Parochialism as Method

Pejorative, Partage, Pastoral

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15. Parochialism as Method: Pejorative, *Partage*, Pastoral

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Abstract: In the methodological ecumenicalism of its focus on objects and concepts, cultural analysis is particularly susceptible to a decolonial critique that emphasizes the importance of situated knowledge. However, I propose that it is precisely in the disavowed parochialism that links cultural analysis to Amsterdam with its conjoined histories of capitalism, colonialism, and liberalism, that its methodological ecumenicalism is at its most generative. As parochialism in various guises takes on a general conjunctural force, cultural analysis models a form of community that is predicated not on belonging, but in participation in difference, or parochialism as *partage*.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, translocality, decolonial critique, conjuncture, noise (Serres), opacity (Glissant)

Noting the "tension" within certain traditions of thinking about philosophy "between the alleged universality of reason and the fact that its upholders are so intent on localizing its historical instantiation," Robert Bernasconi points to what he terms "the paradox of philosophy's parochialism" (213–14).[1] What are we to make, he asks, of a discourse that simultaneously asserts the universality of its truth and the exclusive specificity of its origins? Of a discourse which proclaims, at one and the same time, that its truths are both universal and "Greek"?

1 With special thanks to Louise Autar, Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken, Sarah Budasz, Özge Calafato, Quinsy Gario, Leni van Goidsenhoven, Nosa Imaghodo, Gerold Sewcharan, and Sidra Shahid, who all offered generous and astute commentary on an earlier draft of this chapter.

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In this essay, I wonder if the same question might provide a guide to thinking about the status of cultural analysis within what Stuart Hall termed the "present conjuncture" (Hall and Massey). In what ways does cultural analysis, as a particular way of doing cultural studies, reflect its association with Amsterdam? Moreover, how does that association inflect its ability to address the questions whose status as questions-that-cannot-not-be-asked mark the present as a moment of rupture between past and future? At the same time, I wonder if cultural analysis, in the intimacy of its association with Amsterdam, might provide some perspective, not only on Bernasconi's paradox, but also on the idea of the parochial in general.

Parochialism: "limited and narrow character or tendency, provincialism, narrow-mindedness and uncuriosity about the wider world."[2] These are not typically the qualities thought desirable in academic research, and when, in 2008, Josef Früchtl delivered the term as a final accusation in his (locally) celebrated denunciation of cultural analysis's "pretense" to epistemological rigor, his aim was clearly condemnation, not methodological rejuvenation (57). As tools of condemnation, however, pejoratives as well as the sources from which they derive their rhetorical force are precisely the sorts of cultural object that cultural analysis has made its privileged site of investigation.

Like many pejoratives, the accusation of parochialism functions by invoking the norm through its negation. To be parochial is to fail to be broad-minded, or curious, or inquiring. But, more specifically, in its etymological appeal to the parish as synonymous with that narrow-mindedness and lack of curiosity, it invokes an ecclesiastical spatial order that is opposed to the secular space of Enlightenment. To be parochial is, very explicitly, to fail to be cosmopolitan. In the specificity of its allusion to that superseded spatial order, the parochial as pejorative performs Bernasconi's paradox. It serves as a reminder of the palimpsestic relationship between the Enlightenment and Christendom; a reminder that they are both the parochial concerns of only one particular portion of the planet (Mignolo, Vázquez, Wynter). As such, rhetorically at least, Früchtl's use of the parochial as pejorative seems to present us with an instance of what Jacques Rancière describes as *partage*: that is, of a rupture that is also a continuity (Rancière).

