge.

The fact that Said engages with nineteenth century European literature and the twentieth century North American academy is suggestive of the fact that he situates the oppositional binary of Occident/Orient within the template of modernity. And yet, while Said encloses his subject matter within a historical frame, this temporal imposition co-exists with a temporal transcendence, a constant oscillation between the category of the west and the category of the modern. What is implicit throughout Said's thesis becomes explicit when he argues that:

In classical Greece and Rome geographers, historians, public figures like Caesar, orators and poets added to the fund of taxonomic lore separating races, regions, nations and minds from each other; much of that was self-serving and existed to prove that the Romans and Greeks were superior to other kinds of people.²

What we witness in Said's text, dramatised in the above quote, is the collapsing together of Julius Caesar's Rome with the reign of Queen Victoria. And yet, what remains a largely ambiguous positioning of the classical period in Said's work, finds full expression in Francis Hartog's thesis that Herodotus's *Histories* represents one of the earliest expressions of Greek efforts to understand its neighbours through radical opposition. *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*,³ offers, as the title suggests, an in-depth textual reading of the *Histories* from an interpretative position that construes Herodotus's references to the Persians, Scythians, Libyans and other non-Greeks as emblematic examples of the representational production of self/other in classical antiquity.

While Hartog's *Mirror of Herodotus* provides both an insightful and sophisticated reading of the *Histories*, the interpretation of the *Histories* as a text of otherness has a currency that goes beyond the jacket of Hartog's book. If Said oscillated from ancient Rome to nineteenth century Europe, more contemporary works have found no hesitation in mapping Herodotus's *Histories* over Renaissance representations of the New World. Thus, in a work concerned with first contact between Spanish voyagers and indigenous Americans, Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvellous Possessions* retraces the roots of European constructions of the other back to Herodotus whose ethnology he argues, constitutes 'the first great Western representation of Otherness'.⁴ In a similar vein, Michel de Certeau parallels the *Histories* with Montaigne's famous essay *On Cannibals* suggesting that both function as texts which offer 'a representation of the other'.⁵

In works as different as that of Said's, Hartog's, Greenblatt's and de Certeau's, works that engage with radically distinct intellectual projects, there nevertheless exists a shared theoretical premise: that it is possible to speak of the West as an entity that extends itself back to antiquity, an entity that is malleable to all historical conditions. Thus, implicit in this narrative is the contention that

one can traverse over centuries—from the dizzy peaks of Greek and Roman civilisation to the glory of European imperialism and encounter, throughout this breathless history, a self-defining identity of the west as conceived through the oppositional representation of the non-western other. It is precisely this proposition that this present paper seeks to question.

Historicising power

In light of the literature I have briefly reviewed, it becomes evident that in appealing to the classics for testimony of representations of otherness, we are investing the self/other distinction with no other significance than that of cataloguing—the registering of hierarchical difference. If this is the case however, it is a practice that can hardly be preserved as the exclusive intellectual property of the West. After all, numerous civilisations throughout history have engaged in the intellectual and practical exercise of distinguishing themselves from their neighbours, and have often predicated this distinction on a self-proclaimed superiority. Such an accusation could be directed at the Aztecs and Chinese no less than the Greeks and the Romans. However, if our understanding of self and otherness is reduced to merely a recognition of this fact, its value is of a very limited scope. In attempting to explain everything, it fails to tell us any thing. Indeed, in rendering self/other as ubiquitous we are denied precisely that which makes such organising categories significant—we are denied the possibility to distinguish over time and space; to acknowledge history and recognise power.

What is striking when reading a text such as Herodotus's *Histories* is the fact that even if we allow for an interpretation that construes the *Histories* as ethnocentric (a fact itself questionable given Herodotus's effusive praise of the Libyans), it is difficult to argue that power mediated the relations between the Greeks and the barbarians. Not only was the wealth and might of the Persians difficult to deny, but even the Scythians, for all their 'barbarity' were regarded by Herodotus as simply indestructible—given their nomadic existence '[h]ow ... can they fail to be invincible and inaccessible for others?'⁶

The fact is, that in failing to recognise that the self/other binary was a grammatical feature of *colonial* representations, we risk losing sight of the fact that the ubiquitous power of modern colonialism lay not only in the unparalleled success of Europe's domination over much of the globe, but in the corresponding appropriation of the discourses of modernity by the colonised peoples—a fact immediately apparent in the narratives of nationalism, modernisation, science and the universalisation of the language of rights and the individual. What we risk ignoring also, is precisely that which makes the self/other binary an integral feature of modern colonial relations—that in the context of nineteenth century European colonialism the self not only constituted, defined and represented the other for its own consumption (a charge one might level at Herodotus), but translated that knowledge as 'truth' both in the realm of discursive practices, and in the production of material realities.

