

# *The Place of America in an Era of Postcolonial Imperialism*

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IN AUGUST 1962, the *Times Literary Supplement* published the second of two special summer issues on the newly emergent literatures from the Commonwealth. While the tone of some of the reviews recalls Samuel Johnson's pronouncement on women's preaching—that, like a dog walking on its hind legs, it is remarkable not because it is done well, but because it is done at all—the general response to the new Commonwealth literatures was one of indulgent approval. The overall tone of the issue was most strongly conveyed, however, in a solemn concluding reminder to reviewers that

the future of English . . . is still largely in our own hands, in spite of the surprising developments abroad, unless we intend to abdicate responsibility. . . . We are under an obligation to criticize these [emergent] literatures, with understanding but without leniency, and to accept them for what they are—integral parts of a world literature in English. But our duty is our advantage: we shall find the language itself refreshed by its new uses and our own literature stimulated by other examples. Macaulay would have urged us to seize on the possibilities being offered ahead.

("The Give and Take of English" 568)

The imprimatur of Macaulay works was intended as a reassuring symbolic reminder of Britain's prevailing authority in cultural matters—an authority which was generally upheld both by the popular literary press and by university English departments throughout the Commonwealth for the better part of the next two decades.<sup>1</sup>

By the early 1990s, the situation had changed dramatically, as reflected in an article which appeared in 1993 in *Time*—significantly, an American, rather than an English weekly—

titled "The Empire Writes Back." In that article, journalist Pico Iyer hails the inauguration of a new "polycultural" order, observing that "Britain's former colonies have begun to capture the very heart of English literature, while transforming the language with bright colors and strange cadences and foreign eyes" (54). This image of the ravishment of English literature becomes the hallmark of Iyer's triumphant postcolonialism, in which the progressive movement from monologism to multiplicity, from tyranny to freedom, from English nationalism to decentred globalism is accompanied by the noisy explosion of the British canon.

Significantly quiet in the scene depicted by Iyer is the US, which surely should be mentioned in the narrative of English literary rebellion. Long before the "closed and almost airless rooms of English literature" (57) were penetrated by writers from India, Nigeria, Trinidad, and Canada, American literature had succeeded in not only gaining entry, but in claiming a room of its own. Indeed, as Bruce King has observed, the success of American writing during the 1960s and 1970s was frequently held up as an inspiring example for other postcolonial cultures, for whom it performed the enabling task of

opening windows and doors, allowing new kinds of energy and ideas to enter what many writers and intellectuals thought of as their own staid, conservative, colonial societies. . . . In contrast to British gentility and superiority, American culture . . . appeared as a model of vitality, equality, social mobility and modernization. (146-47)

In the context of American literature's tradition of oppositionality and progressiveness, Iyer's article is striking in its implicit—and apparently unconscious—assumption of a writing position *within* the heart of English as against the "bright colors" from outside. I want to explore the implications of that assumption—an assumption which informs not only the New World English literature industry described by Iyer, but also the academic discourse which supports (as it is in turn supported by) that industry—in order to suggest one way that we might answer the challenge raised by Peter Hulme in a previous issue of *ARIEL*, to include America in the postcolonial.<sup>2</sup>

The elision of the place of his own writing from Iyer's discussion of "world" literature is perhaps not surprising given the

scant attention the US has received within the dominant academic formulations which compete under the rubric of literary postcolonialism.<sup>3</sup> In what might loosely be designated the Third Worldist school of postcolonialism, invoked by critics such as Fredric Jameson,<sup>4</sup> a generally nationalist Third World—defined as those “countries which have suffered the experience of colonialism and imperialism” (“Third World” 67)—is defined in opposition to an explicitly American “West.” It is not ultimately clear, in this analysis, “by what these [Third World] nationalisms might be replaced except perhaps some global American post-modernist culture” (65). Jameson posits, in other words, a nationalistic Third World as against a more or less *post*national First World, which is nevertheless coterminous with one nation—the US.

In Commonwealth constructions of postcolonialism, the battle lines are not so clear (see, for instance, Ashcroft et al.). Indeed, far from defining itself against what Jameson identifies as the dominant power of the twentieth century, the Commonwealth model of postcolonialism includes the US, allowing that “perhaps because of its current position of power, and [because of] the neo-colonizing role it has played, its post-colonial nature has not been generally recognized. But its relationship with the metropolitan centre as it evolved over the last two centuries has been paradigmatic for post-colonial literatures everywhere” (Ashcroft et al. 2). According to this formulation, the US is in the paradoxical position of being the exemplar of postcoloniality, whose autonomy is maintained, in part, through its imperial dominance of other nations.

Thus emerges a curious composite representation of the US as at once nowhere and everywhere, neocolonial and paradigmatic of the postcolonial nation. What these critical texts demonstrate is the extent to which the US, in all its contradictions, impinges on the imaginative construction of the rest of the former colonial world. In these contradictions may be found, at the same time, at least a partial explanation of why postcolonial criticism of the Commonwealth school has tended to sidestep the US, engaging instead in what Meaghan Morris has described in a different context as an “obsessive resuscitation of yesterday’s bogeys”

("Small Serve" 476). By focusing almost exclusively on the effects of British colonialism, such criticism does not simply ignore American culture as a legitimate object of critique, but actually collaborates in the mythical construction of the US as a model of liberation from the repressive strictures of British tradition. This construction is summarized neatly by Donald Pease in the introduction to a special issue of *boundary 2* on American literary nationalism. The national mythology, as Pease defines it, "interconnects an exceptional national subject (American Adam) with a representative national scene (Virgin Land) and an exemplary national motive (errand into the wilderness)." The biblical references here invoke a myth of emancipation wherein the national subjects are represented as having been liberated from a tyrannical power. The resulting entity, "Nature's Nation," is made up of "citizens [who] believed, by way of the supreme fiction called natural law, that the ruling assumptions of their national compact (Liberty, Equality, Social Justice) could be understood as indistinguishable from the sovereign power creative of nature" (4). Invoking the biblical authority of Genesis, this national myth ultimately comes to acquire a kind of scientific credibility based on a simplistic rendering of the principles of Freudian psychoanalysis: the American nation becomes the exemplum of the child who, in seeking to displace the British father, simultaneously loses his innocence and gains the free will that is bestowed by the Law of individualism.

