Unsettling responsibility: postcolonial interventions

Abstract:

This paper contributes to debates about geographies of responsibility. In contrast to much of the previous literature in this field, which has concentrated on teasing out the intimate interconnections between different people, places and spaces, in this paper we highlight the limits to such connections, focusing on more unsettled versions of responsibility. Our critique draws on postcolonial readings to highlight two limitations of responsibility: its availability as an ethical gesture which can be ascribed even where it is not practised; and its imputed agency which makes it possible for responsible agency to be usurped by the global North. This starts to muddy the water of responsibility, showing how it may involve refusal, denial, withdrawal and contamination. More problematised enigmatic and risky versions of responsibility arise from these critiques. In particular, we argue that in considering responsibility *as practice*, a recognition of the provisional, contaminated and complex myriad of power relations involved may signal a move towards more ambivalent versions and visions that acknowledge the vulnerabilities and disconnections involved in geographies of responsibility.

Unsettling responsibility: postcolonial interventions

Introduction

Responsibility is increasingly summoned as a route to living ethically in a postcolonial world. In response to a widespread political shift towards the scaling down, localisation and privatisation of responsibility (Ilcan 2009), geographers have strongly argued for a global agenda of responsibility that recognises responsibility to 'distant others'. Early versions of responsibility in geography were often enunciated from a broadly top-down liberal-humanist perspective. Thus, richer nations were asked to take up responsibilities for people and countries that were less wealthy, often evoked through the figure of the poor and marginalised 'distant stranger' (Corbridge 1998; Smith 2002). Matthew Sparke (2007b, 396) pointedly criticises this kind of 'flat world geographical conceit', one that he links with recent political discourses around global responsibility, in which responsibility is interpreted from a putative centre in terms of the capricious global agency of a privileged few, so that "bombing too can be coded as just another act of responsible global leadership". However, a significant intervention in the field, the special issue of *Geografisker Annaler B* (2004) entitled *Geographies of Responsibility,* has significantly shifted debates about global responsibility in geography away from this unilinear view of responsibility for an agency-less underprivileged other towards a more nuanced and power-conscious analysis. The articles in this (2004) special issue offer a sustained engagement with the political implications of conceiving global responsibility

as embedded within the 'power-geometries' of relational space. They echo Young's (2004, 2006) argument for a need to shift away from a liability model of individualised responsibility to a more political one based on recognising social connections and 'shared responsibility distributed across complex networks of causality and agency' (Barnett 2010, 7). Thus one may be responsible for injustice because of structural connections to it, but not be to blame for it as an individual (Young 2003, 40).

In this paper we build on the growing literature on geographies of responsibility (Barnett and Land 2007; Jazeel and McFarlane 2010; Lawson 2007; McEwan and Goodman 2010 Massey 2004; Sparke 2007a; 2007b), in which responsibility is framed in terms of the specificities of transnational inter-relationships between different people, places and spaces. We utilise postcolonial critiques to highlight the limits to such connections, producing more troubling and unsettling versions of responsibility. We highlight the discontinuities, limitations and refusals that are also inherent in responsibility but we do so without jettisoning responsibility, as it undoubtedly offers enormous potential in imagining the geographies of existing and evolving relationality. This venture, we believe, is another spoke in the larger project of rethinking the relationalities *and* disconnections that are central to the making of the postcolonial world (see Noxolo et al 2008).

The paper is structured into four parts. Following a brief discussion of the geographies of responsibility literature, in the second section we utilise the uncertainties that postcolonial critiques insert into discussions of responsibility to highlight two key limitations: the gap

between ascription and action and the limitations surrounding the notion of agency. Recognition of these two limitations issues challenges for how we think about and *practice* responsibility in geography, which are set out in the third section. The third section therefore argues for the need to recognise the riskiness of responsibility and the enigmatic responses that appeals to be responsible may invite. The final fourth section concludes by briefly reflecting on the implications of these postcolonial interventions for thinking about and practising geographies of responsibility. Our key contribution is to unsettle and complicate both linear/top down versions of responsibility *and* more relational approaches precisely because, in practice, responsibility is messy, uncertain and can be refused. However, in unsettling discussions of responsibility we are not outright rejecting connectivities and relationalities; rather we are making a plea that at the same time as there is recognition of interconnection, there is also awareness of the importance of allowing for a politics of disconnection, even if that is an uncomfortable and difficult terrain for the academic geographer.

