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## Impure and worldly geography: The Africanist discourse of the Royal Geographical Society, 1831-73

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper argues for a theoretically informed critique of the formation of modern geographical knowledge which focuses upon the written networks through which knowledge is produced and circulated. Drawing on deconstruction and colonial discourse theory, the paper presents a reading of the Royal Geographical Society's published record of nineteenth-century African exploration. This discourse posits a racially unmarked subject-position as the condition of scientific discussion. The Royal Geographical Society's geographical knowledge is shown to have been formed through the effacement of alternative subject-positions and the appropriation of other ways of knowing. It is suggested that closer attention to the discursive structures of written networks of knowledge might inform a more nuanced understanding of the reproduction of disciplined knowledge.

**key words** Africa colonial discourse deconstruction discipline Royal Geographical Society writing

IMPURE AND WORLDLY GEOGRAPHY <sup>1</sup>

The Africanist discourse of the

Royal Geographical Society

1831-1873

**Post-colonial readings**

'Post-colonial' cultural criticism has emerged from work in a variety of disciplines which has begun to interrogate assumptions that present the West as a self-contained entity and as the origin of a universalising history (e.g. Bernal 1987; Hulme 1989; Said 1978, 1993; Slater 1994; Viswanathan 1991). However, the radical impulse in post-colonial theory towards decentering Eurocentric conceptualisations of history, culture, and society has not yet been significantly registered in the renewed interest shown in excavating the history of geography (Sidaway 1997). The focus of this recent historiographical work remains largely upon the complexities and diversities amongst Western geographical knowledges. Without denying the importance of recovering such diversity, it remains the case that the scope for rehabilitating alternative traditions has been largely limited to counter-discourses which were part of a metropolitan discursive space.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, by pursuing protocols of reading derived from post-structuralist and post-colonial theories, I want to re-write a fragment of the text of geography's history in order to mark the subaltern traces that continue to be subsumed in the eagerness to affirm that Western geographical traditions were more varied than previous critiques allow.

Theories of colonial discourse have been pivotal to the emergence of the wider field of post-colonial cultural theory (Slemon 1994). Colonial discourse analysis is composed of a set of interpretative practices which critically examine the role played by a variety of representational apparatuses in the regulation of colonial and imperial subjectivities.<sup>3</sup> The standard model of colonial discourse as a purely fantastic projection of the imperialist will-to-power of the West has difficulty treating non-Western agency and resistance. Colonised groups have therefore too often presented as the objects rather the sources of knowledge. Colonial discourse has generally been theorised as wholly the product of the colonising power, and consequently "it has figured above all as a coherent imposition, rather than a

practically mediated relation" (Thomas 1994, 3). What is required is a conception that acknowledges the constitutive role played by colonised groups in colonial discourses. This implies a recognition that certain types of communication took place across the coloniser-colonised divide, without losing sight of this communication being structured by highly unequal social relations. Accordingly, recent work has increasingly emphasised the importance of cross-cultural contact and the entanglements of different knowledge-formations in constituting colonial discourses (e.g. Pratt 1992, Suleri 1992).

The challenge for postcolonial cultural criticism is to be able to acknowledge the ethical value of dialogue as the principle guiding the interpretation of representations without, in so doing, erasing from view the uneven relations of domination and resistance characteristic of modern colonialism and imperialism (Parry 1997, 16). The purpose of a postcolonial reading, one which demonstrates the hybrid and syncretic qualities of discourses previously assumed to be the unique expressions of enclosed cultural spaces, is not to simply celebrate an ahistorical pluralist multi-culturalism. It is meant to demonstrate the unequal relations of appropriation and exchange which underwrote the monopolisation of cognitive legitimacy by European geographical science and the simultaneous elision of subjugated knowledges. In the light of this concern, theorisations of colonial representation which rely upon notions of projection and reflection need to be rethought. Harvey (1989, 264) characterises the period of modern imperialism as one in which "the world's spaces were deterritorialized, stripped of their preceding significations, and then reterritorialized according to the convenience of colonial and imperial administration". This understanding is echoed in Young's (1995, 173-4) recent suggestion that both the material operations and symbolic dimensions of colonialism might be best understood in terms of "palimpsestual inscription and reinscription". This notion of colonialism as a 'territorial writing-machine' acknowledges "the extent to which cultures were not simply destroyed but rather layered on top of each other, giving rise to struggles that themselves only increased the imbrication of each with the other and their translation into increasingly uncertain patchwork identities".

While 'post-colonial' theory consists of a highly diverse and somewhat contested array of academic discourses, in this paper the deconstructive emphases of post-colonial theories are underscored.<sup>4</sup> Deconstruction is understood here as a certain work of reading

which relies upon the principle that prior to language as a medium of accurate representation, there is language as the place wherein affirmation of alterity and the commitment to dialogue resides. This is an affirmation and commitment that exceeds any conscious decision but calls forth responsibility and response:

before and beyond all theoretico-constatives, opening, embracing, or including them, there is the affirmation of language, the “I am addressing you, and I commit myself, in this language here; listen how I speak in my language, me, and you can speak to me in your language; we must hear each other, we must get along”. (Derrida 1992, 60-1)

This *ethical* dimension of language as discourse enables us to contemplate a deconstructive reading of the ‘imperial archive’ which can recover from it the memory and future promise of other ways of articulating difference. By opening this discourse up to the irreducible traces of alterity within it, the possibility of an expanded space of call and response is demonstrated as the condition of all discourse. This possibility need not be posited as an ideal, but is demonstrated as the immanent principle of critical evaluation which calls to responsibility even those practices which loudly disavow it.

