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WORLDIRNG THE SOUTH
Toward a post-colonial urban theory

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But unless theory is unanswerable, either through its successes or failure, to the essential untidiness, the essential unmasterable presence that constitutes a large part of historical and social situations (and this applies equally to theory that derives from somewhere else and theory that is ‘original’), then theory becomes an ideological trap.


Inventing the south

In Singapore, at the heart of the Kampong Glam heritage district, lies Muscat Street. Bordering the Sultan Mosque, it is lined with a series of arches, each depicting the global interconnections that bind Singapore to the Arab world (see Figure 3.1). Murals prominently feature trade maps, specifically shipping routes from Muscat to Canton and Singapore (Figure 3.2). Sans date, such maps narrate a glorious and timeless history of economic hegemony. In doing so, they inaugurate a post-colonial present, one in which Muscat, Canton and Singapore are the centres of a world order, world cities bound together in a geography of familiar relationalities.

I present the murals of Muscat Street as an instance of the ‘worlding of the south’. Following Heidegger, the iconography of the arches can be understood as a ‘world view … not a view of the world but the world understood as a view’ (Heidegger 1976: 350). They are an ineluctably modern world view, in Heidegger’s sense of a world view being necessarily modern, that ‘the basic process of modern times is the conquest of the world as picture’ (ibid.: 353).

As a world view, the maps of Muscat Street also centre the world. They conjure a world of trading relations that span a territory broadly understood as Asia. Other geographies remain off the map, irrelevant in this centred representation of economic hegemony. A historical depiction of Indian Ocean empires, such representations are also bold assertions of a future that is now imagined as the Asian century, an era of the emergence and ascendance of Asian economies that stretch from the Arabian Gulf past the South China Sea to the Pacific Ocean. Heidegger (1976: 350) reminds us that in the age of the world view, ‘we are in the picture . . . in everything that belongs to it and constitutes it as a system, it stands before us’. What stands before us at Muscat Street is the invention of the global south. I do not mean invention in a pejorative way, but instead as the sheer creativity of human practice, and as the sheer fact of the invented character of all that passes as tradition (AlSayyad 2003). And what
Figure 3.1 Muscat Street (Photo: Ananya Roy)
is invented at Muscat Street is indeed a ‘system’, the global south as system, as that which can stand before us as a whole.

The world that is on view at Muscat Street is inevitably an effect of the state. The Kampong Glam neighbourhood, now a heritage district, was designated as a Malay settlement in British colonial master plans. Anchored by the Sultan Mosque and neighbouring madrassas, the area came to be seen as home not only to merchants from the Indo-Malay archipelago but also to trade routes linking Singapore to the Arab world (Ismail 2006: 244). Street names evoked these distant and yet familiar geographies: Bussorah (Basra), Muscat, Baghdad, Kandahar, and the generic Arab Street. As Yeoh (1992: 316) argues, the conferral of the street name, Arab Street, by the British indicates the effort to identify the area as an ‘Arab kampung’. In this way, the colonial city itself could be neatly ordered into ‘recognizable racial units’, with Europeans inhabiting the ‘town’ and racial-ethnic others ‘relegated to separate kampungs’ (ibid.: 317).

But what is at work in Muscat Street is more than the remains of the colonial past. Equally at work is the statecraft of post-colonial government. The designation of Kampong Glam as a heritage district (see Figure 3.3) took place in the 1980s when, as Yeoh and Huang (1996: 412) detail, historic conservation emerged as an urban planning priority in Singapore. Such efforts were part of a broader state project to reclaim ‘Asian roots’ as a ‘bulwark against westernization’ (ibid.: 413). What was at stake was not only a search for ancestry but also the making of national futures. Thus, Minister of State George Yeo was to declare in 1989: ‘As we trace our ancestries, as we sift through the artifacts which give us a better understanding of how we got here, as we study and modify the traditions we have inherited, we form a clearer vision of what our future can be’ (Yeoh and Huang 1996: 413). The murals of Muscat Street can be understood in keeping with this vision of the multi-cultural, post-colonial city, one in which heritage becomes a vital element of the redevelopment of urban futures. But it can also be understood as a world view, one that constructs the global south, its histories and its future. To the extent that this world view is the Asian century, Asia must be understood not as a bounded location or even as a set of circulations but rather as a citation, a way of asserting the teleology of progress.

