

postcolonial whiteness



a critical reader on
race and empire

Alfred J. López
editor

POSTCOLONIAL
WHITENESS

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*A Critical Reader
on Race and Empire*

EDITED BY
ALFRED J. LÓPEZ

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*To Susan López, wife and partner;
and to Sofia and Diego, our beautiful Latino babies
(who, like their daddy, look white but aren't)*

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book began life in April 2000, as a panel at the Seventh International Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars Conference, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Mayaguez. My fellow panelists, Lisa Blansett and Linda Strong-Leek, were also my colleagues at Florida International University, where we were all assistant professors. A third FIU colleague, Ryan Trimm, had planned to join us but finally could not attend. The success of our panel, entitled “Whiteness, Colonialism, and Caribbean Women,” energized us as we conspired to produce an edited volume based on the understudied theoretical intersection of whiteness and postcoloniality.

Nearly five years later, now that the product of our Puerto Rican daydream is finally coming into the world as a book, much has changed. I regret that this book appears without the contributions of my former FIU colleagues. Happily, if paradoxically, Ryan Trimm’s fine essay on Caryl Phillips’s *Cambridge* does appear in these pages; I am grateful that at least one link remains to the volume’s original conception. I am thankful to Lisa Blansett and Linda Strong-Leek, good colleagues then and now, for their help during the crucial first stages of this project, and to Donald Watson, then Chair of English at FIU, for his support of both the panel and the book in the early stages.

At The University of Mississippi, I have also received generous support from my chair, Joseph Urgo, and have enjoyed a wonderful rapport with colleagues in English and elsewhere who share my interest in whiteness studies and postcoloniality. A special debt of thanks goes to Sharrón Sarthou, who painstakingly converted the manuscript to conform to Chicago style (from MLA style—no small task, that) and compiled the index. I am also deeply grateful to my wife, Susan López, both for her careful and insightful reading of the proofs and for contributing her art, which is prominently featured on the cover.

I am utterly indebted to my editor at SUNY Press, Jane Bunker, who remained steadfast and loyal to this project throughout. Laurie Searl has

been an invaluable ally as the production editor, as has copyeditor Alan Hewat. An earlier version of my chapter on whiteness and psychoanalysis appears in *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Society* in 2004, under the title “Who’s Afraid of the Big White Wolf? Whiteness, Counter-transcendence, and Freud’s Wolfman.” I am grateful to PCS’s editor, Lynne Layton, for all her help with the Freud chapter. And I am especially thankful to all the contributors, who have stuck with me through a lengthy and not always predictable process. I hope that they find the final product worthy of all their hard work and patience. Some very fine scholars have contributed to this volume, and I hope that I have done them and their work justice.

Finally, the world is obviously a very different place today than it was when I began work on this book. George W. Bush was not yet president of the United States. The events of September 11 had not yet happened. The meaning of whiteness itself, as a signifier of global hegemony and imperialism, was somehow more abstract than it is for me today. September 11 does appear occasionally in this volume, beginning with my own introduction. Yet the shadow of September 11 also hangs over the book as a whole. As you read these chapters you may find yourself wondering whether a different kind of postcolonial whiteness could have prevented the attacks of September 11, by rendering impossible the kind of entrenched, implacable hatred that inspired them. I have wondered that myself as I read these pages over. I wonder whether the Bush administration’s rhetoric of “freedom” and the “liberation” of Iraq isn’t just the latest version of the colonial civilizing mission: the advanced white society once again presuming to teach other civilizations how to live (even as the soldiers we send to enforce our *neo-colonial* imperatives are disproportionately black and Latino).

I rushed home from that Mayaguez conference to witness the birth of my daughter Sofia, who was born with her mother’s white skin and my dark hair and eyes. My son Diego, born almost four years later, is even paler and a redhead to boot (like his mother). I can only wonder what sorts of complications the appearance of white, redheaded, green-eyed, Mississippi-born Cuban Americans will have on the concept of whiteness as we know it today. Perhaps the whole idea of race will become irrelevant in my children’s lifetime and books such as this one will become obsolete, or at best quaint historical documents. Perhaps the best a book such as this can hope for is paradoxically to contribute to a future in which it will no longer be necessary. One can hope.

ONE

INTRODUCTION: WHITENESS AFTER EMPIRE

ALFRED J. LÓPEZ

In a sentence: the past half century or so has been the first time since the dawn of modernity, since the rise of capitalism and the knitting together of the globe in one unified “system,” that white supremacy has been called seriously into question on a world-historical scale.

—Howard Winant, “White Racial Projects”

[T]o apply the colour white to white people is to ascribe a visible property to a group that thrives also on invisibility.

—Richard Dyer, *White*

The Negro is not. Any more than the white man.

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*

THE PERSISTENCE OF WHITENESS

WHITENESS IS NOT, yet we continue for many reasons to act as though it is. It would seem a simple enough assumption that the end of colonialism ushers in the end of whiteness, or at least of its unrivaled ascendancy. Yet the cultural residues of whiteness linger in the postcolonial world as an ideal, often latently, sometimes not. Although the state of being demonstrably

