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The Postcolonial: Conceptual Category or Chimera?

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No discussion of the ‘postcolonial’ should proceed without participants making known their understanding of the term, for no word is more seductive in appearing to offer limitless possibilities for composing a revised narrative of colonialism and its consequences, and few words have proved more elusive. Yet within the multiplicity of literary and cultural studies now identified as constituting a ‘postcolonial criticism’, there is a constant slippage between significations of an historical transition, a cultural location, a discursive stance, and an epochal condition. Not only has postcoloniality been privileged as the position from which to deconstruct colonialism’s past self-representations and legitimating strategies but it is also designated the location for producing properly postmodern intellectual work on the contemporary world, which, it is asserted, has seen the implosion of Western culture under the impact of its inhabitation by other voices, histories, and experiences.¹ Nor do these variants exhaust the connotations which, more narrowly, include a description of those Third World literatures characterized by intertextuality that (in contrast to fictions of an earlier phase) devise ‘post-nationalist narratives’.

Such indeterminacy in signification has prompted essays and lectures with titles such as ‘What is Post(-)colonialism?’ and ‘When was the Postcolonial?’;² and indeed a glance at the contents of the two recent Postcolonial Readers will suggest the range of topics and methodologies now being subsumed under the sign of the postcolonial.³ But if the critical freedom from precision and closure has induced scepticism in some critics, the very multivalencies of the term have been valorized by others concerned to rearticulate colonialism and its aftermath from a theoretical position that has disentangled itself from the categories of political theory, state formation, and structural socio-economic relationships. It is this model that came to attain predominance in the burgeoning discussion, and while its suppositions and

¹ For an extravagant statement of this position, see Ian Chambers, Migrancy, Culture, Identity (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 68.
procedures have already been questioned, there are now indications that its premises are being contested by critics devising practices considered more appropriate to understanding the continuities of the imperial project within our late imperialist moment.

To the exponents of 'a postcolonial critique', the post in postcolonial is 'a space-clearing gesture'\(^4\) signifying a site for the production of theoretical work which, although indelibly marked by colonialism, transcends its cognitive modes. This 'negotiated postcolonial positionality' has been described by Gayatri Spivak as the heritage of imperialism which the postcolonial critic occupies intimately but deconstructively, making interventions 'in the structure of which you are a part' and trying 'to change something that one is obliged to inhabit'.\(^5\) For Homi Bhabha this 'in-between' or 'hybrid position' enables the critic to re-read the colonialist archive in ways which are attentive to 'the more complex cultural and political borders that exist on the cusp' of opposed political spheres.\(^6\) The location occupied by such criticism has been glossed by Gyan Prakash as 'neither inside nor outside the history of western domination but in a tangential relation to it',\(^7\) the double or semi-detached consciousness facilitating an understanding of colonialism and its legacies different from the narratives handed down by both colonialism and anti-colonialist movements. In the work of some adherents, this departure extends from a repudiation of justificatory Imperial Histories and liberal Commonwealth Studies, to the narratives composed by liberation theorists and subsequently modulated for circulation in Third World analyses.

The immediate ancestry of postcolonial theory can be assigned to the wide-ranging retrospect undertaken during the 1980s on the exclusionary forms of reason and universality composed by a Western modernity complicit with imperial expansion and colonialist rule.\(^8\) The genealogical map of the propositions and procedures deployed by both colonial discourse analysis and postcolonial theory is, however, altogether more complicated. This indicates a shared provenance with contemporaneous gender and gay studies, as well as with the devising of minority discourses,\(^9\) and the recovery of African-American literary and cultural traditions.\(^10\) Significantly, such

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\(^{7}\) 'Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography', *Social Text*, 31/32 (1993), 8–19 (pp. 16–17).

\(^{8}\) See Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters* (London: Methuen, 1986).


diverse inquiries directed at contesting the authority of distinctive systems of domination, and jointly contributing to deciphering systems of representation designed to validate institutional subordination and silence the voices of competitors, had recourse to the same critical paradigms.

Poststructuralism undermined the concept of language, and indeed of any signifying system, as a transparent medium for the neutral transmission of information, thereby ruining the notion of representation as innocent and authentic mimesis. When Foucault defined the discourse of any cultural epoch as the means of producing its objects of knowledge according to rituals of truth or authorized sets of internal rules and procedures, he demonstrated how cognitive codes are deployed in relations of power. For Edward W. Said the study of colonial discourse was facilitated by Foucault’s ‘understanding of how the will to exercise dominant control in society and history, has also discovered a way to clothe, disguise, rarefy, and wrap itself systematically in the language of truth, discipline, rationality, utilitarian value, and knowledge’. Gayatri Spivak, on the other hand, found that a postcolonial criticism could take ‘analytic and interventionist advantage’ of Derrida’s deconstruction of the discursive apparatus to occidental reason, since ‘his sustained and developing work on the mechanics of the constitution of the Other’, posed ‘the question of how to keep the ethnocentric Subject from establishing itself by selectively defining an Other’.

