

Still at the Margins

Biblical Scholarship Fifteen Years after
Voices from the Margin

Edited by

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Chapter 9

MARGINS AND THE CHANGING SPATIALITY OF POWER:
PRELIMINARY NOTES

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The wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological 'limits' of those ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices – women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities.

(Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*¹)

The space of imperial sovereignty ... is smooth ... it is crisscrossed by so many fault lines that it only appears as a continuous, uniform space ... In this smooth space of Empire, there is no *place* of power – it is both everywhere and nowhere.

(Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*²)

In the introduction to the 1991 edition of *Voices from the Margin*, R. S. Sugirtharajah alludes to the questions raised by the use of the word 'margin'. What do we mean by 'margins'? Perhaps for a book that gathers mainly biblical scholars, the most logical interpretation of 'margins' is that space of a page left unmarked by the printed text – where we write comments that might never become part of 'the text', where we inscribe ourselves as readers and critics. In this sense of the term, biblical criticism is, by definition, a marginal endeavour. Margins are the only places that biblical interpretation can ever take place, for writing on the margins is all it has ever done. In political parlance, margins, like 'borders' or 'periphery' are similarly imagined as a space contiguous to, but outside a centre – a centre which is, like the printed text, the focus of attention. The metropolis, the corporation or the nation are our typical images of centres. Thus it seems that political margins would be to centres as margins are to printed texts. But the usefulness and neatness of the analogy fades rather quickly. The locations and boundaries of centres of power are frequently more elusive – or at least more debated – than the boundaries of a written page, for instance. On the other hand, occasionally marginalia do become the focus of the printed book, sometimes even the lenses through which the text is interpreted. While the latter phenomenon resonates with some aspects of biblical criticism 'from the margins',

1 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 4.
2 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 190.

the connotations of simplicity, uniformity and stability of this spatial metaphor seem to convey a distorted image of the complex realities that we are addressing.

In addition to the distortions of the textual metaphor for margins, the apparent implication of subordination to a more original and significant 'centre' frequently raises questions like those that Sugirtharajah alludes to: Doesn't the term 'margins' misrepresent the significance and complexity of the positionality of the voices represented in *Voices from the Margin*? As the postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak observes, the term margin frequently reflects 'people's longing to find a marginal who is locatable', and thus appropriable.³ Is it possible that by defining our position as marginal we are contributing to the illusion of the centre? Perhaps it is true that 'we all give too much importance to the idea of a world with a center' as Orhan Pamuk claimed in his 2006 Nobel lecture, 'My Father's Suitcase'.⁴ Voicing his troubled optimism, scarred by the anger of being consigned to the margins, Pamuk reflects on his 'faith in the opposite, the belief that one day our writings will be read and understood, because people the world over resemble one another'. The journey marked by the scars of marginalization but lured by a faith in community has effected a transformation in his own experience of reality: 'What I feel now is the opposite of what I felt as a child and young man: for me, the center of the world is Ishtambul.' The effects of this epistemological shift have global proportions.

Biblical scholarship from the margins certainly recognizes the value of the aesthetic and epistemological goals that Pamuk describes: writing that attempts to represent visions and worldviews that are often dismissed as being valuable only within the limited boundaries of the communities from which they emerge. But in addition to representing ignored realities, biblical scholarship from the margins also strives to challenge: to affect dominant knowledge and power. Rather than a self-definition in terms of victimization, Sugirtharajah explains, *Voices from the Margin* employs the term 'margins' to describe places 'pulsating with critical activity'⁵ – a definition that draws from Spivak's work. In this distinctively epistemological use of the term, 'margins' becomes associated with particular forms of agency and knowledge. As in Homi Bhabha's statement quoted above, 'margins' is used in reference not only to the limits of systems of knowledge, but also to the possibility of critical challenge that the recognition of such epistemological limits makes possible. 'Margins' are here the limits of dominant knowledge and the edges from where it is transformed – dynamic boundaries where movement, displacements and collisions may occur. And yet this epistemological interpretation is still envisioned in relation to space: epistemological boundaries, Bhabha observes, are also the *places* people raise their dissident voices. As Soja notes, they are 'real-and-imagined' spaces of critique.⁶

3 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 156.

