

Robert J.C. Young. *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*. 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2004. Pp. 287.

In *White Mythologies* Robert Young enters into the debate concerning the relation of theory to history by repudiating conventional assumptions that post-structuralism denies, withdraws from, or randomizes history. As Young sees it, the objections raised against post-structuralism arise not from any demonstrable neglect of history, but rather from its highly political and ethical challenge to the orthodox Marxist belief that history operates according to the dialectic and toward a specific end. The teleological version of history in which all human experience can be incorporated into a single, linear, rational, coherent, and optimistic chronological narrative (i.e., History) is, for Young, a humanist invention that depends on an excluded non-Western other and the assimilation of contradictions and difference to re-constitute a Western self. In this sense, History, with a big H, is “the west’s greatest myth” (p. 3) and one that “uncannily simulates the project of 19th century imperialism” (p. 34) by operating within the limits of a Eurocentric perspective to affect an egotistical and, indeed, white supremacist constitution of the West that negates, appropriates, and incorporates the Other.

Young begins his powerful critique of Western Marxism by drawing upon the work of Lukacs, Merleau-Ponty, and Lévi-Strauss, among others, to illustrate that the system of the Hegelian dialect has long rested upon Eurocentric presuppositions that human history is singularly intelligible, united for all humanity, and equivalent to the history of the West. Even Sartre, despite the obvious anti-colonialism that was prominent both in his street-level politics and in his theoretical emphasis upon human subjectivity, was unable to escape the ethnocentrism of such totalizing accounts of history. Young moves on to illustrate how Althusser invoked the alternative historical epistemology of Bachelard to argue for a new theorization of Marxist history that turned on differentiated and irreconcilable temporalities. Notwithstanding Althusser’s apparent failure to address how transition between modes of production constituted by different times and histories was effected, his theorization of a decentred totality that allowed for the possibility of difference outside the dialectic laid the basis, Young claims, for subsequent theoretical investigations of history by the likes of Derrida, Foucault, and Young himself.

Young obviously shares Foucault’s skepticism toward progressivist and homogeneous histories and his endorsement of historiography as an ethico-political project. He defends the Foucauldian method of historical enquiry that explicitly counters

historicist assumptions of rational and teleological development by focusing on spaces of dispersion, heterogeneous temporalities, the singularity and particularity of historical events, and the formation of concepts often assumed to be ahistorical (e.g., madness, sexuality). Young argues that conventional historiography, with its incessant search for continuities and causes, has failed to account for the alterity and incommensurability that Foucault highlights via an historical approach that does without the mythologies of uniform causality or “continuous History” (p. 112). Through the work of Derrida, however, Young also points out that even Foucault, an unrelenting critic of historicism, was forced to rethink his own assumptions about the distinction between the Same and Other and his understanding of an “enabling separation between writing and history” (p. 108).

Of the many theorists discussed in this book, none comes under such scathing criticism as Jameson, whose attempts to attain a rapprochement between the antithetical traditions of Sartre and Althusser are deemed by Young to forgo rigorous argument in favour of exploitative rhetoric and doctrinal logic. Young observes that Jameson recognizes post-structuralist concerns of epistemology, representation, and interpretation only to then strategically dispense with them in a retrieval of the truth-claims of historical materialism by which differentiated histories are re-totalized into a single story called the “human adventure” (p. 131). Young finds refreshing Jameson’s attention to human agency in historical narration, but is harshly critical of Jameson’s subsumption of the excessive elements of history under the notion of a singular “real history” that can be read off absolutely like biblical truth (p. 137). With his reinstatement of History in these unqualified and Eurocentric terms, Jameson is such an obvious target for criticism that the chapter seems almost out of place among all the other radical thinkers, who appear to have been much more sympathetic to the cause of peoples from outside the West.

Late in the book, Young turns his attention to explicit critiques of Eurocentric scholarship by examining Orientalism as a genre of imperialist historicism. Said is praised for demonstrating so effectively western historicism’s complicity in colonialism, but he is also chastised forcibly by Young for methodological and conceptual flaws that seemingly trap Said in the terms of his own critique. Young contends that throughout Said’s work there is evidence of a privileged position propped up by a totalizing western liberalism. That is, by tending toward dualistic binaries that foreclose the possibility of contradiction, by repeatedly appealing to the values of humanism, and by elevating the individual genius and agency of intellectuals like himself to positions with critical distance and consciousness in relation to systems of oppression, Said replicates another kind of Orientalism. The paradox for Young is telling, given Said’s status as the “great campaigner against racism and ethnocentrism” (p. 173).