The aim of a deconstructive reading is, then, to unfold alternative layers of significance from colonial discourses whose meanings are usually considered to be the singular expressions of Western interests and desires. In the case of the R.G.S.’s Africanist discourse of the nineteenth-century, it will be argued that such a reading can help identify the traces of other ways of knowing subsumed beneath its triumphant claims to scientific legitimacy. However, a reading which recognises the centrality of deconstruction to the formation of postcolonial and colonial discourse theory does not presume to ‘recover’ or ‘recuperate’ subordinate voices from historical texts.<sup>5</sup> Rather, following Prakash (1992, 177), it is one which sets out to critically address the effects of the epistemic violence of colonialism and imperialism “by writing histories of irretrievable subject positions, by sketching the traces of figures that come to use only as disfigurements”. Such a work of reading bears witness to the erasure of subject-positions by alighting upon those points in hegemonic discourses when the presence of other ways of knowing are registered sufficiently to enable us to inflect these discourses in new directions.

For any reading to take place, even a reading which is 'out of context', one must already be part of a text's own *discursive* context (Bennington & Derrida 1993, 91). The reading envisaged here involves a doubling or repetition of the texture of writing in order to expose the pattern of assigned subject-positions which constitute the text's minimal conditions of intelligibility.<sup>6</sup> This notion of reading is also indebted to Foucault (cf. 1972, 95-6):

Foucault asks us to remember that what is reported or told is also reported and told and thus entails a positing of the subject. Furthermore, that anyone dealing with a report or a tale (the material of historiography or literary pedagogy) can and must occupy a certain "I"-slot in these dealings. The particularity of this "I"-slot is a sign. It may for instance signify a socio-political, psycho-sexual, disciplinary-institutional or ethno-economical provenance (Spivak 1988, 243)

A deconstructive reading of any discourse therefore involves an effort to re-articulate the relations between 'the saying' and 'the said' of that discourse (cf. Crowley 1992). The reading that follows will reconstruct the particular pattern of prescriptions by which certain subject-positions were marginalised or erased in the construction of nineteenth-century geography. It will do so by endeavouring to expose the competing rhetorical registers which characterised the R.G.S.'s public discourse of African exploration and discovery. The dominant descriptive or 'constative' register asserts that knowledge is the monopoly of only one party, and this in turn is taken to confer rights of possession over territory. Yet the texture of the written discourse shows this theme to be a retrospective re-writing of an encounter in which communication between different knowledge-formations took place, the evidence of which survives despite the efforts to erase it.

### **White Writing**

I want to sketch a description of the "internal regime of power" (Foucault, 1986, 54-55) which characterises the discourse concerning Africa produced by the Royal Geographical Society and disseminated through its regular publications, the *Journal* and *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society*, from 1831 to 1873. The year of Dr. David Livingstone's death, 1873 seems an appropriately symbolic limit around which to organise the reading of the

knowledge produced by the R.G.S. during the period of so-called 'free-trade imperialism'. Representations of Africa are taken as the focus of attention here for three related reasons. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, the R.G.S. established its scientific credibility and prominence on the public stage through its close association with the exploration of the African continent. It was through the sponsorship of African exploration in the 1850s and 1860s that the R.G.S. first began to realise the twin aims of its founders: the encouragement of scientific expeditions and the dissemination of geographical knowledge. Furthermore, 'Africa' held a particular position in the geographical imagination of nineteenth-century European science. Nineteenth-century geography was part of a much wider field of representations which laid down a series of tropes about Africa which have since been revived and recirculated (Jarosz 1992). As Christopher Miller (1985) argues, Africa was consistently represented as the most unknown and unknowable region of the world, as a "nullity" (cf. Mudimbe 1988). In the case of nineteenth-century representations of Africa, knowledge did not bring enlightenment, but seemed only to confirm the cognitive and moral limits of European endeavours:

Even in the presence of empirical knowledge, Africa and things African [were] a privileged locus of lags, breaches, delays, and failures in understanding and knowledge (Miller 1985, 20)

Following from this, the focus upon representations of Africa serves as the means to disrupt and displace the projection-model of colonial discourse derived from Edward Said's (1978) influential account of Orientalist representations. Nineteenth-century Africanist discourse is characterised by the twin failure to write Europe's desire upon Africa or to hear any message that might be uttered by Africans. 'Africa' as an object appearing in colonial discourses cannot therefore be understood as the product of a straightforward projection of a Western will-to-power. These discourses register instead the interruptions and disappointments suffered by teleological imperial designs. Thus, Young (1994) has suggested that attention to the specificities of Africanist discourses provides for an alternative theorisation which emphasises the confrontation between different knowledge systems as the constitutive event in the production of colonial representations.<sup>7</sup>

The complex of assumptions and interests animating the fascination with Africa amongst the nineteenth-century geographical fraternity are succinctly stated in the

congratulations extended in 1850 by the President of the R.G.S. to Dr. David Livingstone for his success in opening up new prospects of geographical research and discovery:

