12 Postcolonial criticism

Perhaps one of the most important abilities critical theory develops in us is the ability to see connections where we didn't know they existed: for example, connections between our personal psychological conflicts and the way we interpret a poem, between the ideologies we've internalized and the literary works we find aesthetically pleasing, between a nation's political climate and what its intellectuals consider "great" literature, and so forth. Most of the critical theories we've studied so far have encouraged us to make connections along one or more of these lines. Postcolonial criticism is particularly effective at helping us see connections among all the domains of our experience — the psychological, ideological, social, political, intellectual, and aesthetic — in ways that show us just how inseparable these categories are in our lived experience of ourselves and our world. Indeed, that's why postcolonial criticism asks us to think of ourselves and others in terms of what it calls cultural difference: the ways in which race, class, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity. In addition, postcolonial theory offers us a framework for examining the similarities among all critical theories that deal with human oppression, such as Marxism; feminism; gay, lesbian, and queer theories; and African American theory.

In fact, because postcolonial criticism defines formerly colonized peoples as any population that has been subjected to the political and economic domination of another population, you may see postcolonial critics draw examples from the literary works of African Americans as well as from, for example, the literature of Aboriginal Australians or the formerly colonized population of India. However, the tendency of postcolonial criticism to focus on global issues, on comparisons and contrasts among various peoples, means that it is up to the individual members of specific populations to develop their own body of criticism on the history, traditions, and interpretation of their own literature. Of course, this is precisely what African American critics have been doing for some time, long before postcolonial criticism emerged as a powerful force in literary studies in the early 1990s.

To place postcolonial criticism in a historical context of its own, however, let's take a minute and think back to our high school history classes. As most of us can recall from our high school education, European domination of the New World began in the late fifteenth century. Spain, France, England, Portugal, and the Netherlands were the main contenders for the plunder of natural and human resources, and over the next few centuries European empires extended themselves around the globe. During the nineteenth century Britain emerged as the largest imperial power, and by the turn of the twentieth century the British Empire ruled one quarter of the earth's surface, including India, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, and significant holdings in Africa, the West Indies, South America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. British colonial domination continued until the end of World War II, when India gained independence in 1947, and other colonies gradually followed suit. By 1980 Britain had lost all but a few of its colonial holdings.

Although postcolonial criticism didn't become a major force in literary studies until the early 1990s, the cultural analysis of colonialism on which it draws has played an important role in anticolonial political movements everywhere and took its place as a field of intellectual inquiry when colonial regimes began to topple after World War II. As a domain within literary studies, postcolonial criticism is both a subject matter and a theoretical framework. As a subject matter, postcolonial criticism analyzes literature produced by cultures that developed in response to colonial domination, from the first point of colonial contact to the present. (You may recall reading postcolonial literature under the heading of "Commonwealth literature," which it was called until the 1980s.) Some of this literature was written by the colonizers. Much more of it was written, and is being written, by colonized and formerly colonized peoples. As a subject matter, any analysis of a postcolonial literary work, regardless of the theoretical framework used, might be called postcolonial criticism. For English majors, of course, postcolonial criticism focuses on the literature of cultures that developed in response to British colonial domination because English departments study, for the most part, literatures written in English.

However, as a theoretical framework, and this is our primary concern here, postcolonial criticism seeks to understand the operations — politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically — of colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies. For example, a good deal of postcolonial criticism analyzes the ideological forces that, on the one hand, press the colonized to internalize the colonizers' values and, on the other hand, promoted the resistance of colonized peoples against their oppressors, a resistance that is as old as colonialism itself. And as we'll see, because colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies can be present in any literary text, a work doesn't have to be categorized as postcolonial for us to be able to use postcolonial criticism to analyze it.

Colonialist ideology and postcolonial identity

That so many peoples formerly colonized by Britain speak English, write in English, use English in their schools and universities, and conduct government business in
English, in addition to the local languages they may use at home, is an indication of the residual effect of colonial domination on their cultures. In fact, the dynamic psychological and social interplay between what ex-colonial populations consider their native, indigenous, precolonial cultures and the British culture that was imposed on them constitutes a large portion of the field of study for postcolonial critics. For postcolonial cultures include both a merger of and antagonism between the culture of the colonized and that of the colonizer, which, at this point in time, are difficult to identify and separate into discrete entities, so complete was the British intrusion into the government, education, cultural values, and daily lives of its colonial subjects.

In short, although the colonizers retreated and left the lands they had invaded in the hands of those they had colonized, decolonization often has been confined largely to the removal of British military forces and government officials. What has been left behind is a deeply embedded cultural colonization: the inculturation of a British system of government and education, British culture, and British values that denigrate the culture, morals, and even physical appearance of formerly subjugated peoples. Thus, ex-colonials often were left with a psychological "inheritance" of a negative self-image and alienation from their own indigenous cultures, which had been forbidden or devalued for so long that much precocolial culture has been lost.

