

DANE KENNEDY

THE IMPERIAL HISTORY WARS

Debating the British Empire



B L O O M S B U R Y

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Introduction

The British imperial past seems to stir up a new public controversy almost every month. In August 2016, it was a tweet by Conservative member of Parliament Heather Wheeler, claiming that the “British Empire,” miraculously resurrected from its grave, was ahead of the “Rest of World” in the Summer Olympics medal count. In May 2016, it was Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau’s official apology for the Komagata Maru incident, named after the Japanese ship loaded with Sikh immigrants that was prohibited entry to Canada a hundred years ago. In April 2016 it was now foreign secretary Boris Johnson’s provocative assertion that US president Barack Obama’s “part-Kenyan” heritage had imbued him with an “ancestral dislike” of the British Empire. In February 2016 it was the high-profile campaign by Oxford students to remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes from its perch in Oriel College. This had been preceded in May 2015 by an Oxford Union debate about whether Britain owed reparations to India for its colonial subjugation, which provoked a heated exchange in the British and Indian press. And in March 2015 students at the University of Cape Town had generated international attention and inspired their counterparts at Oxford by launching the “Rhodes Must Go” campaign, which led to the removal of Rhodes’s statue from their campus after a prolonged struggle.

What are we to make of these and other controversies that connect the British imperial past to the present? Can they be dismissed as the last flickers of nostalgia or, alternatively, outrage against an empire that is fading from public memory? If so, why have so many people—not just Britons but Canadians, Indians, South Africans, and others—felt compelled to actively pontificate and agitate on these issues? Can they not indicate instead that the imperial past is not truly past, but endures as a point of departure for making sense of the present? While the British Empire no longer exists, its afterlife lingers on, and, indeed, its relevance to contemporary concerns seems resurgent.

One way to measure this resurgence is to conduct a Google Ngram metadata search of the words “empire” and “imperial.” If we track their usage over the past fifty years, what we see is a parabolic pattern. Starting in the 1960s, with decolonization reaching its climax, “empire” and “imperial” appeared with far greater frequency than they would do over the next couple of decades. The trend lines began to turn upward again in the 1990s, and from 2004 there has been a noticeable spike in the use of “empire” and “imperial.”

Academic interest in British imperial history has followed much the same pattern. My own career as a historian of the British imperial world began in the midst of the Ngram's terminological trough. The subject attracted little attention in the 1970s and 1980s. Those historians who did study the empire stayed close to familiar shores, trawling increasingly depleted fisheries for their evidence and analysis. By the 1990s, however, newcomers had arrived on the scene, sailing into deeper waters that offered richer returns. Fleets of vessels were soon plying these imperial seas, each seeking to assert its own dominance and drive out its rivals. They flew the flags of postcolonial studies, subaltern studies, the new imperial history, settler colonial studies, the British World, and other piratical projects. To strain this metaphor still further, they transformed a once tranquil, even stagnant, backwater into a stormy, turbulent sea. They created what can be called the imperial history wars.

This book seeks to make sense of these wars. It is the product of several decades' worth of reading and writing about the increasingly large and varied scholarship concerning the British imperial past. The ramifying nature of this scholarship, which has broadened the scope of historical inquiry from political, military, and economic concerns to social, cultural, and epistemological ones, bringing historians into dialogue with literary scholars, anthropologists, geographers, and specialists in other fields, has meant that any examination of the subject must necessarily be a running commentary, sensitive to shifting contexts and concerns. I offer no apologies, then, for including in this volume a number of previously published essays, each of them highlighting a particular point of rupture in the ongoing debate about the British imperial past. I also include several newly written essays, which take up topics that have generated a great deal of interest among imperial historians in recent years. Taken as a whole, this collection is intended to trace the transformation of British imperial history from its rather staid—some might say stagnant—state of affairs in the 1970s and early 1980s into the intellectually vibrant and politically charged subject it has become today. As John Darwin recently observed, “there has never been a better time to study the history of empire—or write about it.”¹

I have sought in these pages to adopt an independent, often skeptical stance toward the various schools of scholarship that have contributed to these debates about British imperial history. To be sure, I have preferences for particular methods, approaches, and interpretations, as will become evident in the chapters that follow, but my intent throughout has been to carry out historiographical reviews that offer informed and engaged assessments of the state of the field and establish the larger contexts within which that field has taken shape. Some of the chapters examine the challenges that postcolonial studies, the new imperial history, and other self-proclaimed intellectual projects have posed for the standard historiography, and especially for the historical consensus that became enshrined in the multivolume *Oxford History of the British Empire*. Other chapters review recent scholarship on

subjects ranging from exploration to settler colonialism to decolonization, tracking shifts in the terms of debate and exposing points of conflict. Still others reflect on the comparative uses of British imperial history, especially as they relate to the United States' recent role in the world. My overriding aim throughout the book has been to bring to these topics a spirit of intellectual curiosity and critical engagement.

