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Kant We Hegel Our Way Out of This? The Problem of People in Postcolonial Studies

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Postcolonial theory has a people problem. By this, I do not mean to suggest those who practice, write, or otherwise espouse a postcolonial perspective on cultural affairs are somehow tricky, obtuse, or otherwise problematic to deal with in professional settings. Even if this were the case, the solution to the deficiencies in postcolonial theory most certainly does not lie in the mandatory installation of the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation "Genuine People Personality" (Adams 95) software on every humanities department's server the world over. Instead, I am unabashedly suggesting that postcolonial theoreticians' overemphasis on people as the site of analysis lies at the heart of the limitations of the field's key terms, epistemological boundaries, and approach to understanding phenomena as a whole. Indeed, if postcolonial theory and its related concepts and methods are to have any intellectual purchase, then it is time to abandon its anthropocentric approach to explaining how the world works in favor of perspectives which include non-human entities in colonial processes.

The goals of postcolonial practice occupy several intellectual nodes. One likely comes in the identification of the impact on the psyche and society of those people who suffer under the weight of the colonial project. A second is a means of demonstrating how human knowledge and the institutions it produces has been constructed to create a racist, gendered, and other exploitive architectures to justify and sustain patterns of oppression. A third occurs around communicating the stories of humans before contact and colonization, their collective trauma and resistance to occupation, so that they may liberate themselves to live in freedom in particular cultural conjunctures. What unites these goals are both their evident anthropocentric character and the aims of shifting the locus of analysis from inside the minds of characters in the colonial drama to the human subject positions and collectivities which play out in social and cultural life. Concerns about the colonization of humans were rightly on the minds of postcolonial thinkers during the 20th century. Roughly one-third of all humans alive at the middle of the 20th century lived in non-self governing territories; diplomatic speak for a colony, a mandate, a protectorate, or some other entity which lacked state sovereignty. The onset of the Cold War, the withdrawal from imperial possessions as the global balance of state power shifted, the emergence of wars of national liberation, and the politics of various United Nations organs, and the proliferation of capitalism all worked to create a context for seeing the value of changing the dynamics of political colonization around the world. For postcolonial academics, whose published work came to the party a full generation (Eagleton 204-206) after the formal processes of political decolonization began, their concerns centered mainly on cultural interpretations of identity. This work is done to not only voice, explain and lay blame in the history of colonial relations, but also to point towards ways in which colonial logics, in varying degrees of Derridean-ness, can be deconstructed. This sort of postcolonial analysis fails to acknowledge that colonialism extends beyond the narrow frame of political colonialism, regardless of the suspension of the UN Trusteeship Council's work in 1994.

The fluid definition of postcoloniality reflects the apparent fact the term 'postcolonial' has severe limitations. Loomba rightly situates the very language of postcolonial studies, arguing that the word 'postcolonial' itself is only useful "with caution and qualification" and that if divorced from specific historical circumstances, "postcoloniality cannot be meaningfully investigated, and instead, the term begins to obscure the very relations of domination it seeks to uncover." (16) In turn, Hardt and Negri see postcolonial thought, particularly Bhabha's binary-busting mechanism of hybridity, as epiphenomenal of the logics of power and Empire. (145-146) These critiques point to another obvious fact: the colonial condition has not ended. Colonialism, neo or otherwise, is not merely or even primarily about the oppression of people. Imperial projects are ontologically materialist in its exploitation of territory through settlement, resources through extraction, surplus value through labor, and profit through finance. In other words, understanding colonialism means examining exploitive relationships between things; a perspective that does not dismiss humans, but indeed dissenters them from the analysis. In the same way that Roy (54) suggests that an exclusive focus on human rights is a camera obscura of contemporary conflict which ignores the vital, fundamental importance of territorial appropriation and resource extraction, so too does postcolonial theory distract of a richer understanding and resistance to the colonial project as a whole by focusing on the epiphenomena of humanity through concepts such as subalternity, the native informant, and hybridity which not only foreclose a sophisticated understanding of human social affairs, but offer a nihilistic and narrow reading of life itself.