Geographical discovery in Africa has long commanded, and will ever command, a greater degree of interest than in, perhaps, any other portion of the globe; and with reason: for while it was one of the earliest inhabited portions of the world, and some of its people shone before all other nations in the scientific and industrial arts, it is now the least known and least civilised of any. Indeed, the intelligent races of Europe have less knowledge of it in the present day than they had 2000 years ago; and ignorance, with debasing and repulsive barbarism, reign almost supreme from one end of that vast peninsula to the other<sup>8</sup>

Africa's place in the Victorian geographical imagination arose from it being not only "a geographical blank", a "*terra incognita*", but from being 'old' as well.<sup>9</sup> European explorers are seen to be slowly rolling back the frontiers of ignorance, establishing the facts about Africa and laying the basis for the banishment of barbarism at the same time. Enlightenment is a light thrown upon Africa by Europeans, which relieves their own curiosity and at the same time sets about uplifting the benighted figures who appear in the shadows thrown by that light:

The vast untrodden steppes in the interior of Africa may be pregnant with objects of interest in the vegetable or mineral kingdom, which, with the progress of discovery, may open out new sources of wealth to our commercial adventurers, whilst the inhabitants will in the fullness of time be ready to receive the blessings of liberty, which we may impart to them<sup>10</sup>

Geographical science is presented here as the arbiter of a bargain whereby, in return for the privilege of entering into commercial relations beneficial to both sides, the fruits of Christian civilisation will be bestowed upon non-Europeans. At the head of a multifaceted project to expand European hegemony is geographical knowledge itself, and prime responsibility for this project consequently falls upon its practitioners, who are described as being nothing short of "missionaries of science".<sup>11</sup>



From its inception, the *Journal*, and later the *Proceedings*, were the instruments with which the R.G.S. promoted and diffused geographical knowledge. Geography in this period straddled an institutional terrain of scientific, lay, and official government arenas, which gave it direction and from which it in turn drew its influence (Stafford 1989). The diversity of topics, areas, approaches, and opinions which find a home in the R.G.S.'s published record indicates its location within a specifically written network of scientific and popular discourses whose relative stability was maintained until the 1870s and 1880s, and in which issues of natural science, theology, and human progress were all debated (Young 1985). The R.G.S. was one of those institutions that oversaw the "archivalization of local knowledges" in the nineteenth-century. This process involved the collection of myriad bits and pieces of information at the imperial margins and their re-territorialization into a global economy of knowledge (Richards 1993). This centripetal network constructed the non-European world as the repository of raw data, and sequestered for the educated elites of the imperial metropolis the privilege of ordering this data into universal systems of thought. The passage from reported fact to scientific organisation was facilitated by the written networks by which geographical information flowed into Europe. The reports of missionaries and explorers were the only form in which Africa was widely available to be systematically examined as an object of knowledge (Stocking 1987, Thornton 1983).

The R.G.S.'s publications were thus integral to its scientific credentials, which depended upon the knowledge it produced being open to rational public scrutiny. Writing for the public sphere of nineteenth-century scientific knowledge required the assumption of an anonymous subjectivity and an abstract audience. It presumed the decorporealisation of both authors and readers, an indifference to the particulars of class, gender, or race. The forms of publicity required by scientific discourse thus depended upon the mobilisation of various rhetorical strategies of personal abstraction (cf. Warner 1992). Signifiers of embodiment or interest are markers of particularity, and run counter to the required self-abstraction which is the condition of being recognised as a subject of nineteenth-century scientific discourse. It is with respect to this relationship that I want to locate the significance of the racialised idiom that is a routine feature of mid-Victorian geographical discourse.

The observation and classification of the physical features of different peoples was regarded as a basic task of any worthwhile scientific traveller.<sup>12</sup> The effort at marking racial difference in the discourse of the R.G.S. constitutes the author/reader as unmarked, disembodied, and therefore able to abstract from their particularity and enter into the imagined community of “missionaries of science”. The representation of certain embodied subjectivities mired in particularity is the rhetorical condition of this discourse being read as science, since this explicit marking of racially embodied subjects posits the existence of racially unmarked subjects as its necessary corollary. The discursive production of whiteness as an unmarked subject-position provides access to the self-abstraction which is the founding condition of the necessary publicity of the R.G.S.’s geographical science.

Racialisation works by constructing certain subject-positions as the unmarked norm by reference to which representations of difference are constructed. A passing remark by Dr. Charles Tilstone Beke, relaying information about country he had not himself traversed, exemplifies this operation and its tensions. The information of an African slave, Dilbo, is reported in the following manner:

The inhabitants are of various shades of colour: some nearly black; others, to use Dilbo’s expression, nearly as red (we should say white) as ourselves<sup>13</sup>

In the symptomatic act of correcting Dilbo’s information, Beke inadvertently draws attention to the status of race as a “trope of difference” (Gates, 1985). The degree of whiteness or blackness of skin cannot be as obvious as it may at first appear if it might always be mistaken by the uninitiated as redness. Beke reappropriates Dilbo’s information and inscribes it into a culturally specific order of differentiation in which “white” is the usually absent norm against which all else is judged. His passing remarks reveal that the apparently natural visibility of skin as a signifier of difference has to be carefully maintained. Homi Bhabha’s account of the dynamics of the racialised colonial stereotype locates the function of racial discourse in the differential form of subjectification it effects in relation to the coloniser and colonised. Colonial discourse “seeks authorisation for its strategies by the production of knowledges of coloniser and colonised which are stereotypical but antithetically evaluated” (1983, 23). In the process of producing race as real and knowable through specific aesthetic and epistemological practices, racialised populations become identified with other types of devalued and degraded knowledge.

