

# An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory

Peter Childs and Patrick Williams

**literature** *lit' (ə-)rə-cher, n* the art of composition in prose and verse; the whole body of literary composition universally, or in any language, or on a given subject, etc; literary matter; printed matter; humane learning; literart culture or knowledge. — **adj** **lit'eratured** (*shakesp*) learned, having literary knowledge. [L *līterātūra*, from *lītera* (*littera*) a letter]

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*Peter Childs and R.J. Patrick Williams*

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# Preface

To write a book which introduces or surveys a particular area of writing or field of theoretical work is to encounter inevitable frustration: there is so much to say, so many things to explain, so many polemics to unravel . . . To write a book which aims to introduce and discuss an area of contemporary theory which is not only diverse and frequently complex, but also rapidly expanding and the subject of heated debate, is to encounter such levels of frustration as to make you wonder why you didn't stick to eighteenth-century poetry. In its attempt to provide a critical introduction to the area of post-colonial theory, this book is necessarily, unavoidably, selective in what it discusses. Given the impossibility of comprehensive coverage, we decided to include slightly fewer topics or theorists than might have been possible in a book of this length, and as a result to be able to discuss them in more depth. In this, we are to an extent replicating the approach of *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*,<sup>1</sup> rather than that of the *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*,<sup>2</sup> which offers a much wider sweep, but with a resultant loss of depth and detail. Although the Reader and this book are obviously independent of one another, we hope that a useful measure of complementarity exists between them, with the Critical Introduction helping readers to get to grips with the ideas in challenging pieces such as Gayatri Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', or to see how the work of different theorists connects, and the Reader both offering substantial texts which would otherwise exist just as titles and occasional quotations, and extending the range of issues and theorists covered. In addition, we have tried not simply to present those ideas and thinkers whom we considered important, but also to engage with the ideas to some small degree – showing connections or contradictions, or offering counter-arguments (which are not necessarily our personal opinions) – while at the same time being particularly careful that the book should not become mere disputation (to which academics are of course notoriously prone).

Internally, the book is organized along similar lines of independence and complementarity. The chapters are free-standing, but most of them offer their own perspectives on questions raised elsewhere in the book. Partly as a means to compensate for the impossible comprehensive coverage, the chapters indicate a number of ways in which one might configure ideas in this area: chronological, thematic or geographic, based on theories, or on the theorists themselves. The Introduction examines a number of issues, such as historical period and geographical location, which have provided a focus for debate about the general field of post-colonial study. This is important, not just because post-colonial work – both practical and, above all, theoretical – is increasingly the subject of more or less hostile criticism from outside (an outside constituted in disciplinary rather than geographical terms), but also because the field itself is what we might call ‘internally conflicted’, with often fierce disagreements emerging between those who would nevertheless all wish to identify themselves with the project of post-colonial studies. The fact that these debates are very much on-going means that it is particularly difficult to indicate anything like consensus on many points, and readers new to the area will unfortunately have to accept that confusing lack of unanimity (or, better still, interpret it as the sign of genuinely productive debate!). The chapter on resistance looks at a mixture of earlier and contemporary figures, writers and activists, poets and politicians, in order to examine some of the forms which anti-colonial and anti-imperialist resistance has adopted, the ideas which it has foregrounded, and the paths it has followed. The idea is not to offer anything like a simple narrative of the emergence of post-colonial theory from anti-colonial activism, but rather to highlight significant clusters of resistance. The chapter on metropolitan theorizing shows just what a contested field the post-colonial is. None of the countries discussed – Britain, Ireland, the United States, the former white settler colonies of Australia, Canada and New Zealand – can be located within the field in an easy or unproblematic way, but at the same time claims can be made on a variety of grounds for their inclusion. (The fact that we include them in the book does not mean that we regard their inclusion in the field as in any way a settled issue.)

‘... it would be true to say that Said, Bhabha and Spivak constitute the Holy Trinity of colonial-discourse analysis, and have to be acknowledged as central to the field.’<sup>3</sup> Whether or not one agrees with the (ironic) elevation here accorded these three theorists, their importance must indeed be acknowledged. The next three chapters in the book recognize that importance but also use the centrality of these figures as a means to address issues – such as the role of post-colonial intellectuals, the subaltern subject, hybridity and mimicry – which

their work raises, but which are not restricted to what Said or Spivak may have to say about them. The final chapter adopts yet another perspective, examining the ways in which work in other disciplines (social theory, ethnography) and other theoretical fields (feminism, post-structuralism, postmodernism) relates to post-colonialism. Some of these intersections are well established, others are indications of the possible paths which post-colonial study may follow in the future, navigating between the dispersals of diaspora and the totalizing of globalization.

