

THE OTHER IS ONESELF. AN EXPANSIVE DEFINITION OF POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY

DAVID T. LOHREY*

ABSTRACT. This paper examines the relationship between war and postcolonial identity in works by a range of African and American writers of 20th century fiction. This inquiry focuses on 'literature of the displaced author', as expressed in fictional writings which show the ways personal trauma are reflective of collective experience. It explores the ways a number of indicative postcolonial writers have presented psychological and political consequences of postwar trauma across generations. It will analyze different forms of violence that animate the genealogy of the postcolonial past and how they impact on the present and, by doing so, seek to explore ways the geography of postcoloniality can be expanded. It explores the relationship between imperialism and totalitarianism as it is manifested in the British, Nazi and American empires of the last two centuries; it suggests continuities into the twenty-first. It argues that World War I and World War II have had a profound impact on shaping the way life has been lived as seen in work by African writers such as J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, and Doris Lessing, and Americans, such as Saul Bellow, Cormac McCarthy, and Philip Roth. Through the critical writings of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said and W. G. Sebald to name a few, my thesis establishes the centrality of disorder to the formation of postcolonial identity. My study develops a method for reading canonical texts of postcolonial writers as narratives of protest, transgression, and regeneration, and it seeks to produce an understanding of the problems of fictionalizing complex relations of class, sexuality, gender and race in the context of upheaval.

KEY WORDS: imperialism, postcolonial, postwar, totalitarianism, trauma

Oh that's how it is people go all over, you never hear what's with them, these days, it's let's try this place let's try that and you never know they's alive or dead, my brothers gone off to Cape Town they don't know who they are anymore... so where you from?

(Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and other stories*, 2007: 15)

This paper traces the struggle to survive the reach of empire: living on the frontier, surviving internment, fleeing urban violence. Modes of resistance, expressions of transgression, however tentative and frustrated, and occasional acts of rebellion and escape reveal across geographic boundaries moments of willful rejection of imperial hegemony. Diasporic dislocations and temporary habitations have been shown to occasion public and domestic

* DAVID T. LOHREY (PhD) is Lecturer in English at Lakeland College in Tokyo, Japan. His interests include political theory, Holocaust studies, and contemporary novelists, such as André Brink, J. M. Coetzee, and Philip Roth. Email: lohr_burg@hotmail.com.

transgressions. Instances of personal growth as seen in Gordimer's fiction can be compared to displays of collapse. Apolitical resignation can be suggestively juxtaposed with the writings of others in which one finds moments of ritualized assertion and ceremonies of resistance.

What post-colonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Achille Mbembe, and Elleke Boehmer make clear is that the Holocaust does not belong to the past. Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism and its origins forbids the sort of reduction that wants to make the Holocaust part of some sort of culture of memory. The resonances of traumatic memory are not to be dismissed; the significance of the events of the past lies in the ways they continue to inform the present. The precondition of totalitarianism described by Arendt (1964) as "world alienation" remains operative; nothing illustrates this sense of mass helplessness better than the specter of nuclear war. What has emerged in recent decades, however, is the threat of total domination. Annihilation has replaced marginalization and oppression as the potential consequence of global conflict. The recent American "war against terror" has, according to Susan Sontag, called forth "the dangerous, lobotomizing notion of endless war" (2007: 123). Theodor Adorno describes a glimpse of what his generation witnessed and, what he warns, threatens ours:

Cinema newsreel: the invasion of the Marianas, including Guam. The impression is not of battles, but of civil engineering and blasting operations undertaken with immeasurably intensified vehemence, also of "fumigation", insect-extermination on a terrestrial scale (Adorno, 2006: 56).

