

The Postcolonial Past

Barbara Fuchs and David J. Baker

When?

Historicism is the belief,” says Maurice Mandelbaum, “that an adequate understanding of the nature of any phenomenon and an adequate assessment of its value are to be gained through considering it in terms of the place it occupied and the role it played within a process of development.”¹ But, says Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe*, when this belief was applied to “non-European peoples in the nineteenth century,” it often amounted to a way of saying “not yet” to them (8). The “process of development” that had brought the colonizers to power was exclusively a European process, these peoples were told. It had a “unity” from which non-Europeans were excluded (6)—indefinitely, in practice. Today, Chakrabarty says, as we consider the situation of places such as “postcolonial India,” we need to move away from the view that the present is connected to the past by “a ceaseless unfolding of unitary historical time” (15). Instead, we should see that “historical time is not integral, that it is out of joint with itself” (16). In this way, we can at least begin to (re)imagine a history that is “radically heterogeneous” (46). This special issue of *MLQ* is a forum for historical inquiry into the condition we now know as “postcoloniality,” but it has not been assembled as an exercise in historicism, at least not of the kind that Mandelbaum means. It brings together scholars of several

¹ Quoted in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 22. Further references are included parenthetically.

periods, reaching as far back as the classical period, each of whom has been asked to address questions such as: How has postcolonial studies influenced you in the work that you do in your period? What similarities and/or differences do you see between the colonialism that you study and, for instance, the colonialism of nineteenth-century India? Or between that colonialism and the postcolonialism of our own day? Is it at all meaningful, in other words, to speak of “the postcolonial past,” and, if so, how?

In a certain sense, of course, these are historicist questions. One assumption that strongly informs this special issue is that colonialism, as a “phenomenon,” is not unitary but diverse, a single word covering an array of historical situations. Another is that each of these situations can and should be considered “in terms of the place it occupied” in its historical setting. The scholars who appear in this issue take the specificity of the colonialism of their own periods as their starting point and then ask how it can be brought into relation with the more familiar conditions of the last century and a half. To an extent, then, these essays are framed by—though not constrained by—standard historicist imperatives. But the effect we hope for from a cumulative reading of them is not that of a narrative of “development.” Historicism, as Chakrabarty says, has often implied a *grand récit* of “unitary historical time,” whereas these essays together show that the history of colonialism is itself “radically heterogeneous,” though not so heterogeneous as to prevent meaningful comparisons across and among the various colonialisms that can be subsumed into that history. This issue of *MLQ* is meant to open a discussion of, and to provide some first examples of, a postcolonial inquiry that is committed neither to telling an overarching story—a colonialist story, precisely—of a single, progressive “historical development” nor to splintering its story into incompatible temporal fragments. Rather, the postcolonial historiography that we think is implied by these essays, taken in the aggregate, is a comparative one. How, we have wanted to learn, in the complex coming together of “post” and “colonial,” do the present and past inform one another?

It is worthwhile to raise such questions precisely because so much inquiry into the history of colonialism has been pursued in a spirit of historicism, though not always under that rubric. Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* has done something to bring the problems of histori-

cism to the fore, but the book itself remains poised within the moment of “modernity,” since, as its author explains, “postcolonial scholarship is committed, almost by definition, to engaging the universals—such as the abstract figure of the human or that of Reason—that were forged in eighteenth-century Europe and that underlie the human sciences” (5), among them, of course, the unitary History that said “not yet” to colonized peoples. Indeed, most postcolonial scholarship has concerned itself, mostly if not exclusively, with the high imperialism of the eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries, and with its aftermath. For Chakrabarty, this focus entails a method: “The idea is to write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it” (43). But while we recognize the predicament of modernity, it is not necessary to elevate belatedness into a historiographical principle, such that *only* the colonialism informed by Western universals and its aftermath are relevant for scholarly considerations of colonialism and postcoloniality. Chakrabarty rightly denies that “the human exists in a frame of a single and secular historical time that envelops other kinds of time” (16), and we have sought contributions from a range of scholars who model a more temporally complex history. Roland Greene, for example, argues for the counterintuitive contemporaneity of the colonial and the postcolonial by showing how, from the first moment, colonial dynamics involve practices of resistance. John Dagenais demonstrates how Petrarch deliberately creates a “rift in time” for moderns to colonize, while Lisa Lampert examines the complexities of contemporary and highly problematic “neomedievalisms” that align themselves with new forms of imperialism. All of these essays proceed from the assumption that one way to undo historicist history is to do it comparatively.

