

Introduction

Catachresis: Religion, Gender, and Postcoloniality

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There has to be somewhere else, I tell myself....Everyone knows that a place exists which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system....I am searching: somewhere there must be people who are like me in their rebellion and in their hope.¹

The theme of this issue of *Religion and Gender* is the relationship between the categories of religion, gender, and postcoloniality refracted through the figure of 'catachresis'. The papers collected here are but a small sample of those presented at a workshop held at SOAS, University of London on 17–19 December 2012 entitled 'Catachreses: Gender, Religion, and Postcoloniality'. The workshop itself was organized as one of the planned activities of an international research and networking project – 'Interdisciplinary Innovations in the Study of Religion and Gender: Postcolonial, Post-secular and Queer Perspectives' (IISRG) – led by Utrecht University, Faculty of Humanities, and funded by the Netherlands Organisation of Scientific Research (NWO) under its 'Internationalisation in the Humanities' programme. The project has brought together leading scholars in the field of Religion and Gender from internationally renowned research institutions (see <http://projectreligionandgender.org/participants/>) with the objective of developing research project proposals and grant applications and establishing a structural research network for the study of religion and gender. The aim of the IISRG project is to contribute to the development of the interdisciplinary study of religion and gender from a range of contemporary critical perspectives in the humanities and social sciences by focusing on three important themes:

¹ H. Cixous and C. Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans., Betsy Wing, London: I.B. Tauris 1996, 72.

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postcolonial criticism, post-secularism and queer theory. The first workshop in a planned series of three, from which the articles in this issue are drawn, focused on the 'postcolonial' strand of the project.

The framework of catachresis was adopted as the thematic and theoretical focus in order to enable what the organizers felt was hitherto insufficiently explored within religion and gender scholarship, that is, the variety of naming and conceptualizing mechanisms and systems of intellectual prescription that organize the intellectual itineraries of the field and which carry with them a certain kind of value-coding that has proven resistant to or insufficiently cognizant of the depth of postcolonial critique. The term 'catachresis' (Gk. *Katakhrēsis*) comes from the Greek term *katakhrēsthai* which means 'to misuse' (from *kata-* 'down' – carrying a strong sense of 'perversion' – and *khresthai* 'to use' but also 'to need'). In a technical sense it means to misuse words, as in a mixed metaphor, either in error, or for rhetorical effect; this 'misuse' can thus either be deliberate or mistaken. Jacques Derrida suggests that catachresis concerns

first the violent and forced *abusive* inscription of a sign, the imposition of a sign upon a meaning which did not yet have its own proper sign in language. So much so that there is no substitution here, no transport of proper signs, but rather the irruptive extension of a sign proper to an idea, a meaning, deprived of their signifier. A 'secondary' original.²

This 'secondary origin' produces 'a new kind of proper sense, by means of a catachresis whose intermediary status tends to escape the opposition of the primitive [sense] and the figurative [sense], standing between them as a "middle"'.³ Catachresis, as the 'middle', is here also a 'between', an interval that is neither purely semantic nor purely syntactical; it is simultaneously a spacing and a *displacement* of the sense proper to a term. In Derrida's formulation catachresis is both a kind of impropriety and an opportunity, inasmuch as in losing the sense *proper* to a sign exposes a reconfigured relation to that sign.

The term has been taken up by various postcolonial theorists (for example, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha) as an expressive means of articulating one of the conditions or formations of postcoloniality and postcolonial criticism. Whilst an introductory essay such as this is not the place to engage in a comprehensive survey of the hugely complex and protracted debates concerning the status of postcolonial theory (and its theorists), or of the nature of postcolonialism – these have been well documented elsewhere⁴ and are, in any

² J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans., Alan Bass, Brighton: Harvester Press 1982, 255.

³ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁴ The following references to the debate are by no means exhaustive but are among the most frequently cited: A. Ahmed, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, London: Verso 1992; A. Ahmed, 'The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality' in *Race and Class* 36:3 (1995), 1–20; K. Appiah, *My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, London: Methuen 1992; B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin (eds.), *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, London: Routledge 1998; C. Breckenbridge and P. van der Veer (eds.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1993; A. Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1997; A. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, London: Routledge 1998; A. McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Postcolonialism"' in F. Barker et al. (eds.), *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial*