white remains, as Richard Dyer deftly puts it, “a passport to privilege” (Dyer 1997, 44), and despite the obvious role that the visibility of whiteness—what Satya Mohanty calls the “white man as spectacle” (315)—has played in the colonial context, whiteness itself remains a largely unexamined category. Despite the efforts of scholars such as Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Appiah to portray race generally as a kind of malignant fiction,¹ and calls from Dyer, Ross Chambers, and others to bring greater scrutiny to bear on whiteness as a tacit norm,² whiteness in the postcolonial moment continues to retain much of its status and desirability, if not its overt colonial-era power. Although the two groups approach race from different, and arguably incompatible, directions—the former wishing to do away with race as a category entirely, the latter to render whiteness visible as one racial category among others—they nevertheless share the aims of critiquing the privilege and power associated with whiteness, and exposing the ways in which whiteness has historically used its normative power to suppress and marginalize its others.³ Howard Winant, whose eloquent state-of-the-discipline statement begins this chapter, dates the move to critique white hegemony on a global scale to the period “since World War II, and particularly since the 1960s” during which “*the world has undergone a profound shift in the global logic of race or . . . racial formation*” (Winant 2001, 99), the most significant challenge to global white supremacy since Columbus. But even this globalized challenge, Winant admits, “could not dislodge, but only somewhat weaken, that ferocious tradition of white supremacist world rule” (99). However passionate Fanon’s declarations to the contrary, it seems that rumors of whiteness’s demise have been greatly exaggerated.

Fanon is emphatic in his desire to be seen (and assumedly, read) as “a man, nothing but a man” (Fanon [1952] 1967, 113); yet the impossibility of such a raceless *rapprochement* with the white colonial Other recurs throughout *Black Skin White Masks*. The famous statement in the epigraph, which would apparently disavow both whiteness and its racial other, is framed on the one hand by Fanon’s reference to himself as “the man of color” and on the other by an imperative that both whites and blacks “turn their backs on the inhuman voices which were those of their respective ancestors” (231). The apparent ambivalence of Fanon’s vacillation between the negation and affirmation of race exemplifies a dialectic of race consciousness that has lingered within postcolonial studies into the present moment: on the one hand the humanist impulse to, as Fanon himself puts it, “discover and to love man, wherever he may be” (231) and on the other the drive toward reparations, equity, payback—what elsewhere in *Black Skin White Masks* Fanon calls the former slave’s desire to “*make himself recognized*” (217) through conflict specifically with the erstwhile white master.⁴ In this context, then, it is not merely freedom that the black slave wants, but more specifically a freedom-*from* its subjection to white colonial power—a psychological and ontological freedom that mere national independence does not necessarily bring.

Homi Bhabha recognizes this “sense of division” and “uncertain dark” in Fanon’s writings, and in *Black Skin White Masks* specifically, as the mark of a “transgressive, transitional truth” (Bhabha 1994, 40). Fanon’s foundational postcolonial manifesto proves to be transitional for the same reason that it is so transgressive: the articulation of a particular moment in the dialectic of erstwhile masters and former slaves that exposes both the continuing privilege of whiteness and the hollow sham of the promise of true integration. Bhabha carries over this reading of Fanon into his own theorizations of race and ethnicity, most pointedly in his definition of colonial mimicry as “the desire for . . . *the subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. . . . almost the same but not white*” (Bhabha 86–89).

With the notable exception of Bhabha and a few others, however, postcolonial studies has generally shied away from explicit discussions of race such as those found in Fanon and Bhabha.⁵ Curiously, even those texts that address Fanon’s and/or Bhabha’s writings seldom focus on race. This apparent avoidance of race may stem from the poststructuralist sensibility of much postcolonial writing, with its accompanying aversion to any seemingly oppositional logic and affinity for linguistic and literary, as opposed to sociological, critique. Conversely, the undertheorization of colonial whiteness may be the product of a simple conflation; that is, whiteness in this context may be so closely associated with colonial domination that no further distinction seems necessary or desirable. (Such analyses overlook, of course, the key role of nonwhite colonial elites in consolidating and maintaining colonial and neocolonial power.)⁶ Whatever the reason, postcolonial studies has to date produced relatively little scholarship exploring the relations between race and power, and specifically between whiteness and the consolidation and maintenance of colonial power. Perhaps the most pointed example of this curious “race-blindness” in postcolonial studies appears in Routledge’s *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, arguably the single most comprehensive and widely read survey in the field; in a nearly five hundred-page anthology featuring excerpts from more than eighty texts, the word *race* emerges in only five essays for a total of eight appearances, one in conjunction with *ethnicity* (which merits its own dozen mentions in the volume).⁷

In the United States, however, whiteness studies has emerged within the last ten years as a field that does address relations between race and power within an American studies setting. Very little of this work, however, has focused on the United States in a specifically colonial or postcolonial context, having opted instead for a broader approach to race and ethnicity. Arguably the founding text of American whiteness studies, Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* focuses on the ways in which white cultural discourses reduce representations of blackness to the level of function, as tropes employed in the construction of white identity. Richard Dyer’s *White* refines and develops this iconographic approach to whiteness, and has emerged as an *ur*-text that has generated much commentary and discussion as well as subsequent studies;

certainly it is, with the possible exception of Morrison's text, the most widely cited book-length study in the field. Neither text, however, features any sustained discussion of colonial and/or postcolonial contexts, with the exception of Dyer's very fine chapter on the BBC television serial *The Jewel in the Crown*.⁸

The influence of these canonical texts upon subsequent scholarship has tended on the one hand toward a critical approach that focuses on representation and iconographies of whiteness, in both literary and visual contexts. On the other hand, the ascendancy of Dyer's and Morrison's writings has meant that relatively little scholarship has moved beyond representations of whiteness in Anglo-American culture to the more salient question of how the representational power of whiteness has historically operated in the service of colonial and neocolonial regimes, and has specifically served such regimes in the domination of their nonwhite others.