There are solutions to the people-based problems of postcolonial theory. Emerging transdisciplinary scholarship focus attention on how the myriad of non-human forms of life, as well as objects themselves, shape and, are shaped by colonial processes. In turn, theoretical and philosophical debates over "cenes" and the ontology of things point to how holistic work on colonialism necessitates the inclusion of non-human entities to produce robust analyses. Postcolonial theory may have its roots in the study of human affairs, but humans are not the only agents or objects that make up imperial practices; thus the study of colonialism should, therefore, continue to expand to reflect these realities.

The Problem of People

People are a problem in postcolonial theory on at least two levels. First, analyses that focus attention wholly on humans foreclose how colonialism influences other forms of life, as well objects, things, and other aspects of the physical world. People-centered approaches not only limits the field of colonialism's impact on culture but also miss how material culture can work to sustain and expand colonial projects. Anthropocentric thinking emerges in the precursors and foundational work of postcolonial thought. Cesaire, Fanon, and Memmi all root their analysis of colonial conditions in varying degrees of psychoanalytic thinking. Indeed, it is the emergence, power, and durability of psychoanalysis which not only directly impacted early postcolonial theorists —Fanon, for example, was trained as a psychologist –but speak to what has become an emblematic feature of the humanities; the conceptual and theoretical borrowing from other intellectual disciplines in order to find novel ways to study humans. Digressing into the various critiques of each of these psychological schools would be beside the point at this juncture, although there is something delicious in thinking about Deleuze and Guattari's critique of psychoanalysis as, "a capitalist disorder." (Crews 176) Rather, the fact that postcolonial theory latched onto and then extended ideas which were oriented exclusively towards thinking about people, and oppressed people, in particular, was the first act in narrowing the aperture of postcolonial thought for the remainder of the century. The intertwining of psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory is not surprising, for psychoanalysis may be an emancipatory schema committed to freeing, "human beings from what frustrates their fulfillment and well being." (Eagleton 166) Liberating oneself from slavery, servitude, or the precariat class under the weight of colonialism certainly seems like a worthwhile endeavor for psychoanalytic thinking.

Cesaire may root his work in Marxist analysis, yet the language he employs, "First we must study how colonization works to decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the truest sense of the word" (35) is nothing short of anthropocentric. Cesaire's suggestion that "no one colonizes innocently," (39) is an intelligent rebuttal to attempts to negate human complicity in colonization – perhaps an earlier, more poetic version of Goldhagen's provocative thesis on 'ordinary' Germans during the Second World War. While Cesaire works to frame colonialism in economically imperial terms, his argument about both mental states of colonizer and colonized, the latter often dehumanized through the racial component of colonialism, reaffirms that he sees the colonial project as one that lies exclusively in the world of human affairs. In the same vein, Memmi articulates his analysis of colonialism in wonderfully parsimonious terms, "the best possible definition of a colony: a place where one earns more and spends less." (4)

In a similar vein, Fanon's works rehumanize the racialized construction of blackness in the face of white supremacy, "I start suffering from not being a white man insofar as the white man discriminates against me; turns me into a colonzes subject; robs me of any value or originality; tells me I am a parasite in the world, that I should toe the line of the white world as quickly as possible , and that we are brute beasts, that we are walking manure, a hideous forerunner of tender cane and silky cotton, that I have no place in this world." (78) For Fanon, the task of his critique is to expose how the racism that is inherent to colonialism makes him something other than a human, "I am an object among other objects." (89) But what if we all are objects? What if, rather than setting up human-centric hierarchies, we think about the structures and impact of all objects within particular systems? By framing his opposition to colonialism as a project of rehumanization, Fanon closes off broader, more accurate ways of reading and resisting colonialism, by privileging human existence over those very beasts abused under colonization.

Memmi spends chapter after chapter working through the positionality of the hypothetical colonizer and colonized person, looking to unpack the relationship between these protagonists, intertwined in the tragedy of colonialism. Memmi invokes adjectives such as "disfigurement," (147) "annihilation,"(151) and "liberation" (152) to describe the personal outcomes of this

relationship. Memmi hints at a broader understanding of the colonial frame but then pulls back towards his exclusively human analysis, “Colonization is, above all, economic and political exploitation. If the colonized is eliminated, the colony becomes a country like any other, and who then will be exploited?” (149) Finally, Memmi writes that the human free of colonialism, “will be a whole and free man;” (153) reaffirming that colonialism and its end is species, or indeed agent-specific to humans.