The development metaphor reflects the notion that the US is a nation which is not only founded on humanist principles, but may in fact, as the motto *e pluribus unum* signifies, be conceived of as an individual. This metaphorical reduction thus enables the construction of a normative framework of "manifest destiny," according to which the postcolonial development of the American nation can only be seen as both natural and progressive. The invocation of the individual serves, moreover, as a justification for the extension of American sovereignty throughout the world: if the nation is reducible to the individual American citizen, it is also, through the metonymic logic of humanism, expandable into the world. "The world," in this formulation, is both excluded from and harnessed into the American vision, as a kind of pen-

umbra around the solid core of America or more generously as a less-developed extension of the nation itself.

A vivid illustration of the cultural significance of this formulation—and of its fundamental difference from earlier imperialist mythologies—can be found in the 1985 Live Aid project, in which, under the sponsorship of such corporations as AT&T, an internationally televised live concert was arranged by British and American musicians to raise money for famine victims in Ethiopia. The main thrust of the project is embodied in the simple, inspirational lyric of the American single released in the same year: “We are the world, we are the children. We are the ones who make a brighter day, so let’s start giving” (“U.S.A. For Africa”). “We,” of course, is a slippery term here seeming first to refer to everyone and only at the end of the line acknowledging that “we” are the Americans, within whose power it lies to represent, give to and withhold from the rest of the world.

This rhetorical slipperiness is striking in its difference from the (literally) black-and-white clarity of the original British single which inaugurated the project of musical aid. While the American song invokes the rhetoric of universalism, the English version, “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” is firmly if somewhat ironically inscribed within the old colonialist binaries of “us” and “them” and is cast in a mood of self-congratulatory paternalism, with an undercurrent of missionary zeal in the chorus, “Here’s to you, raise a glass for everyone / Here’s to them underneath that burning sun / Do they know it’s Christmas time at all?” (Band Aid). In the American song, the discourse of master/slave, colonizer/colonized is translated into the World Bank rhetoric of donor and client, conveying the reassuring image of a voluntary transaction taking place in a world of universal freedom and equality.

The Live Aid concert represented the triumphant materialization of the message contained in the American song as it succeeded in conveying a spectacular image of a global village bathed in the warmth of electronically generated goodwill. Simon During describes Live Aid as an example of what Gramsci calls the “global popular,” a product of “the new cultural technologies that permit visual communication to triumph over spatial

distance, enabling a genuinely weightless global simultaneity" (341). The global popular, as During goes on to point out, appeals to a humanism based not on the traditional (and restrictive) notion of the essential dignity of "man," but on the imperative of a universalist consumerism:

Its general magic relies on the trick by which global markets, technologies and information flows fuse into a humanism transcending national boundaries at the same time as, in its clear dependence on marketing, it leaves in tatters the idealism and naïve appeal to human nature so integral to older humanisms. (342)

Indeed it is partly through its spectacular transcendence of the boundaries of the past—national, technological and epistemological—that the new humanism seems to possess a liberatory potential.

Whether it also has more menacing implications—and whether, or to what extent, the menace can be located in one particular nation—has been the subject of intense critical debate. Some of the earliest and most prominent participants in that debate were the large group of member states of UNESCO who began calling, in the mid-1970s, for a New World Information and Communications Order. Issued in 1980, the MacBride report, *Many Voices, One World*, spoke to concerns on the part of many developing nations that traffic in the "global village" was being controlled and driven exclusively by a few wealthy nations—the US in particular. Among its points of critique, the report noted that the concept of "free flow" communications, advanced most vociferously by the US, has resulted in advantages for those nations (such as the US) with the greatest communication resources (141).<sup>5</sup>

The UNESCO argument echoes those raised by such cultural critics as Herbert Schiller,<sup>6</sup> who point to the role of multinational media corporations, largely based in the US and given clandestine support by the CIA, as vehicles for the promotion of capitalism. The US-dominated corporations work, Schiller argues, to secure

not grudging submission but an open-armed allegiance in the penetrated areas, by identifying the American presence with freedom—freedom of trade, freedom of speech and freedom of enterprise. In

short, the emerging imperial network of American economics and finance utilizes the communications media for its defense and entrenchment wherever it exists already and for its expansion to locales where it hopes to become active. (3)

American media work, in other words, according to a sophisticated variation of Macaulay's formula for colonial education in India. Just as an English education serves as the means of inculcating in its subjects the kind of quality of mind that would make them more amenable to colonial "civilization," American culture, according to this argument, might be seen to construct, on a global scale, the kind of consumerist subjects required by the US's ever-expanding capitalist economy. American culture then functions as a direct instrument of its will to global domination.