In another register, Western Marxism provided a model of the reciprocal action between base and superstructure, between material conditions and ideas, thereby recuperating the earlier Marxist formulation of a socioeconomic formation within which a nexus of heterogeneous and contradictory determinations interact. The writings of Gramsci, which made connexions between culture and both state and civil institutions, proposed that the inventions of cultural activity kept the ideological world in movement; and British cultural criticism, or Cultural Materialism, proffered a definition of culture as itself a set of social practices, rather than as superstructure. Particularly significant was Raymond Williams’s exposition of hegemony — that is, the expedients deployed in order to win the spontaneous consent of the great mass of the population to the intellectual and moral direction imposed on social life by the dominant group. Williams’s elaboration of a concept devised by Gramsci, defined hegemony as ‘a whole body of practices and expectations [. . .] a lived system of meanings and values — constitutive and constituting’. It also expanded on the volatility and open structure of an interaction which accommodates not only complicity, but the space for resistance, the maintenance of domination depending on ‘continuous processes of adjustment, reinterpretation, incorporation, dilution’, processes

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12 ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in Williams and Chrisman (pp. 90, 89) (first publ. in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988, pp. 271–313).
moreover which are conducted in relation to ‘alternative’, ‘oppositional’, ‘residual’, and ‘emergent’ cultural formations.\textsuperscript{13}

It was also from within Western Marxism that ideology was reconceived not as false consciousness but as the means of constituting concrete individuals as subjects, the subject denoting both subjectivity and subjection. I have here referred to the work of Althusser, and although this is currently out of fashion, his disposals of a Marxism that drew on the theories of Freud and Lacan to explain the multiple determinants of subject-formation, continue to circulate as if unconsciously in the larger contemporary discussion on the uncertain relationship between objective structural position, or social interest, and political identification. Furthermore, although seldom cited as an influence, the practice of ‘symptomatic reading’ (that is, reading literature for the ways this challenges ideology by using and transforming it) proposed by Althusser’s collaborator Pierre Macherey\textsuperscript{14} appears to have infiltrated the work of critics examining the signs of empire, both conspicuous and ghostly, written across the body of metropolitan literature.\textsuperscript{15} In all, the strategic redeployment of these different theoretical paradigms enabled investigations to be made into the ways that culture and ideology participated in exercising and sustaining colonial domination; they remain invaluable for understanding both the making and reception, whether as approbation or interrogation, of colonialist self-representation in the metropolis, and the buttressing of military and institutional force in the colonies with the production of consent.

According to Peter Hulme\textsuperscript{16}, the disciplinary area known as ‘colonial discourse analysis’ came into being as a critique of the continental theoretical work it enlisted. The progenitor of this criticism of European critical thought was Said. In freely acknowledging a debt to continental theorists, Western Marxism, and Anglo-Saxon cultural criticism, Said observed both the massive indifference of these modes to colonialism as constitutive of metropolitan society and the failure of their authors to recognize that anti-colonialist critics such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and C. L. R. James, had confronted the contradictions and hierarchies in the thought of Western modernity long before prominent European, North American, and British


\textsuperscript{14} A Theory of Literary Production (London: Routledge, 1978).

\textsuperscript{15} See, for example, Daniel Bivona, Desire and Contradiction: Imperial Visions and Domestic Debates in Victorian Literature (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Suvendrini Perera, Reaches of Empire: The English Novel from Edgeworth to Dickens (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Firdous Azim, The Colonial Rise of the Novel (London: Routledge, 1993). There are also numerous recent essays on the deployment of empire as metaphor in novels such as Mansfield Park, Jane Eyre, Daniel Deronda, The Moonstone, and The Waves.

theorists had got round to it.17 Said’s own writings can be seen to negotiate an alliance between Western theory and the analyses developed by liberation movements, in the process producing elaborations which were not in the metropolitan sources. This conjoining of disparate intellectual spheres has provoked criticism from those who find that Said’s attempt to graft Foucault’s anti-humanism on to appeals to a transcendent human reality remains involved in the ethical and theoretical values it criticizes, and hence fails to ‘decolonize western thought’.18 But for Peter Hulme, Said’s achievement is to have brought together ‘the rhetorical power of the textual readings offered by discourse analysis […] with a “real” world of domination and exploitation, usually analyzed by a Marxism hostile to poststructuralism’s epistemological scepticism’ (p. 3). Thus, Hulme contends, Said, who recognizes the scrupulously ethnocentric nature of Foucault’s undertaking, chooses to emphasize the possibilities inherent in this work, in the interests of extending to a global terrain the concept of discourse with the constant implication of textuality within networks of history, power, knowledge, and society.

Tim Brennan, however, maintains that Said, who is resistant to the totalizing forms of all theoretical systems, owes more to Raymond Williams than to continental theory;19 and indeed it is evident that in a parallel resituation of another critical practice within a larger arena, Said draws on Williams’s work, while at the same time interrogating its privileged inclusions and calling attention to its exclusions. For lodged within Said’s handsome appreciations of Williams’s path-breaking studies is a commentary on the irrelevance of the colonial experience to Williams’s revisionist narrative about the making of English culture, the zones of exclusion staking out the ground on which Said offers an interpretation of empire’s constitutive role in the making of metropolitan cultures: ‘Studying the relationship between the “West” and its dominated cultural “Others” is not just a way of understanding an unequal relationship between unequal interlocutors, but also a point of entry into studying the formation and meaning of Western cultural practices themselves’ (Culture and Imperialism, p. 230). All the same, Said acknowledges that it is from Williams that he derived his usage of

culture as social practice, as the negotiated processes within which subjectivities, cognition, and consciousness are made and remade under determinate historical and political conditions; and it is this construction that makes possible Said's usage of discourse as always implying a 'worlding' of textuality.

