

Dissidence, Richard K. Ashley, and the politics of silence

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Abstract. Within the academy we are taught to look for silence – as a noun. We are counselled to find gaps in the literature or empirical case studies that have yet to be researched in order to bring our own voice to the issues that they raise. But, there is a tension with the other face of silence, when it assumes the form of a verb. Silence and silencing have therefore been integral motivators for the entire spectrum of ‘critical’ literature within international studies, not only to show what cannot be spoken or thought about within international studies but also, at times, how this can be a deliberate political practice. But there remains a hope. The hope is that the catalyst for transformation – not merely change – is within that which we already know and that which we already have the ability to articulate or to speak. But should we take these assumptions for granted? It is at this precise point where the concerns of Richard K. Ashley with dissidence can combine with the conceptual provocations of the case of the Pirahã people of western Amazonia to generate some uncertainty about the revelations that ‘critical’ scholarship often wants to provide.

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Introduction

‘La parole est d’argent mais le silence est d’or’ – French proverb

One would be hard pressed to find someone more uncomfortable about the positionings of Richard K. Ashley in the myriad narratives of international studies than Richard K. Ashley himself. Whether as *the* catalyst of a broad based ‘critical turn’, *the* post-modern overman or *the* post-structuralist boogie-man, Ashley has been elevated and/or denigrated to a status reserved for a select few. But as the other contributors to this forum have argued, both positive and negative representations have had a tendency to ossify Ashley into a character of one form

* Earlier versions of this article were represented at the YCISS Annual Conference, York University Canada February 2005, the BISA Conference, University of Cork, Ireland December 2006, and at Newcastle University, UK workshop on Professor Richard K. Ashley, April 2007. Preliminary elements of this article were sketched out in Kyle Grayson, ‘At a Loss for Words: Silence and Empire Life’, in Ryerson Christie and Elizabeth Dauphinée (eds), *The Ethics of Building Peace in International Relations* (Toronto: Centre for International and Security Studies, 2005), pp. 6–18, an edited conference proceedings. Many thanks to David Mutimer, Elizabeth Dauphinée, Peter Liotta, Cynthia Weber, Mark Laffey, Richard Ashley, Michael Dillon, Rob Walker, and Jenny Edkins for their insightful comments (and difficult questions!) on these earlier attempts. All errors and omissions remain my own responsibility.

or another from which there is to be no escape. In other words, in many quarters, he has been written and placed full-stop. The main contentions that therefore stem from these accounts is what one should find at 'destination Ashley' and whether it is worth visiting?

But these are questions whose central premise needs to be challenged. Ashley and his work are not quite so easily placed. There are multiple 'Ashleys': all dynamic, all fluctuating, all becoming, all contested. These are the Ashleys that continue to circulate and reformulate across the fields of international studies, sometimes breaking boundaries and transgressing limits, while at others being used to replicate them. Thus, my contribution to this forum is a contribution based upon *an* Ashley. The '*an* Ashley' in question is one that I will argue haunts much recent critical scholarship. It is *an* Ashley that brings up difficult questions about dissidence, borders, and (self-imposed) limits. It is *an* Ashley that exposes a fundamental dilemma in (critical) scholarship that is not easily resolved. It is *an* Ashley that promotes humility and a sense of discomfort. My introduction to this Ashley was catalysed by a departure from the usual locations where we find narratives of (his) place in international studies. As such, my starting points are the western Amazonia and the field of linguistics. The end points though remain indeterminate.

A departure

In August 2004, a research paper published by linguist Peter Gordon in *Science*, caught the imaginations of both the academic community and the popular press. Based on fieldwork within the communities of the Pirahã of western Amazonia (pronounced Pee-da-HAN), a hunter-gatherer society of some 300 people, Gordon's research sought to answer the question: 'is it possible that there are some concepts that we cannot entertain because of the language that we speak?'¹ Furthermore, Gordon provocatively asked whether languages can be incommensurate to the point that they can neither be translated into another language, nor have their concepts understood by speakers whose own thought processes are encoded in the words or grammar of another language?²

Having had their first contact with Europeans in 1744 and having been involved in trading relationships ever since, the Pirahã people had remained monolingual demonstrating a complete disinterest in the Portuguese language and outside culture, save for very basic material goods.³ While this cultural resistance is itself quite fascinating given the demographic devastation suffered by the Pirahã beginning with the first European encounters, it was the actual contours of Pirahã culture and grammar that were considered to be totally distinctive. From information gathered through the pioneering work of Daniel and Keren Everett, who had spent time living with and learning from the Pirahã, the following characteristics of everyday Pirahã life were highlighted in the academic and popular literature:

¹ Peter Gordon, 'Numerical Cognition Without Words: Evidence from Amazonia', *Science*, 306:15 (2004), p. 496.

² *Ibid.*, p. 496.

³ It has been estimated that at the time of first contact, the Pirahã numbered around 50,000.