This paper claims that those who "bear witness" help define the space that "constitutes", according to Bhabha, "the memory and the moral of the event as a narrative, a disposition to cultural communality, a form of social and psychic identification" (1994: 349). The Holocaust may very well be "a powerful prism", as Andreas Huyssen points out, "through which we may look at other instances of genocide" (2003: 14). But such ways of speaking suggest that the Holocaust is an event of the past now to be made use of, rather than a political reality that has permanently shaped our lives. Affording to those who "bear witness", Bhabha states, a full hearing "reinscribes" the "lessons of the past' into the very textuality of the present that determines both the identification with, and the interrogation of, modernity..." (Bhabha, 1994: 354).

Events have left one estranged from modernity in so far as its justification of hierarchy and racial supremacy informs human degradation and domination. Adorno, Sheldon Wolin and Arendt show how new ways of organizing human relations were introduced throughout the 20th century that continue to be put into practice. If, as Arendt makes clear, war is an equalizer, the anonymous mass grows increasingly less able to perpetuate "the imaginaries

of sovereignty” that make Othering reflexive (Mbembe, 2003: 18). The prospect of global conflagration, therefore, presents a challenge to traditional notions of the Other. It is recognized that global war would leave few survivors and, as the saying goes, the living would envy the dead... in the aftermath of nuclear holocaust. The point is that a vital break has occurred in our traditional conception of the Other as one who inevitably poses a threat (Mbembe, 2003: 18). This paper recognizes the emergence of a transnational culture in which the Other can no longer be distinguished from oneself.

Such questions recall Rayment’s preoccupation in Coetzee’s *Slow Man* (2006): In an increasingly transnational culture, how does one locate one’s culture? Disparate events—the Amritsar massacre (1919), Katyn Forest (1940) or My Lai (1968)—can, of course, be studied both in isolation and in their broader contexts. Although Arendt, George Steiner, and Mbembe have focused on those pertaining to Nazism and the Holocaust, their significance for postcolonial studies has been rarely emphasized. These events were in fact of such signal moment that their long-term consequences can be seen as multi-generational and continue to shape the postcolonial world in ways often only narrowly conceived (Johnson & Poddar, 2005).

It is not only a matter for cultural critics such as W. G. Sebald and Steiner who see the centrality of war atrocity; writers such as Doris Lessing, Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee create characters whose memories and experiences were shaped by war. These are writers of widely diverse backgrounds whose narratives nonetheless display converging, trans-generational memories. It is in recognition of Sebald’s moral claims that one must consider broadening one’s outline. His argument, which I find persuasive, is that ‘our inner lives have their background and origin in collective social history’ invites a redefinition of the postcolonial (2004: 184). It can be demonstrated that new alignments of comparison are dictated by pervasive thematic similarities that should be accorded significance. Where national contexts might invite narrowing, similarities of experience and response have called for expansion.

It is not only through the discrete examination of individuals that the weight of 20th century embattlement can be measured; it is rather the accrual of war experience, through war-fatigue and cultural exhaustion that informs postcolonial frameworks. Commonalities and similarities can be traced among disparate loci of upheaval. Steiner (1971) and Mbembe (2003) concur in their insistence on making war-remembrance central to understanding culture formation. “Yet the barbarism which we have undergone reflects, at numerous and precise points, the culture which it sprang from and set out to desecrate” (Steiner, 1971: 30). If one could realistically claim that the threat to human existence belonged to the past, these matters would be best left to the expertise of historians; that the potential for the extermination of entire

peoples exists makes understanding its causes and purposes vital to the post-colonial project.

It is in this connection that one is reminded of the prescriptive impulse in the postcolonial project of some authors, especially those who conceive of a radical regenerative project that sees in totalitarianism a living threat. Elizabeth Costello in Coetzee's novel of the same name suggestively argues that the machinery of industrial meat production is to be compared to the butchery of the Third Reich (2003: 63). Understood in this way, and taking seriously Hannah Arendt's warning against modes of domination as an ever-possible way for society to organize itself, Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Ruthford skillfully articulate why the postcolonial resists narrowing:

What one must remember is that fulfilment is a *ceaseless* task of the psyche; that *identity is part of an infinite movement* [my emphasis], that one can only come into a dialogue with the past and future, a dialogue which is necessary, if one ceases to invest in a single (and therefore latent totalitarian) identity. If one invests in identity one locks oneself in an immobile horizon; totalitarian identity was the extreme function of the Nazis. One must be prepared to participate in the immense and specific challenges of a wider community, to participate in what Wilson Harris calls the "complex creativity involved in the 'digestion' and 'liberation' of contrasting spaces" (2006: 142).