To get a clearer sense of what is at stake in this instance of rupture and continuity, I want to approach the idea of the parochial initially by way of an autobiographical detour. Not least because it was an abiding sense of my

2 "Parochialism (n.)," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, January 21, 2020. https://www.etymonline.com/word/parochialism.

own parochiality that I remember most vividly from my first encounters with the form of cultural studies as practiced in my new home of Amsterdam in the early 2000s. After graduate and postgraduate studies in the UK, defined by the delicate and not-so-delicate negotiations between British Marxism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism, the easy cosmopolitanism and apparent theoretical eclecticism of cultural studies as it was practiced a ferry ride across the North Sea left me slightly disorientated. The happy conviviality of a research community embracing theoretical traditions that elsewhere were entrenched in separate departments and universities—Adorno and Deleuze? Spivak and Žižek? Anzaldúa and Latour?—produced disconcertingly mixed emotions: a feeling of liberation, certainly, but a liberation always troubled by the habit of suspicion.

"Let the object speak back" (Bal, *Travelling Concepts* 45).[3] Of course! Mieke Bal's memorable formula promised a simple and elegant solution to the contradictory imperatives—"always historicize" (Jameson) and "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (Derrida)—that had dominated my academic life in the 1980s and 1990s. It was also close enough to Stuart Hall's aversion to Grand Theory and Epochal Thought to appear comfortably familiar. Nevertheless, the question nagged: Surely an object can speak only in the languages that its interlocutor is trained and willing to hear? How does one ensure that a speaking object is not simply being invoked to endow your own language with the authority it would otherwise lack? Doesn't "the object" simply function here as an epistemological alibi for hermeneutic closure?

The notion of *noise*, as that which interrupts speech and announces the presence of the exclusions that are the precondition of speech (Serres, *Le parasite*), provided me with a productive framework for engaging with that question. Any remaining doubts I had about the value of cultural analysis as praxis were assuaged by the conceptual agility and quizzical intelligence of my mentor and then director of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), Reij Rosello. Yet, attending to the noise of analysis inevitably ends up considering the ways in which noise as a concept can become just another language. Any illusion that noise, whether as Michel Serres's *tiers exclu* (*Le parasite* 35) or even as Sylvia Wynter's "dysselected" (McKittrick 7), provides privileged insight into the exclusions inherent in hermeneutic traditions extends an open invitation for rebuke.

3 Mieke Bal has of course written with great sophistication on the dangers of ventriloquism implicit within the idea of the object that speaks back. See, for example, the "serendipity" section in Bal, *Lexikon*.

One such rebuke occurred recently at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum as I was listening to Miriyam Aouragh, who described her life as a Dutch woman with a Moroccan heritage living and working as an academic and activist in the city that I'd learned to call home. In her talk, Aouragh spoke about the exhaustion of everyday life in a society where racism was amplified by its denial, and about navigating institutions unable to countenance the very possibility of the violence of their tolerance; violence which had ultimately led her to work in the country that I had left behind. The occasion of her talk was an event that departed from Marlene Dumas's portrait of Mohammed Bouyeri, the twenty-six-year-old Amsterdammer who, in 2004, had killed his fellow citizen, the filmmaker Theo Van Gogh. The painting is titled *The Neighbour* (2005).[4]

Parochialism: from *para-oikos*, for "near home" or "neighboring." Another *partage*: here, but not here; next door, but a world away. Aouragh described the sense of relief within her community on learning that the murderer of Pim Fortuyn was not Muslim, as well as the sense of imminent catastrophe that ensued on hearing that the murderer of Van Gogh was. She described the speed with which that catastrophe unfolded as Dutch liberalism morphed into what she characterizes as "enlightenment fundamentalism"; how a feeling among many Dutch Muslims of being strangers in their own land was made explicit through demands that they collectively disassociate themselves from Bouyeri's act. Aouragh described, in other words, the speed and ferocity with which the ostensible space of cosmopolitan liberalism revealed itself to be just another parish: fideistic and profoundly antagonistic to any other faith than its own.[5]

Parochialism as Conjuncture

It is the echo of Aouragh's testimony to the violence of the disavowed parochialism in the cosmopolitan that I hear most powerfully in the concerns of recent generations of cultural analysis students. Often invoking a broader decolonial interrogation of "method" (Smith) and insisting, in different ways, on the non-negotiability of experiential knowledge, the mounting critique of the "hubris" of cultural analysis's ecumenicalism demonstrates

4 See *Drawing Faces* (*in Terror Times*), December 2, 2022. https://www.stedelijk.nl/nl/evenementen/drawing-faces-terror-times, accessed 29 Aug. 2023.

