



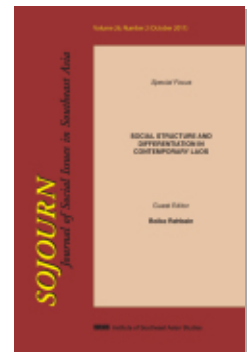
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Research Notes and Comments

Towards a Poststructuralist Southeast Asian Studies?

Rommel A. CURAMING

This article is specifically in response to the two thought-provoking articles ("Space, Theory and Hegemony: The Dual Crises of Asian Area Studies and Cultural Studies" and "Mapping Poststructuralism's Border: The Case for a Poststructuralist Area Studies") published in *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* in April 2003. It questions the viability of the author's attempt to integrate poststructuralism in an effort to re-invent conventional area studies, such as Southeast Asian Studies. It argues that the justification for the call for a poststructuralist area studies is flawed and that while there is a need to re-invent area studies, it cannot be safely accomplished by appropriating poststructuralism as a theoretical support. This is primarily because the opposing epistemological foundations of the two projects — area studies and poststructuralism — will tend to cancel each other out and analysis therefore that purports to combine the two contains contradictions. It further argues that poststructuralism can be more useful in playing the role of a higher-order critique of — as adjunct to, rather than as an integral part of — area studies.

Keywords: Southeast Asian studies, poststructuralism, area studies, Asianization, transculturation, semicoloniality, globalization.

Observers had it that the heyday of conventional area studies, in general, and Southeast Asian studies, in particular, has long faded in the horizon (Anderson 1984, 1992; McVey 1998). The initial outburst of optimism and excitement has been replaced by a sense

of uncertainty and foreboding characteristic of a field under threat. Despite renewed interest as of late in Asian Studies brought about by the growing “Asianization” of some American universities,¹ and because of the post–September 11 atmosphere,² perpetual insecurity rather than sustainable growth seems to be what holds for the future. While such pessimistic estimation captures more adequately the state of Southeast Asian Studies in North America, something not diametrically different may also be said of that in Australia³ and in Europe.⁴ Apparently, it is only in Singapore and in Japan where area studies, especially the Southeast Asian branch, are on the rise.⁵

The reasons for the above-cited condition are many. These include the shift in the thrusts of funding agencies,⁶ a move that was related to area studies’ close association with the Cold War era and modernization project, both of which have seen their days. Of equal, if not more, importance is the nature of conventional area studies itself that makes it seemingly incongruous with the changing configuration of a globalizing world.⁷ By nature of conventional area studies, I take it to mean the often narrow concerns for a specific area, usually a nation-state, coupled with the empiricist/positivist approach adopted that left unarticulated the assumptions and theoretical underpinnings.⁸ This echoes the two-decade old observation by Anderson that “the bulk of North American scholarship on Southeast Asian politics is ... decidedly untheoretical, ... uncomparative and thus, from a disciplinary point of view, unsophisticated” (Anderson 1984, p. 42). Seen from the Australian perspective, Sundhaussen blatantly calls a similar phenomenon as a manifestation of parochialism. (Sundhaussen 1986). He was referring specifically to the study of Indonesian politics and history, but his critique may well cover other countries, and perhaps other fields of study that deal with the region. According to Ruth McVey, one almost fatal consequence of this is, specifically referring to the case of the United States, that once area studies ceased to be the “darling of the grant-makers”, it has been easy for those in the discipline to “ghettoize” and marginalize it (McVey 1998, p. 44). While some observers claim that Australia’s engagement with Asia is different owing among other things to its proximity to the region

and that this would ensure resilience of Asian Studies in Australia, the downsizing if not closing down of Asian Studies in most universities tends to fuel a sense of “crisis” that haunts the field.⁹ Against such a backdrop we can easily understand the various calls from different directions¹⁰ either for the rejection or re-invention of the concept of “area studies” that traditionally underpins Southeast Asian Studies (or Asian Studies in general). As Kenneth Prewitt emphasizes, the area studies we have known for so long is “not the optimum structure for providing new insights and theories suitable for the world in which the geographic units of analysis are neither static nor straightforward” (cited in Reynolds 1998, p. 13).

