Spatial Boundaries, Abounding Spaces

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Spatial Boundaries, Abounding Spaces: Colonial Borders in French and Francophone Literature and Film.


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In 2005, as banlieues all over France burned, the world press attempted to explain the crisis. Ranging from governmental apathy, a partisan police force, to the deep-seated racism of French society, the press advanced many explanations for the fiery and riotous aftermath of the death of two minority teenage boys, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, electrocuted in an alleged attempt to escape the police. In this journalistic profusion of analyses and commentary, an article in the *New York Times Magazine* caught my attention.¹ It zeroed in on city planning as the culprit.

The famous Swiss architect Le Corbusier, the article stated, had designed the banlieues to keep the poor working-class clustered around the city in huge high rises. Placed on the periphery, these soaring “apartments, he thought, would finally give sunlight and fresh air to city laborers, who had been trapped in narrow and fetid back streets since the dawn of urbanization” (Caldwell). Unfortunately, Le Corbusier’s noble intentions notwithstanding, the spatial distribution became a trigger for social discord and laid the groundwork for the eventual ghettoization of urban France. Poverty, unemployment and disgruntled youth made for a dangerous cocktail, resulting in the fiery petrol bombs that lit up the French suburbs.

What the article does not elaborate is that the line dividing the banlieue from the city stands not only as a rendition of the economic difference between two classes but also, very clearly, as a racial divide. The majority of the underprivileged banlieue dwellers are nonwhite immigrants from the former French-occupied territories and their French offspring. The simple spatial appellation of a French banlieue – no longer a passively demarcated space – is the indicator of a constellation of colonial influences. The unrest that started in the banlieues
spread from the margins to the center, highlighting the changing signification of spatial domains. It has forced the French to reassess their colonial history.

This colonially marked border taking on a life of its own and exacting revenge could have been a statement of exaggeration had it not been for Marseille going unscathed during the riots. Unlike most French cities, Marseille “is turned inside out, so that ‘inner city’ and ‘suburbia’ retain their American connotations” (Caldwell). In the case of Marseille, much like in the American context, it is the inner city that is marked by poverty, and the suburbs connote relative affluence. Despite “one of the heaviest concentrations of immigrants’ children in France” (Caldwell), this port city of Marseille, owing to the absence of a historically generated colonial periphery, was spared the violence that besieged most of urban France. No banlieue meant no violence. With no banlieue to act as a carrier of colonial history, Marseille was spared the social conflict.

The global vision that undergirded this ideological project of colonial space remains pertinent even today. If capitalism and brute force were central to the French colonial project, it was not without space management techniques playing an equally important role in exercising a racial and ethnic superiority over the native populations.\(^2\) Once Algeria won its independence in 1962, all the administrative techniques employed to manage the colonies – techniques of spatial abstraction also on display in V erne’s work – were brought back home. This led to the perpetuation of “a form of interior colonialism” (7) that contributed to neo-racism in France.\(^3\) Even more importantly, this interior colonialism serves to explain France’s continued contemporary colonial engagement. Those spatial practices that kept the colonies at a disadvantage were now implemented within France, with not very dissimilar results – and the periodic unrests in the French banlieues are only a testament to this continued presence of colonialism.

The literary works and film analyzed in \textit{Spatial Boundaries, Abounding Spaces: Colonial Borders in French and Francophone Literature and Film} have demonstrated the setting up and continuation of various aspects and manifestations of colonial spaces at different moments. The spatial results of the process of intensive colonization – to which Jules Verne’s novel \textit{Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours} testifies, are still unfolding. Colonization has not ended with the liberation of colonies and the formation of new nation-states. For this book it has been important to show that colonization of space that is found in today’s Paris – as it is found in London, where Phileas Fogg the protagonist of Verne’s novel starts his journey – is also found in other works that make up the corpus of this book. The spatial obliteration that colonization carried out “there” in the realm of the Other at another time is present now and here – and indeed
everywhere. Verne details the exploits of an English gentleman, testifying to the setting up of this global colonial space, as much as he also prepares the ground for the return of the repressed that is to take place in the twenty-first century film *Caché*, where it is colonial guilt that assails the characters.