Given that a good deal of postcolonial criticism addresses the problem of cultural identity as it is represented in postcolonial literature, let's take a closer look at the issue of postcolonial identity. In order to do so, however, we must first understand colonialist ideology, the various reactions to which, in large part, constitute the origins of postcolonial identity for individual human beings as well as for communities. As we begin to use the following concepts, however, we must remember that we are applying generalizations to groups of people that differ greatly in terms of their history and experience before, during, and after colonial rule. Thus, such postcolonial terms as unhomeliness and mimicry, which we'll discuss shortly, are only "a helpful shorthand, because they don't allow for the differences between different kinds of colonial situations, or the workings of class, gender, [geographical] location, race, caste or ideology among people whose lives have been restructured by colonial rule" (Loomba 19).

Colonialist ideology, often referred to as colonialist discourse to mark its relationship to the language in which colonialist thinking was expressed, was based on the colonizers' assumption of their own superiority, which they contrasted with the alleged inferiority of native (indigenous) peoples, the original inhabitants of the lands they invaded. The colonizers believed that only their own Anglo-European culture was civilized, sophisticated, or, as postcolonial critics put it, metropolitan. Therefore, native peoples were defined as savage, backward, and undeveloped. Because their technology was more highly advanced, the colonizers believed that their whole culture was more highly advanced, and they ignored or swept aside the religions, customs, and codes of behavior of the peoples they subjugated. So the colonizers saw themselves at the center of the world; the colonized were at the margins. The colonizers saw themselves as the embodiment of what a human being should be, the proper "self"; native peoples were considered "other," different, and therefore inferior to the point of being less than fully human.

This practice of judging all who are different as less than fully human is called othering, and it divides the world between "us" (the civilized) and "them" (the "others," the "savages"). When Europeans first arrived in the "New World," for example, land that wasn't occupied by Christians was considered "empty land" and, therefore, theirs for the taking. In other words, native inhabitants of these lands were so othered by the colonizers that they didn't officially exist. Native inhabitants were certainly physically present — indeed, European conquerors often used them as slaves, and European missionaries arrived to Christianize them — but as non-Christian "savages," they didn't count. The "savage" was usually considered evil (the demonic other) as well as inferior. But sometimes the "savage" was perceived as possessing a "primitive" beauty or nobility born of a closeness to nature (the exotic other). In either case, however, the "savage" remained other and, therefore, not fully human.

Today, this attitude — the use of European culture as the standard to which all other cultures are negatively contrasted — is called Eurocentrism. A common example of Eurocentrism in literary studies is the longstanding philosophy of so-called universalism. British, European, and, later, American cultural standard-bearers judged all literature in terms of its "universality": to be considered a great work, a literary text had to have "universal" characters and themes. However, whether or not a text's characters and themes were considered "universal" depended on whether or not they resembled those from European literature. Thus, the assumption was that European ideas, ideals, and experience were universal, that is, the standard for all humankind.

An example of Eurocentric language can be seen in the term I used earlier — New World — to denote the very old worlds of the Americas, a land which was "new" only to the Europeans. Similar examples of Eurocentric language can be seen in the terms First World, Second World, Third World, and Fourth World to refer to, respectively, (1) Britain, Europe, and the United States; (2) the white populations of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and southern Africa (and, for some theorists, the former Soviet bloc); (3) the technologically developing nations, such as India and those of Africa, Central and South America, and Southeast Asia; and (4) the indigenous populations on every continent who were subjugated by white settlers and are marginalized today by the majority culture that surrounds them, such as Native Americans and Aboriginal Australians (and, for some theorists, nonindigenous populations who have the status of racial minorities in First World countries, such as African Americans). Although these four "worlds" are commonly referred to today, and we'll use these terms in this chapter, we should remain aware of their
Eurocentric implications. Such language makes sense only if history begins with Europe and is organized in terms of European colonial conquest. It ignores the existence of earlier worlds – such as those of Greece, Egypt, Africa, the Middle East, China, and the Americas – and it privileges European military conquest as the primary means of organizing world history.

Orientalism is an example of Eurocentric othering, analyzed by Edward Said (pronounced sah-eed), which has been practiced in Europe, Britain, and America. Its purpose is to produce a positive national self-definition for Western nations by contrast with Eastern nations on which the West projects all the negative characteristics it doesn't want to believe exist among its own people. Thus the Chinese or the Arabs, or whatever Asian or Middle Eastern populace is politically convenient, are defined as cruel, sneaky, evil, cunning, dishonest, given to sexual promiscuity and perversion, and the like. (Think of the cruel, deceitful Arab merchant in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, published in 1818, who is saved from prison by the young DeLacey, a European, whom the Arab subsequently betrays.) Citizens of the West then define themselves, in contrast to the imaginary "oriental" they've created, as kind, straightforward, good, upright, honest, and moral. In short, the "oriental" is an invention of the West, by contrast to whom it has been able to define itself positively and justify any acts of military or economic aggression it has found advantageous.

