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Colonialism and the Postcolonial Condition

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Colonialism and the Postcolonial Condition

To the Editor:

No alleged effect of colonization evokes greater moral indignation or fretful nostalgia than fragmentation. Colonialism breaks things. It shatters an imagined wholeness. Colonialism's will to power creates binaries where a unified field and healthy singularity of cultural purpose once existed. The self of the colonizer explodes a native cultural solidarity, producing the spiritual confusion, psychic wounding, and economic exploitation of a new and dominated other. Colonization imposes evil, fear, and ignorance on the innocent native landscape. What might be termed neo-colonial studies (Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, for example) teaches that colonial rupture is the social, psychological, cultural, and economic equivalent of a paradigm shift, inaugurating a new regime of knowledge. Words and relations on either side of the colonial rupture are incommensurate.

Neo-colonial studies, thus, dictates that the project of decolonization is erroneously, or at least naively, conceived if its goal is (as Amílcar Cabral proposes) to return to the source or to recuperate native wholeness. Cabral writes, "A people who free themselves from foreign domination will be free culturally only if . . . they return to the upward paths of their own culture" (*Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amílcar Cabral* [New York Monthly Review, 1973] 43). If the model of a paradigm shift is accepted, such a happy return is at best problematic. Emancipation from colonial domination never entails, or even suggests, fulfillment of the beautiful poetic dream implied by Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. The return to one's "native" land is a paradigmatic impossibility.

What then is to be made of the outbreak of supposed freedom—the decolonizing moment—which carries a force similar in effect to the rupture of colonization? Answers are legion, and they are complex. The answer that seems most theoretically interesting (and, I believe, most accurate) is that when the obvious chains and shackles are removed, fragmentation reveals its essential uselessness as an explanatory model.

The great gift of the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe is his creative limning of this revelation. Achebe persuasively and subtly suggests that native, pastoral, folk, innocent, utopian, productive wholeness is never the ur-condition of anything that can reasonably be called culture. The things that fall apart in Achebe's fictions are already well on their way to toppling when the colonizers

arrive. The essential cultural things (customs, mores, rituals, material modes of production) are eternally threatened by foibles, idiocies, hubris, and universal limits of our human capacity to share space and resources equitably and charitably across lines of simple difference.

The brutality of Achebe's colonizers is nothing new. What is new and ever renewing is the myth that colonial rupture sets in motion. It is a postlapsarian myth of fragmentation, of imposed evil, of things only recently fallen apart. If only the colonizers had not arrived, we are tempted to believe, Okonkwo's intemperate idiocy and violence, the Igbo's cultural rites of selective infanticide, and the irreconcilable intergenerational responses of their society to modernity would somehow have left Igboland prosperous and whole. If only the colonizers had not arrived! "Nonsense," we suspect Achebe would say in response. Acknowledging the dreadfulness and even the horror of colonialism, Achebe always refuses to construct ignorance, fear, and evil as serpentine products of the white man's arrival in Africa.

If what we call cultures are always already fragmented, pluralistic, socially constructed, historically indeterminate in their origins and progressions, riven with opposing drives to modernity and conservatism, how do we isolate the colonial moment with theoretical accuracy? How can we know precisely when a culture has departed the colonial moment to become . . . what? A postcolony? The term *postcolony* hauntingly echoes the title of James Weldon Johnson's novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

Neither *postcolony* nor *ex-colored man* seems charged with quiddity. Perhaps it is the farcical implications of such terms that the historian Achille Mbembe has in mind when he discusses the "banality of the post-colony" (*Public Culture* 4 [1992]: 1-30). Possibly, too, it is the absence of a suitably weighty habitation or name for those putative moments after colonialism that makes the object of postcolonial studies difficult to locate. Colonialism and the Postcolonial Condition, the special topic of the January 1995 issue of *PMLA*, is a vibrant testament to this locative difficulty.