Today, at the arch that marks the entrance to Muscat Street, sits a brass plaque (see Figure 3.4). It signifies the ‘reopening’ of the street in 2012 as a joint redevelopment effort of the city-state of Singapore and the Sultanate of Oman. We are instructed to view the arches and murals that ‘reflect Kampong Glam’s role as a hub for Arab traders during Singapore’s early history’ and ‘symbolise the maritime and trade connection between Singapore and Oman which have continued to this day’. As in British colonial urban planning, such a script creates stable ontological categories of recognition, notably that of Arab-ness. And as in the case of the state-led urban redevelopment of the 1980s, the joint Singapore–Oman venture is a tracing of ancestry in order to forge new destinies of global capitalism. Such destinies implicate and transcend the territorial boundaries of sovereign nation-states, evoking the unbounded geography of empire and world. The collective subject imagined here is at once national citizen and post-national worldly subject.

The reinvention of Muscat Street can thus be understood as an example of what Aihwa Ong and I have analysed as inter-referenced Asian urbanism, a set of citationary practices that seek to narrate a history of Asian hegemony and a future of Asian ascendance (Roy and Ong 2011). Marked by numerous urban experiments of which Muscat Street is only one, these geographies of solidarity (re)invent Asia as territory and temporality, and above all as a citation. From global Islam to global capital, from ancient trade routes to speculative financial markets, such circulations and citations place cities like Muscat and Singapore at the centre of a ‘reopened’ world order. It is in this way that the global south becomes a world view, the world understood as a view. But such a world view is necessarily untidy, in Said’s (1983: 173) words necessarily ‘unmasterable’. What then is the theory/Theory that is generated from and about such a world view? What then is theory/ Theory from the south?
Figure 3.2 Murals featuring shipping routes from Muscat to Canton and Muscat to Singapore (Photos: Ananya Roy)

Figure 3.3 Kampong Glam heritage district (Photo: Ananya Roy)
Maps of theory

While the twentieth century closed with debate and controversy about the shift from a ‘Chicago School’ of urban sociology to the ‘Los Angeles School’ of postmodern geography, the urban future already lay elsewhere: in the cities of the global south, in cities like Shanghai, Cairo, Mumbai, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Dakar, Johannesburg, Singapore, Dubai. For many decades, the canon of urban theory had remained primarily a theory of a Euro-American urbanism, a story of urban change in a handful of global cities: Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, all located in the global north. The cities that housed the world’s urban majority could only appear in this canon as ‘mega-cities’, sites of underdevelopment, on the margins of the map of global capitalism. Although considerable empirical research and robust analysis was being conducted in the context of such cities, this work had not necessarily entered into the annals of what constitutes Theory, or the authoritative canon of the discipline of urban studies. Mega-cities were, as Jennifer Robinson (2002) sharply put it, ‘off the map’ of urban theory. Against the ‘regulating fiction’ of the First World global city, Robinson (2003: 275) called for a robust urban theory that could overcome its ‘asymmetrical ignorance’.

Robinson’s call has been taken up by several genres of urban scholarship. From the mandate to ‘see from the South’ (Watson 2009) to the effort to create new regional theories that can ‘speak back to putative “centres” of geography in transformative ways’ (Sidaway, Bunnell and Yeoh 2003: 279), the effort to enact a post-colonial urban theory is now fully underway. In this chapter, I outline one such
approach and its efforts to disrupt the canon of global urbanism by foregrounding the cities of the
global south. Following my previous work with Aihwa Ong, I designate this approach as ‘worlding’
and suggest that it is one of several possible contributions to the making of post-colonial urban theory
(Roy and Ong 2011). But before I outline an analytics of worlding, let me first address the question of
cities of the global south and why they matter.