Such a challenge is central as I see it to the postcolonial project. Devadas and Prentice embrace this challenge: "Postcolonial critique remains productive to the extent that it brings its commitment to the analysis of all violent sovereignties that have followed colonialism's modern movement" (2007: 3).

The case for this is reinforced by the reality of the Great War. The war veteran is not easily assimilated. Veterans of all stripes often carry the burden of repudiating the forces that seek to uphold a vision of empire. The fears and anxieties experienced by veterans, not to say physical traumas suffered, undermine confidence in authority. Soldiers are among the first to turn their backs on imperial ideology, as are women. As shown to be true of Doris Lessing's memories of living with her war-crippled father, the domestic scenes are war-haunted, frequently with women left to carry the burden of nursing wounded men back to life. Frequently, the soldiers' family members are left wounded in the process by the strain and stress of living with embittered, less than articulate companions. Lessing came to see after many years that the Great War had been the defining event of both her parents' lives. Her female protagonists are scarred by neglect and socially constricting values, constraints against female self-definition, but she never allows it to be forgotten that the source of their despair was the Great War (Lessing, 2008: 170). Hers is a vision shaped by her father's despair.

What one finds within the range of writings I have considered is a concern for personal and social identity. It is the contention of this study that writers frequently do reinforce hegemonic ideologies but they do not always do so. Margery Fee (2006) points out this limitation in Said's conception of an imperialist intellectual dynamic. There is more room for ambiguity and complexity on all sides of the dominant ideology than Said's "consolidated vision" seems to embrace. Fee rightly sees Bhabha as seeking to articulate a more fluid interpretive language:

It is not possible simply to assume that a work written by an 'Other' (however defined), even a politicized Other, will have freed itself from the dominant ideology. Homi Bhabha says 'there is always, in Said, the suggestion that colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the coloniser, which is an historical and theoretical simplification' (Fee, 2006: 171).

In his essay 'Reflections on Exile' Said writes: "Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees" (Said, 1994: 173). On the face of it, this seems like one of those statements that cuts to the heart of the matter. Certainly, the writers and artists are there to back up such a claim. Said, however, says this with more than mere numbers in mind. He is seeking to identify a kind of modern sensibility, and it would seem easy enough to locate. Trans-nationality is certainly a key to defining and recognizing contemporary sensibilities, whether they are found among Europeans ruined by the brutality of modern wars or among first and second generation immigrants, refugees, and exiles who move ambivalently between two or more worlds. Said would be right had he said that writers in the 20th century are forced to become 'travel' writers, while insisting, clearly, on the profound differences between forced exile and leisure travel. Exile may be described as a psychological uprooting, but perhaps what is lost is less disturbing when one has belonged through class to a transnational order. As Andrew Smith points out:

Without the right circumstances of birth or bank account the majority of the world's population remain intractably in place and very distant from the celebration of a newly mobile, hybrid order. Because our world is marked by such disparities—because travel is price-tagged like any other commodity—migration can involve forms of domination as well as liberation and can give rise to blinkered vision as well as epiphanies (Smith, 2004: 246).

It is arguable that Bhabha's sense of the negotiated voice communicating from this "third" space is the inevitable voice of the writer who has lost his or her home and experienced the cultural conditions of diaspora. Such voices as Lessing's and Gordimer's may articulate colonial interests, but such expressions need not be part of the "consolidated" vision found by Said; they

may be said instead to express Bhabha's notion of a 'hybrid' voice born of the circumstance of exile, colonial settlement or expatriation. In *The Location of Culture* he expresses his understanding of this fluid by-play whereby writing is to be understood as much as a negotiation as a description:

The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilised in the passage through a Third space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot "in itself" be conscious (Bhabha, 1994: 36).