Beke's exemplary gesture of correction reveals that there is the most intimate connection between, on the one hand, the 'antithetical evaluation' of coloniser and colonised which Bhabha identifies as being characteristic of the idiom of stereotypical racialisation, and on the other, the asymmetrical ascription of legitimacy to the geographical knowledge of European and non-European subjects. This in turn bears upon the differential evaluation of who is ascribed the rightful authority to administer geographical space itself.

The network of scientific discourses to which the R.G.S. belonged ordered information collected from multiple sources, yet admitted only a limited range of subjects to the role of administering that knowledge in systematic form. The resulting tension over the question of agency runs throughout the length of the R.G.S.'s published record of African exploration. The R.G.S.'s public discourse undertakes the task of re-presenting to a specific metropolitan public sphere the contingencies of geographical exploration which, in principle, threaten to undermine the rightful authority claimed by Europeans over the world's spaces. The unstable conditions of contact and appropriation which underwrote the global archivalization of information are covered over by the rhetorical forms in which claims to a European monopoly over legitimate knowledge are articulated. I shall now turn to the task of unpicking the warp of this particular discourse.

### **Narrations of Possession**

In the period under examination, the R.G.S.'s publications provided a forum in which a wide diversity of themes and issues were discussed. These include descriptions of racialised cultural difference; accounts of the customs, manners, and the spatial practices of non-European societies; and representations of geographical landscapes. There is now an extensive and burgeoning critical literature analysing these themes in a variety of historical and geographical contexts (e.g. Alatas 1977, Carter 1987, Coetzee 1988, Greenblatt 1991, Gregory 1995, Grove 1995, Hulme 1986, Pratt 1992).<sup>14</sup> Here, I want to discuss just one feature of this particular textual archive. The specific theme I want to reconstruct here concerns the representation of the production of geographical knowledge itself. In the course of writing Africa into existence for a metropolitan audience, European and non-European subjects and their knowledge are differentially evaluated. The actual conditions of cross-

cultural contact upon which the production of nineteenth-century geographical knowledge depended are retrospectively re-written to present European subjects as the singular sources of meaning. This operation amounts to the discursive dispossession of non-European subjects of their authority over knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

The foundation of the new *Geographical Society of London* in 1830 coincided with the successful solution of the first great geographical mystery of the modern European encounter with Africa, when John and Richard Lander navigated the course of the Niger. The pages of the R.G.S.'s journals are liberally sprinkled with contributions of 'speculative geography'<sup>16</sup> from so-called 'critical geographers'<sup>17</sup>, who used the latest information communicated from the field to synthesise, cross-check, and produce further speculations and hypotheses about little known regions. One such commentator, W. M. Leake, considered what light the newly established facts about the Niger threw upon the quality of the geographical knowledge inherited from figures such as Ptolemy, Herodotus and Strabo. Allusions to Ancient geography are not unusual in this body of writing. They reveal a self-representation of modern geographical science as the inheritor and guardian of the geographical knowledge produced by the progenitors of Western civilisation. A dialogue across two millennia, undertaken in order to establish the facts about African geography, is enabled only by privileging certain conceptions of the form and order in which knowledge needs to be presented for it to be considered worthy of judgement by the standards of science:

The value of this discovery, and the great merit of those whose successive exertions have prepared and completed it, is the more striking, when we consider that the hydrograph of an unknown country is the most important step to a correct knowledge of its geography, and that in barbarous Africa nothing short of the ocular inquiries of educated men is sufficient to produce the requisite facts. It is curious to observe how the best collectors of oral information in that country have failed in arriving at the truth as to the origin, course and termination of its rivers<sup>18</sup>

This paradigmatic distinction between knowledge gained through direct visual observation and reported knowledge is not simply a call to only trust what one observes oneself. The geographical enterprise could not survive on such a principle, since in the nineteenth-century

actual experience of travel in Africa, or elsewhere, remained the reserve of just a few. The testimony of local inhabitants is not disqualified just because it is reported knowledge. After all, papers like Leake's are wholly based upon reports of features and phenomena that have not actually been observed by those, like him, who produced legitimate speculations using them. The reported information of European travellers is considered to be reliable "ocular testimony",<sup>19</sup> a notion that demands a conception of language as the medium for the unambiguous communication of visual observations. The privilege accorded to written and graphic presentation of information is a means of privileging certain sorts of reports, and certain reporters, over others. It distinguishes just who is considered to have adequate visual capacities. These are denied to Africans, whose knowledge, through that very denial, takes on the identity of not being 'ocular' at all, but is reduced to 'hearsay'. The division between objective visual scrutiny on the one hand, and confused and chaotic oral testimony on the other, is a discursively imposed distinction. It locates the origin of knowledge within the European subject, and works to occlude the co-existence and co-dependence of European and non-European knowledges.