- the absence of creation myths and fiction in Pirahã society;
- a kinship system that does not extend beyond siblings and parents;
- the absence of distinct terms for colour;
- a communication system that is restricted to non-abstract subjects that fall within the immediate experience of interlocutors;
- the Pirahã language is world's most phonemically limited with only 10 consonants and vowels in total;
- pronouns which are believed to have been borrowed from another community are used very rarely as compared to any other known language;
- the absence of any individual or collective memory beyond two generations past;
- the absence of writing, drawing, or art;
- an ontology that recognises spirits and possession;
- the practice of sleeping for no more than two hours at any time, day or night;
- frequent foregoing of food even when it is in abundance;
- one of the least materialist cultures found in anthropological study.⁴

Most significantly though, for linguists and anthropologists, is that the Pirahã language has no concept of numbers, no means by which to count, and no terms for quantification. For example, there are no equivalents to terms such as all, each, every, most, or some. Instead, it is argued that the Pirahã linguistically distinguish quantities based on three words: one that translates roughly into 'small size or amount' (*hói*), one word that is used to designate a 'somewhat larger size or amount' (*hoi*), and one series of words that can be loosely understood as 'many' (*bá a gi so*).⁵ Despite these terms, Everett has highlighted, for example, the difficulty of determining when the Pirahã use the term *hói* to describe fish, whether they mean a single fish, a small fish, or one or two fish.

Given that Pirahã society relies on trade with outsiders, not having basic numerical skills could serve as a disadvantage in negotiating exchanges. This was even recognised by the Pirahã who in 1980, asked the Everetts to teach them how to count, in order to ensure that they could not be taken advantage of by traders who visited their settlements on riverboats.⁶ After eight months of enthusiastic

⁴ Daniel L. Everett, 'Cultural Constraints on Grammar and Cognition in Pirahã: Another Look at the Design Features of Human Language'; (Manchester: Department of Linguistics, University of Manchester, 2005) available at: {<http://r0ry.co.uk/mirror/CULTGRAM.PDF>}; Constance Holden, 'Life Without Numbers in the Amazon', *Science* (20 August 2004), p. 1093; Stephen Strauss, 'Life Without Numbers in a Unique Amazon Tribe', *Globe and Mail* (20 August 2004), p. A3. For a shorter version of Everett's research findings with comments from others in the fields of linguistics and cultural anthropology, please see Daniel L. Everett, 'Cultural Constraints on Grammar and Cognition in Pirahã: Another Look at the Design Features of Human Language', *Cultural Anthropology*, 46:4 (2005), pp. 621–34; Brent Berlin, Marco Antonio Goncalves, Stephen C. Levinson, Andrew Pawley, Alexandre Surrallés, Michael Tomasello, and Anna Wierzbicka, 'Comments', *Cultural Anthropology*, 46:4 (2005), pp. 635–41; Daniel L. Everett, 'Reply', *Cultural Anthropology*, 46:4 (2005), pp. 641–6. All references to Everett, 'Cultural Constraints' in this article refer to the University of Manchester document.

⁵ Everett argues that in Pirahã, *bá a gi so* literally means to 'cause to come together'. See 'Cultural Constraints', p. 7.

⁶ Everett has remarked that there is often very little connection between amount of goods that the Pirahã bring to trade and the amount of what they ask for in return. Generally the Pirahã offer whatever goods they have collected and point at what they want in exchange until the riverboat owner/captain signals that they have been paid in full. The fairness of the exchange from the

participation, the Pirahã concluded that they were incapable of understanding basic math and numerical skills and abandoned their learning efforts. Everett noted that over the time period, not one student was able to learn to count to 10 and no one could perform simple arithmetic – including calculating $1+1$ – with a level of consistency that could not be attributed to random guessing.

It was this apparent inability to conceptualise numbers and math passed on anecdotally by the Everetts to Gordon that caught his attention. Thus, he systematically decided to investigate the extent to which the Pirahã were able to deal with mathematical concepts that have no representational form in their own language. In a series of tests of Pirahã men, Gordon found that they were generally unable to perform what we might consider to be standard tasks. These exercises included duplicating a row of up to 10 batteries placed on a table (performance generally started to decline after two batteries), matching boxes with pictures of several fish to obtain a reward, or retaining the memory of numbers.

The results were considered to be extraordinary given that linguistics has largely operated under the assumption that human beings possess an innate number sense. And thus began a politics of interpretation around how these results should be understood. From orthodox perspectives, Gordon's research findings were dangerous as they had the potential to undermine nearly forty years of universal theorising that had dominated the discipline.⁷ Even asking whether it becomes difficult to articulate concepts in the absence of language that represents these was potentially quaint thanks to the disciplinary hegemony of Charles Hockett's 'Design Features of Human Language', Steven Pinker's 'Universal Language Instinct' and Noam Chomsky's theory of 'Universal Grammar'. All of these theories rooted the capacity to think and speak about particular ideas to a shared, cross-cultural human nature.⁸ Thus, from perspectives grounded in universalism, there were two tactical responses. The first was to brand the work of Everett and Gordon as lazy. The problem was not that the Pirahã did not share the same numerical understanding as other groups, but that researchers had yet to find where these understandings were located and to discern how these were communicated. The second was to attribute limited capacity to the Pirahã themselves.

Thus, rather than seeing the particularities of this culture as evidence of the sophistication and richness of Pirahã life, orthodox apologists returned to 'bad old days' of anthropology based on technological fetishism, positioning difference as exotic, and the deployment of problematic conceptions of 'primitivism' which historically had made both the dehumanisation of indigenous peoples and assorted forms of violence against them possible. Drawing upon comparisons to infants and animals intimated in Gordon's own research on numerical skills, revived cultural chauvinists speculated that the Pirahã kinship system led to inbreeding which in

perspective of the Pirahã is determined post-event after consultations with other members of the village. See *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷ For example see Andrew Ira Nevins, David Pesetsky, and Cilene Rodrigues, 'Pirahã Exceptionality: A Reassessment', *lingBuzz* (Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007), available at: {<http://ling.auf.net/lingBuzz/000411>}; Daniel L. Everett, 'Cultural Constraints on Grammar in Pirahã: A Reply to Nevins, Pesetsky, and Rodrigues (2007)', *lingBuzz* (Illinois State University, 2007), available at: {<http://ling.auf.net/lingBuzz/000427>}.