Modernity's alibi

Yet, my objection to the temporal transmigration of the self/other binary to classical times is not simply limited to its consequent rendering of power and history as obsolete. More significantly, once we consume all inter-societal contact from antiquity to the present as a dialogue between self and other, then we risk rendering ancient knowledge into a textual alibi in the very defence of modernity itself. It is not my intention to deny the fact that the Greeks sought to differentiate themselves from their neighbours nor that their observations were mediated through categories which, at times, employed the language of negation to represent the antithetical non-Greeks—be s/he a Scythian nomad, an Amazon or one of the panoply of monstrosities believed to populate India. Clearly, it is possible to interpret the *Histories* as a testimony to Greek constructions of self and otherness—numerous scholars, after all, have done so. And yet, I would argue that while such a reading is indeed possible, the very fact of that possibility, the very fact that the *Histories* can be rendered into a text of otherness speaks less to Herodotus Greece than to modernity more generally, and nineteenth century colonialism more specifically. In other words, it is from the vantage point of colonial history, a history that has, in part, been mediated through the grid of self/other, that we transpose our (modern) reading onto ancient texts.

Thus, while it is undoubtedly true that *Histories* is one in a pantheon of classical texts that has helped to shape the contours of a European self and its Oriental, African Asian and American other, it has become so through a process of *translation* wherein an ancient text has been rendered malleable to modern categories, and then appealed to as confirmation of the antiquity of those self-same categories. Integral to the logic of this circular argument is the premise that from Herodotus's time to our own the categories employed to conceptualise the Other have remained unchanged; that the conceptual grids through which we order our world resonate in the texts of pre-Christian times, that the division between an East and West has always already existed, and that ancient texts are the oracles of our modern condition.

In the final analysis, to privilege the Self/Other binary in a reading of ancient texts, is to assume that knowledge was ordered, structured and imported through this very grid. It represents a failure to recognise even the possibility that such reading may require the visual aid of retrospective lenses. In ignoring this possibility we risk rehearsing Said's intellectual position whereby in extending his critique back to antiquity in order to historicise and debunk the truth claims of modern European colonialism, he is, in fact, forced to rearticulate its premises, ignore its implications and confirm its self-made historical trajectory. Thus, in an act of imaginative migration, ancient Greece and modern Europe can speak to each other as familial brethren sharing a language encoded with the same timeless categories of West and East, Self and Other.

Signatures of similitude

It is not simply for the sake of conceptual clarity that I have sought to emphasise the distinction between a metaphysical representation of the west and its

historical production. Nor is it the intention of this paper to simply pay secular homage to historicism; a desire to reassert history, power and the specificity of modern colonial relations back into our reading of self and other. Rather, these two inter-related arguments have been necessary in order to lay claim to a larger theoretical premise: that while *we* may order and translate our world through oppositional categories, this was not always the case.

In so saying, I am not referring to the oft-quoted example of Buddhism or other eastern philosophies that have made Japan, for example, such a popular site of postmodernist scholarship. Rather, I am referring to pre-modern Europe, or more precisely, to the Europe of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Europe of the Renaissance.

In so doing I have to acknowledge my debt to Foucault's all too brief chapter on Renaissance epistemology as elaborated in his work *The Order of Things*.⁷ In his discussion on Renaissance knowledge formation, Foucault's thesis questions the intellectual relevance of translating the self/other grid onto pre-modern times by highlighting the historically dubious nature of such an exercise. Foucault's work points to the fact that the defining feature of Renaissance knowledge relied not on oppositional categories but the logic of similitude to translate the world into an ordered, comprehensible and knowable entity.