The Proposal

One fairly recent and thought-provoking proposal to re-invent area studies has been bravely put forward by Peter Jackson in two articles published in the journal *SOJOURN* (April 2003). The titles of the two articles are revealing: “Space, Theory, and Hegemony: The Dual Crises of Asian Area Studies and Cultural Studies” and “Mapping Poststructuralism’s Borders: The Case for Poststructuralist Area Studies”. The primary purposes of these interesting articles are to foreground the problems immanent in area studies and cultural studies and to make a case for reconfiguration and integration of the two. He argues for a “poststructuralist area studies” whereby certain elements of conventional area studies would be reconfigured and creatively combined with poststructuralist cultural studies. In my own estimation, these articles are important for three reasons. First, they demonstrate a concrete and serious effort towards a synthesis of elements of conventional Southeast Asian Studies and poststructuralism that underpins Cultural Studies. Second, they offer what seems to me an ironic, though in some ways compelling, critique of poststructuralism as applied in globalization and cultural studies. Finally and most importantly for the purpose of this article, they exemplify a number of seemingly intractable difficulties which, as I will elaborate later, seem to be attendant in any effort to combine elements of two projects that are contradictory in some fundamental ways.

Initially, Jackson attempts to rescue the two vital elements of his project: area studies from the much-maligned pangs of essentialism and parochialism and poststructuralism/cultural studies from their unholy alliance with globalization theories. The first task is easily accomplished as he merely inserts his position within the echoes of similar sentiments as those expressed by Reynolds (1995, 1998), Morris-Suzuki (2000), McVey (1998), and Hong (1996), among others. The second proves to be quite a challenge and while I think he acquits himself rather well in some aspects, he founders in others. He has rightly shown, for one, that poststructuralism's key concept of *difference* and the related ideas of border-crossing, rupturing of binaries, indeterminacy of meaning and mutual contamination of identities have been misappropriated by practitioners of cultural and globalization studies to argue for a supposed realization of a borderless world where capital, ideas, cultural influence, and even human beings freely flow (Jackson 2003a). For another, he argues that despite the undeniable onslaught of globalizing forces, the world is not really converging towards a homogenized entity where difference is erased. Thus he calls for a theorizing that eschews any presumption of universal applicability. It is on the strength of this assertion that he pushed for a reconfigured poststructuralism — one that is supposed to be stripped of universal pretensions and sensitive not just to the *difference within* a cultural or discursive system but also to the spatially or geographically nurtured *difference between* distinct systems (Jackson 2003b). He chides Foucault and Derrida's poststructuralism for being blind to geography, a move that, as I will show later, betrays sign of yet another urge to misappropriate poststructuralism. He believes that such blindness makes its application (without modification) rather dubious to areas outside of the West where it originated. He further claims that it makes poststructuralism an unwitting partner of what he considers as the conservative politics that underpin the push for globalization and the move to affirm the Western world's intellectual hegemony. On top of that, he argues, and I agree, that if scholars would hope to make any headway in combating the intellectual hegemony of the West, an effective battle plan should include emphasis on a

spatially grounded type of intellectual project. This seems to be the foundation of his crusade to “save” area studies.

His idea of “saving” area studies is, he hints, not a straightforward matter of merely deducting something from the classical area studies and graft what is left with poststructuralist cultural studies. It instead involves a substantial overhaul of the concept of the “area” so as to make it multi-dimensional and in the process free it from the tyranny of the old preoccupation with the nation-state as the only legitimate locus and focus of analysis. He argues for a “multidimensional domain of geographical, virtual and other forms of locality and boundedness”¹¹ (Jackson 2003b, p. 76). It is not difficult to appreciate the usefulness and the good intention behind such a move. One can easily agree that the push for hegemony of globalization narratives can be neutralized by reference to the boundedness of the local. However, what struck me was Jackson’s flawed justification for upholding boundary and space as the basis for his “poststructuralist area studies”.

Flawed Justification

Jackson strongly asserts that central in poststructuralism is the idea of boundary or borders. He correctly notes that inherent in Foucault’s notion of discourses is the idea of boundary beyond which “something different happens” (Stoler 1996, p. 208, from Foucault 1977, pp. 67–68, cited in Jackson 2003b, p. 51). That is, a discursive realm is like a self-contained box outside of which different rules (governing utterances, for instance) apply. I am less sure, however, about his interpretation of Derrida as Derrida offers a range of possibilities depending on one’s purpose and proclivities. One, for example, can invoke Derrida’s concept of *differance* (perpetual deferment) to support a highly relativistic even nihilistic position. Jackson, like many other scholars, understandably ignores this part of Derrida¹² and instead emphasizes what Robertson and Khonder (1998) (cited in Jackson 2003a) call as “conflexification” or blurring of borders in Derrida’s thought, which I should note emanates from the other meaning of *differance* (that is, identity can be established

only in reference to its “other”, so in effect there is really no pure identity). Jackson seems so confident in his assertion that he made it a cornerstone for his proposal to “save” area studies. However, the problem is not so much that Jackson may have overstretched his confidence in asserting the supposedly inherent link between borders and poststructuralism (although that may indeed be a problem). It is rather in his failure to realize that the notion of borders in Foucault’s and Derrida’s thought may not be ontologically transposable with the border on a geographic space. Foucault and Derrida were interested in borders within or between discourses that make use of the representational and analytic power of language and “Western” logic. Jackson’s border, on the other hand, marks the boundary of geographic or virtual spaces. His conflation or transposition of the two is thus questionable. While it is agreeable that certain forms of area studies deserve to be upheld, I submit that better justification must be sought from quarters other than the supposed centrality of “border” in poststructuralist thoughts.