In addition to the references in the Notes, we have included, for those less familiar with the field, a number of suggestions for further reading, as well as a Glossary. The latter is not designed as a short cut through the debates with which the book engages, and by no means attempts to offer definitive explanations (that would be another area of impossibility), but may help to ease certain terminological difficulties in what some may think is already a sufficiently complex area.

Roger Bromley and Dave Murray were thoughtful and encouraging readers of the manuscript; our thanks to them. In addition, Peter would like to thank Elspeth Graham, Gerry Smyth and Ross Dawson for their criticisms of early drafts, Patrick for his steadfast support and co-operation, and Helen for everything. Patrick would like to thank Phil Leonard and Benita Parry for comments, Peter for strenuous collaborative efforts, and Jen for love and patient support.

## Notes

1. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.
2. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 1995.
3. Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 163.



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# *Introduction: Points of departure*

## **When is the post-colonial?<sup>1</sup>**

The obvious implication of the term post-colonial is that it refers to a period coming after the end of colonialism. Such a commonsense understanding has much to commend it (the term would otherwise risk being completely meaningless), but that sense of an ending, of the completion of one period of history and the emergence of another, is, as we shall see, hard to maintain in any simple or unproblematic fashion. On the face of it, the era of the great European colonial empires is over, and that in itself is a fact of major significance. The Anglo-Irish novelist J.G. Farrell, a post-colonial chronicler of the British Empire's moments of crisis, and certainly no supporter of the system, nevertheless singled out the decline and dissolution of the Empire as the important event of his lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Whether Farrell's view is rather too Anglocentric, or whether there is some point to the privileging of the British experience is not at issue here. The dismantling of structures of colonial control, beginning in earnest in the late 1950s and reaching its high point in the 1960s, constituted a remarkable historical moment, as country after country gained independence from the colonizing powers.<sup>3</sup> That so many millions now live in the world formed by decolonization is one justification for the use of the term post-colonial.

Post-colonialism may then refer in part to the period after colonialism, but the questions arise: after whose colonialism? after the end of which colonial empire? Isn't it unacceptably Anglocentric or Eurocentric to be foregrounding the mid-twentieth century and the end particularly of the British and French empires? What about, for example, early nineteenth-century Latin America and the end of Spanish and Portuguese control? or the late eighteenth century and the independence of the United States of America? Clearly, there has not been just one period of colonialism in the history of the world – indeed, the

sense in which a colonizing power may itself have once been a colony is one of the starting-points for Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Although, as we shall see later, there may be ways in which Latin America and the United States can fit into the model of post-colonialism which is proposed, there certainly are problems with broadening the historical or conceptual frame too far, as the Indian critic Aijaz Ahmad argues:

But I have seen articles in a great many places, in the special issue of *Social Text* on postcoloniality, which push the use of the term 'colonialism' *back* to such configurations as the Incas, the Ottomans and the Chinese, well before the European colonial empires began; and then bring the term *forward* to cover all kinds of national oppressions, as, for example, the savagery of the Indonesian government in East Timor. 'Colonialism' then becomes a trans-historical thing, always present and always in process of dissolution in one part of the world or another, so that everyone gets the privilege, sooner or later, at one time or another, of being coloniser, colonised and post-colonial – sometimes all at once, in the case of Australia, for example.<sup>4</sup>

He then goes on to accuse Anne McClintock of inflating the term to such an extent that 'all territorial aggressions ever undertaken in human history' are included under the same heading, which, if true, would render the term analytically useless. Whether or not we would want to agree with all the points made by Ahmad (particularly his criticism of Anne McLintock) there is value in what he says. At the same time, it is worth noting, as part of the complexity of the area we are dealing with, that although the final sentence in Ahmad's quotation is obviously meant to demonstrate the absurdity of the positions he is outlining, there might in fact be good grounds for suggesting precisely that form of paradoxical simultaneity in a case like Australia.<sup>5</sup>

A major contention in post-colonial studies is that the overlapping development of the ensemble of European colonial empires – British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, Belgian, Italian, German – from the sixteenth century onwards (but especially in the nineteenth), and their dismantling in the second half of the twentieth century, constitutes an unprecedented phenomenon, and one with global repercussions in the contemporary world, so that one answer to the question 'When is the post-colonial?' is 'Now'. Another, and much more contentious answer, and one which complicates the simple sense of historical periods just outlined, is offered by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*. As its subtitle indicates, the book looks at 'theory and practice in post-colonial literatures'; it was the first to do so under such a rubric and on such a scale, and no book – perhaps wisely – has, in the six years since it was published, attempted as much. In the

opening chapter, the authors provide a definition which has become somewhat notorious:

We use the term 'post-colonial', however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression.<sup>6</sup>

Among the difficulties created by this are, first, whether it is actually possible to identify a 'continuity of preoccupations' over such an expanse of time, and, secondly and more importantly, whether, even if that were possible, it would justify the loss of specificity which results from the inevitable eliding of periods, processes and practices which this entails. For a critic such as Abdul JanMohamed, for instance, we are dealing with two very different periods which, in a somewhat Gramscian sense, he labels dominant and hegemonic.<sup>7</sup> Although Jan-Mohamed arguably does not go on to exploit this as much as he might, it remains an important distinction, emphasizing as it does that substantially altered relations – cultural, economic, and, above all, political – obtain, and these have substantial implications for the processes of cultural production which are one of the particular concerns of post-colonial theory.