4 Orhan Pamuk, 'My Father's Suitcase', *New Yorker*, 25 December 2006.

5 R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, new edn (Maryknoll and London: Orbis and SPCK, 1995), 2.

6 Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

Undoubtedly the use of the term margins to allude both to a location at the outskirts of the 'centres of power' and to the epistemological perspectives that arise from those locations has served as a viable name for spaces of creative activity. However, the significant transformations in the configurations of power that characterize what has been named the 'postmodern', or the 'postcolonial' – marked as it is by an intensification of capitalist globalization and the apparent weakening of nation-states – has led to important changes in spatial representations of power. The effects of these cultural changes are already visible in the field of religious studies. Since the publication of the first edition of *Voices*, but especially since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the US Pentagon on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, discussions about contemporary forms of power have proliferated and with them an increasing sense that the world has entered a different historical age. Challenges to circumscribed images of power, such as 'the centre', and the search for language that highlights the pervasiveness and dispersed nature of the contemporary 'empire', are important aspects of the emerging debates. Conceptions of power have direct implications for notions of resistance, and thus for the meaning of the term margins: not only does it have embedded assumptions about power, but new dominant cultural assumptions about power may displace its meaning.

Jorge Luis Borges opens his essay 'Pascal's Sphere' with this statement: 'Perhaps universal history is the history of a few metaphors.' Following this proviso he offers his well-known look into notable representations of God as an eerie sphere whose centre is everywhere.⁷ I would not dare to attempt an imitation of Borges, but this exploration of margins is indeed a glance into a persistent metaphor not unrelated to a multi-centred sphere. Neither biblical interpretation nor theology can ignore the power of metaphors: the effects of the symbols that we have received from the Christian traditions with which we engage, but also of the cultural symbols that affect the readers and the readings of those traditions. Indeed, the images we live by condition our experiences of power and resistance as well as the forms of subjectivity and relations that we may develop. And conversely, the critique of those symbols and images is the vehicle through which we attempt to deconstruct oppressive knowledge and open spaces for the production of transformative worldviews. Making explicit the views of power that inform our self-understanding as critics, and thus our hermeneutical decisions and critical strategies, may foster much needed dialogue among marginalized groups about those views.

This article poses the question once more: What do we mean by margin? Where do we imagine ourselves to be when we speak from the margins? It engages two recent discussions about the nature of contemporary geo-political power that have stimulated debate and/or responses from religious scholars in the USA: Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, and Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Through a brief exposition of their descriptions of the metamorphoses in structures of power and the cultural representations of

⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, 'La Esfera de Pascal', in *Obras Completas* (Barcelona: Emecé, 1996), 14–16.

power, this chapter seeks to uncover the connections between those cultural transformations and the increasing ambivalence towards the term 'margins'. The engagement reveals not only cultural dislocations, but also alternative interpretations of the marginal positionings. Evidently, this cannot be but a preliminary attempt to uncover the contours of a complex metaphor – and hopefully an invitation for future conversation.

Empire

'The margin itself has been radically transformed', Sugirtharajah observes as he looks back to the context of the 1991 edition of *Voices from the Margin*. The margin has become 'crowded' and 'complicated', permeated by 'fanaticism and fundamentalism'.⁸ 'Atomization' and 'fragmentation' characterize theological production, as postcolonial and diasporic hermeneutics begin to emerge as alternative strategies to liberationist interpretations.⁹ These are all recognizable symptoms of the 'postmodern condition', which are increasingly attributed to contemporary culture in general. But what do these symptoms indicate about the structure of power and how do they affect the possibilities for critiques from the margins? To address these questions we need to consider the changing spatiality of the postmodern times.