The issue includes insightful contributions to gender studies, strategic negotiations of the politics of critical and theoretical positionality, far-reaching considerations of the discursive constructions of cultural authenticity, and careful meditations on the possible philosophical underpinnings of an objective realism that can lead to the "noncolonizing" cohabitation of differences. There are also original readings of literary and dramatic texts and innovative and informative explications of some well-known lives, such as T. E. Lawrence's. However, there is no definition of the postcolony. It is thus difficult

to extrapolate from the issue a useful working definition of postcolonial criticism. We are told in the introduction that postcolonial criticism is "a broad anti-imperialist emancipatory project" that adds a political dimension to literary criticism (8). This sounds unexceptionable. To apply its wisdom, though, we need to know what texts qualify as critical objects. If only texts from the post-colony qualify, we are frustrated by a definitional absence that seems insurmountable. We might ameliorate the frustration by looking to the essays themselves as object lessons that imply allowable geopolitical boundaries of the postcolony as well as methodological limits for effective postcolonial cultural criticism. Alternatively, in the manner of the issue's epilogue, we might elide the question of a working definition with questions of multicultural ethics.

Linda Hutcheon (author of the introduction) and Satya P. Mohanty (author of the epilogue) have managed as well as anyone has to suggest the vast territories subsumed under the signs colonialism, postcolonial condition, and postcolonial criticism. I found the works of Thomas Foster and Joseph A. Boone in the issue especially enlightening. However, I think Gwen Bergner's essay most clearly reveals how the methods and insights of "race" and "gender" criticisms are finally the best stuff of postcolonial studies. Until a better working definition comes along, it may be wise to think of "Who Is That Masked Woman? or, The Role of Gender in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*" as a model of post-colonial criticism.

HOUSTON A. BAKER, JR.
University of Pennsylvania

To the Editor:

I have been writing about postcolonial theory in relation to South African literature since the mid-1980s, but following the recent changes in the country I have begun to question whether the available theoretical paradigms can be constructively applied in this context. The publication of the January 1995 issue on Colonialism and the Postcolonial Condition, with a photograph of the new South African flag on the cover and Rosemary Jolly's article "Rehearsals of Liberation: Contemporary Postcolonial Discourse and the New South Africa" (110 [1995]: 17-29) given prominence of position, therefore aroused my expectations that perhaps theoretical terms adequate to this enormously complex arena were in the making.

Jolly's article did not fulfill these expectations, however, but simply endorsed my feelings concerning the inadequacies of the theoretical discourse that academics

outside South Africa apply to this part of the world. I was not one of the 117 scholars who submitted papers for publication in the issue, so my response is not sour grapes. While Jolly pays lip service to certain relevant issues, such as the need for “a profoundly different strategy” in South Africa now and for critical evaluation in “various intersecting spheres—economic, social, political, and cultural—in numerous different localized contexts,” her paper fails to deliver on these levels (18, 17). She resorts, instead, to a recirculation of well-worn theoretical currency, using Homi Bhabha’s 1983 notion of the stereotype against Derrida’s 1985 commentary on apartheid in “Racism’s Last Word.”

Jolly’s examples of South African cultural production are equally dated, and she frequently distorts them to suit her purposes. Discussing the appropriation of township theater in the early 1980s, she says, “The desire of anti-apartheid cultural workers to create theater that will succeed overseas may cause that theater to lose its dissidence by conforming to the expectations of the liberal enthusiasts Barnes describes,” using the convention of the academic present tense to conceal the fact that these conditions no longer pertain in the “new” South Africa (19). Her references to South African history are secondhand, drawn from the literary critics Annamaria Carusi and André Brink, and her ignorance of the complexities of the current debate on the politics of language in the country is evident when she claims, as an insight, “Thus alliances among dissident speakers of Afrikaans on both sides of the color bar, which may seem strange in the light of the binarism dictated by apartheid, may yet prove to be a considerable resource in the creation of a new South Africa” (23). Her use of the 1950s term *color bar* here reinstates precisely the terms of racial binarism for which she has been castigating not only the previous South African government but also a host of postcolonial theorists.

