

Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt, eds. *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity and Literature*. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2000. Pp. xx, 471. \$50.00; \$26.00 pb.

The editors of *Postcolonial Theory and the United States* contend that postcolonial theory has had a significant and will eventually have an even more significant and productive role in U.S. ethnic studies. On the face of it, it is a reasonable contention. It would seem almost natural for scholars working on the literatures produced by African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latino/a and Chicano/a Americans to find at least a source of inspiration if not actual critical paradigms in that body of writing about the intellectual conditions of peoples in other countries emerging from a state of exploitation into a state of self-assertion. Living as we are in a “transnational” moment, when the sources of our identities and subjectivities are diasporic and hybrid rather than parochial and regional, postcolonial theory should provide an international filter for viewing domestic arrangements anew. The essays in this volume demonstrate both the potential and the pitfalls in that project, and by “pitfalls” I mean not the inherent dangers of using postcolonial theory to read ethnic U.S. literatures but the reasonable resistance some critics express about the costs of doing so.

One of the reasons simply has to do with the fact that the term “postcolonial” has sometimes been used so pervasively to describe any national or subnational group that it loses the oppositional political force it used to wield when it was used to describe that more limited group of Asian and African countries that had been colonized by European nations. Not only have relatively affluent countries like Canada and Australia been called postcolonial (and in fact given us many of the finest theorists of postcoloniality), but some intellectuals go so far as to call even imperialist America a postcolonial country. The strategy of referring to any sort of political inequity as “colonization” is not altogether new and not always wise. In 1969, for instance, Huey P. Newton, the leader of the Black Panther Party, found so compelling the force of this kind of logic that he pronounced not only African Americans and other minority groups to be colonized but that the “the whole American people are colonized . . . and even more so than the people in those developing countries where the militaries operate” (Newton 69). The point Newton is trying to make—that the capitalist elite profit from the exploitation of the masses—is a good one. The strategy he employs to make it—mischaracterizing the form of exploitation and discounting the colonization of actually colonized countries—is not. More recently, and with a rather different agenda,

Walter Benn Michaels analyzes the racist work of Thomas Dixon within a postcolonial paradigm (Dixon is the author of the novel *The Clansman*, which D.W. Griffiths would make into the movie *Birth of a Nation*).

For whatever reasons they do it, political, playful, or perverse, critics' extensive use of the term "postcolonial" has meant that what used to be a specific political condition of particular nations has become essentially an intellectual construct. Indeed, using Arif Dirlik's terms, we can say that for most academics "postcolonial" is more meaningful as a definition of a "discourse" informed by "the epistemological and psychic orientations" that are the products of a colonized status than a "literal description of conditions in formerly colonial societies" (Dirlik 348). As scholars like Linda Hutcheon and Anne McClintock have pointed out, there is an inherent problem in this widespread misuse of "postcolonial," and one need not be a committed dialectical materialist to be skeptical of this abstraction from concrete to intellectual conditions.

The essayists in the volume who write on Native American literature most forcefully remind us of the danger of forgetting those concrete conditions. In one essay, Jana Sequoya Magdaleno subtly reminds us that the "category of Native American fiction may be clarified by placing it within the theoretical framework of colonial discourse" (292), while in another Arnold Krupat less subtly declares that Native American literatures cannot be classified as postcolonial because "there is not yet a 'post-' to the colonial status of Native Americans" (73). In both of these essays, though, the essayists draw out the potentials in postcolonial theory for their chosen subjects. Krupat, for instance, provides an astute reading of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* as an example of a Native American author who lives in a postcolonial world but writes within a colonial context.

One of the essayists in the volume addresses another danger in the application of the body of postcolonial theory to the body of ethnic American literature, that is the belief that these might be separate bodies of writing. Kenneth Mostern vigorously challenges the supposed primacy of postcolonial theorizing by arguing that the key terms and figures and ideas of that theorizing (represented by Homi Bhabha) are appropriated from W.E.B. Du Bois (258-76). Again, though, following his vigorous critique, Mostern then attempts to see how serviceable postcolonial theory might be by considering in what ways postcoloniality works as a class category.