It is precisely these missing elements in postcolonial and whiteness studies, respectively, that the present volume seeks to address. This collection of essays examines the interrelations between whiteness and the history of European colonialism, as well as the status of whiteness in the contemporary postcolonial world. Together the essays present a range of critical and theoretical responses to two fundamental questions. First: *What happens to whiteness after empire?* What transformations, for example, does the nation's self-image undergo when former colonial subjects return to London or Paris as citizens of the erstwhile "Mother Country"? How do those cultural processes resemble—and how do they diverge from—those experienced by whites of the former oppressing class in South Africa who remain behind in the post-apartheid state, to live and work alongside the newly empowered black majority? How does class impact the ability of white populations to receive their new fellow citizens and subjects?⁹ What happens to whiteness, in other words, after it loses its colonial privileges?

The volume's second central question is perhaps more poignant and difficult: *To what extent do white cultural norms or imperatives remain embedded in the postcolonial or postindependence state as part—acknowledged or not—of the colonial legacy?* Here we may think of any number of colonial-era discourses and practices, from the adoption of the erstwhile mother tongue (whether English, Spanish, French, or some other) as the new national language, to the persistence of color-based socioeconomic caste structures in former colonies such as Jamaica and the Dominican Republic. These examples and many others point to the stubborn persistence of whiteness as a cultural norm in many of the postcolonial world's official and unofficial cultural practices. Further, what emerges in the relation between former colonizers and colonized, now fellow citizens in a postindependence state, is their common dependence upon—and complicity with—the ideology of whiteness, or more specifically of white (hence Western) superiority. Each must now face the unpleasant truth of their own complicity in telling, and believing in, the

cultural lie of colonial whiteness. Such a bitter epiphany, I would argue, is indispensable for the future health of the postindependence state in particular and the postcolonial world as a whole. Such a facing-down of colonial ghosts is crucial to the task of constructing an integrated postcolonial subject.

Whiteness thus represents not only the contents of the colonial unconscious, but the very agent of its own repression: it is that which would simultaneously recast everything else in its own image and banish the scene of the recasting into an originary myth. Thus does the colonizing process displace or “bleach” the precolonial past and replace it with its own cultural imperatives. Each of the volume’s contributors will approach and examine some aspect of these two central questions: on the one hand, whiteness’s radically altered status in the postcolonial world, and on the other its lingering (if not always acknowledged) influence. While there is a great deal of scholarship in postcolonial and whiteness studies individually, relatively little addresses the particular intersections of race and power that help fuel colonialism at every stage. Further, there is currently no book-length text that focuses on this very fertile ground for scholarly study; it is indeed remarkable that none of the best-known postcolonial scholars have attempted such a work. One important task for the present volume, then, is to make a thorough assessment of this undertheorized convergence of postcoloniality and whiteness as an important and burgeoning field of study.

It is telling that whiteness studies has concentrated its efforts mostly on the United States, with a few exceptions (most notably Dyer’s work), making it seem something of an opposite number to postcolonialism. While the latter has recently come under criticism precisely for its collective myopia regarding U.S. involvement in historical colonialisms and the neocolonial relationship it maintains today with many of its minority populations,¹⁰ whiteness studies has for the most part declined to explore its various and significant points of convergence with the postcolonial. Given the growth of whiteness studies in the past decade, and the proliferation of published studies examining whiteness across a remarkable range of cultural contexts, it is both significant and curious that European colonial whiteness—arguably whiteness at its apex, in its most ascendant and global powerful form—has not loomed large in these analyses. One may rightly wonder whether, to introduce a variation on a concept I have introduced elsewhere, whiteness and its lingering, if somewhat latent, hegemonic influence over much of the world does not occupy some as-yet-unexamined corner of the “colonial unconscious”: a continuing malaise that many postcolonial whites (and non-whites) intuit but few are willing to address.¹¹

A converse but equally instructive absence arises in postcolonial studies: although so much postcolonial criticism and theory thematizes its counterhegemonic writings in terms of the marginalized racial, ethnic, and cultural identities of the colonized, relatively little space has been devoted to the dominant colonial cultures as racial and ethnic imperatives—and

specifically to whiteness itself as a cultural imperative functioning in the service of empire. The signifier *whiteness*, then, functions in this sense as the marker or index of the traces of colonial legacies that yet lie latent (but not dormant) in the postcolonial world's own "colonial unconscious," which it owes to itself to uncover and interrogate. I suspect that much of postcolonial studies' inability to address whiteness as a subject position stems from the race-based meta-opposition that grounds much of its thinking: white as colonizing, colonial/nonwhite as colonized, postcolonial.¹²

Such a founding principle, left unexamined, can and does fuel much of the misguided critical polemic over what or who is or is not authentically postcolonial. That European colonialism was a white, implicitly and explicitly racist undertaking should by now be beyond argument. What is just as obvious, yet too often overlooked, is that whiteness continues to play a role in the postcolonial world, that there are white subjects, cultural groups, who think of themselves as postcolonial. The point is that there remains in the early twenty-first century a *postcolonial* whiteness struggling to come into being, or rather a number of post-empire, post-mastery whitenesses attempting to examine themselves in relation to histories of oppression and hegemony of their others in order to learn the difficult, never-mastered skill that Heidegger used to call *Mitsein*: Being-with. It is this learning of a postcolonial *Mitsein*, this being-with others after the fact of domination, abuse, and outright murder of them, that constitutes the ground of the most important negotiation between erstwhile colonizers and colonized that postcolonial studies can offer. One philosophy for the white subject wishing to escape from the necessity of referring to a "universal" privileged white—that is, how to distinguish the new antiracist white subject from its erstwhile racist "self"—is to work through the relation to nonwhiteness phenomenologically, as an intersubjective relation. Thus my own recourse here and in my previous work¹³ to the Heideggerian *Mitsein*, a "being-with" that undoes white solipsism and escapes the ontological dead end of colonialism by changing the script of the Hegelian Lordship-Bondage relation, or at least its outcome.