**Urbanism in the south**

The twenty-first century is commonly understood as an age of historically unprecedented urbanization,
notably in the global south. As the most recent *State of the World’s Cities* report produced by UN-
Habitat, notes, ‘today of every 10 urban residents in the world more than seven are found in developing
countries’ (UN-Habitat 2012: 25). The ‘urban millennium’ is also then an age of southern urbanization,
or specifically an ‘Asian urban century’, with half of the world’s urban population now living in Asia
(ibid.: 28). UN-Habitat (2012: 28) describes this world of cities as that of ‘massive conurbations’, or
‘meta-cities’. If nothing else, contemporary urban theory has to take account of the material realities of
the urban century. However, as Brenner and Schmid (2013) warn, the idea of the urban age is a ‘chaotic
conception’. They caution that ‘the urban is not a pregiven, self-evident reality, condition or type of
space’ (Brenner and Schmid 2013: 20). Instead of a focus on settlement types, they call for the study of
historical processes of spatial change and global capitalist development. Such an approach is in keeping
with Lefebvre’s (1974) philosophical mandate to understand urbanism not as objects in space but rather
as the production of space. It is in this sense that the cities of the global south are the centre of a world
order that is being created and recreated through the urban revolution. And it is in this sense that
southern urbanism is today’s global urbanism, what Lefebvre (1974: 412) would have described as the
making of space on a ‘world scale’.

To take account of southern urbanism also requires conceptualizing urbanism as a formally
constituted object, one produced through the practice of statecraft and the apparatus of planning. This
is, as Lefebvre (1974: 11) argues, the ‘active − the operational or instrumental − role of space’. The
‘urban millennium’, and indeed the ‘Asian urban century’, must be understood then as historical
conjuncture, one at which the terrain of the urban becomes the matter of government. As Rabinow
(1989: 76) explains, such forms of government produce a field of rationality; they are a ‘normative
project for the ordering of the social milieu’. A prominent theme in the normative projects of the urban
millennium is that of economic growth, recast in the recent UN-Habitat report as ‘prosperity’. Keenly
attuned to economic crisis, and titled ‘The Prosperity of Cities’, the report argues that cities are a
‘remedy’ for ‘regional and global crises’ (UN-Habitat 2012: 11). In the face of stark socio-spatial
inequalities, the report frames the question of economic growth as ‘shared prosperity’ (ibid.: 12). It is
language that is reminiscent of emerging policy paradigms in many parts of the global south, for
example, the discourse of ‘inclusive growth’ that now dominates urban planning in India (Roy 2013).

What is significant about the vocabulary of shared prosperity or inclusive growth is not its remedial
character but rather its implied reference to a new world order of development and underdevelopment,
the rearrangement of prosperity and growth across global north and global south. On the one hand, the
economies of the North Atlantic are in turmoil. From the American Great Recession to what has been
dubbed the ‘existential crisis’ of the Eurozone, hitherto prosperous liberal democracies are on shaky
ground. If the 1980s was billed as the lost development decade in Africa and Latin America because of
structural adjustment, then today, the Bush era of neoliberal redistribution is being billed as the lost
decade for the American middle class (Pew Research Center 2012). In sharp contrast, in the economic
powerhouses of the global south, for example in India and China, new hegemonic models of capital
accumulation are being put into place. And there is fast and furious experimentation with welfare
programmes and human development, be it the building of the world’s largest development NGO in
Bangladesh (Roy 2010) or the crafting of a ‘new deal’ for India’s slum-dwellers (Mathur 2009) or the institutionalization of ‘right to the city’ policies in Brazil (Fernandes 2011) or vigorous debate about a guaranteed minimum income in South Africa (Seekings 2002; Ferguson 2009). These exist in relationship with, and also at odds with, what Wacquant (2009: xi) has billed as ‘the neoliberal government of social insecurity’, or ‘America as the laboratory of the neoliberal future’. Such socio-spatial formations call into question the global south as the location of underdevelopment. They reveal the intense reinventions of development that are taking place in the global south, practices and imaginations that seem foreclosed in the North Atlantic. They also bring into view the multiplicity and heterogeneity of capitalism’s futures. In short, they present a challenge for how a post-colonial urban theory, one concerned with cities of the global south, may be forged.

Theory from the south?

