

**John Thieme**

**Postcolonial Mappae Mundi**

**Abstract:** After a brief consideration of some of the ways in which cartography has operated through the ages, this article discusses the maps mentioned in the first part of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and references to maps in the work of three postcolonial writers: Jamaica Kincaid, Amitav Ghosh and Derek Walcott. It suggests that the postcolonial texts display a distinctive cartographical vision, which rethinks the way spaces are imaginatively constructed. Different though they are from one another, the three postcolonial writers considered particularly foreground the personal cognitive aspects of mapping and, explicitly or implicitly, challenge the totalizing, supposedly authoritative versions of world geography that characterize maps of Empire and Western cartography more generally.

After a brief consideration of some of the ways in which cartography has operated through the ages, this article discusses the maps mentioned in the first part of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and references to maps in the work of three postcolonial writers: Jamaica Kincaid, Amitav Ghosh and Derek Walcott. It endeavours to suggest that the postcolonial texts taken as case-studies display a distinctive cartographical vision, which although it is not always completely at odds with colonial map-making practices, nevertheless asserts a right to rethink the way spaces are imaginatively constructed, both locally and globally. Different though they are from one another, the three postcolonial writers considered particularly foreground the personal cognitive aspects of mapping and, explicitly or implicitly, challenge the totalizing, supposedly authoritative versions of world geography that are prevalent in maps of Empire, and in Western cartography more generally. Considering references to maps may suggest a focus on a very

particular aspect of postcolonial writing, but the writers' use of cartographical tropes offers an index of their response to colonial configurations of space and culture more generally.

To provide a context, I would like to begin by suggesting that there are two main impulses in cartographical practices through the centuries and across the globe: an approach that strives to achieve scientific accuracy and an approach that readily embraces what Edward Said, among others, has termed 'imaginative geography' (Said 1993b: 49-73). And, although these two impulses may initially seem to be mutually exclusive, they can be, and often are, twinned, since historically supposedly 'neutral' maps have invariably incorporated cultural agendas that are very specific to the world-views of the cartographers and communities who produced them. Perhaps the most famous example is Gerardus Mercator's 1569 world map, the model for all the subsequent maps that have represented the spherical earth as an oblong, with the distances between the lines of longitude expanded at the top and bottom, so that the polar regions are accorded the same amount of space across the flattened globe as the equator. Mercator-based projections have, of course, retained much of their popularity until very recently, although digital mapping such as google earth is superseding such cartography in the early years of the twenty-first century. Until then and even today, most atlases have contained world maps that are Mercator derivatives, maps that in the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century heyday of Empire supplemented the cartography of Mercator and his successors with political colour coding that asserted or cemented European colonial powers' claims to non-European territory.

Mercator's Projection gives the illusion of being both authoritative and 'neutral', and certainly its landmark status as one of the greatest achievements of the golden age of Dutch cartography represents one of the two impulses identified above, the impulse towards scientific accuracy. It was produced '*ad usum navigatum*' ('for navigational use') and it was an invaluable aid for sailors,

making it more feasible for them to chart their course on a map as a straight line than had been possible using earlier Ptolemaic cartography. That said, consciously or unconsciously, Mercator's Projection has a clear Eurocentric bias, perhaps only to be expected given the context in which it was produced: the golden age of Dutch cartography coincided with the Low Countries' pre-eminence in global trade. In the sixteenth century, first Antwerp and then Amsterdam supplanted cities such as Florence and Lisbon as the most important centres of European commerce and banking, and maps were essential tools for the trading activities of the merchants of the Low Countries. They also assumed another importance at home, as they became status symbols for the Flemish and Dutch moneyed classes, who unsurprisingly saw themselves at the centre of the world. Dutch interiors, particularly the paintings of Vermeer, often have maps on their walls, maps that establish a relationship between the private domestic worlds of these interiors and the global enterprises on which their affluence was built. Cartography was, then, far more than simply utilitarian and the impulse towards scientific accuracy in such maps was paired with a view that saw them as *objets d'art*. So art and science, the interior decoration of homes and the cartographical advances underpinning the expansion of trade, appear to have cohabited comfortably in a mercantilist view of the world that naturalized the assumption that Western Europe had the right to plunder less 'civilized' parts of the globe.