⁸ See Holden, 'Life Without Numbers', p. 1093; Everett, 'Cultural Constraints', p. 4.

turn created an entire population of intellectually challenged people.⁹ Others turned the tables and accused Everett himself of being racist because his research findings denied that the Pirahã possess what the field of linguistics considers to be a universal human attribute.¹⁰

Gordon's own argument was that the findings clearly gave credence to the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf, whose theories incorporated both linguistic determinism and relativism to argue that 'language can determine the nature and content of thought'.¹¹ The implication of Whorf's theory was that language moulds thought patterns rather than reflecting them. However, the relationship he posed was causal rather than constitutive, leading to restrictions in how one could perceive of the nexus formed by language, thought, and culture. As Everett has argued, the implications of the Whorfian view make the process of language and thought unidirectional with language determining thought patterns with no consideration of what makes language and different linguistic structures possible. Thus, in its attempt to combat an innate universality, the Whorfian hypothesis ultimately eliminates the reverse interaction, that is the interplay of thought as mediated through culture and language.

The (international) politics of silence

The case of the Pirahã involves a fascinating set of questions, power-relations, and political positions. Yet, what is the link to international studies and to one particular representation of *an* Ashley? Harkening back to earlier articulations of 'dissidence', it is these kinds of stories on the so-called margins of international studies that are often the most powerful in that:

They seek to show how and why such far-flung cultural happenings, far from properly belonging to the shadowy periphery of disciplinary interest, raise questions that might prompt it to think anew its most central understandings of the world and of its place in it.¹²

⁹ Everett, 'Cultural Constraints', p. 31. It was argued that inbreeding was a strong possibility given the small population, the lack of clearly defined kinship relationships and reports that the Pirahã had sexual mores that might be considered promiscuous by dominant Judeo-Christian standards. However, the Everetts noted that based on their experiences with the Pirahã, they never saw marriages between full biological siblings. In an interview for the *New Yorker Magazine*, Gordon callously argued that 'if there was some kind of Appalachian inbreeding or retardation going on, you'd see it in hairlines, facial features, motor ability. It bleeds over. They don't show any of that.' His statement and subsequent apology generated a storm of protest. See, John Colapinto, 'The Interpreter', *The New Yorker Magazine* (16 April 2007), available at: {http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/04/16/070416fa_fact_colapinto}; Society of Professional Journalists, 'Professor Apologizes for "Appalachian inbreeding" remark' (16 April 2007), available at: {<http://www.spj.org/pressNotes.asp?REF=19236>}.

¹⁰ Patrick Barkham, 'The Power of Speech', *The Guardian* (10 November 2008), available at: {<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/nov/10/daniel-everett-amazon>}.

¹¹ Gordon, 'Numerical Cognition', p. 496. Whorf spent most of his life outside of academia working in the insurance industry. He is credited with identifying the confusion generated by the warning label 'flammable' on substances prone to ignition (that is, the suffix 'in' is generally used in the English language to denote what something is not; invisible; indeterminate; inarticulate). His finding catalysed a shift across industries and products towards the word 'flammable'.

¹² Richard K. Ashley and R. B. J. Walker, 'Reading Dissidence/Writing the Discipline: Crisis and the Question of Sovereignty in International Studies', *International Studies Quarterly*, 34:3 (1990), p. 396.

The issues of language, culture, and adaptive transformation raised by the Pirahã have considerable implications for global politics. Primarily, one is struck by how the findings of Gordon's study reflect what has become a guiding assumption for much of the critical scholarship undertaken in international studies: that culture, discourse, and language have a fundamental influence over what can be thought, what can be understood, the construction of meaning, and what can be considered possible, which all in turn shape practice. And these are of course questions that have figured prominently in Ashley's own analyses of the cultures of power politics.¹³

In navigating the case of the Pirahã, it is disheartening to find that linguistics also shares much of the same extreme behaviourist baggage as international studies, as well as the same type of incitement to discourse, that is a disciplinary policing tactic whose purposes are to render anything that challenges the foundations of orthodoxy as an outlier to be kept at a distance so that just enough is known without actually having to *know* what is being kept there.¹⁴ The Pirahã and the potential insights that they bring to linguistic theory and perhaps more importantly to discussions of the diversity of the human condition are significant; they cannot and should not be ignored just because they 'do not fit' into what has been ontologically positioned as a shared (and more assertively as an innate) characteristic of humanity.