Dr. Andrew Smith's account of his expedition into central Africa in the late 1830s exemplifies this discursive reinscription of local knowledge as non-knowledge. When he relates his interactions with local inhabitants, they take on the appearance of obstacles and hindrances to the otherwise smooth process of discovery. Smith reports that while staying at one settlement, he learnt from the inhabitants of a very large, fresh water lake some distance to the north. Suitably excited by the prospect of 'discovering' this lake, there follows an account of how this intention is thwarted because of the inability of the people who know of the lake to provide him with information about how to get to it:

The statements made in regard to the lake were vague and unsatisfactory on every point, except as to its existence, - on that no discrepancy occurred, - the appearances of the water during stormy weather were so naturally detailed, and the form of boats, and the method of making them 'walk', so minutely and clearly described, as proved at once that all must have actually seen what they attempted to picture. On the subject of the direction and distance, little could be ascertained with certainty, - some stated it bore n-w

from us, others n-e: some that they could reach it in three weeks, others that it would require 3 months. If it be kept in view that almost no two of our informants reached it from the same place, and perhaps not one without wandering and halting amongst the intermediate tribes, it will be evident that none of them were fitted to form a correct estimate either of the actual distance or direction<sup>20</sup>

The lake begins to take on a sort of ghostly appearance from such an account, appearing as a feature barely discernible upon the landscape. His informants are represented as being unable to describe the geography of their own land with any precision. The task of full and proper description falls to the travelling scientist, who can thus present his act as an originary inscription of meaning. Smith complains that his informants seem unable to separate the description of the lake from the particular set of movements and actions upon which their knowledge of it is based. No room is left either for the possibility of misunderstanding, or more significantly, the possibility that what Smith hears is not confusion and ignorance but a different form of knowing tied to different ways of producing space. The knowledges and understandings woven into local spatial practices are allowed to enter this discourse only so that they can speak their own inadequacy according to standards of accuracy, precision, objectivity, and clarity which are tied to practices of surveillance and appropriation which are strictly antagonistic to them.

The everyday actualities of travelling in Africa are routinely presented in terms of the diligence and effort needed to overcome the obstacles erected by 'interested', 'devious', or 'mischievous' native guides and labourers to the smooth passage of scientific exploration and discovery. Samuel Baker's account of his explorations of the watershed of the Nile is exemplary in this respect. The actual 'discovery' of the Albert Nyanza merits just a few words: "Suddenly, upon reaching some rising ground, the great reservoir of the Nile lay before me!"<sup>21</sup> In fact, Baker's report is mainly concerned with recounting the difficulties he had to overcome in the shape of the various unwelcome machinations of local tribal leaders, and frequent desertions and mutinies amongst his party: "Every day the porters, apparently without reason, would suddenly throw their loads down, and bolt into the high grass, disappearing like so many rabbits".<sup>22</sup> Given Baker's candid admission of his use of force to subdue unruly

labourers, his representation of the interminable problem of reliable help in terms of unreasoned desertions appears as an example of the “narrative containment of resistance” in colonial discourse (Sharpe 1989, 137).

Without the use of local guides and interpreters, the exploits of men represented as untiringly persevering, independent, and self-denying seekers after the truth would have been impossible. But this routine *practical* dependence on local knowledges and information is not accorded any independent *epistemological* value. Local knowledge is refashioned as a hindrance, as a barrier to the arrival at the truth. Its presence in the discourse of geographical discovery is framed by a rhetoric of doubt and suspicion. It is normal practice in reports of what a traveller has observed, mapped, and measured, to add a comment reporting what has been told to him by local inhabitants about the territory he has not yet reconnoitred. If local knowledge thus appears as a lure, it is nonetheless ascribed no independent status as knowledge. Indigenous geographical meanings and knowledges are admitted into this discourse on condition of being stripped of any validity independent of European definitions of scientific truth. The potential for the possessive authority of European travellers to be undermined by admission of their interactions with indigenous societies is countered by presenting indigenous knowledge as simply awaiting authoritative confirmation by the scientific-traveller (cf. Greenfield 1991).

Livingstone’s report of the ‘discovery’ of Lake Shirwa condenses the conception of knowledge which underwrites the claims of geographical science to be uncovering previously unknown facts. He remarks that the discovery is “claimed for Dr. Kirk and myself, as Europeans who accomplished it, entirely ignorant of any information that may or may not be locked up in Portuguese archives.”<sup>23</sup> The status of this feature as unknown rests on the absence of written information by Europeans referring to it. Any knowledge that non-Europeans may have in relation to it does not enter into consideration. This representation of the ‘event’ of discovery rests upon a well established understanding of the relationship between *writing*, *knowledge*, and *historicity* (Gates 1987). Frequent judgement is passed in accounts of scientific travels with regard to peoples who have no “visible” form of thought and who make no use of “symbols”:

Superior minds must have arisen from time to time in these regions, but ignorant of the use of letters, they have left no memorial. One never sees a grave nor a stone of remembrance set up. The very rocks are illiterate; they contain no fossils<sup>24</sup>

Livingstone complains here at the lack not just of visible signs, but specifically of signs of the past, of “memorials” and “fossils”. A correlation is also drawn here between the lack of a written culture and the very condition of the land. Notions of the uninscribed character of the African landscape standing outside of history are not merely poetic fancies attached to objective geographical observations. They belong to a particular understanding of the physical geography of Africa itself. Many of the most famous African expeditions sponsored by the R.G.S. in the 1850s and 1860s were intended to provide evidence which would enable Roderick Murchison’s hypotheses concerning the geological structure and history of the continent to be confirmed. Murchison had argued in favour of the long-term stability of the geology of Africa.<sup>25</sup> In establishing that the major rivers of the continent had their sources in the lakes and marshlands of the interior, these expeditions confirmed, in Murchison’s view, that the stability of the interior of the continent was due to its not having undergone any of the “great submarine depressions”<sup>26</sup> that had affected Europe, Asia, and Australia.