case, variously cited throughout the papers in this issue – because the term ‘postcoloniality’ is especially fraught with political and rhetorical contestation it is necessary to indicate here the particular function it serves, or more particularly, does not serve, in the context of this special issue. What we have tried to avoid is what R. Radhakrishnan has suggested is a tendency in academic discussions of postcoloniality to treat it as a matter of ‘first-world’, metropolitan abstraction, where ‘postcoloniality as potential politics or activism’ is sacrificed ‘at the altar of postcoloniality as metropolitan epistemology’.⁵ Nonetheless, whilst wanting to represent its diverse political functioning, we have thought it important to acknowledge both its force and the ongoing necessity of its work of epistemic critique in metropolitan academic circles. In relation to this latter point, we also want to draw attention to the role of postcoloniality in producing new bodies of knowledge, novel reframings of apparently stable concepts, and the unsettling of seemingly normative propositions where political gestures are transported into the space of the academy. As such, we have tried to read ‘postcoloniality’ as a condition of mediation and transformation in both the political and intellectual realms, and as an intervention in the logic that maintains the two as separable. Understanding postcoloniality in these ways connects to the figure of the catachresis inasmuch as it stands in for, and as postcoloniality *in medias res* where, as Gyan Prakash suggests, ‘postcoloniality signifies a critical realignment of colonial power and knowledge’.⁶ Prakash later argues that ‘containing a link to the experience of colonialism, but not contained by it, post-coloniality can be thought of as a form of realignment...critically undoing and redrawing colonialism’s contingent boundaries’.⁷

One of the basic premises, therefore, of postcolonial political and intellectual labour is the necessity – in the process of this ‘redrawing’ of boundaries – of rendering the universalist posture of colonialist, imperialist, and indeed, neo-colonial conceptuality as in fact the product of particular, contingent knowledge formations. This is because the foundational narratives that characterize the west’s self-understanding – of reason’s transcendence, modernity’s inexorable progress in the singular, and of the exemplarity of European civilization – functioned as the condition of possibility for the form and content of European colonialisms. Radhakrishnan points to the continuing force of these narratives in the present era when he notes that ‘[u]nwilling to accept a non-leaderlike role, much less exclusion from Third World projects, the First World mandates a seamless methodological universalism to legitimate its centrality

Theory, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1994, 253–266; A. Mukherjee, ‘Whose Postcolonialism and Whose Postmodernism?’ in *World Literature Written in English* 30:2 (1990), 1–9; B. Parry, ‘Sign of Our Times’ in *Third Text*, 28/29 (1994), 99–113; B. Robbins, *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress*, New York: New York University Press 1999; E. Shohat, ‘Notes on the “Post-Colonial”’ in *Social Text* 31/32 (1992), 99–113; S. Slemon, ‘The Scramble for Post-Colonialism’ in C. Tiffin, A. Lawson (eds.), *De-Scribing Empire: Postcolonialism and Textuality*, London: Routledge 1994, 15–32.

⁵ R. Radhakrishnan, ‘Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity’ in *Callaloo* 16:4 (1993), 750–771: 751.

⁶ G. Prakash, ‘Who’s Afraid of Postcoloniality?’ in *Social Text* 49 (1996), 187–203: 188.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 188–189.

the world over'.⁸ Here what is at stake in maintaining the universalist claim of western conceptuality is visible: it is in fact an attempt to assert the naturalness of western superiority. It is the legitimacy and truthfulness of this centrality, of the specious nature of western conceptuality's universality-cum-superiority, that postcolonial criticism calls into question, seeking to dismantle the west's universalist and normative pretensions and to challenge the prematurity and parochialness of its self-proclaimed prophetic mission.

However, the ambivalent nature of postcolonial criticism – the specific methodological dilemmas it raises, and questions of enunciative location it asks – should not be underestimated, bearing as these do directly on the nature of catachresis as a strategic tool of displacement and realignment. Postcolonial criticism faces the decolonizing imperative to speak in terms not indebted to, or derived from the inevitably dialectical structure mandated by colonial conceptuality – divisions between self and other, colonizer/colonized, centre/periphery, civilized/barbaric, and so on – but this structure requires actors who wish to challenge its hegemony to locate an 'outside' from which to speak. To do so then reifies the priority of the center and acquiesces with that structuration that demands one's relegation to the margins. Gyan Prakash lays out the problematic as follows:

postcolonial critique...seeks to undo the Eurocentrism produced by the institution of the West's trajectory, its appropriation of the other as History. It does so, however, with the acute realization that its own critical apparatus does not enjoy a panoptic distance from colonial history but exists as an aftermath, as an after, after being worked over by colonialism. Criticism formed as an aftermath acknowledges that it inhabits the structures of Western domination that it seeks to undo.⁹