Geographies of responsibility

Responsibility has entered the frame of geography through disparate routes. Early versions of responsibility were often articulated as unproblematised and 'top-down'. This created a one-sided view of the causality of relationships of responsibility, with richer nations being encouraged to take up responsibilities for countries that were less affluent, and for people who were less prosperous (Corbridge 1998; Smith 2002). However, following the influential special issue of *Geografisker Annaler B* (2004), debates about responsibility in geography moved towards more context-driven, relational analyses

which stressed the mutual constitution of sometimes distant places and people. This line of thinking has been elaborated and nuanced through the work of a range of other writers in geography more recently. Thus several strands of work on responsibility are emerging: responsibility as accountability to a constituency, often embedded in judicial notions or with a strongly political bent (Atkins et al 2006; Bickerstaff et al 2008; Koschade and Peters 2006; Sparke 2007a); responsibility as responsiveness through generosity or hospitality to distinct calls from various cosmopolitan groups (Barnett 2005; Barnett and Land 2007; Bosco 2007; Jazeel 2007; Popke 2007); responsibility to those who will come in the future, especially in relation to the environment (Armstrong 2006; Hobson 2006; Pickerill 2009); academic responsibilities in pedagogy, research, writing and publication (Jazeel and McFarlane 2010; Madge and Eshun in press; Newstead 2009; Noxolo 2009; O'Loughlin et al. 2011); responsibilities associated with ethical and moral economies (McEwan and Goodman 2010; Hughes et al 2008; Jackson et al 2009); and responsibility as postcolonial relationality, tuned to past and present inequalities of a postcolonial world (Madge et al 2009; Noxolo et al 2008; Power 2009). These works all push, in different ways, at teasing out the complex relationships of responsibility between variously located people and places.

Ultimately, as Lawson (2007) argues, taking responsibility is an ethical disposition that offers a way of taking account of inequalities and confronting power in a profoundly unequal postcolonial world (see also Blunt and McEwan 2002; Power et al 2006; Robinson 2003). However, it is precisely because of these power differences that it is worth considering not only the possibilities of transcending these power differentials but

also the problems associated with doing so. Recent geographical work takes some steps in this direction. For example, Jazeel and McFarlane (2010) start to question the limits to responsibility, questioning how abstraction can result in distancing, and can therefore risk evasion of concerns from 'the field' by decontextualising places, constituencies and ideas. Similarly, McEwan and Goodman (2010, 105) draw attention to the problems of focusing on individual responsibility rather than collective action which can turn attention away from the political and issues of institutional and structural power. Thompson (2010, 195) probes further, asking some difficult questions surrounding the moral evaluation of political action, raising the problem of 'dirty hands' in the context of the Copenhagen Accord on climate change. He asks whether the production of international agreements on global climate change overrides other duties towards the global poor. In other words, is a position of 'good enough' responsibility better than doing nothing at all? These papers are indicative of a more general move away from idealized models of justice towards starting from 'more worldly, intuitive understandings of injustice, indignation and harm, and building up from there' (Barnett 2010, 7).

Another critique of the responsibility literature arises from the role of agency therein. Sin (2010), for example, argues that the embedding of calls of responsibility in a universal ethic of sameness is *still* (despite moves towards a more relational approach) often underpinned by problems of voice, of address and of agency. He argues that both the speakers and those called to be responsible seem to be those in the First World while those they are responsible for appear to be 'poor Third World subjects'. As Sin (2010, 984, 985) notes:

'The notion of 'responsibility'...is often shaped and constructed around the view that the privileged 'developed world' should be responsible to the less-privileged 'developing world'. Ascribing responsibility to and only to the 'privileged' is often an unspoken and seemingly unproblematic assumption.... (The 'South') is also often deemed incapable of irradiating its problems...and therefore needs the privileged 'North's' assistance and resources...'

Through such a framing, the focus of moral agency rests with the active giver at the cost of the receiver who is 'thereby rendered a rather passive subject' (Barnett and Land, 2007, 1071), which can set up enduring asymmetries in power relations. These recent papers therefore suggest some of the difficulties still associated with notions of responsibility.

We want to push these debates about the unsettled nature of responsibility further. In particular, we want to argue for an intersubjective, place-based reading of responsibility, which highlights that responsibilities to ourselves over 'here' and that to others over 'there' are not clearly demarcated. This insight blurs the boundaries between outside and inside in relation to place and by implication also questions the boundary between self and other (see Noxolo et al 2008), suggesting that we are not only 'a part of' each other but can also be 'apart from' each other (Raghuram et al 2009, 9). Towards this end, the paper draws in the next section on the anti-colonial imperative within postcolonial theory to critique responsibility. This is a relatively underdeveloped aspect within postcolonial geographies as well as geographies of responsibility.