Thus, the research, interpretations, and understandings of the Pirahã that have been brought forward are *political* for identity claims are being made. Moreover, the politics is imbricated in how the Pirahã are positioned through these representational practices in international studies, but more importantly, in how our own cultures position themselves. As Karena Shaw has argued, 'our modes of understanding, practices of knowing and acting, structures of social and political organisation, and so on, establish and reflect political possibilities, and [...] these spaces are always both enabling and constraining for indigenous peoples (as well as many other 'marginal' peoples)'.¹⁵

While it is not immediately apparent what exact political possibilities become thinkable or unthinkable in this case, these yet unknown possibilities are initially provocative in an abstract sense: principally, what if our languages, discourses, and cultures (general, disciplinary, sub-disciplinary, political) are so closed as to prohibit the articulation of radical alternatives in a way that can be understood and ultimately configured into practice? Ashley in a searing critique of the predominance of statist economism noted that:

taboo terms secure disciplinary boundaries which in turn impose and legitimate limits on political and social discourse, constrain the symbolic resources available to contending

¹³ For example, see Richard K. Ashley, 'Three Modes of Economism', *International Studies Quarterly*, 27:4 (1983), pp. 463–96; Richard K. Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism', *International Organization*, 38:2 (1984), pp. 225–86; Richard K. Ashley, 'Living on Border Lines: Man, Poststructuralism, and War', in James Der Derian and Michael Shapiro (eds), *International/Intertextual Relations* (Lexington MA: Lexington Press, 1989), pp. 259–321.

¹⁴ Ashley, 'Living on Border Lines', p. 259.

¹⁵ Karena Shaw, 'Indigeneity and the International', *Millennium*, 31:1 (2002), pp. 55–81. See also, J. Marshall Beier, *International Relations in Uncommon Places: Indigeneity, Cosmology, and the Limits of International Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); John Hobson, 'Is Critical Theory always for the White West and for Western Imperialism? Beyond Westphalian to a Post-Racist Critical IR', *Review of International Studies*, 33: Special Issue (2007), pp. 91–116.

parties, and circumscribe the social reordering possibilities imaginable within that discourse. Taboo terms are, if you will, expressions and instruments of political power, just as disciplinary divisions of scholarly labour are themselves reflections of the power of dominant organizing principles of society in opposition to contesting principles.¹⁶

Ashley's argument on taboo therefore sheds light on one part of the constriction equation. But what of the imagined inhabitants of the space beyond taboo, that is the terms, concepts, discourses, and modes of thought that might be able to completely transgress the limits of international studies, but which are completely beyond articulation or even conceptualisation within the limits of our contemporary cultural structures, discursive formations, understandings, and ideational norms? In other words, rather than reading the case of the Pirahã as a means by which to take a swipe at a transposed statist-economism, how might this case give purchase on the political subjectivities of those who would position themselves at the 'margins', as 'dissidents', as 'exiles', by standing defiant against the ravages of a renewed economism (of risk) and the continuing depoliticisation of the political through the deployment of technical rationalisms?

It is productive to interpret the Pirahã case as reflective of issues within international studies, primarily the roles of silence as both a noun and a verb in mapping out political possibilities. Thus, this rendition of the Pirahã as read through *an* Ashley provides an opportunity for further reflection on how to promote progressive political practice that can transcend disciplinary limits and the pitfalls of past attempts at emancipation. It also echoes a previous call to 'resist knowledgeable practices of power that would impose [...] a set of limitations on what can be done [...]'.¹⁷ Thus, reflecting *an* ethos of previous dissident works within which one can catch glimpses of *an* Ashley, the implications of this reading 'help to accentuate a disciplinary crisis whose single most pronounced symptom is that the very idea of "the discipline" enters thought as a question, a problem, a matter of uncertainty'.¹⁸ But, the point of departure is the 'discipline' in question. The discursive formation for analysis ought to be critical scholarship itself within international studies. What do we remain silent on?

Within the academy we are taught in one sense to look for silence – in terms of as a noun. As post-graduate students we are counselled to find gaps in the literature or empirical case studies that have yet to be researched in order to bring our own voice to the issues that they raise. In theory, it is this kind of innovative research that is supposed to bring a volume to our voice that demands attention, respect, and a reputation that garners one employment and professional kudos. But as many find out first hand, there is a tension with the other face of silence when it assumes the form of a verb.

We are often reminded that international studies as a discipline has been largely predicated upon a series of unreflexive assumptions about what the field comprises, legitimate concerns within these domains, and the properly rigorous methods to analyse them.¹⁹ The propositional has then become concretised, with dialogue

¹⁶ Ashley, 'Three Modes', p. 464.

¹⁷ Richard K. Ashley and R. B. J. Walker, 'Speaking the Language of Exile: Dissident Thought in International Studies', *International Studies Quarterly*, 34:3 (1990), p. 263.

¹⁸ Ashley and Walker, 'Reading Dissidence', p. 376.

¹⁹ For example, see Richard K. Ashley, 'Can the End of Power Politics Possibly be Part of the Concepts with which its Story is Told? A Post-Hoc Thematic', Paper presented at *From Dissidence*

routed to produce and secure a dominant consensus.²⁰ And as *an* Ashley has argued, the membership of the dominant consensus leaves fields of inquiry in international studies that are ‘unable to know their own consensual basis or to reflect critically on the correlation, if any, between their own deep presuppositions and the dominant structures of world society’.²¹

