A postcolonial reading of a park in East London offers a critique of 'space' that acknowledges the unique position of the subject as 'mediator' and of objects in creating agency.

Words and objects in transposing desire and making space

Nishat Awan

In this article I will explore the relationship between space, language and objects and interrogate the role of language as a signifier for the transformation of space through cultural difference. My work is informed by the context and the methods of postcolonialism and specifically the notion of hybridity. If the hybridity of a postcolonial identity is acknowledged, then the space where these identities are negotiated could also be seen as sharing qualities of overlap and mixing. Influenced by psychoanalytic theories of the self and its relation to others, postcolonial theory has used strategies of 'mimicry' and 'hybridity' as motifs to provide a vocabulary that shifts colonial relations out of the dialectic of oppressor and oppressed. But following Lefebvre's idea that all space is social space,[1] and Foucault's spatialisation of power,[2] the move from the historic preoccupation with time to a spatialisation of the processes of knowledge production, allows postcolonial thinking to go beyond the complicities of identity politics, which has been one of the major criticisms of this mode of thought.[3] As an architect, this opens up certain possibilities of interrogating postcolonial subjectivity through the spaces that are occupied and used by those who are implicated within it. This paper will focus on one such space: a park in East London.

The term 'postcolonial space' is quite general and can be used to describe any number of different situations, from space in the former colonies to the situation of migrants from those colonies in the West. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai refers to 'diasporic public space', a more precise term which allows for other possibilities to emerge.[4] Appadurai speaks of these spaces being created when 'moving images meet deterritorialised viewers'. He also calls them 'the crucibles of a postnational political order'. He places an emphasis on the effects of modernity and globalisation and the role of technology and the media in creating these spaces. Here I would like to add the notion of appropriation and the desire for a place of one's own.[5]Appropriation occurs through space and within public space there is an active overlapping of appropriated space, which goes beyond the simple deterritorialisation of the users and creates spaces that are re-territorialised through use. This shift in perspective is a lateral move that allows a postcolonial sensibility to go out into the street, away from the enclosed walls and hidden spaces of adapted and customised interiors that have been much theorised in architectural discourse, especially regarding the domestic. I am interested in what a postcolonial public space is, or could be.

For most people, as for most architects, postcolonial space is signalled through the display of different 'signs'; writings in other scripts, alien produce and the sound of foreign tongues. Language and objects can thus become easy signifiers of cultural difference still based on identity politics. In this paper, I present a brief sketch of how objects alongside words can be theorised within postcolonial space, in a network of relations, in order to make space for different desires and multiple occupancies. How can the politics inherent within language and things be used to create space that does not objectify 'others'?

Latour's critique of the modern condition

This article owes a lot to Bruno Latour and his helpful critique of the modern condition.[6] The rest of this article is arranged around his argument. It also has its genesis in an exhibition project that I was involved in while working at the London based, feminist, art and architecture practice, muf.[7]

My interest in postcolonial space, with specific regard to architecture, is based around a critique of how these issues have been interrogated within architectural theory and practice. There has not been a very large or sustained engagement with the subject within architecture. There are some books that deal historically with the architectural and spatial consequences and residues of racial segregation in USA, others that deal with these issues but in the former colonies.[8] While both interesting and necessary – my aim here is not to critique the work in itself – there are few books that explicitly deal with the postcolonial in the present, within the West itself. I am therefore critiquing an omission. What is the reason for this omission? Latour's explanation of the 'modern condition' provides

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some answers; and let us not forget that architects are the most modern of Modernists.

Latour's critique is based around the false separation between Nature and Culture that is for him the distinction of Modernism; it is also what separates the West from the Rest. The separation is made of two sets of practices, which he calls 'the work of translation' and 'the work of purification'. The work of translation creates hybrids of nature and culture, while the work of purification separates them – the two practices working in tandem to create the modern illusion of the total separation of nature from culture, while producing lots of amalgamations of the two in the form of 'natures-cultures'. What this process does not take into account is 'the work of mediation' that takes place between the two poles of Nature and Culture, this is the role of what Latour calls, 'quasi-objects/quasi-subjects'. He states the modern position on this:

> *'On the contrary, they* [the Modernists] *recognised their existence but emptied it of any relevance by turning full-blown mediators into mere intermediaries. An intermediary – although recognised as necessary simply transports, transfers, transmits energy from one of the poles of the Constitution. It is void in itself and can only be less faithful or more or less opaque. A mediator, however, is an original event and creates what it translates as well as the entities between which it plays the mediating role.'*[9]

This description is very similar to Derrida's critique of Plato's *chora*, where he asserted that Plato denied the existence of a phase between the mental world of reason and the material world of the senses. For Derrida, *chora* plays this mediating role and its mark is left on all of Plato's writing, whether on politics, the body or the *polis*.[10] In this reading *chora* takes on a central role, it is the place of nurture or the 'nurse of becoming'[11] without which the very existence of the two poles defined by Plato is questioned. What are these strange hybrids that have such power, that are in fact the effaced products and producers of our world, and how do we begin to account for them? What Latour calls for is a representation *for* these 'quasi-objects' and a taking account of and following of the intricate networks that they are a part of. I would like to make an architectural representation of one such 'quasi-object'.