The point of postcolonial criticism and action should not only be one of ending the exploitation of humans but exploitation writ large; an argument that is sorely absent from postcolonialist theory and praxis because of the anthropocentric nature of their intellectual project. The second people-problem in postcolonial thought: the anthropocentric logic of self-centered human inquiry forecloses other ways of knowing, and thus selectively limits the utility of postcolonial perspectives and concepts. For example, it is worth considering the intellectual options available to anti-colonial intellectuals in the early part of the 20th-century that would have allowed for a more robust postcolonial praxis beyond that of psychological critiques. While it is easy to levy critiques against postcolonialism theory’s myopic foci from the safety of the early 21st century now that many national liberation struggles have been played out, doing so would reek of post hoc commentary. Early postcolonial theorists did not participate in a world with robust environmental criticism, indeed developed theories of nationalism, not even World Systems Theory. But they did have the concept of ‘imperialism,’ a materialist-based, not-exclusively anthropocentric way of understanding and resisting colonial logics that was available to mid- and late-20th century postcolonial thinkers. Indeed, it is curious to ponder why ideas which were so widely in circulation seem completely absent from this postcolonial perspective. Hobson’s turn of the 20th-century analysis of imperialism as the natural extension of capitalist logic beyond the borders of the nation-state not only accurately diagnose the problem of imperialism, but also frame solutions to avoiding colonial logics through capital controls and domestic reinvestment. Hobson’s study is an assessment of both the human and non-human aspects of colonialism, one that rightly sees exploitation in broad terms beyond that of the individual. So influential was Hobson’s thesis that Lenin built and expanded on these ideas for his most prominent of publications, Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism. Synthesizing Hobson and Marx and Engels, Lenin sees financial capital, a non-human object, as the driver of colonialism, one that produces the incentives for imperial policies, extractive economies, and the offshoring of class conflict, the latter being remarkably similar to Memmi’s definition of colonialism. As with much of Marxist influence in the postwar period, (Hobsbawm) Hobson and Lenin-based understandings of imperialism serve to inform anti-imperial praxis in Latin America, from overtly Marxian political and cultural analyses (Morana, Dussel, and Jauregui) to pedagogy, (Freire) to liberation theology. So too can the legacy of Hobson and Lenin be found at the heart of World Systems Theory and in particular, Hardt and Negri’s profoundly influential *Empire*. Each of these analyses not only avoids the personal and psychoanalytic approach to critiquing the colonial condition, but they are also overtly solidarist and at least are open to, if not outright considerate of, their treatment of human and non-human things.

Hobson and Lenin are nowhere to be found in the analyses of the psychoanalytic approach to postcolonial thought, even though Hobson’s (in English) and Lenin’s (published in English in 1939) work predate and were available to Cesaire, Fanon, and Memmi. But let’s not merely hold these three accountable on their own; their reasons for missing Hobson and Lenin are likely unknowable. Where are Hobson and Lenin, and the study of imperialism in general, in the intellectual history of postcolonialism? Gandhi offers no analysis of either Hobson or Lenin and frames imperialism as “Western Nationalism;” (195) a curious connotation as national liberation and nationalism are the some of the very solutions postcolonialists espouse towards countering logics of imperialism. Indeed nationalism(s) is a key blind spot for postcolonial thought. Loomba is also silent on Hobson, dedicates less than a page to Lenin (10-11) in context with situating the term ‘imperialism’ itself, and dedicates a mere six pages (256) in the entire volume to the concept. Even the inexorable Spivak avoids Hobson entirely, and only discusses Lenin as an

apologist for state power. (83) Spivak dedicates pages of prose and footnotes towards imperialism, although much of this comes in the form of her “unquiet ghosts” on the subject. (Eagleton 3) Said reserves just a single line for Hobson, “For imperialists like Balfour, or for anti-imperialists like J.A. Hobson, the Oriental, like the African, is a member of a subject race and not exclusively an inhabitant of a geographical area.” (92) Lenin escapes Said’s sting insofar as he does not appear at all in Said’s seminal work. Imperialism features in Said’s Orientalism of course but Said frames it mainly as a Western construct, rather than a capitalist one. Perhaps this is a reason –there is never ‘the’ reason –why Hobson, Lenin, and imperialism never gain any traction in postcolonial conversations.