In previous work (Roy 2009: 819−20), I have argued that it is necessary to craft ‘new geographies of theory’, those that can draw upon ‘the urban experience of the global South’. The intent of such an effort was ‘not simply to study the cities of the global South as interesting, anomalous, different, and esoteric empirical cases’, but rather to recalibrate urban theory itself. I expressed optimism that ‘as the parochial experience of EuroAmerican cities has been found to be a useful theoretical model for all cities, so perhaps the distinctive experiences of the cities of the global South can generate productive and provocative theoretical frameworks for all cities’. My call for ‘new geographies of theory’ raises at least two questions. First, at a time when the global south is being reinscribed and redrawn, what does theory from the south entail? Second, why theory?

Following Sparke (2007: 117), I mean the global south as a ‘concept-metaphor’ that interrupts the ‘flat world’ conceits of globalization. Sparke (2007: 117) notes that ‘The Global South is everywhere, but it is also always somewhere, and that somewhere, located at the intersection of entangled political geographies of dispossession and repossession, has to be mapped with persistent geographical responsibility.’ Such an approach to the global south allows us to think about the ‘locatedness’ of all theory, and to take up the task of mapping geographies of theory as one that entails responsibility. But the locatedness of the global south does not imply a single and stable location. Instead, I am suggesting that the global south be understood as a temporal category, an emergence that marks a specific historical conjuncture of economic hegemony and political alliances. It is this conjuncture that I have designated with the short-hand reference, the Asian Century.

If the global south is not a stable ontological category symbolizing subalternity, what then does it mean to produce theory from the south? Comaroff and Comaroff (2012: 12) define the task in a manner that is attentive to the historical conjuncture I have already outlined: that it is in the global south that ‘radically new assemblages of capital and labor are taking shape’ and that these ‘prefigure the future of the global north’. Theory from the south, the Comarroffs (2012: 7) argue, is not about narrating modernity from its ‘undersides’, but rather revealing the ‘history of the present’ from the ‘distinctive vantage point’ that are these frontiers of accumulation. It is with this in mind that I have been interested in ‘post-colonial self-government’, its audacious programmes of reform and development, and its aspirations of economic hegemony (Roy 2013). For theory to respond to this ‘specific historical and social situation’, it must disassemble the world view that is the global south.

Here it is worth turning to Clifford’s (1989) ‘Notes on Theory and Travel’. Clifford writes: “Theory” is a product of displacement, comparison, a certain distance. To theorize, one leaves home. But like any act of travel, theory begins and ends somewhere.’ For Clifford, ‘every center or home’ is today ‘someone else’s periphery or diaspora’. Theory, he thus argues, ‘is no longer naturally “at home” in the West’, because the West is no longer ‘a privileged place’ to ‘collect, sift, translate, and generalize’. In keeping with Said’s ‘Traveling Theory’, Clifford ‘challenges the propensity of theory to seek a stable
place, to float above historical conjunctures’. If the condition of no longer being ‘at home in the West’ is understood as the post-colonial condition, then it may mark a useful, albeit unstable, (dis)location for a theory from the south. But for such a theory not to become what Said cautions against as an ‘ideological trap’, it must also conceptualize the global south as a place that cannot be privileged, as a world view that must be diligently and constantly disassembled. After all, a world picture or world view is, as Sidaway (2000: 606) notes, an essential truth. While Sidaway sees a world picture to be a mainly western representation, I am arguing that the self-worlding of the south also entails the conquest of the world as picture. Recently such a world view was on display at the summit of the BRICS held in Durban and at which a new development bank was discussed. Bond (2013: 1) describes the summit as one at which heads of state met ‘to assure the rest of Africa that their countries’ corporations are better investors in infrastructure, mining, oil and agriculture than the traditional European and US multinationals’. To craft a theory from the south it is necessary to critique such forms of post-colonial reason.