More serious difficulties haunt Jackson in what seems to me a misguided attempt to recast poststructuralism. His bitter complaint about Foucault’s and Derrida’s blindness to geography while factually justifiable utterly misses the purpose for which poststructuralism was formulated. To reiterate, Derrida and, to a lesser degree, Foucault are more interested in the problems inherent in what purport to be representations of reality, not in reality itself. Derrida has pointed to the problems or limitations of the tools — language, binary logic — that we employ in our attempt to analyse and represent reality. He seems not as interested in what’s happening “on the ground”. This puts poststructuralism, and this point is often missed, in a league substantially though, as I will note below, not totally different from, say, structuralism, functionalism, Marxism, and other theories/methods employed in “more traditional” scholarship. While the latter purport to capture, analyse, and theorize “reality on the ground” and hence need not only geography but also realist or foundational epistemology, poststructuralism aims to problematize and critique precisely the outputs (knowledge) of those attempts to represent and

explain “reality”. In other words, it is a critique of knowledge, not a tool for “knowing”. It does that by resting on a non-foundational (deconstructive) epistemology and it assumes a position of a meta-critique, on a level different and “higher” from “traditional” scholarship. It should not surprise therefore that geographic space is not one of Foucault’s and Derrida’s main concerns. This foregrounds Jackson’s rather vacuous case for recasting poststructuralism to incorporate spatiality — a move that according to Jackson is necessary to make poststructuralism more “applicable” to the areas outside of its Western origin. As he claims, poststructuralism proved to be not uniformly “applicable” to all cases in all areas (specifically Asia or Thailand, as Jackson’s often cited example), just like many other theories that originated in the Euro-American world. He seems to forget that Derrida was categorical in his critique of the “Western” mode of thinking or knowing, specifically the language and the logic that underpin it. Any product therefore of any scholarly endeavour which by design operates within such a mode is potentially at the receiving end of Derrida’s critique. To emphasize, it does not matter that scholars are talking about a non-Western country or that they are Asians themselves who use the native language in their scholarly discourse. The very fact that they employ logic and analytic methods that are unmistakably Western makes them an object of Derrida’s wrath. As a critique of knowledge/scholarship or any attempt to represent “reality”, therefore, poststructuralism is applicable all throughout the universe where “our” brand of scholarship is practised regardless of whether such scholarship is done in or about the West or the non-West.¹³ Possibly, a poststructuralist critique may cease to be applicable only in areas, or level of existence, where our kind of logic is not considered as “the logic” such as perhaps in Harry Potter’s magical world or in the spiritual world of the yogis, Sufis, or Zen Buddhists. The boundaries that must be emphasized therefore should not be between the geographic West and the rest but between the world where Western logic and scholarship operates, on the one hand, and that which it does not, on the other. In short, the great divide is more epistemological than geographical, making Jackson’s case

for reconfiguring poststructuralism to make it geography-friendly almost pointless. It cannot but reveal both his misunderstanding of certain aspects of poststructuralism and, at the same time, his urge to appropriate poststructuralism for a job which it is not meant to do.

Application and Contradictions

What Jackson exactly means by “application” is not very clear based on the two articles cited above. One clue, however, is his transposition of the idea of border in poststructuralism thought with geographic space which I have shown to be untenable. His more recent articles may offer some more clues. In “Tapestry of Language and Theory” (Jackson 2004), he observes that poststructuralism, along with other critical theories, have now replaced Marxism as a vehicle of radical critique in Thai Studies. He notes further that just like Marxism and other Western theories that have to be acculturated into a non-Western soil, poststructuralism must also be “transcultured” to make it more “applicable” to Thai Studies. This is telling. As far as Jackson is concerned, Marxism and poststructuralism share more or less the same epistemological properties that make one replaceable by another. I should reiterate that this is not the case. As already noted, from an epistemological standpoint they occupy not only different but also disjointed platforms. As theories, they are ontologically distinct. Marxism rests on a realist or foundational epistemology whereas poststructuralism is exactly the opposite, its epistemology is non-foundational. Whereas Marxism and other conventional theories are employed to construct knowledge that is supposed to correspond to reality, poststructuralism aims to deconstruct such knowledge and thus explode the “myth” that enable individuals or groups to establish knowledge’s supposed correspondence to reality. The two are thus essentially contradictory. One reason postcolonial theory is fraught with contradictions is precisely because of attempts of its proponents to combine elements of poststructuralism and other theories such as Marxism. Said, for instance, in order to pin down the discourse

he named Orientalism cannot but be guilty of the same mistake, inadvertently falling into its conceptual opposite, Occidentalism. Spivak, on her part, notwithstanding her tirade against essentialism had to settle ignominiously to “strategic essentialism”, sidelining all its dire theoretical implications. As I will further try to demonstrate below, Jackson falls into similar pit of contradictions and unfortunately he seems oblivious to it.