These works are deeply expressive of the realities of communities dealing with contestations that arise from spatial transitions. That these are spatially charged intrigues and one needs to read them as such is evident from their own focus on different manifestations of space. Moments of changing spatial divisions and newer usage of space within the colonial context are the explicit backdrop for creative works that *Spatial Boundaries, Abounding Spaces* analyzes. Verne’s literature records European contact with hitherto unknown locations as well as the setting up of a technologically defined spatiality. The relationship that Devi’s characters have with India, Indian nationalism, global capitalism and the territorial definition it imposes upon the world are the focus of analyses of Devi’s works. At the heart of the novel *Texaco* is the fight over the ownership and meaning of the hutment that bears the name of Texaco. In *Caché* Majid inhabits the geographical and colonial location of the banlieue that was responsible for the electrocution of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré. More importantly, it is his place in the margins of the French nation that shows how we are all marked by spatial colonization in relation to each other.

In addition to bringing out the obvious centrality of spatial divisions, this book has analyzed the larger spatial paradigms and spatial networks that these works reference. When read through the prism of postcolonial theoretical concerns, the evidence of spatial paradigms shows creative spatiality assuming forms that develop on complex relationship between space and creative production. Such a reading also shows how in multiple ways spatiality has anchored itself in various facets of our lives, thus also displaying the necessity of a deeper examination of the enduring effect of these colonially initiated spatial interconnections.

Literature for Brosseau is “a subject that becomes a geographer in its own right” (Brosseau, “City” 92). The spatial evidence from these works, when placed against postcolonial theoretical concerns, reveals spatial networks. Disparate locations mutually interact with each other to create novel geographies and to give the world a new geographical meaning. For instance, an examination of the route taken by the adventures in *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* reveals an opium economy that mathematically rationalizes different parts of the colonial empire to ensure the smooth transport of opium across the world. Understanding the surreptitious operations of the opium network that redefines global spaces also shows why human subjectivity too can only appear as
a by-product of this mathematical thinking. Analyzed against the debate about geographies of origin, different locations in Devi’s work together speak against the idea of a stable national identity. When these locations together highlight the collusion between the nation-state and an exploitative capitalism, they show how a creative work can become a “geographer in its own right” (Brosseau, “City” 92).

Throughout this book, I have attempted to understand and make sense of these spatial paradigms by seeing the world they construct and the myriad and complex relationships they bring out within their various components. Placed within their own local context, as much as they belong to a worldview, each of these creative works also defines the world and its relationship to the world differently. Whether it is in terms of nascent trade routes, a linguistic colonization, an advancing globalization, or in terms of national boundaries, these local narratives evoke their place, explicitly or implicitly, within a larger global spatial network.

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During the infamous Berlin conference of 1884-5, the colonizing powers of the time – Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Portugal and Spain – got together in Europe and divided the African continent among themselves. They carved the map of Africa in straight lines, ignoring local customs, languages and history. Colonization was after all a project of spatial expansion. They first divided lands on charts and maps and then transposed that colonial understanding onto the African continent. This division of the continent on pieces of paper, which predetermined the European contact with local populations, serves as the perfect example of the kind of spatial interaction that Verne prepares with the elsewhere in his literary corpus. It was important to show how Verne follows a geography of colonial expansion in order to display why the colonized subjectivity, even before any contact, is already rationalized. Diktats of straight line on colonial maps would henceforth define a colonized subject.

The first chapter of this book laid out the theoretical parameters necessary to understand the concerns highlighted here. It outlined the backdrop necessary to understand how analyses of literary spatiality show the human subject is engaged in a process of mutual exchange with colonial spaces. The second chapter recorded a moment of shift in the spatial stakes involved in defining a colonial subject. Verne’s literature displays colonial expansion rationalizing world spaces in terms of capitalism and colonizing nationalisms. Territorial expansion and acquisition of newer markets during colonialism could not have been achieved
without reconfiguring the human subjectivity along axes of capitalism and nationalism. The definitions of human beings that accompanied the colonial reassessment of space followed the same mathematical logic that was defining territories.

The third, fourth and the fifth chapters engaged with particular spatial questions that have resulted from the colonial project. Each chapter figured contemporary responses to a vision of the world constituted by a vocabulary of expansion, discovery and conquest. In addition, these questions of spatiality also furnished the occasion to discover and discuss how and to what extent issues important to the postcolonial world are intertwined with questions of spatiality.