An indication of why it might be important to adopt a position such as that of *The Empire Writes Back*, which at the same time complicates further the question of historical periods, is given by the Canadian critic Stephen Slemon:

Definitions of the 'post-colonial' of course vary widely, but for me the concept proves most useful not when it is used synonymously with a post-independence historical period in once-colonised nations, but rather when it locates a specifically anti- or *post-colonial discursive* purchase in culture, one which begins in the moment that colonial power inscribes itself onto the body and space of its Others and which continues as an often occulted tradition into the modern theatre of neo-colonialist international relations.<sup>8</sup>

In this formulation, 'continuity of preoccupations' becomes the more substantial process of anti-colonial cultural practices (which introduces the other most important meaning of post-), in other words, one dimension of the resistance to imperialism which has been an increasingly important aspect of post-colonial thinking, and which is discussed in a number of contexts in different chapters in this book. The other meaning of post- is one which is shared with those sets of theories which use the compound term, especially post-structuralism, where the emphasis may not be so much on the chronologically subsequent – i.e. coming after structuralism, modernism or feminism – but

on conceptually transcending or superseding the parameters of the other term. In this perspective, texts which are anti-colonial, which reject the premises of colonialist intervention (the civilizing mission, the rejuvenation of stagnant cultures) might be regarded as post-colonial insofar as they have 'got beyond' colonialism and its ideologies, broken free of its lures to a point from which to mount a critique or counter-attack.

The additional complexity or blurring of the question of historical periods occurs with the phrase 'in the moment when colonial power inscribes itself onto the body and space of its Others'. Although certain post-colonial critics use the verb inscribe rather loosely or metaphorically, if we retain its more or less literal sense of writing (textual inscription) then we face another historical paradox, since the colonial powers frequently wrote about their civilizational Others (Africa, or the Orient) either officially or in the shape of individual novelists or poets – and hence inscribed themselves 'onto the body and space' of those Others – long before they actually intervened against them in any properly colonialist sense (through the occupation or direct control of their territory). Accordingly, if post-colonial texts as anti-Western counter-discourse are said to operate to oppose Western inscriptions, then we have a formidably paradoxical post-colonialism, which, not content with beginning at the moment of colonization (the version in *The Empire Writes Back*), potentially starts years, even centuries before colonialist incursions.

In both Slemon's and *The Empire Writes Back*'s formulations, there are possible or actual conceptual gains, but also a variety of problems, losses or hostages to fortune in the move away from what is presumably regarded as an over-simple period-based model of post-colonialism. In some ways, their shared preference for post-colonialism as a form of writing which it is difficult to pin down in chronological terms, recalls older debates about whether modernism (and subsequently postmodernism) was best understood as an historical period or a literary/cultural style. It also links up with the definition offered in the introduction to *Past the Last Post*, where it is suggested that like post-modernism, post-colonialism could be seen as having two 'archives':

The first archive here constructs it as writing (more usually than architecture or painting) . . . from countries or regions which were formerly colonies of Europe. The second archive of post-colonialism is intimately related to the first, though not co-extensive with it. Here, the post-colonial is conceived of as a set of discursive practices, prominent among which is *resistance* to colonialism, colonialist ideologies and their contemporary forms and subjectificatory legacies.<sup>9</sup>

The resurgence of the earlier period/style debate in another form suggests the difficulty for critics, even those who are definitely *post*

Structuralism – and therefore aware of the problems of binary thinking – of escaping from these two-part conceptual models.

