
Book Section:
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Introduction:

What Postcolonial Theory Doesn't Say

I

The chapters that make up the contents of this book first came together as papers presented at a 2010 conference, with the same title, at the University of York. As organizers, we were careful in the ways in which we shaped the panels, which featured an eclectic range of topics – from screening the conflict in Afghanistan and the contemporary Nigerian novel, to questions of world ecologies and human rights ethics – as well as the usual investigations of the "epistemological crisis" surrounding the subject area that always populate large gatherings debating any aspect of the nature of postcolonial studies. Our initial aim was to examine the points of interaction between these different specific critical inquiries and to ask what might be theoretical in the ideas that underpin them. Developing this line of questioning, we wanted to assess the theoretical articulations of these interdisciplinary projects, to see how they say what they say and whether it is what scholars in the field would like to hear said. How, we asked, might the field's cultural and institutional capital best be put to use in an investigation of its theoretical foundations?

The conference's final session was an open discussion, chaired by the three of us, with the various participants. We began by outlining the conversations we had shared that had prompted the event and the reasons we believed the topic to be timely, and then reflected on the ways in which various papers had intervened – provoking, troubling, extending, confirming – in the debates we had collectively generated. Finally, we turned the discussion outwards: after all we had shared what, we asked those assembled in the room, might we might be able to say about

the range and resources, the successes and failures, of postcolonial theory seen in the snapshot of that moment? The initial silence that followed may well have been because the question was a difficult one to answer, in terms of gathering ideas together in that kind of forum; but reflecting on it afterwards we felt that the caution and difficulty articulated something tangible about the discipline itself. Graham Huggan has noted that, as a field, postcolonialism enacts "a performative mode of critical revisionism, consistently directed at the colonial past and assessing its legacies for the present, but also intermittently focusing on those forms of colonialism that have surfaced more recently in the context of an increasingly globalized but incompletely decolonized world" (Huggan 2013, 10, emphasis added). The value of the "performative", as well as the multiple opportunities for "consistent directions", is that they have always, of course, offered postcolonial studies numerous variations through which to operate its revisionism – there is never a lack of subjects when it comes to postcolonial critique – but possibly our question caught a moment when the details of these subjects and variations struggled to find expression through a category – theory – that should, but might not, frame and shape them in productive ways.

"Postcolonial theory" is not spoken of today with the kind of reverence it received in the 1990s in particular. This is, of course, not purely a point about the postcolonial; all manner of critical cultural fields or projects arguably appear less "theoretical" than they did a generation ago, and work that self-consciously seeks to advance the field of postcolonial criticism is more likely to choose postcolonial studies as the vehicle of choice than the specifically theoretically understood version of the subject. Just what was "theoretical" about postcolonial theory in its first formative decade also makes for an interesting question: postcolonialism's poststructuralist formations are often seen as the predominant manifestation of "theory" in the discipline, rather

than the equally "theoretical" critical Marxism that has been its main challenger. "Theory", it now seems, has come to be understood as one avenue among many through which to explore the "revisionism" of which Huggan writes, and not the originating and foundational category it may have seemed in the past.

In seeking to understand how this notion of theory manifests itself, we might note that possibly because of the field's desire to keep an openness in its working method, much critical analysis undertaken in the name of the postcolonial performs a self-reflexivity that takes that openness to be constitutive of its theoretical formations. Robert Young has argued that this kind of relational aspect is in fact central to an understanding of the subject, noting that postcolonial theory is "about relations between ideas and practices: relations of harmony, relations of conflict, generative relations between different peoples and their cultures" (Young 2003, 7). "Relations" is obviously a central term here, which can also be read as a privileging of diversity and difference within both subject matter and method. Young later makes this point more explicitly, arguing that the deployment of the "apparently antithetical positions" of antifoundationalism and empiricism is what characterizes the field (Young 2012, 24). This methodological heterogeneity can be seen as incoherence, as Vivek Chibber, among others, has argued: "It is not that postcolonial studies is an assemblage of theories while Marxism is not […] The difference is that Marxism always sought internal coherence and systematicity, while postcolonial studies resists any compulsion to bring together and assess its various strands" (Chibber 2012, 3). Yet we might equally take Young's notion of relation as a way of describing an ongoing position-taking among the field's primary oppositions – materialists versus poststructuralists, activism versus literature, revisionism versus revolution (Huggan 2013, 4), the detail in representation versus the method of representation – that has facilitated many valuable conversations.