Throughout the article Jolly elides the difference between postcolonial theory (critical discourse produced in the academy) and postcolonialism or postcoloniality (the multiple forms in which the victims of colonization express resistance to colonialism or neocolonialism). The chasm that separates these two areas of endeavor is apparent in her suggestion that “[p]erhaps the targets of postcolonialism have too often been the easy ones, such as apartheid” (26). Easy for whom? Certainly not for the victims of apartheid, some of whom have lost everything in their struggle against it.

While Jolly takes the moral high ground, striking out at the “neoimperialist politics of the academic milieu” (abstract [183]), all she really attacks is the by now jaded “evil” of Manichaean opposition, using the equally jaded maneuvers of deconstruction. And her article manifests

precisely the neoimperialist politics she attacks, as it appropriates for publication this “new” field that the “new” South Africa seems to offer academics around the world, who (to use Jolly’s words) have “an almost parasitic relation” to the place (26). The use of a photograph of the new South African flag on the cover of the issue, in an attempt to give contemporaneity to the journal’s belated treatment of the field of postcolonial theory, likewise exemplifies this parasitic relation to a much abused corner of the world.

There is work to be done that is not parasitic, work that Satya Mohanty refers to in his epilogue to the same issue as “the ‘actual study’ of cultures, part of the process of empirical inquiry that should accompany and inform any theoretical cross-cultural negotiation” (114). In South Africa today this task is extremely difficult, requiring on-the-spot, day-to-day observation of a constantly fluctuating process of construction and reconstruction. The critique now required is, as Jolly points out, not based entirely on race. What she claims, again as an insight, is widely recognized within the country but nevertheless requires courage to put into practice.

The rhetoric of Jolly’s title, as well as statements in the essay, try to make postcolonial theory into an act of liberation, equating academic discourse with the liberatory work of the oppressed people within South Africa. Jolly claims that the task faced by postcolonial scholars is the “redistribution of resources and power necessary to realize an international postapartheid future” (26), but North American academics should remember that the real resources and power at their disposal are those related to the material conditions of the production of “knowledge” in the form of scholarly publications. It is ironic that in the Forum of the same issue of *PMLA* there is criticism of the publication process that promotes articles like Jolly’s, which consist of “superficial insights dressed in pretentious terms” (see the letter from Wendell V. Harris [121]).

To have power in the academy is to have a voice—that is, to be granted a forum in which to speak. The responsibility of granting such power should be taken seriously by the editors and reviewers of *PMLA* when they decide what kinds of discourse are to be heard in this powerful publication. To use Jolly’s words against her once more: “Resistance, then, is not a quality inherent in a cultural product but rather an effect of the process of that product’s creation and reception” (19). Writers, editors, and publishers should not overlook this crucial aspect of their own forms of production.

TERESA DOVEY
Rhodes University

Reply:

Teresa Dovey questions the ability of “available theoretical paradigms” to be “constructively applied” to South Africa, especially by “academics outside South Africa.” The doubt is twofold: first, can models of postcoloniality participate in building the new South Africa; second, is someone who resides outside the country capable of answering such a question? Once one assumes that any international concept of postcoloniality is complicit with the center’s neocolonial acquisition of margins, one is forced to reject the idea that postcoloniality has a variety of implications, some of which may be held in common across cultures and may be recognized in cross-cultural dialogue.

But what does this approach entail? If local knowledge is the only legitimate kind of knowledge, the insights of anybody “foreign” become the useless speculation of an ignorant colonial traveler. Such a formulation strictly divides insiders and outsiders, denying the reality of the postcolonial migrant and adhering to the center-margin dichotomy, which is the effect of an assumed opposition of the universal and the relative, as Satya Mohanty describes it.