In drawing attention to Said's immense influence on the development of both colonial discourse analysis and its close younger relative, postcolonial theory, I do not mean to overlook that the beginnings of these projects were multiply determined by the convergence of a new generation of critics, many of whom came from decolonized worlds, the availability of innovative critical theories, and the concurrent investigations of other forms of oppressive ideologies. Furthermore, whereas Said's theoretically eclectic work was a potent force in promoting an inquiry that in turn generated postcolonial theory, and although the realist paradigm continues to be the chosen mode of many who situate themselves as contributing to a postcolonial criticism, it was the 'the linguistic turn' that a prominent exponent was to hail as effecting 'a shift within contemporary critical traditions of postcolonial writing'.

Thus, while the notions and the language of the subject and the realm of human activity are still retained by participants who acknowledge the energies of the colonized's self-affirmation, and hence of conscious agency, what high-profile critics brought to the discussion was the poststructuralist critique of subjectivity as a theory bound to the metaphysics of presence. As an exemplary instance of this procedure, Homi Bhabha, in his concern to expose 'the myth of the transparency of the human agent', and to dispose of the discourse of the intentional subject or collectivity, has proposed a subjectless process of significations and discursive mechanisms. The implication of a position enjoining the critic to recuperate agency from the native's inappropriate and subversive rearticulations of colonialist enunciations, has been criticized as tending 'to conceive of colonial subjects as resisting or acting only within the spaces made available by colonial discourse'.

Moreover, in eschewing the notion of agency as performed by the subject on contested ground, and disclaiming resistance as a social practice, Bhabha's proposal is incommensurate with accounts of 'a culture of resistance'. In the

21 In his foreword to *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), Said commends the work of the Subaltern Studies collective for theorizing the insurgent subjectivities of the conscious native as agent, the rebel in Ranajit Guha's work being conceived as 'an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion'; see also Guha, 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency' in the same volume, pp. 45–86.
version offered by Said, however, written and remembered stories of insubordination and rebellion are chronicled and insurgent acts are recounted. We could also note that Bhabha’s designation of agency as sited in the enunciative act falls outside the long-standing debate between structural explanations which foreground the determinate constraints of ideological construction, and those paradigms privileging the conscious actor; it is also distinct from that other famous story of how history is made by human subjects, but not under conditions of their own choosing.23

For another influential postcolonial critic, who is also hostile to notions of consciousness-as-agency and rejects the search for the colonized’s sovereign and determining subjectivity,24 it is axiomatic that ‘imperialism’s epistemic violence [. . .] constituted/effaced the subject that was obliged to cathect [. . .] the space of the Imperialists’ self-consolidating other.’24 ‘The clearest available example of [. . .] epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other.’25 Gayatri Spivak’s adamantine contention that the over-determinations in Europe’s constructions of its Others obliterated their subjectivity, leaving no space from which the subaltern could speak, appears to conflate the intentionality of a dominant discourse with its effects, thereby overestimating social constraint while occluding the ways in which multiply constituted subjects refuse a position as pliant objects of another’s representations.26 Her position has been designated by Ania Loomba as absolutist in its effacement of the alternative positions occupied by the colonized and

23 The ‘paradox of a critique of determinism based on an approach that “underestimates human action”’, while attributing to the structure of language ‘another, equally powerful factor of determination’, is discussed by Eleni Varikas in the context of writing women’s history: see her ‘Gender, Experience and Subjectivity’, New Left Review, 211 (1993), 89–101.

24 Gayatri Spivak, ‘Deconstructing Historiography’, in Selected Subaltern Studies, p. 18. Spivak has criticized Foucault’s post-representational vocabulary for hiding an essentialist agenda where the concrete experience of the oppressed is valorized. Perceiving an inconsistency in the project of Subaltern Studies, whose practice implicitly acknowledges the impossibility of the sovereign self at the same time as it falls back upon ‘notions of consciousness-as-agent, totality, and a culturalism that are discontinuous with the critique of humanism’, she endeavours to correct their work by reading it against the grain. This is then re-presented as ‘a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest’, the retrieval of subaltern consciousness interpreted as ‘the charting of what in a poststructuralist language would be called the subject-effect’ (‘Deconstructing Historiography’, pp. 10, 12).

25 ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, p. 76. Spivak’s contention resembles that of Jean and John Comoroff who, working within a realist paradigm, have maintained that ‘the essence of colonization inheres less in political rule than in seizing and transforming “others” by the very act of conceptualizing, inscribing and interacting with them in terms not of their own choosing; in making them into pliant objects and silenced subjects of our scripts and scenarios; in assuming the capacity to “represent” , the active verb itself conflating politics and poetics’ (Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa, 2 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), i, 15.

26 In a recent study, Honi Fern Haber stresses that ‘the self is never the culmination of a single [. . .] narrative’ but is the product of plural modes of constitution (Beyond Postmodern Politics (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 119–20). In specifically addressing the colonial situation, Rosalind O’Hanlon is sceptical of the possibility that ‘the subaltern may be subject to such an intensity of ideological and material pressure that his consciousness and practice are indeed pervaded and possessed by it’ (‘Recovering the Subject’, Modern Asian Studies, 22 (1988), 189–224 (p. 222). We could here also refer back to Raymond Williams’s gloss on hegemony as ideological domination that must always contend with resistance.
outside the remit of imperialism’s ideological constructions. Other commentators, however, have argued that ‘Spivak’s theory of subalternity does not seem [...] to be a theory of “native agency” at all, but a theory of the way in which disenfranchised elements of the ‘native’ population are represented in the discourse of colonialism.’ Such a reading of her stance conforms with Spivak’s own declaration that it is the ‘catachrestic’ rearticulation of dominant texts that will force a re-thinking and fracturing of forms of knowledge and social identities authored and authorized by Western modernity.