Terms such as fragmentation, dispersion, hybridity and ambivalence, to name just a few, have become standard descriptors of postmodern culture – described as perceivable effects of significant changes in the structure and nature of power which characterizes the contemporary world. These changes mark the dawn of the last stage in an increasingly common periodization of history in terms of how power is perceived and experienced. In pre-modern time, so the story goes, the organization of societies depended on an appeal to extra-worldly principles based on which people or groups were assigned pre-determined levels in the hierarchical structure of existence. Societies were organized in reference to heights. The extra-worldly, extra-temporal foundation of power structures was then replaced by worldly factors such as geographical location, biological traits, etc. depicted in terms of depth rather than heights. This modern reliance on depth for the conceptualization of the grounds for the distribution of power and resources supported colonialist projects as well as the nationalist struggles against them; racist ideologies as well as many of the anti-racist strategies of modernity. In recent years new models for describing the distribution of power around the globe challenge the modern one: the stable spatial foundation of modern ideologies is being replaced by a flattened and mobile plane of differences. Lacking the pre-modern appeal to extra-worldly heights or the modern appeal to natural depth, the postmodern figuration of power is thus primarily horizontal, as the images of margins and centres suggest.

⁸ R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, revised and expanded third edition (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), 3.

⁹ Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin*, 4.

The enthusiastic scholarly reception and interdisciplinary discussions of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's works, *Empire* and *Multitude*, manifest the perceived need for new models for the understanding of geo-political power and resistance. Scholars seem to assent to, or at least be provoked by Hardt and Negri's (quasi-apocalyptic) observation: 'We can already recognize that today time is split between a present that is already dead and a future that is already living – and the yawning abyss between them is becoming enormous.'¹⁰ In their books, Hardt and Negri attempt to provide a cartography of the new imperial powers and a vision of resistance in its midst. *Empire* – Hardt and Negri's term for this global dominating force – reflects the postmodern shifts to the horizontal conceptualization of power that I alluded to before, indeed a 'deterritorialization' of dominance – avoiding a sense of nostalgia for modernity while rejecting the subversive potential of postmodern and especially postcolonial modes of critique.

Of special interest for this exploration of margins is Hardt and Negri's analysis of the interior/exterior division in modern political and philosophical discourses. Modern imperialism arose in tandem with colonialism and expansionism. Thus modern sovereignty is inherently linked to space, Hardt and Negri argue, and has been imagined as a crisis between interior and exterior spaces. The bounded space of civil order was set against and exteriorized 'nature' or the 'primitive' societies, and modernization was conceived as the 'internalization of the outside', the 'civilization of nature'.¹¹ Development and progress were conceived as movements against the limits that separate the inside from the outside. Models of resistance and liberation also relied – and often still rely – on the image of a frontier between interior and exterior spaces. In some cases excluded subjects or groups were depicted as claiming their right to be included in the spheres of power. In other cases – in nationalist discourses, for instance – the borderline was construed as a protective wall, a barrier that could hold out the advance of oppressive power against the rights of individuals or nations.

Empire argues that the inside/outside relation no longer represents the main defining tension of dominance, for the 'outside' is no longer conceived as 'original and independent of the artifice of the civil order'.¹² 'There is no more outside', they bluntly assert.¹³ To be sure, the disappearance of the 'outside' does not entail the death of sovereignty and its exploitative machinery, but rather the internalization of previously protected realms into the force-field of Empire. Nothing is outside the reach of Empire. Postmodern power can thus be seen as the extension of the orbit of Empire not only to the end of its former geographical/spatial limits. As Zygmunt Bauman describes it, we are experiencing 'the annihilation of the protective capacity of space'.¹⁴ For in addition to its spatial extension of geographical boundaries, Empire transgresses its 'internal' boundaries: the borderlines that protected private spaces, the body and the individual. As public spheres

10 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 358.

11 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 187.

12 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 187.

13 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 186.