Foucault points to four conceptual grids that rendered the world familiar. *Conventientia* 'which pertains less to things themselves than to the world in which they exist', has the effect of rendering the world perfectly symmetrical. The number of fish in the sea is equal to beasts on the land and beings in the sky and thus everything is made to correspond with the other. *Aemulatio* (emulation) speaks to those things that are similar enough that they duplicate one another, are mirrored in each other yet the 'two reflected figures [are not in] a merely inert state of opposition' but rather, one is weaker and thus malleable to the influence of the stronger. Then there is *Analogy*, which is not dependent and thus limited to the visible similarities between properties, but rather identifies commonality through 'subtle resemblances of relations'. Finally *Sympathy* risks rendering objects the same 'it will not rest content to be merely one of the forms of likeness' but rather threatens the individuality of objects by collapsing them into a homogenous whole 'and thus rendering ... them foreign to what they were before'. An extension and counterpart to Sympathy therefore, is *Antipathy*. Whereas Sympathy transforms objects in the direction of sameness, antipathy 'maintains the isolation of things and prevents their assimilation'. It jealously guards against similitude enclosing 'every species within its impenetrable difference and its propensity to continue being what it is'.⁸

Similitude offered a conceptual schema premised on the familiar, one which wove the world into a complex tapestry where every thread intertwined and complemented the whole. Under the rubric of similitude and through the organising filters of convenience, emulation, analogy and sympathy, that which was living and inanimate, all that resided on land and hid in the oceans, that which inhabited the sky and shone from the heavens—in short, the earth and the cosmos, were rendered knowable, intelligible, and interpretable.

While I am indebted to Foucault's thesis on the episteme of Renaissance Europe, his work nevertheless, presupposes a Europe that is poised in self sufficient detachment from the worlds that reside outside its borders. Indeed, the absence of any reference to a non-European subject goes some way in explaining the differences that distinguish the intellectual project of postmodernism from its later arrival, postcolonialism. After all, one of the most important contributions of postcolonial scholarship lies in its repeated emphasis on the centrality of the non-European world to the very making of Europe itself.

Informed as I am by this scholarship and given the fact that it is precisely during the Renaissance that Europe embarked on overseas conquest, it is perhaps an obvious question to ask how the taxonomy of similitude translated the strange new world of America into a commensurable and knowable entity. Answering this question relies upon recognising two of the mediums through which the frighteningly strange became reassuringly familiar. It relies upon recognising the interplay between the world of the text and a textualised world.

To see is to read

To appreciate the distinctive nature of the Renaissance episteme necessitates acknowledging the primacy and reverence attributed to canonical texts. As Anthony Grafton recently reminded us, the writings of ancient scholars and medieval saints constituted the boundaries of knowledge and the repertoire of facts. Hence, to be a man of letters required a familiarity with Ptolemy's geography, Euclid's geometry, Aristotle's politics, ethics, logic and science, Herodotus' *Histories*, Peter Lombard's theology and Galen's treatise on anatomy.⁹ Co-existing with the canons an equal authority was vested in the writings of early travellers—Columbus after all, embarked on his voyage armed with Mandeville and Marco Polo.¹⁰

The written word, however, was not simply confined to bounded texts. The world itself bore a textual likeness where signatures abounded on the surface of things, and thus through the conventions of convenience, emulation, analogy and sympathy the animate and inanimate could be deciphered, were rendered translatable. To quote Foucault:

the face of the world is covered with blazons, with characters, with ciphers and obscure words ... And the space inhabited by immediate resemblance become like a vast open book; it bristles with written signs, every page is seen to be filled with strange figures that intertwine and in some places repeat themselves.¹¹

Within the taxonomy of similitude, this interplay between the written text and a textualised world provides an insight into the early representations of the Americas and its inhabitants in the European imagination. For it is signatures that make translation possible: the recognition of signs in the inhabited world allows that which is observed to enfold, replicate, conform to and confirm the authority of canonical knowledge. The written text, in turn, ensures that the act of seeing, of touching, hearing and smelling are not undisciplined senses

threatening unpredictable responses, but rather both the experience and the description they inspire are already circumscribed by the authority of the canons. In a potentially frightening and chaotic array of signs, discrimination is possible, reading is selective and the conclusions predetermined precisely because the written text mingles with a world of signs, each pre-empting, drawing upon, deferring to and reconfirming the other.