It could be claimed that it was the common pursuit of all who engaged in the study of colonial discourse to reveal the limits of a Western modernity which had accommodated slavery and colonial genocide and was complicit with the imperial project. However, a consideration of what came to constitute the most influential practices within postcolonial theory will suggest the distance travelled from the initial project of unmasking the making and operation of colonial discourses — an undertaking which, for all its diversity, shared a concern with the specific historical conditions and social purposes of ideological representation. By no means all the studies that can be subsumed under colonial discourse analysis were attentive to the indigenous systems of thought and hermeneutic traditions that Western writing had traduced or mistranslated; nor were their authors necessarily


29 As an instance amongst many other possible citations of critics who have adopted this stance, consider the contention of Denis Ekpo: ‘Perhaps the most interesting thing that the postmodern turning-point has brought about through its radical and uncanny unmasking of the principles and ruses of western culture, power and history, is opening the way for non-westerners in general and Africans in particular to radically re-think the fundamental categories through which they have hitherto perceived, received and rejected the West’ (‘Towards a Post-Africanism: Contemporary African Thought and Postmodernism’, Textual Practice, 9 (1995), 12–135 (p. 129).

30 As a sample which makes no claim to being either representative or exhaustive, and which does not include journal literature, consider Johannes Fabian, 

*Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Hulme, 

*Colonial Encounters*; Christopher Miller, 

*Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); V. Y. Mudimbe, 

*The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (London: Currey, 1988); Jenny Sharpe, 

*Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Nicholas Thomas, 

concerned with recovering signs of native resistance. All the same, these dimensions were not programmatically ruled out.

This was the effect of Spivak’s emphatic declaration that the task of postcolonial work is not to address victimage ‘by the assertion of identity’, but to tamper ‘with the authority of Europe’s story-lines’, as the critic negotiates and attempts to change what s/he necessarily inhabits ‘by reversing, displacing and seizing the apparatus of value-coding’. Similarly, Bhabha has contended that ‘a shift within contemporary critical traditions of postcolonial writing’ has replaced ‘an influential separatist emphasis on simply elaborating an anti-imperialist or black nationalist tradition “in itself”’ with a ‘postcolonial rearticulation that attempts to intervene in and interrupt the Western discourses on modernity’ (The Location of Culture, p. 241). This privileging of an immanent critique of dominant Western forms has been contested by Laura Chrisman, who looks forward to a paradigm shift in which ‘colonialism be construed less as a self-determining and pre-determined condition of power knowledge, and more as a product of struggle and contestation with the oppositional (physical and cultural) presences of the colonised’, where ‘the anti-colonial movements [...] become a fundamental element in the theorisation of colonial discourse’, and are ‘seen as constitutive of, not merely constituted by, colonialism’.

What are the consequences of contending that the task of the postcolonial intellectual is not to recover signs of self-representation or of ‘the disenfranchised speaking for themselves’? One such outcome is to disregard the importance to once or still dominated populations of recognizing the continuities and persistence of indigenous temporalities within transformed and plural cultural formations, or of recovering the evidence and traces of resistance to colonialism. This last has been the concern of critics recuperating the slave narratives, either written or dictated by ex-slaves of African descent during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. A similar urge is intimated in the aphoristic writings of the Martinican writer and critic Edouard Glissant, who contends that because the slave trade had

31 Said’s work accommodates ‘the rediscovery of what had been suppressed in the natives’ past by the processes of imperialism’ and is attentive to written or remembered accounts of native insubordination and rebellion; while Mudimbe addresses the problems of translating African gnosia.
34 Spivak, The Postcolonial Critic, p. 56.
35 For example, The Slave’s Narrative, ed. by Charles T. David and Henry Louis Gates Jr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). See also Wilson Harris, the Caribbean novelist and critic, who cites limbo dancing as an instance of re-membering. This is a practice stemming from Africa and reinterpreted on the slave ships of the Middle Passage, and which although indebted to the past is not an imitation of that past but ‘rather the renascence of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures’ (History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas (Guyana: National History and Arts Council, 1970), p. 10). On the place of memories of Maroonage in contemporary consciousness, see Baker; also Aimé Césaire’s poem ‘The Verb “Marronner”’ (for René Depestre, Haitian poet), Collected Poetry, trans. by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 369–71.
snatched African-Caribbeans from their original matrix, erasing memory and precluding the ability to map a sequence, it is the function of a contemporary counter-poetics to engender that tormented chronology: ‘For history is not only absence for us. It is vertigo. The time that was never ours, we must now possess’.36

In a discussion where the language model is deployed to devise a social theory of the colonial encounter, the material and experiential worlds of colonialism addressed by historians, social scientists, and cultural materialists have receded from a purview which instead foregrounds the neurotic structure of colonialism evidenced in its texts, or the dubieties and unease registered in the instabilities of its enunciations.37 This direction in turn has elicited protests from those who, while appreciative of the immense contributions textual studies have made to an understanding of the many dimensions and articulations of colonialism and imperialism, contest a rewriting of the imperial project that derives social explanation from the language of discourse and textuality, or from enunciative modalities, and asserts that the testimony of history is invested in its mode of writing. (Bhabha, p. 30). When language is taken as the paradigm of all meaning-creating or signifying systems, the significant disparities between construing the structure of language and explaining the forms of social practice are collapsed, and because human practice is perceived as mimicking the forms of writing, what is offered is the World according to the Word.38 A procedure which reduces the dynamics of historical processes to the rules of language and reads these as encoding the agonistic and ambivalent movement of discursive differentials thus permits the circumvention and relegation of the economic impulses to colonial conquest, the appropriation of physical resources, the exploitation of human labour, institutional repression, and cultural domination.39