In his article, “Semicolonality, Translation and Excess in Thai Cultural Studies” (Jackson 2005), some more clues about what he meant by “application” are revealed. In this article, he aims to develop further his earlier proposal for a poststructuralist area studies by spelling out in some details what can be done to realize such a project. The two main pillars of this proposal are (1) Thailand’s supposed status of being “semicolonial”, and (2) the rigorous practice of translation. He claims that Thailand’s “semicoloniality” — that is, while not being colonized was nonetheless affected by Western colonialism — puts it in a strategic position to offer insights or counter-factuals, what he calls “excess”, that can help refine poststructuralist theorizing. He believes that Thailand has a “distinctive history of culture/power relations”, thus requiring poststructural theorizing that is sensitive to such distinctiveness. He expresses valid concerns that without “transcultured” theorizing, the object of study, the Thais, would be at the supplicating end of the hegemony of Western theories. How such theorizing can be accomplished, translation holds pivotal function.

By translation, he does not just mean from one language to another (from Thai to English or vice versa, for instance) but also translation between discourses, and ultimately between theories. The centrality of translation in his project he declares thus: “Poststructuralist Asian cultural studies can only realise its critical objectives by incorporating and paying careful attention to the technical skills of translation that were the hallmarks of area studies” (Jackson 2005, p. 24). No wonder he sets forth rigorous procedures or requirements¹⁴ for what he dubs as poststructuralist translation. Personally, I find the idea of poststructuralist translation exceedingly strange. For one, as he does

not cite the source of these rules, it makes me wonder whether he himself has formulated them. If he himself did so, I wonder if he can satisfy those requirements and at the same time call himself “poststructuralist”. Meaning, to the extent that he succeeds in reaching very high level of accuracy by following those rules, and be certain that indeed such high level of accuracy is attained, there is corresponding negation of one of the main tenets of poststructuralism, that is, indeterminacy. For another, if we follow poststructuralism strictly, there is no such thing as translation, only transformation primarily because a different set of power underpins the source and the target languages. Still another, the very idea of translation presupposes two “essentially” different, but at same time “essentially” parallel entities. One can grasp these entities only by upholding their essential meanings. The question is, whatever happens to injunction against essentialism? Would he also take refuge in “strategic essentialism”, as Spivak did? Jackson may rebuke me for taking too strictly the meaning of essentialism. But as I will further discuss below, it is in the fundamentally essentialist nature of our language (or perhaps any written language) alongside with the logic that is operative within it, that lies the primal roots of the poststructuralist anti-essentialist stance. The reason why poststructuralism heralds the “linguistic turn” that horrifies most quarters in the academy while overly excite others is precisely because it grounds the problem of representation in the tool — the language. Whereas before, the problem was attributed to the limitations inherent in the knower, encapsulated in the concept of “perspective”, and thus can be remedied by better methods or by proper attitude, poststructuralism reminds us that the roots go more deeply. The well-spring of problems is the tool itself.

Unfortunately, the full import of this seems to have escaped Jackson. Despite his awareness that “no one interpretation, and hence no one translation provides the definitive meaning of the text” (Jackson 2005, p. 22), he brews with confidence in castigating Morris (2000, among others) for inaccuracies of translation (Jackson 2004). While he often cites that all knowledge are manifestations of power relations, yet it did not seem to cross his mind that by following such an axiom his

virulent critiques of Morris's "faulty" translations would appear no more than an assertion of his power over that of Morris's and not that he can or does indeed translate more accurately. How can he then intrepidly suggest that through his brand of poststructuralist translation, he would be able to understand Thailand better and it would put him in better position than Morris to offer what he calls "a more radical poststructuralist project", whatever that means? (Jackson 2005, p. 39). One cannot help but wonder, if Jackson is indeed "applying" poststructuralism, at the core of which is incredulity towards all certainties, how can he seem to be so certain about so many things, not the least of which is his faith in poststructuralism?