To maintain a consensus, consensus-makers have deployed various strategies and technologies to silence alternative perspectives on any of its foundational assumptions.²² One of the most effective has been to attempt to not think about or discuss them by making them either taboo or sacred. In instances where cultural norms of conformity fail, there are a host of mechanisms to ensure that there are ways of casting off those things, people, and ideas that challenge dominant modes of thinking. These range from sophisticated strategies such as reversing the burden of proof, ontological sleights of hand, and re-deploying mysticism, to the sophomoric – but no less effective – such as bullying, belittlement, and ostracism. These tactics produce the all too familiar jocular narrative of international studies where from the dawn of time to the end of time, man – it is only men who seem to matter in this story – is doomed to be invariably locked into the intrigues of the high politics of international affairs. Somewhere in between, the orthodoxy of

to Defiance: Resisting the Disciplines of Global Politics, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne (2007); Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979); Beier, *International Relations*; David Campbell, *Politics Without Principle: Sovereignty, Ethics, and Narratives of the Gulf War* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1993); David Campbell, *Writing Security: US Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); James Der Derian, ‘The Boundaries of Knowledge and Power in International Relations’, in James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro (eds), *International/Intertextual Relations* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 3–10; Jim George, *Discourses of Global Politics* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 1994); Jim George and David Campbell, ‘Patterns of Dissent and the Celebration of Difference: Critical Social Theory and International Relations’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 34:3 (1990), pp. 269–94; Hugh Gusterson, ‘Missing the End of the Cold War in International Security’, in Mark Laffey Jutta Weldes, Hugh Gusterson, and Raymond Duvall (eds), *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999), pp. 319–46; Friedrich Kratochwil, ‘The Embarrassment of Changes: Neo-Realism as the Science of Realpolitik without Politics’, *Review of International Studies*, 19:1 (1993), pp. 63–80; Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams (eds), *Critical Security Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Mark Neufeld, ‘Reflexivity and International Relations Theory’, *Millennium*, 22:1 (1993), pp. 53–76; V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan, ‘Gender as a Lens on World Politics’, in *Global Gender Issues* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 17–44; Michael J. Shapiro, *Violent Cartographies: Mapping Cultures of War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Christine Sylvester, *Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Post-Modern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); J. Ann Tickner (ed.), *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); R. B. J. Walker, ‘Security, Sovereignty, and the Challenge of World Politics’, *Alternatives*, 15 (1990), pp. 3–27.

²⁰ Richard K. Ashley, ‘The Eye of Power: The Politics of World Modeling’, *International Organization*, 37:3 (1983), p. 529.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 529.

²² Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Robert Keohane, ‘International Institutions: Two Approaches’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 32:4 (1988), pp. 379–96; John Gerard Ruggie, ‘Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations’, *International Organization*, 47:1 (1993), pp. 139–74; Stephen Walt, ‘The Renaissance of Security Studies’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 35:2 (1991), pp. 211–39; Stephen Walt, ‘International Relations: One World, Many Theories’, *Foreign Policy*, 110 (1998), pp. 29–47; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Colin Wight, ‘MetaCampbell: The Epistemological Problematics of Perspectivism’, *Review of International Studies*, 25:2 (1999), pp. 311–6.

international studies has demonstrated an unintentional mastery of its deployment of the Derridean double-bind.

To not engage in these acts of (petty) criticism, to not 'circle the wagons', to not condemn others for failures to meet standards that the critics themselves fall far short of, would potentially spoil the stories that are told to explain why things happen in particular ways, that is the common sense of international studies, and the practices that these make possible. Silencing, as *an* Ashley has revealed, is an active pursuit undertaken by self-defined guardians of orthodoxy to preserve the integrity of a particular meta-theoretical position that benefits the hegemonic aspirations of the most powerful in global politics.²³

In part then, silence and silencing have been an integral motivator for the entire spectrum of 'critical' literature within international studies, not only to show what cannot be spoken or thought about with international studies but how this can be a deliberate political practice.²⁴ At the same time, critical scholarship has drawn attention to the even more insidious problem of circumstances in which silence and silencing are outcomes that are neither intentionally pursued or easily perceived because of the attractiveness of the political project in which they become manifest. Thus, there is a long-standing 'tradition' in critical scholarship to investigate outside the borders and on the margins, as well as a growing body of work on what cannot be spoken, thought, or understood in international studies. In particular, the feminisms of international studies have been at fore-front of exploring the political implications of silence as demonstrated in Jan Jindy Pettman's research on the absence of the body in IR scholarship,²⁵ Carol Cohn's work on defence intellectuals,²⁶ Cynthia Enloe's work on the silences both within emancipatory politics and in the (re)production of war,²⁷ and Lene Hansen's analysis of the political and cultural constraints which shape who is able to voice concerns that may lead to securitisation or desecuritisation.²⁸

But in reflecting upon the political praxis that has flowed from critical scholarship, both comforts and concerns can be found. In one sense, much of this literature shares a glimmer of hope that 'the political' can be revived. The implication for political agency is that the discursive conditions that give rise to problematic practices and structures are not permanent: the 'right' words, a radical

²³ Richard K. Ashley, 'Political Realism and Human Interest', *International Studies Quarterly*, 25:2 (1981), pp. 204–36; Ashley, 'The Eye of Power'; Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism'; Richard K. Ashley, 'The Geopolitics of Geopolitical Space: Toward a Critical Social Theory of International Politics', *Alternatives*, 12 (1987), pp. 403–34; Richard K. Ashley, 'The Achievements of Postmodernism', in Ken Booth, Steve Smith, and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 240–53; Ashley and Walker 'Speaking the Language of Exile'; Ashley and Walker 'Reading Dissidence'.

²⁴ It also bears noting that critical scholarship is not static on who is doing the silencing. Other critical theorists as much as an orthodoxy are identified as 'silencers'.

²⁵ Jan Jindy Pettman, 'Body Politics: International Sex Tourism', *Third World Quarterly*, 18:1 (1997), pp. 93–108.

²⁶ Carol Cohn, 'Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defence Intellectuals', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12:4 (1987), p. 687–718.