Integral to this revisionistendeavour is a concern to effect the ‘break-up of a binary sense of political antagonism’, and, by subsuming the social to textual form, a criticism such as that practised by Bhabha strains to represent

38 This practice has come in for concerted criticism from, amongst others, Christopher Norris, who on both cognitive and ethical grounds has censured ‘facile textualist thought’ which ‘contrives to block the appeal to any kind of real-world knowledge or experience’ (The Truth About Postmodernism (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 182.
colonialism as transactional, thereby replacing the received perception of contest with the 'in-between' space of negotiation. Spivak too is critical 'of the binary opposition coloniser/colonised', her concern being to 'examine the heterogeneity of "colonial power" and to disclose the complicity of that opposition as it constituted the disciplinary enclave of the critique of imperialism.'\footnote{Angela McRobbie, 'Strategies of Violence: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak', Block, 10 (1985), 9.} The substitution of interjacent ground for a war zone would appear to stem from a theoretical commitment to rejecting fixed subject positions as ontologically faulty, and dyadic polarities as epistemologically unsound, and because the means of representation or the semiotic process is privileged as the progenitor of meaning, the colonial encounter comes to be rewritten as an exercise of authority that is agonistic rather than antagonistic. For in this critical mode, where the regime of phrases is all-powerful, an analysis of the ambivalence and blind-spots in colonial enunciations is extended to underwrite the assertion that because 'the implacable logic of oppositionality' in colonialist thought is always and necessarily disrupted, the critic can therefore deduce that 'the functioning of colonial power' was disjunct from 'its founding oppositions'.\footnote{Prakash, 'Postcolonial Criticism', pp. 16–17; my emphasis.} The implications of rewriting a historical project of invasion, expropriation, and exploitation in terms derived from the indeterminacies of language, is that this dispenses with the notion of conflict — a concept which certainly does denote antagonism, but which does not posit a simplistically unitary and closed structure to the adversarial forces.

If the purpose of displacing an oppositional structure is to construe colonialism as a complicated, overlapping, and entangled event, then this should not imply that its operations are to be understood as necessarily conducted in a negotiatory or interstitial space.\footnote{Colonialism's histories are, of course, differential, and therefore opportunities for discovering a 'middle ground' are greater, for example, in nineteenth-century India than in the plantation colonies of the Caribbean, the genocidal settler regimes of Southern Africa, the Americas, and Australia, and the territorial expropriations in North and sub-Saharan Africa. However, even in the case of India, it should be noted that the political and cultural traffic which occurred was between the rulers and India's elites, and not its overwhelmingly peasant populations. Kenneth Parker adds a note of necessary caution when observing that whereas the rigid administrative and cultural divisions set up by colonialism 'were marked by constant acts of transgression, especially on the part of the elites of both sides', it was the subaltern figures from all sides who were victims of that process ('Very Like a Whale', p. 157).} Rather, it counsels us to recognize borders as ground that is policed as well as transgressed. This is, I suggest, the perception yielded by the tension in Said's 'contrapuntal' reading of colonialism's intertwined histories, a strategy proposed to interpret the discrepant experiences as interactive, and one haunted by visitations of schism. For what Said recognizes is that running like a fissure through 'the imperialist ensemble [...] is the principle of domination and resistance based on the division between the West and the rest of the world' (Culture and Imperialism, p. 60). Certainly, Said does discern sympathy,
cooperation, and congruence in the imperial encounter, but such affirmations are repeatedly interrupted by observations of ‘the fundamental ontological distinctions’ (p. 129), the absolute discrepancy in power (p. 195), the meticulous codification of difference, the installation of a radical discontinuity in terms of human space, the preservation of ‘absolute geographical and cultural boundaries’ (pp. 129–30), the withholding of mutuality, and the exercise of an ‘almost total control’ which placed the parties to the encounter in ‘devastating and continuous conflict’ (p. 308).

Thus, against the grain of his own optimistic practice, Said makes this melancholy observation: ‘History [. . .] teaches us that domination breeds resistance and that the violence inherent in the colonial contest — for all its occasional profit and pleasure — is an impoverishment on both sides’ (p. 348).

The perception that both interconnection and division were innate in the colonial encounter is also registered by the anthropologist Nicholas Thomas. While insisting in Colonialism’s Culture that the power of colonialism was never total, its history having been shaped by both indigenous resistance and accommodation, its discourses not only exhausted by its own internal contradictions and debates but always in unacknowledged traffic with the native’s discontents, Thomas dissociates himself from those paradigms within ‘the anthropology of exchange’ which he considers to be ‘myopically liberal in their models of reciprocity and assumptions of consent’. For what is relegated as mere external contingency, he argues, is that this interchange took place in the ‘context of illiberal domination’ that was colonialism; what is overlooked is that the centrality of exchange in everyday practice does not encompass ‘the larger field of power relations that constitutes the circumstances of colonized populations’. Likewise, Kenneth Parker’s acknowledgement of border-crossings within the colonial relationship, and the location of ‘the Rest’ as part of ‘the West’, is not made at the expense of denying ‘the force of the discursive as well as the ideological utility of binaries [. . .] and the consequent emphasis on oppressor/oppressed’ (p. 157). A similarly nuanced reading is offered by Annie Coombes in her study Reinventing Africa. Although Coombes is concerned ‘to indicate some of the more ambiguous and strategic exchanges in the dialogue between coloniser and colonised’ and to explore ‘the possibility of an interactive and mutually transformative relationship’ between communities that were heterogeneous rather than ‘easily unified and straightforwardly oppositional entities’, she does not overlook that ‘any dialogue said to occur between coloniser and colonised is already circumscribed by the all too tangible violence of imperialism’.