As has been shown, however, the location of that 'true home' remains in doubt. The postcolonial identity instead remains trapped in conditions best described as Kafkaesque. Zadie Smith says, "These days we all find our anterior legs flailing before us. We're all insects, all *Ungeziefer*, now" (2008: 17). Smith identifies that most disturbing of modern realizations, namely, the recognition that the drama of the individual has ended. The individual is nothing. This threat is addressed by Bhabha who warns that 'in the renaming of modernity' one must guard against 'the fact that the hegemonic structures of power are maintained in a position of authority' (1994: 347). While Adorno's attention was drawn to the ordeal of soldiers dying in battle without glory, as insects, the potential for sinking into oblivion without recognition preoccupies Milan Kundera: "Hell (hell on earth) is not tragic; what's hell is horror that has not a trace of the tragic" (2008: 115).

It is a time, Adorno argues, that makes the idea of the home increasingly obsolete because, although it may offer solace, it cannot provide protection: "There is no remedy but steadfast diagnosis of oneself and others, the attempt, through awareness, if not to escape doom, at least to rob it of its dreadful violence, that of blindness" (2005: 33). Unlike Said, who seems in some ways preoccupied with the experience of loss and with what has been lost, Bhabha and others, echoing Adorno, are determined to see what has been and can be gained even with the recognition that what remains can be described as "a kingdom of bones" (Kadare, 2000: 61).

What distinguishes Said's and Bhabha's points of view is their understanding of the past. Said describes well the emotional laceration afflicted on intellectuals torn from their cultural heritage, left adrift in foreign lands, forced to learn new languages and to adjust, as he had to do in the United States. Rightly, he places the exile at the center of the age, without, perhaps, taking proper care to make the important distinctions offered by Chelva Kanaganayakam between the exile, expatriate, refugee, and immigrant (1996: 202). Be that as it may, like Hannah Arendt, Said locates the terrible events of the 20th century at the center of what it means to talk about culture in our time.

This is crucial and a central concern of his. What he cannot seem to bring himself to admit is that the cultures that were lost created the conflicts that bore them away. Said's definition of the exile seems not to be mitigated by an appreciation for the sense of loss that may be imbedded in the culture left behind "in this era of world wars, deportations, and mass exterminations" (Said, 2000: 183).

On the other hand, Said's high praise for the writings of Theodor Adorno suggests an ambivalence that is worth considering. He quotes from what he calls Adorno's "masterwork", *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*:

[T]he house is past. The bombings of European cities, as well as the labour and concentration camps, merely precede as executors, with what the immanent development of technology had long decided was to be the fate of houses. These are now good only to be thrown away like old food cans (1994: 184).

This is not far from what Bhabha sees and properly places this recognition at the center of his definition of postcolonialism:

The time for "assimilating" minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has dramatically passed. The very language of cultural community needs to be rethought from a postcolonial perspective, in a move similar to the profound shift in the language of sexuality, the self and cultural community, effected by feminists in the 1970s and the gay community in the 1980s (1994: 251).

From this sense of homelessness, Bhabha finds it possible to speak beyond despair. The loss does not function as an obstacle to renewal. Bhabha argues that it is not that culture is lost, but that it is found on the grounds of historical trauma:

The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognise themselves through their projections of "otherness". Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonised, or political refugees—these borders and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature (1994:17).

Part of this project entails identity formation (Bhabha, 1994: 63). There is tension between the desire to break with one's past and the urge to restore. There may be the sense that nothing is left, or that one has left everything behind, for better or for worse.