5 See Aouragh, "Refusing to be Silenced," for a detailed analysis of the conjuncture she described in her talk and also her incisive account of the history and prospects of racial politics in the Netherlands in "'White Privilege.'"

the distance of the present from Früchtl's intervention in 2008. For, this critique is precisely the opposite of Früchtl's. Rather than denouncing a lack of philosophical rigor, it is directed instead at the ways in which cultural analysis displays the same evasion of situatedness evident in philosophy's claim on the universal: its pretension, if not exactly of offering a view from nowhere, then at least to be able to facilitate a view from anywhere.

Faced with this critique, it's tempting to adopt a defensive posture and to argue, for example, that the practice of cultural analysis is inherently situated, and so always reflects the conjunctural situation of the scene of analysis, even if this is not always marked in practice. However, I think it is important to dwell a little longer on the operation of the parochial in this context. For, while the decolonial critique of the hubris of method may seem pejorative, it is also possible to recognize within the spirit of this critique the rearticulation of the parochial in relation to a conjunctural turn toward what might be called questions of belonging; to questions, that is, about the forms of conscription that align and divide bodies; the belongings which distribute possibilities of relation.

Subtending reflections on identity, the experiential, positionality, affect, and autoethnography, as well as discussions of bordering, migration, indigeneity, citizenship, and the relationship of the state form to platform capitalism, these questions of belonging take many forms and have been theorized from different positions. Here, I simply want to gesture toward two specific drivers of this turn toward the parochial, the one technological, the other environmental.

Michel Serres's speculations on the future of education in the age of ubiquitous computing provide one convenient point of entry to the technological dimension in that he identifies the rise of algorithmic technology with the dissolution of old belongings—including "regions, religions, cultures (rural or urban), teams, towns, a sex, dialect, a party and a motherland"—and their replacement by a new "topological space of neighborhoods" (*Thumbelina* 9, 6). However, in his enthusiasm to wave goodbye to the catastrophic belongings of a Eurocentered twentieth century, Serres seems to miss the many ways in which his new topological space of neighborhoods encodes its own desires and languages of belonging, as well as how those interact often in pernicious ways with the forms of belonging that they have supposedly replaced. Thus, while Serres celebrates the power of the algorithm to interpellate the individual as an "atom without valence" (*Thumbelina* 10), he ignores the ways in which algorithms work to accentuate difference to increase the "engagement" central to platform capitalism (Srnicek). This amounts to the same logic of niche marketing that, as Ruha Benjamin points out, "drives

the proliferation of racial codification" that wraps structures of inherited racism in the cloak of objectivity and "digital denial" (22).

To complement this technological drive to the parochial within algorithmic relations of production, I point to Achille Mbembe's thesis that the experience of constriction and contraction that once defined the life world of the colonized has now arguably become the dominant marker of environmental belonging for all:

> Ce désir de violence et d'endogamie et la montée des angoisses ont lieu sur fond d'une prise de conscience—beaucoup plus accentuée qu'auparavant—de notre finitude spatiale. La Terre ne cesse en effet de se contracter. En tant que système en lui-même fini, elle a atteint se limites. (*Brutalisme* 19)

> This desire for violence and endogamy and the accumulated movement toward anxiety are taking place against the background of an awareness—more accentuated now than ever before—of our spatial finiteness. The Earth is in fact constantly shrinking. As a finite system in itself, it has reached its limits. (My translation)

If David Harvey's identification of "time-space compression" as the condition of postmodernity belongs to an epoch of globalization and neocolonial expansion, of speed and immediacy, Mbembe's becoming-Black of the planet announces an epoch in which the corresponding forces of constriction and contraction are resolutely parochial. Hence, whether in terms of a cybernetic logic that works to accentuate difference rather than commonality, or of a revised ecological relationship between self and planet, the parochial can now be seen as a generalized orientation toward finitude and restriction, which operates at different scales and in different domains.