It is in the interest of helping foster precisely this spirit of intersubjectivity and mutual recognition between postcolonial whiteness and its others—once slaves and colonial subjects, now peers and fellow citizens—that I have assembled the present volume. In uncovering hegemonic whiteness not only in its historical colonial forms but in its contemporary neo- and postcolonial traces, I and the other contributors to this book hope to contribute not to an undoing or annihilation of whiteness, as some would have it,¹⁴ which in any case would be as impossible as any other such project of cultural "purification" (as our century of failed ethnic cleansings and "final solutions" has amply taught us), but the inscription of a new script or narrative of whiteness: a post-mastery whiteness that would be empowered to enter into this relation of *Mitsein* with its others in an barely glimpsed, emergent postcolonial world.

WHITENESS AND THE POSTCOLONIAL

If postcolonialism can be said to represent any single principle or embrace any single critical project, it would be a critique of the West's historical domination of its others, the corresponding assumption of its cultural superiority over those others, and especially the discourses that enable both. This definition is undeniably broad and allows for all kinds of divergences among methods, ideologies, even competing literary and critical canons.¹⁵ Yet for all the irregularities and inconsistencies that often surface among any gathering of texts under the heading *postcolonial*, the category itself emerges from a particular institutional history: namely, the grouping of writers and writings in English departments under the term "Commonwealth" (Mukherjee 1996, 5–6). As I have pointed out elsewhere, aside from the continuation of England as a conceptual center in such a curriculum, such a framework also willy-nilly maintains the oppositional structure of the old colonialism: England as center/metropolis, the "Commonwealth" as margin or province always read in the context (if not the shadow) of the erstwhile mother country.¹⁶

But we must distinguish here among the various approaches and methodologies—among postcolonialisms, as it were—currently existing somewhat incongruously under the heading *postcolonial*. There has been no shortage of critics who find the term too overdetermined, too ubiquitous to be useful; Aijaz Ahmad, to cite my favorite example, considers "postcolonialism" a term that "designates far too many things, all at once" (Ahmad 1995, 9). The term *postcolonial* paradoxically suffers from the very flexibility that has rendered it useful in such a variety of historical and cultural contexts. The very overdetermination of the term, in other words, its very inflation as a signifier, comes as a quite mimetic consequence of its efficacy; it fits so many contexts, I would argue, precisely because there are so few places on the globe where European colonialism did not leave its mark. Nevertheless, for present purposes it would be useful to have a roadmap of the various theoretical "camps" that make up this unwieldy field of study, in order to better indicate the particular forms of postcolonial scholarship I am interested in engaging here.

Several postcolonial scholars have attempted within the last few years to "speak for" the field to the extent of naming its referent; or put another way, postcolonial studies has now itself enough of a history for a number of scholars to attempt to write something resembling a poetics of the field, its primary texts, practices, and methods. It is instructive of the difficulty of this task, however, that the two most prominent such attempts—from eminent postcolonialists Gayatri Spivak and Robert Young—approach it from almost diametrically opposed directions. Spivak's epic *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* is explicitly indebted and clearly committed to a typically (for Spivak) eclectic poststructuralist approach to postcolonialism, yet its chapter headings examine the field in the broadest possible terms: "Philosophy," "Literature,"

"History," "Culture." Spivak's *Critique* constitutes an attempt to engage these established, broadly defined disciplines while defending the continued efficacy of deconstruction in the service of postcolonial goals, aims, and concerns.¹⁷ On the other hand, Young's more recent *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* aims to do precisely what its subtitle suggests: offer a more conventional, linear exposition of postcolonialism as an epistemologically discreet category unto itself, with a specific history, ideology, and so on.¹⁸ The only exceptions to this approach appear in the book's final section on theoretical formation, which displays a certain eclecticism even as it attempts to define an overarching theoretical matrix for postcolonial theory, and in the more personal preface and epilogue that frame the volume.¹⁹

But it is not only methodology that distinguishes these two texts, but the very object of their disparate analyses. Young's historicist approach unambiguously defines postcolonialism as the culmination of a third world Marxism born of anticolonial struggle, and thus focuses its attention on explicitly revolutionary figures such as Fanon, Che Guevara, and Mao Zedong. Conversely, Spivak's tireless (and exhausting) deconstruction of postcolonialism and the field's customary understanding of itself never settles for such a comprehensive or straightforward formulation (indeed the book's subtitle, "Toward a History of the Vanishing Present," provides an early hint as to its approach), favoring instead a close analysis of a handful of key texts. Also, in marked contrast to Young's predilection for third world anticolonials Spivak opts to interrogate the continental philosophical canon—Kant, Hegel, Marx, whom she reads not as ancestors or founders of postcolonialism but as "remote discursive precursors"—as well as a diverse group of literary texts running from Bronte and Jean Rhys to Baudelaire and Kipling to J. M. Coetzee. Even Spivak's historical analysis (in a chapter entitled, somewhat misleadingly, "History") resists the kind of historicized account that Young's book seems to strive for; the chapter seems more preoccupied with placing postcolonial India within a larger global context than with offering any broader history of postcolonial thought itself as an object, as Young's text is at pains to do.

