WORKS CITED


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Postcolonial Criticism
and
Heart of Darkness

WHAT IS POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM?

Postcolonial criticism typically involves the analysis of works by authors from regions of the globe subject to European colonization. Postcolonial criticism might just as easily have been referred to as “post-imperialist criticism,” since the term *imperialism* refers to the extension of rulership or authority (almost always unsought and unwanted) by a politically and economically powerful empire or nation and its culture over a weaker, less “developed” foreign country or region and its culture, thereafter referred to as a “colony” or “dependency” of the imperialist[ic], colonizing ruler nation.

Usually, the prefix *post* in *postcolonial* signifies the period following the end of colonization and the achievement of national independence by a former colony, but sometimes it is used to refer to any point following the establishment of colonial rule. Thus, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1959), a novel that implicitly opposes the ongoing colonial oppression of the Nigerian people, is often referred to as a postcolonial work. Although in such instances the prefix *post* seems to have secondary connotations of *anti*, its meaning is usually more strictly chronological. For one thing, postcolonial criticism sometimes engages texts produced by authors hailing from the colonizing culture. (Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, written by an author Achebe has called a
“bloody racist,” is a case in point.) The intent of this type of postcolonial criticism is to expose colonialist attitudes held by the author and/or literary characters and to demonstrate the role such biases play in the representation of subjugated persons and cultures.

Emerging from an extraordinary variety of critical and theoretical discourses prevalent during the last half of the twentieth century, postcolonial criticism entered the twenty-first century as the predominant form of literary study. Because it may best be thought of as a convergence of discourses, postcolonial criticism may be best understood in relation to some of its antecedents.

One of these involved the study of so-called Commonwealth literature; that is, literature produced in and about areas colonized by the British Empire that at one point become part of the Commonwealth of Nations (to which, for instance, Canada still belongs). Another focused on what used to be called Third World Literature, a wider field of study since it included non-English cultures and texts (e.g., francophone studies of cultures once colonized by France). Important intellectuals associated with the development of postcolonial criticism include Achebe, mentioned earlier; Edward Kamau Brathwaite, a Caribbean writer from Barbados whose work will be described later; Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon. Césaire, a francophone postcolonial intellectual best known for his book *Discours sur le colonialisme* (*Discourse on Colonialism*, 1950), experienced the brutality of French imperialism firsthand. He established the “Négritude” movement, the purpose of which was to increase political awareness and unite the pan-national interests among black victims of European colonization. Fanon, a French-educated black African psychiatrist who immigrated to Algeria, wrote a series of essays on the needs of colonized peoples, with particular emphasis on political independence from the imperialist, colonizing country.

When painting the background of contemporary postcolonial criticism with the very broadest brush strokes, it is impossible not to mention cultural criticism, or cultural studies. Indeed, in the most general sense, postcolonial criticism may be seen as a form of cultural criticism, an approach to literature and its manifold social and economic relationships that emerged in England in the 1950s and 1960s. Cultural critics notably opposed the general tendency to hear “culture” and think “high culture”—evenings at the symphony, gallery openings, *belles lettres*. They strived to make the term refer at least equally to popular, folk, even “street” culture. Raymond Williams, an early British cultural critic, famously suggested in his book *The Long Revolution* (1961) that “art and culture are ordinary”; he did so not to “pull art down” but rather to point out that there is “creativity in all our living… We create our human world as we have thought of art as being created” (37). The idea that culture, including literature, is produced not only by the dominant or “official” culture but also by ordinary folk enabled and encouraged an interest in authors speaking from the vantage point—and often in the native language of—a colonized people.

Early cultural critics such as Williams followed the practices of Marxist criticism in viewing culture in relation to ideologies, which Williams defined as the “residual,” “dominant,” or “emerging” ways of viewing the world held in common by asocial groups or by individuals holding power. Williams’s view that even repressive ideologies can evolve was linked to his belief in the resilience of subjugated individuals, in their ability to experience the conditions in which they find themselves and creatively respond to those conditions. These relatively hopeful views paralleled those of Michel Foucault, a mid-twentieth-century French theorist who greatly influenced the new historicism (see “What Is the New Historicism?” pp. 245–57), cultural criticism, and, ultimately, postcolonial criticism.

Like Williams, Foucault had been influenced enough by Marxist thought to study cultures in terms of power relationships. But Foucault refused to see power as something exercised by a dominant class or group over a subservient one. Instead, he viewed it as a whole web or complex of forces involving everything from “discourses”—accepted ways of thinking, writing, and speaking—and social practices. According to Foucault, not even tyrannical aristocrats wield power, for they are themselves formed by a network of discourses and practices that constitute power. Viewed by Foucault, power is that which produces what happens. It is positive and productive, not repressive and prohibitive. Furthermore no historical event, according to Foucault, has a single cause; rather, it is intricately connected with a vast web of economic, social, and political factors. Like Williams’s view that culture is not, by definition, centered in “high” culture and reflective of dominant ideologies, Foucault’s radically decentered view of both power relations and history—the history that power relations engender and are engendered by—reinforced the work of early postcolonial critics and enabled the development of postcolonial criticism by later practitioners.