More specifically, the third chapter placed Devi’s narratives of colonial displacement against discussions of geographies of colonial origins and location to understand how her work responds to identities that reductive postcolonial nationalisms impose. Different manifestations of Devi’s India anchor debates about nation-based identities in the postcolonial world, and have also helped understand the evolution in Devi’s own literary relationship with India. Spatial analyses revealed how Devi’s earlier resistance against the general idea of a fixed identity has taken the shape of a more focused resistance against the impositions of a religion-based nationalism. Her work also highlights the combined workings of the nation-state and global capitalism, responsible for global displacements and clustering of populations.

The fourth chapter placed Chamoiseau’s work within the larger historical context of Martinique’s colonial relationship with France to understand the interaction between space, gender and language within the Francophone literary tradition. The struggle led by Marie-Sophie for the ownership of Texaco becomes a metaphor for the conflict that Chamoiseau sees between Creole and French. Marie-Sophie enmeshing her memories with the hutment of Texaco serves as an imperative to define a location in relation to the personal memories of its inhabitants.

It is not just about the claims of two communities – the Creole-speaking hutment and the French-wielding city authorities – over a piece of land. Rather, when analyzing the colonial connections between France and Martinique alongside the strained relationship between French and Creole, it is about the inability of the French language to communicate the Creole community’s relationship to the place it inhabits. More broadly speaking, this chapter shows how humans live in a situation of constant exchange with the spaces they inhabit. Human perceptions determine the meaning of space as much as spaces define human beings. Simply put, one needs to understand the two in relation to each other.
A book that claims to participate in the ‘spatial turn’ of the last few decades cannot be complete without seeing how colonial space and spatiality have influenced our understanding and articulation of the world. The very last chapter moved to the space of difference between two colonial products negotiating their relationship with colonial history. The human subject anchors itself in relation to its own perceptions of all that surrounds it. In Haneke’s film Caché representative of the French nation Georges Laurent can only locate himself and his colonial Other Majid using colonial coordinates that surround him. Humans give meaning to spaces and a spatial understanding becomes the basis for humans defining each other. These readings show how our knowledge of Others and of ourselves is influenced by our interaction with the physical world we inhabit.

In Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Jameson discusses how it has become impossible to locate ourselves either physically or theoretically in the space of postmodernism. An architectural analysis of Hotel Bonaventura shows how the “postmodern hyperspace” has transcended the human body’s ability “to map its position in a mappable external world.” This absence of spatial coordinates serves to point to the lack of critical distance at a theoretical level. Even forms of cultural resistance are “disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it” (44).

If the human subject inhabits a social and political reality whose coordinates it cannot locate and that is undefinable, how then does one establish a model of political change? To answer this question and to regain the “capacity to act and struggle” (Postmodernism 54), and also to elaborate a cultural model such that the individual subject might place itself in the larger global system, Jameson extends Kevin Lynch’s spatial understanding of “cognitive mapping” (51) onto the political realm. In the “alienated city” (51), such as the contemporary grid of Jersey City, people are unable to locate “either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves” (51). Cognitive mapping involves a “practical reconquest of a sense of place” (51). It permits an understanding of one’s own place as well as of the larger spatial whole. When projected “outwards onto some of the larger national and global spaces,” cognitive mapping that Lynch presents in the context of gridlike cities offers the potential for the kind of political change Jameson desires (51).

Jameson elaborates “cognitive mapping” (51) in order to find bearings in “the world space of multinational capital” (54). Given the analyses undertaken above that display the central presence of transnational capital, one could easily see how Devi’s literature figures as a cognitive map of a “world space of
multinational capital.” Not only do Devi’s works define the immediate context of their characters, they also present a vision of a postcolonial world in which capitalism and nationalism are defining the everyday lives of ordinary peoples. However, the cognitive maps that the chapters of *Spatial Boundaries, Abounding Spaces* elaborate should be understood as responding to a colonially redefined world. Against the backdrop of a global spatiality (that continues to be) brutalized by colonialism, the creative spaces of these works are attempts at understanding the world and their place within it from their own vantage position.