And in a crude sense this formulation is historically accurate. From its earliest forays into the arena of global trade, the US did not hesitate to employ whatever means of indoctrination were necessary to secure overseas markets. During the nation's first concerted push for greater commercial activity with Asia, Thomas H. Norton, an American consular officer in the Middle East, was able to defend aggressive missionary activity in that area by arguing that

In a thousand ways they are raising the standard of morality, of intelligence, or education. . . . Directly or indirectly every phase of their work is rapidly paving the way for American commerce. . . . I know of no import better adapted to secure the future commercial supremacy of the United States. (Qtd. in Williams 125)

Fifty years later, in the midst of what was proudly proclaimed, in a 1941 *Life* editorial, to be "the American Century" ("Golden Years"), the US government needed no convincing of the value of "cultural" imports—albeit of a more secular variety. A 1966 report from the congressional committee concerned with "Ideological Operations and Foreign Policy," stressed the role of communications in winning the Cold War, arguing that

the recent increase in influence of the masses of the people over governments, together with greater awareness on the part of leaders of the aspirations of people . . . has created a new dimension for foreign policy operation. Certain foreign policy objectives can be pursued by dealing directly with the people of foreign countries, rather than with their governments. Through the use of modern

instruments and techniques of communications it is possible today to reach large or influential segments of national populations—to inform them, to influence their attitudes, and at times perhaps even to motivate them to a particular course of action. These groups, in turn, are capable of exerting noticeable, even decisive, pressures, on their governments. (Qtd. in Schiller, *Mass Communications* 12)<sup>7</sup>

The means by which such influence might be wielded turn out to be surprisingly prosaic. For example, David Ogilvy, founder of the Ogilvy and Mather advertising agency, suggests that *Reader's Digest* "exports the best in American life. . . . In my opinion, the Digest is doing as much as the United States Information Agency to win the battle for men's minds" (qtd. in Schiller, *Communication* 6).

Citing this and other compelling examples, Schiller makes a convincing case for the capacity—and indeed, the conscious effort—of American media to transmit an ideological program necessary for the upholding of capitalist democracy, creating, in the process, a compliant global population with a homogeneous set of, not only cars, supermarkets and suburbs, but also, following Macaulay, "taste, opinions, morals and intellect." While this process exemplifies a particularly powerful and, by now, fairly familiar form of cultural imperialism, it does not represent the whole story. The neo-Macaulayist formula of cultural influence has a number of limitations, two of which I want to concentrate on in some depth here.<sup>8</sup>

The first is the fear, expressed by Schiller and others, of a global uniformity imposed by the process of capitalist development. Cees Hamelink's study *Cultural Autonomy in Global Communications* can be read as a typical example of anti-capitalist critique which focuses on the issue of cultural homogenization. Hamelink illustrates the phenomenon through a series of recollections of personal experiences of the "international scene":

In a Mexican village the traditional ritual dance precedes a soccer match, but the performance features a gigantic Coca-Cola bottle. . . . In Singapore, a band dressed in traditional Malay costume offers a heart-breaking imitation of Fats Domino. . . . For starving children in the Brazilian city of Recife, to have a Barbie doll seems more important than having food. (2)

Hamelink cites these examples as evidence of the unprecedented level of "cultural synchronization" which has accom-



panied the global advance of capitalism and observes ominously that "never before has the process of cultural influence proceeded so subtly, without any blood being shed and with the receiving culture thinking it had sought such cultural influence" (4). Hamelink's conclusions have been challenged by critics such as John Tomlinson on a number of grounds, not least of which is the heavy undercurrent of paternalism that informs his concern. As Tomlinson dryly notes, "any critique which bases itself in the idea that cultural domination is taking place 'behind people's backs' is heading for trouble" (110). The distinction between the knowing Western observer and the unwily Third World consumer is one which Tomlinson cannot finally help making himself, however, as he observes that whether or not cultural synchronization is a bad thing depends where the individual are standing. "It is difficult to object to global homogenisation," Tomlinson writes,

without falling back on the simple intuition that it is a good thing that there is variety in cultures. But then we have to ask, a good thing for whom? Who is to enjoy the range of cultural differences? It is not difficult to see how this preference for variety might become that of the Western global-cultural tourist as much as of the concerned anthropologist. (98)

The idea that what is good for the culturally literate Westerner is not good for the more limited Third World subject comes dangerously close to reifying the split between the West as the producer and the Third World as the subject of knowledge which Tomlinson is elsewhere careful to dispel.<sup>9</sup>

What his critique of Hamelink *does* suggest, however, is that cultural heterogeneity cannot be read unproblematically as either a corrective to or as a reassuring sign of the ultimate failure of cultural imperialism. Heterogeneity, on the contrary, operates as a vital component *within* the homogenizing system of capitalist development which, like the mythology of the American frontier, depends on the existence of a limitless number of thresholds of alterity, by whose progressive transgression the movement of capital—and, by extension, the consumer's ever-expanding freedom of choice—is defined.

One of the clearest examples of the successful operation of this law is the new "world literature" industry celebrated in *Time*.

Iyer's article lends support to the argument made in a different context by Susan Hawthorne that

it is precisely because capitalism depends on the usefulness of its colonies that the work of [postcolonial] writers just now is doing well. What is the basis of this "usefulness"? Western capitalism depends on change, or on the illusion of change, to establish a need for (apparently) *new* goods. (260)

Thanks to world literature, in other words, "hot spices are entering English, and tropical birds and sorcerers. . . . World Fiction has expanded our conception of the possible and brought wonder into our living rooms" (Iyer 56, 57). The appeal of such images lies not, as Iyer claims, in their reflection of a "frontierless" world but conversely, in their spectacular capacity to *embody*, in their heterogeneity, the mythological frontier of the post-colonial, which separates the New World from the Old.