The long period under which the continent had been subject only to terrestrial and atmospheric processes is interpreted in a particular way by Murchison. He draws an analogy between the presumed antiquity of the physical geography of the continent and the moral condition of its inhabitants. If the interior of Africa has “preserved its ancient terrestrial conditions during a very long period, unaffected by changes except those which are dependent on atmospheric and meteoric influences”, then this in turn implies that “the Negro may claim as old a lineage as the Caucasian or Mongolian races.”<sup>27</sup> This remark needs to be understood in relation to Murchison’s presentation of the physical geography of Africa as having undergone *no significant change*. To this understanding of physical processes there corresponds a very specific understanding of the place of the “Negro races” within the overall scheme of humanity. Despite their “antiquity”, they are charged with having made but small advances in civilisation, as indicated by the lack of lasting impression they are understood to have made upon the land. In a commentary on the significance of the fossil evidence



gathered by Livingstone and John Kirk,<sup>28</sup> Murchison argues that the decisive value to science of African exploration lays in its having established the essentially static nature of both the continent's physical geography and the character of indigenous African societies:

We still have every reason to conclude that, in this stable continent, which has through long ages been subjected to atmospheric influences only, the negro type of mankind must be one of very high antiquity. Yet notwithstanding this antiquity, the people of that race have made slight advances in civilisation, or in the commonest arts of life, as compared not only with the people of the Caucasian type, but also with those of the Mongolian and Malayan races, or even with the Red Indian and Polynesian races<sup>29</sup>

Here, with respect to one of the most notable scientific contributions of nineteenth-century geographical knowledge, we find an interpretation of the physical qualities of land, soils, and geology in relation to the lessons these provide about the degree of progress and civilisation of the inhabitants of those places. Such an interpretation produces the appearance of geographical spaces unmarked by the types of human *and* physical transformations which are considered the very condition of civilisation and history itself.

John Hanning Speke's written accounts of his travels are distinctive for the great attention they pay to his use of native information. Speke's disputed claim to have settled the question of the Nile's source rested in no small part upon the conditional validity he ascribed to native information. He asserted that the map he constructed in support of his claim served "to show what power of knowledge an explorer can possess himself of by local information".<sup>30</sup> His report starts by recounting the difficulty presented by the information acquired from Arab traders:

the Arabs, by their peculiar mode of expression, spoke of the flow of a river in the reverse manner to that which we are accustomed to speak of the direction of the current of a river<sup>31</sup>

Speke recalls that this caused him all sorts of confusion, because he kept taking such reports "literally", forgetting the lesson he had initially learnt. What seems to be simply a different and

easily catered for mode of expression is quickly transformed in his account into a mark of ignorance.

In his rebuttal of Speke's settlement of the "great problem" of the "mysterious stream", Richard Burton questioned, among many other things, Speke's account of the reliability of Arab information. He refers to the information he gleaned from Arabs with respect to whether Lake Tanganyika could be the source of the Nile:

All declared (probably falsely) that they had visited it: all asserted that the Rusizi River enters into, instead of flowing from, the Tanganyika. I felt sick at heart. The Africans account of stream directions opposed to fact: seldom the Arab's. In this point I differ totally from Capt. Speke<sup>32</sup>

In these marginal details of a very public dispute, we can identify the shared terrain upon which such disputes were situated. In both confirming and denying the accuracy of non-European knowledge, the general principle of uncertainty and doubt with which it is treated is reiterated. While Burton and Speke disagree about just who is to be believed, they share the same habit of denying validity *as knowledge* to modes of knowing which contradict the standards and conventions of European science. The two arguments confirm in the space of their disagreement only that the status of information from non-Europeans is open to considerable question and prone to confusion. Burton's paper is an affirmation that the central facts concerning the Nile, even after the efforts of himself and others to decide them, are now more, not less, unknown. We here see the discourse of exploration first emptying the very space it then proclaims itself to be filling with meaning.

James Grant's discussion of the ways in which Speke dealt with "collateral information"<sup>33</sup> in the course of travelling reveals the ways in which local information was translated into the idioms of sanctioned geographical knowledge as the European traveller appropriated to himself the knowledge of others. Referring to a sojourn in the area of the Victoria Nyanza, Grant goes to some length to explain Speke's methods of "interrogating" his informants:

Here, and in every other territory we passed through, have I seen Speke, compass in hand, with native travellers around him, getting from them the positions of Uganda, Unyoro, Ujiji, Ukereweh, Luka Nzige, Victoria Nyanza,

Usoga, Ugani, or places we had never seen, and hearing from them the descriptions of the races around the lake. In fact, we never met a traveller of any intelligence who was not put through the points of the compass in this way; but none of those who lived on the western shore of the lake could ever tell us who lived on the opposite shore. As we changed ground from camp to camp, going northwards, Speke, by following this system of observation and native interrogation, was able to secure cross-bearings of all the countries which appear in his map. And as far as we inspected afterwards, these cross-bearings were wonderfully near the truth; for this reason I predict that what we were unable to procure by inspection will be found equally accurate. In one instance, this is already confirmed. Speke laid down the Luta Nzige lake entirely from native information: it was afterwards visited by Sir Samuel Baker, and its northern extremity had not been altered from Speke's map; and the southern end has yet to be visited before it can be shown that Speke accepted wrong bearings. This case I instance to prove that when information is properly sifted and obtained from natives of the upper and intelligent class, it is decidedly reliable<sup>34</sup>