Anthropocentrism lies at the heart of some critical postcolonial concepts. Spivak’s conception of the subaltern is a way of thinking through how to name and amplify individual and collective identities under colonization. Spivak’s argument that, “The subaltern as female cannot be heard of read” (104) has its problems, as stories of and by these very women exist and are acknowledged, for example, in testimonio literature the world over. Spivak perhaps concedes this conceptual shortcoming with the intervention of the native informant concept (4); the human tasked with speaking on behalf of their culture under colonization. Spivak’s conception of the subaltern or that of the native informant is emblematic of postcolonialism thinkers’ intense focus on the human subject position which works to foreclose an acknowledgment of other forms of exploitation. The very notion of speaking, and the silences that Spivak sees as a part of the imperial project, presumes that human communication is the only form of dialogue worth acknowledging or even apprehending. In turn, Bhabha’s work on identity also suffers from the same problem of anthropocentrism, although from a different perspective from Spivak’s Whereas Spivak wants the reader to hear and see those who are obscured by colonialism, Bhabha claims that these folks are already visible, we’re just looking in the wrong places. For Bhabha, an individual’s identity is a hybrid of their cultural condition, one that is shaped and informed by the long arc of colonialism. (277) For Bhabha, there is no Other in a binary sense, only individuals, and groups operating in third spaces between reified conceptions of colonizer and colonized. (66-69) These liminal locales may be sites of oppression or cosmopolitanism, but for Bhabha’s reader, they are spaces dominated, if not exclusively occupied, by human affairs and relationships.

Can postcolonial theory resolve the twin traps of personhood? Such a move will be tricky, as the concept of the subaltern, the native informant, and hybridity are devoutly anthropocentric in their ontology. Focusing on personhood is a central pillar of postcolonial thought, as the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment shapes the way we have prioritized our politics; both postcolonialists and the rest of us, even if the former is uncomfortable with the idea. Abandoning Hegelian notions of the Self and the Other will be difficult to realize unless one is willing to reconsider humanity’s relationship to life writ large, a perspective that finds its home most prominently in emerging, interdisciplinary ways of knowing. This does not mean colonizing non-Western, indigenous, or other ways of knowing to recapture some lost intellectual framework, although acknowledging these cosmologies is undoubtedly the right thing to do. Instead, rejecting anthropocentrism means considering all of how colonialism impacts and informs material agents in cultural contexts.

Postcolonial Materials

Cross-disciplinary analysis of colonial projects opens up rich ways of understanding how non-human entities contribute to and are influenced by imperialism. Such work invariably involves the methods, evidence, and other tools from cultural, environmental, and literary studies, along with history. Postcolonial theory rests on the practice of traversing intellectual disciplines, and so extending the logic of interdisciplinary practice is essential understanding what Lowe (19) sees as “the intimacies” inherent in colonial practice. For example, paper, sugar, tea, and floral prints;

each are seemingly innocuous on their own, and yet each object shapes and is shaped by colonial practices just like humans. Derived from one of the earliest merchantable economies of North America, (Cronon 109) lumber extraction drove efforts of British and later American settler-colonists across the continent; displacing flora and fauna along the way. The colonial logic of the mechanization of production and profit-seeking helped to change the sourcing of paper from rags to wood pulp, producing profound changes to cultural, economic, and environmental landscapes of colonized spaces of nineteenth-century western Massachusetts. (McGaw) In turn, Senchyne (144-148) suggests that the materiality of paper works to develop and further racialized hierarchies by operating within Robinson's (3) conception of "racial capitalism;" part and parcel of the colonial project. In this case, non-human life such as trees and their surrounding ecosystem, as well as machines and objects themselves that contribute to the production and use of paper embody and normalize colonial legacies.