At the same time, for all that we understand the value of the performative, the generative and the relational, we still felt that the initial difficult silence that started our discussion session at the conference spoke of something else, and in fact was rather an example of a critical "not saying". Here was a moment where we could have held that the "theoretical" aspect to the various papers we had shared lay in articulating the matrix on which they were mapped, stressing the common genesis and relational spaces between them. In fact, we found the space to be problematic rather than generative, indicative of an absence of theory more than an opportunity for performance, and it is our desire to find a language for that absence that shapes the project of this book. In this sense, then, this is not a volume that seeks to "map" a state of the field, nor to function as a handbook in the ways in which the various chapters can be placed into dialogue with one another; equally we do not want to repeat well-rehearsed debates about the discipline's supposed various failings. Rather, through the multiple subject matters of our contributors, we are interested in making a claim as to how postcolonial theory has left key questions about both postcolonial praxis and method unsaid. The collection thus picks up from where many of the best-known assessments of the field, most of them published more than a decade ago, left off, to ask with renewed urgency: what do we want postcolonial theory to say, and how might we make it possible to say it?

Postcolonial theory's sins of omission have, of course, been discussed by others, and in many ways. Often, these discussions revolve around the problem of the relationship between "theory" and "practice", especially around a concept such as "resistance." Elleke Boehmer has written of the "still under-acknowledged antecedents-in-resistance of postcolonial theory" (Boehmer 2013, 307), while Neil Lazarus has, across a number of projects, asserted a more total critique of theory's failure to address the subject's materialist concerns. In The Postcolonial

Unconscious, for example, Lazarus asserts that postcolonial critical discourse has often "been premised on a distinctive and conjuncturally determined set of assumptions, concepts, theories and methods that have not only not been adequate to their putative object – the 'postcolonial world' – but have served fairly systematically to mystify it" (Lazarus 2011a, 16-17). For Lazarus and other critics who share his viewpoint – such as Benita Parry – the mystification of the material realities and capitalist relations of the "postcolonial world" has been the most conspicuous failure of postcolonial theory's intellectual agenda.

We are interested less in revisiting these debates than in noting that, for the younger scholars who make up many of our contributors here, this critique is often taken for granted, in the wake of what Tim Brennan has described as a new materialist turn within the field, from questions of "discourse, identity, migrancy, and subjectivity […] to an engaged, activist language of political movements and positions" (Brennan 2013, 68). So our sense of what postcolonial theory leaves "unsaid" here is not an observation about how, as Boehmer asserts, it "draws attention away from, or pays insufficient heed to, the contexts of political struggle against empire" (Boehmer 2013, 309), but rather a feeling that the materialist/poststructuralist opposition no longer dominates the field. As the essays collected here show, while the battles of the 1990s (and beyond) as to the proper nature of postcolonial studies raged on, a whole range of other topics, events, locations, methods and worldviews went ignored. Whether on Palestine and Eastern Europe, or questions of economics, aesthetics, and disaster (to name just some of the subjects considered in this volume), much was left unsaid.

In addition, part of our claim here is that contemporary practice in inter- and multidisciplinary scholarship demonstrates that a new assessment of postcolonial theory need not see it as a relational tool that works to juxtapose different fields of inquiry. We argue that there is

a specific value to a literary/cultural critical methodology, necessarily now proficient in the languages of subjects such as sociology and politics, which informs our understanding of the postcolonial in ways that open up earlier approaches, whether these stem from humanism, Marxism or post-structuralism. We find this multidisciplinary methodology working across our contributors' essays, detailing a huge range of postcolonial moments, from dance to diaspora and international relations to land seizure. Scholars of the postcolonial now bring the literary into discussion with the material, or talk of affect and politics, with a skill that means there is now greater opportunity to do justice to the analogous and multiple manifestations of postcolonial cultures and societies. In making this assertion, we see our position not as one of revisionism but rather as part of a more productive and forward-looking critical politics.

II

There is no clearly definable moment when postcolonial theory came into being. If it seemed that no graduate student essay on any postcolonial topic in the early 1990s was complete without some reference to the so-called "holy trinity" of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha or Gayatri Spivak, that fact – and its then presentism – masked a longer heritage of theoretical exploration of postcolonial topics. Whether in the 1950s Francophone examples of Frantz Fanon or Albert Memmi, or the 1960s language debates that took place across the essays of creative writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (and later, Salman Rushdie and Amit Chaudhuri), critical writing from both Europe and the postcolonial world theorized both histories of contact and the new, emerging sets of relations that came to characterize the period of decolonization.

Without the self-consciousness that comes with the label of theory as subject, such writing explored topics as diverse as interpersonal relationships and the effects of pedagogy, to name but two major issues.