In reality, of course, New World global culture is not reducible either to the homogenizing force lamented by Schiller nor to the heterogeneous carnival celebrated by Iyer; it works rather through a productive (in an economic sense) tension between these two opposing impulses. Stuart Hall suggests that contemporary processes of globalization are characterized by an emphasis on a particular form of heterogeneity which operates both within and against an overriding homogenizing force—a force he identifies, in contrast to an earlier, monolithic, and predominantly British form of hegemony, as essentially American. Accepting the truism that global mass-culture seems, in one sense, to operate through a process of homogenization, Hall stresses not only that the process is never complete, but also that "it does not work for completeness." It is not, he goes on to argue,

attempting to produce little mini-versions of Englishness everywhere, or little versions of Americanness. It is wanting to recognize and absorb those differences within the larger, overarching framework of what is essentially an American conception of the world. That is to say, it is very powerfully located in the increasing and ongoing concentration of culture and other forms of capital. But it is now a form of capital which recognizes that it can only, to use a metaphor, rule through other local capitals, rule alongside and in partnership with other economic and political elites. It does not attempt to obliterate them; it operates through them. It has to hold the whole

framework of globalization in place and simultaneously police that system: it stage-manages independence within it, so to speak.

(28-29)

The kind of diversity Hall is talking about is a powerfully contained one: nominally postcolonial nations are confirmed as free and independent states insofar as they uphold an American model of democratic capitalism, in much the same way as branch plants and franchises are encouraged to make superficial adaptations to local conditions which will ultimately strengthen the economic position of the head office to whose policies they remain ultimately accountable.

Perhaps the most obvious model for such an incorporation of diversity within homogeneity is the supermarket—that structure which is frequently invoked as a symbol of the depressing uniformity of capitalist development. While the external structure of the supermarket, both physical and economic, might be uniform, its *strength* is maintained by the variety of goods contained within. The “supermarket” vision of the world tolerates—indeed promotes—cultural difference insofar as it is attractively packaged, easy to serve and not too shocking to the palate.<sup>10</sup> For in contemporary Western culture, as Hall observes,

the most sophisticated thing is to be in the new exotica. To be at the leading edge of modern capitalism is to eat fifteen different cuisines in any one week, not to eat one. . . . Because if you are just jetting in from Tokyo, via Harare, you come in loaded, not with “how everything is the same” but how wonderful it is, that everything is different. In one trip around the world, in one weekend, you can see every wonder of the ancient world. You take it in as you go by, all in one, living with difference, wondering at pluralism, this concentrated corporate, over-corporate, over-integrated, over-concentrated, and condensed form of economic power which lives culturally through difference and which is constantly teasing itself with the pleasures of the transgressive Other. (31)<sup>11</sup>

Thus the principle of the supermarket is extended into the world via the practice of tourism. When the possibility of consuming “exotic cuisine” becomes accessible to everyone via the supermarket’s democratic ubiquity, the stakes of diversity are raised, so that in order to gain the status attached to the consumption of *authentic* difference, it becomes necessary to move farther afield.

At its most sophisticated, the practice of tourism enables the consumption of other cultures while maintaining the illusion that the places one visits emerge from the encounter intact, as timeless sites of pure difference.<sup>12</sup> Of course, tourism, as Graeme Turner has observed,

is a particularly unlikely champion of national difference. The discourses of tourism are thoroughly internationalised, and operate as a means of translating existing cultural differences into a transnational code of the exotic, of the leisurely, and of the familiar; a code that results in a consoling crosscultural sameness—what Meaghan Morris has called a “consistent indistinction.” (111)

The ability to negotiate that transnational code confers on the tourist a form of authority—literally, a “worldliness”—through which interpretations of “other” places are validated as objective. The tourist thus gains accreditation as a kind of world expert, whose ability to bring alterity home, so to speak, is analogous to the skill of the theorist who domesticates far-flung, and often unruly, strands of information into a stable and familiar cognitive framework.

Parallels between the activities of the tourist and the theorist have been identified already and cast in different lights ranging from the critical to the celebratory.<sup>13</sup> If nothing else, this conjunction points to a general agreement about the significance of both tourism and theory as contemporary world-shaping processes. I want now to focus on the latter issue—the role of theory in the contemporary global economy—and in so doing to address what I see as the second major limitation of Schiller’s approach to cultural imperialism. The first, discussed above, is the failure to address the complex function of heterogeneity in capitalist cultural development. The second, related issue is the *place* of the cultural industry in the broader economy.

In Schiller’s formulation, American culture functions essentially as a global vehicle for capitalist values, much in the same way as the school worked in the nineteenth century to transmit British colonialist values to the outposts of empire. What this construction fails to take into account is the extent to which the communications industry has increasingly become not just a shaping force in, but also a constitutive part of, the capitalist

economy. The "recolonization" of the developing world has occurred, as During has argued, as the (largely American based) industry of "information production and transmission comes to have better profit rates than manufacturing, service and primary industries" (343). Intellectual-property industries, During goes on to note, "belong disproportionately to the First World: even 'world music,' which would seem to be the intellectual property of its non-Western creators, is in fact mainly owned and controlled by the big six music companies" (343). Thus, "culture" not only serves to communicate the values of private property; it *is* private property, produced and transmitted through the entertainment industry, through the publishing industry and (perhaps less lucratively) through the so-called knowledge industries of anthropology and literary criticism. Even the corporate sector has been overtaken by the information industry, as American corporate advisors promote what Jameson describes as "the export of experts" ("Conversations" 268).