Although the problems of historicism pervade postcolonial scholarship, *Provincializing Europe* provides a rare, and much needed, systematic treatment of them.² To get a sense of how these problems surface and resurface, consider the discussion that has accrued around the question: “When exactly . . . does the ‘post-colonial’ begin?” Though

² Much of the explicitly historiographical work in postcolonial studies is done by scholars associated with the Subaltern Studies Project. On the evolution and current state of this project see Vinayak Chaturvedi, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso, 2000).

we take this from Arif Dirlik's well-known essay "The Postcolonial Aura," the question he poses is actually one in a sequence. It echoes a query first put by Ella Shohat and later taken up by Stuart Hall.³ Dirlik's own answer is unequivocal: the time of the postcolonial is now. Postcolonial criticism is the discourse of "the intelligentsia of global capitalism" (519); it mediates a contemporary "sensibility" (511) defined at and by "the location of postcolonial intellectuals in the academic institutions" of the Western metropole (513). Dirlik's essay, an anticapitalist critique, is best known for this sort of polemic, but Dirlik historicizes the emergence of the postcolonial within specific spatiotemporal coordinates. Doing so allows him both to avoid and to call attention to the ahistorical imprecision often seen in postcolonial work. He writes of a "self-referential 'universalizing historicism' that reintroduces an unexamined totality"—postcolonialism—"by the back door of projecting what are but local experiences" (514) onto all times and places. The very historicism that Chakrabarty denounces, Dirlik sees as characteristic of postcolonial studies.

And he is right. Postcolonial scholars often claim that an undifferentiated history culminating in "modernity" has been imposed by Western colonizers. The postcolonial stance, it is then said, properly entails an agon with and within this modernity. Like it or not, colonialism's intellectual heirs must now contest its categories in the terms that those categories make available. "So long as one operates within the discourse of 'history' produced at the institutional site of the university," says Chakrabarty, "it is not possible simply to walk out of the deep collusion between 'history' and the modernizing narrative(s) of citizenship, bourgeois public and private, and the nation-state" (41). The type of thinking that might separate out the "modern" from what precedes or escapes it is itself regarded as suspect, somehow complicit with the very

³ Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 501. Further references to this essay are given parenthetically. Dirlik is quoting Ella Shohat, "Notes on the 'Post-colonial,'" *Social Text*, nos. 31–32 (1992): 103. Stuart Hall also begins his essay "When Was 'the Post-colonial'? Thinking at the Limit," in *The Post-colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London: Routledge, 1996), 242–60, with the question posed in the title.

“political modernity” (16) that must be tacitly accepted in order to be contested. For example, Gyan Prakash, citing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, has claimed that “*postcoloniality* acquires significance not as a term that periodizes history too glibly” but as a “displacement of European concept-metaphors from their proper context.” As such a “catachresis,” “it sidesteps the language of beginnings and ends” and installs itself in the “totalizing narrative of European colonialism” in such a way as to “seek to undo” it.⁴ Whatever the political effectiveness of such a struggle from within, this view of history, with its distrust of beginnings and ends, is unlikely to give rise to much nuanced reflection on how the moment of high imperialism on the Indian subcontinent can be marked off from (and linked to) the colonialisms of other times and places. As long as a contest with the modernity forged, as Chakrabarty says, by the “European colonizer of the nineteenth century” (4) is definitional for postcolonial scholarship, we suspect, premodern and/or nonmodern colonialisms will seldom be on the agenda. Indeed, settled answers to questions such as “When is/was the (post)colonial?” may simply not be available within postcolonial studies.

Yet the historical questions persist and can come to define a field of inquiry. Productive but chronically irresolvable, they reflect the dilemmas out of which postcolonial criticism reconstitutes itself. They have proved intractable, as Dirlík rightly says, largely because they reflect a troubled temporality intrinsic to much postcolonial thinking: postcolonialism’s concerns derive from a specific and quite recent historical moment (as postcolonial scholars themselves often tell us), but the “themes that it encompasses are as old as the history of colonialism” (507). The relation between what is site and time specific and what endures across those sites and times remains mostly unthought. Sorting out the “now” and “then” of colonialism would require a good deal of exacting comparative work informed by a sophisticated historiography, and, to date, this project has not been vigorously pursued. As early as 1992 Anne McClintock noted that, although the term *postcolonial* “promises a decentering of history in . . . multi-dimensional time . . . the *singularity* of the term effects a re-centering of global history around

⁴ Gyan Prakash, “Who’s Afraid of Postcoloniality?” *Social Text*, no. 49 (1996): 187. Prakash cites Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 281. Emphasis Prakash’s.

the single rubric of European time.”⁵ That singularity has yet to be fully problematized. The name for the failure is presentism.