Although the two volumes cannot avoid mentioning some of the same names (most notably Marx, Foucault, and Derrida), they take divergent approaches to these apparently shared interests. Although space will not allow an exhaustive study of these interests and their presentation in the Young and Spivak, we can briefly examine each text's presentation of Derrida and deconstruction. Aside from a doggedly poststructuralist approach within the main text, Spivak's appendix "The Setting to Work of Deconstruction" concludes the book with a concise genealogy of deconstruction as a critical practice with special attention to the "ethical turn" in Derrida, or what Spivak calls "affirmative deconstruction," whose originary movement Spivak traces back to 1968 and "The Ends of Man" (Spivak 425–26). This brief appendix or ghost limb to Spivak's text seems to function as a defense of the

ethical efficacy and “responsible action” (428) of deconstruction in the act of its “setting to work” (427, 431). Conversely, Young’s study treats Derrida very much as a historical subject and even as an acquaintance of the author; parts of it seem written to Derrida himself, and refer to him in the second person. The chapter subtitled “Derrida in Algeria,” in fact, focuses squarely on Derrida’s personal history as an Algerian-born Jew, a fact that Spivak’s more text-centered analysis refers to only fleetingly and only at the end of her appendix, as if an afterthought.²⁰ Although both texts seek to demonstrate poststructuralism’s relevance for anticolonial struggle, Young’s chapter makes it a particular point to portray poststructuralism itself as “one echo of the violence of Algeria playing itself out in an insurrection against the calm philosophical and political certainties of the metropolis” (Young 2001, 412), thus historicizing the entire enterprise of deconstruction by positing the founder’s personal subalterity and “experience” of anticolonial struggle as its very precondition—not a particularly Derridean critical move, and certainly not one that the deconstructivist Spivak would be likely to make herself.²¹

The point here is to demonstrate how even texts that seek to represent some sort of conclusive or overarching picture of postcolonialism as a discrete field of study cannot be reconciled to a single set of critical practices or assumptions, or even a canon of readings. If two of postcolonialism’s leading critics can’t even agree on a canon of key texts in their respective poetics of the field, then any critical enterprise calling itself “postcolonial whiteness studies” would be well advised to remain wary of the dangers inherent to relying on general references to “the postcolonial” or assumptions about its contents, or of glossing over the very heterogeneous nature of what has always been a contentious field of study. One common result of such overgeneralizations has been a tendency to cast postcolonialism in terms of an anglocentric model, which maintains and even reinforces England’s place at the center of the post-empire on which the sun apparently never sets. As I have argued elsewhere at some length, one of postcolonial studies’ ongoing flaws has been a prevalent notion of the field that congratulates itself on its “cultural diversity” while its arguably most widely read critical anthology continues to define its object of study as “those literatures written in English in formerly colonized societies” (Ashcroft 1995, 1). A study of postcolonial whiteness that accepts this definition of postcolonialism would itself be guilty of uncritically privileging whitenesses that speak English, and even of reinforcing the grim fact of English as the world’s preeminent white language.²²

Even the more commendable efforts toward an encapsulating theory or poetics of the postcolonial, culminating in Young’s and Spivak’s recent efforts, have had to contend with three areas of significant theoretical difficulty: questions of *epistemology*, *agency*, and *hybridity and hegemony*. I have discussed these issues in some detail elsewhere under slightly different headings;²³ here I will limit myself to a brief summary of each general problem. Each of these objections, as we will see, carries over to different degrees and in varying

forms into whiteness studies, and thus any commingling of whiteness and postcoloniality will need to maintain an awareness of them.

The objections to the term *postcolonial* as constituting a discrete epistemological category do not only center on questions of semantics and historicity (when this “post-“ is supposed to begin, what distinguishes it from its root word “-colonial,” and so on).²⁴ More importantly, epistemological critiques of the postcolonial focus on the larger question of the field’s self-definition and its apparent inability to produce its referent as a stable object for its study. What such critiques, most famously Ella Shohat’s, emphasize is what they see as an unresolved tension between an abstracted philosophical distinction and a more temporally concrete historical one. Postcolonialism seeks to encompass a generalized condition of colonization and its aftermath yet also wants to engage in specific but disparate historical and cultural contexts, from the Algerian War of Independence to the Cuban Revolution to cultural practices such as Indian *sati*; even Bhabha’s most rarefied theoretical interventions attempt such engagements, albeit in ways that critics such as Shohat would still consider problematic.

Critiques of the status of agency in postcolonial studies, or rather of some postcolonial critics’ formulation of the subaltern and its possibilities for agency, take a more pointedly ideological form. The most virulent of these critiques have accused postcolonialism broadly (too broadly, given the diversity of the actual field) of producing a discourse that privileges cultural and linguistic differences over the concrete historical and economic conditions of colonization and its aftermath, thus ignoring what Benita Parry calls “the voice of the native” in her struggles against oppression and reducing actual anticolonial struggles to a theoretical *techné*, or what Parry dismisses as mere “devices circumventing and interrogating colonial authority” (Parry 1987, 43). Parry and others assert that such critical practices actually work *against* the agency of subaltern groups and the emergence of their “voice,” and further Western hegemony, by privileging the discourses of third world elite academics such as Bhabha and Spivak and their specious “representation” of the subaltern. It is characteristic of the epistemological paradoxes I have just described as immanent to postcolonialism that the very inclusion of critiques such as Parry’s and Kwame Appiah’s in so many discussions of the postcolonial actually undermine their railings against what E. San Juan Jr. calls “postcolonial doctrine” (San Juan 1998, 6), or at least co-opts them by demonstrating both the significance of the subject to have attracted such a range of critical studies and its flexibility in accommodating them—in short, of the diversity of argument and critical method that can and does exist under the banner of “postcolonial studies.”²⁵

Finally, the critique of “hybridity” as a privileged, even celebrated concept within postcolonial studies has argued that such approaches diminish the field’s efficacy as an oppositional anticolonial discourse. Such critiques argue that the emphasis on hybridity, syncretism, and ambivalence in

postcolonial studies constitutes an implicit rejection of oppositional narratives of resistance and liberation, most prominently third world Marxism, and an embrace of the concepts and language of poststructuralism and postmodernism. (Of course, this critique is also part of the larger polemic over the political efficacy of deconstruction that appears in Spivak and to a lesser extent Young.) Of course this objection does not equally apply to all postcolonial discourses; Bhabha's deconstructivist approach is more susceptible to this kind of critique than the more apparently politically committed stance of, say, Edward Said.²⁶ Nevertheless, what is at stake in this critique is whether the questions that a certain type of postcolonial theory has raised—about difference and hybridity, about both colonizing and colonized subject positions in relation to hegemonic colonial discourses of power and their various neocolonial manifestations—contribute to anticolonial struggle or distract from it. According to this type of general objection, the writing of theory does not necessarily constitute an adequate form of "resistance" (a point that Bhabha pointedly denies in "The Commitment to Theory").²⁷ Consequently, this privileging of theoretical difference over "actual" resistance and struggle belies postcolonial studies' own shortcomings as an anti-colonial praxis.