Another complication of the periodizing implied by post-colonialism relates to the persistence of colonialism. Although we began this chapter by referring to the dismantling of the colonial empires, there are important ways in which European control is very much present. One of the most obvious is that colonial powers still operate colonies: for instance, Britain, with its rump of Hong Kong, the Falklands/Malvinas, and – though it was never officially admitted as being a colony – Northern Ireland. The continuation of direct colonial control in this way makes any un-nuanced talk of post-colonialism – and especially a generalized ‘post-colonial condition’, of which some critics are rather fond – difficult to sustain. A further complicating factor, sometimes gestured towards, but more usually overlooked in post-colonial studies, is as Slemon says ‘the modern theatre of neo-colonialist international relations’. In the period after decolonization, it rapidly became apparent (to the newly independent nations, at least) that although colonial armies and bureaucracies might have withdrawn, Western powers were still intent on maintaining maximum indirect control over erstwhile colonies, via political, cultural and above all economic channels, a phenomenon which became known as neo-colonialism. For a growing number of analysts, it was clear that the overriding concern was the ability to go on extracting profit from formerly colonized areas, and that the relation between colonialism and neo-colonialism made most sense in the context of even larger historical processes. From the late fifteenth century, the unrelenting, if uneven, expansion of capitalism from its West European base has been a constant – some might say *the* constant – of world history, to the point where there is now no part of the globe left untouched by it – though not all are equally subjected to it. This larger, still incomplete project of the globalization of capitalism is what a number of post-colonial critics, especially those working with Marxist, or Marxist-derived concepts, understand as imperialism. For them, it is perhaps the key explanatory concept. With the framework it provides, colonialism can be seen to be a particular phase or modality of imperialism, an appropriate form of intervention corresponding to capitalism’s needs at that time, but which by the mid-twentieth century had run its course. What the precise needs of capitalism might be are not necessarily a matter of consensus. For Marx and Engels, ‘The need for a constantly expanding market for its goods chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.’<sup>10</sup> For others, however, ‘The search for markets as an explanation simply does not hold. A much more plausible explanation is the search for low cost labour forces.’<sup>11</sup>

The latter obviously was an important dimension of the colonialist phase, with the mass movements of millions of slaves from Africa and indentured labourers from Asia and the Indian subcontinent as the best-known examples of a general pattern of directing cheap labour to places where it was needed. The end of colonialist control means that it is no longer possible physically to force workers to migrate to the place of work, though that does not automatically mean an end to the patterns of diasporic displacement which had been established. In the current phase of imperialism, the most striking change is that instead of bringing workers to the point of production (Caribbean sugar plantations, South African diamond mines, etc.), capitalism takes the point of production to the workers, as transnational corporations endlessly relocate factories to the zones of lowest-cost labour, such as Central America or the Pacific rim, providing themselves with a workforce which is low-paid, non-unionized, and which will have job security only as long as it stays that way.

While the directly coerced migration of labour may not be part of current capitalist strategy, semi-large-scale movements do still take place, as workers from economically disadvantaged areas (North Africa, Turkey, the Indian subcontinent) converge on areas of core capitalist activity. Traditionally, that has meant the movement of non-white, non-Western groups to white, Western areas, but factors such as the collapse of state Communism and the existence of 'core' capitalist areas outside the West have complicated the situation. While these movements still help to provide a potential pool of low-cost labour, the fact that they are not directly regulated by capitalism means that they tend to be unwelcome and subject to obstructive or repressive measures by state authorities.

At the beginning of his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said suggests that imperialism is 'a word and an idea today so controversial, so fraught with all sorts of questions, doubts, polemics and ideological premises as nearly to resist use altogether'.<sup>12</sup> We would argue that it is precisely because the term has been, and still is, used in a variety of (often contradictory) ways, and because the phenomenon to which it relates is of such magnitude in world history, that it is important both to retain the term and to debate and clarify its usage. While the scope of this book does not allow for that particular extensive debate, we have briefly indicated above that what we see as the most helpful way of understanding imperialism. However, even if the 500-year expansionary dynamic of capitalism-as-imperialism is accepted as the 'big picture' within which colonialism and post-colonialism are phases, that does not exhaust the debates about post-colonialism and historical period. For instance, in 'Notes on the "Post-Colonial"', Ella Shohat asks, 'When exactly then does the "post-colonial" begin?',<sup>13</sup>

and the historian Arif Dirlik, 'Misreading the question deliberately [supplies] an answer that is only partially facetious: When Third World intellectuals have arrived in First World academe.'<sup>14</sup> This kind of approach shifts the question to the plane of institutional politics, and suggests different criteria for periodizing. While the connotations or implications of Dirlik's 'misreading' may be negative ones of vested interests, special pleading or political correctness, his remark nevertheless draws attention to the importance of intellectuals in this area.