In the final two chapters, Young examines the deconstructive work of Bhabha and Spivak, both of whom formulate possibilities for thinking and writing about history that circumvent the dialectic and disturb its reproduction of dominant structures of knowledge and power. For these theorists, and for Young, simple inversions positioning subalterns as the subjects of their own histories are insufficient to counter western historicism, since such inversions continue to constitute the Third World according to the terms of the original opposition which recuperates non-Western and women subjects as others for a Western Self. Young is troubled by Bhabha's silence on the historical relations between various descriptions of the conditions of colonial discourse (e.g., mimicry, hybridity, and paranoia), but he is clearly supportive of the theoretical elusiveness that marks Bhabha's analyses and that demonstrates ambivalence to be constitutive of the colonial condition. Young is similarly supportive of Spivak's "worlding" narratives that make obvious how the epistemic violence of the Western imperialist project has constructed the so-called Third World in ways that make impossible the recovery of a lost subaltern subject with an authentic voice (p. 202). Young finds disconcerting, however, Spivak's illumination of her own complicity in the oppressive systems of which even alternate and counter-histories form a part and suggests that she problematically exhibits the very feminist individualism she critiques. In so far as Young's book highlights exclusively male theorists (with the exception of Spivak) and merely sprinkles the significance of feminism to historiography throughout, I was left thinking that this particular criticism seemed to emanate from the "patriarchal constituency" that Young himself argues to be integral to western white mythologies (p. 3).

It is, moreover, difficult to accept Young's disapproving judgements on Spivak's attention to her own positionality given that there is a complete absence from Young's text of a contextualization of the possible ways in which his own authoritative choices and criticism might be complicit in reinstating the primacy of the West and white male theorists of history. In the only major change to the original edition, a chapter entitled "*White Mythologies Revisited*," Young had an opportunity to exhibit this sort of self-reflexiveness. In fact, he does implicitly acknowledge some earlier shortcomings by attempting to incorporate reformulations of Marxism by non-European thinkers such as Mao Zedong and Che Guevara. However, the new chapter also centres Young's own brilliance and innovation, in ways that replicate Western narratives of discovery, through descriptions of the book as having posed "a question which few had ever considered a problem" and as being the "the first to chart and define" the new field of post-colonial studies (p. 1). The white mythologies sustained by an "arrogant and arrogating narrative" (p. 33) of the West revisit Young and ensnare him too in a sphere of mastery that negates the Other and reduplicates a superior white and male Self.

Young's inability, within his own theoretical critique, to avoid suppressing the Other and bringing it under the aegis of an intellectually superior Self ironically lends weight to his salient points about the pervasiveness of racism and the capacity of "that ruthless whiteness" (p. 1) to blank out the Other through egotistical historical narrativization and theorization. Still, by demonstrating that shared ethnocentric, Eurocentric, and universalist assumptions infuse the theorizations of radically dissident scholars who have been critically engaged in projects of independence and emancipation in solidarity with peoples outside the West, Young's arguments about the "implacable whiteness" (p. 4) of Hegelian Marxism and the "appropriating narcissism of the West" (p. 49) are persuasive and forceful. It is a challenge to get beyond Young's difficult prose and his dense analysis of complex scholarship, but the rewarding result is a richer appreciation of the political and ethical salience of the post-structuralist project and its fundamental aim to deconstruct "the concept, the authority, and the assumed primacy of, the category of the west" (p. 51).

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Roderick MacLeod and Mary Anne Poutanen. *A Meeting of the People: School Boards and Protestant Communities in Quebec, 1801 - 1998*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004. Pp.507

It is some years since we have had a study in English of the history of education in Quebec. Thus it is noteworthy to be able to welcome the appearance of such a well-written and thoroughly researched work as *A Meeting of the People: School Boards and Protestant Communities in Quebec, 1801 - 1998*, by Roderick MacLeod and Mary Anne Poutanen. As the subtitle anticipates, this study deals almost exclusively with the history of Protestant education in Quebec over two centuries. Nonetheless, dealing with a neglected area of Quebec history as it does, it also offers numerous insights as well into rural and small-town Quebec and the ever-changing relations between the anglophone, francophone, and allophone populations of that province. It is an exemplary study of a significant, though minority, community in Quebec as seen through the eyes of one of its main institutions, the elementary and secondary school. As a piece of historical writing, A