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1 Repetition and alteration: Shaheed Minar in Dhaka ...
2 ... in Sydney ...
3 ... in London ...
4 ... in Tokyo ...
5 ... in Linz ...
6 ... and in Graz

Altab Ali Park and the Shaheed Minar

While I was working with muf, we were invited to participate in an exhibition in Linz that re-presented public spaces in London.[12] Each participant was asked to choose a space that they liked or which had particular significance for them and interpret it in a 'new' way for the exhibition. The space that I looked at was a small urban park in East London which was chosen by an anthropologist from the local Bengali community. He dropped out at the last moment, leaving me to come up with a reading of a space that I knew vaguely from my visits to the Whitechapel Art Gallery and Brick Lane. The history of the park revealed that it was the site of 'the White Chapel' after which the area was named and which was destroyed in the Second World War. Its current name, Altab Ali Park, revealed another strand in its history; the park was named after a local Bengali resident who had been killed in a racist attack in the 1970s, around the time of the notorious race riots in that area of London. But I was also aware of the park's role in recent politics; a large demonstration against the war in Iraq had started at the park and marched to Whitehall.

I began to think of the connection between this small inconspicuous pocket of land and the agency of the local community. This thinking was reinforced by my conversation with a local community leader,

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Cubist sculpture, made of white marble, denotes a mother protecting her children with a red disc in the background representing the blood that was spilled during the independence/language struggles. What stands in Altab Ali Park is a 1:5 scale replica of that monument – and it is not the only one. There is another Shaheed Minar in the UK in Oldham, others in Tokyo and in Sydney and one planned for Toronto, as well as several different versions in Bangladesh itself. What did this proliferation of monuments, wherever there was a critical mass of the Bengali population, tell me about the public space I was trying to reinterpret? *[1–6]*.

One of my colleagues found the whole idea of the monument difficult. He was disturbed by the claiming of public space by what was essentially something based around a nationalistic struggle for independence. But to me there was something more interesting at work here, in the repetition at different scales of the same monument, where it seemed to me that repetition did indeed produce alteration.[13] From the variation in construction that responded to the specific weather or security conditions of the different sites to the personalised interpretation of the design. The original monument was made of white marble while the one in the park was made of mild steel, painted white. Other versions neither replicated the material nor the exact design. What if I looked at this monument as Bruno Latour and Michel Serres have theorised, as



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who told me about the significance of what looked to me like a strange sculpture in one corner of the park *[3]*. The Shaheed Minar or 'Martyr's Monument' was built in commemoration of the students killed in the Language Movement Day riots in Bangladesh, fighting for the right to have Bengali as a national language alongside Urdu, in what was then East Pakistan. The original Shaheed Minar was a small stone monument that was destroyed by the army in the Bangladeshi independence struggle; it was later replaced by a large-scale monument designed by the famous Bangladeshi sculptor, Hamidur Rahman. The

objects that could also hold a politics, or 'quasi-objects' with a politics that is affected by the changing context around them?[14] And of course the dimension of appropriation is always latent in public space; the problem occurs when things become static – 'staking a claim' is not inherently bad. In England where people have grown used to the idea of a 'semi-private public space', this might be a detail that is sometimes overlooked. Everyone appropriates space; de Certeau speaks of the spatial practice of walking as an appropriation of the city space.[15]

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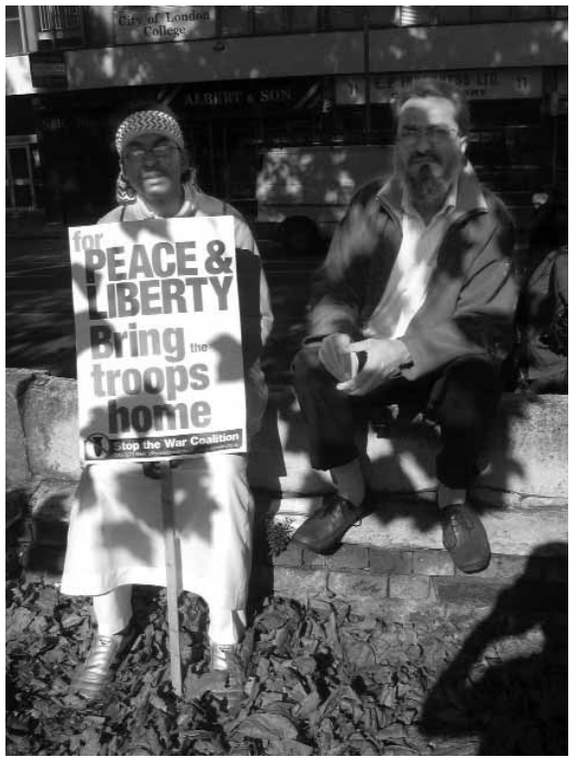
Shaheed Minar as 'quasi-object', the postcolonial 'quasi-subject'