For instance, Brathwaite, generally viewed as one of the first postcolonial critics, adopted a fluid and dynamic view of the power relations that develop between imperialistic nations and colonized cultures. In *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770–1820* (1971), he used the term *creolization* to describe what he viewed as a “two-way
process,” “a way of seeing the society, not in terms of white and black, master and slave, in separate nuclear units, but as contributory parts of a whole. . . . Here in Jamaica, fixed within the dehumanizing institution of slavery, were two cultures of people, having to adapt themselves to a new environment and to each other. The fiction created by this confrontation was cruel, but it was also creative” (153). Homi Bhabha, a leading contemporary cultural critic, focuses on the creative aspect of the colonial confrontation, making a Foucauldian argument that marginalized people subject to repressive power in fact wield positive and productive power of their own. In an essay entitled “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” (1987), he uses the term hybridity to refer to the process whereby subjugated people, having at first assimilated aspects of oppressor culture, eventually manage to metamorphose those elements, making them their own through a process of transformation. Bhabha, it should be noted, also adopts a decentered view of history made possible by Foucault, arguing that modern Western culture is best understood from the perspective of the postcolonial world, rather than vice versa, as Westerners (stereotype) typically assume.

The overlap between postcolonial criticism and the cultural criticism from which it emerges is perhaps most evident in the work of Bhabha, who in his groundbreaking work *The Location of Culture* speaks cryptically of “culture’s archeaic undecidability” in arguing that “there can be no ethically or epistemologically commensurate subject of culture” (135). Since culture is thought to distinguish humanity from the rest of nature, to define the subject of culture generally one would have to begin with an impossibility, namely, a definition of humanity that is not derived from any particular culture’s sense of values. Thus, just as there is no one set of practices that can be said definitively to constitute “culture” as opposed to “pop culture” or “high culture”), so any larger definition of human culture is a dangerous undertaking doomed by a relativism that is inevitably myopic and potentially murderous, as when the values and practices operative within one social group (e.g., the native Africans represented in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*) are viewed and represented by members of another group (e.g., Mr. Kurtz, the European manager of “the Company’s” Inner Station) as sub- or even nonhuman. (“Exterminate all the brutes!” Kurtz writes in his postscript to a report written for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs [p. 66].)

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In theory, postcolonial criticism could analyze works about or arising from any colonized culture and could be written in the language of the imperialistic colonizers or in the colonized language. In fact, however, most postcolonial criticism is written in English and tends to concern itself with the following geographic areas: Africa and the Caribbean, as have been mentioned, but also the “East” (i.e., the Middle East and Asia) and the Indian subcontinent—areas in which, during the past century, liberation movements arose that ultimately led to national independence. To be sure, some attention has been paid to Australia, Canada, and New Zealand—often referred to as English “settler colonies”—and sometimes even the thirteen “settler” colonies that became the United States are viewed from the postcolonial perspective. (However, in this instance, the focus is far more likely to be on African American works and works by nonblack authors about African slaves brought to America and/or their free descendants than on, say, Thomas Jefferson as leader of a postcolonial rebellion!) Additionally, an occasional postcolonial reading of Irish literature has taken into account Ireland’s status as a colony in all but name—but one that, unlike other colonies, was near the center of the empire with respect to matters such as location, race, and (for the most part) language.

With regard to the Middle East and Asia, the most powerful practitioner of postcolonial criticism is, indeed, one of its acknowledged founders: Edward Said. Said, like his cultural-critical precursor Williams, understood implicitly the role played by ideology in blinding the colonizer to the realities and conditions of the colonized. More specifically influenced by Foucault, Said laid the foundations of postcolonial criticism in *Orientalism* (1978), a book in which he analyzed European discourses concerning the exotic, arguing that stereotypes systematically projected on peoples of the East contributed to the establishment of European domination and exploitation of Eastern (Asian) and Middle Eastern cultures through colonization. Although *Orientalism* focuses on colonialist discourses, both Said and those scholars influenced by him have used its insights to interpret the aftermath of colonialism.