To be a member of the American "expert" class is always to be figuratively if not literally "just jetting in from Tokyo, via Harare," travelling in such a way that one's American credentials can be momentarily forgotten, casually stuffed in the back pocket, until the crucial moment of border crossing when their production guarantees an easy passage. Transcending the "ugly" label with which the American tourist is sometimes saddled, the American expert joins the ranks of what Bruce Cumings terms "intellectuals with no name" (49), roaming freely throughout a borderless world which turns out to be easily convertible into the discursive (and, ultimately, the economic) equivalent of a comfortable suburban home.

A powerful example of the kind of structure erected by the American knowledge industry to house the world is the Modern Language Association, described, not inaccurately, in a recent newsletter as "*the* international organization in the fields of language, literature and culture" (Gilman 3). Acknowledging the "invisible A" in the title which definitively locates the organization as the "Modern Language Association of *America*," MLA President Sander Gilman insists nevertheless that the MLA is fundamentally an international organization. "At the end of the

twentieth century," he suggests, "the MLAA has evolved into the space where scholars throughout the world feel themselves at home" (3).

If the identification of the organization as a *space* can be seen as reflecting, on the one hand, a utopian desire, on the part of Gilman, and a large number of MLA members, to eliminate barriers to cross-cultural communication, it is at the same time symptomatic of the forgetfulness that is born of privilege, that those barriers still exist, not just between the American "home" of the MLA and those other nations whose academics boast MLA membership, but also *within* the organization itself, which, like most organizations, looks more like a hierarchy than a "space." The external borders of the organization are relatively easy to map. The MLA's America includes Canada, as Gilman is quick to point out, noting that the organization "has large numbers of Canadian as well as United States members, has twice held its convention in Toronto, and has had distinguished Canadian presidents" (3). If Canadian members of the MLA are occasionally exposed as *not quite* American, as for example, at the 1993 MLA Convention in Toronto, when some of them tried to buy books with *Canadian* money, the barriers faced by overseas members are more formidable.<sup>14</sup>

Notwithstanding the difficulty of getting there, the MLA convention itself is represented by Gilman as an event of global significance, a celebration of the postcolonial cultural order. He remarks on being struck, in South Africa recently, "by how important South African colleagues felt it was that after the end of apartheid and the boycott they could attend the annual conference" (3). If the opportunity to attend the MLAA conference might not seem like the most obvious benefit to be realized from the end of apartheid, Gilman makes its significance clear: South African publishers and writers, he explains, "saw the MLAA as a space to present the 'new' South Africa" (3). Represented once again as a *space*, the MLA functions here both as a metonym for freedom and as a stage on which world events can be "presented" for an international/American audience and thus rendered meaningful.

If the MLAA grants an audience to the world, it also operates as the venue through which those responses are reified, and

subsequently marketed back to the world as authoritative representations of global relations. "I was struck," Gilman observes

by how very important American publications, including those of the MLAA, were to South African colleagues. These texts enabled them again to track the development of scholarship. Here too cost is a factor; but that MLAA publications are so priced to make them generally available is a sign of our commitment to the diffusion of knowledge throughout the world. (3)

If the diffusion of knowledge proposed by Gilman looks suspiciously like a one-way process, he hastens to add that the American Literature Section of the MLAA welcomes the contributions of the "British, German and Chinese Americanists" who prevent it from becoming "purely chauvinistic." The internationalization of the MLAA, Gilman reflects finally, is "reflected in the constant reshaping and revitalization of American literary studies" (4). At its core, then, the MLAA would seem to be organized around the promotion of American scholarship and/or American literature, enhanced by the participation of grateful outsiders whose difference "is the oil that enables the [American] machine to run" (4).

In its construction of a putatively international association whose structure and purpose are defined by the boundaries of *America*, Gilman's endorsement of the MLA recalls the myth of universal exceptionalism on which the cultural hegemony of the US is symbolically founded. As a kind of mission statement for the self-identified "*primary* international society" in the fields of languages, literature, and culture, Gilman's account is all the more remarkable for the lack of self-consciousness with which it displays its Americocentrism. According to Said, however, such a lack of self-consciousness is typical of an American knowledge industry, which, in its failure to acknowledge the history of American imperialism, colludes in its perpetuation. For example, "to practice anthropology in the United States," as Said points out, is

not just to be doing scholarly work investigating "otherness" and "difference" in a large country; it is to be discussing them in an enormously influential and powerful state whose global role is that of a superpower.

The fetishization and relentless celebration of "difference" and "otherness" can therefore be seen as an ominous trend. It suggests

not only what Jonathan Friedman has called "the spectacularization of anthropology" whereby the "textualization" and "culturization" of societies occur regardless of politics and history, but also the heedless appropriation and translation of the world by a process that for all its protestations of relativism, its displays of epistemological care and technical expertise, cannot easily be distinguished from the process of empire. ("Representing the Colonized" 213)

Said goes on to note "an almost total absence," in contemporary writings on anthropology, epistemology, textualization, and "otherness," of any reference to American imperial intervention as a "factor affecting theoretical discussions" (213).