In numerous passages taken from the works of Lessing, Gordimer and Coetzee, one sees the clash between rival expectations, resulting in responses ranging from disappointment to madness, as in the case of Lessing's Mary Turner, her protagonist in *The Grass Is Singing*. In these exchanges, what

emerges is a glimpse into the inner turmoil wrought by relationships created by imperial associations based on social barriers, those created by class, race or hierarchy. These texts give evidence of the sort of malaise described by Aimé Césaire as an ineluctable part of colonialism:

What am I driving at? At this idea: that no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization. A civilization that is morally diseased, that irresistibly, progressing from one consequence to another, one repudiation to another, calls for its Hitler, I mean its punishment (1972: 4).

Césaire connects the barbarities of colonialism to the brutalities of Europe's twentieth century wars and beyond to America's continuous use of military force to maintain its global power. His insight is that the imperial enterprise leads eventually to barbarism at home: "Colonization: bridgehead in a campaign to civilize barbarism, from which there may emerge at any moment the negation of civilization, pure and simple" (1972: 3). This is the meaning of the Swede's confrontation with his daughter; in *American Pastoral* Roth skillfully essays the consequence of a war brought home and the burdens heaped on a society that thought it could get away with murder. This is, finally, the reverberation of the quest for imperial expansion, guided by extinction theory and the premise of cultural superiority. The ultimate repercussion is to be found in what John Edgar Wideman, Cormac McCarthy and Don DeLillo set forth, namely, the end of the world.

Bellow and Roth are fascinating examples of writers in the postwar years whose experiences reflect mentalities formed within the orbit of the American empire and the juggernaut of the Cold War. Bellow's Henderson searches for a way to find himself in a postwar environment, where the entitlement and triumph of battle no longer have a place. He rebels against the expectations and oppressions of suburban domesticity, but has nowhere to turn, save for the author's imagined Africa. His adventure is not an escape but a journey of discovery, through which he acknowledges responsibility. He learns to face and admit complicity; he traces the source of his guilt to himself. Roth's hero also has nowhere else to turn, as the world around him falls apart. The war he and his generation conspired to forget or to remember in silence did not prepare him for the war his daughter and her generation chose to bring home.

Roth and McCarthy, however, describe worlds from which they both emotionally and intellectually recoil. Theirs is not a search for flux, but an effort to retreat from the happenings that undermine stability and sanity. Roth and McCarthy create protagonists who are faced with silent menaces. Roth's daughter, a stutterer, rebels by refusing to speak to her father, the Swede.

Eventually, her injuries rob her of the ability to speak coherently. McCarthy's protagonists in *The Road* seek to survive in a silent world, threatened by faceless marauders, cannibals in some instances, who eventually succeed in killing the father. Roth's daughter becomes a kind of lone Other, sporting the urban demeanor and looks of the MOVE members described by Wideman. The Swede finally finds her, a virtual mute, a victim of a terrible sexual assault that left her barely alive and covered in excrement. She is described as living alone under a highway crossing, made vulnerable to the sort of victimization that the MOVE members experienced at the hands of the Philadelphia police.

The political order that devised the machinery of death that annihilated an entire generation in the trenches of World War I had had years of practice in the colonies. It was those experiences that had hardened and equipped that society for the brutalities to come, only this time to be turned against its own people. These principles and capacities were to be extended by the Germans against the peoples of Eastern Europe, with special attention given to the annihilation of the Jews. By addressing the Nazi atrocities and insisting on seeing them as the culmination of colonial logic, Césaire gives coherence to what otherwise might be forgotten as disparate incoherent events, or memorialized for their uniqueness.

What these well-known incidents and events make clear is that the distinction between colonizer and colonized had become irrelevant. The brutalization and dehumanization had become systematic. These writers participate in a project committed to giving voice to those for whom identity is related to the act of historical recovery. These writers are engaged in a kind of struggle against amnesia. This is true of Gordimer and Coetzee as well. The pounding hoofs of the Cossacks reverberate through the writings of Gordimer, at once a reminder of her Lithuanian heritage, and of the connection between South African apartheid and European genocide. Theirs is an exercise in retrieval and recuperation, as a response to cultural fragmentation. Such writers are alert to cultural genocide, if not as physical extermination, then as dilution. They give voice through fiction to Césaire's despairing thought:

The Indians massacred, the Muslim world defiled and perverted for a good century, the Negro world disqualified, mighty voices stilled forever, homes scattered to the wind, all this wreckage, all this waste, humanity reduced to a monologue (1972: 19).