Finally, Nordicism is an ideology that might be seen as an example of Eurocentric othering taken to its logical extreme. While many students have never heard the term Nordicism, it plays a powerful role in most if not all white cultures. From a Nordicist perspective, not only is the Caucasian race genetically superior to all other races, but Nords – Germanic peoples of Northern Europe – are the most genetically superior Caucasians: they are born with superior intelligence, physical strength, and beauty. Although Nordicists sometimes disagree on which countries should be considered Nordic, most agree that Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland belong to this group. Our nationality, however, is not important in determining our membership in this "superior race." Human beings have been migrating around the globe so much for so long that our place of birth, or even our great-great-great grandparents' place of birth, is not a reliable indicator of our racial heritage. The only factor that can be counted on to reveal our racial makeup is our physical appearance. Specifically, the word Nordic is associated with persons of tall stature, long rather than round facial structure, fair skin, blond or brown hair, and light-colored eyes. If we have this combination of physical features, it is assumed that we are of Nordic ancestry and, therefore, genetically superior to all others. The US Immigration Act of 1924, which gave immigrants from Northern Europe favored status while restricting the immigration of people from Southern and Eastern Europe, is a well-known example of the Nordicism that pervaded the United States during the 1920s. Another example of Nordicism is Hitler's Aryanism, or master-race theory, which fueled the Holocaust during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Nordicism is still alive and well throughout the world today in many neo-Nazi, white nationalist, and white supremacist groups. And I think it's reasonable to argue that it still plays a role, even if it's an unconscious role, in our everyday lives, for instance in the idealization of "fair-haired boys" and "golden girls" and in the staying power of blond, blue-eyed Barbie dolls.

Colonialist ideology, which is inherently Eurocentric, was a pervasive force in the British schools established in the colonies to inculcate British culture and values in the indigenous peoples and thereby forestall rebellion. It's difficult to rebel against a system or a people one has been programmed, over several generations, to consider superior. The plan was extremely successful and resulted in the creation of colonial subjects, colonized persons who did not resist colonial subjugation because they were taught to believe in British superiority and, therefore, in their own inferiority. Many of these individuals tried to imitate their colonizers, as much as possible, in dress, speech, behavior, and lifestyle. Postcolonial critics refer to this phenomenon as mimicry, and it reflects both the desire of colonized individuals to be accepted by the colonizing culture and the shame experienced by colonized individuals concerning their own culture, which they were programmed to see as inferior. Postcolonial theorists often describe the colonial subject as having a double consciousness or double vision, in other words, a consciousness or a way of perceiving the world that is divided between two antagonistic cultures: that of the colonizer and that of the indigenous community.

Double consciousness often produced an unstable sense of self, which was heightened by the forced migration colonialism frequently caused, for example, from the rural farm or village to the city in search of employment. ( Forced migration, either as a quest for employment, including indentured servitude, or as the result of enslavement, scattered large numbers of peoples around the globe, and large populations of their descendants have remained in the diaspora, or separated from their original homeland.) This feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither rather than to both, of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological disorder but from the trauma of the cultural displacement within which one lives, is referred to by Homi Bhabha and others as unhomeliness. Being "unhomed" is not the same as being homeless. To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak.

Double consciousness and unhomeliness persist in decolonized nations today. Among the tasks formerly colonized peoples face is the rejection of colonialist ideology, which defined them as inferior, and the reclamation of their precolonial past. Both tasks involve many complex problems of interest to postcolonial critics. For example, in order to reject colonialist ideology and embrace their precolonial
cultures, some native authors, such as Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, write in their own local languages. When they do so, however, they face the difficulty of surviving in a publishing industry, both in their own countries and internationally, that requires the use of English. The use of native languages often requires native writers to put forth the double effort of writing in their indigenous languages and then translating their work into English or having it translated.

On the other hand, many indigenous writers from former British colonies prefer to write in English because that is the language in which they first learned to write. As Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe observes, "For me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it" (Morning Yet on Creation Day 62). Some also argue that English provides a common language for the various indigenous peoples within Third and Fourth World nations, who speak a number of different local languages, to communicate with one another. And they point out that English, as a world language, facilitates the emergence of those nations into global politics and economics.

Another problem that complicates the desire to reclaim a precolonial past is that it is not always easy to discover that past. As we noted earlier, much precolonial culture has been lost over many generations of colonial domination. In addition, many postcolonial theorists argue that, even if there had been no colonization, the ancient culture would have changed by now: no culture stands still, frozen in time. Furthermore, most cultures are changed by cross-cultural contact, often through military invasion. For example, ancient Celtic culture was changed by the Roman legions who occupied the British Isles. And Anglo-Saxon culture was changed by the many generations of French rule that followed the Norman conquest of that same territory in the eleventh century. By the same token, the precolonial cultures of colonized peoples influenced European culture. For example, Picasso's art was greatly influenced by his study of African masks. Therefore, many postcolonial theorists argue that postcolonial identity is necessarily a dynamic, constantly evolving hybrid of native and colonial cultures. Moreover, they assert that this hybridity, or syncretism as it's sometimes called, does not consist of a stalemate between two warring cultures but is rather a productive, exciting, positive force in a shrinking world that is itself becoming more and more culturally hybrid. This view encourages ex-colonials to embrace the multiple and often conflicting aspects of the blended culture that is theirs and that is an indelible fact of history.