14 Zygmunt Bauman, 'Living and Dying in the Planetary Frontier-Land', *Tikkun* 17 (2002), 42.

become privatized and individual desires commodified, Empire appears to have the ability to penetrate even bodily boundaries. Thus for some theoreticians of postmodernity, spatial configurations have lost their former significance: this is 'the symbolic end to the era of space', Bauman asserts.¹⁵

Inclusion in Empire, however, does not entail democratization across differences. Instead, differences are included 'differentially' – that is, classified in reference to a standard, and generating patterns of exclusion and segregation. What differentiates these patterns from modern hierarchies – racial ones, for instance – is that differences are no longer attributed the stability of biological foundations. As culture replaces biology as the basis for differences, differences are seen 'always as accidental', the effects of social and/or cultural factors.¹⁶ However, the processes of 'differential inclusion' assure the constitution of persistent and effective hierarchies of power. 'Subordination is enacted in regimes of everyday practices that are more mobile and flexible but that create racial hierarchies that are nonetheless stable and brutal.'¹⁷

Patterns of differential inclusion have long been experienced, analysed and subverted by the hybrid subjects of the modern empires – a fact that Hardt and Negri omit from their discussion, as explained below. Their description signals perhaps not the emergence, but surely the proliferation of the effects of racial ideologies that coexisted with the more stable modern ones. The recognition of this proliferation is still significant for theorizing contemporary margins, for whereas the relativization of the foundations for marginalization based on categories of identity might appear as the opening of possibilities for the equal inclusion that marginalized groups struggle for, Hardt and Negri's analysis identifies new tendencies in dominant culture to recreate old hierarchies on new foundations. Rather than the elimination of exclusion, postmodernity entails a generalization of problematics formerly restricted to conditions of marginality.

Instead of territorially organized structures, power is perceived as travelling at high speed through infinitely branching networks that comprise all levels of relations, erecting and transgressing boundaries and hierarchies throughout. 'Crisscrossed by so many fault lines', empire may appear as a smooth place, but it is fraught with conflict. Struggles seem also to move along horizontal networks that bleed through national boundaries and branch in and across geographical regions. Power 'is both everywhere and nowhere'. The margins, one could say, are everywhere.¹⁸

It is crucial, however, not to overstate this generalization of the postmodern to the point where other spaces with radically different modes of existence are denied *a priori*. For such all-encompassing ideological apparatus may indeed render the Other unrepresentable. As Spivak insists, we shall not blind ourselves to the presence of the real Other: those who are still outside even these networks of capitalist economy, those who still cannot speak.¹⁹ Indeed claiming to be 'at

15 Bauman, 'Living and Dying in the Planetary Frontier-Land', 33.

16 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 194.

17 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 194.

18 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 190.

19 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

the margin', where margin is imagined to be absolutely outside the force fields of Empire, may contribute to the obliteration of the subjects beyond the networks of power. Some might argue that such subjects do not exist: that there is literally nothing outside Empire. I wonder, however, if rather than representing their absence, such ideology makes the representation of their existence impossible. Without a space for their representation, how can the Other be thought of? Perhaps being convinced that there is no one out there is part of the subaltern's erasure. While asserting the need to open an imaginary space for the Other – perhaps even outside Empire – the self-identified 'marginal' theologians and biblical scholars should not imagine themselves to be occupying that space. We can and do speak. We are part of the networks of power that Hardt and Negri describe. The margins in which we may stand are already internal to Empire – crisscrossed by its networks of power.

Within Empire the inside/outside has lost significance, for 'all places have been subsumed in a general "non-place"', Hardt and Negri argue.²⁰ As a result of this generalization of place and thus of location, figurations of margins seem to scatter. Although the horizontal representation of conflict implicit in the metaphor of margins is recognizably postmodern, its unavoidable associations with centres seem misplaced in a culture that conceives power as being everywhere and nowhere. Not only is power no longer understood as flowing from a centralized source, but processes of marginalization and modes of resistance are also complexly situated. A perceived increase in the pervasiveness of power calls for conceptualizations of resistance, not in terms of externalities, but as alternative ways of inhabiting Empire. Places of resistance represented not as localized outside of unified centres, but complexly and impurely within.