The representational collusion between the text and the material world can best be elucidated through reference to those very writings that spoke to the early years of European contact with the new world.

For example, many authors have commented on the extent to which Columbus, in hopeful expectation of sighting land, appealed to signs for confirmation. The appearance of a large cloud mass from the north, the spotting of dolphins, the drizzling of rain without wind, the recording of 'much more vegetation' were all signs prophesying land—prophesises heralded as early as a month before the coast of the Caribbean was sighted.¹²

Yet while Sale expresses surprise and disdain at Columbus' ignorance,¹³ the value of signs for the Admiral can be better appreciated if the natural world is recognised as a text offering confirmation of a pre-established set of beliefs themselves encoded with the authority of canonical literature and travel tales. As Todorov argues, Columbus 'knows in advance what he will find; the concrete experience is there to illustrate a truth already possessed, not to be interrogated according to pre-established rules in order to seek the truth'.¹⁴

And the truth was that months into his first voyage, Columbus was adamant that the land of the Great Khan was surely within reach. 'It was after all', Greenblatt notes, 'the known world that Columbus had set out to discover by an unknown route: that was the point of reading Marco Polo and Mandeville.'¹⁵

Hence, it should be of little surprise that when encountering the natives of Trinidad, Columbus' immediate observation was the nature of their headgear: 'They had their heads wrapped in scarves of cotton ... which I believe were *almaizares*'.¹⁶ That is, the veils worn by the Moors in Spain. Was this not sufficient proof that Columbus had arrived on the fringes of Asia? As with the natural world, where Columbus appealed to signs, so too with the human world where a myriad of signatures provided the medium through which to interpret the physical and social body of the Indians.

Perhaps one of the most significant observations Columbus records in his first voyage concerned the human corporeality of the Indians he encounters. 'In these islands', Columbus writes, 'I have so far found no human monstrosities, but on the contrary all the people are of a fine appearance.'¹⁷ The significance of these observations lies in its most categorical recognition of likeness. The Indians are analogous to us, that is, they mirror the Spanish conquerors in the very humanness of their constitution. Yet the humanness of the indigenous people he encounters, does not deter Columbus from the certainty that monsters do inhabit the surrounding islands—a fact that he was able to ascertain through communication with the Indians whose gestures and signs confirmed (with remarkable accuracy!) the existence of those very same creatures cited by the Ancients, the Saints and the travellers. Thus Columbus reports of an island inhabited only by warring women, one in which reside men who feast on human flesh, another

where people have no hair and yet another by the name of Avon which is reported to be populated with human beings equipped with tails—and all of this in a single letter!¹⁸

Columbus' narrative, therefore, envelops this foreign land and its strange inhabitants into a reassuring embrace. The discriminate observance of a multiplicity of signs, themselves ageless and universal, enfolded the novelty of discovery into a familiar repertoire of resemblances. But from these eclectic and diverse examples let us move to a more specific one—that of the cannibal motif.

It is impossible when studying European representations of the New World to ignore the pervasive presence of the Cannibal. Devoted to precisely this feature of Renaissance literature, Peter Hulme's book *Colonial Encounters*¹⁹ attempts to chart the emergence and powerful resilience of the cannibal motif in the context of the Americas, from when it first appeared in Columbus's *Journal* to its imaginative deployment in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

While the Greek word denoting the practice of eating human flesh—a practice Herodotus ascribed to the Black Sea tribes—was anthropophagy, the present day term of cannibalism had its etymological roots in the pronoun Carib: the Indian inhabitants of the Antilles who were widely recorded to eat the flesh not only of their enemies but of their children.²⁰

Columbus, on his first voyage, identified the practice of anthropophagy with a monstrous race inhabiting the as-yet unvisited islands purported to be inhabited by the Caribs. While the Caribs, when finally encountered, proved to be human in form, Columbus was nevertheless confirmed in his view that some Indian tribes practiced anthropophagy by the report of Dr Chanca, the king's surgeon who accompanied Columbus' second voyage. Dr Chanca recorded the presence of human bones sheltered in the houses of the Indians (reputedly Caribs) on one of the islands, deducing from this discovery the ethnological conclusions that:

'The customs of these Carib people are beastly ... The Caribs eat the male children [of their female captives] and only bring up the children of their own women; and as for the men they are able to capture they bring those who are alive home to be slaughtered and eat those who are dead on the spot ... They castrate the boys they capture and use them as servants until they are men. Then when they seek to make a feast they kill and eat them. For they say the flesh of boys and women is not good to eat.'²¹

Thus from the first moment of contact, cannibalism became part of the representational diet fed to domestic audiences by European travellers. Cannibalism was the necessary ingredient of tabloid travel tales, but was also placed under philosophical scrutiny by Vitoria, appealed to as the penultimate evidence of Indian savagery by Sepulveda, figured in the engravings produced by de Bry and was the subject of Montaigne's relativism.

