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The colonial present

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reviews in brief

The colonial present. By Derek Gregory. Malden, MA: Blackwell. 2004. 367 pp. £16.99 paper. ISBN 1577180909.

The colonial present extends and deepens our understanding of contemporary geopolitics in ways that speak to the key concerns of this journal. For Derek Gregory as for Edward Said, to whom the book is dedicated, and whose intellectual legacy runs through its pages – issues of culture and of geography are central to understanding how colonial ‘pasts’ bleed into contemporary Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine. Drawing upon Said, Gregory details colonialism as a cultural process: ‘Culture involves the production, circulation, and legitimation of meanings through representations, practices, and performances that enter fully into the constitution of the world’ (p. 8). Since none of us is ‘outside’ or ‘above’ culture, we are all in one way or another bound up in ongoing processes of colonization, ‘the performance of the colonial present’ (p. 10). For me, much of the power of the book is derived from this recognition. While the empirical detail of the *The colonial present* draws our critical attention to the interconnected geopolitics and geo-economics of violence in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine, the book also compels us to look critically at ourselves, the ways in which we ‘continue to think and to act in ways that are dyed in the colors of colonial power’ (p. xv).

Gregory shows how geography is implicated in (our) cultural judgements and evaluations that underlie the ongoing exercise of colonial power. Intertwined constructions of difference and distance continue to ‘licence the unleashing of exemplary violence’ (p. 16) against ‘other’ people and places. Importantly, Gregory insists that ‘imaginative geographies’ are ‘performances of space’ (p. 19). It is in part for this reason that *The colonial present*, unlike many other postcolonial studies, provides a welcome extension of Said’s (imaginative) geographies to analysis of ‘real’ spaces. The main body of the book is a series of chapters which detail the lived, *human* geographies of Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq as well as the geopolitical entanglement of these spaces. My chief concern with this important book is the way in which it can be read as mapping this complexity into a (singular) colonial present. While Said’s imaginative geographies have been extended brilliantly to analysis of Euro-American colonial power in the Middle East, there are other colonialisms which are perhaps not so clearly centred in Washington, DC. Nonetheless, *The colonial present* is an exemplary performance of critical cultural geographies that can – indeed, surely must – be extended to diverse colonial presents.

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