A labour of transformation is undertaken upon local information before it is allowed to appear as knowledge open to scientific verification and refutation. This transformation, the details of which are graphically laid bare here by Grant, transfers the authority of acting as the agent of knowledge to the racially unmarked scientific-traveller. It is only he who is equipped with the necessary abilities to filter and refine into scientific observation information which, outside of this process of transformation, remains just so much 'native' confusion. In this movement, local knowledge is translated into new idioms over which certain identifiable groups maintain a monopoly. In turn, the identity of sanctioned knowledge is secured by the return of the residue of this transformation: the knowledge which, when properly sifted, can be made good use of, is made to reappear in its raw state to confirm the inadequacies of those who are its natural bearers. In both cases, the subject-positions of non-Europeans as agents capable of producing knowledge are systematically erased from the discursive space of the nascent geographical science. The subordination of non-European meanings and knowledge is

written into the very form in which their existence is allowed to appear in this discourse, as practical dependence is simultaneously acknowledged and disavowed.

### **The discourse of the elect**

The discursive effacement of non-European agency in the production of geographical knowledge secures for the R.G.S. all the authority which comes from being aligned with an apparently self-generating tradition of European science, one which reserves to itself the privilege of rationality and reflection that elevates its knowledge to the level of universality. The self-appointed mission of the R.G.S. from its foundation was the dual task of the acquisition and dissemination of geographical knowledge. In the practical execution of this task, as mediated by the public discourse of the R.G.S., a re-writing was undertaken through which the legitimacy of non-European knowledges and meanings was denied. The R.G.S. and its agents simultaneously took on the appearance of an army of scientists blessed with Adamic powers to name the world into existence.

I want to conclude by briefly considering what light the sort of post-colonial reading undertaken here might throw upon our understandings of the disciplinisation of knowledge. Nineteenth-century geographical knowledge did not constitute itself against other forms of knowledge through a simple act of exclusion. The knowledge of non-European subjects is represented within the R.G.S.'s discourse as the confusion and noise against which European science takes shape and secures its authority. The institutionally disciplined production of knowledge is founded and re-founded through a "double gesture of recognition and denial" of other possible knowledges, interests, and subject-positions. (Woodmansee 1994, 5). The closure of the field of sanctioned geographical knowledge around strictly delimited boundaries therefore enfolds the excluded elements on the inside. In fact, to fully grasp this effect we need to think of the disciplinisation of knowledge in terms other than those provided by the territorial metaphors of borders, boundaries, inclusion, and exclusion which characterise both normalising and critical accounts of disciplinary practices (Lyon 1992, Rose 1995). These territorial metaphors underplay the constitutive role of writing in producing disciplined knowledge. The reading presented here suggests that it is the *representation* of

exclusion and expulsion that constitutes and reconstitutes boundaries, but which in turn also renders all boundaries liable to deformation.

Understanding the disciplinisation of knowledge in terms of written networks rather than bounded territories directs attention away from an explanation in terms of exclusion and inclusion, and towards a concern for structured rhetorical operations of elision and erasure. The Africanist discourse of the R.G.S. examined here is characterised by the rhetorical figure of preterition, by which passing and summary mention is made of something in the moment of professing to omit it. Subjugated geographical knowledges are mentioned in being passed over in favour of the legitimate knowledge of European science. Such passing reference marks the place where words and voices that would complete the tale are found to be absent. This ellipsis is the gap which can be prised open in order to read this discourse otherwise than was intended. The authority of the new geographical science is undermined by its having to state as such the non-elect status of other agents of knowledge. Following Berubé (1992, 224), this discourse of preterition can be reinscribed in order to restore the apparently autonomous discourse of geographical exploration and scientific travel to its rightful place in an antagonistic field of competing and differentially empowered discourses. Such a reinscription demonstrates that the contested quality of this geographical knowledge is not to be located in disputes over the sources of rivers or over just what constituted properly scientific geography. It is instead marked in the interstices of its discourse in mute form, for the contest is about the right to articulate meanings, and consequently some of the contestants are never heard from since they are systematically denied the status of agents capable of meaningful speech-acts.

It is for this reason that David Livingstone's (1992, 1995) recent characterisation of the 'contested' nature of geographical traditions remains inadequate as a way of capturing the full dimensions of the power relations which underwrite disciplined geographical knowledge. Livingstone presents the 'contested enterprise' of modern geography in terms of an essentially pluralist *conversation* between different perspectives. This hermeneutic trope of conversation effects a depoliticisation of the radical implications of post-structuralist theorisations of the relationships between knowledge, language, and power. As Shapiro (1992, 38) suggests, the political force of such theorisations depends "on an appreciation of

the trace of losses associated with the victories of given, institutionalised systems of intelligently". A critical reading of the production of modern geographical knowledge must account for the historical processes which condemned certain knowledges, meanings, and subjects to a place outside the field of what was considered intelligible, rational, and *disciplined* scientific discourse. This paper has tried to begin the task of making visible the 'trace of losses' that is constitutive of modern geography, a trace upon which the cacophony of subsequent conversations is over-written.