The ubiquitous presence of the cannibal/Carib motif could be offered as testimony to the explanatory value of appealing to the Self/Other narrative in the reading of sixteenth century representations of the Indian. In the charge of cannibalism the very fusing of the Carib subject with the practice of cannibalism itself could be interpreted as one of the most potent constructions of radical

Otherness. Did not Columbus identify the practice of anthropophagy with monstrous races?

And yet, I would argue that the representation of savage peoples feasting on the culinary delights of the human flesh is indelibly encoded within the grammar of similitude. Cannibalism maps the European imagination onto the social geography of the New World enveloping the Indian into a repertoire of images that long preceded their discovery—images that roamed over the surfaces of travel writings, scholarly dissertations, poetic verse, artistic canvases and religious treatises traversing a history from ancient times to the sixteenth century; from the sixteenth century to the present day.

Among the myriad of signs offering disparate interpretations of the New World, it was the savage-cannibal that came to be privileged. As Hulme argues, Columbus shifts from an oriental trope to a savage one; from a discourse on the Great Khan as immortalised in Marco Polo to the competing signifier of the savage as identified in Herodotus. In Columbus' *Journal*:

each discourse can be identified by the presence of key words: in one case 'gold', 'Cathay', 'Grand Khan', 'intelligent soldiers', 'large buildings', 'merchant ships'; in the other 'gold', 'savagery', 'monstrosity', 'anthropophagy'. Even more boldly, each discourse can be traced to a single textual origin, Marco Polo and Herodotus respectively.²²

The figure of the cannibal became both the necessary pre-requisite and obvious consequence of Columbus' decision to privilege the motif of the savage over the Orient. The fact was that the practice of cannibalism did not require observation in order to testify to its presence. Columbus, when he first reported the presence of anthropophagy, had not even visited the islands of the 'Caribs'. Dr Chanca never thought to consider alternative explanations for the presence of Indian bones on the island of Guadalupe: their very existence was testimony to cannibalism.²³ Similarly, Vespucci's letter to the Sordenis reporting the events of his third voyage to the New World, recounted in graphic detail the capture of three 'Christians' from among the ships crew who the natives then promptly murdered, roasted and feasted upon—events that unfolded, we are told, in front of the very eyes of the author.²⁴ It is largely accepted today, however, that Vespucci's 1501 voyage was more of a flight of the imagination than a journey across seas. Indeed, it is of interest to note that in a subsequent letter to the Medici family, Vespucci purports to be recording the self-same voyage. Among the numerous disparities between the two accounts, the most striking is the fact that while the shadowy figure of the Indian cannibal remains, the gruesome encounter reported by Vespucci in his first letter is nowhere to be found. Judging from the contents of the Medici letter it is possible that the author thought the Medicis were an audience more susceptible to the Golden Age motif than that of the Indian-as-cannibal.²⁵

Whatever the Medici's narrative preferences may have been, the fact is that once the motif of the cannibal had gained wide currency in Renaissance representations of the New World, any contrary evidence, while noted with surprise, never constituted a challenge or forced a reassessment of Indian cultural practices. Hence, the fact that the 'captain' had lost his way when exploring the

island of Guadelupe came as a surprise to the ships crew who had concluded that the poor man had become a victim of the Indian appetite. His sudden reappearance, a week later, was nothing short of a welcome but unexpected outcome.²⁶ That he had not been sacrificed and/or eaten did not raise doubts as to the truth of Indian cannibalism, it was simply the blessings of good fortune.