Gayatri Spivak, an Indian scholar, has examined the ways in which issues of class and, especially, gender pertain to the postcolonial situation, relationships that develop within it, and representations of it. In her groundbreaking essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), Spivak uses “subalterns” — a British term used to refer to the lowest-ranking officers in the military — to refer to the colonized and, more specifically, to the most vulnerable of the groups comprising that population.
(e.g., women, racial minorities, immigrants, and underclass persons dominated by relatively powerful groups within the colonized culture). With regard to the position of women, subaltern scholars have pointed out their double oppression, both by traditional patriarchal attitudes and practices within their own culture and, beyond that, by attitudes and practices inherent in colonizing cultures that were in many cases more masculinist, sexist. Indeed, Michael Payne has said that subaltern critics in India, Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya, and Rey Chow of China “have read imperialism as not only actively suppressing the more feminist and egalitarian of indigenous institutions and cultural practices, but also as driving the indigenous patriarchy to increasingly reactionary excesses against women and subalterns in an effort to maintain its strength vis-à-vis the colonizers” (425).

Issues Spivak raises concerning whether and how agency — the ability of postcolonial, subaltern subjects to choose and to speak independently — can survive the impact of long-term hierarchal situations are central to the understanding of individuals and groups in postcolonial contexts. But they also highlight the difficulties faced by postcolonial scholars whose goal is to give the voiceless a voice. Some of these scholars have resorted to such things as court testimony and prison memoirs, while others have studied popular cultural forms (e.g., oral literature and street theater) through which those who have been silenced may still be heard to speak. The Subaltern Studies Group has been particularly successful at producing visionary historical accounts of life as experienced by once-silent or silenced colonial subjects. Ranajit Guha’s “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency” (1983), for example, provides a critical alternative to accepted historical narratives by contrasting official documents with personal ones, contemporary accounts with retrospective ones, and European views with indigenous perspectives.

Feminist postcolonial critics have understandably focused on recovering the cultures of postcolonial women. In doing so, they have questioned whether the universal category “woman” constructed by certain French and American predecessors is appropriate to postcolonial women or the diverse groups of women comprising that general category. They have stressed that, while all women are female, they are something else as well (such as African, Muslim Pakistani, lesbian, working class, and so forth). This “something else” is precisely what makes them — including their problems and goals — different from other women. Some feminist postcolonial critics have focused on a particularly unique female postcolonial experience, namely, that of women marginalized not in their own colonized culture but, rather, in the imperialistic, colonizing

culture to which they have immigrated or been forcibly taken. The so-called classics of white European novels may even tell, indirectly, of the experiences of these women. In “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985), Spivak mines Charlotte Brontë’s novel Jane Eyre for its numerous references to the West Indies, the slave trade, and Bertha Mason (often referred to as “the madwoman in the attic”), the insane Jamaican wife of the novel’s hero, Mr. Rochester. Elsie Michie subsequently focused not on images of the colonized in Jane Eyre but, rather, on “the way the colonizers are represented in Brontë’s novel because, as Edward Said and subsequent postcolonial critics have noted, images of the colonized are inextricably bound up with and determined by the attitudes of the colonizers” (584).

For the most part, however, the postcolonial women discussed by feminist postcolonial critics are not characters in novels written by white women. Amrit Wilson has written about the challenges faced by postcolonial Asian women living in London, pointing out, for instance, that they tend to be expected by their families and communities to preserve Asian cultural traditions; thus, the expression of personal identity through clothing involves a much more serious infraction of cultural rules than it does for Western women. Gloria Anzaldúa spoke personally and eloquently about the experience of women on the margins of Eurocentric North American culture. “I am a border woman,” she wrote in Borderlands: La Frontera = The New Mestiza (1987). “I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo. . . . Living on the borders and in margins, keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity is like trying to swim in a new element, an ‘alien’ element” (1).

Powerful though it is as a force in contemporary literary studies, postcolonial criticism has its critics. Even the name postcolonial has been deemed imprecise, due to the various, inconsistent ways in which the prefix post is used and the way postcolonial may be used to refer to political situations, writers writing from or about those contexts, and scholars and critics writing about those writers. Others find postcolonial misleading if not useless as an umbrella term because, in fact, the attitudes and practices of some colonizing countries differed so utterly from those of nations with dissimilar political values and economic purposes. Still others take the opposite view, arguing that postcolonial critics overstate differences and undervalue attempts (for instance by the Negritude movement) to forge a shared collective (in this case African) history of repression and revolt.
The use of *postcolonial* as an adjective to describe any and all so-called diaspora studies has been questioned — whether these studies concern slaves living in the American South, thriving but insular “black” communities in London, or Chinese American families like the one depicted in Amy Tan’s novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). Critics have also objected to use of the term with reference to settler colonies in which the majority of the population came quickly to consist of colonists and use of the term in connection with minority groups living within a colonizing culture (e.g., the Irish) whose race and language they share.

Some critics of the postcolonial approach have argued that the focus on relations between imperialists and those they have colonized leaves entirely too much out of the picture, whether the picture in question is of postcolonial society or some literary representation or a postcolonial situation. Within this group are those who would prefer to see race, class, or gender difference privileged over the opposition colonizer/colonized. Then there are various groups of detractors who find a misleadingly bright thread in various aspects of what has been called postcolonial studies. Some of these believe that, in so often telling the story of oppressed peoples who eventually gained independence from subjugating empires, postcolonial criticism misleadingly implies that oppression ends when political independence is gained.