For these works, creative spatialities are sites where postcolonial assertions confront colonial spatial paradigms and register the formation of new subjectivities even as mutating forms of subjugation continue challenging ideas of belonging and community. These analyses trace some of the colonial and postcolonial struggles to define one’s relationship with geography. The itinerary charted out through these analyses is intended to provide access to ways in which questions of language, gender, nationalism and race are intertwined with our understanding of space in the contemporary world. These analyses and the creative works analyzed therein function as attempts to triangulate their presence within the world via theoretical coordinates important for the postcolonial world. Jameson points to how the invention of the compass and other instruments for naval navigation allow for the charting of one’s presence as a coordinate of “unlived, abstract conceptions of the geographic totality” (52). These creative works triangulate their presence in the world at different locations: both geographical and theoretical. From each of them emerges a perspective on the world that provides a theoretical anchor that shows not only how spatiality is an important vector in the formation of human subjectivity but also how our perception of space in itself is the result of interaction with all that effects human identity. In particular, the last chapter on Haneke’s cinema has been a gesture to show the constant ongoing exchange between our understanding of space and human identity. If humans have been responsible for shaping spatial contours, then our understanding of space too has influenced our understanding of human interactions.

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In *Spatial Boundaries, Abounding Spaces* I have analyzed the presence of (sometimes abstract) notions of space in critical as well as creative French language works to show how they present colonial spatiality as a necessary vector in the formation of a colonial subject. These works offer sometimes poignant, at other times stark, at times even menacing, but never disinterested accounts of
association with French colonial history, Metropolitan French borders and French conceptualizations of space. This task has been far from easy and has carried the risk of oversimplification, in particular when analyzing creative production in the contemporary world made up of overlapping networks, circuits and ever-changing notions of communal as well as individual spaces.

Indeed, to write a conclusion, to impose a limit on a book bearing Abounding Spaces in its title, will run contrary to its grain, hence the title “Interjecting Passages” for the concluding segment. In the various connotations that they together evoke, “Interjecting” and “Passages” sum up in many ways the objectives this book has tried to achieve. “Interjecting Passages,” firstly because colonization is not a fait accompli and the passages and pathways (financial as well as logistical) that colonization created during the period of overt exploitation continue to expand and interject into our daily lives, as Devi’s work shows, assuming ever-changing newer forms. Devi’s work also displays how the creative response – her literary passages – continues to derail and interject these colonial-capitalist passageways and their nefarious collusion with power structures that impose sexual, racial, casteist and gendered imperatives, among others, on human bodies.

“Interjecting Passages” also because the passages in this book have hopefully productively interjected in the vibrant debate around postcolonial spatiality to show how spatial boundaries are constituted by, and at the same time are a constitutive vector of, the colonial subject. Multiple notions of space have criss-crossed with each other, interjected each other, to reveal in myriad ways how spatial boundaries have transformed the colonial subject. And, how these spatial boundaries in themselves are products of specific knowledge paradigms in which the subject participates.

It is thus, because the book takes its spatial cues from these literary works and engages with disparate spatial analyses, that it also bears Abounding Spaces in its title. Abounding, firstly because at times this book has espoused the unending, limitless space that was the mainstay of the last chapter’s argument, and more importantly also because of the myriad spatial constellations it evokes. Multiple and varied assertions of spatial belongings and spatial rejections have produced a colonial subject, difficult to contain within any one spatial discourse.

Be it imposed spaces, subjugating spaces, spaces of contention, spaces of rebellion, or, dissenting, defiant and revolting spaces, these spaces in their various assertions are producing intersections of subjectivity and spatiality that testify to the influences on them of colonial expansion, modernist reassertions of nation-states, as well as creative postmodern engagements.
It should not then be surprising that *Spatial Boundaries, Abounding Spaces* has simultaneously deployed material, historical, linguistic and postmodern readings of creative works to understand the overarching principles that guide the creative engagement with spatial oppression and the new paradigms of colonial citizenship that these French language works produce. It is in this spirit that I present the following reading, not as the conclusive limit of this much larger discussion, but as a punctuation mark that illustrates some aspects of the analyses this book has espoused.