From similitude to historicism

It is not possible in the present work to detail the epistemological shifts that informed the changing representation of the indigenous Americans in the intervening years between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century.²⁷ For this reason, I wish to limit the remainder of this article to not only juxtaposing Renaissance and nineteenth century representations of the New World, but also gesturing to one significant factor that informed the radically different epistemology's that informed these representations.

I have argued, following Foucault, that one of the defining features of Renaissance epistemology was the fact that through the organising grid of similitude, the mapping of difference was embedded within a cartography of resemblances. Thus, what distinguishes Renaissance epistemology from the nineteenth century and our own, is the fact that the very effort of ordering the world and rendering it commensurable was made possible through the interpretive filter of assimilation. Hence why the Spanish jurist, Francisco de Vitoria, could argue that the Indians were like Spanish peasants²⁸ and why the simplicity of Montaigne's sailor/servant/informer paralleled and reflected the innocence and sincerity of the New World natives.²⁹

When Vitoria compared the Indians to Spanish peasants and when Montaigne saw in the simplicity of his servant the innocence of the indigenous Americans they were arguing, quite simply, that the 'savages' 'out there' were like the 'savages' we have here at home. Under the canopy of similitude, Vitoria and Montaigne were enfolding the world of the native Americans into the world of the familiar.

Yet when Darwin wrote, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, of the 'savages' 'out there', commensurability no longer relied upon self-referencing—the appeal to analogy which was itself predicated on the familiar. The 'savage' out there was rendered commensurable precisely because historicism enveloped the savage into the folds of human history while simultaneously asserting historical distance and thus, cultural disparity. And if Europe once occupied that same historical moment Darwin identified with the Fujians, the emphasis was on the 'once'—an historical stage that had long since been deserted.

The work of Johannes Fabian³⁰ and, more recently, that of Dipesh Chakrabarty³¹ have sought to reveal the debt owed to historicism (and the discipline of history more generally) in the construction of colonial otherness. To quote Chakrabarty, 'Historicism ... posited historical time as the measure of ... cultural distance'—a distance in time that had encoded within it gradational differences in culture.³²

Precisely because the organising principle of Renaissance knowledge was predicated on assimilation, the categories that constituted that knowledge were

of a very different order to that of the eighteenth and, more particularly, the nineteenth century. It was not that cannibalism, paganism or savagery disappeared from the iconography of nineteenth century thought, but that these categories were no longer articulated through the language of similitude, through the interpretation of signs and the reverence for ancient texts. Rather, they figured as tropes within larger disciplinary narratives, such as anthropology and evolutionary science which were themselves made intelligible through appeals to history.

Such a simple translation as that offered by Montaigne and Vitoria, one that slipped comfortably between the American Indians and the lower classes of Europe, was feasible because historical time, that which rendered cultures and people measurable and distinctive, was not a conceptual framework available to Renaissance Europe. Thus, we find innumerable illustrations in Grafton's *New World, Ancient Texts* of history being demarcated into seven stages to correspond with a Christian teleology;³³ of books in which engravings of biblical figures came complete with fifteenth century German costume and hair-dress,³⁴ and of texts where expansive surveys of customs and manners find their taxonomic medium through geography but not time.³⁵ In a similar vein, Ryan argues that while the sixteenth century preoccupation with weaving the New World inhabitants into a biblical narrative that failed to account for them gave impetus to extensive genealogical maps, such ancestral lineages did not constitute history—indeed, they were fundamentally ahistorical:

For it mattered less which particular ancestor or set of ancestors was proposed than that the problems was understood in genealogical, not developmental terms. The upshot of these fantastic forays into exotic pasts was to make the New World into very old worlds, to reduce their uniqueness to similarity.³⁶

The radically different epistemological schemas that informed sixteenth and nineteenth century thought, ensured radically different prisms through which to conceptualise and order the world. If the sixteenth century sought to render difference commensurable by enfolding the world in on itself, nineteenth century epistemology was governed by the need to reveal its creases, demarcate its boundaries and differentiate its inhabitants. It is in the entangled web of historicism and colonialism, itself born out of modernity, that we must locate such contemporary figures as the self and other.

Conclusion

Mindful of the stylistic directives of academia, I should, by way of conclusion, end where I began, with a cautionary reminder that to transport the civilisation frames of self and other to a reading of ancient texts or Renaissance discoveries is to dehistoricise knowledge and obscure power. However I would rather conclude not by signalling the end of this article, but by gesturing to the possibility of another—yet to be written. For while my argument engages with the academy, and the theoretical implications of confusing a metaphysical west with its historical production, its inspiration, if you like, hints not at theory, but political utopianism.

