# Some Self-Reflections on Colonialism and Postcolonialism

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Amar Acheraïou. *Rethinking Postcolonialism: Colonialist Discourse in Modern Literatures and the Legacy of Classical Writers*. Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. $80.00.

Christopher Douglas. *A Genealogy of Multiculturalism*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2009. $45.00.

Dorothy M. Figueira. *Otherwise Occupied: Pedagogies of Alterity and the Brahminization of Theory*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2008. $55.00.

In the forty years I have been studying, researching, and teaching them, postcolonial literature and theory have undergone many substantial disciplinary and cultural changes, both in the ideological configurations of the subject matter, carrying rubrics such as *Commonwealth Literature*, *World Literature in English*, *Postcolonial Literature*, and, currently, an alternative *World Literature* with a Comparative Literature accent and an international and multilingual scope, and in its various pedagogical methodologies addressing issues of nationalism, identity, subjectivity,

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race, ethnicity, culture, alterity, the Diaspora, globalization, transnationalism, and subalternity. Formative designations such as *New Literatures in English* today may seem more presumptuous even than quaint. Yet categories such as the essentializing *commonwealth* and *world*, the divisive *postcolonial,* and the Eurocentric *English* imply a degree of complacency among their practitioners, a smug acceptance of *here* over *there*, *after* over *before*, *us* over *you,* along with the valorization of *margin* over *centre*. The temporal illogicality of *after before* is perhaps the most unsettling to me, given that, whereas India gained its independence in 1947 and most other of Britain's colonies in the 1960s, I work at a university named after a Scottish explorer of Canada and live in a province called British Columbia in a culturally diverse Dominion of Canada, whose Head of State is the sovereign of the nation that colonized the indigenous peoples and my own French ancestors, a paradigm that calls to mind Ngugi wa Thiong'o's phrase "decolonising the mind." In addition, favouring *after* over *before* discourages direct confrontations of colonialism in contemporaneous records, such as the novels and stories about British women in colonial India by Canadian author and journalist Sara Jeannette Duncan, including *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib* (1893), *The Path of a Star* (1899), *The Pool in the Desert* (1903), *Set in Authority* (1906), *The Burnt Offering* (1909), and *The Consort* (1912). Duncan's imperialist perspectives on colonial experience in India are invaluable to anyone assuming a postcolonial stance today, particularly in that her fiction provides an alternative *before* to narratives such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), and Joseph Furphy's *Such Is Life* (1903) as directly documenting colonial perspectives on colonial-indigenous confrontations.

Terminologies and political anachronisms aside, several of the disciplinary and cultural developments in the field of postcolonial studies have been wholly positive. To take an example from my own area of expertise, the study of Polynesian literature has expanded recently into the multidisciplinary fields of Pacific Studies and Asia-Pacific Studies, which by including Hawaiian, New Zealand, and some Asian literatures along with the literatures of the Pacific Islands subvert the arbitrary literary configurations of both the Commonwealth and the non-contiguous United States. Similarly, Diaspora Studies have helped to free writers from nationalist aspects of citizenship and even call into question the alternative concept of global citizenship as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Judith Butler have done in *Who Sings the Nation State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (2007). Thus Diaspora Studies have helped writers to find new forms of expression

and new transnational audiences by acknowledging the continuum from migration to personal mobility. Thus, in separate publications, a book and an article, I have recognized Barry Humphries, who was born in Melbourne but has lived in London for fifty years, in the contexts of Australian literature and British literature, only because in a transnational milieu he no longer fits exclusively or even conveniently into national categories.

During the Australian Republic Referendum of 1999, while Humphries's persona Dame Edna Everage canvassed for the "Yes" side, Humphries as himself endorsed the "No." Although the referendum narrowly missed achieving the required double majority, the republican debate has continued in Australia into the twenty-first century, whereas in Canada, outside of Quebec, the discourse of political self-determination has been largely silent since the British North America Act was repatriated in 1982. Despite having the power to amend its own constitution, Canada, like Australia, remains a constitutional monarchy. The other Commonwealth constitutional monarchies are Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Grenada, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, and St Vincent and the Grenadines; the United Kingdom also is a constitutional monarchy. Although Queen Elizabeth II is only the titular or nominal head of state of these countries, constituting 30 percent of the fifty-three member states of the Commonwealth of Nations, of which she is also the titular or nominal head, the position of head of state evokes a yet to be completely historicized colonial memory and an importunate present colonial reality.

Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o has addressed the paradox of the postindependence colonial condition in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), *Writing Against Neo-Colonialism* (1986), *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom* (1993), and *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: The Performance of Literature and Power in Post-Colonial Africa* (1998). That a pernicious kind of colonial mentality should persist in sixteen pre-independence constitutional monarchies in the Commonwealth of Nations is perhaps only to be expected. But the complacency implicit in resigning oneself to what is "to be expected" is like that of promoting *after before* inherent in *postcolonialism* as a term, theory, movement, methodology. Even if the head of state is only titular or nominal and the head of the Commonwealth has only symbolic power because the British Empire has long ago been filed away in history, catalogued under *past atrocities*, "the politics of language" associated with Queen Elizabeth II, with constitutional monarchies such as Canada, and with the Commonwealth of Nations is powerful. How

can people in a constitutional monarchy call themselves postcolonial, how can they call themselves free, when they fall under the shadow of a foreign dictator? How, in a smugly postcolonial Canada, can First Nations, Québecois, and migrants ever hope to be free?

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As if drawing directly from Ngugi's cognitive modeling system, Amar Acheraïou posits the concept of "rethinking postcolonialism" as a means to reconsider and re-evaluate literatures produced during the period of colonization, to reconfigure oneself as a postcolonial subject, and to render arbitrary the politically determined boundary between colonialism and postcolonialism, like the critically determined boundary between modernism and postmodernism, and thus to expand postcolonialism's historical and cultural capacity. *Rethinking Postcolonialism: Colonial Discourse in Modern Literature and the Legacy of Classical Writers* is distinguished by the scope of its subjects, ranging from Conrad to Gide, Kipling to Camus, in the context of an actual colonialism, as distinguished from a historicized one. Acheraïou's rethought colonialism is more a personal interpretation of a human tendency to dominate members of their own species than a conventional postcolonial theory of literature, oral production, art, and culture, because Acheraïou prefers to see colonialism as "an immemorial phenomenon" (3), as distinguished from the time-specific phenomenon of various hegemonic European empires in the New World over the past five hundred years. Thus, in the arc of his discussion he addresses how classical writings have influenced colonial discourse over the last two centuries and how constructs of modernism and empire are interrelated.

Devoting only two of his eleven chapters to the almost obligatory *bêtes noirs* of Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* and *Heart of Darkness*, Acheraïou leaves himself room to address the more compelling questions of rethinking a postcolonialism that may never have been thought through in the first instance and recovering thoughts of colonialist discourse. His theory of postcolonialism is ideologically expansive and culturally inclusive, historically bold, and reminiscent of empire in that he reminds readers that colonialism has never ended and may be a universal system without an end boundary. Much of his discussion pertains to imperial ideologies, attitudes, and practices as informing specific works of literature and as evident textually. His commentary on the texts is insightful and engaging in its didactic energy. For example, on the titular character in Conrad's story "Karain: A Memory" (1897), he observes, "The ghost-ridden, superstitious Karain is a prototype concentrating the Malays' features. He is made paradigmatic of his race, culture and environment typifying the very Malay essence and tropical nature. In semiotic terms, Karain becomes

a mere metonymy—the part that represents the whole—mirroring his own people. He is reduced to a generic type, organically connected to his cultural and geographical milieu" (43). The subtle rhetorical transitions apparent here, from prototype to paradigm and metonym, and from race, culture, and environment to cultural and geographical milieu, are typical more of Acheraïou's pedagogy than of his style of writing.