It is important to note, however, that these arguments don't take into account the need of formerly colonized peoples to rediscover and affirm their precolonial civilizations for the very good reason that the colonizers told them they didn't have any precolonial civilizations. Before colonization, the colonizers claimed, native peoples lived barbarically, without any systems of government, religion, or rational customs. Or if colonizers acknowledged that a native culture existed, they claimed that such cultures were not worth sustaining in the face of the "superior" civilization offered by the Europeans. Many ex-colonials therefore feel they must assert a native culture both to avoid being swamped by the Western culture so firmly planted on their soil and to recuperate their national image in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. This emphasis on indigenous culture, especially when accompanied by the attempt to eliminate Western influences, is called nativism or nationalism. From a nativist perspective, there is a big difference between a culture changing over time and a people being cut off from their culture.

If you've read Chapter 4, "Feminist criticism," you've probably noticed by now, as many postcolonial critics have, a number of similarities in the theoretical issues that concern feminist and postcolonial critics. For example, patriarchy subjugation of women is analogous to colonial subjugation of indigenous populations. And the resultant devaluation of women and colonized peoples poses very similar problems for both groups in terms of achieving an independent personal and group identity; gaining access to political power and economic opportunities; and finding ways to think, speak, and create that are not dominated by the ideology of the oppressor.

These parallels between feminist and postcolonial concerns underscore the double oppression suffered by postcolonial women, often referred to as double colonization. For they are the victims of both colonizer ideology, which devalues them because of their race and cultural ancestry, and patriarchal ideology, which devalues them because of their sex. Sadly, postcolonial women have suffered patriarchal oppression not only at the hands of colonists, but within their own patriarchal cultures as well. Gender inequities are often particularly visible in rural communities where women are expected to do most or all of the agricultural work, in addition to the considerable work associated with taking care of homes and families, without compensation comparable to the familial authority, community leadership roles, or economic opportunities afforded their male counterparts.

It is clear, nevertheless, that postcolonial women are very capable of effective leadership when circumstances offer the opportunity. For example, much of the grassroots resistance to the destruction of local environments in the Third World was started by village women and consists today mostly of village women. The Chipko Movement in India, for instance — which grew from a spontaneous protest by local women in 1973 against the continued and excessive felling of local trees for commercial purposes — employs the strategies of nonviolent resistance to prevent the deforestation of large wooded regions critical to the survival of the rural environment and of the Indian people who inhabit it. And the Green Belt Movement — begun in Kenya in 1977 by Wangari Maathai to restore, seedling by seedling, those areas already suffering the dreadful effects of deforestation — has spread throughout her country and gained international influence. When it comes, however, to the distribution of financial opportunities, international aid to technologically developing countries has tended to reinforce the patriarchal belief that women are naturally less capable than men by giving the money, the machinery, and the...
training to men alone, even in Africa, where "women farmers produce 65–80 percent of all agricultural produce, yet do not own the land they work, and are consistently by-passed by aid programs and 'development' projects" (McClintock 298). So the double colonization of women continues. As Anne McClintock observes, "In a world where women do two-thirds of the world's work, earn 10 percent of the world's income, and own less than 1 percent of the world's property, the promise of 'post-colonialism' -- that is, the promise of a better life for all once the colonizers were gone -- has been a history of hopes postponed" (298).

Foundational postcolonial debates

Perhaps you have noticed that a good deal of the material we've discussed so far involves issues that seem to be under debate. For example, how important is it that postcolonial peoples seek lost evidence of their precolonial past? How much of their precolonial past is really available to them? Should postcolonial authors write in English, in their native languages, or in both? What should a postcolonial writer do who was raised with English as his or her first language? Is hybridity, as postcolonial theorists define the term, a realistic alternative for postcolonial individuals who feel unhome? And so forth.

Many postcolonial issues, like many of the theoretical issues we've discussed in other chapters, are matters of some disagreement among those who study the field. But before we move on to issues that are of somewhat more recent origin in postcolonial studies, let's take a brief look at three of the important debates that have helped form the field of postcolonial theory from the beginning: Which peoples -- and, therefore, which literary works -- should be considered postcolonial? Is postcolonial theory in danger of marginalizing the real concerns of postcolonial peoples? Finally, is postcolonial criticism in danger of marginalizing the work of postcolonial writers?

As you may have noticed, our focus in this chapter, so far, on the political, social, cultural, and psychological colonization of indigenous peoples has limited our discussion to invader colonies – colonies established among nonwhite peoples through the force of British arms, such as those established in India, Africa, the West Indies, South America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia -- for no one debates the inclusion of literature from these cultures in postcolonial literary studies. There is also a general consensus that the United States and Ireland are not postcolonial nations, the first because it has been independent for so long and has itself colonized others, the second because it has long been an integral part of British culture (though some Irish people, especially in Northern Ireland, would surely disagree with this assessment, and many postcolonial critics cite the work of Irish poet W. B. Yeats as emblematic of anticolonialist nationalism). However, there has been much debate among postcolonial critics concerning whether or not the literature of white settler colonies -- specifically, those established in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and southern Africa -- should be included in the study of postcolonial literature.