By the late nineteenth-century such political cartography had progressed a long way from the comparative innocence of Mercator's Projection. And one of the most frequently cited and fascinating instances of allusions to maps in fiction from the late colonial period comes in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), a novella whose response to imperialism has, of course, elicited enough criticism to make the shelves of a library buckle under its weight (1). However, the nuances of *Heart of Darkness's* map references have for the most part escaped detailed attention. These are subtler than has generally been appreciated and, if one notes that the references are varied and period-specific, they seem to imply a critique of

colonial cartography. The narrator Marlow's response to maps is central to the initiation he undergoes during the course of his journey into the 'heart of darkness', which is based on Conrad's own experience in the Congo in 1890, shortly after the Berlin Conference (2) had effectively licensed the institution of European-imposed borders that cut across tribal boundaries during the period of the so-called 'Scramble for Africa'. Early on in his narrative, Marlow tells his listeners:

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all looked that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there. [...] But there was one yet – the biggest, the most blank, so to speak that I had a hankering after (Conrad 1994: 11).

In an essay written towards the end of his life, Conrad confessed to a similar addiction to maps as a boy (Conrad 1924) and, if we assume Marlow to be Conrad's approximate contemporary, it would seem reasonable to date the period in which both author and character were poring over maps as boys in the 1860s or just possibly the early 1870s (Conrad was born in 1857), or, to put this another way, prior to the Scramble for Africa and the Berlin Conference. Significantly, in the very next paragraph of his narrative, Marlow tells his listeners that a very different cartography had come into being by the time he actually undertook his journey to the place he has "hanker[ed] after". His interest to go there has been rekindled by a later map, which he has seen in a shop window in the highly significant site of Fleet Street, the centre of the British newspaper industry and, one might add, much British myth-making. In this map, he says, the blankness of the earlier map "had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness" (Conrad 1994:

11-12). Marlow remains fascinated, but now not by white blankness – the Eurocentric maps' failure to assign any clear identity to the pre-colonial space, which we recognise as Africa, though it is never named as such – but rather by the image of 'a mighty big river [...] resembling an immense snake uncoiled', which, he says "fascinated [him] as a snake would a bird – a silly little bird" (Conrad 1994: 12). The suggestion is that in the intervening years, Africa has ceased to be constructed as an absence in the nineteenth-century European imagination and has been reinvented as the Dark Continent (3); and in this *colonial* cartography it is a site of primeval evil – seemingly associated with the serpent in Eden. But there is another dimension to the change that has occurred in the years that have passed since Marlow's boyhood. Africa has also become a site for colonial economic exploitation and, intent on journeying to the heart of darkness, Marlow goes to an unnamed European city, strongly redolent of Brussels, to seek employment in the service of a company trading in the "place of darkness". Here he encounters a third map and, although Conrad stops short of including the names of the nations involved, the imperialist political cartography involved here is unmistakable. In the Company's offices, Marlow sees

a large shining map, marked with all the colours of a rainbow. There was a vast amount of red – good to see at any time, because one knows some real work is done in there, a deuce of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer. However, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centre. And the river was there – fascinating – deadly – like a snake (Conrad 1994: 14-15).

The colour coding of this map legitimizes the way the Berlin Conference has divided Africa up into regions for European economic exploitation. Marlow naively approves the 'rainbow' coalition that the Conference has sanctioned, taking particular pride in the 'red' that denotes British influence, gently satirising the

'purple' of areas under German hegemony and indicating his own imminent implication in the 'yellow' of Belgian colonization of the Congo, which a few years after the Conference was to become a byword for cruelty, even among those who otherwise had few scruples about the ethics of imperialism (4).