Postcolonial critique is only made possible by what is already there, the historical facticity – the content *and* form – of European colonialism and the imposition of what Naoki Sakai has termed its 'homolingual' idiom.¹⁰ Thus for Spivak, postcoloniality involves the persistent critique of 'a structure that one cannot not (wish to) inhabit' and the necessity of saying 'an impossible "no" to a structure, which one critiques, yet inhabits intimately'.¹¹ For her, this is the form of critique she terms 'catachresis' which aims at 'reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value-coding'.¹²

The task of displacement is a repeated trope in postcolonial criticism, which for Prakash also gestures to the ambivalence of postcolonial labour:

[D]isplacement must not be thought of as only disarticulation or dispersal of colonial discourses. The concept of displacement acquires added vitality and specificity if it is taken to refer not just to the derailment of colonial categories but to their necessarily disjunctive, agonistic functioning. Such a concept...begins with

⁸ Radhakrishnan, 'Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity', 751.

⁹ G. Prakash, 'Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism' in *American Historical Review* 19:5 (1994), 1475–1490: 1475–1476.

¹⁰ N. Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997.

¹¹ G. Spivak, *Outside In The Teaching Machine*, New York: Routledge 1993, 60.

¹² G. Spivak, 'Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality, and Value' in P. Collier and H. Geyer-Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory Today*, Bloomington: Indiana 1990, 219–244: 228.

the proposition that a fundamental instability and division characterized the exercise of colonial power because it was required to produce the authority of the 'civilized' in the figure of the 'uncivilized'; that the very functioning of colonial discourse entailed estrangement because it was compelled to address incommensurable positions of the colonizer and the colonized.¹³

As such, catachresis as a mode of postcoloniality produces a deliberate displacement; it moves the site and sources of articulation and refuses to cooperate with or to acknowledge the propriety of the normative enunciations of colonial conceptuality. It appropriates the metaphors of the oppressor and yet 'abuses' them through interventions that exceed the order of the oppressor. But it is necessary to remain realistic about the scope of the endeavour. Prakash puts it well when he suggests that,

The issue...is not whether disjunction and displacement demobilize the opposition to power, but how and in what historically contingent ways the disjunctive and differentiating functioning of colonial and capitalist dominance provides sources for an immanent criticism, for conducting a sort of guerrilla warfare that operates through historically specific strategies of recombination and realignment.¹⁴

What we have tried to do in this special issue, through our different reflections on the utility and function of catachresis is to attend to the place that 'postcoloniality' should have in the academic field of religion and gender such that we can diligently respond to the postcolonial call for displacement and disjunction of western conceptuality as the *a priori* ground from which we undertake our work. We have wanted to make the argument, in however preliminary a manner, for the necessity of expanding how 'religion and gender' might be examined in a postcolonial frame as categories of analysis that move beyond or away from their inscription in a particularistic field of operation that is definably western and thus caught up in the politics and preoccupations of the west's configurations of modernity. When we refer here to the field of religion and gender we acknowledge that this is a multidisciplinary field which, as Anne-Marie Korte points out in this journal's first issue, in recent years has witnessed a new or expanding interest from 'scientific domains and from vantage points that do not only or primarily belong to theology and religious studies', the disciplines that have initiated and harboured the study of religion and gender from the last quarter of the 20th century.¹⁵ Our suggestion is, however, that the intervention of postcolonial criticism as discussed above may be particularly relevant to those approaches to the field of religion and gender that originate from the disciplines of Theology and Religious Studies – the latter being the discipline with which we primarily identify ourselves – since other disciplines, such as Anthropology, have different intellectual genealogies and also different trajectories of engagement with the challenges posed by postcolonial critique.

¹³ G. Prakash, 'Who's Afraid of Postcoloniality?', 188.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁵ A.-M. Korte, 'Openings: A Genealogical Introduction to Religion and Gender' in *Religion and Gender* 1:1 (2011), 4.