In reality, however, most of the above-mentioned critics of postcolonial criticism are, in fact, in almost everyone else’s view, postcolonial critics themselves, a fact that demonstrates the dynamic liveliness of the approach, the way in which, although we have the general rubric *postcolonial criticism*, it can mean as many different things (for the time being) as the prefix *post*.

In the example of postcolonial criticism that follows, Patrick Brantlinger begins by alluding to the now-famous claim — made in 1975 by African novelist Chinua Achebe — that Conrad was a racist and that *Heart of Darkness* is a racist work. He then summarizes the diametrically opposed view of Cedric Watts, one of the many critics who have rejected Achebe’s assertion. Implicitly asking how the same text could strike different readers so differently, Brantlinger comes up with a compelling answer: “*Heart of Darkness* . . . offers a powerful critique of at least certain manifestations of imperialism and racism, at the same time that it presents that critique in ways that can only be characterized as both imperialist and racist” (p. 305).

Brantlinger draws a parallel between the mixed signals given out by *Heart of Darkness* and its author’s lukewarm opposition to colonial oppression in real life. Conrad was sympathetic with the goals of the Congo Reform Association, founded by his friend Roger Casement (see pp. 113–16 in this volume), but generally “backed away from involvement,” contributing less to the association’s work than did writers such as Mark Twain and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (pp. 112, 114). Furthermore, Brantlinger points out, “the worst feature of imperialism for Conrad may not have been its violence toward the ‘miserable’ and ‘helpless,’ but the lying propaganda used to cover its bloody tracks” (p. 307). What bothered Conrad more than the thought of starving, Congolese chain gangs was the realization that their exploitation was being characterized in Europe as a noble act of philanthropy.

One of the most interesting aspects of Brantlinger’s essay is his claim that in writing *Heart of Darkness* Conrad drew as much on books and newspaper articles written after his return to Europe as upon his own experiences in the Congo in 1890. While in Africa, for instance, Conrad “probably saw little or no evidence of cannibalism, despite the stress upon it in his story” (p. 307); he would have learned about the savage practices of cutting off heads or limbs (see “Mutilated Africans,” pp. 116–18) from “expose literature” chronicling the horrors of the 1891 war between Arab slave traders and King Leopold’s forces, both of which employed Congolese slave-soldiers. What doesn’t come through, either in the accounts Conrad read or the novella he subsequently wrote, is that many of the atrocities described were not so much the traditional practices of the Congolese natives as they were the exploitative, intimidating tactics of their Belgian and Arab oppressors.

That “Conrad portrays the moral bankruptcy” of colonizing ventures by “showing European motives and actions to be no better than African fetishism and savagery” is a telling indication of the novel’s at once anti-imperialist and racist tone, according to Brantlinger. He writes that Conrad “paints Kurtz and Africa with the same tarbrush. His version of evil — the form taken by Kurtz’s Satanic behavior — is ‘going native.’ In short, evil *is* African in Conrad’s story; if it is also European, that’s because some number of white men in the heart of darkness behave like Africans” (p. 311).

Another important aspect of Brantlinger’s postcolonial approach is a usage of Marxist thought regarding the relationship between repressive ideologies and oppressed cultures that recalls the work of Williams and Foucault. Brantlinger draws on Fredric Jameson’s Marxist argument that another famous novel by Conrad, *Lord Jim*, is characterized by a split between a hollow, modernist “will to style” (which according to Jameson is the source of Conrad’s “impressionism”) and the mass
culture tendencies of romance conventions” (p. 313). Brantlinger deconstructs Jameson’s opposition, arguing that “on some level, the ‘impressionism’ of Conrad’s novels and their romance features are identical” (p. 314). Certainly, “romance conventions” and “heroic adventure themes” do as much to advance colonialist propaganda as the modernist (and/or impressionist) will to style does to blur the depiction—thereby obscuring the reader’s awareness—of atrocities.

Brantlinger shows his debt to earlier practitioners of cultural criticism by using Marxist thought while fusing it with the thinking of non-Marxist postcolonial critics such as Said. Tactically agreeing with Williams that “culture is ordinary,” Brantlinger insists on seeing a Great Work of Art like Heart of Darkness not only in terms of literary modernism but also as a work informed by newspapers, exposé literature, and mass culture romances. Finally, though, Brantlinger’s essay exemplifies that contemporary strain of cultural criticism best described as postcolonial criticism insofar as it places the text in the context of postcolonial politics, seeing it not only in terms of the political reality it supposedly represents but also in terms of the politically motivated representations of that political reality.

POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM:
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Postcolonial Criticism and Theory: General Texts