Clearly postcolonial criticism eschews the Enlightenment notion of universal reason. Less obvious is what postcolonialism does when it assumes “cultural or historical relativism.” This relativism “appears less as an idea than as a practical and theoretical bias, and leads . . . to a certain amount of historical simplification and political naïveté” (Satya P. Mohanty, “Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2.2 [1989]: 1–31; 1). Mohanty demonstrates that while the assumption that the other cannot be known may appear nonimperialist, its implications are otherwise. If I cannot know the other, I cannot know how my actions impinge on the other, and I am unlikely to take responsibility for the effects of my actions on the other. Even if I express concern about the other, my concern can only be interpreted as charity (14–15). This position presupposes that the other cannot teach me anything of value. What Mohanty offers in place of both Enlightenment reason and debilitating relativism is “postpositivist ‘realism’” (“Epilogue: Colonial Legacies, Multicultural Futures: Relativism, Objectivity, and the Challenge of Otherness,” *PMLA* 110 [1995] 108–18; 115), which argues that not all cross-cultural disagreement is unresolvable but that “we can understand both differences and commonalities adequately only when we approach cross-cultural disputes in an open-ended way” (114).

Mohanty’s argument allows for the possibility of migrants who are “insiders” neither in their birthplaces nor

in their host countries. More important—because experience is not the only form of epistemology—Mohanty’s argument makes vital the kind of project I attempt in my article: a cross-cultural communication using postcolonial theory to critique some modes of resistance and to suggest others. I try to cross between more than one simple pair of cultures. I discuss links not only between postcolonial discourse and South Africa but also between postcolonial theory and practice, between theory on the margins and in the center, between the old South Africa and the new.

To study how loci are similar and different is not to confuse them. I may think that postcolonial theory and practice should be accountable to each other, but to state this as a goal is not to mistake it for an ontological condition. Dovey suggests I make this mistake when she assumes that I disregard victims of apartheid because I say that apartheid has perhaps been too easy a target for postcolonialism. Her misunderstanding may arise from an assumption that I am unaware of the difference between theorists of subversion and activists in postcolonial struggles. The proper addressees of her warning are in fact critics who assume that racial trouble is the exclusive concern of a stereotyped postcolonialism and that their task is to discuss trouble at the margins but not to suggest commonalities between racism at the margin and the center. I had no say in *PMLA*’s cover illustration; yet I do not intend to deny Dovey’s point that *PMLA* represents the academic mainstream, whose “treatment of the field of postcolonial theory” is “belated”: that is precisely the audience I wished to reach.

Similarly, to suggest connections between the past and the present is not to say that the present conforms to the past; it is to assert that an analysis of models operative in the past can contribute to a different future. This point applies to the analysis of both theoretical approaches and sociopolitical practices. Discounting the work of Derrida and Bhabha because it preceded the installation of Mandela is a historical form of the error of relativism that Mohanty discusses in its geographic and social forms. Likewise, to suggest that some may still think about South Africa in terms of the “color bar” is not to claim that the term is current; on the contrary, I use its anachronistic effect to illustrate that the mode of thought to which it refers is inadequate to address current South African realities. As Dovey points out, this mode still requires “courage” to relinquish.

Finally, there is a difference between drawing on a number of critical models to develop an approach to a situation and applying a single model that predetermines the outcome of research. For example, I use deconstructive maneuvers to analyze Derrida’s “Racism’s Last Word”

and the stereotyping of South Africa that it entails; but deconstruction alone is inadequate to the demands of the South African situation. My exploration of recent anthropological discourse and of the interdisciplinary critical-fictional practices of Erna Brodber and Wilson Harris suggests a syncretic approach to the use of critical models. Such an approach constantly criticizes models, partially rejecting and partially adopting them, according to their usefulness. I do not claim to present a postcolonial theory that explains the complexities of the South African situation. I acknowledge the admissibility of mistakes and, like Mohanty, assert the necessity for cross-cultural critique.