In short, the maps of Marlow's boyhood, Eurocentric though they are, are comparatively innocent compared with the two that he sees shortly before his journey. Most significantly, though, his subsequent experience as he travels upriver into the African interior is completely at odds with the neat divisions of the colonial maps and exposes the reality underlying Europe's 'civilizing' mission in Africa. So the text's use of the trope of maps works as a metonym for its critique of the economic exploitation of late nineteenth-century European colonization. Colonial maps, it is suggested, are paper geography, which overwrites spatial realities. Talking more generally about space, the cultural geographer, Doreen Massey has referred to it as "the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of co-existing heterogeneity" (Massey 2005: 9), and the colonial reinscription of African space in post-Berlin Conference maps of the continent closes down the possibility of "distinct trajectories coexisting" together. *Heart of Darkness* has been criticized for its failure to represent African experience from the inside (Achebe 1988), but Marlow's map references clearly challenge the exploitation inherent in late nineteenth-century European mappings of Africa and by extension what the Tasmanian poet, James McAuley, in his poem 'Chorale', has called world maps that are "Mercator's with the hues of trade" (McAuley 1963: 6).

In this sense Conrad's implied critique anticipates later postcolonial map-making, and Mercator-based projections particularly came under attack in the 1970s and 1980s. In a number of maps published in the last quarter of the twentieth century, such as the Bligh Revised Map of the World, Australia is rescued from 'down under' mythology, by being located, often centrally, in the earth's upper hemisphere. The caption supplied with the Bligh Map says, "No longer will the

south wallow in a pit of insignificance, carrying the north on its shoulders. The south has finally emerged on top, supporting the north from above” (5). A reasonable enough readjustment, given that such privileging the north is, of course, no more than a Eurocentric convention and, after all, the term ‘orientation’ suggests the ‘naturalness’ of locating oneself by facing east.

While the Bligh Revised Map adopts a light-hearted approach, the slightly earlier Peters’ Projection, which was the work of the German Marxist historian Arno Peters, is altogether more serious in tone. In his 1973 map of the world, Peters offers a more fully developed corrective to some of the Eurocentric biases inherent in projections such as Mercator’s. In his view such maps magnify the surface area of countries like Greenland that are near to the poles and reduce the size of equatorial countries. His Projection rectifies this by decreasing the distance between lines of latitude towards the poles, with the corollary that the tropical regions, particularly Africa, Latin America and the Indian subcontinent, are elongated and cover a much larger surface area than in virtually all earlier projections. The Peters’ Projection was attacked by traditional cartographers, who claimed it was more of a political statement than an accurate cartographical representation and in any case was not original (6); and it remains controversial, though it was adopted by various international agencies, including UNESCO, and found favour in developing countries, who responded positively to its ‘area accurate’ mapping. It does seem that Peters made some minor miscalculations (7), but given that Mercator’s Projection and most of its derivatives not only distort the land area of countries, but also locate the equator more than half way down the map, further privileging the ascendancy of the north and specifically Europe, attacks on Peters’ map seem to involve an attempt to sidestep the larger implications of its persuasive agenda.

There is something more involved here. Although the goal of achieving scientific accuracy dominated Western map-making from the Renaissance onwards and became an obsession during the period of the Enlightenment, maps,

as I hope the above remarks on their usage in the golden age of Dutch cartography illustrate, have always served multiple purposes, ranging from artworks to political tools. And in pre-Renaissance Europe, a cartographical practice in which there was scant regard for scientific accuracy was the norm. In medieval *mappae mundi* ('cloths of the world') art jostles with geometry, geography with theology, and mythology with science, to provide pictorial fables that are astonishing compendia of knowledge and beliefs about the world and humanity's place in the cosmos. In an age when illiteracy was the norm and pictorial imagery was a major factor in ensuring the laity's faith, *mappae mundi* depicted central events in Christian history, such as the expulsion from Eden and the Flood, often contrasting the pleasures of the saved with the sufferings of the damned and sometimes also serving as *memento mori*. *Mappae mundi* generally place the east rather than the north at the top and Jerusalem at their heart, with the world radiating out from this focal point and becoming increasingly barbarous around its outer limits (8). *Mappae mundi* are still centred on Europe and the Near East, and in some respects can be seen to contain the seeds of later colonial cartography, since Asia and particularly Africa, are usually represented as being inhabited by strange beings and monstrous animals, but their imaginative geography lacks the later maps' pretence of scientific accuracy. And, given that 'accuracy' has been crucial to the authority asserted by colonial cartography, it seems reasonable to see the license of *mappae mundi*'s imaginative geography – a mode of representation serving the Christian purpose of instilling faith through a mixture of information, aesthetic pleasure and threat – as a parallel pre-Enlightenment discourse to the post-Enlightenment discourse of postcolonial map-making.