In the same article, he expresses regret that "(s)ome poststructuralist approaches to translation have sometimes concentrated more on deconstructing the power relations implicit in forms of knowledge *than on the rules that govern the production of meaningful utterances*" (emphasis mine) (Jackson 2005, p. 24). This is rather an ambiguous statement. One interpretation is that he is unhappy that some poststructuralist scholars focus more on deconstructing power relations than on deconstructing "rules that govern the production of meaningful utterances". If this is the case, it does not make sense because deconstructing power relations that underpin knowledge forms necessarily requires deconstructing the rules governing meaning formation that enable such knowledge to be considered as acceptable knowledge. The other possible interpretation of the statement is that he wishes that more attention be focused on the rules that define meaningful utterances rather than on deconstructing power relations. If this is the case, it is perhaps one of the most telling indications of his misunderstanding of epistemological limits of poststructuralism and of the purpose for which it is meant to be utilized.

Poststructuralism, to restate, is for all intents and purposes meant to deconstruct knowledge claims and this includes poststructuralism itself. Now, when Jackson expresses his wish that more focus should have been on the "rules" that define "meaningful utterances", he did not seem to realize that one would have to operate beyond poststructuralism to do that. For how can poststructuralism identify

“meaningful utterances” when from its heart springs scepticism about meanings? Jackson rejects this absolute scepticism towards meaning by citing Rappaport who, according to Jackson, claims that those who interpret Derrida’s *differance* as a “retreat from meaning” to indeterminacy are mistaken. Derrida’s aim, so Jackson paraphrases Rappaport, is “to make clear the local contexts of meaning ...” (Rappaport 2001, p. 73, as cited in Jackson 2003b). This emboldens Jackson to insist (despite awareness that “(t)he rules of language, and the meanings they produce are shifting”) that “in any given context there is usually sufficient consensus about the rules of linguistic and discursive production to *guarantee* that quite specific consequences follow” from infractions of the rules (emphasis mine) (Jackson 2005, p. 23). Rappaport and Jackson are seemingly unaware that the formation of consensus on rules and the “local context of meaning” are precisely among the sites of power that poststructuralism wants to deconstruct. Poststructuralism likewise aims to unsettle the predictive attributes of knowledge that “guarantees” (in Jackson’s word) something, primarily because that is precisely where power and knowledge meet and cause problems. That one can in actual practice seem to do a translation or a prediction indicates that he already operates beyond the confines of poststructuralism, perhaps within the parameters of structuralism or some forms of empiricisms or hermeneutics.

Reasons for Contradictions

Jackson is oblivious to these lapses or contradictions maybe because of the following reasons: First, he seems to be acutely unaware of the oxymoronic relationship between poststructuralism and scholarship in general. I will even hazard a proposition that the idea of “poststructuralist area studies” is an oxymoron *par excellence*. This is due to the characteristic features of what we call scholarship. When we do scholarship, clarity of thoughts or expression is one of the imperatives. Otherwise, we would not be understood. We try as much as possible to define words and concepts in an unambiguous manner, and we try to establish (or impose) conceptual order based

on what we consider as logical templates. The outcome is what we call “knowledge”, which conventional scholarship regards for so long as an approximation of reality. Then here came poststructuralism. Foucault, for instance, reminds us that what we call “knowledge” is no more than a product of a constellation of powers that “freeze” what Derrida considered as ever-fleeting and floating signifiers of reality. The problem is that proponents of poststructuralism such as Derrida do not or cannot use language and logic other than those used by other scholars. They thus have to insert poststructuralism within the scholarly community built upon conventions — logic, language, methods — that are precisely the object of its criticisms. Its proponents despite their aspersions against essentialism and binaries cannot but use a language that is by its very nature essentialist and a logic that cannot operate except by referring to or presupposing its opposite (binary logic). In other words, the primeval roots of the scourge of essentialism lies in the very nature of language and the binary logic we use. The answer then to the question “Can a poststructuralist criticism, as honest as it can be, be framed without such criticism going back to itself?” appears to be negative, strictly speaking. For instance, as Said criticized the essentializing moves of Orientalist scholars, he was at the same time essentializing and reifying the otherwise multivalent “West” as well as the highly differentiated processes and impacts of colonial projects. One may say that Said is more a postcolonial rather than a poststructuralist scholar but it was from the arsenal of poststructuralism that he drew theoretical support. In the case of Jackson, claiming Thailand’s “semicoloniality” as the locus of potentially rich empirical data that would allow Thai Studies to “speak to” and eventually refine poststructuralist theorizing carries an underlying assumption that Thailand is “essentially” different. His thorough emphasis on rigorous translation which he believes would help extract “empirical excess” is underpinned by the same assumption. The case is even more difficult for Jackson because he is talking about “area studies”, which I think no matter how one reconfigures it, its rationale for existence remains predicated on the “essential” distinctiveness of an area. Otherwise those in the disciplines would

be justified in eliminating or absorbing area studies. They would claim that if such and such area is not so different after all, then conventional disciplinary approach would equally apply.