Postcolonial interventions

Theories of responsibility have entered geography -and have been conducted at- a high level of abstraction. As a result, responsibility is often theorised in ways that make it appear injunctive, even metaphysical. Moreover, it is not associated with a set of practices - there is no 'responsibility work'[1] - and therefore, there are no institutional parameters for assessing responsible action. Responsibility, especially as responsibilisation[2], can as a result often become introverted, institutionalised through 'discipline and punishment'. Hence, while theories of responsibility may recognise the interconnections that make up the modern world, implicating all people irrespective of location equally in responsible action is problematic because in practice responsible action is located in an unequal political world which complicates both the practice and the ethics of responsibility.

One implication of these inequalities is the very clear sense of ineradicable 'otherness' in some forms of relationality. For Spivak (2008, 1994), this otherness is a direct consequence of the interconnected yet hugely uneven global relationships through which we are formed. As a result she rejects any possibility of pure responsibility, arguing instead that responses and accountability are always caught up in asymmetrical processes. However, this asymmetry is not only one of locations, nor indeed of identities. The call to respond arises out of the unevenness of the relations in which we are all involved. And it is precisely this unevenness that makes responsibility, for some, an impossible call.

Postcolonial theorists have, as a result, played a significant part in interrogating Eurocentric versions of responsibility. In this section we explore two aspects of responsibility that have been the bases for postcolonial interventions. They revolve around two qualities of responsibility: its availability as an ethical gesture which can be ascribed even where it is not practised; and secondly, its imputed agency, which makes it possible for responsible agency to be usurped by the global North.

Ascription

Responsibility, understood as practice, is inherently agentic, but it is a relationship that is linked to practice in a morally-mediated sequence – responsible agency takes place as a consequence of an interpretation of relationship, whether that is a relationship of reciprocity, of trust, or of guilt, usually based on previous actions. Responsibility, then, is a quality that is *ascribed* or imputed to practice, either before, while or after that action takes place. This explains the force of the moral pull of geographies of responsibility as a call to action – the relationship of responsibility, once established, calls for action as its *necessary* corollary[3]. Failure to act can, thus, become a marker of irresponsibility.

Action and its moral calibration are easily separated because of this inherent quality of responsibility, opening up ways in which responsibility can be grasped, enacted and denied differentially between those who feel the weight of the actions and those who prescribe its normative qualities. In other words, whatever the actions or the relationships themselves, responsibility is open to contestation, not only in the establishment of that

relationship (which has been the focus of geographies of responsibility hitherto), but also in the gap *between* action and relationship.

This very different relation between action and relationship means that the calibration of the success of responsibility is not inherently tied to its outcomes. This in turn allows action to be appropriated or rescripted (or refused) so that responsibility can be ascribed even where it is not achieved. One implication of this, within the context of unstable power relations where both action and ascription are enacted, is that it opens up possibilities for a complex *politics* of ascription of responsibility. Moreover, because responsibility, as ascribed to practice, often begins from institutionalised relationships of political governance, this separation between ascription and action becomes more distanciated, more mediated, often with violent consequences. This has had at least two consequences: first, the language of responsibility can be adopted even when there has been a withdrawal of responsibility from some humans and some places and, secondly, responsibility can simply be 'passed on'.

The misuse of the language of responsibility becomes evident when considering (post)colonial geographies of international domination and development (Hall 1994; Slater 2004; Spurr 1993) where responsibility can become associated with violent or juridical action that can leave real bodies either dead or in need of care (Gregory 2005; Mbembe 2003; Young, 2003). Moreover, these acts may be *claimed* as responsible action even when they present a denial of responsibility. The complexity of this denial of responsibility is evoked in Agamben's (1998) analysis of 'bare life'. Agamben draws a

picture of the modern political subject, constructed within a situation of Foucauldian biopolitical power, in which the sovereign state retains "the right to make live or to let die" (Foucault 2004, 241). In other words, although it is the problem of how to make the population live longer and more productively that becomes the great political question for the state, integral to this question is the drawing and re-drawing of boundary lines between the citizen (for whose life the state takes responsibility, and whose death, for example in war, is honoured and mourned as sacrifice), and the exception ('bare life') , towards whom there is no responsibility, and who can be killed or be allowed to die. Sylvester (2006) traces the widespread use of such exceptionalism (the marking out of certain groups as excepted from accepted political contracts between governments and citizens) as a mandate for state-led killing of 'bare life', from colonial regimes (in which bodies were surveilled, disciplined, mutilated, raped and murdered with impunity, most notably under slavery), through to modern postcolonial regimes (Gilroy 1993; Mbembe 2001). For postcolonial theorists it is the possibility of extending the state of exception to large parts of the world, places which are outside the ambit of responsibility or indeed where responsible action is constituted through these exceptions (Duffield 2007), that can make responsibility suspect as an ethical gesture.