In the prefatory section to her essay-collection *My Garden (book)*:, Jamaica Kincaid talks about the beginnings of her adult attachment to gardens. After relating how her first tentative attempts at horticulture failed, she gives an account

of how she began to replace parts of the front and back lawns of her American house,

[...] into the most peculiar ungardenlike shapes. These beds – for I was attempting to make such a thing as flower beds – were odd in shape, odd in relation, odd in relation to the way flower beds usually look in a garden. I could see that they were odd and I could see that they did not look like the flower beds in gardens I admired, the gardens of my friends, the gardens portrayed in my books on gardening, but I couldn't help that; I wanted a garden that looked like something I had in my mind's eye, but exactly what that might be I did not know and even now do not know (Kincaid 2000: xiii).

The catalyst for this has been her reading of William Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843), which she says made her feel her garden was "something else" (Kincaid 2000: xiii) (9), and Kincaid sees books as integral to her interest in gardens. She explains that "the garden for me is so bound up with words about the garden, with words themselves, that any set idea of the garden, any set picture, is a provocation to me" (Kincaid 2000: xiii). The essays in *My Garden (book)*: are eclectic – they discuss gardens in various parts of the world, as well as commenting on larger botanical issues, such as Linnaean classification and the colonial management of the Caribbean landscape, but this notion of gardens and words being interlinked underlies Kincaid's responses to all the gardens she visits or contemplates. Gardening, she suggests, is inextricably tied up with words, a discursive practice. Her title implies this, by parenthetically adding "book" as a supplement to "Garden", almost challenging the notion that one might be able to record a garden without the mediation of a book, or even perhaps suggesting that a garden is a text, to be written and read in a manner akin to a book. The title, then, foregrounds the extent to which the book will be a meta-gardening work; and the awkward colon at the end, which subverts normal syntactical rules, further destabilizes the relationship between "Garden" and "book".

Kincaid's flower beds are, she says, "odd", an attempt to realise something unknown in her "mind's eye", and towards the end of the opening section of *My Garden (book)*: she represents herself as lacking the sense of "an established aesthetic of a garden" (Kincaid 2000: xiv) that other gardeners have. However, the section concludes with her saying that one day she realised that what she "was making (and am still making and will always be making) resembled a map of the Caribbean and the sea that surrounds it" (Kincaid 2000: xiv). Her personal garden aesthetic was, is and, in her own terms, always will be a response to her own "immediate past". So too her book, one feels. And at this point she also reminds readers of the influence of Prescott's *History of Mexico*, now referring to it as a reminder of "the past as it is indirectly related to me" (Kincaid 2000: xiv). In short, the shapes in her garden seem to involve a very personal map-making, but one that it is inextricably bound up with Caribbean and Central American history and geography. Here and elsewhere in *My Garden (book)*: her comments on gardening and the "book" that is linked with it are informed by a political cartography that is both quirkily individual and a response to the colonial past.

Later essays in the same collection are more explicit about the political backdrop to Caribbean botany. An essay entitled 'In History' contemplates the naming strategies that have fashioned both post-Columbian New World history and the plants of the Americas, as seen from the vantage point of her garden in Vermont. An essay entitled 'The Glasshouse' contrasts temperate zone greenhouses such as the one in Kew Gardens, with the Edenic Botanical Gardens of St. John's Antigua, which she has frequented as a girl, to arrive at the conclusion that botanical nomenclature has been the prerogative of those like Linnaeus who cultivated plants in glasshouses that were stocked, during the era of Dutch and British mercantile ascendancy, "at a great expense to someone else" (Kincaid 2000: 113). The link between political geography and botany is, though, at its most explicit in an essay entitled, 'What Joseph Banks Wrought'.