What puzzles is that Jackson celebrates such difference as though the idea is compatible with Derridean concept of *difference* or as an affirmation of what Foucault calls something beyond which “different things happen”. This cannot be the case because the concept of *difference* is — very ironic indeed — a theoretical hindrance to identifying or representing a truly empirically grounded difference. This is a tricky philosophical question, but let me try to explain. The concept of *difference* posits that one cannot really establish an identity (of anything) because it always contains the seed of its “other”, which makes identity a non-identity (because it is shared with its “other”). Defining, for instance, A necessarily requires implicit reference to its opposite, say, non-A. This is how our binary logic works. One thus cannot establish that A is different from non-A precisely because the identity of A is shared with non-A. So A cannot be different. Derrida’s difference is theoretically posited; it is not an empirical reality. It exists synthetically on a theoretical plane as a conceptual device to map out the supposed nature of representation. One may ask, how come we can perceive identities, meanings, and differences around us? If we go by the concept of *difference*, the appearance of identities and difference and meanings are just that, appearance. It is not naturally there. It is imposed by the perceiver, abetted by the calculus of power in a given social context. Lest we forget, poststructuralism posits that in the natural scheme of things, what we have are floating signifiers. So when Jackson identifies Thailand’s “semicoloniality” as a fountainhead of distinctiveness, he was able to do so because of the network of powers, including his own, that underpin such a view. The Derridean concept of *difference* certainly has nothing to do with that. What the concept does is precisely to expose Jackson’s tacit claim to the contrary.

Second, Jackson may have been misled by the proliferation as of late of a “poststructuralism industry” in the social sciences into thinking that it may indeed be “applicable”. As I observe, the applications

of poststructuralism in various branches of social sciences and the humanities appear to constitute a piecemeal borrowing of certain concepts, such as anti-essentialism, anti-reification, anti-binaries, and knowledge/power. The first three directly emanate from Derridean concept of *différance* whereas the last is obviously Foucauldian/Nitchean. The problem is that in Derridean formulation it seems that the concept of *différance* is inherently linked to the other meaning of *différance* (*differance*). This is a part of poststructuralism that is often ignored for its nihilistic or anti-scholarship implications. The question is, can one “apply” the first meaning of *différance* to the total exclusion of the other meaning? Within the ambit of poststructuralism, I am afraid not. Built-in in the anti-essentialist ideas (the first meaning) of poststructuralism is its logical and necessary connection with the second meaning of the concept of *différance* (constant deferment). This is simply because the absence of an “essence” precisely leaves any representation no choice but to build on yet another representation. Reality, as poststructuralism emphasizes, can be accessed only through mediation; it cannot be directly accessed or represented. I suspect that once one applies the concept of *différance* without the other meaning, one exits the domain of poststructuralism to that of structuralism, in which case, it loses the critical edge inherent in poststructuralism.

I should add that Foucault’s ideas of knowledge/power and discourse are also inherently linked to Derrida’s anti-essentialist stance. To reiterate, what gives knowledge an appearance of “truthfulness” is no more than a set of power relations; it is not that they contain essential truths. This does not mean, however, that knowledge is always false or that it cannot capture reality. It only means that no one can be certain that it is true, except oneself through whose subjectivity one can invoke personal power to ascribe to it appearance of certainty. The appearance of certainty, already noted, is something imposed, say by an author or by a community of scholars or by collective societal acclamation of, say, scientific methods. In the final analysis knowledge is a manifestation of power relations. Whether such assertions of power would be validated depends on another set of powers. The

fact that there are many “untruths” that for long have paraded as true attests to this. The question thus of whether a knowledge-claim is true or false should take a backseat to the question: “Whose or which assemblage of power determine which knowledge is true and which is false?”

It may well serve a poststructuralist analyst therefore to desist from acting so smugly about the accuracy of one’s critique. At best, an analyst is merely asserting his power over that of other analysts and that one is participating in yet another discourse when one offers its analysis. He should always remind himself, as I do remind myself now, that beyond certain boundary “different things happen”. That I am able to offer critique to Jackson’s ideas is a testament to my personal power to assert my views. I should not, in all honesty, assume that my views are right. Whether my views or his are right will be decided by individual scholars who themselves are inserted in the interstices of power relations in the academy where we both exist. The configuration of the constellation of such power in the academy is yet another product of indeterminate combinations of factors in the society at large. And even more complex it goes, and more insignificant me and my views become, as one extends to the world stage and beyond. Humbling, is it not? I figure that if there is one most “essential” lesson one should learn from poststructuralism, it is intellectual humility.