I would, however, contest the use of ‘dialogue’ in the context of colonialism, since the word suggests an equal and symmetrical association between parties conducting colloquies in non-coercive situations, and hence intimates an interaction where each party recognizes the other as an agent of knowledge. It would appear, then, that another term should be devised for the transactions where the native was sometimes an informant, always a topic, but rarely, and only in very special circumstances, an interlocutor. The same qualification surely applies also to accounts that specify the appropriation by the West of Asian and African architectural styles, decorative arts and artefacts, or the successive vogues in Europe for the myths and metaphysics of the East, as constituting a ‘cultural dialectics’, or ‘a politics of reception’.

European culture is undeniably ‘hybrid’, as are all cultures, and certainly metropolitan societies were multiply and determinately inflected by traffic with the colonial worlds. But this infiltration should not be designated a ‘conversation’ with other cultural forms and cognitive traditions, a term that should properly be retained for communications of mutuality and requital. The inequality and constraints in the exchanges of colonial encounters emerge from Mary Louise Pratt’s deployment of the notion of ‘transculturation’ as a ‘phenomenon of the contact zone’. This describes a process where ‘subordinated or marginalized groups select or invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture’, determining ‘to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for’. But when Pratt asks ‘another perhaps more heretical’ question, how one can speak of ‘transculturation from the colonies to the metropolis’, of the ways ‘the periphery determines the metropolis’, what she is able to offer suggests a greatly attenuated, indeed a solipsistic notion of ‘transculturation’, since the only instance she cites is ‘the latter’s obsessive need to present and represent its peripheries and its others to itself’.

Thus, whereas the peripheries can readily be shown to appropriate and redeploy materials from the centre, what emerges is that the centre is unable to recognize the materials from the periphery as constituting Knowledge.

The attempt to retrieve colonialism as negotiatory, as a mutually transformative and symbiotic encounter, may be designed to shift the position of the colonized from victim to participant in its structures and processes. Christopher Miller has observed how in response to ‘the messy history of hegemony and conflict’, recent trends in anthropology have turned to ‘the far more congenial model of interpretative practice’, which, by drawing on Bakhtinian criticism, is concerned to show how ‘dialogue and

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polyvocality can be uncovered within apparent hegemonies'. While acknowledging dialogue to be 'the most compelling ethical model for the representation of cultures', Miller cautions that 'such a fantasy depends on a complete rewriting (or ignorance) of the material conditions of history [...] that vitiate dialogism within the substance of history'. It is because so many authors of a postcolonial critique melt the solidity of history into air, that I want now to consider how colonialism is theorized within other explanatory systems.

The perspective on colonialism as a spatial or geographical enterprise offered by contemporary historical-materialist geographers focuses on how, in the words of David Harvey, 'the world’s spaces were deterritorialized, stripped of their preceding significations, and then reterritorialized according to the convenience of colonial and imperial administration'. As both Edward Soja and Neil Smith have argued, the global spatial integration initiated by colonialism and completed under imperialism effected the uneven insertion of the colonies into a world economy as the underdeveloped sector, and instituted an international division of labour facilitating a transfer of value from periphery to core. To speak, then, of metropolis and colony as inhabiting the same interstitial ground neglects that this territory was differentially occupied and that it was contested space, being the site of coercion and resistance, and not of civil negotiation between evenly placed contenders. This suggests that the besetting problem in the current postcolonial rewriting of the past and chronicling of the present is a 'culturalism' where the analysis of the internal structures of texts, enunciations, and signifying systems has become detached from a concurrent examination of social and experiential circumstances.

What, then, is the relationship of a dialogic model to the record of colonialism as violent dispossession achieved by military force and sustained by institutional power, or to received perceptions of the quotidian colonial world as a place of economic exploitation, social division, and political conflict? Such is the theoretical legacy of anti-colonialist analyses, although it is now too often forgotten that if Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory are recent, then the critique of colonialism is not. There are, of course, many contemporary critics who do honour the writings produced from within liberation movements, which were in ostensible dialogue with

the long anti-colonialist traditions of European socialism. None the less, the relationship of the newer debate to the prior discussion (which did after all inaugurate the interrogation of colonialism and imperialism as both a project of and a constitutive force in Western modernity) is less intimate than one could expect of a filial relationship.