Indeed, most of the essays in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States* creatively and suggestively attempt to situate their readings of the ethnic literatures of the United States in terms of the keywords and figures postcolonial theorists have given us—"nativism," "mimicry," and, the most favored

term, “hybridity.” In most of the essays, however, we see not a servile borrowing of theoretical concepts to give a patina of sophistication to readings of literary texts; we see a genuinely critical engagement with the terms and ideas. Bruce Simon, for example, is explicit in taking on the ways “hybridity” in the face of its “overriding emphasis on culture” can occlude the economics and politics that give substance and pain to the color line (414). In both their essays, Carla Peterson and Anne Fleischmann implicitly do the same, the first analyzing how “hybridity serves . . . to resist the commodification of the African-American literary text” in the 1850s (182), while the second sees the value of adapting “hybridity” in her reading of early-twentieth century legal and literary texts as a useful challenge to the manichean allegory of race in American thinking (250, 244).

Although almost all the articles in this collection are reprinted from other sources, the editors’ opening essay is original in every sense of the term. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt give a lucid overview of the origins and key developments in postcolonial theory, and a helpful analysis of how postcolonial theory draws on and is connected to transnational, diasporic, immigration, feminist, and whiteness studies. The overall trajectory of their argument is that of the two salient intellectual positions in U.S. ethnic studies since the 1960s – the “postethnicity” school and the “borders” school—the latter is significantly more progressive, imaginative, and able to generate the kinds of new paradigms that will produce critical work that is equally progressive and imaginative. In American cultural studies, they enthusiastically conclude, “the main problem of the twenty-first century will be the problem of the *border-lines*,” and the greatest source of inspiration for those who enroll in the borders school is likely to be postcolonial theory (44). The essays they have selected for this volume show that they could well be right.

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Works Cited

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C.J. W. L. Wee. *Culture, Empire, and the Question of Being Modern*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2003. Pp. xviii, 231. \$26.95 USD.

Culture, Empire, and the Question of Being Modern is an important study that makes a significant contribution to the various discourses addressing the relationship between centre and margin, occident and orient, and, most obviously, the relationship between the modern and the primitive. Wee's project is ambitious in its effort to reverse the flow of post-imperial discourse, to focus upon the impact of the margin on the centre, the primitive on the "civilized." His founding assumption is that modernity is itself a fractured and contested territory, not a straightforward good, in the eyes of the imperial centre, that the "civilizing" project of imperialism is not immune to debilitating doubts about the merits of the very civilization imperialism exports. In Wee's view, these doubts have not been adequately addressed, and, instead, they have been conveniently recast in the simple terms of an unreflective, arrogant colonizer and a helplessly malleable colonized. He maintains that "the general focus [of the discourse of imperial modernity] has been too much on how the colonized have their identities and cultures reinscribed by the more advanced colonizer, on how the colonizer gains a superiority complex" (xi) and not enough on how the presence of the colonized (both in terms of a primitive subjectivity and a frontier landscape) might reinscribe the colonizer's vision of western culture. Addressing the work of Charles Kingsley, Rudyard Kipling, T.S. Eliot, and V.S. Naipaul, Wee focuses on the English imperial centre and wonders, "why the world's first modern industrialized society desires what it conceives to be the 'primitive' and the rural?" (xi), or, put another way, "why does a triumphant modernity breed a longing for tradition?" (198).

These are good questions, and Wee goes a long way toward answering them. He posits a complex set of "links between culture, modernity, nationalism, colonial masculinity, and notions of the primitive as they pertain to a national imperialism with a desire for re-creating an organic homeland" (2). Essentially, Wee argues that the colonial frontier acts as a dominant trope for cultural unity and spiritual and physical strength at a time when notions of "true" English masculinity are/were slipping away at home. While this is, in some ways, simply a re-formulation of well-established forms of colo-