Thirdly, by focusing only on certain aspects of poststructuralism at the expense of others (*differance*, indeterminacy, anti-essentialism, anti-binary) he denies himself a chance to be self-reflexive about his own location as a scholar and as a proponent of poststructuralism within the ambit of power relations in the academy and the society at large. His pretence to innocence or detachment is almost palpable, making the whole exercise very ironic indeed, considering that he calls himself a poststructuralist. I should add that one way to mitigate the self-refuting tendencies of a poststructuralist analysis is for the author to satisfy the requirement of self-reflexivity. That is, not only that one should be aware of one’s predilections, positions in the scheme of things, aims or interests, but also that one should make

them explicit and factor them in the analysis and conclusion. This will not totally eliminate elements of contradiction which as I have noted earlier is rooted in language and logic. However, being transparent can spare one from the embarrassment of unwittingly doing the same mistake committed by those whom one criticizes. I for one know that much of my critique of Jackson is predicated on my belief on the correctness of my interpretation of poststructuralism which ironically, if correct, effectively casts doubt on the accuracy of my interpretation. Such paradox is a curse of poststructuralism being imbedded in scholarly practice. My advantage over Jackson is that I do not claim to be a poststructuralist. But that should not be comforting enough.

Conclusion

“What to do then with poststructuralism?” There is, I think, a very special place for poststructuralism in area studies as in all other branches of human knowledge — natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. As a critic of all forms of knowledge, it reminds all scholars of the potential and actual damage they can unknowingly inflict on nature and other human beings. It casts serious doubt on the Enlightenment’s belief on the inherent goodness of “knowing” or knowledge by exposing knowledge’s inescapable and intimate link with various forms of power. Every scholar therefore worthy of this label should understand poststructuralism and “apply” it as the basis of one’s reflexive attitude towards one’s own work.

As a foundation of scholarly practice, I believe that poststructuralism can best function as a framework for deconstructing all representations, and not as a basis of representation itself. In other words, poststructuralism should act as an adjunct to, not an integral part of, the area studies or any other branches of knowledge for that matter. If scholars do insist on appropriating certain concepts from poststructuralism, they should better be aware of the self-refuting tendencies that would result from such a move. They should explicitly satisfy the requirement of self-reflexivity. Finally, I also suggest they refrain from proclaiming that theirs is a “poststructuralist” approach,

much less that they are poststructuralist. Otherwise, they expose themselves to criticisms for failing to fully observe the injunctions emanating from poststructuralism — injunctions that in the first place cannot be fully observed by any scholar owing to the very nature of scholarship he/she does.

NOTES

*I would like to express gratitude to Mary Kilcline-Cody and Tomoni Ito for reading and commenting on the earlier draft. All mistakes are solely my responsibility.

1. The changing demographics in the United States, particularly in California, has seen the entry of an unprecedented number of Asian Americans to the university. Sometimes called “heritage students” owing to their desire to understand better their Asian roots, they pushed demands to unprecedented level for more Asia-focused, or Asian American–related courses. See Rafael (2003), Salman (2003), Zinoman (2003), Yamada (2003), and Diller (2003) for various aspects or implications of this phenomenon.
2. Anthony Reid notes that there has been a substantial increase in funding for area studies in the wake of the September 11 attacks. This seems to be in response to the need to understand the “enemy” better (see Reid 2003, p. 2).
3. Views on the state of Asian Studies in Australia are mixed. Milner (1999) and Reid (1999) are far more optimistic than Burgess (2002) and Jackson (2003a), who talk about “crisis” in Asian Studies.
4. In a message from Peter Cave in the H-Asia list dated 2 November 2005, for instance, he noted lack of funds as being the reason for the “sacking” of specialist Chinese and Japanese librarians at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). He also mentioned that he wrote an article published in the *Financial Times* (20 October 2005) concerning the “underfunding of Asian Studies in Britain. This message was reinforced by Frank Conlon, who attached an editorial note saying that he heard during his visit in NIAS at Copenhagen recently that “government indifference to the health of our field of studies is not a phenomenon limited to the Anglo–North American world”.
5. The establishment of Asia Research Institute (ARI), the hiring of Anthony Reid to spearhead it and the subsequent parade of well-known scholars staying long- or short-term with ARI are among clear indications of the increased commitment of the National University of Singapore to vigorously promote Asian Studies. In Japan there is long tradition of well-established scholarship on