One looks for an answer to the question of how it is that one can be expected to live with the knowledge of what has been allowed to occur, while facing the prospect of being a witness to or being victimized by further acts of barbarism. There may be divergent explanations, but Bhabha and Said are concerned with what it means for a so-called civilization to have destroyed what

it means for a people to have a home. Gordimer and Coetzee are novelists whose works describe transformations of the kind now taking place around the world in response to the destruction of war. They participate in a project devoted to making life humanly possible in the context of radical upheaval. These writers look to ways of picking up the pieces, but also of making something valuable out of what might seem to be meaningless fragments. Isidore Diala (2000) finds opportunities for recovery and reconciliation in recent post-apartheid writings, particularly those of Gordimer and Coetzee (68). What I have argued is that what has been forged in South Africa can be applied beyond its borders. Trauma can be healed and, if Adorno is right, can be transformative. Reconciliation is one path but, as Sebald makes clear, so is accusation and ‘the unremitting denunciation of injustice’ (2004: 157).

This inquiry has examined literature of writers at the periphery of empire who have experienced war in the 20th century and suffered its consequences. These writers show collective preoccupations with cross-cultural and transnational experiences expressed in the fictional writings of European, American, and African writers. Displacement and estrangement are central themes in the literary works analyzed here, along with social class and class awareness. As James Clifford puts it, “Not everyone is equally on the move” (2006: 182). What emerges is a realization that the experiences of disparate peoples cannot be categorized easily, because in an increasingly contingent world the provisional has replaced the permanent (Said, 2000: 185). The challenge, then, is to search for a balance between yearning and memory; this is what remains crucial to Bhabha’s notion of “inbetweenness” (Clifford, 2006: 157).

What remains crucial to the postcolonial project is the recognition that none has escaped unscathed from the century’s upheavals. R. Radhakrishnan argues that one is not merely speaking of adjustments but of alignments, of commitments:

The challenge theorists face, particularly when they are committed to addressing the collective human condition, is that of critical alignment: how to line up the coordinates of their theoretical model with the contradictory, heterogeneous, and contingent whereabouts of life, existence, reality (2010: 794).

Furthermore, it is Kwame Anthony Appiah’s contention that the reader participates in the construction, that neither the act of writing nor the act of reading is apolitical:

what is necessary to read novels across gaps of space, time, and experience is the capacity to follow a narrative and conjure a world; and that, it turns out, there are people everywhere more than willing to do (Appiah, 2001: 224-25).

This is what binds the colonized and the colonizer and, therefore, points to what Sue Kossew (2000) calls “the possibility of recovery”. The postcolonial project is not immune to the promise of belonging and, by implication, of excluding. This is why critics like Sara Suleri (2006) find it necessary to argue for a way of seeing things that eschews binaries that not only violate complexities but also offer complacencies. Strategies of thought that promise exemption from the consequences of what the 20th century has wrought are to be avoided. “Consummate inhumanity”, to use Adorno’s apt phrase, describes what has taken place (2005: 56). A perhaps even “bloodier age” may come (Gordimer, 1988: 284). Plenty Coups and the Crow leaders were forced by circumstances to forge a new way of looking at things in the face of total cultural extinction. Their challenge, Jonathan Lear (2006) argues, was to acknowledge what had befallen them by sorting out the relationship between Self and Other. “One needs to recognize the destruction that has occurred if one is to move beyond it” (152). This paper seeks to contribute to a comparable challenge. Given fiction’s capacity to deal with what we call ‘actuality’ and to fictionalize its implications, one strives to see patterns of continuity based on the past. The future must remain unknown, but through acknowledgment of shared experience the tension between Self and Other may be diminished.

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