But why theory? Theory matters because too often cities of the global south are narrated in the format of empirical description. I am not suggesting that empiricism can somehow be separated out from theorization. In fact, all theory is provincial and parochial, and thus empirical. All empiricism contains within it organizing concepts and purposive norms. What I am concerned with though is the structuration of urban theory through a divide between Theory and ethnography. Note my deliberate capitalization of Theory, as that which masquerades as a universal, as that which has global purchase, as that which can be capitalized. While cities of the global north are often narrated through authoritative knowledge, or Theory, cities of the global south, are often narrated through ethnography, or idiosyncratic knowledge. While Theory is assumed to have universal applicability, ethnography is seen to be homebound, unique, lacking the reach of generalization. Thus, in their recent treatise, Theory from the South, Comaroff and Comaroff (2012: 1) note that too often the ‘non-West … now the global south’ is presented ‘primarily as a place of parochial wisdom … of unprocessed data … as reservoirs of raw fact: of the historical, natural, and ethnographic minutiae from which Euromodernity might fashion its testable theories and transcendent truths’. Such geographies and methodologies of authoritative knowledge must be interrogated and disrupted. As Cheah has noted (2002: 59), ‘we need to understand more fully the schema through which the subject of universal knowledge becomes isomorphic with the West and all other regions become consigned to particularity’. It is in this sense that what is needed is not only a rich empirical description of cities of the global south but rather what I have earlier termed ‘new geographies of theory’ (Roy 2009). To be concerned about the geography of theory is to pay attention to how theory is inevitably located and the ‘conditions of acceptance’ (Said 1983: 158) under which it travels to exceed and even transform its geographic origins.

In his famous essay on ‘Traveling Theory’, Edward Said (1983: 168, 173) reminds us that ‘theory is a response to a specific social and historical situation’ and it is thus ‘unanswerable’ to ‘the essential untidiness … that constitutes a large part of historical and social situations’. Following Said, it is possible to argue that a theory of/from the south is necessarily a response to the specific historical conjuncture that I have already outlined, one in which the urbanization of the world must be interpreted and analysed and one in which new claims to economic hegemony must be critiqued. But such a theory, also following Said, is necessarily incomplete, necessarily an articulation of the untidiness that is the ontological category that is the global south. If southern Theory is to avoid being what Said (1983: 173) fears is an ‘ideological trap’, then the radical instability of the meaning, location and history of the global south must constantly be in view. The murals of Muscat Street, which I presented at the start of this essay, are a glimpse of such radical instability, of the untidiness of the seemingly stable categories of Asia, Arab, Singapore/Singapura, global south. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2012: 47) suggest, ‘the south cannot be defined, a priori, in substantive terms. The label bespeaks a relation, not a thing in or for itself.’
Worlding the south

In an essay on the ‘fantasy of urban India in its current phase of globalisation’, Lata Mani (2008: 43) argues that ‘globality’ is a ‘phantom discourse’ which creates a ‘mode of affiliation’ for the ‘chief beneficiaries’ of globalization. Mani’s critique marks a disavowal of the ‘global’ that is widespread in post-colonial theory. And it raises the important question of the geographic signifiers of theory and their distinctive meanings. I borrow this idea from Jazeel (2011: 75) who calls into question the ‘innocence’ of such geographic signifiers. As I have already noted, to assert the global south as a signifier of theory requires constant vigilance. Mani’s critique raises the additional question of how a theory that speaks from the ‘unmasterable presence’ that is the global south can reject the phantom discourses of globality and globalization and yet retain a sense of embodied location and material relationality. It is with this puzzle in mind that I turn to the concept of ‘worlding’. In particular, I am interested in how ‘worlding’ may provide an alternative to the phantom discourse of globality and the dominant paradigm of globalization (see also Madden 2012). Radhakrishnan (2005), for example, argues quite vigorously that worldliness must not be confused with globality. For him, ‘globality is a condition effected by the travel of global capital’, while worldliness is the state of ‘being in the world’. While ‘being in the world’ is available to all locations in the world, globality is a ‘fait accompli in the name of the world’. Worlding is ‘a perennial process of a lived and immanent contingency’, while globality is a ‘smooth and frictionless surface where oppositions, antagonisms and critique cannot take hold’ (ibid.: 184). In a brilliant turn of phrase, Radhakrishnan (2005: 185) presents the ‘metropolitan legitimation of globality’ as the ‘provincialism of dominance’. It is this provincialism of dominance that several scholars have sought to expose and critique the canon of urban theory as well.