²⁷ Cynthia Enloe, *Making Feminist Sense of International Politics: Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* (Pandora Press: London, 1989); Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

²⁸ Lene Hansen, 'The Little Mermaid's Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School', *Millenium*, 29:2 (2000), pp. 285–306. All of the scholars mentioned above are illustrative of critical scholarship that wishes to interrogate silence; there are, of course, many others too numerous to mention.

way of re-thinking, a means of overcoming the most egregious forms of silencing exists – perhaps outside of the specific domain of international studies and its discursive forms – but ultimately a way around the impasse can be found – though this will not be easy. As Lene Hansen has outlined, the transformative task is always very difficult given that one must operate within dominant discourses to be understood even while trying at the same time to reveal their contingent character.²⁹ However, there is still an optimism that this can occur; undecidability can become praxis and the topography of contemporary onto-politics re-landscaped.³⁰

As such, there is still hope. The hope is that the catalyst for transformation – not merely change – is within that which we already know and that which we already have the ability to articulate or to speak. But ought these assumptions be taken for granted? It is at this precise point where the concerns of an Ashley can combine with the conceptual provocations of the Pirahã case to generate some uncertainty about the revelations that ‘critical’ scholarship often wants to provide.

The first is with respect to hegemony. For example, Craig N. Murphy has explored the nexus of ‘critical IR’, hegemony, and silence particularly in terms of whose voices get heard.³¹ But there is another dimension of silence that must be engaged regarding the claims of difference in counter-hegemonic proposals: whatever their form, how different are they in terms of the teleology of governance? This is not a question that should be disregarded, particularly with the experiences of the past decades where we can see the contours of hegemonic power politics being reproduced in post-colonial moments as the discourses and practices of Western governmentality and biopolitics are re-claimed as indigenous forms. For example, we are witnessing this process to potentially cataclysmic results in Burma, China, and Zimbabwe.³² And despite promises of progressive politics in other sites through ‘new labour’, ‘compassionate conservatism’, the ‘responsibility to protect’, UN Resolution 1325, ‘human security’, ‘human development’, ‘sustainable development’, and a ‘new world order’, biopolitics, a renewed economism of insurance, proliferates in ostensibly producing ‘life that is worthy of living’.³³

For example, while Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri may draw attention to specific systems of accumulation and property, rights and responsibilities, political and social organisation and biology and technology, that are said to embody contemporary life, our gaze must also turn to the knowledge, the beliefs, the profane, and the holy that are all reflective of a cosmological orientation which is constitutive of particular relations of power.³⁴ It is this shared cosmology that

²⁹ Lene Hansen, ‘A Case for Seduction? Evaluating the Poststructuralist Conceptualization of Security’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 32:4 (1997), p. 386.

³⁰ David Campbell, ‘Beyond Choice: The Onto-Politics of Critique’, *International Relations*, 19:1 (2005), pp. 127–34.

³¹ Craig N. Murphy, ‘The Promise of Critical IR, Partially Kept’, *Review of International Studies*, 33: Special Issue (2007), pp. 117–34.

³² For a discussion in the context of Zimbabwe, see Christine Sylvester, ‘Bare Life as a development/postcolonial problematic’, *The Geographical Journal*, 172:1 (2006), pp. 66–77. More broadly, see Achille Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, *Popular Culture*, 15:1 (2003), pp. 11–40.

³³ Michael Dillon and Luis Lobo-Guerrero, ‘Biopolitics of Security in the 21st Century’, *Review of International Studies*, 34:2 (2008), pp. 265–92.

³⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

necessarily bounds ontological possibility; there may be a competition between different ontological systems, but the competition is limited to a particular ontological set within a shared cosmological orbit.³⁵ Thus, there is a danger that any struggle for transformation will be no more than the continuation of an ongoing sectarian conflict over the ultimate control of global biopower.

This is certainly not a good prognosis. But by turning to the example of the Pirahã we may be able to identify potential avenues to extricate ourselves out of this quagmire without succumbing to Pandora's boxes of our own design. It is in remaining healthily sceptical of the avenues for transformation that can potentially keep critical scholarship from becoming complicit in problematic reconfigurations of intellectual and practical hegemony.

However, in this on-going struggle to problematise the problematic, there has been a lot of posturing and boundary building of late. Manifestos of perceived inclusion and exclusion have been written and nailed to metaphoric church doors sparking heated debates.³⁶ Increasingly, those on the frontier appear to be colonising territory, potentially restricting entry through practices of definition.³⁷ It is also evident that there is an increasing intolerance of intellectual difference at the margins.³⁸ As such, critical scholarship itself has sometimes shown a darker understanding of the theory/practice nexus around silence.

This has been compounded by a crucial strategy that appears to have largely gone un-deployed. Both the case of the Pirahã and a reading of the discipline of international studies brought forward by an Ashley emphasise the safety in remaining 'unknown' to the eyes of power to as great an extent as practical. Much like in contemporary calculations of risk central to security management, the most subversive and unsettling phenomenon is that which cannot be known by the actuary – one which is accompanied by a lack of readily digestible information so that normal means of determining probabilities cannot be utilised. Why then has there been a rush in some quarters to make it easy for critical positions to be known at 'arms length' by mainstreamers without really having to be known?³⁹ Once probabilities are calculated, once mainstreamers believe that they have

³⁵ For a far more detailed and sophisticated treatment of these issues central to contemporary global politics, please see Beier, *International Relations*, pp. 44–7.