In the midst of the complex networks of power and conflict of Empire, resistance and alternative enunciative spaces are created. These are the spaces that Homi Bhabha refers to in the statement that opens these explorations. The enunciative boundaries traced by dissident voices run throughout Empire, creating 'real-and-imagined' places of contestation and coalition. These places will not be equated with either an imaginary centre or a space outside of it: it is neither the 'inside' nor the 'outside' of modern sovereignty as Hardt and Negri describe it. Not because the contemporary world is devoid of 'real-and-imagined' places of exclusion, but because the margin as a site of critique opens a 'third space' that is something different from any of the categories deployed by dominant powers. This third space is not merely metaphorical, for it does create material places of contestation – like this book.

The Multidimensionality of Power

In her book *Methodology of the Oppressed*, published the same year as *Empire*, Chela Sandoval seeks to uncover forms of resistance that might sustain the efforts to build a 'dissident and coalitional cosmopolitics' in postmodern times.

Like Hardt and Negri, Sandoval argues that the changes in the dynamics of power that characterize postmodern times, which affect all areas of contemporary life, demand new forms of resistance. But the situations to be confronted are not completely new. The postmodern condition, Sandoval argues, represents the generalization of many of the pressures to which oppressed groups have long been subjected. As Bhabha explains, the epistemological limits of dominant ideologies have long been visible to those on modernity's 'underside': such as the heirs of the former colonies. Indeed, colonial encounters – their 'negotiations of differential meanings and values', 'governmental discourses and cultural practices' – 'have anticipated, *avant la lettre*, many of the problematics of signification and judgment that have become current in contemporary theory'.²¹ The early history of postmodern criticism was written beyond the geographical borders of the metropolis. Walter Mignolo names the epistemological excess that flows from those experiences 'border thinking'.²²

And it is precisely in 'border thinking' that Sandoval finds resources for postmodern modes of resistance: in the methods and consciousness developed by oppressed groups under modern models of power – colonization, conquest, enslavement and domination. 'The skills, perceptions, theories, and methods developed under previous and modernist conditions of dispossession and colonization are the most efficient and sophisticated means by which all peoples trapped as inside-outsiders in the rationality of postmodern social order can confront and retextualize consciousness into new forms of citizenship/subjectivity', Sandoval argues.²³ The methodologies of the oppressed are, in other words, suitable for the conditions of Empire.

Through a close reading of Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Sandoval traces his description of the 'postmodern condition' (Lyotard), and the challenges it entails for resistance. While agreeing with Jameson's description of postmodern culture, Sandoval uncovers his failure to recognize the interconnections between the angst of postmodern subjects and the life conditions of oppressed groups under modern forms of power.

To explore critically the changing contours of our contemporary world entails analysing both new socio-political conditions and the imaginary in which those realities are represented. Sandoval's analysis keeps visible the tension between representing the postmodern as a characterization of a new historical reality and engaging it as an ideological construct. By doing so she highlights the need to be attentive to the power of its metaphors: the effects of these descriptive models of power on the actual experiences of power. While recognizing significant changes in contemporary configurations of domination, Sandoval also warns of the dangers of an unproblematized imaginative vertical-to-horizontal shift and the resulting erasure of the vertical/hierarchical axes in descriptions of power. The exclusively horizontal dimensionality of depictions of power occludes as much

21 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 173.

22 Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

23 Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Theory Out of Bounds (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 36.

as it discloses. The postmodern 'retranslation of differences allows hierarchical and material differences in power between people to be erased from consciousness', as differences are imagined to have equal possibilities to tap into a horizontally laid grid of power, even while the economic and social imbalances of power are intensified.²⁴

Imagining, for instance, that power is accessible across a grid based on race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. may give the impression that these differences are now on an equal footing in relation to power, as expressed frequently in the propaganda of multiculturalism. That ideology would assume different groups entering into dialogue or conflict from equivalent, if spatially different positions. Hardt and Negri dispute this assumption of equality across differences by observing that differences are always included differentially, as we saw before. But Sandoval is concerned about the materialization of that ideological assumption in the very institutions of knowledge that we speak from. Religious scholars are not exempt from the effects of this mindset: we inhabit scholarly places that inscribe the model of a flattened plane of self-contained differences in the spatialization of academic domains according to those categories of identity. Postmodern understandings of power engender their own kinds of relations and hostilities, not least along categories of identity.