Postcolonial theorists draw on a post-colonial history of rejecting the ascription of responsibility to the inter-state actions of former colonisers, figuring the invocation of responsibility as a neo-colonising 'desire to intervene' (Slater 2004, 224). For example, dependency theories (see for example Cardoso 1982; Rodney 1981) and theories of neo-colonialism (see for example Nkrumah 1965; Nyerere 1968), were extended and

powerful critiques of the fact that what may be claimed as responsible action by powerful governments may be rejected as the maintenance of unequal power relations by those living in the places on which they impacted (see Slater 2004 for a reconsideration of what dependency theories still have to offer). Thus while history serves as a valuable example, so too are post-development theories, as well as critiques of 'partnership' and other forms of conditionality, continuing condemnations of the neo-colonising effects of development labelled as 'responsible action' (see for example Baaz 2005; Noxolo 2006; Ziai 2007).

Moreover, the need for a politics of refusal has intensified in recent years within a renewed attempt to grow the US empire (Stoler 2001). Thus, the United States government framed the use of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as a way of bringing about: "democracy, development and free trade" in terms of responsibility: "The United States welcomes our responsibility to lead in this great mission" (Sparke 2007b, 395). Here responsibility is also deployed in relation to security in the more generally securitised context of the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the US in September 2001 (Ingram and Dodds 2009; Noxolo and Huysmans 2009).

In addition to the issue surrounding the language of responsibility, responsibility may also be denied by simply being passed on. The complex spatio-temporal patterns in which responsibility can be denied are explored by both Sylvester (2006) and Mbembe (2003). Sylvester (2006, 69) offers an analysis of the ways in which denial of responsibility becomes a game of 'pass pass' between scales of postcolonial governance, so that global institutions condemn human rights atrocities in poorer countries, and their former

colonisers deny their own historical complicity in the contemporary situation, whilst local elites divert attention from their contemporary authoritarianism by focusing attention on historical oppression. Mbembe's (2003) careful historical exploration of the changing spatiality of death as a means of rule shows how large portions of the population are placed outside the boundaries of responsibility at different conjunctural moments in colonial and postcolonial history. Thus reference to postcolonial theory starts to muddy the water of responsibility, showing how it may involve refusal, denial and withdrawal.

Agency

A second aspect of responsibility that has been critiqued by postcolonial theorists is the way in which responsible agency is conceptualised. This line of argument follows two strands. First, responsible action is never free of its locational imperatives and its identifications so that the responsible agent is always tainted: there is no pure space within and from which responsibility can be enacted. Secondly, at least partially as a result, responsibility may also therefore be refused.

In a passage that is worth quoting at length for its uncompromisingly truthful obviousness, Spivak (2008, 71) talks scathingly of:

> "the liberal Euro-US academic, unceasingly complicitous with the text of exploitation, possibly endorsing child slavery every time s/he drinks a cup of tea, paying taxes to destroy survival ecobiomes of the world's poor and bomb innocent Afghan villages by mistake, sometimes mouthing a 'marxism' liberal-humanized

out of existence and talking no doubt against US military aggression….For them the happy euphoria of being in the right."

In this context it is difficult for well-meaning western academics to talk about responsibility, even reformulated as intersubjectivity, whilst the conditions that allow us to do so are so very complicit in these exploitative relationships. For this reason many postcolonial writers have refused the very possibility of the powerful acting responsibly in the sense of addressing the very inequalities that make them powerful, arguing that they can neither have the will nor the capacity to do so (see Memmi 1985).

As a result, Spivak's criticism of the academic is not for their complicity but because of their failure to fully face up to and accept their 'contaminated' position. This acceptance is necessary if responsibility is to be understood as a practice that is always incompletely comprehended, i.e. it is the responsibility of the academic to remember that our relationship with others is always an imperfect process of exchange, in which there is always something that does not get through, "the event that escapes the performative conventions of the exchange" (Spivak 2008, 59). In other words, to the same extent that our postcolonial *condition* makes us a part of each other, our postcolonial *politics*, with its anti-colonising impulse in the face of continued inequality and exploitation, must recognise that we are also apart from each other, and that this gap is never entirely bridged (see Noxolo et al 2008)[4].