Parochialism as Method

If it is possible, then, to discern the rough outline of a critical conjuncture in the parochial, the question follows, What can cultural analysis bring to the analysis of this centripetal movement of force? The proposition I'd like to entertain in the remainder of this essay is that reflection on the parochialism of cultural analysis itself may provide a generative response.

Indeed, in relation to this world of belongings now ineluctably configured around restraint (Mbembe, *Necropolitics*), cultural analysis's most important

feature might be that, in its insistence on its particular way of doing cultural studies, it models a distinctive version of the parochial. Its greatest potential arguably lies in its ability to draw people together into a functioning community by providing a sometimes clunky ("What's your object?!") language that enables conversations that would otherwise not take place. In this way, I want to suggest, cultural analysis models a community that is predicated less on substantial belonging than on participation; a community, that is, constituted in the very parochiality of its shared language of objects and concepts.

Approaching cultural analysis as modeling a "belonging" through a shared language has at least two significant consequences. Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of acts of translation within the practice of cultural analysis. Furthermore, it acknowledges the inevitable tension that arises from the demand that worlds of conscripted identity be translated into the lingua franca of *object* and *concept* as a currency of exchange or mutual intelligibility. The archives of cultural analysis over the past thirty years strongly suggest that this practice of translation has come most easily to those already comfortable with forms of disassociation, the hybrid, the queered, and the fluidity of intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue. For those from worlds of conscripted belongings, whether somatic, cultural, academic, or disciplinary in nature, the burden of translation is substantially greater. As postcolonial scholarship makes clear, within the "communities" produced through a lingua franca, there is always an uneven burden of translation. As such, cultural analysis as a methodological lingua franca also inevitably institutes a translation deficit whose structure defaults to that of colonialism generally (I thank my former student Maan Meelker for reminding me of this fact).[6]

Engaging with that translation deficit in a spirit of advised parochialism might encourage us to rethink the practice of cultural analysis in relation to the vexed history of Amsterdam as one site in the many possible "loci of enunciation" for thinking "culture" (Boone and Mignolo 303). The methodological agnosticism of cultural analysis carries traces of its roots in the mud of a port city that, as the birthplace of the joint stock company and the first multinational corporation, occupies a signal position in the conjoined histories of capitalism, colonialism, and liberalism. It would perhaps bring us to see the method of cultural analysis as an "implicated" methodology (Rothberg). Consequently, we may attempt to hold present

6 For a particularly powerful description of the character of this translation deficit, see Bhanot.

the historical role of Amsterdam as an engine of commodification, marking its role in the transformation of people and the stuff of worlds into objects of fungibility (Ghosh) as well as its propensity to reproduce itself around archives of objects—ranging from warehouses to museums, galleries, and department stores—whose contents vacillate constantly between goods, objects, commodities, and cultural capital.

From Parochial to Translocal?

At the same time, emphasizing the parochial within cultural analysis and its situatedness within Amsterdam may also mean gaining awareness of the alluvial character of Amsterdam as a maritime city, a locus of enunciation formed through its incorporation or sedimentation of traces of countless other places. This process of sedimentation is emphatically marked in the archives of cultural analysis, which show that thinking from Amsterdam has also meant being free to think simultaneously from Frankfurt, Birmingham, Paris, Berkeley, Madison, Ljubljana, Istanbul, and numerous other "centers" of cultural and critical theory. However, as the translation deficit testifies, it is just as emphatically marked in the *absence* from that archive of most of the places that have shaped Amsterdam through ties of coloniality and resource extraction.