Postmodern power will not be construed exclusively as simply horizontal. Rather than two-dimensional cartographies of power, we shall picture topographies of power, for what the metaphoric dominance of horizontal over hierarchical geometries of power creates is 'a kind of double-reality ... with new and old formations at work all at once'.²⁵ Zooming in for a close look at particular contexts, we can see the mutual imbrications and interplay between distance forces of influence and the production of hierarchies, boundaries and exclusion. I would further argue that Hardt and Negri's description of postmodern spatiality as a general non-place needs to be supplemented (or interrupted) by a description of the simultaneous ecological crisis, which while indeed demanding global responses, betrays the material impossibilities of placeless existence. For the ever louder cries of global warming announce the irreducible and irreplaceable character of place, the vital specificity of environments. Thus while postmodern ideologies leave nothing outside their legitimate domain and elevate mobility over grounding, they do so by erasing from consciousness the threat of ecological collapse. Even as we challenge modern conceptualizations of space and its modes of territorialization, the spatial dimensions of our postmodern lives should be kept in sight.

Resisting the metaphorical obliteration of ecological place in discourses about globalization, Spivak proposes 'the planet to overwrite the globe'.²⁶ For someone whose mother-tongue is Spanish, where earth, soil and homeland share a common noun, Spivak's allusions to planet bring the analysis back to the materiality of

tierra. Globalization, she explains, 'is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere. In the gridwork of electronic capital, we achieve that abstract ball covered in latitudes and longitudes, cut by virtual lines, once the equator and the tropics and so on ... The globe is in our computers. No one lives there.' In contrast, the 'planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan'.²⁷ I have explored the theological implications of these statements of radical alterity elsewhere.²⁸ What interests me here is to highlight the need for a critical distancing from the common metaphors of Empire, exploring also how the networks of power and representation affect, and yet tend to obscure their dependence on the non-human world; developing modes of critique that are attuned to significant political and cultural changes that affect our times while avoiding the homogenizing force of meta-theorizing calls for a third space of critique, not unrelated to the differential consciousness that Sandoval analyses.

The 'third space' of critique is never free from the effects of Empire, and their figurations will reflect this by representing dissident subjects not outside, but 'differentially inside power'. The spatial reconfigurations of power that I have been describing – as networks that not only run throughout the planet, but also penetrate all boundaries, including bodily and psychic ones – entail profound changes in how power is experienced. And changes in the experiences of power cannot but transform in modes of subjectivity being produced, indeed in the very nature of Western consciousness. 'The strategic adversary under postmodern times has become our own sense of self ... the major enemy to face during our own time has infiltrated every citizen-subject's body'.²⁹ The postmodern concern with the so-called 'death of subject' emerges from the disjunctions between the stable foundations provided by modern ideologies of identity and origin, and the new configurations of power and authority.

The challenges of subjectivities built in the midst of uncertain relations to power, multiple and conflicted demands and allegiances have long affected oppressed groups. For members of subordinated groups, resistance entails the development of forms of subjectivity different from those imposed on them by other dominant groups. Implicit in this rejection of the assigned place of identity is a conceptualization of subjectivity as self-positioning. As a process of affiliation, identity-claims demand constant assessments of the topographies of power and the possibilities of resistance as grounds for strategic and provisional choices. The modes of subjectivity that arise from these processes are by definition mobile. The death of the self-centred, stable subject is in this context perceived as a shattering of a myth.

The deployment of subjectivity as positioning is more pronounced for subjects formed in relation to multiple axes of identification and differentiation. Thus Sandoval turns to US feminists of colour for examples of modern subjects who faced the 'postmodern' predicaments and developed effective methods of

24 Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 74.

25 Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 74.

26 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 72.

27 Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 72.