For all the cogency of his observations, Dirlik himself fails to engage the historical questions that his critique of historicism should raise; instead, he resorts to a kind of historicism of the present. His claim that postcolonialism constitutes the discourse of the intelligentsia of global capitalism changes, in effect, a “when” question to a “who” question; it sidesteps the implications of Shohat’s initial query, a complicated and rich historical one gesturing toward and inviting comparisons among the colonialist histories of several centuries and regions.⁶ Unlike Dirlik’s present-oriented *dicta*, Shohat’s queries are directed to the emergence of (post)coloniality in a past that is every bit as “radically heterogeneous” as Chakrabarty might wish. Truly answering those queries would require just the kind of comparative historiography that we are advocating here, a movement from the present into the colonialisms of the past and then back. Hall’s return to Shohat’s question is far more nuanced than Dirlik’s. As Hall unpacks its implications, he also goes farther toward suggesting what a nonteleological history of colonialism might look like and begins to link the variegated now of the postcolonial to a multiple past. In response to Dirlik, he argues that colonialism should be thought of as both a history and a historiography, at once a “specific historical moment . . . a complex and differentiated one” and also “a way of staging or narrating [a] history” (253). Colonialism’s moment is “differentiated,” Hall holds, because it is multiple, split up into several mutually implicative times. “From [the] turning point in the closing decades of the fifteenth century,” when the West encountered those it designated its aliens, until the present, “there is . . . no ‘single, homogeneous empty (Western) time’” (251).

⁵ Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-colonialism,’” *Social Text*, nos. 31–32 (1992): 86.

⁶ Here is the full quotation: “Colonial-settler states, such as those found in the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, gained their independence, for the most part, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most countries in Africa and Asia, in contrast, gained independence in the twentieth century, some in the nineteen thirties (Iraq), others in the nineteen forties (India, Lebanon), and still others in the nineteen sixties (Algeria, Senegal) and the nineteen seventies (Angola, Mozambique), while others have yet to achieve it. When exactly, then, does the ‘post-colonial’ begin?” (Shohat, 103).

This is an important, though somewhat familiar, point. Pace historicism (as Chakrabarty conceives it), Western time is not unitary and has not been since the West found an East against which to define itself. That very inscription renders its time heterogeneous. But Hall makes a crucial next step. He begins to put Western time in relation to the “other” times that are braided into the complex temporality of colonialism(s). Western time, he insists, is not the only time, although it cannot simply be set aside in favor of alternative times that have somehow escaped from or remained outside it. It may be, Hall implies, that since 1492 there have been no such times. Rather, a postcontact history of colonialism is made up of diverse times, many of them “out of joint” (as Chakrabarty puts it) with one another. The task of “staging or narrating” interimplicative times, Hall suggests, is to bring them into (dis)junction. Postcolonial critics should attend to the “condensations and ellipses which arise when all the different temporalities, while remaining ‘present’ and ‘real’ in their differential effects, are also rupturally convened *in relation to*, and must mark their ‘difference’ in terms of . . . the over-determining effects of Eurocentric temporalities” (251).

Hall’s remarks are brief. They are not couched as a critique of historicism as such, and they do not provide a fully developed historiography of colonialism’s multiple pasts. Nor do we agree with all that Hall says. It is not clear to us, for instance, why the “closing decades of the fifteenth century” should mark the point at which colonialism’s temporal differentiations begin. Surely that history extends before 1492 and is traversed by the colonialisms of many earlier times, which were themselves “rupturally convened” in relation both to each other and then eventually to “Eurocentric temporalities.” And surely this history extends at least as far back as the classical period. Irad Malkin points out in this issue, for example, the importance of considering Greek models of colonialism that both diverge radically from later binary forms and yet are themselves usefully described by such postcolonial concepts as the “Middle Ground.” Nonetheless, Hall’s remarks broach the questions around which a comparative history of colonialism could be organized. Generally: What is historically same and what is different across this complex temporal (dis)continuum, and why? What times are counterpoised along it? How are they articulated against and/or imposed on the other histories that they have subsisted “*in relation to*”?