The period of "high" postcolonial theory that emerged from the 1980s onwards, as the ideas of Said's Orientalism (1978) percolated into an era that saw the marketization of university subjects, was part of the production of the disciplinary idea of postcolonial studies, in which theory frequently played the role of the subject's aggressive leading edge. The Empire Writes Back (1989), a foundational text in the field, had "Theory and Practice" in its subtitle, as well as two chapters devoted to the specific work literary theory played in assessing postcolonial writing. Such an indication of the prominence of theoretical investigation also made clear the claim being made for its naturalness as a mode of critical inquiry; and for much of the 1990s the "theory" that animated such investigation was fundamentally poststructuralist. Even as such a situation appeared to become solidified in the classroom, however, a number of significant critiques of postcolonial theory emerged to question its forms and practices. Ella Shohat's 1992 article "Notes on the Post-Colonial" and Arif Dirlik's "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism", from 1994, formed part of an attack on the ways in which theories of the postcolonial constructed ideas of the global and the manner in which the origins and locations of such writing betrayed themselves as sites of privilege. As Dirlik put it: "Now that postcoloniality has been released from the fixity of Third World location, the identity of the postcolonial is no longer structural but discursive. Postcolonial in this perspective represents an attempt to regroup intellectuals of uncertain location under the banner of postcolonial discourse"; while also noting that "postcolonial criticism has been silent about its own status as a possible ideological effect of a new world situation after colonialism" (Dirlik

1994, 332 and 331). Such characterization of "discourse" as a limited vehicle through which to engage the realities of postcolonial experience, and the concomitant link to a potential complicity in the development of a capitalist world order, re-framed theory for some not as a productive analytic tool but rather as potentially a marker of a narrow and ahistorical critical conservatism.

Robert Young's Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction (2001) marks possibly the last attempt to position an idea of theory as being central to a global view of postcolonial histories. For Young, postcolonial studies at the beginning of the twenty-first century had yet to acknowledge the full force of the theoretical implications of the anti-colonial struggles that dominated global politics during the previous sixty years. By way of response, he defined postcolonialism as a field whose critical methods were "theoretically and historically fundamentally hybrid, the product of the clash of cultures that brought it into being" (Young 2001, 10). Hybridity, seen here as a productive and insightful mechanism through which to explore postcolonial experience, had been arguably the dominant term in postcolonial theory during the 1990s, from Homi Bhabha's celebrations of its discursive possibilities to Young's claims for its historical and ontological centrality. In Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction, Young named the "hybrid" as both "form and strategy", a method that could bring together historical trajectories and definitions of agency, or a revised situated Marxism and new intellectual internationalism, under the banner of "tricontinental critiques of eurocentrism" (Young 2001, 345-351).

But rather like the grand double album that emerges from years in the studio just as musical tastes change, Young's book failed to preface the kind of theoretically-informed historical criticism he championed; rather postcolonial studies fragmented precisely because of the multiple suspicions that now accompanied its claims to view the world whole. In place of this

project, the variety of new modes of postcolonial enquiry – ecocritical, queer, indigenous, to name but some – that have emerged in the last ten years are informed by theoretical models, often interdisciplinary in origin, that discuss commonalities among diverse formerly colonized locations but deliberately eschew ideas of conceptual totality. As new formations of postcolonial theory, they challenge the idea that the label has an automatic right to assume subject status – a matrix of theoretical positions is a long way from assumptions of a unifying hybridity. Nevertheless, it is our contention, evidenced by the work collected in this volume, that this matrix itself has become a way in which theory speaks – "says" – the postcolonial. For all that a history of postcolonial studies might suggest that its "theory phase" is over, it is clear that this is, in fact, not the case. The new imperialisms of the contemporary global world, formations that could not have been envisaged during the debates around the postcolonial that took place in the 1990s, increasingly demand theoretical engagement, and in fact it is precisely the legacies of theorizing the postcolonial that become useful here. Without a renewed engagement with the disavowed and under-articulated theoretical paradigms that underpin the field – including traditions of revolutionary thought, which are often invoked but less often worked through – we will remain unable to produce the "new 'history of the present'" (Gopal and Lazarus 2006, 9) that we so desperately need.

III

As we explained above, although there are numerous critiques of the field of postcolonial studies in this volume, the primary aim of the collection is not critique for its own sake. If anything, we are proponents of the "unabashed enthusiasm" that Terry Eagleton once complained was so sorely lacking in the field (Eagleton 1999, 3). Notwithstanding our provocative title, this volume

emerges from our investment in the future of postcolonial studies and our commitment to its basic premise, namely the attempt to conceive of particular cultural and literary articulations in relation to larger structures of colonial and imperial domination. We contend that praxis depends on theory for its coherence, or at least as a safeguard against chronic disarray. The theoretical register enables a more consistently lucid purview not only of the relations between multiple interventions, but also of the conditions – intellectual, political, philosophical and literary critical – that make them possible.