At least partly in response, other postcolonial theorists have argued for the need to refuse the inequality of these connections, the second point we wish to make. In an analysis of Aimé Césaire's Letter to Maurice Thorez, Kemedjio and Mitsch (2010) argue that Césaire's letter of resignation from (i.e. refusal to be part of) the Communist International was a proclamation of responsibility. They suggest that for Césaire taking responsibility for oneself was the ultimate achievement of decolonisation. Colonialism dispossessed the colonized from historical initiative and placed them in a 'situation of dependence that is also a situation of irresponsibility….The colonial situation establishes the irresponsibility of the colonized at both the individual and collective levels because, as Fanon instructs us, colonization writes the history of the nation that colonizes, not the history of the colonized people (Fanon 36)' (quoted by Kemedjio and Mitsch 2010, 97). Taking responsibility for one self through refusal was therefore a key practical and theoretical move for Césaire. It was a way of claiming agency in order to reconstruct a new post-colonial world.

Looked at through the Foucaultian (2004) lens of biopower, the recovery of agency by the colonized was made possible not because of the limits of colonial power, but because that power was Janus-faced – it was both constitutive and repressive (Parfitt 2009). This enabled certain forms of agency. Mbembe too gestures at the paradox that bare life represents – its active agency which goes beyond response[5]. As Mbembe (2003, 22) argues '(T)reated as if he or she no longer existed except as a mere tool and instrument of production, the slave nevertheless is able to draw almost any object, instrument, language, or gesture into a performance and then stylize it.' The response to violence, its

potentiality, its immanence and its incomprehensibility was thus a new call to respond. This recognition of the constitutive role of power was necessary in the context of colonialism, as for many the removal of agency from the colonized was one of the worst outcomes of colonialism. Thus Kwadwo (2009) argues that the greatest violence that colonialism did was to remove responsibility from those who were colonized, to find that the 'initiative in your own life or your history is taken away. You are taken out of the stream of your own history and put into somebody else's' (Kwadwo 2009, 102).

Reclaiming responsible agency by those who were colonized thus involved a rejection of existing inequitious connections and a demand for disconnection or autonomy. However, such a reclamation of agency not only highlights the disconnections between different peoples and places but also lays the basis for new connections to be forged. Not permitting others to take responsibility for you, becoming agents in your own history, is therefore not simply to request to return to disconnected (at least relatively) pre-colonial relations. It is not a simplified call for self-determination, always a tricky demand in an uneven world. It also resists the individualization of responsibility through notions of self-reliance and self-help (Noxolo, 2011). Nor is it to claim that pre-colonial relations were innocent - rather responsible refusal recognizes that the past too was uneven, riven with injustices. Taking responsibility instead constitutes a demand for a new form of connection to produce new collectives. It argues for inclusion into 'the collective' of collective responsibility. This responsibility too has a spatial stretch and reaches beyond the individual to the wider world. This is a responsibility in which everyone is implicated, and responsibility can no longer be 'passed on'.

Risky and enigmatic responsibility

In the previous section we have highlighted some of the complex power relations that underlie 'responsible' relationships. In this section we suggest that there are two ways of dealing with such a critique of responsibility: firstly, by recognising that it can be risky and, secondly, by thinking of it as enigmatic. Both of these positions, in practice, involve an uncertain final outcome of responsibility- either to you or to the others with whom you are in a relationship. Thus calibrating responsibility as practice can be a risky venture which envisages unfinished futures.

This uncomfortable recognition of the uncertainties involved in responsible practice carries with it the responsibility of constantly making ourselves vulnerable to the presence of the incomprehensible which lies unsaid and unacknowledged at the 'selvedges' (Spivak 1992, 178) of discourse, where language and thought begin to fray and lose their ability to make meaning. This responsibility therefore involves "the difficult giving of permission to be approached by that which most resists thought" (Spivak 2008, 60). When responsible action is taken (responding as best we can to what we understand of the other's call) there needs to be an awareness that this question of the irreducible incomprehension that surrounds the response to the other is only being put on hold, not resolved. In other words, responsible action involves making proximate that which is distant. It involves creating an affective affiliation through a recognition of relationships that are constitutive of who we are, *and at the same time* involve degrees of

complicity in suffering and inequality. Spivak is therefore not arguing for baffled paralysis, but asking for "the least grave of these forms of complicity" (Derrida quoted in Spivak 2008, 63) as a basis for action.