If, by definition, utopia is that which is unachievable, it is also that which is imaginable. By denaturalising the oppositional ordering of our world, Foucault's work on Renaissance epistemology not only reminds us of the fluidity of our conceptual categories, but forces us to recognise that the metanarrative of self/other is historical and not ethereal, modern and not eternal. It is when we acknowledge this fact that we create the possibility for utopic imaginings, for conceptualising and visualising other ways of engaging with difference—ways that do not require the translational codes of similitude or opposition, ways that can permit alterity and thus allow for incommensurability, can allow for difference while resisting appropriation.

Notes

- ¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin, 1978.
- ² Said, *Orientalism* p. 57.
- ³ Francois Hartog *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*, trans. Janet Lloyd. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988.
- ⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 122.
- ⁵ Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies. Discourse on the Other*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 68
- ⁶ Herodotus, *Histories*, Wordsworth, 1996, p. 321
- ⁷ Michel Foucault *The Order of Things*, New York: Vintage Books, 1973. It is important to note that, from a different perspective, an earlier article authored by Michael T Ryan also considers the value of Foucault's conception of similitude to an understanding of sixteenth century representations of the New World. While an excellent article, I would argue that Ryan's efforts to posit paganism as the single organising trope that rendered the non-European world familiar to discoverers and European audiences alike, risks implying that Renaissance thinkers rendered all the new lands discovered—be it in Asian, Africa or America—as the same. It must be remembered however, that similitude did not constitute sameness. Michael T Ryan, 'Assimilating New Worlds in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23, 1981, pp. 518–538.
- ⁸ Foucault, *Order of Things*, pp. 18–24.
- ⁹ Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts*, Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 16.
- ¹⁰ Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*, p. 88.
- ¹¹ Foucault, *Order of Things*, pp. 26–27.
- ¹² Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*, p. 87.
- ¹³ Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990, p. 59.
- ¹⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1982, p. 17.
- ¹⁵ Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*, p. 88.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*, p. 86.
- ¹⁷ Christopher Columbus, 'The Letter of Columbus (1493)' in *Wild Majesty: Encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the Present Day. An Anthology*, Peter Hulme and Neil L Whitehead (eds), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 14.
- ¹⁸ Columbus, 'Letter of ...' pp. 14–15.
- ¹⁹ Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, London and New York: Methuen, 1986.
- ²⁰ Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, p. 15.
- ²¹ Dr Chanca, 'The Letter Written by Dr Chanca to the City of Seville', in Christopher Columbus, *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, Penguin Classics, p. 136.
- ²² Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, pp. 20–21.
- ²³ Hulme makes the point that 'burning the flesh off the bones of dead bodies was common mortuary practice throughout the native Caribbean'. Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, p. 69.
- ²⁴ Albericus Vespuccius, 'Third Voyage of Amerigo Vespucci—Letter to Soderini' in *Letters of Amerigo Vespucci and Other Documents Illustrative of His Career*, Introduction and Trans. Clements R. Markham, London, 1894, p. 38.
- ²⁵ Vespuccius, 'Letter to Medici', in *Mondus Novus*, Trans. George Tyler Northup, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1916, pp. 1–13.
- ²⁶ Chanca, 'Letter Written by ...' p. 137; also, see Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, p. 69.

- ²⁷ Tracing these epistemological shifts is, in part, the subject of my dissertation which I am currently completing: *Pasts Without History*.
- ²⁸ Francisco de Vitoria, 'On the American Indians', in *Francisco de Vitoria—Political Writings*, Anthony Pagden and Jeremy Lawrence (eds), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Section 23, p. 250.
- ²⁹ Michel de Montaigne, 'On Cannibals' in *Essays*, Penguin Classics, 1958. P. 108.
- ³⁰ Johannes Fabian *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
- ³¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- ³² Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 7.
- ³³ Grafton, *New Worlds*, p. 16.
- ³⁴ Grafton, *New Worlds*, p. 19.
- ³⁵ Grafton, *New Worlds*, p. 100.
- ³⁶ Ryan, 'Assimilating New Worlds ...', p. 533.