As I mentioned earlier, through his avowed move to connect *Caché* to the “dark stains” on the collective unconscious of “every country,” the Austrian director Haneke has already taken this Paris-based French-language film away from its national confines. Georges Laurent living in contemporary Paris is understood as a product of the colonization in Algeria as well as of the “blind spot” of history associated with 17 October 1961, when hundreds of people of Algerian origin were drowned in the river Seine without any consequences for the perpetrators.

As I have concentrated on zones of contact to question the containment – identitarian as well as spatial – of human beings, the idea has been to show that in order to understand the here and now, one needs to start with there and then. The first chapter of this book began with the work of a French author writing about an Englishman’s colonial exploits that demonstrated how a uniform colonial space was created across Earth. The last chapter was about an Austrian director making a French film about French colonialism. In the same spirit of working with authors writing about locations of national nonbelonging, I end this book with a poem by the Polish-American Nobel Laureate, Czesław Miłosz, writing about Paris.

This gesture of reading an English translation of a non-Francophone author writing about the interconnections between the heart of French colonial empire, the capital city of Paris, and the “cloudy provinces” is an attempt at underlining the all-pervasive presence of French spatial structures; a presence that exceeds the linguistic divisions that one imposes upon creative works. “Bypassing Rue Descartes” is a poem that speaks about the arrival in Paris of those belonging to the “cloudy provinces.” The poem nuances the interlinkages between Paris and the impoverished immigrants:

*Bypassing rue Descartes*

Bypassing rue Descartes
I descended toward the Seine, shy, a traveler,
A young barbarian just come to the capital of the world.
We were many, from Jassy and Koloshvar, Wilno and Bucharest, Saigon and Marrakesh,
Ashamed to remember the customs of our homes,
About which nobody here should ever be told:
The clapping for servants, barefooted girls hurry in,
Dividing food with incantations,
Choral prayers recited by master and household together.

I had left the cloudy provinces behind,
I entered the universal, dazzled and desiring.

Soon enough, many from Jassy and Koloshvar, or Saigon or Marrakesh
Would be killed because they wanted to abolish the customs of their homes.

Soon enough, their peers were seizing power
In order to kill in the name of the universal, beautiful ideas.
Meanwhile the city behaved in accordance with its nature,
Rustling with throaty laughter in the dark,
Baking long breads and pouring wine into clay pitchers,
Buying fish, lemons, and garlic at street markets,
Indifferent as it was to honor and shame and greatness and glory,
Because that had been done already and had transformed itself
Into monuments representing nobody knows whom,
Into arias hardly audible and into turns of speech.

Again I lean on the rough granite of the embankment,
As if I had returned from travels through the underworlds
And suddenly saw in the light the reeling wheel of the seasons
Where empires have fallen and those once living are now dead.

There is no capital of the world, neither here nor anywhere else,
And the abolished customs are restored to their small fame,
And now I know that the time of human generations is not like the time of the earth.

As to my heavy sins, I remember one most vividly:
How, one day, walking on a forest path along a stream,
I pushed a rock down onto a water snake coiled in the grass.

And what I have met with in life was the just punishment
Which reaches, sooner or later, the breaker of a taboo.
The poem begins with two proper names, Seine and Descartes: the river where *Caché*’s colonial subject Majid loses his parents and a road name that evokes René Descartes, the most well-known of all French philosophers, and here the emblem for France. Let me read this poem in light of the analyses from *Spatial Boundaries, Abounding Spaces*. It is through a necessary analysis of the passage (both meanings intended – pathway as well as the poem) leading from the road (“rue Descartes”) to the river that one can hope to discover a world that radically redefines the way locations relate to each other; and a movement away from a world of hierarchical oppositions.

This poem can be divided into two distinctly temporal evocations. From “Bypassing” to “turns of speech,” the poem remains in the past. The poem starts with a narrator who “descended toward the Seine.” In the second segment (from “Again” to “taboo”), the narrator assumes the first person “I” and speaks in the present tense of an inclusive geography where history becomes central to our understanding of space.

In opposition to the plural place names (“Jassy and Koloshvar, Wilno and Bucharest, Saigon and Marrakesh”) of these “cloudy provinces,” Paris, “the capital of the world,” exists in the singular. Unlike these provinces that follow the plurality of “customs of our homes” that need to be censored (“About which nobody here should ever be told”), Paris, associated with the one and only “universal,” can behave in only one particular predictable manner: “in accordance with its nature.”