In 'What Joseph Banks Wrought', Kincaid contrasts English and Antiguan attitudes to landscape, finding the English "quality of character that leads to obsessive order and shape in the landscape [...] blissfully lacking in the Antiguan people" (Kincaid 2000: 98). At the same time she demonstrates that botany in Antigua has mainly been a colonial preserve, not least because so much Caribbean flora and fauna has a post-Columbian history in the region (10). She provides a provenance for various plants and flowers commonly associated with the Caribbean, explaining that the bougainvillea is from tropical South America, the croton from Malaysia, the Bermuda lily from Japan, the flamboyant tree from Madagascar, the casuarina from Australia, and so on (Kincaid 2000: 100). In short, colonial trade has been responsible for bringing many typically 'Caribbean' plants to the region, and in this context, Joseph Banks, the most famous English botanist of his day, the founder of Kew Gardens and James Cook's naturalist on his first voyage to the antipodes, becomes a metonym for the transportation of produce along the trade routes of Empire. Kincaid refers to Kew Gardens as a "clearinghouse for all the plants stolen from the various parts of the world", pointing out that Banks "sent tea to India" and, most notoriously, sent the breadfruit to the West Indies from the East Indies "as a cheap food for feeding slaves" (Kincaid 2000: 101) (11).

In one sense Kincaid is here simply charting the place of plants in the traffic of Empire and underscoring the extent to which commercial trade that furthered European interests dominated the lives of Caribbean subjects to the extent that it determined the flora and fauna among which colonial Antiguan grew up. However, in addition to demonstrating the extent to which colonial transactions have been responsible for the contemporary botanical make-up of Antigua, and by extension most of the Caribbean, through the lay-out of her own garden *and* her book, she offers perspectives on botany and cartography that are as much extra-colonial as anti-colonial.

Her account of the imported nature of many Caribbean plants complements the transported situation of the early generations of the majority Afro-Caribbean population in the New World, who experienced a particular traumatic relationship to 'agriculture', since they were brought to the Americas to work as plantation slaves, but her strategy for moving beyond this is far from simply oppositional. The odd configurations she has produced in her garden serve as a trope for what she is doing both as a gardener and as a writer: they suggest a strongly felt need to articulate a highly personal cartography, albeit one that assumes a Caribbean shape. She subverts expectations of what a formal garden should be and she reinvents the genre of the gardening book.

Arguably, Kincaid's shapes, personal though they are, typify a particular strain in post-colonial literary cartography, a strain which, while it is invariably at odds with colonial mapping, is less concerned with disputing the norms of Eurocentric cartography, though it may do this, than with asserting the right to map the world individually – to move outside the imperial desire to impose precision and codification. It would be imprecise simply to equate Kincaid's garden shapes and her *Garden (book)*: with the artwork of *mappae mundi*, but her imaginative horticulture involves similar modalities. Just as *mappae mundi* affirm the right to shape the world as fable, Kincaid, who can be very direct in her indictments of imperialism (12), chooses to draw personal maps. In her garden she seems to arrive at an alternative cartography intuitively; in her *Garden (book)*: the process seems more conscious, but in both cases the end-product is an approach that eschews not just the agendas of colonial cartography, but the approach to mapping that has produced them.

And this is a major tendency in the *mappae mundi* that many postcolonial writers produce. They move away from colonialism, not simply by turning the world upside down like the Bligh Revised Map, or, like the Peters' Projection, questioning the proportions involved in Mercator-derived world maps' allocations of space. In an age when digital mapping is extending the possibilities for scientifically

accurate cartography into hitherto undreamt-of territory, they return us to the notion that place is imaginatively constructed. The conventions, parameters, iconography, dimensions, materials and contexts of maps, along with the media in which we encounter them – on the printed page, on a globe, on a GPS system, on a desktop computer or a cellphone – always involve cultural baggage, but a cartographical practice that openly acknowledges its subjectivity or eccentricity, or foregrounds the arbitrariness or relativism of the choices it embodies, offers a corrective to the authoritarian modes of post-Renaissance European discourse that often legitimized colonial expropriation.