Notwithstanding the flaws that these general critiques have exposed within postcolonialism, the turn toward what we now recognize as postcolonial studies has sought to break the literary, cultural, and ideological hegemony that white English and other European literatures have historically maintained over their nonwhite and near-white others. Taking its cue from poststructuralist theories, much postcolonial scholarship seeks to undo the binary thinking of "colonizer/colonized" and other such essentialized oppositional categories—including the concept of "race" itself—and expose the ways they function to perpetuate the cultural dominance of the West and the marginality of its colonized and once-colonized others. Further, as I have argued elsewhere, in the most general sense postcolonial studies seeks to both interrogate the colonial discourses of the past and provide analyses or articulations of the diasporic, migratory condition that is perhaps the most salient characteristic of the postcolonial world.²⁸ Even given the theoretical difficulties that critiques of the postcolonial have indicated, postcolonial studies even in its present form remains a body of work that strives to move beyond the limitations of an economic or historicist approach to encompass issues of class, gender, race, ethnicity, language, and geographical location—in short, all of the tangible and intangible factors that constitute the shaping and maintenance of nations and peoples. Marxist critiques tend to miss the crucial point that domination is not only about economic subjugation but also penetrates the minds and bodies of the oppressed, a point that both San Juan's book and, in whiteness studies, David Roediger's class-centered critique fail to grasp.²⁹

Further, postcolonialism doesn't neatly or without violence fit any dialectical model of humanist progress; it is thus inaccurate to treat the field as

a form of idealism, because it is possible only in the most general terms to identify the multitudinous discourses existing under the banner of the “postcolonial” as a single, easily summarized ideal or essential horizon of expectations. To dismiss the postcolonial as another failed “end of either history or ideology,” as San Juan does (San Juan 14), or reduce it to a grouping of underdeveloped “national allegories” that lag behind “first-world cultural development,” as Fredric Jameson so notoriously does (Jameson 1986, 65, 69) is to forget that postcolonial studies draws much of its strength from the critique, largely learned from poststructuralist thought, of precisely such categories of social and cultural development. The most compelling writings in whiteness studies, from Dyer’s *White* to Frankenberg’s writings to Wray and Newitz’s *White Trash* volume, exemplify this resistance to totalized notions of race and ethnicity and tendency toward what Michel Foucault has called “an autonomous, non-centralized kind of theoretical production,”³⁰ a critical orientation largely derived from the same theoretical precursors that inform much postcolonial criticism.

Finally it is worth pointing out, if only in brief, that the by-now familiar criticism of theoretical interventions informed by structuralist and poststructuralist approaches—which have been somewhat pejoratively called “constructionist” approaches—does not form an automatic or necessary opposition with criticisms that claim a more overt historical or activist engagement. Deconstructivist approaches to postcolonialism, or to whiteness, do not automatically or necessarily represent an evasion of the world in their analyses of colonial discourses, although the danger of a sort of solipsism is always present. The choice is not, as Robyn Wiegman’s recent critique of whiteness studies would have it, between agency and constructivism. Although Wiegman sees what she calls “an emphasis on agency that situates a theoretically humanist subject at the center of social constructionist analysis” as a “contradictory” effect of current approaches to whiteness studies (Wiegman 1999, 135), I see no necessary contradiction in theorizing a subject that is aware of its own constructedness in terms of constitutive discursive influences yet wishes to project itself as a human agent in what is, after all, a human struggle played out on the level not only of state and collectivity but also (and especially) of individuals.³¹ Thus, it is not necessarily or automatically a contradiction in terms to argue for the social constructedness of whiteness as a colonial imperative while positing a subject—who is after all, the concrete focus of such imperatives—as a human agent who must contend with and strive to overthrow them. Such a subject and agent necessarily acts out of a sense of historical and cultural specificity, and both postcolonial and whiteness studies are unavoidably historiographic enterprises to the extent that they are concerned with hegemonic discourses and their effects on subjects.

To the extent that postcolonial critiques, however well intentioned, eliminate race as an object of inquiry, they neglect a crucial dimension of the

colonial ideology. One does not make whiteness as a malignant colonial ideology go away by simply showing how it deconstructs itself, any more than one can do away with the concept of the subject itself by such maneuverings. One can and should, however, strive to show both how whiteness does not essentially, irrevocably come with the kinds of privileges that it now enjoys, and how the privileges of being white have always come at the expense of those who are not. The point is not to undo or “abolish” or destroy whiteness, as the “race traitor” school of whiteness studies argues, since this sort of ethnic self-cleansing (literal or otherwise) is neither desirable nor possible.³² John Brown, a favorite “race traitor” example, never renounced his whiteness, symbolically or otherwise. Neither has Breyten Breytenbach, the self-identifying “Albino Terrorist” who has written so eloquently about his years in prison for fighting against the Apartheid regime in South Africa.³³ There is no need to resort to the self-sacrificing, self-destructing white male rebel as a trope of the new postcolonial whiteness, a paradoxically self-serving figure who would allow whites to retain their central status as “emancipators” (à la Lawrence of Arabia, dancing across the traintops) and thus their power and privilege.