28 Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

29 Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 164.

resistance that could address the needs of contemporary oppressed groups. Although working within the apparently stable definitions of 'social location' of modernist stances, some subjects have always experienced such locations as conflictive spaces, where complex networks of power crisscross any of the available spaces of self-definition. For such agents, to choose a position – even a margin – entailed occluding other axes of power and subordination. This is a well-known claim, but discussions of these conflicted stances are too frequently reduced to mere (ethnographic) descriptions of a category within a category, at best showing the need for yet another category of identity/location. This has been the case of most dominant interpretations of the category of *mestizaje*, for instance, commonly understood as a collection of 'races'. And yet, what Sandoval emphasizes (yet again) is the critical insight – the 'epistemological excess', if you will – that such positionings perform. What the well-known hybrid, and other postcolonial characters such as the queer, mestizas, mulattos, etc. offer is a critique and alternative understanding of subjectivity under multiple, mutable, multidimensional force-fields of power and allegiance.

Hardt and Negri read postmodern and postcolonial theories as 'symptoms of passage' between modern sovereignty and postmodern imperialism. This is evidenced, they argue, by the insistent postcolonial critique of modernist forms of domination – forms which have already metamorphosed in Empire. Indeed, they argue that Empire works through the very forms of subjectivity being 'celebrated' by postcolonial theorists. 'Difference, hybridity, and mobility are not liberatory in themselves', they argue.³⁰ Agreed – and the main exponents of postcolonial theory would also agree. Indeed the characterization of postcolonial theory as a 'celebration' ignores the persistent attention to the dynamics of domination from which these modes of subjectivity arise. Furthermore, what Sandoval finds in those modes of subjectivity is not an overarching formula for liberation, but practices and modes of subjectivity born out of dissident ways of inhabiting worlds 'crisscrossed by fault lines' of power and conflict. Thus, whereas Hardt and Negri tend to dismiss postcolonial strategies, Sandoval recognizes them as possible enablers for resistance within the multidimensional topography of Empire.

The dissident methodologies employed by the oppressed subjects, which Sandoval names 'differential mode of consciousness', offer an alternative ground from which strategies of opposition can be deployed. This methodology does not abandon the strategies of opposition used against modernist modes of power, but grounds them in a differential positioning, indeed a different consciousness. Under previous forms of power, Sandoval argues, the most common forms of oppositional consciousness included: equal rights ('liberal', 'integrationist'), revolutionary ('socialist', 'insurgent'), supremacists ('cultural-nationalist') and separatists. All these were present in liberation movements. However, contemporary experiences of power have unsettled the foundations on which these were commonly based, and thus contemporary approaches require a 'mobile interchange' between different conceptions of power. Resistance demands that subjects

30 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 156.

deconstruct modes of subjectivity previously accepted to 'mobilize identity as a political tactic'.³¹ This is a profound transformation – one that Sandoval aptly calls, with a slightly theological tone, a 'principled conversion'.³²

The differential mode of consciousness allows subjects to move between ideological positionings, assessing correlations and disjunctures. It entails agency and a performative understanding of subjectivity. While subverting the foundations upon which modernist (and many liberationist) modes of resistance were based, the differential mode of consciousness, Sandoval suggests, is able to deploy earlier modes of opposition. 'When enacted in dialectical relation to one another and not as separated ideologies, each oppositional mode of consciousness, each ideology-praxis, is transformed into tactical weaponry for intervening in shifting currents of power.'³³ The occupation of a category of identity – or the margin, for instance – does not entail the assumption of a stable centre, or of a margin imagined as outside or originary. Nor does it assume a teleological movement to a centre. Instead it entails conceptions of subjectivity as 'tactical', 'with the capacity to de- and recenter'.³⁴