I am keenly sympathetic to Radhakrishnan’s distinctions between globalization and worlding, between globality and worldliness. Yet, in my use of the term worlding, I am also interested in how the world-picture or world view is entangled with the global circuitry of capital, with ways of ‘being in the picture’. If we are to rely on Heidegger’s concept of the ‘worlding of the world’, then we must also acknowledge, as does Young (2000: 189), that Heidegger, especially the late Heidegger, is concerned with dwelling rather than with homelessness or radical insecurity. ‘To dwell is … the experience or feeling of being “at home” in one’s world … it is the existential structure of being-in-the-world’ (Young 2000: 194, 202). Dwelling, for Heidegger, as Young (2000: 189) notes, is ‘ontological security’. In other words, here worlding becomes a way of finding a privileged place, of being at home, of crafting the art of being global. As on Muscat Street, a being-in-the-world is produced alongside the travels of global capital. With this in mind, there are at least three ways in which I deploy the term ‘worlding’ to provide an approach to post-colonial urban theory and to the worlding of the global south.

First, in my previous work with Aihwa Ong (Roy and Ong 2011), I have argued that the canon of urban theory, with its emphasis on ‘global cities’, fails to capture the role of southern cities as ‘worlding’ nodes: those that create global connections and global regimes of value. The worlding city is thus a claim to instantiate the world understood as world view. From Indian ‘world-class cities’ to influential world models of urbanism such as Singapore, the worlding of the south is a complex and dynamic story of flows of capital, labour, ideas and visions. Ambitious experiments, these worlding cities are inherently unstable, inevitably subject to intense contestation, and always incomplete.

Second, it is important to note that worlding practices are not simply the domain of governing and transnational elites. In his work on African cities, Simone (2001: 17), for example, highlights how practices of worlding are set into motion through the ‘state of being “cast out” into the world’. For Simone, ‘worlding from below’ involves ‘circuits of migration, resource evacuation, and commodity exchange’. It is thus that, in the Indian context, I have described the ‘world-class’ city as a mass dream, rather than as imposed vision. Such notions of the popular and populist character of worlding cities bear
resemblance to recent discussions of subaltern cosmopolitanism. Jeffrey and McFarlane (2008: 420) thus present cosmopolitanism as a ‘set of performances enacted by diverse agents’. Indeed, as Gidwani (2006: 16) argues, the ‘unmarked Eurocentrism’ of dominant strands of cosmopolitanism must be called into question through the actually existing cosmopolitanisms of the world’s subordinated populations. It must be noted, this is no romantic alternative to the provincialism of dominance. Gidwani (2006: 18) pointedly argues that ‘there are no subaltern solidarities to be sutured’ across subaltern populations who ‘inhabit vastly different places within globalization’s geographies’ and even have ‘opposed interests’. Nevertheless, to be attentive to the world view as a mass dream is to understand both the scope of hegemony and its limits.

Finally, worlding indicates how disciplines are worlded. For example, Gillman et al. (2004: 260) view globalization as a ‘godterm’, one emanating from a ‘US nationstate that continues to occlude its myriad interests and intentions under the mythic term, America’. They thus call for a worlding of American studies that is quite closely beholden to Heidegger, as a ‘critical tactic’ that can make the ‘world horizon come near and become local and informed, instantiated as an uneven/incomplete material process of world–becoming’ (Gillman et al. 2004: 262). In urban theory, the idea of worlding makes evident how cities are worlded in authoritative knowledge.

If the idea of a world view, and even that of ‘being in the picture’ of the world view, relies to some extent on Heidegger, then this third meaning of worlding requires moving beyond metaphysical philosophy to post–colonial critique. In fact, as Spivak (1999: 212) comments in a footnote on Heidegger’s concept of worlding, ‘it is not okay to fill these outlines with the story of imperial settlement although Heidegger flirts with it constantly’. She argues that it is imperialism that transformed the ‘uninscribed earth’ into a ‘represented world on a map’, into the ‘worlding of a world’. Indeed, in an earlier essay, Spivak (1985: 262) had drawn attention to the ‘worlding of what is now called the Third World’. Examining the ‘empire of the literary discipline’, Spivak shows how the Third World is taken up as ‘distant cultures, exploited but with rich intact literary heritages waiting to be recovered, interpreted, and curricularized in English translation’. At the same, there is a silence about such worlding connections in the literatures of European colonizing cultures, a sanctioned ignorance of imperialism and its penetrations. Spivak urges us to study such cartographic inscriptions and silences. She also asks if ‘an alternative geography of the “worlding” of today’s global South’ can be broached (Spivak 1999: 200). To me, this is what seems to be at stake in the project of urban theory: an analysis of the worlding of the world but equally an effort to imagine other worlds.