Focusing attention on production practices reveals both colonialism's history and current state of affairs. Tsing's conception of scalability, economies that perpetually expand without the need of changing the essential elements of production, decenter but do not displace humans from colonial narratives (505). In particular, the historical development and contemporary practice of the sugar industry rest upon colonial methods of expansion, standardization, and commodification. (Tsing 510-515) The drive to grow and profit from sugar serves to explain the long arc of capitalist territorial expansion, slave and "free" labor, and deforestation, which in turn influences contemporary demand and practice for cheap food. (Patel and Moore 14-18, 32-34) Indeed, Manning (2004) suggests that food is both an indicator and tool of colonialism. Colonization stabilized episodic famines in Europe (41) where "Agriculture was not so much about food as it was about the accumulation of wealth. It benefited some humans, and those people have been in charge ever since." (38)

Exemplifying this focus on things instead of people, Lowe demonstrates that, "trades in tea, cottons, silks, and opium connect slave labor in the cotton fields of the U.S. South, the history of Asian textile design and production, and the role of the East India and China trades in the rise of British 'free-trade' imperialism." (74) English tea drinking practice and culture is not contingent on the cultural behavior of humans in Great Britain, but rather the presence of "sugar from the West Indies, tea and china service imported from China, tables made of hardwoods from the West Indies, splendid dresses made from Indian cottons." (82) What Lowe and the other scholarship makes clear is that an anthropocentric postcolonial perspective that privileges human identity and agency as the site of analysis obscures or subordinates material objects that are essential to understanding the onset and endurance of colonialism.

Speculating Future Postcolonialisms

Thinking about colonialism in a non-anthropocentric way becomes an access point for scholarship on biocolonialism, environmental racism, and speciesism. (Huggan and Tiffin 4-11) This perspective is but one way of rescuing the concepts of the subaltern, the native informant, and hybridity. Animals, in parallel to Spivak's reading of the term, cannot speak or be heard. Individuals, or better yet animals themselves can, in turn, speak on behalf of non-human objects from their cultural perspective; we merely have to listen. Hybrid locations and cultures can be remapped to acknowledge the existence of non-human actants in these spaces. The slums of Kibera are probably spaces where Bhabha would find hybrid cultures and identities that have been informed by the British colonial experience, so why not the wildlife reserves and parks established by the British East Africa Protectorate? (Chongwa 39-40) These parks are undoubtedly cosmopolitan, home to a broader variety of species and identities that can be found even in the capitalist-core cities of London or New York. Kenyan national parks undoubtedly reflect a legacy of colonialism, including the exercise of colonial power, intervenes in the culture of those who inhabit those spaces if culture is ordinary, learned and lived experiences. (Williams

4-5) There are problems with this line of reasoning for sure, cultural appropriation perhaps the most prominent one, yet questions of who has the authorial power to speak on behalf of something else don't merely emerge when we are analyzing the colonization of non-humans; the critique is part and parcel to cultural studies as a whole. Instead, decentering humans from colonial studies means acknowledging that the colonization of non-humans occurs in similar and different ways than those of us who work in academia generally recognize.

An edge of contemporary ecocriticism, postcolonial environmental theory synthesizes various scholarly approaches towards understanding the historical, present, and future arc of colonial projects. A core area of study within postcolonial environmental theory addresses the origins and nature of "cenes:" Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Themocene, Chthulucene, and more. (Balkan 2017) From these standpoints, colonialism is not an exclusive function of human agency at the species level, as climatic and extinction structures work with a variety of entities to further colonial practices in combined and uneven ways. Taking the analytical logic of structures and agents further, Bennett and fellow vibrant materialists understand social action and agency by exploring the assemblages of actants in particular contexts; for example, North American power grids. (24-28) In other words, one can apprehend colonial conditions by acknowledging the agency and influence of all types of objects beyond anthropocentric limits. The point here is that inquiry into colonialism need not be, nor never should it ever have been, exclusively about humans. Some of the more intriguing work in this area lies at the forefront of energy humanities (Imre and Boyer) and petroculture studies, (Wilson, Carlson, and Szeman) whereby access to or in pursuit of fossil fuels enable colonial action and where energy itself exerts agency and structures relationships between all varieties of objects. Thus colonialism remains alive and well, even if humans claim to have abandoned colonialism because the concomitant exploitation of colonization occurs in spaces with and without humans.