- Asia/Southeast Asia, and recent developments point to its continuing vitality. Takashi Shiraishi, for instance, categorically declares that “Area Studies, above all Asian Studies, are booming in Japan” (Shiraishi 2003).
6. As cited by Reynolds (1998, pp. 12–13): “The rationale for area studies in the federal government and in other funding agencies ... has already weakened. The Social Science Research Council and American Council of Learned Societies, whose work is financed by foundations such as Ford, Mellon, and Luce, has moved to abandon its area-commitment structure in favour of committees that will pursue comparative and regional studies.”
 7. For a more recent and thoughtful exposition of the weaknesses that bedevil Southeast Asian Studies, see McVey (1998). See also Burgess (2002) aside from Jackson (2003a, 2003b) for thought-provoking justifications for a reconfiguration of Asian Studies through engagement with new intellectual movements, especially Cultural Studies.
 8. I would like to acknowledge Hock Guan for suggesting this. Anti-theoretical attitude seems deeply entrenched in conventional area studies. The very idea of “area studies” presupposes the importance of the particularities as opposed to the general, as espoused by theories. Theories are often seen as Euro-centric and therefore cannot capture reality found in specific areas of study. For instance, in the engaging debate between Benda (1982) and Feith (1982), Benda’s critique of Feith shows clearly the cautious attitude towards the usefulness of theorizing. Lev (1982) for his part shows his dismissive attitude towards theories by praising the articles in the book *Interpreting Indonesian Politics* for having “little of the opaque conceptualizing that clutters much of modern social science” (p. v).
 9. For an optimistic view on the state of Asian Studies in Australia, see Milner (1999), who argues that unlike in the United States where Asian Studies has been in “crisis”, in Australia it possesses “certain added resilience” that shields it from similar ill (see also Reid 1999).
 10. See, for example, McVey (1998), Burgess (2002), among others.
 11. Jackson gives examples of what he considers as multidimensional spatialities, thus: “Thai discourses, for example, are no longer bounded within the borders of the single state called Thailand, but neither do they float amorphously without any boundaries whatsoever across all domains or locales. Like all contemporary forms of discourse, Thai discourses are delimited or contained within traceable borders in a range of domains. While not all Thai discourses or Thai cultural practices are contained within the borders of the geo-body (Thongchai 1994) of “Thailand”, the nation-state of Thailand nevertheless does remain a key geographical location for Thai discourses. The diasporic spaces of Thai communities — whether composed of permanent emigrants in

Western cities such as Sydney and Los Angeles or of Thai guest workers in Singapore, Taiwan, Japan, and the Middle East — are additional sites for the circulation of Thai discourses. The virtual spaces of Thai websites and e-mail communications, Thai satellite transmissions, Thai broadcasting, videos, CDs, VCDs, and other media are also sites for Thai discourses. Furthermore, Thai discourses are no longer mediated solely via Thai language communications. For example, distinctive features of Thai discourses, such as the legally enforced silence that envelops public discussion of the private lives of members of the Thai royal family, are mediated equally effectively by the local English and Chinese language press and media in Bangkok. The contemporary location of Thai discourses within the borders of the Thai state, in diasporic locales, in cyberspace domains, as well as the mediation of distinctive features of Thai discourses by Thai, English, Chinese, and other language media show the need to rethink the idea of spatiality in multidimensional terms.” (2003b, p. 76).

12. Jackson is very much aware of this part of Derrida. In Jackson (2003b, pp. 61–63) he discusses the “relativist paradox” as being indicative of the “explanatory limits of deconstruction”. However, he uses it to bolster his argument against hegemonic tendency of Western theories by claiming that “deconstructive poststructuralism ... critiques older theories of everything while representing itself as a new, better theory of everything”. His other article (2003a, pp. 26–27) also contains reference to the “nihilistic” part of Derrida but did not pursue it to its logical conclusion.
13. One can argue that area studies, for all its ability to produce nuanced understanding of the local conditions in non-European societies cannot deny that the language, the logic, and analytic tools it employs are all Western in provenance. It can be likened to a Western-machine that processes primarily for Western or Westernized audience non-Western knowledge. It thus requires a dose of pretension to claim that the product is not Western in form, if not as well in substance.
14. The rules are as follows: “(1) the phonetic and phonemic systems that govern the production of meaningful units of sounds; (2) the grammar and syntax that determine which combinations of phonemes constitute acceptable sentences; (3) the pattern of etiquette, privilege, and power that determines the sociolinguistics of which grammatically correct and syntactically well-ordered utterances are permitted to be stated in a given discursive setting that determine which utterances are accorded authority and which despite all their “accuracy” according to the manifold rules of phonetics, phonemics, grammar, syntax, and sociolinguistics, are ignored or perhaps even denied (pp. 22–23).

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