Concluding Thoughts

The deployment of multiple, seemingly conflicting critical strategies is perhaps one of the factors behind the maddeningly divergent approaches in contemporary biblical scholarship. The 'third space' of biblical interpretation is becoming populated by interpretative perspectives explicitly grounded in modes of subjectivity privileged by postmodern and postcolonial theory: diasporic hermeneutics, postcolonial readings, and other modes of border thinking. These readings stand side by side with interpretations based on modern modes of opposition, such as liberation and identity politics. A differential mode of consciousness highlights the need for continuously assessing the topography of power that each critique responds to. It does not assume, however, their necessary convergence in a single strategic model, or even a unidirectional movement towards a centre. But the difficulties and suspicions that threaten the attempts to build more sustained coalitions also betray remaining attachments to modernist foundations, where strategies of resistance are construed as the expressions of predetermined identities that dictate practices. Such an assumption closes the possibilities for 'the coexistence of multiple ideological positionings and resistance strategies' and tends to privilege the enactment of particular methods and practices perceived as emerging from identity foundations. Thus, it territorializes critical stances as opposing realms of intellectual production and social practice. A 'principled conversion' to differential modes of consciousness may offer new grounds from which to analyse and conceptualize these divergent critical stances while attempting to theorize the grounds on which they come into relation.

31 Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 144.

32 Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 62.

33 Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 58.

34 Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 59.

As the spatiality of power changes, new forms of co-optation and domination come gradually into view. Some of them defy our former models of power and resistance, as Hardt and Negri's work has helpfully explored. But in the process, old structures of power become fortified, just as old myths are shattered and former modes of resistance are re-energized. The texts considered in this short essay announce the emergence of a new era, not only in respect of geo-political rearrangements of power, but also of the cultural imaginary in which we experience power and articulate our critiques. This imaginary *recognizes* no outside, no boundaries, except those of its own strategic creation.

In the midst of the all-encompassing networks of Empire, however, margins proliferate. Not outside the centres of power, but within them. This is construed by some theorists as the end of the possibilities of effective critique and resistance. But those who have endured life in the former empires might find in their strategies resources for the needed reconceptualizations that would allow for the creation of spaces of critique. Against the backdrop of a totalizing and yet multiply located Empire, the image of margins becomes elusive and dispersed; not only because its implied allusion to centre seem to fracture the point of reference, but because any perceived claims to an outside protected space for critique are being deconstructed from within.

The term margins might be irremediably entangled in these associations. But critical decisions regarding the term can move through and beyond these simplifying representations. The term margins might still be strategically deployed to address particular forms of oppression anywhere in Empire. As Sandoval shows, the new overarching realities of Empire do not occlude the need for the deployment of previous modes of opposition, including those that address territorially defined centres. It is also crucial to recognize, and make explicit in our critiques, the complex significance that the term has acquired in the works of many critiques of colour. Even while recognizing the problems of signification that the concept entails, especially for contemporary readers, we must also recognize that the depictions of margins as simple allusions to centres and outside does not necessarily reflect the meaning of margins in the critical contexts in which it has been deployed. We have seen the epistemological connotations of the term in the works of thinkers like Homi Bhabha and Walter D. Mignolo, where 'margins' and 'boundaries' represent a 'third space' of enunciation, from which alternative knowledges are articulated. These spaces are described not merely as places inside or outside realms of domination, but as spaces *produced* by the critical praxis. As Edward Soja summarizes its meaning in bell hooks' works, margins are conceptualized 'as lived spaces of representation as potentially nurturing places of resistance, real-and-imagined, material-and-metaphorical meeting grounds for struggles over all forms of oppression wherever they are found'.³⁵ Developing the methodological frameworks that support meaningful exploration of the intersections between spatial practices, representations of space and spaces of representation under postmodern and postcolonial configurations of power remains a crucial task for biblical hermeneutics and theology. Such analytic endeavour may lead to explicit re-conceptualizations of margins or, perhaps

preferably, to the appropriation of other concepts that effectively convey the multi-dimensionality of spaces of power and resistance, like 'third space', for instance. Any alternative would need to be grounded in explicit debates within the field of biblical studies, but also across disciplinary boundaries, about the implications of current cultural and geo-political transformations for our methodological choices.

35 Soja, *Thirdspace*, 12.