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Reports of My Death are Greatly Exaggerated": Postcolonial Theory and "The Politics of Postcoloniality

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“Reports of My Death Are Greatly Exaggerated”: Postcolonial Theory and “The Politics of Postcoloniality”

Camille Isaacs

In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri contend that “postmodernist and postcolonial theories may end up in a dead end because they fail to recognize adequately the contemporary object of critique, that is, they mistake today’s real enemy” (137). It is to respond to critiques such as this and others that the “Politics of Postcoloniality: Contexts and Conflicts” conference was held at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario Canada in October 2003. Bringing together many North American scholars in the field, the conference organizers sought to find answers to the question of whether it was time to move “beyond postcolonialism.” Through keynote speakers—Diana Brydon, Himani Bannerji, and Asha Varadharajan—as well as a number of other panelists, the conference was more than just a host of postcolonial scholars trying to save the field in which they work. In addition to addressing the problems of postcolonial theory, the participants also put forward ideas about directions postcolonial studies might take if the field was going to move beyond the stalemate that seems to be plaguing it. By the end of the day’s event, it became clear that postcolonial studies have not been exhausted. While the field needs to move beyond a “politics of blame” and challenge itself to think how it might become more relevant for the masses whose situation it hopes to alleviate, the “job” of postcolonial theory has not yet been completed since marginalized groups continue to be marginalized and new forms of Othering continue to emerge.

It is Hardt and Negri’s contention that “Empire” (international and supranational conglomerates) has created a new world order and that postcolonial theory is too busy flogging the dead horse of older empirical structures, such as nation-states and concepts of nationality, which are no longer as relevant. Many have also accused postcolonial nation-

states of sharing not much more than a history of oppression, where migrant, well-educated diasporic figures gain all the attention and the former colonized masses have been lost in the process. But in Diana Brydon's response to these questions, "The Ends of Postcoloniality," she argued that postcolonial studies has been stereotyped and reduced to the dialectic of "bad/good," "them/us." She suggested instead that there are various truths along a continuum, not just the extreme ends. As was the case with some of the other participants, Brydon stressed the actions that postcolonial studies was undertaking a "doing" as opposed to an "end." She accentuated "dithering as a positive space." Postcolonial studies, as is the case with the many truth and reconciliation bodies that have arisen recently for example, should be seen as a step toward community mobilization, not necessarily as an end point. She reminded the audience that it is important to address and reassess history in a complex manner and not necessarily to fall into an all-too-easy politics of blame.

Brydon did argue, however, that it is time to step back, analyze what postcolonial studies has accomplished so far, and perhaps set some goals for the future in order to move beyond its current stalemate. If postcolonial studies are going to remain relevant, it must constantly reshape itself, in what Wilson Harris calls "infinite rehearsal." It must listen to and then respond to its critics. She put forward some questions that postcolonial scholars ought to ask of themselves and the field in order to ameliorate it:

1. What is the point of postcolonial scholarship?
2. Is the field imbued with a missionary zeal to redeem the world?
3. To what extent can such idealism be harnessed for progressive ends?
4. To what extent does it remain embedded within forms of idealism that can slip toward fascism?
5. Is there a temporal limit to the scope of the field?
6. What form should a postcolonial politics take in Canada? Or the world?
7. How does one connect indigenous literacies to transnational literacy?
8. Where are the spaces for dissent?

If postcolonial scholars think in a cross-disciplinary fashion and view uncertainty as a part of the process, then it must be acknowledged that there is still a great deal of work to be done in the field.

Laura Moss, in her paper "Indeterminacy and the Ethics of Postcoloniality in Canada," reiterated Brydon's position of uncertainty as a positive space. The questions being raised about postcolonial theory need not be stifling, but ought to be seen as an opportunity for those in the field to question where postcolonial theory stands and to be more specific about its aims. Moss identifies one of the problems of postcolonial theory as the multiple ambiguities of meanings in the field. Scholars should define the terms they are using in the context of their research. As was the case with Brydon, Moss sees postcolonial theory as a process, where indeterminacy can be seen as a critical paradigm, as "a refusal to fix." She also pointed out that while some academics have grown weary of the debates that postcolonial theory is bringing forward, the material is still new to many students. Postcolonial debates still raise questions in students' minds, and arguments do not have to be new in order to be relevant.