ROSEMARY JOLLY
Queen's University

To the Editor:

"Musst du nicht längst kolonisieren?" "Hasn't colonizing been your business?" is Mephisto's suggestive comment on Faust's dilemma—namely, Faust's inability to persuade Philemon and Baucis to vacate their little estate voluntarily in exchange for pleasant retirement quarters in his newly gained territory, wrested from the sea. Baucis in particular sees no reason why they should be displaced and resents Faust's expansiveness: "Wie er sich als Nachbar brüstet, soll man untertänig sein" 'He struts into the neighborhood expecting us to act like serfs.' *Kolonisieren*, as Mephisto uses the word, clearly favors strong-arm tactics over restraint. Faust finally gives the go-ahead—"So geht und schafft sie mir zur Seite" 'Go and get them out of there'—for an attempt at forced resettlement that leaves three more corpses on his path to salvation and that introduces a seamless flow of events culminating in his death (*Faust, Part 2* 5.11274, 5.11133–34, 5.11275).

We have here, I believe, a depiction of and comment on the practices of the great colonial powers, not just in the Americas but also the world over, that treat indigenous populations as inferior at best and expendable at worst. By contrast, Goethe makes sure that Faust's reward for successfully aiding the emperor is an empty and unclaimed coastline that does not require eviction or expropriation. Likewise, the original Swiss settlers in Schiller's *Tell*, part of the Great Migration, found the land empty save for wild beasts and a ferryman and decided to stay. Before agreeing to resist the house of Habsburg's expansionist policies, the conspirators recite that history to reassure themselves that the land is rightfully theirs (2.2).

Pylades, in Goethe's *Iphigenie*, justifies his plans for deceit and theft by insisting that they are dealing with

unworthy barbarians undeserving of civilized treatment (4.4). Thoas comments with considerable bitterness on the Greek habit of committing piracy, robbery, and abduction in the name of cultural superiority. The history of the house of Tantalus suffices, he believes, to put such claims to rest (5.6).

There is a human rights consciousness at work in these examples, in the spirit of the famous debates in the House of Commons a few years earlier during which Edmund Burke attacked with great vigor and rhetorical skill the British colonialist policies and attitudes in Ireland and India. His remarks constitute not a blanket condemnation of colonialism, though, but an astute appreciation of alien cultures and a denial of European cultural hegemony. He spoke about the roughly thirty million inhabitants of what was then called British India: "This multitude of men does not consist of an abject and barbarous populace; much less of gangs of savages . . . but a people for ages civilized and cultivated; cultivated by all the arts of polished life, whilst we were yet in the woods" ("Speech on Mr. Fox's East India Bill," 1 Dec. 1783, *The Works of Edmund Burke*, vol. 2, Boston, 1839, 300).

Philemon and Baucis represent the indigenous population and adhere to cultural practices that get on Faust's nerves. In addition, the cranky old man wants the couple's estate because of its elevation and the tall trees in which he intends to build a platform, from there to survey all he has created. He is justly proud of what he has accomplished. Still, for the centenarian to want a tree house would be laughable if he weren't aping the Jehovah of Genesis, who ended each of the six days of creation surveying what he had made and finding it good. Faust's hubris and ruthlessness here remind us of the beginning of the play. We appear to have come full circle; the man has not changed.

But there is a hint that he might change if he lives long enough. And that's an added meaning of his celebrated final vision, where he sees himself no longer as the lone lord or creator overlooking his creation and the people in it but as one among many in voluntary mutual dependency.

Faust's manner of creating new land for settlement is a triumph of engineering that leaves no displaced populations. It creates assets without creating victims. It is futuristic, even utopian, the ultimate agenda. "A new province acquired without force of arms" was the comment of Frederick II, king of Prussia, on a similar endeavor of his own, the dehydration of the Oder wetlands (1747–53). The duke of Ferrara, in Goethe's *Tasso*, has cause to celebrate two bloodless conquests: Antonio's diplomacy enlarged his territory, while Tasso's newly completed epic "conquered Jerusalem for us" (1.4).