Those who argue that the term postcolonial should be reserved for Third and Fourth World writers observe that white settler cultures share a tremendous common ground with Britain, including race, language, and culture. These colonies viewed Britain as the "mother country," not as an imperial invader, and they were treated very differently from the nonwhite colonies Britain controlled. For example, white settler colonies were permitted a good deal of self-government and were granted Dominion status (political autonomy within the British Commonwealth) without having to take up arms to achieve it. Indeed, it was white settlers who, as Britain did elsewhere, subjugated nonwhite indigenous peoples and took their land and natural resources. In other words, these theorists argue, the inclusion of white settler cultures under the postcolonial rubric ignores the enormous difference race has played in the history of colonization and continues to play today in the racist attitudes that keep Third and Fourth World peoples economically oppressed.

On the other hand, theorists who believe white settler cultures should be included under the rubric postcolonial argue that the foundational concept of postcolonial criticism is anticolonial resistance, and the literatures of white settler cultures have a good deal to teach us about the complexities of anticolonial resistance because their own resistance to cultural obliteration by an overwhelming British cultural presence has occurred without the help of a clear distinction between colonized and colonizer, a distinction that nonwhite invader colonies have been able to count on. In other words, white colonial subjects experience -- in a subtler, less clearly demarcated form -- the same double consciousness experienced by nonwhite colonial subjects. From this perspective, we can't simply ignore the anticolonialist literature produced by the Second World while we uncritically assume that all the literature produced by nonwhite postcolonial peoples is necessarily a literature of resistance.

Another debate that has engaged the attention of postcolonial theorists involves the concern that postcolonial theory is itself in danger of marginalizing the voices of those it wishes to bring into the spotlight. For one thing, most postcolonial theorists -- including those born in formerly colonized nations, many of whom were educated at European universities and live abroad -- belong to an intellectual elite, an academic ruling class that has, it would seem, little in common with subalterns, or people of inferior status, that is, with the majority of poor, exploited ex-colonial peoples who are the object of their concern.

Furthermore, postcolonial criticism's analysis of the problem of cultural identity -- specifically, its focus on the fluid, dynamic, hybrid forms of cultural identity -- is largely a product of the poststructuralist, deconstructive theory of the First World. As you may recall from Chapter 8, deconstruction defines the self as a
Globalization and the “end” of postcolonial theory

Perhaps one of the most interesting developments engaging the attention of postcolonial critics today is what some economists, among others, consider the outdated quality of the field of postcolonial theory as a whole. Colonialism, the argument goes, ended, by and large, shortly after World War II. And the efforts of formerly colonized peoples to create their own governments, establish their own cultural heritage, and the like, have been overshadowed by—or perhaps more accurately, absorbed within—the worldwide spread of international culture and global economics that have affected all peoples, whether postcolonial or not. As you’ve probably noticed, cultural production—for example, music, movies, literary works, fashion, and a variety of consumer products—has gone global due largely to the continually increasing global access to the Internet and other forms of electronic information and communication. Indeed, the geographic borders that separate the nations of the world today are becoming, in many ways, less important than the Internet capabilities that connect the peoples of the world.

Furthermore, this kind of cultural globalization—or worldwide spread of technologies, products, and ideas—is due largely to the globalization of economics, which can be defined as the worldwide spread of capitalism with minimal interference from national governments. And how did the globalization of economics come about? It was created by the success of multinational corporations such as General Electric, ExxonMobil, British Petroleum, and Toyota. For multinational corporations, with those based in the United States leading the way, develop technology and manufacture products in countries that never before housed these industries and, in turn, sell products in countries that never before had markets for them. As their spokespeople point out, multinational corporations contribute to the economies of developing nations by building local factories and other kinds of workplaces, by creating local jobs, and by training local workers. So, they conclude, if we want to talk about the transformation of culture and the development of individual identity in the world today—whether we believe these changes are for good or ill—we need to realize that the postcolonial world is long gone, and with it has gone the usefulness of postcolonial theory. In short, the argument goes, in an age of globalization we need a theory of globalization, perhaps along the lines of international relations theory, but we don’t need postcolonial theory.

The question must be raised, however: Why does globalization mean that postcolonial theory is no longer relevant? Is this conclusion an accurate one? It’s true that colonialism is no longer practiced as it was between the late fifteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, through the direct, overt administration of governors and colonizers from the colonizing country. Today, nevertheless, the same kind of political, economic, and cultural subjugation of vulnerable regions occurs, through different means, at the hands of the very multinational corporations whose success
water, and shelter for the world’s poor — increases the pollution of soil, water, and air as well as the destruction of other natural resources. Second, the continued creation and dissemination of nuclear weapons is putting the planet in a catastrophic ecological jeopardy. And even the weapons used in non-nuclear, relatively small-scale wars — in addition to destroying human life and property — fill the global atmosphere with large quantities of pollutants. Neither of these pressing environmental issues is addressed by, or even related to, the preservation of wilderness areas.