While there are obvious exceptions to this rule, those texts that do acknowledge American imperialism tend to be interested less in tracing its effects on other cultures than in redrawing the map of America. This problem is acknowledged in the 1993 collection *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, edited by Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, which takes as its focus "the multiple histories of continental and overseas expansion, conquest, conflict, and resistance which have shaped the cultures of the United States and the cultures of those it has dominated" (4). Noting the failure of previous revisionist studies of the US to venture beyond the (uncontested) borders of the nation, Kaplan argues, in the book's introduction, for the need to acknowledge the role of political struggles with other cultures and nations in shaping the American national identity. Kaplan herself never quite transcends those borders but argues instead for a reformulation of the concept of the frontier, a concept which, she suggests, might usefully be replaced with the Chicano concept of "the borderlands." She explains:

Where the frontier implies a model of center and periphery, which confront one another most often in a one-way imposition of power, the borderlands are seen as multidimensional and transterritorial; they not only lie at the geographic and political margins of national identity but as often traverse the center of the metropolis. The borderlands link the study of ethnicity and immigration inextricably to the study of international relations and empire. At these borders, foreign relations do not take place outside the boundaries of America, but instead constitute American nationality. (16-17)

By blurring the distinction between "foreign" and "domestic" in order to defamiliarize the domestic, Kaplan also, seemingly un-



consciously, domesticates the foreign, which thus risks becoming, like Vietnam in the 1980s, a site from which to project anguished interrogations of the American psyche. Not surprisingly, the bulk of the interrogations which follow Kaplan's introduction are addressed explicitly from within American borders—a positionality which is underlined by the locations of all the contributors within US institutions. While many of the essays present convincing critiques of official mythologies of the American nation, the theoretical frame of the collection upholds that mythology, suggesting that, in *intellectual* terms anyway, America is still both universal and exceptional.

Ironically, of course, it is the very strength of the myth of universal exceptionalism which underwrites "America" which threatens ultimately to unmoor that sign from its original, politically bound referent. If the power of "America" lies partly in its capacity simultaneously to expropriate and incorporate other cultures, it is, paradoxically, through that much vaunted ability to surmount political boundaries, that the American *myth* necessarily culminates in the death of the American *nation*. The myth's betrayal of the republic for which it nominally stands was clearly illustrated during the Gulf War, in which the US-led invasion of Iraq was conducted under the banner of anti-imperialism, a banner not unlike the one which the US waved persistently during the Cold War. Represented as a means of redeeming, morally and militarily, the losses suffered in the Vietnam War, Operation Desert Storm was constructed by the government as by an eerily obliging media, as an essentially patriotic exercise. While cynical commentators argued that the war was *really* about oil, the fundamental premise that *American* interests were somehow at stake was rarely questioned. As Masao Miyoshi has pointed out, however, the economic principles for which the war was fought ultimately transcended nation:

The United States . . . executed the war, of course, but as the "sharing" of the military expenses among the "allied nations" demonstrates, the war was being fought on behalf of the dominant corporate structure rather than the United States, which served after all as no more than a mercenary. Does this mean that from now on the armed forces of the United States are in service of a corporate alliance with little regard for its own people's interests? (743)

In the scene outlined by Miyoshi, the American myth is brought home to America, with fatal consequences. If the hypothetical scenario offered at the end of the passage seems unlikely, it nevertheless represents no more than the logical conclusion of a national mythology which rejects the arbitrary political concept of state in favour of the "natural" *economic* concept of freedom.<sup>15</sup> If this mythology has not yet brought about the demise of America, it has convincingly prophesied the death of all nations through the mechanism of a radically decentred neocolonialist structure—a structure which postcolonial theory has not yet found the language to describe.

The incapacity of postcolonial literary theory in the face of new forms of imperialism is registered in the foundational crisis with which the field has been beset for some time, one clear symptom of which has been the ongoing debate about the meaning and the efficacy of the term "postcolonial." Perhaps the most consistent and salient objection to the term is its implied sense of premature celebration, the idea that, barring a few vestiges of inequity which still need to be ironed out, the world has been liberated from imperialist forces. Not only has the liberation been conspicuously incomplete, as critics such as Gayatri Spivak and Anne McClintock have observed, but also the very changes which are often taken as signs of the *dissolution* of imperialist forces—increased mobility of populations, improved communications and the consequent burgeoning of a heterogeneous global culture—also represent the conditions for the *consolidation* of the new forms of domination represented by global capitalism. Moreover, the discursive strategies of literary postcolonialism, in their emphasis on liberty, agency, and hybridity, are replicated in the legitimating discourse of capitalism, which, like postcolonialism, seeks to make fluid what was fixed, to eliminate boundaries and to promote diversity. The reluctance of postcolonial critics to engage with the morally and conceptually awkward imbrication of postcolonialist and capitalist discourses is reflected in the conspicuous absence of the United States from contemporary postcolonial criticism. As Lawrence Buell points out in "American Literary Emergence as Postcolonial Phenomenon," the American situation reveals a worry-

ing fracture in the progressivist logic of postcolonial theoretical discourse:

It begins to appear . . . that the old-world tropes whose ingestion by the new-world citizen marks his or her cultural subordination can in turn become reactivated, whether on the frontier within one's own borders or on the frontiers beyond, . . . to reproduce new versions of cultural subordination. This . . . is not the sole or inevitable consequence of postcolonialism, only the most disturbing, but it is by the same token the most dramatic reminder of the quixotism of positing a firm boundary between a postcolonial era and what follows it.

