

Including America

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AS THE RELATIVELY new field of postcolonial studies takes shape, those of us whose work clearly is related to that field have two choices. We can stand outside and pass disparaging comments on the work in progress, probably having to move our feet pretty smartly as the terrain of what is potentially postcolonial gets excavated faster than we can comfortably move; or we can join the throng on the inside arguing about what crops to plant and where to put the gates. (Decisive as we are, sitting on the fence is not an option.) In some ways, neither choice is particularly enticing. Those of us who had thought we had opted out of the postmodern suburbanization project soon found ourselves sharing small clumps of undeveloped land with people we wouldn't have been seen dead talking to 20 years ago, which left us little choice but to hop over the fence and lurk around the corners of the well-tended lawn trying to look disgruntled. On the other hand, the amount of collective effort involved in shaping fields is so prodigious, one's colleagues and friends so reluctant to listen to advice, and so many more people willing to draw up plans than do the digging, that a glass of warm beer down at Ye Olde Bores' Head or even a pragmatic snack at that new fish restaurant can almost seem like attractive possibilities. Almost.

Patrick Williams's and Laura Chrisman's *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, which is the first postcolonial reader but not the last, reprints 31 articles, 21 of which have some clear geo-cultural reference point: eight relate to Africa, five to India, four to the Middle East, two to the United States, one to the Caribbean, and one to Latin America. This is probably not an inaccurate map of how postcolonial theory as currently understood has

developed and of the bits of the world to which it has paid attention. America—in a continental sense—barely features on the map at all. The reasons for this are not hard to understand. For a start, the whole process of postwar decolonization was largely a phenomenon of Africa and Asia: with the exception of the smaller islands of the Caribbean, European colonies had disappeared from America by 1898. As a consequence, the writers now recognized as the principle postcolonial theorists tend either to come from Africa and Asia or to write about them. In addition, Edward Said's enormously influential books, *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), have concerned themselves almost exclusively with the "Old World," even when taking their analyses back into the nineteenth century or earlier.

One of the positive effects of the postcolonial debate has been to re-awaken an interest in the different forms of colonialism and imperialism (for example, Shohat, McClintock). Nevertheless, there is no disagreement about what these are different forms of—in other words, there is no disagreement that the generalizing words do make some sense. The boundaries—historical and geographical—are open to a degree of discussion, but on the surface it would seem a strange definition of colonialism that would not include within its purview the European settlements in America that began in 1492. Such strange definitions, however, have been offered—new episodes in the long history of "American exceptionalism." That phrase usually has meant the exceptionalism of the "future United States" (see Greene), but in a new twist there has been a recent attempt to argue that *Latin American* countries also fall outside the proper definitions of colonialism (and, *ipso facto*, outside the postcolonial field). Some provocative but not very systematic remarks by the anthropologist Jorge Klor de Alva suggest, in a nice twist to the postcolonial debate, that the very notions of colonialism and imperialism came from the modern experiences of the non-Hispanic colonial powers and only subsequently and improperly were imposed on the Spanish American experience from the sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries. Klor de Alva wants to separate off America altogether on the grounds that the wars of independence were

not fought primarily by people who were colonized against the people who had colonized them. If this argument were correct, then certainly Latin America, and probably the whole of the continent, would fall outside the terms of our discussion. But while his description of the American revolutions is accurate enough, he offers no compelling reasons why we should take that single, later definition as *the* model for colonialism and decide that since American countries do not fit we therefore cannot talk about decolonization or colonial discourse or postcolonial theory with reference to the continent. Spanish colonialism in America was undoubtedly different from British colonialism in India: to deny that one was colonialism at all takes away the ground that would facilitate understanding of the particular differences.

Attempts to widen the postcolonial focus similarly have met with some suspicion: *The Empire Writes Back*, by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, set its horizons too broadly for many people, allowing a postcolonial critique to co-exist with colonial discourses from the start, incorporating America but also troubling the intuition that “post” should retain *some* temporal sense; and Lawrence Buell’s claim for “American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon” has been greeted as a rather clumsy effort to colonize postcolonial theory (Kaplan 21)—the wealthy farmer from down the road deciding that this field is probably on *his* property. I share these suspicions. None the less, I suggest the following: 1) the field of postcolonial studies *needs* to find a place for America; 2) the inclusion of America will, and should, affect the shape and definition of the field; and, 3) more positively, many of the misgivings about the role of America in postcolonial studies, on closer inspection, are misplaced.

The first point is the least controversial. At the moment, the United States has a role as the world’s leading imperialist power; the Caribbean is home to a rich tradition of postcolonial theory—Fanon, James, Glissant, Lamming, Fernández Retamar; Latin America is still trying to come to terms with postmodernity (see Beverley and Oviedo); and Canada—as usual—is overlooked. This unsatisfactory state of affairs could be improved drastically

by lengthening the historical perspective through and against which the postcolonial field is constructed in order that it include the colonial experience of the whole of the American continent. No single date is immune to objections, but 1492 has no rivals as a starting point and has the distinct advantage, for those of us interested in the common ground between postcolonial studies and Marxism, of working within the framework established by Marx for what he sarcastically designated as the "rosy dawn" of capitalism. One immediate consequence of this step would be to provide the United States with a nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperial and colonial history that helps in the understanding of its current stance within the world (see Hulme).