³⁶ C. A. S. E. Collective, 'Critical Approaches to Security in Europe: A Networked Manifesto', *Security Dialogue*, 37:4 (2006), pp. 443–87; Andreas Behnke, 'Presence and Creation: A Few (Meta-)Critical Comments on the C. A. S. E. Manifesto', *Security Dialogue*, 38:1 (2007), pp. 105–11; Mark B. Salter, 'On Exactitude in Disciplinary Science: A Response to the Network Manifesto', *Security Dialogue*, 38:1 (2007), pp. 113–22; R. B. J. Walker, 'Security, Critique, Europe', *Security Dialogue*, 38:1 (2007), pp. 95–103; Christine Sylvester, 'Anatomy of a Footnote', *Security Dialogue*, 38:4 (2007), pp. 547–58; C. A. S. E. Collective, 'Europe, Knowledge, Politics – Engaging with the Limits – The C. A. S. E. Collective Responds', *Security Dialogue*, 38:4 (2007), pp. 559–76.

³⁷ For example, Ronen Palan argues that critical theory should pursue approaches that are globally encompassing, historically oriented, and focused on political institutions. It is this third component that is potentially the most limiting. While his heterodox methodology justifiably unpacks orthodox delineations between international and domestic forces central to state formation and relations, it is still important to ask what can count as a political institution? Palan is clear that capitalism is a political institution, but remains silent about identities, popular culture, and other political phenomena that may not map neatly onto his (nuanced) understanding of the state and its relations. See, Ronen Palan, 'Heterodoxy in IR Scholarship', *Review of International Studies*, 33: Special Issue (2007), pp. 47–69.

³⁸ For a particularly overt example, see Ken Booth, 'Beyond Critical Security Studies', in Ken Booth (ed.), *Critical Security Studies and World Politics* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005).

³⁹ Ashley, 'Living on Border Lines', p. 259.

figured out a critical position, it becomes far easier to become coopted (even against one's will), ignored, or otherwise marginalised. To avoid this kind of marginalisation, keeping a step ahead, always transforming, always rethinking, always reformulating, always re-problematizing, and re-examining the foundations of one's contradictions, are a probably a good start.

But reflexivity is not necessarily sufficient in making our own facile gestures difficult. And the difficulty arises precisely at that moment when articulation escapes us, when we are at a loss for words, when we cannot think beyond concepts that arise from within contemporary life, whether these are transformative, reactionary, or apathetic.

This is really just a starting point; there can be concern not only with what we are not capable of articulating in promoting new forms of political and social (dis)organisation in global politics – depending on preference – but also with what we as subjects might be incapable of comprehending. What can we not even think because of our cosmological backdrop? Of course the answer is we do not really know. We may have inklings about what is difficult to conceptualise, but, riffing on a contemporary philosopher of note, Donald Rumsfeld, how can we expect to know the breadth and depth of what we cannot know? In this sense, the Pirahã actually have a leg up on the rest of us. They have partially figured this out, tried to address it, and found ways to cope that retain their distinctiveness. Moreover, they have done so in a way that has caused no violence to any other community.

Therefore, the Pirahã also point to where we perhaps might want to begin to learn what we do not know we do not know: the so-called outliers: people who have resisted the dominant cosmology and teleology of contemporary life; those who in being marginalised have made the privileged (political) condition of the 'critical' academic possible.⁴⁰ Reaching out will likely involve a humbleness that has been lacking in previous attempts in navigating 'Otherness'; it also pushes beyond the deployment of (critical) ethnographic methods as the sole means of communication.⁴¹ Although reflexive ethnographies open the possibility to listen and to struggle to understand other perspectives from as far within them as one can get, the ethnographic encounter is, in part like any other method of data collection or research interaction, made possible and defined by the spores of deeply embedded relations of power.⁴² Therefore, rather than *the* sole means of understanding, it might be better viewed as but one step of a more complex process.

Conversely, it is also important not to discount the relations of power engendered by international studies and the phenomena it seeks to understand that are constitutive of the everyday. What elements then of the everyday shape the ways in which people understand the limits of the political, politics, and the possibilities for transformation? In other words, as illustrated by numerous studies

⁴⁰ Hobson, 'Beyond Westphalian' is instructive on this point.

⁴¹ Particularly distressing is a new position being articulated that for 'critical' scholarship to be empirically informed, it must engage in ethnographic study. Murphy, 'The Promise', skates dangerously close to this position. This begs two questions, assuming that we take the term empirical in its best light: the philosophical 'why is the analysis of texts and/or discourses not empirical?' and a broader disciplinary question of 'how has it become possible for textual and discursive analyses to be dismissed as "not empirical" by other forms of "critical" scholarship'?

⁴² Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

that are concerned with these issues, there is also value in locating international studies beyond the confines of elite statecraft or formal institutions.⁴³ In doing so, it becomes possible to render the normal abnormal and the familiar strange.

Perhaps the biggest challenge then is not only that which arises from *an* Ashley and other early dissidents, that is, to make mainstreamers feel uncomfortable about particular forms of enquiry and therefore themselves, but to really embrace one's own discomfort. This would be a call to go beyond the realisation that our narratives are always bounded, that any knowledge is always partial or that any discourse is infused with relations of power. It is also a call to go beyond what *an* Ashley counselled as 'reflecting critically on the correlation, if any, between [... our] own deep presuppositions and the dominant structures of world society'.⁴⁴ It is a call to get into a conceptual headspace that is completely alien to the point of provoking the question known in cyber-speak as 'WTF?' in order to identify any potential forms of political practice, resistance, defiance, and transformation that are currently unknown – at least to critical scholarship in IR – or overlooked.