A different sort of problem with the temporality of post-colonialism is expressed by the Caribbean poet Lorna Goodison: 'When is post-coloniality going to end? How long does the post-colonial continue?'<sup>15</sup> A pertinent question, and one which compounds the problems of periodizing. If the 'obvious' answer to the opening question 'When is the post-colonial?' is 'Now'; if the 'difficult' answer of *The Empire Writes Back* is 'Then and now'; an alternative answer might be 'Not (quite) yet'. As we have already pointed out in this section, post-colonialism can in no sense be regarded as a fully achieved state. Anne McClintock, for example, in the article mentioned earlier, has criticized the use of the term as 'prematurely celebratory'. We could, however, argue for post-colonialism as an anticipatory discourse, recognizing that the condition it names does not yet exist, but working nevertheless to bring that about. In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson highlights the ways in which theories, ideologies and intellectual practices contain a Utopian dimension, for instance, dialectical thought as 'the anticipation of the logic of a collectivity which has not yet come into being'.<sup>16</sup> If even unsavoury ideologies such as Fascism can project a Utopian aspect, how much more so sets of theories which are grounded in the histories and experiences of the formerly- or still-colonized world, and which articulate their aspirations? There is a form of perverseness in taking the label 'post-' for a state which is not yet fully present, and linking it to something which has not fully disappeared, but in many ways that paradoxical in-betweenness precisely characterizes the post-colonial world. As Gayatri Spivak says, 'We live in a post-colonial neo-colonized world.'<sup>17</sup>

Post-structuralism also offers a sense of the 'not-quiteness' which the 'post-' may legitimately contain. In *Writing and Difference*, the leading post-structuralist thinker Jacques Derrida says that we are still 'within' structuralism to the extent that the latter represents a particular 'vision' or way of formulating questions. Clearly, no one is suggesting an equivalence between structuralism and colonialism. Nevertheless, colonialism as 'vision' or powerful ideology is still with us, even in its brute form (witness numbers of articles in British and American newspapers and magazines in recent years calling for the recolonization of Africa), while slightly attenuated notions of Western

superiority and the right to intervene are founding assumptions of much imperialist activity.

A final aspect of the 'When?' of post-colonialism is the question of history itself, and the ways in which it is theorized, categorized, narrated and written about. Although this will be discussed further in the final chapter, it is necessary at this stage to make some preliminary points. Since the West has a deplorable record of simultaneously denying the existence of any worthwhile history in areas it colonized (Africa is the most obvious example) and destroying the cultures which embodied that history, an important dimension of post-colonial work has been the recovery or revaluing of indigenous histories. A representative example (which is discussed in the next chapter) is C.L.R. James's account of the slave rebellion in what became Haiti. While its component terms – black, slave, rebellion – would normally have been enough to consign it to historical oblivion, its particular importance lies in its depiction of black people making their own history, rather than being passive participants in history made by others.

Aijaz Ahmad is one critic dissatisfied with history made by others, or in this case with models of history constructed on others' terms, and for him one of those problematic terms is post-colonialism:

It is worth remarking, though, that in periodising our history in the triadic terms of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial, the conceptual apparatus of 'postcolonial criticism' privileges as primary the role of colonialism as the principle of structuration in that history, so that all that came before colonialism becomes its own prehistory and whatever comes after can only be lived as infinite aftermath.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of post-colonialism as an 'infinite aftermath' is no doubt not the answer Lorna Goodison would want to her query 'When will it end?' Apart from that, one response to Ahmad might be that given the global impact of colonialism, the fact that it affected some areas for centuries, and that its effects are still felt, it would be irresponsible not to give it due weight, which is not the same as making it the 'primary . . . principle of structuration' of other people's histories.

The refusal to write histories which are predicated on Western-derived priorities or concepts can be taken even further. The post-colonial Indian critic Gayan Prakash argues:

we cannot thematize Indian history in terms of the development of capitalism and simultaneously contest capitalism's homogenisation of the contemporary world. Critical history cannot simply document the process by which capitalism becomes dominant, for that amounts to repeating the history we seek to displace.<sup>19</sup>

Prakash's position is criticized from different perspectives by Aijaz Ahmad and Arif Dirlik in the articles already mentioned. In addition,

there seems to be a strange conflation happening in the quote: the idea that acknowledging that capitalism had a formative effect on the creation of contemporary India is taken as somehow equivalent to merely repeating the history of its incursions and triumphs, and that that acknowledgement supposedly leaves you incapable of contesting capitalism. There appears to be something like what one might call a will-to-powerlessness at work here, a strange determination to refuse the positions which would empower a critique.

The idea of the Western-ness of history, either in origin, orientation or ideology, is one which post-colonial critics debate (and, as such, one which recurs in various forms in the course of this book).

The significance of history for post-colonial discourse lies in the modern origins of historical study itself, and the circumstances by which 'History' took upon itself the mantle of a discipline. For the emergence of history in European thought is coterminous with the rise of modern colonialism, which in its radical othering and violent annexation of the non-European world, found in history a prominent, if not *the* prominent, instrument for the control of subject peoples.<sup>20</sup>

Among the points worth noting here are: do the terms 'History' and history relate to the same things? (Robert Young, for instance, stakes a lot on the idea of 'History' as a totalizing concept); what are the implications of the alleged 'coterminous' nature of history and colonialism? (again, for Young, Marxism's contemporaneity with colonialism is one aspect of its ideological complicity with it); and finally, does the argument that history is 'the prominent instrument for the control of subject peoples' – rather than, for example, armies, police forces, bureaucracies, laws or economic policies – represent a dangerous over-inflation of the power of discourse in general and one discourse in particular?