Hence, thinking with the parochiality of Amsterdam in this respect encourages an understanding of the parochial as *translocal*, constituted through processes of "entanglement and interconnectedness" that link place to the global and the planetary (Freitag and von Oppen 1). However, as Aouragh's testimony has made plain, this translocality cannot be divorced from its parochiality. If thinking from Amsterdam means thinking with the "sum of phenomena which result from a multitude of circulations and transfers" (Freitag and von Oppen 5), it also means being wary of the globalizing dynamic that remains implicit in the idiom of *transfer* and *circulation*. The "phenomena" in question should include an understanding of nonequivalence and proximity-as-separation, of place as *partage*. In this respect, it is an understanding of translocality as equivalence-in-difference that seems most useful, as articulated, perhaps, in the Zapatista counter to globalizing insistence on equivalence that "all are equals *because* they are different" (De Angelis 193).[7]

7 I'm very grateful to my colleague Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken for pointing out the importance of the Zapatista formulation of the translocal in relation to thinking the parochial.

As Massimo de Angelis points out, communication within this understanding of translocality is not about translation into an abstract currency of exchange, but about the production of a common that is grounded in the knowledge that what is shared—a language of concepts and objects—is simultaneously the marker of difference. It is a common that is less about the invocation of a supposedly universally intelligible language than about the possibilities for the recognition of *partage* and connection-in-separation. Such translation practices are perhaps modeled most generatively by Édouard Glissant in his emphasis on opacity and a distinctly alluvial understanding of relationality (33).[8] This model is also evident in Rosello's emphasis on the challenge of dwelling in *rudimentariness* (rudimentariness) and the need to develop an ethics of *accompaniment* (disorientation), both of which feel like key concepts in any practice of translation attuned to the unequal burdens of the translation deficit.

From the Parochial to the Pastoral

Whatever practices of translation prove most adept in thinking about thinking from Amsterdam in the next decades, avowing parochialism as a method also means holding awareness for the continued operation of the logic of neoliberalism, as well as recognizing the attractive power of Amsterdam as a city whose facility with English as the global lingua franca and cultivated profile as a multinational-friendly hub is reflected in its appeal to students from around the world. This means recognizing, too, that Amsterdam is a city that, having gathered its visitors to its cafes and canals, frequently abandons them to the market logic that produces unaffordable housing, massed lecture halls, and the exigencies of the gig economy (Van Heest). For many students, this means abandonment to the anomie and isolation of the topology of neighborhoods described by Serres.

Even more immediately, thinking through the parochial means addressing the practical questions of how cultural analysis will take place pedagogically within the context of an institutional drive toward economies of scale and the turn to digitalization as "innovation." It means asking ourselves how to

8 "We no longer reveal totality within ourselves by lightning flashes. We approach it through the accumulation of sediments.... Sediment then begins with the country in which your drama takes shape. Just as Relation is not pure abstraction to replace the old concept of the universal, it also neither implies nor authorizes any ecumenical detachment. The landscape of your world is the world's landscape. But its frontier is open" (Glissant 33).

teach accountably in lecture halls rather than seminar rooms, and to engage with students who encounter the psychological demands of university education without the resource of communal experience.

As a final declension of the parochial then, avowing parochialism as method means keeping present issues of care within pedagogic practice and cultivating a sensitivity to the forms of violence arising from a dominant cultural logic toward the depersonalization of higher education, its commodification, massification, and digitization under the cybernetic model of "excellence." In the spirit of bell hooks, a parochial cultural analysis would be sensitive to the forms of harm that are replicated in the classroom and to the changing pedagogic context for students who inhabit radically different landscapes—technological, affective, ecological, pharmacological, sexual, and economic—than their predecessors, and (most of) their professors.

The most recent policy response to these challenges—the Dutch government's proposed reduction in the number of international students and English-language programs in further education (Hoger Onderwijs Persbureau)—emphasizes the isolationist elements within the conjunctural turn to the parochial. In the face of this inflection toward nationalism it might be that, in a SWOT matrix (identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), it is the ability of cultural analysis to model conversation among those who do not assume a common language—that is, the parochialism of its method—that constitutes its most generative resource in the face of this potentially existential threat.

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