How do the crucial moments of rupture, for instance, the “originary” moment of 1492, realign these times in their relationality? What should be included and excluded from the postcolonial as it is set within and “after” the variegated temporality of colonialism? As Robert Markley points out in this issue, there are moments in the ostensibly singular European history of colonial expansion, such as the early modern encounter with Tokugawa Japan, that can be read as such only from a willfully teleological, and indeed distorting, perspective. The historicist story of Western empire as it has proceeded since the fifteenth century will continue to be told—how could it not be? As Chakrabarty says, it is not a story that we could do without. We—readers, contributors, editors—will perforce be among the ones telling it. But it should be told together with the intersecting stories of antecedent empires, as well as the alternative histories that have coexisted with it in the past and have persisted into the postcolonial present. As Mary Louise Pratt’s essay in this issue crucially reminds us, Europe has busily written its own story by promoting a diffusionist account of knowledge and erasing what it took from elsewhere. Anticolonial counternarratives, Pratt suggests, correct the story of diffusion by troubling its temporality with accounts of interruption, digestion, substitution, and reversal.

Who?

Reducing the “when” of postcolonialism to a question of “who,” as Dirlík does, might seem narrowly and perhaps invidiously political. Postcoloniality is unavoidably political, of course, but we need to expand our sense of what counts as postcolonial work. Dirlík rightly points out that the “appeals of ‘postcoloniality’ would seem to cut across national, regional, and even political boundaries” (501). And what we may think of as postcolonial criticism’s characteristic themes and tropes—hybridity, displacement, ambivalence, and so on—are not and have not been solely or even especially the preoccupations of postcolonial thought. Moreover, these hallmarks, as they have been developed by postcolonial theorists, have also been broadcast, appropriated, and reworked in many disciplines within—and even without—the academy ever since the start of something called “postcolonial studies.” The pertinent issue at this juncture is not so much whose sensibility postcolonial studies

proceeds from but what postcolonial studies has influenced and been influenced by. We need to place postcolonial studies in relation to the intellectual formations that it presently supplements, resists, elides, parallels, and so on. This special issue of *MLQ* is meant to promote and exemplify this approach.

Here we need to take account of the complex academic terrain on which postcolonialism is arrayed. Postcolonial theorists in the West have mostly been affiliated with English departments, and postcolonial studies has taken as its de facto object the subcontinental British empire, and often the British empire of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Non-Western empires, earlier empires in the West, and even the first English imperial excursions are frequently not a part of the discussion. There is an unfortunate circularity to this dynamic: the Anglophone world and modernity are firmly ensconced at the center, while other cultures and periods are largely ignored. Indeed, the fairly limited scope of postcolonial studies has often been noted by scholars. Peter Hulme, for example, has insisted that postcolonial studies encompass the early modern experience in the New World: "It would seem a strange definition of colonialism that would not include within its purview the European settlements in America that began in 1492."⁷ The early modern Spanish empire has been a huge blind spot, traceable, doubtless, to the Black Legend of Spanish perfidy. So successfully did its Protestant rivals construct Spain as an exceptionally cruel and greedy imperial power that until recently it was almost erased from large sectors of academic inquiry.

Relations between postcolonial and Latin American studies are generally poor. While critics such as Walter D. Mignolo and Pratt have transcended the divide between these disciplines, many others assert that postcolonial models do not apply to Latin America (even though this assertion may have the effect, unintended perhaps, of perpetuating less critical models of engagement). Mignolo himself voices a general mistrust of the metropolitan academy (of which he is nonetheless a part) by arguing for a radical revision of the hitherto metropolitan "locus of enunciation."⁸ He holds that the tools for analyzing the spe-

⁷ Peter Hulme, "Including America," *Ariel* 26 (1995): 118.