**Shadow lines**

In the novel, *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh (1988) tells the story of a protagonist who traverses a world that spans Calcutta and England. It is a provocative and poignant post–colonial tale. Its post–colonial sensibility lies partly in the ambiguity of what constitutes ‘home’ in a series of acts that Ghosh (1988: 113) describes as ‘coming home’. But more significantly, the novel is a glimpse of the violences through which the post–colonial subject is constituted. A young boy, the protagonist, tries to make sense of the ‘trouble in Calcutta’, wondering whether it is meant to ‘keep Muslims out or Hindus in’ (Ghosh 1988: 194, 199). Years later he was to try to speak of the communal riots of 1964, to deal with ‘an emptiness in which there are no words’, to wonder why he remained silent even though there was ‘no barbed wire, no check-points to tell me where the boundaries lie’ (Ghosh 1988: 213). Now a doctoral student in New Delhi, he pulls out a tattered atlas and a rusty compass. He begins to draw circles with cities at the centre, to see which other cities are encompassed by the arc of the compass. Each, he realized, was a ‘remarkable circle: more than half of mankind must have fallen within it’.
Beginning in Srinagar and travelling anti-clockwise, it cut through the Pakistani half of Punjab, through the tip of Rajasthan and the edge of Sind, through the Rann of Kutch, and across the Arabian Sea, through the southernmost toe of the Indian Peninsula, through Kandy, in Sri Lanka, and out into the Indian Ocean until it emerged to touch upon the northernmost finger of Sumatra, then straight through the tail of Thailand into the Gulf, to come out again in Thailand, running a little north of Phnom Penh, into the hills of Laos, past Hue in Vietnam, dipping into the Gulf of Tonking, then swinging up again through the Chinese province of Yunnan, past Chungking, across the Yangtze Kiang, passing within sight of the Great Wall of China, through Inner Mongolia and Sinkiang, until with a final leap over the Karakoram Mountains it dropped again into the valley of Kashmir.

(Ghosh 1988: 227)

Ghosh writes that his protagonist was trying to ‘learn the meaning of distance’. The scene, I would argue, depicts a worlding practice, an alternative worlding of the global south and an alternative worlding of cities. It is a scene that manifests what Ash Amin (2004: 33), building on the work of Doreen Massey and in calling for a ‘new politics of place’, describes as an ‘excess of spatial composition’. Here cities are imagined not as ‘territorial entities’ but rather as ‘temporary placements of ever moving material and immanent geographies’ (Amin 2004: 33, 34). Here once again we are reminded of Radhakrishnan’s insistence that, unlike globalization, worlding is a process of ‘lived and immanent contingency’. But in seeking to learn the meaning of distance, Ghosh’s protagonist is worlding the global south in a manner that disrupts the established world view. That rusty compass on a tattered atlas in a college student’s hostel room in New Delhi cannot conquer the world as picture. It can only seek to write against/speak against/draw against the violence that has already been enacted in the post-colonial nation. The circles, and what they encompass, are untidy. They defy post-colonial reason. Ghosh’s protagonist thus draws ‘shadow lines,’ relationalities hitherto unimagined but with the potential to disrupt the provincialism of dominance.

I would like to think that urban theory is on the cusp of drawing such shadow lines, those that do more than travel with global capital or replicate what Ghosh (1988: 288) calls the ‘looking-glass border’ of petty nationalism. If the Asian urban century is an age of the world view, of the conquest of the global south as picture, then such shadow lines are more urgent than ever before. If the task of theory of/from the south is to be consolidated, then such shadow lines must be, as Spivak (1999) has already insisted, ‘a critique of postcolonial reason’.

References

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