The exclusion and implicit dismissal can perhaps be attributed to an embarrassment amongst many prominent contemporary critics at theoretical constructions which do not conform to their doctrines about discursive radicalism. If we consider Aimé Césaire’s question and response, ‘has colonization really placed civilizations in contact? [...] Not human contact but relations of domination and submission’; or reflect on Fanon’s stark definition of decolonization as ‘the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature’ (The Wretched of the Earth, p. 30), we can see that such inscriptions of dichotomous conflict would be unacceptable to those who set out to dismantle binary structures of domination and dissent and seek to rewrite a historical project of invasion, expropriation, and exploitation in terms that are freed from an explanatory system where contest is foregrounded — an agenda which brings to mind Fredric Jameson’s remark that at stake in such moves is ‘the rolling back of Hegel and Marx by way of a conceptual discrediting of contradiction and dialectical opposition’.

A further obstacle for postcolonial theory is that in the vocabularies of the texts written by the liberation movements, so-called ‘nativism’ remains a major term, since in the interests of mobilizing populations against their foreign rulers, notions of communal ethnic identity were invoked, while indigenous cultural heritages denigrated and despised by colonialism were affirmed as authentic traditions. Such recuperations, which were not made in the interests of discovering uncontaminated origins or claiming ethnic purity, have retrospectively been repudiated by many contemporary critics as atavistic and ‘essentialist’. I, however, want to suggest that these strategies of anti-colonialist writing cannot be dismissed as a retrograde and impossible attempt to retrieve an irrecoverable past.

The writings of Frantz Fanon, the French-educated Martinican psychiatrist who during the 1950s actively participated in the struggles of the Algerian peoples against French colonialism, have recently been invoked in the interests of validating a number of incommensurable theoretical

propositions. What interests me is that whereas Fanon did recommend the construction of an insurgent black subjectivity, cultural affirmation being avowed as a necessary moment in creating a combative position, his perspective encompassed a future beyond ethnicity. ‘This rediscovery’, Fanon wrote, ‘this absolute valorization almost in defiance of reality, objectively indefensive, assumes an incomparable and subjective importance [. . .] the plunge into the chasm of the past is the condition and source of freedom.’ At the same time, Fanon scorned attempts to create a new black culture, since he anticipated a time when national cultures would be transcended by a new universalism.

Here, I think, we witness an anti-colonialist stance that is not just a reaction against Western oppression but, in perceiving decolonization as a project that ‘sets out to change the order of the world’ (The Wretched of the Earth, p. 29), envisions an alternative to dominant western values. Nor should disenchantment with post-independence regimes, which has animated what Appiah calls ‘post-nationalist narratives’, blind critics to the import of liberation struggles conducted in the name of nationalism. Neil Lazarus and Tim Brennan have argued that this disavowal overlooks the distinction between imperialist and anti-imperialist nationalist problematics, the former being an appropriative nationalism taking the form of ‘projects of unity on the basis of conquest and economic expediency’ (Lazarus), whereas the latter are orientated towards the task of reclaiming community from the definitions of that very power whose presence denied community.

Because their preoccupation is with the representational systems of colonialism and imperialism, those pursuing a postcolonial critique are able to hail the vigorous contestation of ideologically contrived Knowledges as tantamount to sounding the death-knell of the West’s continuing power — and without the need to examine the political economy and international social relationships of a contemporary late imperialism. As Kenneth Parker has written, ‘If it is well-nigh impossible to sustain the proposition that the “post” in postcolonial is a temporal one near the end of a millennium in which global neo-colonialisms are rampant, we are reduced to the conclusion

53 See Henry Louis Gates Jr, ‘Critical Fanonism’, Critical Inquiry, 17 (1991), 457–70. Amongst such appropriations is the tendency to read Fanon as an early theorist of a ‘politics of identification’ whose work at ‘the intersection of anti-imperial politics and psychoanalytic theory’ enabled him to diagnose ‘the neurotic structure of colonialism itself’, and whose most important contribution to political thought is that ‘the psychical operates precisely as a political formation’. See Diana Fuss, ‘Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification’, Diacritics, 24 (1994), 20–44 (pp. 20–39).


that the prefix is restricted to discursive practices’ (‘Very Like a Whale, p. 158). In dissenting from this procedure, Laura Chrisman, who observes its metropolitan coinage, maintains that the word *postcolonial* ‘occludes or erases the overtly political dynamic contained in the term “anti-colonial”’, allowing or implying the ‘interchangeability of material [ . . .] with aesthetic and interpretive processes’, and liberating those practitioners who name themselves postcolonial ‘from the messy business of political alignment and definition’ (‘Inventing Post-colonial Theory’, p. 210).

Aijaz Ahmad has recalled that ‘the first major debate on the idea of the postcolonial took place not during the past few years but some years earlier’, and ‘not in cultural theory but in political theory, where the object of inquiry’ was ‘the postcolonial state’. In these discussions, he continues, which were conducted within the terms of Marxist thought, the categories of colonialism and decolonization were used to designate ‘identifiable structural shifts in state and society’ (‘The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality’, p. 5). It is noticeable that when the postcolonial state has been the subject of an extensive debate in cultural studies, the issue of power is largely addressed in ‘superstructural terms’, with only a few participants referring to the different and conflicting interests within the political formations. And it is this last aspect which is, I suggest, damagingly absent from the current modes of theorizing postcoloniality.

Instead, the ‘postcolonial critique’ celebrates globalism for the volatility of the cultural flows it brings about, while the provenance of such traffic in the capitalist expansion of late imperialism is overlooked. This suggests that the problem can be located even further back, in the failure to engage with the prior terms, colonialism and imperialism, that the ‘postcolonial’ is said to displace or supersede. Associated with a casual approach to historical specificities, registered in the interchangeable usage of colonialism and imperialism in cultural and literary studies, is an indifference to overseas empire’s capitalist trajectory, as this passed from mercantilism and plantation or settler colonialism, culminated in the West’s accelerated penetration of the non-capitalist world in the late nineteenth century, and, with the ending of formal colonial rule, left the West’s global reach intact.