There must however be cautiousness towards the ways in which difference is evoked and invoked in order to ensure that it does not become an excuse to mystify, mistreat and/or fear. Moreover, there must be a wariness to guard against difference being discursive deployed for the sake of reactionary politics by tapping into culturally chauvinistic representational practices.⁴⁵

This is always an ongoing concern though even more so in instances like that of the Pirahã when the red flag of incommensurability is raised. As Everett has shown with his fieldwork, there always exists at least the possibility of partial translation that can perhaps be the beginning of a fuller understanding to be reached in the future.

Yet translation itself is not politically neutral. As Talal Asad has argued:

the inequality of languages is a feature of the global patterns of power [... and efforts] must be directed against the assumption that translation requires the adjustment of 'foreign discourses' to their new site. In my view, they should retain what may be a discomfiting – even scandalous – presence within the receiving language.⁴⁶

Echoing this sentiment, Susan Buck-Morss has argued that in the exercise of translation, 'promise lies in [...] apparent incommensurabilities, because the attempt fosters each language to extend itself creatively, becoming more than it

⁴³ Some recent examples include Matt Davies and Michael Niemann, *International Relations and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, forthcoming); Francois Debrix, *Tabloid Terror: War, Culture, and Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 2007); Curtis Marez, *Drug Wars: The Political Economy of Narcotics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Michael J. Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 2008); Alison Watson, 'Children and International Relations: A New Site of Knowledge?' *Review of International Studies*, 32:2 (2006), pp. 237–50; Cynthia Weber, *Imagining America at War* (London: Routledge, 2005); Jutta Weldes (ed.), *To Seek Out New Worlds: Exploring Links Between Science Fiction and World Politics* (London: Palgrave, 2003); Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott, 'Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture-World Politics Continuum' *Politics*, 29:3 (2009), pp. 155–63.

⁴⁴ Ashley, 'The Eye of Power', p. 529.

⁴⁵ Everett notes that the Piraha say that their heads are different than other people. The Piraha language is called *ʔapaitáiso* 'a straight head', while other languages are called *ʔapagáiso*, 'a crooked head'. He argues that this not a reflection of ethnocentrism but rather shows how the connection between culture and language is an essential aspect of the Piraha identity, especially given that they call themselves *hiaitihi*, 'a straight one/he is straight'. See Everett, 'Cultural Constraints', p. 37.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 17.

was, producing an open space in which a new politics might take root [...].⁴⁷ Ultimately then, ‘a successful translation [...] leaves neither the original nor the receiving language unchanged’.⁴⁸ The ethics of translation then is not only how to best voice the ideas and spirit of the words of the original speaker, but also how tolerant is one’s own language in ‘assuming unaccustomed forms’.⁴⁹ Again this is likely easier said than done. While Buck-Morss’ sentiment is laudable, it still is vulnerable to promoting the universal at the expense of the particular. Specifically, the focal point of this conception of translation is implicitly tied to a left Hegelian dialectic that assumes out of the interaction of two particulars, a new emancipatory universal will arise. Thus, Buck-Morss is a little too willing to ignore the power/relations that any claim to universalism embodies as well as the political struggle that is inherent in defining emancipation.

Therefore, claims of incommensurability must be negotiated to ensure that this does not become a justification for not putting in the effort to learn, to expand the channels of inter-subjective communication, cultural understanding and sensitivity. There is also the danger recognised by *an* Ashley that ‘the act of translation can become a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* that transmits [...] new interests and insights [...] only to the extent that they reinforce, and do not call into question [...] dominant consensus’.⁵⁰ Again, this encourages the analyst to be prepared to feel uncomfortable, to move beyond her referents, in a sense to gain freedom through a lack of certainty. This space for reflection, both metaphorical and physical, becomes possible because of the initial work that was undertaken by Ashley and the other earlier dissidents who opened international studies to ‘listen[ing] attentively to the “muffled cries” of dissidence that are already everywhere to be heard’.⁵¹

Departures

With respect to the Pirahã, Everett has argued:

For the rest of us, this beautiful language and culture, so fundamentally different from anything the western world has produced, has much to teach us about linguistics theory, about culture, about human nature, about living for each day and letting the future take care of itself, about personal fortitude, toughness, love, and other values too numerous to mention here. And this is but one example of many other endangered languages and cultures in the Amazon and elsewhere with ‘riches’ of similar nature that we may never, ever know about, because of our own short-sightedness.⁵²

Counter-intuitively, the Pirahã case has a potential twist that points to the value of destabilising the liberal tendency to see silence as inherently a bad thing; silence can have a resonance and dignity more powerful than the words that fill its vacuum. As Slavoj Žižek has noted, ‘those in power often prefer even a “critical”

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Ashley, ‘The Eye of Power’, p. 534.

⁵¹ Ashley and Walker, ‘Speaking the Language’, p. 265.

⁵² Everett, ‘Cultural Constraints’, p. 37.

participation, a dialogue, to silence [. . .].⁵³ Silence, making the conscious choice not to engage in the terms defined by an asymmetrical power relation, can therefore be utilised as a deliberate strategy of resistance and defiance. From this perspective, silence has been used by the Pirahã as a strategy for survival. One wonders if *an Ashley* reveals that this might be useful for resisting the various hegemonies within the disciplines of international studies? If so, where would one end up? Would one want to actually be there? Answers are not clear. However, I do take some comfort in knowing that *the* answer has not yet been decided.

⁵³ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile Books, 2009), p. 183.