Spivak describes this responsibility in the face of our own complicity as 'risky' for two reasons. First, it is risky because it means that academic theory alone (or even centrally) cannot be relied on to ultimately resolve the question of which action is the responsible one to take. It is in the outcomes of responsible action *"without final guarantees" (*Hall 1996, 45; our italics) that we really discover the horrors and triumphs of history, not in disembodied theory (Noxolo 2009). It is by setting responsibility to work that we make ourselves responsible. This is a call to narrow the gap between ascription and practice, to produce our responses with careful learning. For academics this is a vulnerable place to be. It involves a loss of the last vestiges of revolutionary vanguard status for intellectuals, and, beyond this, an ultimate relinquishing of the capacity of knowledge to finally legitimise, "recuperate" (Seshadri-Crooks 2002, 86) and normalise the actions of others. Practices take place in "the risky night of non-knowledge" (Spivak 2008, 63).

Spivak's second reason as to why responsibility is risky, is because being responsible must also involve acceptance that those 'others' in relation to whom we may consider ourselves responsible have no universal, moral or legal reason for accepting our responsibility. We may respond to what we deem to be a call, but the other may not accept our response as such. Both call and response are situational and subjective. As Spivak (2008, 59) points out, the 'other' to whom we respond "will have judged,

necessarily with and in spite of standards, necessarily related and different." Moreover, listening to that judgement requires dialogue, not monologue, a move away from the search for authentic voices (see Achebe 1988 in relation to this) and a shift to recognising the limits of what we can hear, rather than an endless search for subaltern voices (Spivak, 1988). Responsible, caring action therefore involves an openness and vulnerability to that which most resists European thought: those aspects of the 'other' that are not shared and are not comfortable.

This leads to the second point we wish to make: not only is responsibility risky, it is also enigmatic. Kumkum Sangari's (1990) classic essay explores the possibility of the 'other' refusing to 'call' as expressed in the postcolonial literary phenomenon of magical realism, the most famous exponent of which is Gabriel Garcia Marquez. A close exploration of her conception of magical realism as the maintenance of 'enigma', the refusal to give a definitive answer, is instructive in relation to the basis for this call. Sangari argues that the magical realist withholds a final and definitive meaning, not in a postmodern sense (i.e. because there is infinite slippage of meaning, so no meaning is to be found), but in a determinedly postcolonial sense (i.e. as a meaningful refusal to give an answer). This withholding of an answer, Sangari argues, has a specific contextual rooting in Latin America, in that these societies experience on a day-to-day level a postcolonial condition that makes deciding what is real a question of contestation. With their diverse histories and contemporary relations of métissage (bringing into contact a range of ethnicities from repeated conquests, migrations and settlements), and with their mixing of a range of coexisting social forms ranging from feudal to post-capitalist, it is necessary to

withhold meaning precisely in order to understand and work with the dialogues required to establish it:

> "The margin for arbitrariness, the casting up of the strange, the incongruous, the peripheral, is the product of a historical situation… For us, the difficulty of arriving at "fact" through the historical and political distortions that so powerfully shape and mediate it leads not to dismember finally either the status or the existence of fact. Rather, it tends to assert another level of factuality, to cast and resolve the issues of meaning on another, more dialectical plane, a plane on which the notion of knowledge as provisional and of truth as historically circumscribed is not only necessary for understanding, but can in turn be made to work from positions of engagement within the local and contemporary." (Sangari 1990, 220).

At the same time, however, Sangari presents enigma as a historical tactic deployed by people who have been repeatedly marginalised and violated by ostensibly responsible and caring people, whence comes the colonial stereotype of the enigmatic woman or colonised 'other', who the coloniser seeks to scrutinise but finds impossible to understand (see also Spivak 2003, 20-3). Behind this refusal to answer (and perhaps in recognition of the inevitable degrees of complicity in our reading of Spivak's 'risky' responsibility) is a stubborn questioning of the terms on which dialogue is sought: "The unanswered question is not an invitation to further guesswork, but addresses itself to whether the question itself is worth asking or is necessary to answer, whether the question itself is not the first in a series of violations…" (Sangari 1990, 230). Even within the constraints of global interconnectedness, both the terms of interconnectedness and the ability of some to

hear the response may mean that those who are asked the question may ponder, may delay response. This withholding of response can, however, paradoxically form the basis for real dialogue. Sangari warns against a western-centred postmodern scepticism that mistakes this withholding of meaning for an absence of meaning, and points instead to a focus on the 'strain', 'anxiety' and 'insecurity' produced in those who find their attempts to understand frustrated. From within this anxiety, the pressure of *not knowing* focuses *not doing* into a problematic (Sangari 1990, 231) that builds stamina towards the ongoing quest for a mutually listening care and responsibility, rather than the relative comfort of short-term stop-gap solutions, even where these are based on a sense of intersubjectivity and relationality.