(436)

If, Buell seems to be suggesting, America can be read as the entelechy of postcolonial possibility, it also embodies the unseverable link joining the progressive "post" to the obdurate "colonial," the latter of which lies dormant in the new-world citizen, immune to the forces of anti-imperial resistance. Rather than destroying the old-world tropes of subordination, the "new-world" rhetoric of liberation and transculturation redeploys those tropes in a benignly disguised form, which carries and legitimates the force of American cultural hegemony. To engage with that force is to take on what Graham Pechey identifies as the central paradox of postcolonialism—"that it takes anticolonial struggles to produce neocolonial conditions" (152). And, it could further be argued, it takes neocolonial conditions to produce the academic *discourse* of "the postcolonial."

Throughout this paper, the word "postcolonial," like the word "America," has slipped uneasily back and forth between two different registers. Like "America," "postcolonial" has a mundane, historical sense, as well as a more ideologically charged discursive one. Postcolonial critics are generally careful to distinguish between the two, as, for example, do Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back*, noting that "postcolonial" may be used to describe "the culture affected by the imperial process," as well as a kind of *discursive* activity, "the new cross-cultural criticism," which is characterized primarily by its resistance to colonialist ideologies (2). As Arif Dirlik has pointed out, however, the critical erasure of the connection between its two fields of reference also effaces the provenance of "the postcolonial" in a strategically misleading way. For Dirlik, the post-

colonial "begins," *as a term with critical currency*, at the moment when Third World intellectuals arrived in First World academe (329). In other words, it is only through the mechanism of a global knowledge industry and its shifting human resource requirements that the critical discourse of postcolonialism comes into being. And it is a condition of that coming-into-being that the term is severed from the historical experience it putatively addresses and reconstituted by such cultural institutions as the MLA. Whatever its diverse cultural roots, "the postcolonial" has come, in its most highly prized incarnation, to bear the indelible label "Made in the U.S.A."<sup>16</sup>

"Postcolonial critics," Dirlik observes, "have engaged in valid criticism of past forms of ideological hegemony but have had little to say about its contemporary figurations" (356). To focus postcolonial critique on the US is not only to illuminate an important aspect of contemporary figurations of hegemony but also to acknowledge the conditions of that critique's production. It is finally only through the continual scrutiny of the terms of its *own* mythology, its inclusions and its exclusions, that postcolonial criticism can engage usefully with the new forms of power that are emerging at the end of the American century.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> If the goal of Lord Macaulay's infamous 1835 Minute on Education, advocating the production, through education, of "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (249), was never fully achieved, the spirit behind it proved surprisingly resilient. Narasimhaiah cites the case of the well-known Indian journalist who explained in a university lecture in the early 1970s his criterion for the choice of books to review: "he would take a quick look at the imprint of a book on the spine and unless it was published by some better known British or American firm he wouldn't touch it with a barge pole, much less consider it for review in his columns" (xvi). Dale convincingly demonstrates the operation of similar criteria in both curriculum and hiring patterns in Australia up until the mid 1970s.
- <sup>2</sup> While Hulme makes a convincing case for the relevance of the US in discussions of the postcolonial, he does not provide a detailed analysis of the theoretical implications of "including America" in the postcolonial field as it is currently constituted.
- <sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most significant exception to the prevailing tendency is the work of Edward Said, which has come increasingly to focus on the neocolonial influence of the US. Lawrence Buell takes a different tack, looking at nineteenth-century American literature in the context of its resistance to British cultural coloniza-

tion. More recently, Kaplan points out in the introduction to *Cultures of United States Imperialism* that

the absence of the United States in the postcolonial study of culture and imperialism curiously reproduces American exceptionalism from without. The United States either is absorbed into a general notion of "the West," represented by Europe, or it stands for a monolithic West. (17)

As noted below, the essays in this collection are intelligible not so much in the context of critical debates about postcolonialism and neocolonialism as they are in the context of revisionist American literary history. Nevertheless, the connection which Kaplan draws between two formerly separate fields signifies, at the very least, a growing recognition of the useful insights to be gained by viewing the United States through a postcolonial lens.

4 See in particular "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," which appeared in *Social Text* in 1986. A slightly revised version was published a year later, retitled "World Literature in an Age of Multinational Capitalism"—an interesting shift in terms of reference, which Jameson does not fully explain in the revised essay.

5 In 1985, acting on the recommendation of Gregory Newell, Reagan's Secretary of State for international organization affairs, the US withdrew from UNESCO, criticizing the organization for among other things the "irrelevant politicization of issues." Then, as if to confirm UNESCO's charges of American excesses, Newell went on to venture that

given the fact that neither culture, commerce, nor world science can proceed meaningfully without the participation of US nationals and American institutions, cooperative arrangements [through other channels] . . . will surely be activated—and on a healthy non-ideological basis (qtd. in Preston 172).

6 See Schiller's *Mass Communications and the American Empire, Communication and Cultural Domination* and "National Sovereignty and International Communication."

7 A more recent example of the US government's conception of the strategic significance of culture appears in an interview in *Business Week* with House Speaker, Newt Gingrich. In response to a question about "the most important thing you learned in your first few months of power," Gingrich says: "The key is leading the culture, not leading the government." Change culture, Gingrich says, and "everything falls in place behind it" (35).