Passages about maps in the work of Derek Walcott and Amitav Ghosh support the case for likening postcolonial literary cartography to *mappae mundi*. In a central section of Walcott's epic poem, *Omeros* (1990), the poet-persona who is one of the poem's protagonists, declares "I crossed my meridian" (Walcott 1990: 189) and the complex web of associations that follows this statement contains references to other meridians, specifically Greenwich and the meridian of Pope Alexander VI, who at the end of the fifteenth century decreed the line of demarcation that divided the New World between Portugal and Spain. In a passage set in post-imperial London in the same Book, the poet asks, "Who declares a great epoch?" and immediately answers, "The meridian of Greenwich" (Walcott 1990: 196). Meridians, then, come to stand for the Eurocentric metanarratives on which the mappings of the history and geography of recent centuries have been based, but the transgressive (13) crossing involved here is as much personal as political. By crossing his own meridian – a highly personal meridian, but one which obviously relates to and reverses the Middle Passage crossing and other voyages of Empire – the persona both steps inside the former colonizer's space and at the same time disturbs the hegemonies instated by the Greenwich meridian (14) and the earlier borderline decreed by Pope Alexander. So crossing meridians is a migrant act that dismantles the historically constructed borders that separate Caribbean space and subjectivity from Europe. And the

poem *Omeros* operates in a very similar manner throughout, confounding history with new cartographies that have their origins in the restless journeying of the Odyssean travelling protagonist. The text itself moves through a sea of discourses and, although it is rooted in the Caribbean, it expresses a postcolonial poetics of migration. Walcott's poet-persona's act of crossing meridians is in many ways similar to Kincaid's garden shapes, since it too challenges colonial demarcations of space, but where she refashions a small piece of her immediate environment, he unsettles earlier cartographies by undertaking countless *personal* journeys across arbitrarily drawn borders.

Conrad's Marlow discovers that the paper geography that came into being at the time of the Scramble for Africa instituted artificial borders, albeit borders that would have murderous consequences, such as the Nigerian Civil War, in the post-independence era. And a similar act of cartographical carnage, the Partition of Bengal, underlies the very personal stories told by Amitav Ghosh in his novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988), which appears to take its title from a Conrad's similarly named novella, *The Shadow Line* (Conrad 1917). On the most obvious level, the shadow lines of the title refer to the revisionist cartography that left predominantly Hindu West Bengal in India and located the predominantly Muslim parts of eastern Bengal in East Pakistan (later Bangladesh). The lives of the narrator's Hindu family have been irrevocably affected by the institution of the political border, which, after Partition, divided Bengalis who had hitherto lived side by side. Towards the end of the novel, when members of the family are about to undertake a journey from Calcutta to their former home in Dhaka, the narrator's grandmother wants to know "whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane" (Ghosh 1988: 148). Ingenuous though her response is, it nevertheless foregrounds the absurdity of the map-making of the politicians responsible for Partition.

The family journeys to Dhaka to rescue an aged relative at a time of political crisis. However, this relative stubbornly refuses to uproot himself and, again

expressing himself with an apparent naivety that nevertheless has the effect of undermining the supposed wisdom of the revisionist map-makers, he expresses his sense of the absurdity of redrawing political boundaries:

Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere (Ghosh 1988: 211).

In the climax of this episode, the narrator ponders the deadly effects of the new border, when his second cousin, Tridib, a figure who has always exercised a particularly potent hold on his imagination, and particularly his personal mapping of place, is killed amid communal violence.