To conclude this section we suggest the need to approach responsibility in terms of a goal of answerability, i.e. being vulnerable to questioning (also see Clark et al 2006). Giving an answer can lead to vulnerability, to violation, or to political manipulation, so an answer is sometimes withheld, effectively interrogating the question itself. However, interrogating the question is not necessarily the same as closing oneself off from questioning, i.e. to reach a goal of reconciliation, or of a mutually listening dialogue, there needs to be a cultivated state of answerability, even if, in specific cases, an answer is not given. This is of course to do with recognising the fluid, intersubjective boundaries of relationality (Noxolo et al 2008): being answerable is about recognising the claims (Noxolo 2006) that other people have on us, because of their contribution to who we are (Massey 2004). However, it is also about being open to listening for what may be unexpected, painful or confusing questions from an 'other' who may not only 'call', but

may (or may not) also accuse, demand, interrogate or refuse dialogue in our terms, laying down terms of their own. Cultivating and maintaining this state of answerability calls for constant attention to a more risky and enigmatic version of responsibility than geographers have previously worked with.

Conclusions

Geographical literature on responsibility to date has mostly focused on teasing out the intimate interconnections and relationalities between different people, places and spaces. More recent discussions have also highlighted the ways in which the complex relationalities of a postcolonial world mean that relations of responsibility are not always cosy but are contested, complicated and productively unsettling (Raghuram et al 2009). This focus on postcolonial intersubjective interaction -on how we are all *a part of* a postcolonial world- is clearly important. However, drawing on postcolonial theory in this paper we also argue for the need to unsettle these interactions and connections. Interrelating with the 'irreconcilable other' involves a (perhaps uncomfortable?) recognition that not only are some spaces, times, places, peoples and relationships *apart from* this postcolonial interaction, not entirely determined through their relations with the north (Mufti 2005), but beyond this, that they might also want to actively *refuse* some forms of responsible relationships that northern academics want to imagine.

We have, therefore, tried to explore some of the limits to such connections and relations, and exposed a more unsettled terrain for responsibility, one that is marked by

uncertainties, political contestations and risk. We do not repudiate relationality, but we want to unsettle it by redrawing its imagined cartography in two ways. Firstly, we want to include lines of *dis*connection as well as connection, to allow the possibility of refusal, withdrawal, denial and contamination. Secondly, we want to push past simple centres, margins and lines, towards a sense of elevation and depression, which evokes the bumpiness of the global terrain in which responsible agency is actually practiced in an uneven world. In unsettling relational responsibility in these two ways, we want to highlight that relations of responsibility can remain asymmetrical, and can retain inappropriate certainties about the nature of that relationship, even where these certainties are based on the apparently firm political ground of a shared colonial and postcolonial past. Instead of deciding that postcolonial relationships are firmly settled in particular ways, we would argue that responsibility demands a continued openness to other settlements. Responsible agency needs therefore to be envisaged as based on relationships that are still evolving, still unsettled, much more risky and enigmatic for all concerned, avoiding settled certainties.

In unsettling the terrain of responsibility, we hope to move towards more problematised and ambivalent versions and visions that acknowledge the vulnerabilities involved in geographies of responsibility. This intervention, we argue, brings the critical edge of postcolonial theory into literature on geographies of responsibility. Drawing on a rich vein of anti-colonial sentiment in postcolonial theory, the paper argues ultimately for a recognition of the politics of disconnection. Here we are not simply arguing for a lack of connection (an impossibility in a globalised world where there is almost always

inevitably seepage), nor an oppositional 'flip the coin' nihilistic disconnection but rather we are arguing to include the possibility of disconnection within the remit of relationality, even if this is uncomfortable and difficult. This politics of disconnection, as a transient, ever changing and unsettling position complicates the politics of inclusion which has underlain most postcolonial interventions in geography by highlighting some intrinsic tensions in inclusionary politics. These tensions are inherent in all minoritarian politics – desire for inclusion but not for inclusion into pre-existing hegemonic social relations. It arrives as a demand to undo repressive power-laden relations as part of building newer more equitable ones and to use what cannot be understood/talked about/resolved as a starting point for future alliances.