From the postcolonial perspective, matters undoubtedly look more awkward: Anne McClintock amusingly raises the spectre of Henry James and Charles Brockden Brown "awakened from their *tête-à-tête* with time, and ushered into 'the postcolonial scene' alongside more regular members like Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Salman Rushdie" (256). This bunch of nettles needs grasping firmly because it perpetuates two misconceptions about how to use most productively the adjective "postcolonial." One misconception is that "postcolonial" represents some kind of badge of merit, a reward for having purged one's writing or intellect of the evils of colonialism. This move mistakenly perpetuates an old game with the highest scores now awarded for such things as native authenticity and rejection of European languages rather than for the old universals of beauty and truth: as a result we get arguments that Achebe is postcolonial, Soyinka not; Lamming is, Naipaul not. Such games do us no credit. If "postcolonial" is a useful word, then it refers to a *process* of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and probably is inescapable for all those whose worlds have been marked by that set of phenomena: "postcolonial" is (or should be) a descriptive, not an evaluative, term.

This point is related closely to the second misconception, which concerns the much-discussed temporal implications of "postcolonial." After our long discussions about poststructuralism and postmodernity, it should not be too hard to grasp that

the “post” in “postcolonial” has two dimensions that exist in tension with each other: a temporal dimension, in which there is a punctual relationship in time between, for example, a colony and a postcolonial state, and a critical dimension in which, for example, postcolonial theory comes into existence through a critique of a body of theory analyzed as at least implicitly “colonial”—with the concomitant recognition that the critique in part is made possible by the object of the critique. We recognize this as a productive tension when we discuss, for example, *Black Skin, White Masks* as a postcolonial text. That Martinique was (and still is) a French colony does not disqualify Fanon’s text from the postcolonial field to which it belongs by reason of its efforts to think through and beyond the colonial situation. Equally, however, we recognize that the tension can be stretched beyond the breaking point—as is the case with some of the examples given in *The Empire Writes Back*.

But—and this is less well-understood—even the temporal dimension of the word “post” is less restrictive and punctual than often suggested. For example, the generation to which I belong was often described in the 1950s and 1960s as “the postwar generation.” That description did not mean in any simple sense that we were born after the Second World War, but rather that we were marked in various ways by that war without having lived through it—because of our parents’ experience, through remembering the war’s various aftermaths, such as rationing, etc. Given a linear notion of time, that adjective still could be applied to us, and, indeed, if “post” were a merely punctual prefix, the generation born in the 1960s could be described equally well as “postwar.” That neither description is now applied suggests that the prefix as normally used has rather more adaptability than its critics imply. My generation hasn’t suddenly become “not postwar”; rather, the description has lost its sharpness over time as other significant events have become part of our experience. If later generations are “postwar,” the term is likely to refer to another war (Vietnam, for instance).

“Postcolonial” therefore should not be used as if it were an adjective describing a condition that is automatically and for all time assumed once a formal colonial status has been left behind,

any more than it should be taken for granted that the change in *formal* status automatically implies that the psychological, economic, and cultural effects of being a colony can be sloughed off like a snake's skin. Nothing in the *normal* use of the prefix "post" would even suggest all this, let alone the more nuanced ways in which literary and cultural critics should be able to use words that are important to us. No more than generations are states described as "post-anything" in perpetuity. We should have no difficulty in saying that the United States was once "postcolonial" in one meaningful sense, but that at some point (1898?) it ceases to be useful to describe it as such. If such a label can make Charles Brockden Brown more interesting to read, then that is something else to be said in favour of the term "postcolonial." The same argument applies to almost all of the countries of Central and South America. And because "postcolonial" should not be used as a merit badge, the adjective implies nothing about a postcolonial country's behaviour. As a postcolonial nation, the United States continued to colonize North America, completing the genocide of the Native population begun by the Spanish and British. Or, to use a more recent example, "postcolonial" is not a description that should be awarded Indonesia when it became independent from The Netherlands and taken away again when it invaded East Timor: a country can be postcolonial and colonizing at the same time. Such small complexities should not be beyond us, even as we recognize that they need more investigation than they have received thus far.

The same arguments apply in the cultural sphere. Because, for example, Sarmiento does not match our heroic picture of a postcolonial intellectual cut to the pattern of C. L. R. James or Ranajit Guha does not mean that his writings are not marked in roughly equivalent ways by an educational background entirely colonial, a personal formation gained through exile and travel, and a commitment to creating a new culture for a newly independent country. As time passes, and we keep re-reading Fanon, perhaps the similarities between American countries in their postcolonial phases and African and Asian countries in theirs will come to seem at least as important as their differences.

None of the above is meant to suggest that the word "postcolonial" can do all the work. Like many of its critics, I am in

favour of more and more analyses of the different forms of imperialism and colonialism, of more and more analyses of different local situations, and of determined efforts to avoid the ism-ization of the adjective "postcolonial." But if—as seems inevitable—"postcolonial studies" is the name that is going to hang over the gate, then let us use the word in a way that includes America.

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