

RECUPERATING THE POSTCOLONIAL: DISPATCHES FROM THE US CLASSROOM

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Of course there is no ‘one’ postcolonial condition, responds Kerry Bystrom. But in literary studies at least, that’s not primarily what matters. The salience of a term like postcolonial resides in its ability to destabilise normative understandings and received perceptions, to ask questions and open up debate.

Peter Geschiere’s provocation – “Is there ‘a’ postcolonial condition?” – calls to mind one of my first experiences teaching. The year was 2007. As a US scholar trained in the field of postcolonial literature, PhD almost in hand, I was thrilled to have a chance to teach at a small liberal arts college not so far from New York City. My teaching post had nothing to do with postcolonial literature; I was hired on a one-year contract to teach a world civilization class that traced concepts of the Enlightenment from Confucius through Kant to the present day. Purely by accident, however, I did get an opportunity to teach a few classes in my chosen discipline. This happened

when an esteemed colleague was unable to return to school in the second semester to teach a class on “Middle Eastern Literature and Postcolonial Studies”, because the United States government did not like his (Middle Eastern) country of birth and refused to let him back into the country after he went to England to see his British wife and child for the Christmas holidays. Faced with the blatant racism of the situation, in which a professor with a valid work permit was prevented from entering the country to carry out the terms of his contract simply because he came from a country that speaks Arabic, I felt that the least I could do was teach the first couple of sessions of the course, to tide the students over until the visa issue could be resolved.

Not knowing anything really about Middle Eastern literature, I decided to focus these class sessions on the question of “the postcolonial”. I dutifully assigned two essays that I had read perhaps five or six years earlier in the beginning of my graduate school days: the introduction to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s book *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), and Anne McClintock’s “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism’” (1992). When it came time to discuss these essays with the students, however, I ran into something of a personal crisis. Along with my original enthusiasm for the field of study, all of the doubts about the term that I had experienced, and then managed to self-protectively shelve, came flooding back. Re-reading *The Empire Writes Back*, I found myself re-experiencing the “a-ha” or conversion moment that Peter Geschiere refers to: that glimpse into a whole new order of the world, an order that proclaims itself other than the one inaugurated through European colonial domination. Yet re-reading “The Angel of Progress”, I found myself nodding

in agreement as McClintock makes point after point that reveal the term “postcolonial” to be as productive of blindness as of vision. Wasn’t she right in arguing that a monolithic notion of “the postcolonial” flattens out difference, and should be replaced by a series of locally specific theories?, I asked myself as I tried to prepare a lecture. And then in a panic: What is this massive sprawling thing that I am supposed to be explaining to the class? Hence my sympathy with Geschiere’s commentary.

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Doubts continue as I teach postcolonial literature on a more regular basis. Now, though (and for reasons that should become clear below) I worry less about the term than about two preoccupations that shape scholarship in this field. First, the privileging of the colonial-metropolitan relationship as a lens for understanding the contemporary moment, as though this continues to be the one relationship that most profoundly shapes current lifeworlds. For instance, with regard to South Africa, which falls under the rubric of postcolonial literature in the US academy, is it possible to say that this country’s history as a colony (of England? of the Netherlands?) is its most profound shaping influence? Is apartheid most productively understood as version of colonialism? How do we parse the importance of Cold War alignments, as Geschiere notes and as Monica Popescu has shown to be integral to understanding recent South African history, which work in a different logic that cannot be reduced to the colonial? What

about the contemporary neo-liberal global paradigm that shapes South Africa's democracy? Does the obsession with the (post)colonial stop us (and by "us" I mean thoughtful individuals interested in understanding contemporary global intersections and their future implications, with all the inequalities and potentialities inherent in them) from taking an accurate reading of the present? Second, and drawing on Sarah Nuttall's public comments at the JWTC, is the continued emphasis on "difference" in much of postcolonial studies useful? Might it not be time, as Nuttall suggests in her new book *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid*, to move beyond this paradigm towards an acknowledgement and a theorization of how we are all "twisted together or entwined", if not always willingly and not always on equal terms?

These comments are not meant as a rejection of the term postcolonial, or the work of thinking about the postcolonial condition. To respond directly to Geschiere's question: of course there is no "one" postcolonial condition. But I'm in the field of literature, where the richness of a theoretical tool like the term postcolonial does not depend on its ability to exhaustively explain every case. Rather, the salience of the term depends on its ability to open up questions of relevance in many different particular circumstances. My task as a young scholar of cultural products that fall under the heading "postcolonial" isn't one of defining "the (singular) postcolonial," but of determining what the postcolonial might mean in any given instance, what it intersects with, what it elides, what space for debate it creates. This is why the term retains significance.

With this perspective in mind, looking back to that first class on Middle Eastern Literature and Post-

colonial Studies, I wish that I had assigned Jenny Sharpe's famous essay "Is the United States post-colonial?" (1994). I'm not sure I would answer her question now the way that she did over a decade ago. But it seems to me that posing the question, rather than coming to a consensus about the answer, is the important thing. It might have helped us all think through how the contemporary US (and I mean this into the present and not only in 2007 – unfortunately not everything has changed with Obama) continues to operate on the logics of racism, ideological expansion, and what David Theo Goldberg calls "militarization" that can be clarified by a study of the dynamics of colonialism even if they cannot be reduced to it. More concretely, it might have helped the students and myself work through the entangled histories that led to a situation in which I, a US scholar trained in Latin American and Southern African literature, was sitting there attempting to teach a class on postcolonial studies and the Middle East while the professor of record was (as far as I understand it) being subjected to special background checks to determine his worthiness to enter the United States rather than being turned away by border control guards working at airports with names like Newark Liberty International.