At this point, the novel seems to offer a clear indictment of political cartography, in this case a consequence of the end of colonialism – the border has come into being at the moment of Indian Independence – and Ghosh is certainly at pains to demonstrate the arbitrariness of such hastily drawn frontiers. Although the narrator concedes that the political map-makers were well-intentioned, he is struck by the fact that the bonds that link Dhaka and Calcutta are closer than ever, despite the shadow-line of the border. That said, *The Shadow Lines* remains a highly *personal* account of the narrator's family's fortunes and his growing awareness of how space is cognitively imagined by different people and communities. There is a striking instance of this towards the end of the novel, when the narrator remembers riots that have taken place in Khulna in East Pakistan in the first days of 1964. These have been triggered by the temporary disappearance of a relic, allegedly of the Prophet Mohammed's hair, from a mosque near Srinagar in Kashmir. Reflecting on these events years afterwards, in 1979, he uses his compass to draw a circle on a map in his old Bartholomew's Atlas. This circle begins with its

point in Khulna and its tip on Srinagar and the narrator is prompted to draw it by the realization that Khulna is about 1,200 miles, nearly 2,000 metres from Srinagar, “about as far from Srinagar as Tokyo is from Beijing or Moscow from Venice or Washington from Havana, or Cairo from Naples” (Ghosh 1988: 226), and when he draws it, he finds he has covered an area that includes places as far apart as “the Pakistani half of Punjab [...] Kandy, in Sri Lanka, [and] the Yangtze Kiang, passing within sight of the Great Wall of China”. This palimpsest – his circle overwrites the geography of the atlas’s map – strikes him as “remarkable”, but he also feels it is an exercise in “learning the meaning of distance” (Ghosh 1988: 227). And it leads him to draw another circle, another palimpsest, in his atlas. This time he places Milan at the centre, and places 1,200 miles away from it on the circumference. He says:

This was another amazing circle. It passed through Helsinki in Finland, Sundsvall in Sweden, Mold in Norway, above the Shetland Islands, and then through a great empty stretch of the Atlantic Ocean until it came to Casablanca. Then it travelled into the Algerian Sahara, through Libya, into Egypt, up through the Mediterranean, where it touched on Crete and Rhodes before going into Turkey, then on through the Black Sea, into the USSR, through Crimea, the Ukraine, Byelorussia and Estonia, back to Helsinki (Ghosh 1988: 227-228).

All these places are as close to Milan as Khulna is to Srinagar and yet, even in an increasingly globalized world, their destinies are less umbilically linked.

In one sense the narrator’s palimpsests simply involve an overwriting of the political geography of his Bartholomew’s Atlas, and so one might say that they simply contest a form of late colonial cartography – and of course they do just this – but making Khulna and Milan the central points of the circles leads to the creation of two very individual *mappae mundi*, in some ways analogous to medieval cartographers placing Jerusalem at the centre their maps (or Imperial

Rome according Rome, not Milan, centrality in many of *its* maps), but it is more subjective here because the circles are products of the narrator's own personal imagination. *The Shadow Lines* is a novel that depicts traumatic political events that have their origins in colonial cartography, but like Kincaid's garden shapes and Walcott's persona's crossing meridians, the narrator's two circles create an imaginative geography that is uniquely his own.

## NOTES

(1) See, e.g. Said 1993a, Thieme 2001, Collits 2005, Caminero-Santangelo 2005 and Farn 2005. Also Knowles and Moore 2000, particularly the entries on 'colonialism' (77-80) and 'race/racism' (336-338).

(2) The Berlin Conference was in fact a series of meetings held between November 1884 and February 1885 under the chairmanship of Germany's Chancellor Bismarck and attended by representatives of various European nations, the USA and Turkey. It allocated European powers particular 'spheres of influence' in Africa and in so doing both legitimized European appropriations of African territory and provided a framework for the further partitioning of the continent, so that by 1914 most of Africa was under European control.

(3) Prior to this, the discursive construction of Africa as bestial or hellish has a long genealogy in European cartography. See my comment on its representation in *mappae mundi* in this article. However, Marlow sees absence as having been replaced by darkness in the years in question and Conrad's use of his persona suggests he represents an aspect of the late Victorian imaginary that was becoming more aware of Africa.

(4) Through bilateral agreements with other European powers in the 1880s, King Léopold II of Belgium obtained overall control of the Congo basin, an area that came to be known as the Congo Free State. The region was intended to be a free trade area, in which slavery was forbidden. However, during the succeeding years,

Léopold effectively established a private fiefdom, in which slavery was rife, and his economic exploitation of the Congo led to the death of a large proportion of its population. As news of atrocities in the Congo filtered through to Europe, public opinion was outraged. From one point of view, *Heart of Darkness* can be read as a contribution to the attack on the particular brutality of Léopold's form of imperialism.