On the other hand, one effective way to administer the desired privilege-ectomy to the white subject is to show how its position within the colonial society is neither uniformly dominant nor stable, but contingent upon a performance of white power. The reflection on this point offered by George Orwell, as a ruminative colonist in “Shooting an Elephant,” is instructive: “A sahib has got to act like a sahib. . . . He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it” (Orwell [1936] 1970, 269). Here Orwell reveals the fictiveness of white dominance precisely as a performance, an act that must constantly be kept up (here again is Mohanty’s “white man as spectacle”), as Orwell’s colonial policeman is compelled to murder the elephant in question for no other reason than to make a show of white decisiveness and authority in front of the natives (271). Once the authority and superiority of whiteness reveals itself to be a fiction, the revoking of its privileges cannot be far behind.

The postcolonial critique of whiteness cannot end with the defrocking of the latter, however, for the simple reason that whiteness remains as part of the postcolonial world. White settlers in the United States, Australia, South Africa, Canada, and other areas not only did not disappear or leave upon the establishment of these nations, but were in each instance instrumental to their founding. Such situations do not fit Fanon’s infamous description of anti-colonial revolutions as “a total, complete, and absolute substitution” (Fanon 1963, 35), because whiteness remains behind in the new postcolonial state, in the form of both actual white subjects (former colonizers turned citizens) and the cultural and ideological apparatuses that continue to reflect the values of the colonial regime—a national language or religion, educational system, government infrastructure, and so on. The postcolonial critique of whiteness must thus move beyond narrow

anticolonialism or reverse racism to ask whether a new relation to whiteness is possible after empire—to construct, in effect, a whiteness without privilege, while still acknowledging the lingering traces of white normativity that remains more or less latent in the postcolonial world as an irreducible part of the colonial legacy.

WHITENESS AND AMERICAN STUDIES

Whiteness studies in the American studies context begins precisely with this premise of exposing or undoing whiteness as a tacitly privileged subject position. This movement toward rendering whiteness both visible and subject to critique—that is, to challenge both its invisibility and its (unspoken) claims to an essential superiority—characterizes what Mike Hill calls the “‘first wave’ of white critique” (Hill 1997, 2). This whiteness made ethnic or “strange,”³⁴ a whiteness thus rendered “examinable,” as Chambers might put it, marks the success of this first wave of whiteness studies at forcing a moment of reckoning upon its once-invisible object. If the movement that Toni Morrison has described as “a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters” (Morrison 1992, 12) has succeeded in bringing unprecedented attention to the lingering presence of white privilege, it has also made it necessary to up the critical ante. If whiteness has been made to see itself—or more accurately, to see itself as others see it, have seen it—it has now reached a moment of crisis. No longer able to portray itself as either benign or “normal” (in the sense of constituting a norm), whiteness must now reckon with its own history of aggression and hegemony.

Hill’s introduction to his edited collection on whiteness focuses on the new whiteness as a “terror,” and invokes the Oklahoma City bombings among other examples to illustrate the ways in which late twentieth-century whiteness has tried to distance itself from its more extreme articulations.³⁵ Hill sees this emergence of a “‘terrifyingly’ ordinary” whiteness—that is, the tension between the extremity of white supremacist actions and the paradoxical recourse to a sort of populist ordinariness (or in other words, the claim to whiteness as the claim to normalcy, and vice versa) as characteristic of a “second wave” of whiteness studies (3). Yet to grasp the full extent of the impact that the first wave of whiteness scholars has made, it is necessary to move beyond individual acts of white terrorism (Hill also discusses the bombing at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta) to a more broadly ontological analysis. What will happen to normative whiteness now that it has begun to gauge the horrors it has perpetrated on its others, and begins to terrorize even itself? This is a moment of reckoning whose full impact has been postponed by the nearly incomprehensible horror of 9/11. Now whiteness has a new, nonwhite threat to rally itself against, and thus the question of its own implication in and responsibility for helping to create the global political

conditions that brought the attack about is deferred, as is the question of why the United States has enemies in the first place. Although the 9/11 attacks were not directly about race, and American whiteness not the target—had it been so the terrorists would surely not have chosen New York, arguably the United States' most multicultural city—certainly the rise in violence directed at Arab Americans, as well as much of our public policy, especially that of racial profiling, would indicate that both the American government and a significant portion of its population do see the attack and subsequent conflict in racial terms.³⁶

The effect of this shift in focus, from the white terrorists within to the Arab ones without (and within) has the effect, I think, of deferring white America's inevitable moment(s) of reckoning with itself and its historically wronged others. By rallying around the flag and defending "freedom," whites in America can indulge in the temporary distraction allowed by a specious patriotic "color-blindness"; anyone introducing the least divisive issue, including questions about race, into the post-9/11 public arena is accused of being unpatriotic or worse.³⁷ Whiteness thus attempts to generate its own *différance* by projection or sleight-of-hand—the matter of why America was singled out for such an attack is both deferred and made different, and the specter of white terror, both at home and abroad, temporarily fades. Yet now that the critique of whiteness has rendered it visible, and thus subject to critique, the question of "What now?"—what we might call the question of the question of whiteness—is irrevocable.