The history of those conditions can be instructive. One version of the story of the relationship between postcolonial theory and postcolonial studies can be seen through the rise of a critical vanguardism that has become more transparent and less satisfying with time. Early poststructuralist theoretical expressions quickly lost their edge with the growing hegemony of their idiom in the early 1990s. Challenges to postcolonial studies from that point on (especially from area specialists) led to a parting of theoretical ways, with greater input from a returned Marxism, the rise of a clearly expressed cultural studies dimension, and the development of distinct subsections in the field such as ecocriticism or settlement studies. Yet each of these "new directions" seemed to do more to rework postcolonial studies than the other way around, inadvertently reinforcing the impression that the idea of the postcolonial doesn't have much to offer in itself. Arguably, then, postcolonial theory "hasn't said" certain things due to its inability to reach a more mature sense of its scope or develop theoretical positions capable of responding to urgent global developments, from the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of "new Europe" to the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan to the large area of "failed" and failing states stretching from Congo to Syria.

Nevertheless, the idea of "postcolonial theory" clearly has had a conceptual purchase and appeal that went well beyond its disciplinary origins. The pull of this idea has enabled postcolonial studies to survive accusations of ahistoricism, anti-nationalism (or conversely, making a fetish of anti-colonial nationalism) and, perhaps worst of all, adopting a partial world-view riddled with blind spots. We attribute postcolonial theory's resilience to two major factors: first, its commitment to the study of imperialism as a political, economic and cultural force; and second, the resulting salutary transformations of multiple humanities and social-science disciplines. To a certain extent, postcolonial theory is a victim of its own success. The sense of crisis in the field comes in part from the institutionalization of the insights that it has enabled: now that they no longer seem new, it is hard to know what the field's work should be beyond these general commitments, or what we should be talking to one another about, apart from continuing to affirm and celebrate past accomplishments.

This feeling of stasis looks to us like a missed opportunity. We see the renewal of popular anti-imperial energies across the globe as a chance to reassert the political and theoretical value of the postcolonial as a comparative, interdisciplinary, and oppositional paradigm. The collection thus makes a claim for what postcolonial theory can say through the work of scholars articulating what it still cannot or will not say. Once sectarian and strange, now established and familiar, postcolonial theory cannot afford complacency: there are too many urgent developments worldwide calling for a revitalized critique and new ways of theorizing the imperial past and present. Our position, moreover, is that the theoretical stems as much from praxis as from the ivory tower; that, as we noted above, theory is not without its antecedents in resistance; and that praxis depends on theory for its coherence, or at least as a safeguard against chronic disarray. The theoretical register enables a more consistently lucid purview not only of

the relations between multiple interventions, but also of the conditions – intellectual, political, philosophical and literary critical – that make them possible.

Among the many benefits that we might anticipate from a return to the idea of "theory" is a grammar of ideas that will help to confront, rather than re-iterate, structures such as "East versus West" (or worse yet, "Islam versus the West"), and that will dispense with some of the buzzwords (including "hybridity") that have become catch-all terms lacking conceptual precision. This return to questions of theory and method should also enable a return to the universalizing ideals that made early work in postcolonial studies so exciting, but without the "category errors" that distorted the objectives of such work, not least the relative lack of attention paid to the location of colonialism within the broader context of global capitalism (Lazarus 2011b: 7-8). We might hope for a more sophisticated historical understanding of empire and what Said called the "gravity of history" (1994, 367), transcending (without forgetting) the colonial moment of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in favour of a more rigorous appreciation of the historicity of the seemingly endless cycle of occupations, exploitations, wars and all-out planetary destruction that characterise late capitalism. If our work is to be worldly, in Said's sense of the term (1983), and to succeed in criticizing the "actual affiliations that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship, on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force, on the other" (Said 2000, 119), then it must be informed not by the narrow considerations of our (or any) profession, but rather by the sorts of big ideas that once made "theory" both thrilling and subversive: thrilling because subversive of the status quo, always daring to proclaim that the current dispensation is neither inevitable nor invincible.

Over two decades ago, Jacques Derrida – whose name has not always carried positive connotations in postcolonial studies – decried the fact that:

> [N]ever have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and humanity. […] [N]o amount of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth. (Derrida 2006, 106)

The years since these lines were written have only brought further confirmation that there are no limits either to capitalism's creativity when it comes to inventing new forms of exploitation, or to humanity's libido dominandi. It too often seems as if the world's populations are able to do little more than observe and lament the routine assaults on their hard-won rights and dignities. This situation obtains despite the strenuous efforts of generations of activists, scholars and workers across the globe to contest it, not to mention the growth industry in charities that has accompanied the mass resignation of the world's governments from their responsibilities towards their citizens. The seemingly irresistible march towards the concentration of infinite power in the hands of an infinitesimal fraction of the world's population calls for a renewed commitment to the decolonization of knowledge. It is here and now that we, as postcolonial scholars and theorists, are obliged not only to think and act, but also to theorize, the better to work towards an interconnected and systemic view of past and present forms of injustice, oppression, and violence, as part of the larger effort to bring about their obsolescence. What postcolonial theory doesn't yet say – but what our contributors suggest it could – is the promise of a better world.

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