Interrogating the Shaheed Minar not as a mute object that at best represented the nostalgia for 'home' or a commemoration of past struggles, but as a 'quasi-object', opened a whole host of avenues from which I could speak of both the Minar itself and also of the park. It also opened for me a way to articulate a critique of the status quo of the standard academic research that has proliferated around the Bangladeshi community of this area of East London. I will start from the critique and move on to my own reading of the Minar.

Spitalfields is an area with a long and varied history of immigration, from the early Huguenots to the current Bengali community. It has thus been an area subject to many an ethnographic study, focusing on diverse topics such as 'ethnicity and political representation'[16] or 'family and kinship'. These have always made me feel a little uncomfortable. They may be well meant but there is a real feeling of objectification of the communities and individuals involved. But I am well aware of how difficult it is to carry out such research without these accusations. What then could be the answer? My feeling is that such studies seldom cast their net wide enough when carrying out their research; they tend to pick one specific aspect of the community on which to focus. Let me turn again to Latour for some clarification. Latour refers to as the 'Great Divide' the separation of Nature and Culture that is for him the mark of the moderns and, for them, what separates them from all the 'others' of this world. Thinking about postcolonial subjectivity, I wondered how this divide translated to the peculiar hybrid that is the postcolonial individual. Having something of the other within them, did they reject this separation? I imagine there is a bit of both; a 'quasi-subject' perhaps? If this is correct, then the postcolonial individual holds a privileged position that remains unrecognised, being able to mediate between here and there, the local and the global, nature and culture. Latour again on these mediators:

> *'There are no more naked truths, but there are no more naked citizens, either. The mediators have the whole space to themselves.* [...] *The imbroglios and networks that had no place now have the whole place to themselves. They are the ones that have to be represented; it is around them that the Parliament of Things gathers henceforth.'*[17]

The postcolonial is thus placed in the centre, part of an intricate network that reaches across space. Returning to the exhibition itself, I was aware that there was a lot of interest in the language that teenagers from this community were speaking, mixing English and Sylheti. I arranged to meet a group of teenage girls at a local youth centre. Immediately I was struck by their acute self-awareness. They had lived through almost constant interest in their community, both from academia and governmental institutions – in short they were used to the 'limelight'. They could 'perform' for their audience, in this case myself as the naïve researcher. 'Was I not aware that there was a name for the way they spoke, "Benglish" they were calling it and no it



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7–10 **Protests in Altab Ali Park**

wasn't making new words, just mixing English and Sylheti phrases.' They looked at me pityingly, 'do you not speak your own language, what is it anyway?' 'Urdu', I say guiltily and 'yes I do speak it', acutely aware of my country's diabolical past regarding language and the fate of East Pakistan.[18] They proceed to tell me of how they speak another language, 'b-language' or 'backslang', the practice of adding a letter in this case 'b' after every letter you speak – something that I remember trying to do in Pakistan but never quite managing. In England, this same practice is of course associated with girls at boarding school – a very different place altogether.

In my conversation with the girls I was aware of the long networks that they were a part of and the places that they were mediating between. Their conversation skipped from talk of events in their locality, a murder of a young woman and her children, the father who had disappeared, perhaps to Bangladesh, their articulation of UK politics and the role of the police. Would they bother going after the man if he had fled 'back home'? Then teenage talk of boys, the 'b-language', discussions of school, another research project they were involved in, this time an oral history project, giggling among each other, talking about friends and then about politics in Bangladesh and visiting there. It occurred to me that this was exactly what was so difficult to represent, this skipping from one place to the other, the networks these girls were tracing, the merry dance their subjectivity was leading you through, where were they going, where did their loyalty really lie, who would they support in a cricket match between England and Bangladesh? The ultimate question for people of a certain ilk.

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In Latour's terms, therefore, the girls become quasi-subjects, able to mediate between here and there, not just 'belonging' to one place or another. Their subjectivities allow for new forms of culture to emerge, whether it is the b-language or some other 'way of doing' that I was not witness to.