If then, as Gregory Jay asserts, whiteness studies is the "ghost haunting multiculturalism and critical race studies" (Jay 2002, 1), it has also brought Euro-American whiteness to what we might provisionally call a crisis of recognition. For perhaps the first time since its invention some few hundred years ago,³⁸ whiteness finds itself to some extent caught in the other's gaze; it has come to be aware of itself as a race-object among other race-objects, or at least as an entity that can be and is apprehended that way by the other's gaze. This new and uncomfortable condition—what, borrowing from Sartre, we might call a "whiteness for-itself"—also begins to form an uneasy state of being-with (*Mitsein*) as it learns to be looked at by its others. This *Mitsein*, which is half of Martin Heidegger's famous distinction in *Being and Time* between Being-with and Dasein-with (*Mitsein und Mitdasein*), emphasizes both the interdependence of subjectivities and the indispensability of this intersubjective relation for being. Heidegger's division of "Being-in-the-world" into three distinct moments, the third of which, "being," is the being-with, makes clear that the fundamental characteristic of being is precisely its being *with* others.³⁹ This dependence upon the other for the subject's being makes this relation both fluid and radically contingent. For if what constitutes whiteness is in fact a transcendental relation to its others—if, to put it in another context, as Morrison claims, it is possible "to discover, through a closer look at literary 'blackness,' the nature—even the cause—of literary

‘whiteness’ ” (9)—then clearly the truly intersubjective encounter with the Other must constitute a moment of reckoning and of accountability. As Vron Ware explains in her analysis of post-empire England, “The postwar migration of workers and their families from the former colonies involved a reckoning with ideas about “race” and history and culture derived from the past” (Ware 2001, 208). Certainly such moments as Ware describes are in the end always partial and localized. The question of whiteness itself, whiteness qua whiteness, is never the immediate issue, thus rendering all such moments, whether billed as *rapprochement*, Truth and Reconciliation, War Crimes Tribunals, etc., part of the series of *tuchés*—in Lacanian terms, one in the string of missed encounters with the Real that nevertheless keep the subject locked into a dialectic of desire and demand with the Other.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, as Sartre observes in his writings on the Heideggerian *Mitsein*,

The Other is the *ex-centric limit* which contributes to the constitution of my being. He [*sic*] is the test of my being inasmuch as he throws me outside of myself toward structures which at once both escape me and define me; it is this test which originally reveals the Other to me. (Sartre [1947] 1956, 244–45)

Learning to see a whiteness that, in Sartrean terms, is suddenly externalized and thrown “outside of itself” toward others who would both “escape and define” it—or in other words rendering whiteness visible (and thus strange) and subject to critique—is only the first step, as Hill correctly sees. The real action is not in bringing whiteness to reckoning, but in what happens next. And what happens to whiteness next, especially in the postcolonial moment, is what this book is all about.

POSTCOLONIAL WHITENESS

In my previous work I have outlined certain categories or conditions under which such a postcolonial critique of whiteness might proceed: the concept of whiteness respectively as cultural aesthetic, ontological relation, and cultural history.⁴¹ For present purposes, however, it may be more useful to address specific points of convergence between postcolonial and whiteness studies. Given that neither of these fields of study can be glossed in any meaningful way as a stable or homogeneous entity, we can still identify certain problems or questions that various forms of these disciplines hold in common. For the purposes of the present study, we may identify at least four such points of convergence: (1) the concept of whiteness as a cultural hegemon, (2) the history of the spread of hegemonic whiteness through colonialism, (3) a broadening of the comparative focus of the debate on whiteness

beyond a strictly U.S. model, and (4) a growing awareness within postcolonial studies of the United States itself as an imperial power.

Although what Wiegman calls “the use of class as the transfer point between looking white and believing you are white” (135) is not universally applicable, as she argues in her critique of class-based whiteness studies, it is undoubtedly an effective point of departure for deconstructing white cultural imperatives—especially as they manifest in nonwhite bourgeois communities, of which there are no shortage in the postcolonial world: Cuban Americans, Indian Brahmins, Afro-Jamaican bourgeoisie—the list goes on.⁴² What these and other such groups share is an investment in whiteness to some degree or other as an indispensable component of their own upward mobility within their respective societies, which each group retains as part of its own particular legacy of colonialism. This is arguably the most apparent point of convergence, and perhaps the most poignant, between whiteness and postcolonial studies: the example of nonwhites not “looking white” but nevertheless “believing [they] are white,” claiming superiority by virtue of their relative whiteness and establishing economic and cultural hegemony over other less-privileged groups on racial grounds.

Thus, to cite just one example from personal experience, the Cuban American professor who some years ago at my dissertation defense objected to my reading Cuban literature and culture in opposition to “the West,” arguing that Latin Americans were as “Western” as any North American. Antonio Gramsci has pointed out in a different context that while terms such as “East” and “West” are “arbitrary and conventional, that is historical constructions,” the terms have nevertheless “finished up indicating specific relations between different cultural complexes” (Gramsci 447). The crystallization of “East” and “West” as terms in a fixed opposition of essences comes for Gramsci out of “the point of view of the European cultured classes, who, as a result of their world-wide hegemony have caused them to be accepted everywhere” (447). So while my former professor’s argument may be geographically true, it strikes me today as a bit ingenuous: Being “Western” in this context has less to do with where one sits on the map than with one’s relation to a colonial history in which “Western-ness” is bound up with both colonial dominance *and* whiteness.

Over the last two decades, however, under the assault of postcolonial and more recently whiteness studies, this *concept of whiteness as a cultural hegemon* has found itself increasingly subject to interrogation. The idea of whiteness as a cultural aesthetic norm combines with the idea of whiteness as a desirable and even necessary trait for colonized subjects who wish to achieve class mobility and financial success in a colonized (or formerly colonized) society. This tandem of whiteness as both aesthetically desirable and pragmatically necessary begins to be exposed as a product of the so-called civilizing mission of colonialism. The effect of the colonial sham on the individual level is a subject who simultaneously identifies with the white