Landscapes, flora, and fauna are curiously absent from foundational postcolonial analysis, and so too are markets, machines, and commodities, the engines of capitalist colonial projects. For example, French imperial control over Martinique, where both Cesaire and Fanon hail from, and Tunisia, Memmi's country of origin, was not exclusively about the power and exploitation of the local population. Ports in Forte-de-France and Tunis and the shipping lanes which connected these colonial entities to the broader Francophone imperial system and modern capitalist world system undoubtedly impacted the environs that Cesaire, Fanon, and Memmi were so passionate about liberating. Rail lines from Tunis stretch outward toward mines and oil fields across northern Africa, linking further on to the extraction of timber, rubber, and ivory from the heart of the continent. Territory, homes, waterways, mammals, libraries, communication networks; all were occupied and exploited by French colonial capitalism. Yes, the colonial condition for the locals in Martinique and Tunisia were deplorable, but Cesaire's, Fanon's, and Memmi's reading of and solution to the colonial situation is suspiciously one-sided. Where is the critique of the French imperial system's brutalization of the pastoral? Where is the precise, detailed accounting of how the expansion of capitalism from the French core to the Caribbean and North African periphery exploited all aspects of life, not just the local population of bipedal hominids? Flipping the script slightly, is it merely the colonial mindset, and not the literal tools of the trade in the form of flotilla and firearms, which implicate themselves in the colonization of people, places, and everything else in the space? The imposition of the Francophone educational system did not merely colonize locals' school experiences or knowledge structures; books, buildings, and budgets all became ripe for the picking at the hands of French imperialists. Cesaire, Fanon, and Memmi are rather silent on these issues, and yet exploitation of all things –not merely humans –is at the heart of the colonial project. By failing to fully develop a critique of colonialism beyond the exploitation of humans, thereby privileging one type of object over another, these thinkers set the stage for an anthropocentric reading of postcolonial thought which inevitably comes to misread the proliferation and durability of colonialism to the present day. Our task is not to discard the aforementioned work, but to recognize the inherent anthropocentrism of their work as an intellectual limit to overcome in the present and future critique of colonial practices.

There are other, perhaps more worthy assessments of postcolonial thinking than those I have outlined here. The endurance of settler colonialism on indigenous spaces life is probably the most heartbreaking critique of the limits of postcolonial intellectual project, especially as the rise of postcolonial thought in the 1990s was wrapped up in thinking about emerging identities and nationalism at the end of the Cold War and not about the continued occupation and oppression of indigenous peoples under Empire. The problem of nationalism, the Janus-face of postcolonial thought, also works to limit the utility of contemporary postcolonial thinking, as national liberation ascribes both a vector for overturning European colonialism, but also a means of sustaining colonialism and oppression through Empire, settler colonialism, or blatant imperial capitalism. The problem of anthropocentric thinking may be a nuanced and somewhat troubling issue to work through. After all, postcolonial thought roots itself in the humanities and the social sciences where we primarily, if not exclusively, study human affairs. As I have hopefully argued to some reasonable extent, human-centric thinking has neither resolved the problems of colonialism nor provided entirely accurate accounts of the phenomena in the first place. Anthropocentrism blinds our analytical view to see difficulties in purely human terms, both in their causes and their effects. Decentering, and not discarding humans, from our analysis of exploitation opens up more comprehensive ways of reading the dilemmas that are before us. None of this is easy, either intellectually or practically. Yet if humanities scholars and teachers are genuinely interested in addressing issues of ethics and justice, disrupting locations and the exercise of power and exploitation, then our first acts should be to selflessly acknowledge that thinking exclusively about humans –from our philosophical, economic, and political models to our analyses and critiques of current and future conditions –may in itself be the problem. Put another way: if one is genuinely interested in overturning the colonial project, then it is worth naming all of how such exploitation exists and work, even in small ways, to end imperial interventions into life. We must do better than we have done so far.

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