For some critics, the Western-ness of history would appear to be inescapable: Dipesh Chakrabarty, for instance, sees its influence and centrality extending even to those instances – so important for post-colonialism – of indigenous attempts to narrate their own histories:

insofar as the academic discourse of history – that is, 'history' as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university – is concerned, 'Europe' remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call 'Indian', 'Chinese', 'Kenyan' and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all those other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe'.<sup>21</sup>

Depressing as this may be as a possible description, it does at least leave open the possibility of other, non-institutional or non-academic, histories, as well as forcibly highlighting the difficulty and complexity of the production of post-colonial histories and alternative periodizing.

## Where is the post-colonial?

Difficulties connected with the temporality of post-colonialism also introduce questions of its spatial location. Again, there is an 'obvious' geography of post-colonialism – those areas formerly under the control of the European colonialist powers – and tracking the immensity of colonialist acquisition and control is less of a problem:

Consider that in 1800 the Western powers claimed 55% but actually held 35% of the earth's surface, and that by 1878 the proportion was 67%, a rate of increase of 83,000 square miles per year. By 1914, the annual rate had risen to an astonishing 240,000 square miles, and Europe held a grand total of roughly 85% of the earth as colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions and commonwealths. No other set of colonies in history was as large, none so totally dominated, none so unequal in power to the Western metropolis.<sup>22</sup>

In the face of the enormity and the global impact of colonialism, calls to move on to topics other than the (post-) colonial can only seem hasty; indeed, if, as argued in the previous section, the overall framework is one of imperialist expansion, it is difficult to see what a responsible moving-on would involve, caught up as we are in imperialism's relentless unfolding dynamic.

Though he himself does not comment on it, Said's list of the various modalities of domination indicates an important fact about colonialism – its extreme unevenness: we are dealing with different empires, different needs, different strategies, different trajectories of expansion or contraction, different levels of territorial penetration, control and exploitation. Unevenness manifests itself, too, in the fact that '... some other areas, notably the Middle East and China, were not colonies, but were more affected by "colonialism" than many countries that were.'<sup>23</sup> It carries over in a variety of ways into the post-colonial period, not least via the different histories and experiences of the recovery of territory with decolonization: some like Ghana, Nigeria or Senegal were relatively swift and generally peaceful; others, like Algeria, Kenya, Mozambique or Vietnam were protracted, vicious and bloody. Some processes of decolonization were completed long ago; others are still incomplete. The fact that what Gayatri Spivak calls 'decolonized space' is not evenly distributed or inhabited means that for critics like Anne McClintock it is probably too soon to talk about post-colonialism, particularly in a generalized sense:

Ireland may at a pinch be 'post-colonial', but for the inhabitants of British-occupied Northern Ireland, not to mention the Palestinian inhabitants of the Israeli Occupied Territories and the West Bank, there may be nothing 'post' about colonialism at all. Is South Africa 'post-colonial'? East Timor? Australia? By what fiat of historical amnesia can

the United States of America, in particular, qualify as 'post-colonial' – a term which can only be a monumental affront to the native American peoples currently opposing the confetti triumphalism of 1992?<sup>24</sup>

These are important and complex questions: easier to ask than to answer, no doubt, and for which, indeed, there may be no ready or conclusive answer. Certainly, McClintock's questions present a range of situations which are similar but not necessarily equivalent. Risking charges of Eurocentric bias, some might wish to exclude areas such as the Israeli Occupied Territories or East Timor on the grounds that they are not examples of Western aggression (even if they are examples of profound complicity or criminal indifference on the part of the West), nor are they part of the colonialist-imperialist process in the same way as other areas. The fact that the United States is a former part of the empire at the centre of the colonialist enterprise, and is currently the leading force in the economic and cultural globalization of imperialism, as well as perpetrator of quasi-colonialist military actions worldwide, make it an especially difficult case. There may, however, be good reasons to include work being produced there as post-colonial, as we shall see in Chapter 2. A different case needs to be made for the decolonizing metropolises such as France and Britain, where a particular post-colonial phenomenon is the large-scale immigration of groups from former colonies, creating the possibility of something like internal colonization, despite the dissolution of the empire. It is internal colonization, along with other factors, which renders problematic the inclusion of the white settler colonies of Australia, Canada and New Zealand in the category of the post-colonial, but here, too, there is a case to be made.