Faust's eviction of the "indigenous" old couple from their property is a throwback to ancient and barbarous methods of acquisition. The expropriation is based on his haughty assessment of their need, not on their entitlement. His action is an indictment of policy, of imperialist and colonialist instincts anywhere anytime. Goethe's and Schiller's views were shaped by contemporary events and debates and offer a critique of colonialist practices of repression, expulsion, and extermination.

HERBERT DEINERT
Cornell University

T. S. Eliot

To the Editor:

David Chinitz's "T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide" (110 [1995]: 236–47) modifies the image of T. S. Eliot as an elitist who dismissed popular art forms; instead Chinitz presents a conflicted Eliot, torn between popular tastes and literary values. To construct this new image of the poet, Chinitz is obliged to take Eliot's more "populist" statements at face value. However, the populist tastes that Eliot confesses to in his critical essays are less important than the power relations his criticism assumes. In particular, Eliot's concern with how popular culture or "primitive" art can be "refined"—an important focus of Chinitz's readings—should set off our alarm bells. Chinitz treats Eliot's terminology as signifying that Eliot wishes to negotiate fairly with popular practices. Yet who does the "refining" of popular art forms that Eliot calls for in his review of Marianne Moore's poetry? Refinement for whom? Is it a surprise that the modernist poet is the sole apparent authority on how to improve popular culture?

Despite Eliot's opposition to aesthetic autonomy on religious grounds (a point Chinitz nicely elaborates), his concern for refinement demonstrates how readily his criticism invokes the traditional language of aesthetics. Many of Eliot's most famous critical statements assume a tacit agreement with high aesthetic discourse. "The work of art," Eliot declares in "Hamlet and His Problems," "cannot be interpreted. . . . [W]e can only criticize it according to standards, in comparison with other works of art." Eliot's norms for criticism presume a clear consensus about standards and canons.

Despite Eliot's praise for the music hall or jazz as bulwarks against perceived middle-class sterility, key words like "refinement" suggest that he encounters popular culture within guarded parameters. Eliot's defenses of the

English music hall can be particularly elitist: his fear that the demise of the halls ensures that "the lower classes will . . . drop into the same state of protoplasm as the bourgeoisie" ("Marie Lloyd") assumes that film can only numb its working-class audience. Whether discussing popular fiction such as *East Lynne* or music-hall performers such as Marie Lloyd, Eliot's critical essays take up a traditional and increasingly dubious function of the intellectual: the dictation of taste. Eliot certainly never chose simply to ignore popular culture; however, he largely used the popular as a test of his own power to legitimate, to declare which cultural forms were authentic and which were not. The need of modernist and colder intellectuals to preserve their prestige in the face of the popular will be familiar to readers of Andrew Ross's *No Respect*; not every intellectual who invokes the people should be taken for a reluctant populist.

BARRY FAULK
University of Illinois, Urbana

To the Editor:

David Chinitz's article "T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide" makes many useful points about Eliot and his poetry but unfairly characterizes lines quoted from *The Rock* as "traipsing dactyls" (241). If they traipse, it's largely because they're anapests.

MARC REDFIELD
Claremont Graduate School

Reply:

I am grateful to Barry Faulk for his balanced and discerning response to my article, and I believe he has rightly identified our basic point of disagreement. Faulk thinks that I take Eliot's "'populist' statements" at face value; I think, rather, that I give these statements the same degree of credence as anything else in Eliot's essays. Critical practice up to now has generally taken Eliot's elitism and aestheticism at face value while ignoring or discounting the aspect of his thought and practice I have tried to highlight. The prevailing image of Eliot has a long history and is deeply entrenched; its partial accuracy also gives it the ring of truth. The familiarity of this construction, like that of any other prejudice, tends to disarm all challenge; thus, anything Eliot might have said that seems incongruous with the elitism and aestheticism we expect from him is not to be taken at face value.