It hasn’t helped matters that mainstream new media have done little to increase public awareness of the plight of native peoples unjustly and unwisely evicted from their homelands in the name of conservation. “In an age when media venerate the spectacular” event, Rob Nixon argues, “[f]alling bodies, burning towers, exploding heads, avalanches, volcanoes and tsunamis have a[n] . . . eye-catching and page-turning power” that cannot be matched by what he calls “slow violence” (3). Slow violence, Nixon explains, is “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space,” a violence that kills, but “that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). He’s talking here about the ecological devastation of the Third World — caused by, for example, under-regulated foreign industrialism — and the environmental consequences suffered by the poor who live there. But his analysis of the “invisibility” of long-term ecological destruction also applies to the “invisibility” of the millions of aboriginal peoples who have been and are being evicted from their lands all over the world. Conservation organizations have not used military weapons of mass destruction to rid lands earmarked for wilderness preservation of their native human inhabitants. If they had, we surely would have heard about it on the nightly news. As we have seen, however, conservation organizations have succeeded, slowly and methodically, in getting those inhabitants evicted, despite the human or even — in cases where preserves are too big to be adequately patrolled — the environmental consequences. Thus, while many of us are gratefully aware of the millions of square miles of “wilderness” worldwide that have been set aside for preservation, very few of us know how that “wilderness” was created or what has become of it without its native stewards.

Indigenous activists have been making a concerted effort to get justice for their peoples since the 1960s. Their efforts have grown into an international indigenous movement: a steadily growing, worldwide web of communication among indigenous peoples in an attempt to unify indigenous interests within and across national borders. One of the movement’s major goals is to replace the colonial model of wilderness conservation, dominant since the creation of Yosemite National Park, with a cooperative model that would both keep indigenous people in control of their lands and satisfy the concerns of international conservation organizations. The Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) concept, invented by Australian Aboriginals, is one example of the cooperative model. According to IPA values, conservation reserves are not thought of as “wilderness” areas but as country — a term including both land and the sea it borders — that is cared for by the native peoples who already inhabit it or by indigenous evictees who have been resettled in their ancestral homelands. IPAs in Australia are created voluntarily by Aboriginal communities who designate an area they want to protect within or bordering their ancestral lands. They map the proposed area; draw up rules of operation, which they will be responsible for enforcing; and submit a management plan to the Australian government for the conservation of biodiversity. Although land titles have not been granted to these original owners, the Australian Homelands Movement, which has been resettling indigenous peoples on their ancestral lands for over 30 years, continues working toward the restoration of all Aboriginal custodial rights. Various versions of Australia’s IPAs have been created and are being created around the world (Dowie 237–39).

Such gains as these, while relatively small, are encouraging. Yet when we consider that the powerful groups vying for control of the natural environment include government agencies, narrowly focused conservation organizations, and the multinational corporations and global tourism companies discussed earlier in this chapter, the chances that a globally significant number of native communities will be allowed to continue, or return to, stewarding their own lands seem slim indeed. Still, Mark Dowie hasn’t lost hope: “[i]ndigenous peoples’ presence… may offer the best protection that protected areas can ever receive. That’s a possibility that international conservationists have begun to consider” (xxvii). From a postcolonial perspective, that possibility can’t be considered soon enough.

Postcolonial criticism and literature

Wherever postcolonial critics place themselves in terms of the postcolonial issues we’ve been discussing, most interpret postcolonial literature in terms of a number of overlapping topics. These include, among others, the following common topics, which illustrate postcolonial criticism’s recognition of the close relationship between psychology and ideology or, more specifically, between individual identity and cultural beliefs:

1. the native people’s initial encounter with the colonizers and the disruption of indigenous culture;
2. the journey of the European outsider through an unfamiliar wilderness with a native guide;
3. othering (the colonizers’ treatment of members of the indigenous culture as less than fully human) and colonial oppression in all its forms;
4. mimicry (the attempt of the colonized to feel that they belong — to feel that they are not inferior — by imitating the dress, behavior, speech, and lifestyle of the colonizers);
Africa [is] a [symbolic] battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril” (“An Image of Africa” 12). In other words, despite Heart of Darkness’s obvious anticOLONIAL aggressive, the novel points to the colonized population as the standard of savagery to which Europeans are compared. Thus, Achebe uncovers the novel’s colonizer subtext, of which the text does not seem to be aware.

Let’s look at a few more brief examples of postcolonial interpretations of literary texts. Homi Bhabha gives us a wonderful example of the global orientation of much postcolonial criticism when he offers a new way to analyze world literature, not in terms of national traditions, which is how it generally has been studied, but in terms of postcolonial topics that cut across national boundaries. For example, Bhabha suggests that world literature might be studied in terms of the different ways cultures have experienced historical trauma, perhaps such traumas as slavery, revolution, civil war, political mass murder, oppressive military regimes, the loss of cultural identity, and the like. Or world literature might be seen as the study of the ways in which cultures define themselves positively by “othering” groups whom they demonize or otherwise devalue for that purpose. Or we might analyze world literature by examining the representations of people and events that occur across cultural boundaries, rather than within them, such as representations of migrants, political refugees, and colonized peoples. “The center of such a study,” Bhabha says, “would neither be the ‘sovereignty’ of national cultures, nor the universalism of human culture, but a focus on the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” (12). That is, we might study what world literature tells us about the personal experience of people whom history has ignored – the disenfranchised, the marginalized, the unhomed – such as are found in the work of South African writer Nadine Gordimer and African American writer Toni Morrison.