8 For recent critiques of Schiller, see Frederick Buell's *National Culture and the New Global System* (329-32), Tomlinson's *Cultural Imperialism*, and Trend's "Nationalities, Pedagogies and Media." A third issue, slightly less relevant to the current discussion, but considered in depth by all three of the studies cited above, is the extent to which nationalism becomes an issue in discussions of cultural sovereignty. In short, "the heterogeneous and changing nature of nations raises the question of who is authorized to speak on behalf of a national identity and when" (Trend 93). If nations are not adequate representations of collective interests, then the argument against cultural imperialism as a threat to "national sovereignty" becomes suspect. Moreover, having acknowledged the emptiness of the term "nation," one can legitimately ask how an imaginary construct—the US—can exercise domination. John Tomlinson addresses the question by noting the difference between an *ontological* disunity in the imagined community of America and a *practical* integrity as a cultural force in the world. The mainstream white culture which dominates black, Hispanic and native Americans *within* the nation largely defines the face of America as a hegemonic global force. "McDonald's," writes Tomlinson,

is American culture in a way that no New York clam house, pizza parlour, Jewish deli or chop suey restaurant can ever be. So we can reasonably speak of a hegemonic American national culture as experienced from outside. . . . Clearly such aspects of *perceived* American culture may be distinguished from a more complex "reality" in which the symbolic images exist in a contested or contradictory form, or at least alongside other "versions" of American culture. These images exist as what Barthes might have called the *myth* of America. But this "mythical" nature does not mean they do not exist as a *real* cultural threat (75).

- <sup>9</sup> The construction of this kind of split risks reinscribing the image of the developing world as the site of a pure unified culture as opposed to the hybridity of the West. As Frederick Buell, following numerous postcolonial theorists, has pointed out, however, "the Third World has been incorporated into the world system for a long time. It has been 'impure' and 'penetrated' for centuries, having been shaped and reshaped by colonial circumstances for more than four hundred years" (3). Hybridity, in other words, has been a feature of life in the Third World long before it became fashionable in the West.

- <sup>10</sup> Ahmad draws a parallel between the supermarket and the similarly American innovation of New Criticism, suggesting that the

New Critical idea that each literary text constituted a self-enclosed and sufficient unit for analysis rehearsed, in a peculiarly displaced way, this ideological assertion of the supermarket that each commodity carried its own text within itself, with no reference to the origins which in fact saturate it or to the other commodity-texts which surround it. (128-29)

According to this formula, an increasing receptivity, in the US, to literature from different cultures can be read as a reflection of the same hunger for variety that is served by the growing presence, in upmarket food stores, of "house" (read "domesticated") brands of ethnic food.

- <sup>11</sup> Hall qualifies his argument about the pervasiveness of the impulse towards what he terms "the global post-modern," noting that its principles are by no means uncontested. The phenomenon he is describing, he explains,

is not a unitary regime because it is still in tension within itself with an older, embattled, more corporate, more unitary, more homogeneous conception of its own identity. That struggle is being fought out within itself. . . . in American society, in American culture, those two voices speak at one and the same time. The voice of infinite pleasurable consumption and what I call "the exotic cuisine" and, on the other hand, the voice of the moral majority, the more fundamental and traditional conservative ideas. (32)

It might be argued that the forces of the global postmodern are paradoxically strengthened by the persistence of these reactionary voices, against which the enthusiastic celebration of exotic cuisine seems positively progressive.

- <sup>12</sup> As MacCannell explains it, the tourist's conception of his or her relationship to other, more "primitive" cultures is based on a moral fantasy of the transcendence of economic exploitation. He describes the tourist's "fable" as follows:

The return on the tour . . . is to make the tourist a real hero of alterity. It is his coming into contact with and experience of the ultra-primitive which gives him his status. But this has not cost the primitives anything. Indeed, they, too, may have gained from it. Taking someone's picture doesn't cost them anything, not in any Western commercial sense, yet the picture has value. This picture has no value for the primitive, yet the tourist pays for the right to take pictures. The "primitive" receives something for nothing and benefits beyond this. Doesn't the fame of certain primitives, and even respect for them, actually increase when the tourist carries their pictures back to the West? It seems to be the most

perfect realization so far of the capitalist economists' dream of *everyone* getting rich together. ("Cannibalism" 29)

The same argument might, of course, be made for the cultural theorist.

- 13 See, for example, Abbeele's "Sightseers: The Tourist as Theorist," as well as Morris's commentary on Abbeele in "At Henry Parks Motel." While he does not employ the metaphor of tourism explicitly, Clifford's "Notes on Theory and Travel," can be read as an endorsement of a theoretical approach based on the stance of an enlightened tourist, sensitive to both the significance and the provisionality of origins and destinations. bell hooks notes some of the limitations of Clifford's argument, pointing out that "travel" is "not a word that can be easily evoked to talk about the Middle Passage, the Trail of Tears, the landing of the Chinese immigrants at Ellis Island, the forced relocation of Japanese Americans, the plight of the homeless" (343).
- 14 Some of these barriers, while not entirely within the MLA's control, effectively restrict overseas participation in the organization. For example, while overseas members are eligible to vote for executive members, they generally do not receive the ballots until after the election is over. A more significant problem for overseas members is the financial difficulty faced by many who seek to attend the annual convention. Gilman points out that some funding is available: the United States Information Agency, for example, "provides some *Americanists* from throughout the world funding to attend the convention" (3; emphasis added).
- 15 The tension at the core of the national mythology assumed palpable form during the 1996 Republican primaries in a surprising show of support for Pat Buchanan who expanded his traditional focus on the evils of homosexuality and immigration to address the issue of American jobs lost to the forces of globalization.
- 16 Brydon makes this point in an essay which also takes issue with *Time* magazine's version of postcolonialism, suggesting that in the face of the global/American thrust of this movement the now unfashionable "Commonwealth studies" may offer surprising strategies of radical resistance (104).

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