(5) Quoted from the 1980s Bligh Revised Map of the World. N.p.: Bligh Group of Companies. N.d. McArthur's Universal Corrective Map of the World, published in 1979, is said to be the first modern 'south-up' map. A much earlier 'upside down' map was created in Dieppe by Nicolas Desliens in 1566. <http://flourish.org/upsidedownmap/>. Accessed 30 December 2011.

(6) They attempted to discredit it by claiming that a Scotsman, James Gall, had devised a similar map in the nineteenth century. Harwood 2006: 172.

(7) See Harwood 2006: 172-175.

(8) Among the most famous are the Hereford Cathedral *mappa mundi*, believed to be the largest surviving such map, and the Ebstorf world map, reconstructed from photographs in the convent of Ebstorf in Lower Saxony, after being destroyed in a World War II bombing raid. See Barber (ed.) 2005: 58-61; and Harwood 2006: 39-42.

(9) The passage specifically mentions Prescott's references to the marigold, dahlia and zinnia.

(10) Cf. Senior 1995: *passim*, but particularly the opening poem, 'Meditation on Yellow' (11-18).

(11) She continues by reminding readers that the breadfruit "was in the cargo that Captain Bligh was carrying to the West Indies on the *Bounty* when his crew so correctly mutinied" (Kincaid 2000: 101).

(12) See particularly Kincaid 1988.

(13) As Tim Cresswell points out, 'crossing lines' is the literal meaning of transgression (Cresswell 2004: 103).

(14) See my discussion in Thieme 1999: 157-158.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Achebe, Chinua. 1988. *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*. In Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays, 1965-87*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1-13.
- Barber, Peter (ed.) 2005. *The Map Book*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Caminero-Santangelo, Byron. 2005. *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad: Reading Postcolonial Intertextuality*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Collits, Terry. 2005. *Postcolonial Conrad: Paradoxes of Empire*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Conrad, Joseph. 1994. *Heart of Darkness* (first pbld. 1902). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Conrad, Joseph. 1917. *The Shadow Line*. London: Dent.
- Conrad, Joseph. 1924. Geography and Some Explorers. *The National Geographic Magazine*, 45, 239-274.
- Cresswell, Tim. 2004. *Place: A Short Introduction*. Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell.
- Farn, Regelind. 2005. *Colonial and Postcolonial Rewritings of 'Heart of Darkness': A Century of Dialogue with Joseph Conrad*. Boca Raton, FL: Dissertation.com.
- Ghosh, Amitav. 1988. *The Shadow Lines*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Harwood, Jeremy. 2006. *To the Ends of the Earth: 100 Maps That Changed the World*. Cincinnati, OH: David and Charles.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. 1988. *A Small Place*. London: Virago.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. 2000. *My Garden (book)*. London: Vintage.
- Knowles, Owen & Gene M. Moore. 2000. *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- McAuley, James. *James McAuley* (Australian Poets Series). 1963. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.
- Massey, Doreen. 2005. *For Space*. London: Sage.
- Said, Edward. 1993a. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf.
- Said, Edward. 1993b. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (first pbl. 1978). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Senior, Olive. 1995. *Gardening in the Tropics*. Newcastle on Tyne: Bloodaxe.
- Thieme, John. 1999. *Derek Walcott*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Thieme, John. 2001. *Postcolonial Con-Texts*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Walcott, Derek. 1990. *Omeros*. London: Faber.

**John Thieme** teaches postcolonial writing at the University of East Anglia. He has held Chairs at the University of Hull and London South Bank University and has also taught at the Universities of Guyana and North London. His books include *The Web of Tradition: Uses of Allusion in V.S. Naipaul's Fiction* (1987), *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (1996), *Derek Walcott* (1999), *Post-Colonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon* (2001), *Post-Colonial Studies: The Essential Glossary* (2003) and *R.K. Narayan* (2007). He was Editor of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* from 1992 to 2011 and he is General Editor of the Manchester University Press Contemporary World Writers Series.