It is because imperialism lives on in new forms and perpetuates the exploitation of the Third World, that the addition of ‘postcolonial’ to the critical vocabulary remains controversial. Ella Shohat has observed that if the postcolonial denotes the closure of a previous condition, then, by alluding to colonialism ‘as a matter of the past’ and shutting out ‘colonialism’s economic, political, and cultural deforming traces in the present’, the term

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The Postcolonial: Conceptual Category or Chimera?

has ‘depoliticising implications’.\(^{59}\) For Masao Miyoshi and Arif Dirlik, one a literary scholar, the other a historian, the formal independence won by colonial populations does not automatically imply decolonization and independence, since an active colonialism continues to operate in the form of transnational corporatism. Hence they perceive the usage of ‘postcolonial’ as mystifying, both politically and methodologically, a situation that represents not the abolition, but the reconfiguration of earlier forms of domination.\(^{60}\)

Indeed, the problems with the connotations of a term that is in now in constant use are legion, although few sceptics have been as provocative as Anthony Appiah in suggesting that postcoloniality is ‘the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: of a relatively small Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of Western capitalism at the periphery’ (p. 348). For Ania Loomba and Suvir Kaul, the question (one that is repeatedly asked by agnostic critics) is whether postcolonialism ‘deflects attention from the complexity of disparate situations in “third world” societies’ by implying an abstract singularity that overlooks specific histories and differences in the contemporary imbalances of power. Moreover, they contend that the privileging in Western academies of ‘the experience of migration or exile’, has meant that ‘“diaspora” swells to demarcate the entire experience of post-coloniality’, and ‘the subject-position of the “hybrid” is routinely expanded as the only political-conceptual space for revisionist enunciation’ (pp. 4, 13, 14).

But perhaps the ‘postcolonial’ refers to the passage of societies recovering from the experience of colonialism? Rather than indicating contemporary social circumstances, does it signify a state of mind preoccupied with effecting a disengagement from the previous condition? And since, despite formal decolonization, this experience remains a potent factor in the formation of its practitioners, North and South, East and West, does the gesture to an existentially ‘beyond’ intimate a therapeutic discourse composed by critics, scholars, and writers in pursuit of intellectual self-fashioning? If so, then how radical is the break from received knowledge? For, as Anne McClintock contends, its singularity ‘effects a recentring of global history around the single rubric of European time [. . .] reduces the cultures of peoples beyond colonialism to prepositional time [. . . and] signals a reluctance to surrender the privilege of seeing the world in terms of a singular and ahistorical abstraction’.

\(^{59}\) ‘Notes on the “Post-colonial”’, Social Text, 31/32 (1992), 99–113.

\(^{60}\) ‘A Borderless World?’; ‘The Postcolonial Aura’. However we could note that a critic who values a term that is ‘fluid, polysemic and ambiguous’, and proposes that ‘the postcolonial domain’ be seen ‘in terms of the historical trajectory of societies which have been subjected to varying forms of both colonial and neocolonial domination’, has insisted that postcolonial societies be differentiated according to ‘their continued subjection to metropolitan forces.’ See Ferdinand Coromil, ‘Can Postcoloniality Be Decolonized? Imperial Banality and Postcolonial Power’, Public Culture, 5 (1992), 89–108 (p. 101).
thereby continuing to locate the whole planet within a European-based historical narrative.61

What these demurs suggest is that postcolonial studies cannot be left to the metacommentaries of literary and cultural critics but also require the analytical skills of political and social theorists, economists, historians, geographers, anthropologists, and sociologists. Only then will it be possible to study the state apparatus, economic organization, social relationships, and cultural forms of actual and differential post-independence regimes, and to examine the structures of globalism within the contemporary world, where the centres of economic, political, and cultural power remain with a small number of largely Western nation-states. All the same, the word ‘postcolonial’ is, for the present at least, here to stay in both the academic vocabulary and more general usage, since it does after all register the notion of a transition or a threshold. Also, in its name important work has been and is being done both in disfiguring colonialist configurations and displacing the representations colonialism set in place, and in studying the cultural production, past and present, of peoples formed by what Edouard Glissant cryptically calls ‘The Relation’, the process of dislocation and detour, and of self-constitution or return. Perhaps what I am suggesting is that we use the word with suspicion, recognizing that the ‘after’ which some read into it and celebrate has not yet come; while also acknowledging the potential of a theoretical project designed to effect a paradigm shift in critical theory by writing the colonial world back into the annals of world history. But only if its revisionist narrative holds in place the perception that the passage out of imperialism requires a contest with still entrenched systems of power can the postcolonial critique validate its claim to being a radical critical practice.

61 ‘The Angel of Progress: The Pitfalls of the Term “Post-colonialism”’, Social Text, 31/32 (1992), 84–98 (repr. in Williams and Chrisman). Aijaz Ahmad has also contended that the conceptual apparatus of postcolonial criticism which periodizes the histories of colonial worlds in triadic terms of precolonial, colonial and postcolonial [. . .] privileges as primary the role of colonialism as the principal of structuration in that history, so that all that came before colonialism becomes its own prehistory and whatever comes after can only be lived as infinite aftermath’ (‘The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality’, pp. 6–7).
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