It is impossible, however, to make sense of the scholarly debates that have transformed the historiographical landscape—or seascape, if you will—of the British Empire in recent decades without also acknowledging and examining the ways in which these debates have resonated with and responded to current events and concerns. It is this aspect of the imperial history wars that relates most directly to those public controversies I noted in the opening paragraph of this Introduction. Historians' renewed interest in the British imperial past cannot be divorced from their heightened attentiveness to its contemporary echoes in world affairs. As the book's concluding group of chapters suggest, these echoes have reverberated with particular force in the hotly contested assessments of the US-led coalition's invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, which continue to haunt the political scene both in America and in Britain. The past's echoes in the present can also be heard in the debates that raged around the referendums on Scottish independence and Brexit. Still, this resurgent interest in the British imperial past started well before any of these events occurred, and it requires, as I argue in Chapter 9, an examination of an earlier, more deeply rooted set of issues.

Historians are no more immune to presentist preoccupations than anyone else. The questions we ask about the past are invariably informed by the environments we inhabit and the challenges we confront. In *How Empire Shaped Us*, a collection of autobiographical essays I recently coedited with Antoinette Burton, various historians whose work has dealt in one way or another with British imperial history take up this issue in the contexts of their own lives and intellectual interests.² They reflect on the connections between their personal career trajectories and the broader social and political forces that shaped their academic interest in, and approaches to, the past.

Let me offer my own experience by way of example. I was drawn to British imperial history as an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley when the Vietnam War was at its height. For those of us who protested the war, it was a shameful act of imperialist aggression by the United States. Studying British imperial history helped me make sense of this traumatic conflict. I went on to pursue a doctorate in the field and selected as a dissertation topic the experiences of white settlers in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia. My choice came at a time when the renegade white regime of Rhodesia was entering the terminal stage of its struggle against African guerillas and international sanctions. Rhodesia became the black-majority-ruled country of Zimbabwe in 1980, the year before I received my doctorate. Thus, imperialism and colonialism seemed very much present and

meaningful to me in the years I trained to become a historian of the British imperial world.

There was nothing particularly unconventional about that training, though it did occur at a healthy distance from the orthodoxy that pervaded the field's Oxbridge heartland. Only in the early 1990s did I become aware that the imperial past as I understood it was under assault—from anthropologists who were giving increasingly critical scrutiny to their own discipline's origins in empire, from feminist historians who were turning imperial history's masculinist orientation upside down, and, above all, from the literary-inflected school of postcolonial studies that Edward Said did so much to inspire. My efforts to make sense of postcolonial studies and the challenge it posed for imperial history resulted in the first chapter in this book. While sharply critical of certain aspects of this seemingly subversive scholarship, I also applauded its success in opening up cultural and epistemological avenues of inquiry that mainstream historians of the British Empire had all but ignored. Those historians' conception of the parameters of their subject found its fullest expression in the publication in 1998–9 of the five-volume *Oxford History of the British Empire*, the culmination of decades of scholarship and a counterblast to postcolonial critics. The appearance of this work gave me an opportunity to reflect on the “boundaries” of this historiographical consensus—by which I mean its methodological and theoretical limits—in the essay that appears here as Chapter 2. Recently I revisited the issues raised in the first chapter, reexamining the relationship between imperial history and postcolonial studies several decades after the latter school of thought had made its initial splash. What strikes me most forcefully in this reassessment is the degree to which recent work in imperial history has taken up themes, concepts, and methods introduced by postcolonial studies, while reshaping them in important ways. Indeed, I argue in Chapter 3 that much of the most innovative and influential work arising from the forces set in motion by postcolonial studies is currently coming from historians.

Chapters 4 through 6 address historiographical debates that have arisen in recent years about specific topics in British imperial history. The first of these chapters examines the resurgence of interest in the history of exploration. Largely ignored by imperial historians for decades, exploration has recently enjoyed a revival as a subject academics should study. Pioneering work by literary scholars, historical geographers, and historians of science have exposed the crucial contributions that exploration made in shaping British perceptions of other peoples and places, setting the terms of engagement across cultural divides between the British and indigenous interlocutors, and laying the foundations for modern scientific practices and the formation of an environmental consciousness. Chapter 5 takes up another important topic that until recently was relatively neglected in imperial history circles. Neither the *Oxford History of the British Empire* nor its postcolonial studies and new imperial history critics devoted much

attention to the large settler colonies that arose in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa, despite their immense economic, political, and social importance to the empire. Over the past decade, however, two distinct schools of scholarship have sought in very different ways to rectify that neglect. Both settler colonial studies and the British World contingent have given penetrating attention to settler societies, but the similarities end there: they adopt such starkly different approaches to the subject that they might as well be about completely different realms of experience. Why this is so can be explained largely in terms of the contemporary agendas that inform their lines of inquiry. A similar dynamic is at work in Chapter 6, which examines the contentious historiographical debate that has arisen about British decolonization over the past decade. What was once the exclusive province of political and diplomatic historians has now become fertile ground for social and cultural historians as well, and a process that had once been characterized as a relatively peaceful, consensual transfer of power has become reframed as a fiercely contested, often violent upheaval that has left lasting scars all around. These interpretive shifts are not simply the products of new methods or evidence, though both have certainly figured prominently in this historiographical debate. They also are the result of recent events that have reshaped the international order, placing the course and consequences of decolonization in a very different light.

The final group of essays—Chapters 7 through 9—and the epilogue address this relationship between the past and the present in a more explicit and systematic fashion. Written in the aftermath of the al-Qaeda attacks of 9/11 and the wars they set in motion, Chapter 7 surveys the upsurge in the array of works that characterized the United States as an empire and raised questions about the consequences of this imperial order for the post-Cold War world. Commentators of various political stripes sought to draw lessons for American policy in Afghanistan and Iraq from the British imperial experience. I address the uses and limits of such comparisons in this chapter. This theme is developed further in Chapter 8, which critiques one of the most systematic comparative studies of the American and British empires to appear to date, Julian Go's *Patterns of Empire*. The final chapter revisits and reframes many of the topics and themes that have appeared throughout the book, connecting the changing perspectives on British imperial history over the past few decades to a series of contemporaneous social, cultural, and political developments in Britain and the United States. It simultaneously stresses the enduring influence that the imperial past exerts on our current preoccupations and the double obligation it imposes on the historians: to maintain an awareness of our own subjectivity as products of our time while doing our best to uphold the disciplinary standards essential to the integrity of our profession.

The epilogue reflects on the implications of the two seismic elections of 2016—the British referendum to leave the European Union and the American election of Donald Trump as president—for the future of British

history as a field of study. The Brexit campaign and the commentary that has appeared in its aftermath have demonstrated that memories of the British imperial past still exert a powerful influence over many Britons. An opinion survey conducted by YouGov in 2014 found that 59 percent of the British public thought the British Empire was something to be proud of (compared to 19 percent who were ashamed of it and 23 percent who did not have an opinion).³ Is it any wonder then that the pro-Brexit forces made not-so-subtle appeals to imperial nostalgia? More surprising, perhaps, is the fact that many Republican politicians and right-wing intellectuals in the United States have embraced Winston Churchill as their inspiration and model for leadership. Why this is so and what it reveals about the lessons they draw from the British imperial past for the America they hope to remake is sobering. What will come of these initiatives is beyond my capacity to predict, but they point to the enduring presence of the empire as an object of longing in an age of discontent.

There is, of course, a danger in drawing such direct associations between the present and the past, both because the present is the product of a bewildering array of forces and because it becomes the past in the blink of an eye. My concluding comments on Brexit and Trump are likely to look dated soon enough. But they serve to remind us that we understand the present in the context of the past and vice versa. This is, in fact, the theme that runs through all of the chapters in this volume. And it is a theme that holds particular weight and relevance when it comes to the relationship between the British imperial past and the postcolonial present, both in Britain and elsewhere around the world. What is at stake in the historical debates that are the subjects of this book is not simply a matter of how to make sense of the past, but how to make sense of the present.

1

Imperial History and Postcolonial Theory¹

Postcolonial theory—also known as postcolonial studies and colonial discourse analysis—burst onto the academic scene in the early 1990s. For most historians of the British imperial world, it was a strange and disorienting development. This new field of study took up many of the same issues that preoccupied imperial historians, but it drew on theoretical, methodological, and rhetorical strategies that made little sense to them. The following essay, which originally appeared in 1996 in the main journal for imperial historians, The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, was the product of my early efforts to understand and explain postcolonial scholarship. It reflects both the strong objections I had to some of its premises and practices and the high hopes I had for its ability to free imperial history from its narrow and stultifying framework.

The historiography of British imperialism has long been colored by the political and methodological conservatism of its practitioners. Arising as it did from the imperial metropole in the late nineteenth century, it originally served as an ideological adjunct to the empire.² Its purpose was to contribute historical insights into past exercises in overseas power that could be used to inform and inspire contemporaries to shoulder their obligations as rulers of a worldwide imperial system. Decolonization robbed imperial history of most of its practical incentives. Yet it continued to cling to the methodology and mentalité of the “official mind,” as Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher termed it in their enormously influential work.³ The persistence of this paradigm is evident even in the most recent scholarship. Peruse any issue of

The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, for example, and you will find a succession of articles that still tread the path pioneered by John Seeley more than a century ago. They remain wedded to the same official documentation, persist in addressing the same political, economic, and military manifestations of power, and continue to employ the same narrative conventions. They seldom stray from an adamant empiricism. On the rare occasions when they do flirt with theory, it generally derives from well-worn models. P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins's acclaimed two-volume study of *British Imperialism*, which is widely regarded as the most important and innovative contribution to the field since Robinson and Gallagher, resembles nothing so much in its theoretical stance than that old warhorse of imperial theory, J. A. Hobson, with a pinch of Schumpeter thrown in for flavor.⁴ This return to the concerns of Edwardian radicalism is taken within the field for theoretical daring. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that imperial history has acquired a reputation for insularity and inattention to the methodological advances made both by historians in other fields and by scholars in related disciplines.

Perhaps because so many historians of British imperialism have been content to plough the same narrow plot over and over again, their professional domain has been invaded in recent years by a wide array of academic interlopers. Interest in imperialism and colonialism has intensified among specialists in anthropology, area studies, feminist studies, and, above all, literary studies. The latter have proven especially energetic and adept at claiming squatters' rights over imperial history's unclaimed provinces. Armed with the latest poststructuralist theories, the literary invaders have opened up and exploited some surprisingly rich and provocative intellectual terrain. It is their colonization of imperial studies and its implication for the field that this chapter proposes to address.

There can be no mistaking the success that literary scholars have had in making the topic of imperialism their own. Teaching positions in colonial and postcolonial literatures appear to be one of the booming fields in English departments these days. New works with titles like *The Rhetoric of Empire* seem to come off the presses every week. Thick anthologies of influential and representative essays have begun to appear for use as textbooks in college courses.⁵ Leading theorists such as Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have become superstars of the academic firmament. In America, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has highlighted the phenomenon with a feature story, the popular academic journal *Linguafranca* has attacked it in a cover story, and *Time* magazine has devoted several pages to a flattering profile of Said, its principal founder.⁶ In Britain, interest among the intellectual community has been equally intense.⁷ Clearly this is a scholarly industry to be reckoned with.

The problem is that historians of British imperialism have for the most part failed to reckon with it.⁸ This is a pity both for the historians, whose methodological horizons could be broadened by serious engagement with

this literature, and for the literary scholars, whose theoretical excesses could be checked by the sober scrutiny of the historians. In proposing that historians enter into a dialogue with their literary trespassers, I do not mean to suggest that the two parties can be entirely reconciled with one another. Some of the differences that divide them are unbridgeable. Even so, a good deal can be gained, I believe, from historians conducting a critical reconnaissance of the territory that literary theory has claimed as its own. So let us explore.

* * *

The new and growing body of scholarship that concerns us here is generally known either as colonial discourse analysis or as postcolonial theory. Colonial discourse analysis refers to the examination and interpretation of particular colonial texts. Postcolonial theory refers to the political and ideological position of the critic who undertakes this analysis. In practice, the two terms have become virtually interchangeable, so much so that several recently published “readers” have put them in harness in their rather ponderous, mirror-imaged titles, *Post-Colonial Theory and Colonial Discourse* and *Colonial Discourse, Post-Colonial Theory*. Although objections have been raised to the teleological implications of the tag *post-colonial*,⁹ its evocation of an anti-imperialist political stance and a poststructuralist theoretical one has ensured its usage. Indeed, the label “postcolonial theorist” seems to carry rather more cachet among the practitioners of the trade than “colonial discourse analyst,” even though the latter designation is often the more accurate one. Perhaps the term “analyst” has unwelcome associations with financial and/or military functionaries; certainly the term “theorist” has an inflated prestige in lit-crit circles these days. For the sake of convenience and consistency, I will refer to this literature as postcolonial theory, but I caution that much of it is less engaged in developing a body of theory than in making gestures of obeisance to it.

It is generally acknowledged that Edward Said’s seminal study, *Orientalism* (1978), is the foundational text for postcolonial theory.¹⁰ Its transfiguration of the term “orientalism” from an arcane field of academic study to a synonym for Western imperialism and racism has been accepted and applied across a wide spectrum of scholarship, as has its central thesis and theoretical concerns. Said starts from the poststructuralist premise that knowledge is a discursive field derived from language and he draws from Foucault the insight that its significance lies embedded within systems of power. His study of *Orientalism*, by which he means Western representations of those parts of the world the West identifies as the Orient, seeks to show that this body of knowledge tells us little about the so-called Orient, which may or may not exist outside the Western imagination, but much about the West’s efforts to impose itself on the peoples and cultures who came under its hegemonic sway. *Orientalism*, then, pushes past the conventional

conception of imperial power as a material phenomenon, presenting it instead as an epistemological system. Moreover, because the West's power is linked to the cultural representations it constructs and imposes on the minds of colonizer and colonized alike, it is able to survive the political decolonization that occurred after the Second World War. Indeed, it exists even within the purportedly objective scholarship of Western academia. The full implication of this analysis is that the dismantlement of Western modes of domination requires the deconstruction of Western structures of knowledge. Hence the claim that this is a postcolonial theory.¹¹

These central propositions have been endorsed, elaborated upon, and modified in varying respects by subsequent practitioners of postcolonial theory. Although Said has his critics within the fraternity, his influence has persisted to a remarkable degree over the years since *Orientalism* first appeared. Many of the weaknesses as well as some of the strengths of his enterprise have become magnified in the works that have followed its lead.

Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of postcolonial scholarship is its theoretical promiscuity. Said draws mainly on Foucault for inspiration, but other influences on his work include Antonio Gramsci and Erich Auerbach. This odd ménage creates certain tensions and contradictions in his argument. Aijaz Ahmad has observed that Said vacillates between a Foucauldian position that places the origin of Orientalism in the Enlightenment project of the eighteenth century and a Auerbachian stance that traces it all the way back to classical Greece.¹² Dennis Porter has pointed out that Said's use of Foucault is at odds with his use of Gramsci—the former presents a totalizing conception of power that absorbs knowledge itself, while the latter conceives of hegemony as historically contingent and subject to subversion.¹³ Various critics have drawn attention to the ambivalence, if not outright obfuscation, in Said's position regarding the fundamental question raised by his study: is it possible to attain a true knowledge of the Other? For Said to charge that the West's representations of the Orient are distorted seems to suggest that he regards an undistorted representation as attainable, but this conflicts with his poststructuralist insistence that the Orient is nothing more than a discursive phantasm. "Orientalist inauthenticity is not answered by any authenticity," notes James Clifford.¹⁴ Such are the conundrums that arise from the effort to appropriate such incompatible theoretical perspectives.

Said's progeny have taken the turn to theory in ever more tortuous directions. As Stefan Collini has remarked with regard to cultural studies in general, it suffers from "a disabling deference to the idea of 'theory'."¹⁵ In addition to the obligatory bows to Foucault and Gramsci, postcolonial theorists have drawn upon Althusser, Bakhtin, Barthes, Benjamin, Bourdieu, Derrida, de Man, Fanon, Heidegger, Lacan, Lyotard, and other mainly postmodernist theorists. Conspicuously absent from the postcolonial canon is Marx, whose work is considered irredeemably Eurocentric.¹⁶ This seems rather ironic in light of the fact that, except for Fanon, none of the names cited above ever exhibited the slightest intellectual curiosity in the issue of

European colonialism or the concerns of non-European peoples.¹⁷ Yet the fascination with such theorists, especially if they are French, continues to run high among the postcolonial coterie. The latest initiates into the canon appear to be Foucault's contemporaries, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, whose Wilhelm Reich-inspired work *Anti-Oedipus* is advanced by Robert Young as an important new source of post-Saidian inspiration.¹⁸

The infiltration of these varied theoretical influences into postcolonial studies makes for a literature that is often dense and sometimes impenetrable. Arguably the most fashionable figure in the field at the present time is Homi Bhabha, whose ruminations on the cultural effects of colonialism draw inspiration from poststructuralist psychoanalysis and semiotics.¹⁹ Traces of Lacan, Derrida, and the like are all too visible in the style and substance of his essays, which pose a formidable challenge for those who seek to decipher them. One of Bhabha's most sympathetic commentators has suggested that his baffling prose is a deliberate strategy to disorient the reader so as to prevent "closure" and thereby subvert the "authoritative mode" of Western discourse, a claim also offered in defense of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose work is often equally difficult to penetrate.²⁰ One has to admire the over-the-top audacity of this assertion, but the fact remains that the principal reason readers have trouble with Bhabha, Spivak, and certain other postcolonial theorists is they make such indiscriminate use of words, expressions, concepts, and doctrines from so many different, sometimes incompatible, sources. The literary scholar Elaine Showalter rightly complains that the "difficult languages of high theory . . . have become a new orthodoxy as muffling as scholastic Latin, expressive straitjackets which confine all thought to a prescribed vocabulary."²¹ Postcolonial theorists' vocabulary has become clotted with highly specialized, often obscure terms like heteroglossy, alterity, aporia, synecdoche, aleatory, elide, and metonymy. Even familiar words such as gaze, gesture, site, space, efface, erase, and interrogate have taken on highly specialized, almost metaphysical meanings in their writings. Metaphor has metastasized into metaphoricity, narrative into narrativity, origin into originary, fact into facticity. One critic of this plethora of arcana has put tongue-in-cheek in recommending a Devil's Dictionary of Cultural Studies to make its terminology accessible to the uninitiated.²²

It is easy, of course, to mock almost any academic genre for its jargon, but what makes postcolonial theorists especially vulnerable to criticism are the claims they make for the relationship between language and liberation. Language, as they see it, is the key to emancipation from colonial modes of thought. This is the objective the Kenyan novelist and essayist Ngugi wa Thiong'o has referred to as "decolonizing the mind."²³ His strategy for doing so has been to write in his native Gikuyu language (although this does not extend to the programmatic tracts in which he presents his rationale for doing so). The strategy adopted by the postcolonial theorists is to subject the language of the colonizers to critical scrutiny, deconstructing

representative texts, and exposing the discursive designs that underlie their surface narratives. This is seen as an act of transgression, a politicized initiative that undermines the hegemonic influence of Western knowledge and brings about the “cultural decentering of the [European] centered world system.”²⁴ Bhabha, for example, presents his work as an effort to turn “the pathos of cultural confusion into a strategy of political subversion.”²⁵ Its intent is to escape from the totalizing claims of the West. For the sake of argument, let us accept the postcolonial theorists’ assertion. Let us agree that the non-Western world remains in thrall to the discursive system of the West, to the system that Said identifies as Orientalism. How do the postcolonial theorists propose to liberate these hostages? By writing in a manner that is utterly inaccessible to most of them? By writing as the acolytes of Western theorists? By writing to mainly Western audiences from mainly Western academies about mainly Western literature? By writing?²⁶ These questions may seem unnecessarily harsh, but they force to the fore the premise that stands at the heart of postcolonial theory’s sense of itself—the notion that the sort of recondite textual analysis it practices offers a weapon to break free from the cultural and indeed political oppression of the West. One need not be a Marxian materialist—though this stance has supported a healthy skepticism regarding postcolonial theory—to consider this proposition as dubious, if not delusional.²⁷

The issue that concerns us here, however, is not what this literature can or cannot do to decolonize the minds of contemporary non-Western peoples, but what it can or cannot do to deepen our understanding of the history of colonialism. What complicates this issue is that postcolonial theorists hold contending views about the value of historical analysis. For postmodernist purists like Homi Bhabha, history is nothing more than a text, a grand narrative that operates according to the same rules of rhetoric and logic as other genres of Western writing. As such, its significance is limited to the part it plays in the discursive field that the postcolonial critic seeks to dismantle, rather than the contribution it makes to our knowledge about the nature of colonialism. Bhabha keeps out the stuff of history by plucking random works of literature and other texts from their contextual soil and sealing them in the hermetic chambers of a psychoanalytic essentialism. Suspicion of history as an accomplice to the West’s discursive drive to dominate the Other is a disturbing motif within a significant element of postcolonial theory. Edward Said’s position is an ambiguous one, professing on the one hand the importance of a historicized understanding of Orientalism while suggesting on the other hand that the discipline of history is itself implicated in the Orientalist enterprise. John MacKenzie complains that Said’s efforts to achieve a historicism untainted by Orientalist assumptions are essentially ahistorical, a charge that I think overstates the case and cuts off the opportunity for interdisciplinary dialogue.²⁸ The same accusation can be made, however, against some of Said’s confederates. Gayatri Spivak praises the members of the subaltern studies group for engaging in what she

regards as the deconstruction of a “hegemonic historiography” and urges them to break from the premises of historical analysis altogether.²⁹ The influential cultural critic Ashis Nandy denounces historical consciousness as a “cultural and political liability” for non-western peoples.³⁰ In *The Intimate Enemy*, his best-known work, he proclaims that his aim is to present “an alternative mythography which denies and defies the values of history.”³¹ This view of history as a mythography concocted by the West to further its hegemonic ambitions is one that Robert Young argues to be at the core of the postcolonial critique. He traces the intellectual genealogy of this effort to expose, decenter, and deconstruct what are seen as the totalizing claims of “white mythologies,” or history as it has been practiced in the West.³² For historians who have come under the influence of postcolonial purists, this attack on history has occasioned considerable hand-wringing. Some of the younger members of the subaltern studies school of Indian historiography in particular have begun to agonize about whether it is possible to write history when “Europe works as a silent referent to historical knowledge itself.”³³ This is a real and serious epistemological problem, and I do not wish to demean the struggle to reconstruct history from a non-Eurocentric perspective. But this is not the agenda of the postcolonial purists, whose efforts instead are directed against a historical mode of understanding altogether.

What happens when history is set aside? Some recent examples of postcolonial scholarship suggest that it leads to a willful neglect of causation, context, and chronology. The authors of *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* blithely pour the literatures of Africa, Australia, the Caribbean, the United States, and other regions of the world into the same postcolonial pot, ignoring their profoundly different historical experiences except insofar as their “complexities and varied cultural provenance” are taken as signs of the decentering pluralism that identify them as postcolonial literatures.³⁴ Laura E. Donaldson acknowledges the need to address “concrete historical circumstances” in the introduction to her *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender, and Empire Building*, but this appreciation is quickly forgotten as she flits from *Jane Eyre* to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to *The King and I* (the novel, the play, and the film) as well as a bewildering array of other texts in an analysis that conflates colonialism with racism, sexism, and oppression in general.³⁵ One of the most egregious examples of this aversion to history is David Spurr’s *The Rhetoric of Empire*.³⁶ Subtitled “colonial discourse in journalism, travel writing, and imperial administration,” this astonishing book insists that the same discursive forms recurred over more than a century in the diverse genres of writing that Western travelers, officials, and others produced about the profoundly varied peoples across the globe with whom they came in contact. In this “global system of representation,”³⁷ it seems to make no difference whether the rhetoric is British, French, or American, whether the author is Lord Lugard, Andre Gide, or Joan Didion, whether the text is a colonial report, a scholarly treatise, or an article in *National Geographic*,

or whether the place is nineteenth-century South Africa, early twentieth-century Mexico, or the contemporary Middle East. All are indiscriminately advanced as evidence of the depth of the West's discursive drive for power and domination. It might be supposed that reductionism could not be carried much further, but Spurr shows otherwise. Following in the footsteps of Derrida, he tracks his quarry all the way back to writing itself: "The writer is the original and ultimate colonizer, conquering the space of consciousness with the exclusionary and divisive structures of representations."³⁸ Rarely does a theory chase its own tail with such single-minded intensity. We will not trouble Spurr with such obvious questions as whether he too is complicit as a writer in this colonization of consciousness or whether the imperial implications of writing are also applicable to the literatures of non-Western societies. We will merely observe that his analysis is entangled in what postcolonial theorists might call a "double bind": it seeks to convict historically specific parties of historically specific crimes while exonerating itself of any accountability to historical specificity.

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Fortunately, other literary scholars have shown far more sensitivity to the historical record in their work. While operating under the general rubric of postcolonial theory, these scholars have rejected the antihistorical orientation of the theoretical purists. They recognize the distinction that exists between history as a text and history as a tool, between its presence as a discursive product and its use as an analytical practice. By placing their arguments in a historical context and testing them against the historical evidence, they have enriched our understanding of the imperial experience in ways that historians have been slow to appreciate.

Mary Louise Pratt, like David Spurr, concerns herself with the rhetoric of European travel writing in her book *Imperial Eyes*, and like Spurr, she ranges freely across centuries and continents.³⁹ Unlike Spurr, however, she does not conflate one century or continent with another. She takes some care to place the texts she has selected within the contexts of their particular time and space and she readily acknowledges the appearance of discordant discourses along the way. While her main aim is to trace the taxonomic impulses of an emergent European hegemony from the eighteenth century to the present, the story she tells is far from the univocal, unilinear one presented by Spurr. For many historians her enterprise still may seem unduly speculative and her arguments insufficiently grounded in the empirical record, but her efforts to establish the historical textures of her texts make her study of European travel literature much more nuanced and sophisticated than some of its counterparts.

Various other works of postcolonial scholarship have engaged in a profitable if often provisional association with history. Gauri Viswanathan's flawed but intriguing study of the British effort to introduce the study of

English literature into the curriculum of Indian schools draws much of its force from the author's immersion in the early-nineteenth-century debate between Orientalists and Anglicists about how to make Indians more amenable to British rule.⁴⁰ The self-proclaimed "historicist" reading of British explorers' accounts of East and Central Africa that Tim Youngs proffers is successful in showing that these representations of Africa were shaped in significant ways by class-specific preoccupations with identity that had their impetus in Britain itself.⁴¹ Jenny Sharpe overcomes the simplistic assumptions that often accompany discussions of gender and race in the colonial realm by placing her study of rape as a trope in Western fiction about the Raj within the context of the shifting patterns of power from the pre-Mutiny to the postindependence eras.⁴² Patrick Brantlinger's sweeping survey of British literature and imperialism in the nineteenth century succeeds as well as it does partly because it understands that the British Empire was a widely varied phenomenon that inspired different responses in different places and at different times.⁴³ Each of these works evidences a significant degree of sensitivity to the historical record, and although historians in the relevant fields can doubtless demonstrate that distortions and simplifications persist, the fact remains that these examples of engagement with imperial history by scholars influenced by postcolonial theory demand our attention.

This increased fraternization with history has inspired its practitioners to question some of the cruder premises that postcolonial theory brought to the study of imperialism. One of the most dismaying of these is the tendency to essentialize the West, a discursive practice no less distorting than the West's tendency to essentialize the Orient.⁴⁴ In Said's *Orientalism* and much of the scholarship it has inspired, the West is seen as an undifferentiated, omnipotent entity, imposing its totalizing designs on the rest of the world without check or interruption. Ironically, this emphasis on the power of the West countenances the neglect of that power as it was actually exercised in the colonial context, ignoring its plural and particularized expressions.⁴⁵ Further, it fails to appreciate the uncertainties, inconsistencies, modifications, and contradictions that afflicted Western efforts to impose its will on other peoples. Marxist-inspired critics in particular have taken postcolonial theory to task for ignoring what Sumit Sarkar calls "the microphysics of colonial power."⁴⁶

With the appearance of more historically attuned studies like those cited above, we have evidence that postcolonial scholarship is capable of more subtle and persuasive treatments of the West and its widely varied imperial agents, interests, and aims. Javed Majeed's *Ungoverned Imaginings*, for example, shows that Sir William Jones, Thomas Moore, James Mill, and other major British interpreters of India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries constructed profoundly different versions of the Orient to serve profoundly different purposes, purposes that were often directed as much toward Britain as they were toward India.⁴⁷ Monolithic conceptions of the West and its intentions have also proven increasingly unsatisfactory for