Pedagogical rhetoric marks an important property of this book, in that Acheraïou, rather than simply theorizing about "rethinking postcolonialism," engages his readers in a discourse that instructs in and even fosters new modes of thought distinct from the conventional outcome of a convincing scholarly argument. In reference to *Ulysses*, Acheraïou positions Leopold Bloom in a colonial paradigm but not as an imposition of his thesis: "The choice of Bloom as a protagonist of a novel that addresses the genesis of colonialism is in this case very appropriate. Owing to his dual identity (Irish citizen of Jewish descent) Bloom stands for the portrait of the colonised *par excellence*, enacting a modern Irish colonial subject and an ancient colonised Israelite. As such, he connects modern British imperialism to the most ancient imperial power, the Egyptians" (106). Rather than merely arguing that Bloom is an imperial subject, as by acknowledging his "choice" and the appropriateness of his "case," Acheraïou concedes that Bloom "*stands for the portrait* of the colonised" in the manner of a metonym. By inviting readers to consider Bloom according to a new model, as an imperial subject, Acheraïou actually draws attention away from Joyce's protagonist to "*the* portrait of the colonised," to the prototype he discusses throughout the book. Rather than rethinking Bloom, or indeed *Ulysses*, readers rethink colonialism by forging a continuum between two colonial powers, British (a present type) and Egyptian (an ancient prototype). Although I already know what I think about the boundless continuum of colonialism, Acheraïou's new models of "rethinking postcolonialism" provide welcome alternatives to what I must now concede is always already known: his pedagogical rhetoric has some efficacy. The rationale of his paradigm of rethinking thought through "rethinking postcolonialism" is not simply instructional, however. In addition his paradigm emphasizes how colonizers, including some colonial writers, drew on ancient colonial models such as Egypt, Greece, and Rome.

Acheraïou problematizes "rethinking postcolonialism" by aligning it with how colonizers conceptualized colonialism. In his conclusion as throughout the book he stresses "the intricate connections between 'new' and ancient imperialism" (214), he notes that "ideological inconsistencies … can also be easily discerned in the works of those criticising empire,

such as Conrad, Forster, Woolf, Green, Gide and Camus" (217), and he cautions that "failing to acknowledge that imperialism was for the majority of the natives an odyssey of dispossession, humiliation and alienation may be just as mystifying as reducing the colonial encounters to smooth, balanced transactions" (219). His argumentative purpose seems to be to identify scholarly complacency as a hazardous attitude that is common to the perpetrators of both colonialism and postcolonialism and thus to destabilize even his own pedagogy and the knowledge readers gain from his book. This epistemological ambivalence points to the originality of his study and the danger as well as insight that is a consequence of tampering with the prevailing view of postcolonialism as an epistemological duration following an indisputably complete historical and interpretive record.

In *A Genealogy of Multiculturalism*, in which he acknowledges "multiculturalism's triumph at the end of the twentieth century" (1), Christopher Douglas casts a similarly retrospective glance on colonialism, extending the idea of empire through social science models from the disciplines of sociology and anthropology to address highly conflicted issues of race, ethnicity, literature, nation, identity, difference, pluralist culture, and conflict in twentieth-century America, Foucauldian "lines of forces, adaptations and transformations, ruptures and continuities" (6). Bringing together writers Zorah Neal Hurston, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, N. Scott Momaday, Ishmael Reed, Ralph Ellison, Frank Chin, and sociological and anthropological theorists Franz Boas, Robert Park, Jade Snow Wong, John Okada, Américo Paredes, and Hurston, Douglas sets up a cross-disciplinary discourse on multiculturalism and self-identity that addresses African, Asian, and Mexican American historical representations and other models of cultural migration, racial identification, social construction, and nationalism as they pertain to the production of literary texts and other artifacts and to ancestral links to the American multicultural model and counter-models involving identitarian returns to ancestry. Douglas organizes this discourse in three phases: 1920s to 1930s, 1940s to mid-1960s, and mid-1960s to the present. This historical arrangement, in which he first speaks about the separation of race and culture in America and then reassesses the revolutionary phase of racial and cultural integration and segregation, allows him to open up the concept of literary multiculturalism today to his series of bold redefinitions.

Teaching at the University of Victoria, Douglas would be well aware how contentious the legislated immigration and cultural policy of multiculturalism is in Canada, which has traditionally promoted the model of the cultural "mosaic" in contradistinction to the traditional American

model of the "melting pot." His model of literary multiculturalism in America has application to Canada as well as the United States, if not historically then at least with respect to immigration, residency, and settlement demographics and existing politics of citizenship, how citizenship is propagandized through state-sponsored propaganda, as is evident in the current practice of currency immigration, which has become common in Canada and the United States. In the context of his discussion of literary multiculturalism, current transnational policies governing immigration, residency, and settlement are related to racially and culturally based historical phenomena such as the Middle Passage and the Great Migration. For example, Douglas notes that in her research Zora Neale Hurston talked "with the last ex-slave to survive the Middle Passage" (21) and, in reference to the Great Migration of African Americans north to large cities as forming the background to Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), he observes, "Much of this migration ended in New York (like Ellison's narrator), Chicago (as with Wright, and creating the urban ghettoes that Robert Park and other Chicago sociologists studied), Cleveland (outside of which lies Lorain, Morrison's home town and the setting for *The Bluest Eye*), Detroit, and other cities" (203). Here Douglas typically shows the inclusive scope of his comparative technique and hypothetical strategy, in the manner of Acheraïou, to mend the taxonomical rupture between *post* and *pre* and thus emphasize the historical continuity of people and cultures and the inappropriateness of *race* and *identity* as permanent markers.

Douglas's interpretations of literary and social science texts are insightful specifically because they are highly selective, usually focusing in on his thesis on identitarian and cultural representation within a politically determined multicultural model. But the book is remarkably balanced in its discourse. In his final chapter, "Gestures of Inclusion," he recounts highly subjective personal narratives about the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, on Mohandas K. Gandhi's fast in 1932 designed to prevent untouchables from gaining a separate right to vote, and on various illustrations of affirmative action cases according to the statutes of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the U.S. Constitution generally. Passing three different judgements on these three narratives, Douglas draws a single conclusion in a more tentative discourse about the need to recognize "the relativity of suffering" (117), to expose "pedagogies of alterity" as "a culturally acceptable and sophisticated form of racism" (117), and to consider the possibility "that before multiculturalism and postcolonialism, there should have been

the needed decolonization of the Other in the United States" (118). To Douglas the misnomer is *multi* as to Acheraïou it is *post*.

In *Otherwise Occupied: Pedagogies of Alterity and the Brahminization of Theory*, Comparative Literature Professor Dorothy M. Figueira draws a similar conclusion, contending that "it is problematic that culturalism, whether it be multiculturalism, postcolonialism, ethnicity studies, or nomadology, has come to define our encounters with otherness, transforming analysis into excessive concern with ethnicity and politics into identity politics" (127). By ending with a tentative problematic, she deduces that *multi* essentializes, *post* historicizes, *studies* systematize, and *politics* propagandizes, and that, globally, culturalism fosters not communities of communities but otherness itself. However polemical, her conclusion is grounded historically in poststructuralist theory and pedagogies of alterity and well supported in her discussions of multiculturalism and postcolonialism and in her original theoretical model of "the Brahminization of theory" or the enduring phenomenon of theoretical privileging and, concomitantly, othering in contemporary academic institutions and learning communities.

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Figueira proposes a history of multiculturalism as a series of "simulated battles" that she assesses by her distinctive "framing argument" of Civil War Reenactments. As she observes, "My informants have explained to me that the reenactments are primarily a hobby for history buffs" (15). The combination of this whimsical model and her serious disclosure of institutional and political agendas exploiting culturalism to govern disenfranchised communities makes for an edifying discussion. For example, after conceding multiculturalism has established that American history is Native, African, Latino, and Asian as well as European, Figueira declares that multiculturalism's "theory of diversity presupposes and requires the notion of an assimilationist 'common culture' and fosters a social order founded on the principle of unity in multiplicity" (19). Her operative words in what is otherwise an objective statement are *presupposes and requires*, which reinforce her premise that multiculturalism in America is deliberate and coercive because the "melting pot" is a politically determined and negotiated imaginary within "university canon reform" (23).

The whimsy with which Figueira begins her chapter on multiculturalism assumes a fiercely intellectual tone at the end when she identifies "the reality … that authentic multiculturalism remains the unassimilable welter of incommensurabilities that one finds in the high-tech consultancies and spice emporia on the Buford Highway in Atlanta and Northern Boulevard in Queens" and then, apparently with great seriousness, adds

that "this clash of technological innovations with prosaic reality produces a chaos that cannot be homogenized or coated with a theoretical veneer" (29). These boldly judgemental remarks carry a severe warning, a syllogistic directive that because the American population is chaotic and the constituents of chaos are unassimilable, the American constituency is unassimiliable. Conceding her "anxiety" (29) that relegating an imaginary to chaos may create a void to be filled by other modeling systems, she identifies postcolonialism as the fundamental proxy of multiculturalism when discredited.

Her concession proves short-lived when she dismisses postcolonialism as essentializing, as preoccupied "with the location of the theorist, while woefully vague regarding the 'location' of the very term *postcoloniality* itself" (31). She summarily brushes aside canonical definitions by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) and Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge in their article "What Is Post(-)colonialism?" (1991) and goes on to deliberate over the theories of some of the major postcolonial critics, whose theoretical complacency she readily exposes. Picking up her opening allusions to "location" and Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), she discharges them two at a time: "Both Bhabha and Spivak occlude historical determinacy by deploying psychoanalytic and linguistic frameworks that take market relations for granted" (40). Figueira appears to concur with Acheraïou and Douglas when she observes, "critics obscure the continuities and discontinuities of colonial power" (43), implying that the suffix *post* has been added prematurely to *postcolonial*—as may be apparent in the ascription of the origin of postcolonial studies as recently as to Edward Said's research in the 1970s culminating in his *Orientalism* (1978)—and primarily that the history of colonialism cannot be discounted because it continues today.

Figueira does not restrict her vitriol to individuals; she subjects academic disciplines also to her scrutiny for appropriating theoretical studies, as during the 1980s and 1990s when "all English departments now had to do was step in and anoint themselves the true scholars of critical thought and commandeer the enrollments that went along with the theory craze" and "as theory emigrated to English, so too did all those subfields dealing with identity politics, such as feminist, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial studies" (57). Although as a Professor of Comparative Literature Figueira may be speaking hyperbolically from a position of disadvantage, "since comparative literature departments did not have the critical mass to fight the hegemonic onslaughts of huge English departments" (57), her contention that "identity studies such as postcolonial criticism and multicultural-

ism were boons to English departments" (57) seems incontrovertible to me, a Professor of English who began my career in the 1980s specializing in Commonwealth Literatures and over the next three decades had to adjust to several radical identitarian shifts within the discipline. What from outside may seem a boon may have been for the beneficiaries inside something of a burden; what Figueira deems the "fetishized commodity" of postcolonial theory may have become the techno-fetishized commodity of pedagogical theory, even including Figueira's own postcolonial theory.

Figueira comes into her own in her conclusion, titled "The Collecting of the Other," an amazingly insightful take on object collection and assemblage as an analogue of the models, structures, systems, and theories critics have put together about the phenomena of encountering the other, with the unfortunate result of collecting others as objects, "fetishized commodities." This is a chilling conclusion precisely because no writer, critic, or theorist would claim, at least not without irony, to be such a collector. But in the context of her larger study of multiculturalism, postcolonialism, and the other culturalisms, Figueira's polemical conclusion seems to follow logically, not just emotionally. The truth of her seemingly tangential remark "culturalism has contributed to the undermining of the social on both the national and global level. It is this culturalism that needs to be challenged" (127) is apparent in individual human experience, in experiential knowledge, the corollary of theory and the root of culture and society.

Despite their shared position on the need to reassess colonial and cultural history rather than severing the associations with it, Acheraïou, Douglas, and Figueira together, it must be admitted, hardly constitute a prevailing view on postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and alterity. Yet their books do make valuable contributions to the scholarly debate and intellectual discourse on colonial history and the published accounts of it, by acknowledging the currency of the past, by promoting independent thought and judgement, and by exposing the dangers of complacency and of essentializing disciplinary suffixes like *post* and *multi*. But more important Acheraïou, Douglas, and Figueira each take significant measures toward initiating a new debate on colonialism, postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and alterity. Whether this debate will continue for long, whether it will be a central or marginal debate, and whether it will be influential beyond interested parties are perhaps less important than that the debate appears to have some traction for now. Clearly, postcolonialism and multiculturalism, like postmodernism, are modeling and epistemological systems that will probably linger beyond this generation,

at least until the next generation renames them. But these books may have a currency of their own in the university classroom, in critical theory, literature, and cultural studies courses. My own experience in the field has involved supervising a doctoral dissertation on Flora Annie Steel, including the fiction of Sara Jeannette Duncan in my Canadian literature courses, and, more conventionally, teaching colonial-period fiction by such writers as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, in India, Amos Tutuola in Nigeria, Henry Lawson, in Australia, and Olive Schreiner, in South Africa. I have found these writers and their works generally well received in my courses and students willing to discuss colonial issues with reference to the colonial period. Pedagogical success notwithstanding, teaching these writers has been difficult field work, to which all teachers of Conrad and Kipling will attest and which Amar Acheraïou, Christopher Douglas, and Dorothy Figueira have confirmed in their well researched and persuasively argued, yet polemical, studies.