⁸ Walter D. Mignolo, "Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse: Cultural Critique or Academic Colonialism?" *Latin American Research Review* 28 (1993): 122. Mignolo dis-

cific dynamics of Latin America can be found in the work of Latin American critics. His signal example is the Mexican historian and philosopher Edmundo O’Gorman, whose understanding of language as an “instrumental tool for constructing history and inventing realities” in the Americas long predates Edward W. Said’s work on the discursive construction of the Orient (122). Others have suggested that opening the category of the postcolonial to include the Spanish New World conquests risks ahistoricity and anachronism. In a provocative discussion Jorge Klor de Alva argues that the large Latin American areas populated by nonnatives cannot be accurately described in terms of colonialism, since these areas were “relatively disconnected from the metropole.”⁹ He then advocates a much broader dismissal of imported terms. Since “the concepts, theories, and methods used to study colonialism in the second half of the twentieth century were inspired by or resulted from research into the colonial experiences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (15), they are inappropriate for studying the Latin American experience of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. While this kind of refusal addresses the limits of much postcolonial scholarship, it also denies its theoretical applications and, indeed, misses how postcolonial studies might itself be challenged and changed by an engagement with other periods and other empires.

Important as it is to dislocate the tacit assumption that the colonial pertains mostly to Southeast Asia in the eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, however, the historiographical problems that the term *postcolonial* has come to imply will remain. But there is little hope of promoting more complex understandings unless the mostly failed rapprochement between postcolonial studies and its disciplinary others is addressed. Despite misplaced fears that a concern with “the past” can be used to attenuate or domesticate the political force of academic arguments by removing scholars from the here and now, we do not mean to depoliticize or defang postcolonial studies. Indeed, postcolonialism blunts its own edge when it unreflectively equates coloniality

cusses O’Gorman’s *La idea del descubrimiento de América: Historia de esa interpretación y crítica de sus fundamentos* (1952) and *La invención de América: Investigación acerca de la estructura histórica del nuevo mundo y del sentido de su devenir* (1958).

⁹ Jorge Klor de Alva, “Colonialism and Postcolonialism as (Latin) American Mirages,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 1 (1992): 18.

with a certain modernity that arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and did so complicitly with historically discrete notions of “race” and the “nation-state.” This special issue of *MLQ* collects from a number of pre- and early modern fields a wide variety of work that productively engages—or could engage—with postcolonial studies.

To that end, we advance these theses: First, the past is not “pre-colonial” but is instead marked by multiple, historically specific temporalities that preceded modernity and came to be integral to colonialism as we usually think of it. The questions raised by divergent colonialisms concern migrations, relations of center to periphery, and contacts among European and/or non-European peoples, as well as imperial expansion. Second, present-day colonial and neocolonial dynamics—the construction of nations around fictive ethnicities or races, for instance, or the marginalization of Africa—frequently have their spreading roots in earlier periods, that is, in more than one of the temporalities so often subsumed in an overarching narrative of colonialism. Inquiring into these temporalities is a matter not of recovering self-evident legacies but of tracing back the crisscrossed antecedents of complex bodies of tradition and practice that our current understanding of national histories, identity, and belonging often elides. A historiographical approach like the one we are advocating unravels the stories that nations tell of their own pasts, whether as colonizers or as the colonized, and addresses the fictions of empire—utopias, romances, national histories—from multiple, dialectically related historical standpoints. Third, if this approach is to be developed, the relation between postcolonial studies as it is now constituted and those disciplines that are potentially postcolonial will have to be more collaborative, sometimes more contested, perhaps, but certainly more openly negotiated. This will be a matter not of amalgamating but of actively coordinating different fields, each of which will have to develop in dialogue with postcolonial studies, but with careful attention paid to the historical, political, and rhetorical specificities of the cultures they are considering.¹⁰

¹⁰ Thus, for example, one of us has suggested “imperium studies”—in *imperium*’s double sense of internal sovereignty and overseas expansion—as a particularly fruitful rubric under which to enact this negotiation vis-à-vis early modern Europe, a period and continent marked by the many challenges of centralization, national consolidation, and imperial competition. See Barbara Fuchs, “Imperium

We hope that the larger project of reflecting on the rich intersections between postcolonial studies and the various pasts will transcend the debate over who can legitimately practice something called “postcolonial studies.” In a world of neo-imperial and neocolonial power dynamics, we would locate our own practices “not only,” as Hall says, “‘after’ but . . . ‘beyond’ the colonial” (253), ethically and theoretically. To do this, as the essays assembled here will show, we will need to investigate the mechanics, practices, and narratives of the colonialism that in its complex historical formations persists to this day, while recognizing its avatars in colonialisms past.

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Studies: Theorizing Early Modern Expansion,” in *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval through Modern*, ed. Patricia Clare Ingham and Michelle R. Warren (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 71–90.