'The Parliament of Things' within 'postcolonial public space'

To come back to the Shaheed Minar and the park; the Shaheed Minar as 'quasi-object' can be used to interrogate the network of relations that make this a 'postcolonial public space'. The park has been used as a gathering point for a demonstration against the Iraq war, as I mentioned earlier, a protest that included not only Bengalis but also Turks and Kurds and many other people from the surrounding areas. It has also been used as a place to gather when the Bengali community was rallying together for help during the collapse of the First Solution money transfer business.[19] As such the park represents not only the agency of the Bangladeshi community but is also becoming an active place of protest, of meeting, of gathering for all sorts of other people. This public space truly has the dimension of 'agonism' that Chantal Mouffe has called for and it is due to the agency that the Shaheed Minar, and the intricate network that it is part of, has brought to this inconspicuous pocket of land *[7–10]*.[20]

It has created a territory through appropriation, whose boundaries have softened through communication, the park slowly coming to represent the political agency of not just the Bangladeshis but also other people living in the area. The object, in this case the Minar, becomes the vehicle for transposing desire or a politics and thus making space. Most people who had gathered in the park to protest weren't really aware of the exact history of the Minar; they just knew that the park was somewhere you came to when something needed to be said. The Shaheed Minar itself was therefore subject to transposition – it altered as it moved across borders.[21] An account of the Minar in Toronto or Sydney could tell a completely different story. But in East London, the Minar has meant that the park could indeed become a site, alongside many others for a 'Parliament of Things', as Latour calls it.

This type of reading of the postcolonial subject and the objects that form part of the network of meaning around them allows for a new reading of space that places an emphasis on relations and associations. It inherently privileges a fluid and dynamic understanding of space that acknowledges that although certain nodes (subjects or objects) may appear static at certain times, the way that they are connected is always in flux and always has an impact on them. Hence the articulation in this way of words around an object allows for another type of democratic process to take place within public space that guards against essentialism. It is a space that is able to contain overlapping desires.

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Notes

1. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).
2. Michel Foucault, 'Space, Knowledge and Power', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rainbow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 239–56.
3. See for example, Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997).
4. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 4, 22.
5. I am referring here of course to arguably the first book of modern feminist critique, Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929).
6. He has dealt with this subject in detail in Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
7. *Revisit: Urbanism Made in London*, exhibition curated by Peter Arlt with public works and muf, at Architektur Forum, Linz (03.02.07 – 03.03.07) and Haus der Architektur, Graz (19.06.08 – 24.07.08).
8. Two good examples are: *Sites of Memory: Perspectives on Architecture and Race,* ed. by Craig E. Barton (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), which deals with the spatial legacies of segregation and the civil rights movement in the American South. Another book that deals with the postcolonial and architecture is *White Papers, Black Marks,* ed. by Leslie Naa Lokko (London: The Athlone Press, 2000). This volume overlaps a little with the previous but also deals with the much-neglected subject of contemporary architectural practice in the 'former colonies'.
9. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, pp. 77–78.
10. Cf. Jacques Derrida, 'Chora', in *Chora L Works: Jacques Derrida* and *Peter Eisenman* ed. by Jeffrey Kipnis and Thomas Leeser (New York: Monacelli Press, 1997).
11. Elizabeth Grosz, 'Woman, Chora, Dwelling', in Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 111–124 (114).
12. *Revisit: Urbanism Made in London*
13. I am referring here to Derrida's concept of 'iterability', which has been elaborated upon in a postcolonial context by Gayatri C. Spivak; cf. *The Spivak Reader,* ed. by Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (New York: Routledge, 1996).
14. Latour has expanded on Serres' concept of 'quasi-object'; cf. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. by Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).
15. Cf. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
16. John Eade, *The Politics of Community: The Bangladeshi Community in East London* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1989).
17. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 144.
18. The quotes are from an interview I carried out with teenage Bengali girls at a youth centre in East London in 2007.
19. In June 2007, the First Solution money transfer business collapsed. It had a branch in East London, which was used almost exclusively by Bangladeshis sending money back home to relatives. Most of these people were not very well off themselves and some lost their life savings. A rally was held in Altab Ali Park to persuade the government to offer an aid package.
20. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000); Chantal Mouffe, 'Some reflections on an Agonistic Approach to the Public' in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy,* ed. by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2005).
21. I am referring to Rosi Braidotti's concept of 'transposition', which she defines as: 'The term "transpositions" has a double source of inspiration: from music and from genetics. It indicates an intertextual, cross-boundary or transversal transfer, in the sense of a leap from one code, field or axis into another, not merely in the quantitative mode of plural multiplication, but rather in the qualitative sense of complex multiplicities.' Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2006), p. 5.

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Biography

Nishat Awan is a PhD candidate at the University of Sheffield. Her research is based around the intersection of the postcolonial and the spatial, focusing on how power structures, cultural difference and strategies of resistance are played out in urban space. She is assistant editor at *field: a free journal for architecture*.

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