For example, Bhabha argues that Gordimer’s My Son’s Story (1990) and Morrison’s Beloved (1987) are unhomy novels in which the female protagonists – Aila and Sethe, respectively – live in the hinterland between cultures. Aila is unhomed because she is imprisoned for using her house as a cover for gun-running in an effort to resist South Africa’s racist government; Sethe, because she has killed her baby daughter in order to save the child from the abuses of a cruel slavemaster. Thus, Bhabha observes, these two characters are doubly marginalized: first as women of color living in racist societies, second as women whose actions have placed them outside the circle of their own communities. In representing the psychological and historical complexities of these characters’ ethical choices, both novels reveal the ways in which historical reality is not something that happens just on the battlefield or in the government office. Rather, historical reality comes into our homes and affects our personal lives in the deepest possible ways. Marginalized people may be more aware of this fact because it is pressed on them by violence and oppression, but it is true for everyone.
Another attempt to find a common denominator in postcolonial literature is made by Helen Tiffin, who claims that the "subversive [anticolonialist] maneuver[e] ... characteristic of post-colonial texts" does not lie in "the construction or reconstruction" of national cultural identity, but rather in "the rereading and rewriting of the European historical and fictional record" (95). Tiffin argues that, as it is impossible to retrieve a precolonial past or construct a new cultural identity completely free of the colonial past, most postcolonial literature has attempted, instead, "to investigate the means by which Europe imposed and maintained ... colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world" (95). One of the many ways postcolonial literature accomplishes this task, Tiffin maintains, is through the use of what she calls "canonical counter-discourse," a strategy whereby "a post-colonial writer takes up a character or characters, or the basic assumptions of a British canonical text, and unveils [its colonialist] assumptions, subverting the text for post-colonial purposes" (97).

Tiffin sees this kind of "literary revolution" (97) in, for example, Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) by Jamaican-born writer Jean Rhys. Rhys' novel, a postcolonial response to Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847), "writes back" (98) to Brontë's novel by, among other things, reinterpreting Bertha Mason, Rochester's West Indian wife. Brontë's novel portrays Bertha, the descendent of white colonial settlers, as an insane, drunken, violent, and lascivious woman who tricked Rochester into marriage and whom her husband must keep locked in the attic for her own and everyone else's protection. In contrast, Rhys' novel depicts Bertha, in Gayatri Spivak's words, as a "critic of imperialism" (Spivak 271), a sane woman driven to violent behavior by Rochester's imperialist oppression. Rhys' narrative thereby unmasks the colonialist ideology informing Brontë's narrative. And part of Jane Eyre's colonialist ideology, we might add, is revealed when the novel associates Bertha with the nonwhite native population as seen through the eyes of colonialist Europe: Bertha's face is a "black and scarlet visage" (Brontë 93; ch. 27, vol. II), and the room she inhabits is "a wild beast's den" (Brontë 92; ch. 27, vol. II). In other words, according to the colonialist discourse in which Jane Eyre participates, to be insane, drunken, violent, and lascivious is the equivalent of being nonwhite.

Tiffin notes that similar canonical counter-discourse can be found, for example, in Foe (1988), by South African writer J. M. Coetzee, in the way the novel reveals the colonialist ideology of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719), an ideology manifest in Crusoe's colonialist attitude toward the land on which he's shipwrecked and toward the black man he "colonizes" and names Friday. And of course, canonical counter-discourse occurs in the numerous modern Caribbean and South American performances of Shakespeare's The Tempest (1611), which reveal the political and psychological operations of Prospero's colonialist subjugation of Caliban in the original play. As Tiffin observes, canonical counter-discourse doesn't unmask merely the literary works to which it responds, but the whole fabric of colonialist discourse in which those works participate.

Finally, Edward Said demonstrates how postcolonial criticism of a canonized literary work often involves moving the "margins" of the work (for example, minor characters and peripheral geographical locations) to the center of our attention. This is what he does in his analysis of Jane Austen's Mansfield Park (1814). The entire novel is set in England around the turn of the nineteenth century, most of it on the sizable estate of the wealthy Sir Thomas Bertram, who epitomizes the positive image of the traditional English gentleman of property: he is well bred, rational, honorable, and highly moral, and is the proper patriarchal head of his home and of the overseas agricultural enterprise that financially sustains that home.

This enterprise is in Antigua, in the Caribbean British colonies, and it is maintained by slave labor. But things are not going well in Antigua, and Sir Thomas must travel there to take control personally. And take control he does, apparently with the same efficiency with which he rules his home. For having set his "colonial garden" (Culture and Imperialism 86) in order, as Said puts it, Sir Thomas returns home to quickly set to rights his household, which, without his paternal guidance, has gotten out of order: his grown children have fought among themselves, engaged in clandestine courtships, and generally created a domestic uproar. Thus, among other things, Said notes that the novel draws a strong parallel between "domestic [and] international authority" (Culture and Imperialism 97). For the financial well-being of the British estate depends on the success of the colonial enterprise, and the orderly operation of both depends on the guidance of the British patriarch.