Drawing on the antagonism that underlay anticolonial sentiment may feel outdated in a globalising world. However, the underlying ethos of colonialism as a form of global political organisation still survives in new forms of imperialism compelling us to rekindle the antagonistic sensibilities of postcolonial writers. However, it is also important to recognise that the fronts along which the binary politics from which colonialism was (mostly) fought have multiplied. Colonizer-colonised or North-South are not necessarily the only divisions along which these politics are played out - the tension between connection and disconnection may be as significant in newly forming global relations. Nor is the nation (or broad geo-political categories such as global South) the most appropriate category of analysis. Rather, in a globalising world both affiliations and disconnections may occur along other, more transnational, lines. Moreover, the

individualisation of responsibility underpinned by the politics of responsibilisation also means that this tension between connection and disconnection is worth noting.

To conclude then, our critique suggests four provisos to any practice of responsibility. First, these practices should always be recognised as contingent and *provisional*. Through the 'shuttle of dialogue', the process or journey of working out the limits to responsibility in intimate ways in specific places, times and relationships involves 'tacking back and forth between these guardrails in the transnational landscapes of knowledge production' (Jazeel and McFarlane 2007, 784). It is this impermanent, negotiated reading of responsibility, which takes on board the complexities of local configurations of power and the specificities of geographical and historical context, which this provisional approach opens up. Secondly, we would argue that our *complicity* in these power-full relationships of responsibility requires us to remain responsive to the articulations and claims of all those involved in such relationships including their profound silences, refusals and withdrawals and an acute awareness of our denials and delusions. Such a reading produces both the subject and object of responsibility as non-innocent subjects, challenges simplistic and moralistic determinations of wrong-doer and wronged, and thus moves towards attentive, patient and care-full approaches that offer no guarantees. Thirdly, these commitments will remind us of the *complexities*, risks and vulnerabilities involved in working through responsible relations. There will be no easy solutions. Finally, these complexities move us to consider the question of *refusal*. This is a refusal not to *be* responsible but *of* some forms of power that underlie the call to be responsible. Such a politics of refusal may take many forms. In our paper we have explored refusal in

terms of risk and enigma as conduits for provisional, complex and contaminated geographies of responsibilities. Spivak (2008) suggests that we accept our contamination in theory and work with it in practice.

Finally, in unsettling discussions of responsibility we wish to reiterate that we are not outright rejecting connectivities and relationalities; rather we are making a plea that at the same time as there is recognition of interconnection, there is also awareness of the separation and difference that mark this profoundly unequal postcolonial world - a reminder of the politics within which the ethical call to responsibility is being played out. It is towards this search to deconstruct the gap between being a part of and apart from that our risky and enigmatic reading of responsibility moves us.

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Acknowledgements

Notes

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[1] This is in direct contrast to the care literature, whereby care is often looked at through a series of professional practices, such as carework, which means there is a very specific thematic literature that theorises place, space and ethics, often drawing on empirical practice-based case studies (see for example Williams and Crooks 2008).

[2] Responsibilisation refers to the process by which, within many contemporary welfare states, individuals are increasingly being urged to be responsible for their own care rather than welfare (health care, education, poverty reduction), being provided by the state. In the U.K., for instance, a series of shifts in welfare provision have posited the individualised, responsibilised self as the ideal citizen (Clarke 2005; Dean 1999; Rose and Miller 1992) and the volunteering self-regulating local community as the ideal context within which they should receive care (Department of Health and Department of Social Security 1989; Milligan 2000; Prime et al 2002). Ilcan (2009, 207) has thus suggested that we are 'witnessing a change in how we think about and practice our responsibilities', with a move towards 'privatisation' of responsibilities undertaken by the 'responsible citizen' in many diverse parts of the world.

[3] It is worth noting here that this problem is not inherent to responsibility (as theorised by Levinas, for instance), particularly where it is interpreted as an ethical stance. However, responsibility as ethic and that as practise differ and in this paper we have developed a postcolonial critique of responsibility as a set of practices.

[4] This point has also been made forcefully by black feminists who have since the 1970s argued that the construction of universal sisterhood papers over differences, trapping black women in the role of victim and failing to recognise the racialised oppressions through which people are gendered (Carby 1997; Mohanty 1991). As Kaplan (1987, 194) pointed out succinctly in the 1980s: "All women are not equal, and we do not all have the same experiences (even of gender oppression)." By the same token, Hall (1996) announced the death of the innocent black subject, insisting that no one is able to represent an undifferentiated mass of black people, and that difference is at the heart of identity.

[5] Thus for us, bare life is about a process of stripping life, not about its bareness per se. This is an important distinction, given the lack of agency sometimes imputed to bare life. See also Neilson (2004) for a discussion of the differences between the accounts of Negri and Agamben.