If the colonialist moment brought about particular spatial and geographical configurations – for instance, the core and/versus the periphery within the same imperial economy, or empire versus empire as competing power blocs, as bitter rivals warring for control of the same territory (as in eighteenth-century India), or collaborating colleagues calmly sharing out a continent (as with Africa in the nineteenth century) – the post-colonial period is even more complex, with connections from the colonial era remaining (for example, in the shape of the British Commonwealth, or the network sustained by the French system of 'Coopération'), and new relations being constituted. Colonialism's principal mode of the investment and organization of space was via the bounded territory of the nation-state and the latter's extension into colonies, with Sir John Seeley's image of the British Empire as *The Expansion of England*, or Dilke's of it as a *Greater Britain* just two of the better-known examples from the late nineteenth century, while the idea of nationhood as colonialism's greatest gift to the colonies was a long-lived ideological mainstay. Against this, sceptical commentators

such as Basil Davidson have argued that the gift was more of a poisoned chalice in terms of its irrelevance to the needs and conditions of colonized peoples, not to mention the often crippling economic and social legacies it brought with it. It is also possible to argue that colonialism's 'magnificent bequest' is something of an historical irrelevance, as the emphasis in the post-colonial period has shifted from bounded spatial entities to what Masao Miyoshi has termed the 'borderless world',<sup>25</sup> almost as much as colonialism's direct territorial control had become irrelevant to the operations of capitalism. Although the post-colonial period may indeed be marked by an intensification of forms of transnationalism, things are perhaps not as simple as some theorists of globalization, enthusiastically proclaiming the end of the nation-state, might like to suggest:

We hear a good deal these days about the *postnational* status of global capitalism and postcoloniality. Such conclusions ignore the ferocious recoding power of the concept/metaphor 'nation state' and remain locked in the reversal of capital logic and colonialism.<sup>26</sup>

In that sort of perspective, post-colonial spatial relations are likely to be dominated by a power struggle to shore up the boundaries of the nation-state against all those forces which would ignore or bypass them.

## Who is the post-colonial?

Once again, as point of departure, there is an 'obvious' post-colonial population – those peoples formerly colonized by the West. From what we have already seen, however, while such a grouping may be (obviously) correct, it may offer no more than a very partial picture. The unevenness and incompleteness of the process of decolonization is one factor in that: if territories cannot be considered post-colonial (in the sense of being free from colonial control), can their inhabitants? Another level of complexity is added when the territory is arguably decolonized or post-colonial, but it may be difficult to regard all the ethnic or cultural groups who inhabit it in that way. That is particularly true of the situation of First Peoples, of the condition of internal colonization, and is one of the factors which unsettles the claims of white settler colonies to post-colonial status.

Questions of the relation of populations and territories to post-colonialism are further complicated by the major diasporas which mark the colonial and post-colonial periods, to which we have already referred, and to which we will return in the final chapter. Although certain population movements in these periods might see themselves as

in opposition to colonialist incursion (with the trekking Boers as a highly paradoxical example) the most important – the African and Asian diasporas – were the deliberate (and in some ways indirect) result of imperialism. While the numbers involved may not be as large, and conditions usually less violent (though instances such as Rwanda and Bosnia could scarcely be more violent), migrations in the post-colonial period do not necessarily represent a great improvement:

For the demography of the new internationalism is the history of post-colonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees.<sup>27</sup>

Although diasporic population movements may not amount to what the Caribbean poet Louise Bennett once rather optimistically called ‘colonization in reverse’, the arrival of sizeable populations from former colonies in the imperial heartlands creates conditions under which the latter may in some senses claim to be post-colonial. As Homi Bhabha says: ‘The Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of postwar migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative *internal to its national identity* . . .’<sup>28</sup> The idea that post-colonial groups and their histories, far from being alien or Other to carefully constructed and guarded Western identities, are in fact an integral part of them, derives ultimately from Said’s insights on the colonial period in *Orientalism*, but is even truer in the post-colonial period when the Other comes ‘home’. The sort of criticism which is sometimes made of post-colonial work in this area is that it appears more interested in migrants as a metaphor than in migrants as real people or actual political issue. That type of accusation is perhaps easily levelled at the playful use of the term in Rushdie’s novels – or indeed in Bhabha’s theorizing – but one can just as easily point to empirically based work such as Keya Ganguly’s ‘Migrant Identities’<sup>29</sup> as an attempt to understand how people construct or negotiate identities in the unsettling conditions of post-colonial migrancy.