Although Sir Thomas' trip to Antigua is peripheral to the narration — it is mentioned only in passing and we see nothing that goes on there — it is "absolutely crucial to the action" (Culture and Imperialism 89). In Said's words,

Mansfield Park is part of the structure of [Britain's] expanding imperialist venture .... [A]nd we can sense how ideas about dependent races and territories were held [not only] by foreign-office executives, colonial bureaucrats, and military strategists [but also] by intelligent novel-readers educating themselves in the fine points of moral evaluation, literary balance, and stylistic finish.

(Culture and Imperialism 95)

In other words, the colonialist ideology contained in literature is deposited there by writers and absorbed by readers without their necessarily realizing it.

Some questions postcolonial critics ask about literary texts

The questions that follow are offered to summarize postcolonial approaches to literature. Keep in mind that most postcolonial analyses, regardless of the issues on
which they focus, will include some attention to whether the text is colonialist, anticolonialist, or some combination of the two, that is, ideologically conflicted.

1. How does the literary text, explicitly or allegorically, represent various aspects of colonial oppression? Special attention is often given to those areas where political and cultural oppression overlap, as it does, for example, in the colonizers' control of language, communication, and knowledge in colonized countries.

2. What does the text reveal about the problems of postcolonial identity, including the relationship between personal and cultural identity and such issues as double consciousness and hybridity?

3. What does the text reveal about the politics and/or psychology of anticolonialist resistance? For example, what does the text suggest about the ideological, political, social, economic, or psychological forces that promote or inhibit resistance? How does the text suggest that resistance can be achieved and sustained by an individual or a group?

4. What does the text reveal about the operations of cultural difference - the ways in which race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity - in shaping our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live? Othering might be one area of analysis here.

5. How does the text respond to or comment on the characters, topics, or assumptions of a canonized (colonialist) work? Following Helen Tiffin's lead, examine how the postcolonial text reshapes our previous interpretations of a canonical text.

6. Are there meaningful similarities among the literatures of different postcolonial populations? One might compare, for example, the literatures of native peoples from different countries whose land was invaded by colonizers, the literatures of white settler colonies in different countries, or the literatures of different populations in the African diaspora. Or one might compare literary works from all three of these categories in order to investigate, for example, if the experience of colonization creates some common elements of cultural identity that outweigh differences in race and nationality.

7. How does the text represent relationships between the characters it portrays - for example, culturally dominant characters, subalterns, and cultural outsiders - and the land these characters inhabit? Does the natural setting change over time and, if so, what is the cause? Does the narrator's attitude toward the natural setting, or the attitude of any character toward the natural setting, change over time? What kinds of relationships between human beings and nature does the text seem to promote? Questions like these can help you think about a text in terms of postcolonial criticism's environmental concerns.

8. How does a literary text in the Western canon reinforce or undermine colonialist ideology through its representation of colonization and/or its inappropriate silence about colonized peoples? Does the text teach us anything about colonialist or anticolonialist ideology through its illustration of any of the postcolonial concepts we've discussed? (A text does not have to treat the subject of colonization in order to do this.)

Depending on the literary work in question, we might ask one or any combination of these questions. Or we might come up with a useful question not listed here. These are just some starting points to get us thinking productively about literature from a postcolonial perspective. Keep in mind that not all postcolonial critics will interpret the same text in the same way, even if they focus on the same postcolonial concepts. As in every field, even expert practitioners disagree.

Whatever ways we may choose to apply postcolonial criticism, our goal in using this approach is to learn to see some important aspects of literature that we might not have seen so clearly or so deeply without this theoretical perspective; to appreciate the opportunities and the responsibilities of living in a culturally diverse world; and to understand that culture is not just a fixed collection of artifacts and customs frozen in time but a way of relating to oneself and to the world, a psychological and social frame of reference that necessarily alters in response to cross-cultural encounters, whether those encounters occur in our community or on the pages of a literary text.

The following reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby is offered as an example of what a postcolonial interpretation of that novel might yield. You'll notice that my postcolonial reading relies a good deal on psychological analysis and is similar, in some ways, to my discussion of the novel in Chapter 3, "Marxist criticism." In addition, my postcolonial interpretation includes both an analysis of the novel's three major black characters and its erasure of the African American presence in Jazz Age New York City; an analysis you will also find as part of my African American reading of the novel in Chapter 11. This kind of theoretical "overlap" is quite common for a postcolonial interpretation because postcolonial criticism draws on these three theories, among others, in its attempt to analyze all aspects of colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies. In short, my postcolonial interpretation of Fitzgerald's novel focuses on what I will argue is the work's colonialist ideology, an ideology that can subjugate minority populations within a nation's borders as well as colonized populations elsewhere on the globe. Indeed, as I will argue, the novel illustrates some of the ways in which colonialist ideology is also a psychological state - not just a way of thinking but a way of being - that is detrimental to those who oppress others as well as to those who are oppressed.

Although I believe that one of the greatest products of postcolonial criticism is its potential to bring the work of writers from formerly colonized societies, especially the work of marginalized postcolonial writers, to the fore, I hope that my reading of The Great Gatsby serves anticolonialist intellectual efforts by illustrating