Explorations of Catachresis in Gender and Religion

The five articles presented in this special issue explore the intersections of religion, gender and postcoloniality, through the figure of 'catachresis', from various angles and different disciplinary perspectives, mainly perspectives within the disciplines of Religious Studies and Social and Cultural Anthropology. The opening article by Sian Hawthorne, 'Displacements: Religion, Gender, and the Catachrestic Demand of Postcoloniality', provides the most detailed conceptualization of 'catachresis'. Examining the uneasy intersection between 'religion', 'gender' and 'postcoloniality' in contemporary religion and gender scholarship, Hawthorne questions the prioritization of gender as a site of origination for critique in the study of religion and gender, inasmuch as this implies that the ontic and epistemological category of gender itself is unimplicated in colonial value-codings. She identifies two main tendencies that betray a sub-terranean investment in colonial conceptuality by feminist scholars of religion and gender working within religious studies and theology, namely the employment of an ethnocentric model of gender paraded as universal but in fact informed largely by western feminist assumptions and political agendas which selectively appropriate non-western traditions and models in their service and a conflation feminist and postcolonial interests and experiences as though they are the same. Hawthorne then explores the rich potential of the figure of catachresis as one possible means for a postcolonial intervention in the field, as it enables displacing and destabilizing the category of 'gender', as well as of 'religion' and gestures towards the possibility of avoiding the repetition of colonial conceptuality and its universalist masquerade.

In different ways, and with different regional foci, the four following articles illustrate the type of postcolonial intervention in the field of religion and gender that Hawthorne envisions, indicating the heterogeneity of the forms and function of gender and religion as they work on each other. Taking an ethnographic or otherwise empirical approach to religion and gender in post-colonial contexts and from postcolonial theoretical perspectives, the authors employ the figure of catachresis to explore critically particularly how 'gender' as a category and its related critical conceptuality are being destabilized, challenged and displaced as part of postcolonial resistance and creation in various religious settings.

Laura Grillo, in her essay 'Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics: Catachresis in Côte d'Ivoire', discusses recent expressions of protest of Ivorian women against the violence and calamity of civil war in their country. In a highly symbolic performance, these women smear themselves in white clay, wielding branches and draping themselves with leaves, while some strip naked, dancing and gesturing suggestively. Grillo's detailed analysis shows that this embodied rhetoric of ritual appeals to the traditional religious concept of "female genital power", and she argues that the women's act of imagistic resistance to the post-colonial state and the contemporary political situation exemplifies the kind of productive and empowering praxis categorized by Spivak and other theorists as catachresis. As she points out, it is a twisted form of catachresis because the code-switching performance enacted by these Ivorian women is a re-inscription, not of something appropriated from the colonial domain but of a feature of traditional society. In a catachrestic transgressive move, the traditionally sacred

performance of female genital power is displaced to the secular arena, with secret things being turned into a public spectacle and where taboos on showing intimate body parts are broken in order to shame the viewer. Taking up the famous question raised by Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', Grillo suggests that it is in local situations like this Ivorian case where the subaltern speaks, not through the logocentric frame of postcolonial theory but through the syntax of ritual – a medium that is not dependent on the language of the colonial and is thus less easily co-opted by imperial hegemony.

Moving from the Ivory Coast to Egypt, An Van Raemdonck's essay, 'Egyptian Activism Against FGC as Catachrestic Claiming', critically examines the politics of location in knowledge production within the context of Egyptian feminist activism for abandoning female genital cutting practices. Highlighting the complex positioning of local Egyptian activists who work for societal change and abandonment of FGC within global and local dynamics, Van Raemdonck demonstrates how feminists and other activists, collaborating in the national 'Task Force against FGM' (1994–1999), struggled to create their own space, manoeuvring between dominant international anti-FGC discourse that seeks to eradicate a 'barbaric' African traditional cultural practice, and an authoritarian state. The claims of local activists to abandon the practice are catachrestic, according to Van Raemdonck, in that they do not simply follow hegemonic international anti-FGC campaigning discourse but mediate and translate this discourse into the local Egyptian context in order to resist its implicit colonialist undertone of civilization and progress. At the same time Van Raemdonck makes clear that the possibilities for such a mediation and translation of a transnational discourse to take place, and for alternative epistemologies to emerge, are limited, highlighting the questions of location and power in knowledge and norm production that are key to the figure of catachresis.

In her essay, 'Catholic Migrant Pedagogies and Atlantic Returns', Valentina Napolitano explores Catholic, transnational and gendered Latin American migration to Rome, which she conceptualizes as an 'Atlantic Return'. This notion refers to the labour and faith that, historically, resulted from the European encounter with the New World in the 16th century and now, in the 21st century, return to the heart of the Catholic Church in the form of mostly female lay and religious migrants who become the living blood for the new evangelization of an increasingly secular Europe. This return, Napolitano argues, is profoundly postcolonial as well as catachrestic. Taking up Derrida's notion of catachresis as signs being affected with new ideas across time and space, and interpreting this as also referring to processes that diachronically transform and produce material exchanges and socialities, she suggests that a process of catachresis dwells in the knotting of the embodied and affective histories of the Atlantic Return. Hence she explores how the Catholic Church is challenged by transnational migration from Latin America to Rome, the core challenge being that both lay and religious female migrants often do not fit with the trope of the sacrificial carrier that is central in the Church's pedagogies toward migration. These migrants do not present a 'pure' Catholic gift of faith, labour and love, as is expected from them in the 'economy of the gift' that is central to the Atlantic Return. On the basis of her ethnographic account Napolitano points out that the key question for exploring the political economies that sustain and are exposed by catachrestic moments of mistranslation is how economies of the gift conceal non-redistributive affective forms of exchange as well as intangible

moments of irreducibility and catachresis, in this case around affective histories of labour, faith and missionization.

In the concluding essay of this special issue, 'God's World Is Not an Animal Farm – Or Is It? The Catachrestic Translation of Gender Equality in African Pentecostalism', Adriaan van Klinken uses a Zambian Pentecostal preacher's reference to George Orwell's *Animal Farm* to illustrate and explore the ambivalent and paradoxical character of gender ideology in African Pentecostal circles. Focusing his analysis on the conceptualizations of 'male–female equality' and 'male headship' in a series of sermons delivered by this preacher, and interpreting these in relation to both the postcolonial context of Zambia and global gender discourses, he builds on Homi Bhabha's discussion of catachresis and modernity in order to argue that the appropriation and interruption of normative Western notions of gender equality in the sermons can be understood as a catachrestic postcolonial – but not a decolonialized – translation of modernity in an African Pentecostal setting. Hence he addresses the Western ethnocentrism that characterizes some of the scholarly debates on gender and Pentecostalism in Africa and elsewhere, and suggests that, from postcolonial and post-secular perspectives, the catachrestic Pentecostal conceptualization of gender equality calls for critical sensitivity and reflexivity among scholars in the field of religion and gender, to begin with a willingness to be discomforted, troubled, and questioned – by a Pentecostal pastor – on the norms that underlie their scholarship.

While it is coincidental that each contributor to this issue is of white European descent, it is certainly not incidental and has been something to which we have given a lot of thought as editors. An issue on a theme such as this must of necessity tread a fine line between an apparently well-meaning but in fact invidious tokenism – what Gayatri Spivak has referred to as the 'benevolent first-world appropriation and reinscription of the Third World as an Other'¹⁶ – and the unreflexive practice of 'business as usual' where whiteness once again takes center stage and where its privilege remains invisible. By way of *ex post facto* accounting for the selection of authors here, we believe that in order for ethnically white scholars to respond adequately to postcolonial challenges and critiques, it is vital that we do not represent ourselves as 'outsiders' to the experience of colonialism, placing the onus for change, resistance, and critique on the postcolonial 'insider'. Gayatri Spivak has reproached western academics for the tendency to leave postcolonial criticism to so-called 'native informants' suggesting that this is akin to saying "OK, sorry, we are just very good white people, therefore we do not speak for the blacks." That's the kind of breast-beating that is left behind at the threshold and then business goes on as usual'.¹⁷ For white, western scholars to pose as outsiders to postcolonial critique is to deny our complicity in the continuing maintenance of white privilege and to persist in a form of colonial amnesia that depoliticizes ethnicity and disowns the oppressive residue of our shared histories. As contributors to this special issue, therefore, we would acknowledge that our relationship to the postcolonial present is differentiated in terms of the relative privilege of our various

¹⁶ G. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press 1988, 271–313: 289.

¹⁷ G. Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, New York: Routledge 1990, 121.

locations, that we are beneficiaries of the colonial past as it has travelled to our present. At the same time we want to express our determination to participate in the ongoing critique of colonialist practices, structures, concepts, and materiality, and to work for their undoing. Each paper in this issue thus starts from the academic field in which we are located in order to contribute to its transformation: we challenge, probe, and reject the assumed universality of the field of religion and gender's primary categories, or at least their propositional content, and instead suggest the value – intellectual, political, and ethical – of complicating, displacing, and abusing those concepts we now take most for granted. We hope that in declining the homolingual imposition of these concepts we will open them up to a heterolingual work of translation¹⁸ that will go some way to moving us towards that 'somewhere else' signalled in this essay's epigraph and called for by postcolonial thought.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all those who contributed papers to the workshop whose work informed the shape that this issue has taken and Prof. Anne-Marie Korte especially for initiating this project and creating the opportunity to collaborate on its rich set of themes.

¹⁸ Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*.