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## NOTES

1. Cf. Césaire (1972, 37).
2. For a discussion of this issue in relation to feminist recuperations of the marginalised contributions of women travel writers to Victorian geographical knowledge, see McEwan (1997).
3. See Barker *et al* (1994) and Williams & Chrisman (1993) for introductions to colonial discourse theory.
4. On the close connections between deconstruction and post-colonial theory, see Spivak (1990), Niranjana (1992), and Spivak (1993).
5. For further elaboration of this issue, see Barnett (1997).
6. For further consideration of the practice of reading elaborated here, see Barnett (1996a).
7. On the difficult relations between colonial discourse theory and African historiography, see Vaughan (1994).
8. **W H Smyth** 1850 *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* (hereafter *Jnl.RGS*) XX, xxx.
9. **R I Murchison** 1844 Presidential Address *Jnl.RGS* XIV, cxviii.
10. **W. R Hamilton** 1838 Presidential Address *Jnl.RGS* XIII, liv.
11. **Right Hon. Earl of Ellesmere** 1855 Presidential Address *Jnl.RGS* XXV, cxxxi.
12. An indication of this is provided by the *Hints to Travellers*, first published by the R.G.S. in its *Journal* in 1854. These consisted of advice to prospective travellers as to how to best proceed in preparing and undertaking their journeys if they were concerned to produce useful and reliable geographical information. In order to ascertain the “moral and intellectual character” of different peoples, the *Hints* advise careful observation of “Characteristic Form - dimensions, weight, colour, odour, free from uncleanness, hair, features”, and that particular attention be paid to the following questions: “What is the usual form of feature? the shape of the skull? hair? colour? stature? bodily constitution?” (*Jnl.RGS* XXIV, 358, 356). These suggestions crystallise many of the understandings of Victorian racial science, which were intimately tied to the production of geographical knowledge (e.g. Livingstone, 1991). A full discussion of this theme is beyond the scope of this paper. It is, however, not sufficient to consider Victorian attitudes to race as providing a moral justification for colonialism, or to present nineteenth-century geographical



knowledge as having been infiltrated by racial ideology, since racial science was the *theoretical* discourse of nineteenth-century colonialism (Young 1995). That the vocabulary of racial classification was such a taken-for-granted facet of nineteenth-century geographical knowledge was thus wholly consistent with an aspiration to be scientific.

13. **Dr. C T Beke** 1842 Communications respecting the Geography of Southern Abyssinia *Jnl.RGS* XII, 87.

14. These themes are discussed in detail with respect to the mid nineteenth-century R.G.S. in Barnett (1996b).

15. Recent feminist work on women's travel writing suggests that a more inclusive acknowledgement of cross-cultural interaction is characteristic of this genre (e.g. Blunt 1994). One might suppose that this feature was a contributing factor to women's exclusion from the institutions of geographical science, on the grounds that they merely produced impressionistic accounts and not objective measurements, classifications, and collections. This in turn underscores that a particular relation between representation and a distinctive form of masculinity defined the self-proclaimed scientific knowledge of the middle of the nineteenth-century.

16. 1831 *Jnl.RGS* I, x.

17. **R I Murchison** 1866 Presidential Address *Jnl.RGS* XXXVI, cxciv.

18. **W M Leake** 1832 Is the Quorra, which has lately been traced to its Discharge in to the Sea, the same river Nigir of the Ancients *Jnl.RGS* II, 1.

19. **Capt. W Allen** 1838 On a New Construction of a Map of West Africa *Jnl.RGS* VIII,

20. **Dr. A Smith** 1836 Report of the Expedition for exploring Central Africa *Jnl.RGS* VI, 409.

21. **S W Baker** 1866 Account of the Discovery of the second Great Lake of the Nile, Albert Nyanza *Jnl.RGS* XXXVI, 11.

22. **Baker**, 11.

23. 1861 Extracts from the Despatches of Dr. Livingstone *Jnl.RGS* XXXI, 267.

24. **Dr. David Livingstone** 1854 Explorations into the Interior of Africa *Jnl.RGS* XXIV, 295.

25. **R I Murchison** 1852 Comparative view of Africa in Primeval and Modern Times *Jnl.RGS* XXII, cxxi-cxxv.

26. **R I Murchison** 1863-4 *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society* VIII, 246.

27. **Murchison**, 248.
28. **J Kirk** 1864 On a Few Fossil Bones from the Alluvial Strata of the Zambesi Delta *Jnl.RGS* XXXIV, 199-201.
29. **R I Murchison** 1864 On the Antiquity of the Physical geography of Inner Africa *Jnl.RGS* XXXIV, 205.
30. **Capt. J H Speke** 1863 The Upper Basin of the Nile, from Inspection and Information *Jnl.RGS* XXXIII, 326.
31. **Speke**, 322.
32. **R F Burton** 1865 On Lake Tanganyika, Ptolemy's Western Lake-Reservoir of the Nile *Jnl.RGS* XXXV, 4.
33. **Speke**, 330.
34. **Lt. Col. J A Grant** 1872 Summary of Observations on the Geography, Climate, and Natural History on the Lake Regions of Equatorial Africa, made by the Speke and Grant Expedition, 1860-63 *Jnl.RGS* XLII, 256-257.

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