There is consumption of food in both locales. In the cloudy provinces human beings exist in a hierarchy of “masters” and “servants [...] girls,” that live in “homes” (in plural) and indulge in communal activities of “choral prayers.” These inhabitants are “dividing food.” That is, they exist as a community. The capital, on the other hand, is personified. The city laughs, bakes, buys fish and even pours wine, all for itself, and all following its predictable “nature.”

This logocentric universal presentation of the city in contrast against the provinces should not be understood as a valorization of the old-world hierarchy of human beings with predestined social positions in “cloudy provinces.” Within this opposition (universal versus hierarchical) lies the kind of reductive thinking that was at the heart of: a) Phileas Fogg’s journey that presented the colonial world as a function of Europe; b) the crux of postcolonial identitarian assertions that sought to return to the original glory of cultures lost. Masters and servant girls, while both remind of humans existing in assigned hierarchies, are also gender specific, and speak to the kind of Senghorian Négritude that advanced its male-centric postcolonial identity at the cost of the woman subject. Just as the
“master” is able to command (“clapping”) servant girls to do his bidding, so did Négritude deploy the woman in its careless idolization of a sexualized Africa.

It is the incommensurability then of these two worldviews with any subjective assertions that leads to the violence that pervades the poem. Many from these provinces “[w]ould be killed” to maintain the customs, just as “universal, beautiful ideas” would coax others “to kill.” These worldviews erase that which does not conform to the ideal.

It is the second half of the poem (from “Again” to “taboo”) that articulates a geography where history becomes central to our understanding of spaces. For the very first time in the poem, there is a physical coming together of the narrator and the built city: “I lean on the rough granite of the embankment.” This “barbarian” with customs from elsewhere comes to the Seine and leans upon the granite, which has its own history that has rendered it “rough.” What one has in this interconnection is a new way of understanding the relationship between the city and the subject. If this present moment forces us to probe the circumstances that led the narrator to traverse geographies, and to be physically present against the embankment, it is not without wondering about the events that rendered the granite rough.

Milosz’s poem prepares the ground for a space of engagement where the iteration of human space and identity is not shackled by predetermined definitions of history or of other human beings. It should be no surprise, then, that what accompanies this implicit understanding of human and spatial identities within their diachronic and synchronic context is the collapse of a globe existing in hierarchies: “There is no capital of the world.”

Humans and their histories lean on spaces as much as spaces and their various histories lean back upon humans: just as those who were “once living” then “are now dead,” so is it important to point out that neither “here,” nor “anywhere else” is there anymore a “capital of the world.” I italicize the temporal and the spatial designators to stress upon what I have already stated: in order to reckon with the here and now, one needs to start with the there and then. Only then can one hope to look beyond the smoke screen and surpass the debilitating compartmentalization that Phileas Fogg imposed upon the world; a compartmentalization inherently linked to the assertion of superiority over the colonized Other.

“Bypassing Rue Descartes” articulates the importance of spatial understanding to the creation of identity and then presents a time and space relationship that pervades inequality and rejects any watertight definitions – be they of human beings or of chunks of landmasses on which have been scaled nation-states. It is this counteractive challenge to borders that I have attempted
to work toward in *Spatial Boundaries, Abounding Spaces: Colonial Borders in French and Francophone Literature and Film*. In their struggle to redefine spatiality, Chamoiseau, Devi and Haneke reassert the need for a more inclusive spatial paradigm, the kind that is present in Milosz’s poem.

Four geographically dispersed creative constructs belonging to four different creative traditions, different genres and different moments of colonial history speak together of the centrality of the ever-present colonial borders, just as they also attest to the inherent entwinement of these spatial divides with human identity. To explore this space is to recognize its inherent openness, to accept the anxiety of constantly changing coordinates of human identity. To explore this space would also imply being aware that one inhabits an ever-changing relationship with the Other; it is to know that colonization is found both in India and France as well as in the fictional hutment of Texaco. In order to understand this intertwined world of “foggy provinces” of Texaco, India and Martinique, one should not be bypassing Rue Descartes in Paris, is what I have hoped to communicate.