It is the question of relevancy that Nagesh Rao feels postcolonial theory needs to address. In his paper "New Imperialisms, New Imperatives: The Future of Postcolonial Studies" Rao underscored the need for postcolonial theory to address questions of wider political debates. Instead of obscure discussions of theory, Rao suggested that in order to remain relevant, postcolonial theory needs to engage with the current state of affairs in a globalized world. He argued that postcolonial studies has run itself into "a cul-de-sac of its own making," and that the field needs to deal concretely with the materiality of the former colonized people's lives. He also disagreed with Hardt and Negri's contention that the nation-state is on the wane, arguing that the new imperialism must consider the United States as an imperial figure and that it does function as a type of "centre." The American-initiated new world order is putting forward a different type of colonialism. In order for postcolonial studies to remain relevant, it needs to enter the debate on these issues.

Postcolonial studies needs to take stock of where it is today, and decide what global events still needs to be considered by the field. Although

one of the aims of postcolonial theory was to bring light to marginalized literatures, it must acknowledge that despite some gains, minorities are still underrepresented in many English departments, as instructors, students, and in the literature taught. And for those scholars who believe that some authors, V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie for example, are taking advantage of "minority" status, when they have already "crossed-over," it must be kept in mind that although these authors may have achieved widespread popular acclaim, they have still not been embedded in *the* canon of English literature. What has occurred is that there is now a separate canon of international literatures to which authors such as Naipaul, Rushdie, Achebe, Soyinka, Walcott, etc., now belong. It has already been proven that separate does not always mean equal. Many English departments still require that students take a British survey course. How many *require* students to take a course in international or postcolonial literatures?

If the future of postcolonial studies is to mobilize community involvement, it must do more than bring minority literatures to the forefront. It must bring the minorities themselves to the forefront, so that we do not have a majority of white or privileged brown academics discussing the brown masses, as is still the case in the field. This is not a simple proposal for a kind of academic affirmative action policy, but an acknowledgement that if the literatures and the peoples are considered equal, then they should be equally represented in departments and in the required curricula.

Others argue that postcolonialism is losing ground in the face of globalization and theories of globalization, so that some postcolonial scholars have yet again changed their discourse to transnational cultural studies or some such other moniker. Air travel, frequent flier miles, and Internet access, among other new technologies, have made the world seem somewhat smaller. It should be kept in mind, however, that this is still predominantly a one-way exchange of ideas. For the most part, the richer, industrialized North or West is gaining wider access to previously unavailable markets in the South or East. And it is only those parts of the "Other" that are deemed palatable (financially or otherwise) that are considered worthy of representation. Both the East and the West are

given skewed views of each other. The South/East thinks of the West as McDonald's and Starbucks, or the place where everyone drives a big car; and the North/West thinks of the East as the sample of music provided on the latest World Music CD or the odd foreign film that makes it way into mainstream markets. The "Other" is not becoming just a different version of the "same," but we are only given access to those aspects of "Others" similar enough to be acceptable. Postcolonial theory cannot be at an end when it is still needed to debunk the new and revised "Others" that are still being created.

Unfortunately, humans have an unending ability to create new "Others," to which a postcolonial reading could be applied. Postcolonial readings have been applied to the People's Republic of China, the literature of the former Austria-Hungarian Empire, and to children's literature. Anywhere there is an empirical structure in place (actual or metaphoric) a postcolonial reading can be done. And to refute Hardt and Negri's claim that postcolonial theory is misguided, and is assaulting the wrong nexus of power, postcolonial theorists have always been interested not only in the effect of colonialism historically, but how that same colonialism has affected various parts of the world today. As a now classic text of postcolonial theory states, "We use the term 'postcolonial' . . . to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process, from the moment of colonization *to the present day*" (Ashcroft, et al. 2 emphasis mine). Many of those same supranational and international corporations that are the new Empire, according to Hardt and Negri, received their wealth, prestige, and power as a direct result of colonialism and neocolonialism.

Postcolonial theory does need to reconsider its place in academia in the face of global changes. Critics in the field should ask themselves what they can do to ensure that this theory remains current. What are the goals that postcolonial theory would like to set for itself? Many of the panellists at the conference put forward ideas about the ways in which postcolonial theory can move forward and still remain relevant. As for postcolonialism's obituary, the field should perhaps echo Mark Twain when he said that the "reports of my death are greatly exaggerated."

Works Cited

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