The question of identity traverses post-colonial thinking, from the Negritude of Senghor discussed in Chapter 1 to the complexity of Gayatri Spivak’s theorizing in Chapter 5. The problem of unsettled or unsettling identities which Bhabha’s quote raises is an issue at the heart of post-colonialism. If the colonial powers fundamentally disrupted many indigenous cultures and identities in the past, then, as Bhabha’s quote suggests, post-colonial migrant groups could be seen as returning the compliment, in however modest a fashion. In one sense, to ask the question ‘Who is post-colonial?’ seems to assume identities already in place, which can then be judged to be

post-colonial or not, whereas for many groups or individuals, post-colonialism is much more to do with the painful experience of confronting the desire to recover 'lost' pre-colonial identities, the impossibility of actually doing so, and the task of constructing some new identity on the basis of that impossibility. 'Who is the post-colonial?' then becomes at least temporarily or partially unanswerable: to the extent that major reformulations are taking place, with the identities of both the formerly colonized or diasporic groups and the imperial nations unsettled in different ways by colonial and post-colonial histories, attempts to define or circumscribe in advance the content of that Who? are premature.

As well as its substantive populations, post-colonialism also has its representative or emblematic individuals or types, among whom intellectuals and activists are prominent. (At one level this book could be seen as a study of diverse intellectual positions and practices in relation to the field designated as post-colonialism, and an obvious criticism of a project such as this is that it merely increases the (supposedly over-inflated) status of 'star' intellectuals such as Said or Spivak. Several of the chapters address questions of the nature and role of intellectual activity in the contested sphere of post-colonialism. In addition to those figures currently active, we examine the work of important thinkers, some of whom did not survive into the post-colonial period (such as Fanon and Cabral), others who did (like C.L.R. James), and who constitute the essential grounding and continuing inspiration for much current analysis. Without the combination of their writings and anti-colonial activism – whether 'merely' textual, or armed and revolutionary – the field of post-colonialism would be literally unthinkable.)

The important role of intellectuals as participants in, and theorizers of, anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles risks giving intellectuals in general an unearned, or at least unexamined, heroic status in certain quarters. In fact, it is very much part of the 'uneven' natures of colonialism and post-colonialism that intellectuals can occupy positions and embody attitudes ranging from thoroughgoing complicity with the West to outright rejection of it, and in *The Wretched of the Earth* Franz Fanon famously outlines the stages by which some intellectuals move from the former stance to the latter. The fact that intellectuals in the post-colonial field are not automatically praiseworthy has already been indicated in the somewhat cynical remark of Arif Dirlik quoted earlier. Dirlik is not the only critic to attack what is perceived as the self-interested institutionalizing of certain issues by Third World academics, especially those settled in the West. Anthony Appiah, for example, has criticized the actions of what he calls 'a *comprador* intelligentsia',<sup>30</sup> meaning that they supposedly behave in the cultural/

intellectual sphere like the early post-colonial bourgeoisie did in the economic, as 'compradors' (literally, buyers) who specialized in the handling of foreign goods, produced nothing themselves, and were thus essentially parasitic.

Gayatri Spivak has also voiced anxiety regarding post-colonial intellectuals, but for her the danger seems to lie with the institution and its practices, rather than with individuals:

As a result of a decade of colonial discourse studies percolating into disciplinary pedagogy and its powerful adjuncts, and of the imbrication of techniques of knowledge with strategies of power, who claims marginality in the larger postcolonial field? What might have this to do with the old scenario of empowering a privileged group or a group susceptible to upward mobility as the authentic inhabitants of the margin?<sup>31</sup>

Another possible answer to the question 'Who is post-colonial?' is 'Not me!'. Resistance to what is seen as an irrelevant or imposed label (which is by no means a problem confined to post-colonialism) tends to occur more among writers than academics or theorists, such resistance to categorization going hand in hand with other typical resistances to theory, or to suggestions that their 'art' is political.<sup>32</sup> In *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, Carole Boyce Davies questions the relevance of post-coloniality to black women writers, and applauds their reluctance to be labelled (though she is simultaneously unhappy at Lauretta Ngcobo's unwillingness to be labelled as a woman writer, rather than just African). However, even if women do accept labels, they aren't allowed to get away with it:

I want to assert unequivocally that I see few 'Third World women' or 'women of color' or Black women 'doing post-coloniality' even when a few use the language of post-colonial discourse, or name themselves and their work as such.<sup>33</sup>

Part of the problem here, we would suggest, is the model of post-coloniality which Carole Boyce Davies constructs, a question to which we will return in the next section.

## What is the post-colonial?

In this final section, we aim to draw together some of the debates about the nature of post-colonialism, and in particular, some of the criticisms which have been levelled against it. One such area of debate concerns the implications of terminology, for instance the relative merits of post-colonialism and post-coloniality. Although perhaps the majority of people would use the two interchangeably, some critics want to differentiate them. Gayatri Spivak, for instance, says: