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ANTHONY CHENNELLS

ESSENTIAL DIVERSITY: POST-COLONIAL THEORY AND AFRICAN LITERATURE¹

Post-colonial theory and the post-colonial reality

The value of post-colonialism as a theoretical category has been heavily contested ever since the term was first formulated. Even when the meaning is agreed upon, some still see it as an unprofitable, even a dangerous term. One argument claims that post-colonialism privileges the colonial episode over the other multiple movements of indigenous histories and thus colonialism becomes the central issue of most of the world's history. In Anne McClintock's telling phrase, too great an emphasis on colonialism marks a "recentering of global history around the single rubric of European time".² More dangerously, if a nation's culture is seen as post-colonial, the culture of the imperial metropole becomes the nation's most powerful cultural determinant. The Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o notes that in American universities "Third World literatures tend to be treated as something outside the mainstream. Many epithets ranging from 'ethnic studies' to 'minority discourses' are often used to legitimate their claims to academic attention".³ Canadian Stephen Slemon warns against this privileging of metropolitan culture even while a theory of resistance to colonialism is being formulated, when he reminds us that

[t]he forms of colonialist power differ radically across cultural locations....
[W]herever a globalized theory of the colonial might lead us, we need to remember that resistances to colonialist power always find material presence at the level of the local.⁴

¹ An early version of this paper was read in March, 1998 at a seminar in the Department of cultural studies, Palacky University, Olomouc and at a seminar in the Institute of English and American Studies, Masaryk University, Brno.

² Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress", *Social Text* Spring 1992, 1-15, 15.

³ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. London: James Currey; Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers; Portsmouth N.H.: Heinemann 1993, 10.

⁴ Stephen Slemon, "The Scramble for Post-colonialism", in Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson

The Australian Bill Ashcroft, one of post-colonialism's leading theoreticians, answers objections that post-colonialism places too great an emphasis on colonialism's power when he exclaims:

How many times must we insist that post-colonialism does not mean "after colonialism", that it begins from the moment of colonization? Indeed how often must we insist that post-colonialism *exists*?⁵

Ashcroft's two emphases are important. Post-colonialism is concerned with the worlds which colonialism in its multiple manifestations, confused, disfigured and distorted, reconfigured and finally transformed. The effects of colonisation are felt from the moment of the first colonial impact and post-colonialism constitutes as its subject the way colonised societies adjusted and continue to adjust to the colonial presence: sometimes that presence was regarded as genuinely enriching; more often it was seen as demeaning and impoverishing. Invariably though, in the later stages of resistance to colonialism, the exotic was appropriated, domesticated and turned against the alien power. Africa and Asia, for example, used the language of the colonizers to formulate discourses of resistance to imperial authority. Nowhere has modern anti-colonialism been a conflict between the pristine and exotic: resistance has been in terms which colonialism made possible. That is the first point. The second is Ashcroft's emphasis that "post-colonialism *exists*". It is nearly forty years since Ghana's independence proved to be a prelude to Europe's withdrawal over the next twenty years from formal colonial involvement in Africa. Few in Africa, however, believe that the independence of a whole set of new and sometimes old African nations ended colonialism. The West continues, at least as an economic presence, at most as a controlling cultural and economic authority, in Africa's multiple lives. For many in Africa, independent nations should ideally be identified by their unique and authentic cultures but in practice there are few places anywhere in the world which can claim to have remained pristine. We live with syncretism and post-colonial theory addresses this fact.

There is, nevertheless, a danger that the hybrid and the syncretic, however different their constituents, will be regarded as a new homogeneity. Stuart Hall, the great English cultural theorist, who defends post-colonial theorising, warns against too prescriptive a conception of the term with a list of questions:

Is Britain "post-colonial" in the same sense as the US? Indeed is the US usefully thought of as "post-colonial" at all? Should the term be commonly applied to Australia, which is a white settler colony, and to India? Are Britain and Canada, Nigeria and Jamaica "equally 'post-colonial'", as [Ella] Shohat asks ...?⁶

(eds.), *De-Scribing Empire: Postcolonialism and Textuality*. London and New York: Routledge 1994, 15-32, 31.

5 Bill Ashcroft, "Excess: Post-colonialism and the Verandahs of Meanings", in Tiffin and Lawson, *De-Scribing Empire*, 33-44, 33.

6 Stuart Hall, "When was the 'Post-Colonial'? Thinking at the Limit", in Iain Chambers and

Hall poses his questions in order to advocate a more careful discrimination between different “racial and social formations”. But he goes on to observe that although “America and Canada, on the one hand, Nigeria, India and Jamaica on the other, are certainly not ‘post-colonial’ *in the same way*... this does not mean that they are not ‘post-colonial’ *in any way*”.⁷

Hall’s remark has important implications. As a literary theory post-colonialism should not claim for itself an exclusive right to speak about the literatures which developed during and in the wake of Europe’s several empires. The post-colonial critic would have little expertise in analysing, for example, the traces of orature which can be discerned in the new literatures or policing the purity of a national identity when a once-defeated nation has reconstituted itself at the end of formal imperialism. What interests the same critic is a text where fault marks and tensions evidence the problems of reducing orature to writing or how a text which claims to reproduce national sensibilities reveals within itself the simultaneous presence of national and international influences. The post-colonial critic is sensitive both to colonial presences and how those presences are resisted or accommodated within a text.

The one paradigm to which the post-colonial critic is always alert is the paradigm on which any concept of empire is based: centre and periphery. Whether the centre is Rome, St Petersburg and Moscow, London, Lisbon, Vienna or Paris, empires constitute the imperial metropole as both normative and authoritative. Whatever meaning the periphery has, imperialism implies, derives from its relationship with the metropolitan centre. Implicit within the model is an inherent inequality between centre and periphery, the necessary subordination of colony to metropole. An important part of post-colonialism is the study of the consequences on both metropole and colony of that perceived subordination and how and where insubordination occurs. Within my discipline of the study of literature, I note that in the past both British and African critics have seen Anglophone-African texts as inherently inferior to the canonical texts of the British metropole. I also note the multiple ways in which that subordination became insubordinate in African literature and how the normative authority of the metropolitan model was subverted: literatures developed which refused to mimic the productions of the metropole and combined native narrative and poetical traditions with metropolitan models.

Colonialism’s constructions of the real

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is a foundation text of post-colonial theory. Said’s larger argument is that Europe’s vision of Asian societies whether in travel books say or more obviously academic studies of Asian languages created an Orient appropriate to the way in which the European expert on the Orient—the Orientalist—conceives his or her subject. Said observes that

Lidia Curti (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*. London and New York: Routledge 1996, 242-260, 245.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 245-6.

Orientalism can ... be regarded as a manner of regularized ... writing, vision and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient.

The word Orient “accrued to it a wide field of meanings, associations and connotations... [which] did not necessarily refer to the real Orient but to the field surrounding the word”.⁸ In a more general theoretical statement about this process, Said points out that since history is made by people, it is possible “for many objects or places or times to be assigned roles and given meanings that acquire objective validity only *after* the assignments are made”.⁹ Said’s emphatic “after” points to one of the implications of the “post” of post-colonialism.

Africa as much as Asia was “assigned roles and given meanings” in Western scholarship and post-colonialism is at least partly concerned with the consequences of these roles and meanings. The dominant discourse of an empire, which is the metropolitan discourse, has the capacity to create its own realities. Whether or not what was claimed to be real simply served some purpose for the West’s sense of its own identity, the West wrote and indeed ruled as though these constructions constituted the African reality with which colonialism must engage.

African literature has frequently drawn attention to the way in which colonial authorities constructed an African reality and then acted as if that reality existed in the perception of everyone concerned. The proto-text of the modern African novel in English, *Things Fall Apart*, closes on an ironic inter-textual play between an African-authored narrative about an African society which is the novel itself and the production of Western knowledge about the same society. The novel traces colonialism’s destruction of the sophisticated and complex social organization of Umuofia. This process is assigned a quite different meaning within an imagined Africa, when the District Commissioner contemplates his destructive rule of Umuofia as an episode in his projected book *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.¹⁰ In a later novel, *Arrow of God*, Winterbottom, who belongs to the next generation of colonial officials, gives the now-completed book to the new man Clarke to help him to understand Nigeria better. *Things Fall Apart* implies that a series of misunderstandings will provide whatever argument the book possesses. *Arrow of God* shows that such misunderstandings have become the colonisers’ truth within a canonical text. For the new district officer, the master narratives of British rule in Nigeria will be ordered around the binarisms of civilised/primitive and pacifying/disorder.¹¹

National culture and anti-colonial resistance

An obvious form of anti-colonial resistance to these constructions of a colony’s meaning is to deny their truth: the periphery insists on its rights to draw

⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (1978) New York: Vintage Books 1979, 202.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁰ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. (1958) Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House 1985, 148.

¹¹ Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*. (1964) London: Heinemann 1978, 32-3, 35-6.

meanings from itself not as periphery but as centre. Resistance to colonialism is possible, this argument implies, only because the indigenous culture remains intact and therefore possesses its own incontrovertible authority. In Africa the classic formulations of this form of anti-colonialism were made by the Guinea-Bissau liberation leader Amilcar Cabral:

[T]he people are only able to create and develop the liberation movement because they kept their culture alive... and because they continue to resist culturally even when their politico-military resistance is destroyed.¹²

For Cabral this culture of resistance remained alive with "the masses in the rural areas... [who were] untouched or almost untouched by the culture of the colonial power".¹³ The rural masses were the source to which would return the tiny indigenous bourgeoisie, whom colonialism had momentarily distracted from their authentic identity. The anti-colonial struggle would force them, Cabral argued, to confront the contradictions in their identity.

Anti-colonial struggles in Africa, particularly in the 1960s and early 1970s, invoked as their principle strategy cultural nationalism, which is the most obvious way of contesting the authority of the metropolitan power with the power of the local centre. Cultural nationalism in Africa, as we can see in Cabral's remarks, very often gives an extraordinary and sentimental authority to the most powerless constituency in the colonial state: the rural people who had no power because they were least touched by the colonial presence. The culturally authentic are those barely implicated in the particular historical processes which colonialism has set in motion and which is transforming the world. The peasantry is idealised and accorded a power of resistance which is ahistorical. Throughout Africa, where liberation from colonialism took the form of an armed struggle, such a struggle involved a Western-educated leadership mobilising the power of the peasantry.

If Empire and the Orientalism or the Africanism which serves Empire, attempts to draw the disparities of Orient or Africa into a homogeneity which is constituted by the metropole, an obvious form of resistance is to create a counter-discourse. In Africa this was done through Pan-Africanism and, in the 1930s and 1940s, *Négritude*. In an attempt to move beyond the constituting gaze of the metropole, what Europe saw as Africa's weaknesses, *Négritude* valorized as sites of power and as superior ways of being and knowing. If Europe privileged rationality, *Négritude* attributed to intuition more profound insights. Sophisticated technology had not alienated Africans from their natures and the nature around them as it had Europeans and white North Americans. Europe's thinking depended on dualisms such as soul and body, abstract and concrete; Africa knew only the unified human personality. The intention may have been

¹² Amilcar Cabral, "Identity and Dignity in the Context of the National Liberation Struggle", in *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral*, ed. by Africa Information Service. New York and London: Monthly Review Press 1974, 57-69, 60.

¹³ *Ibid.*

to discomfort Europe's racial complacency by confronting and rejecting what Europe chose to privilege. In practice, however, *Négritude* leaves intact the very paradigms which are of Europe's making. Pan-Africanism, in its turn, answered the various grand schemes of Europe's empires with a teleology both for the continent and the African diaspora which involves a recovery of the past in order to realize a black triumphalism.

Increasingly, African and black intellectuals outside Africa have begun to criticise as inadequate the emphasis on race in opposing the intellectual and political authority of Europe and white North America. One of Africa's most important literary critics, Chid Amuta, has attacked such theories precisely because they simply react to what the West has initiated. They postulate an "absolute, fairly homogeneous, immutable and eternal mode of perceiving reality and explaining phenomena" which distinguishes Africa from the West. This is no more than an attempt "to provide a rational mooring for the identity crisis which the Western imperialist has inflicted on Africans and peoples of African descent".¹⁴ To use a different metaphor, the resistance of cultural nationalists consists in playing out rôles which Europe has written. Whether the oppressed are crushed or rebellious, their primary identity is that of the oppressed: they are still the oppressor's creation. Compliant or defiant, they are the "other" drawing an identity from some separate, arrogantly constituted, self. There has been no effective discontinuity in imperialism's narrative.

Post-colonialism is impatient at essentialised identities celebrated by *Négritude* or any grand scheme like Pan-Africanism because post-colonialism derives from postmodernism a scepticism at single origins and the certain teloi which all master narratives presume. Like postmodernism, post-colonialism is aware of the diversity of the local and the contingent. Post-colonialism's particular focus can be identified by reference to Fanon, who, as much as Said, is a source of so many of post-colonialism's ideas. Like Cabral, Fanon saw the indigenous bourgeoisie turning to the rural people to discover a collective identity. In "Identity and Dignity" Cabral was echoing Fanon's remarks that

in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The starving peasant outside the class system, is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays.¹⁵

But Fanon does not allow his search for anti-colonial revolutionaries to remain lodged in the myth of a heroic peasantry. Instead his account of the revolutionary process gives a leading rôle to those who have already been transformed by their encounter with colonialism. His revolution involves a withdrawal from the towns by militants in the nationalist parties who are uninter-

¹⁴ Chid Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature: Implications for Practical Criticism*. London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1989, 37-8.

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (1961; 1965, English edition). Harmondsworth: Penguin 1985, 47.

ested in the reformist compromises of nationalist moderates. Among the peasantry these urban revolutionaries, who have lost their rural roots, “discover a coherent people who go on living, as it were statically, but who keep their moral values and devotion to the nation intact.” This mixture of urban and rural people “can produce an explosive mixture of unusual potentiality”. The peasantry who have “learnt their lessons in the hard school of the people” can now receive from the urban revolutionaries “classes... in political and military education”.¹⁶ At a later stage, the revolution will be spearheaded by the displaced rural population which has moved to the towns but

which is blocked on the outer fringe of the urban centres, that fraction [of the people] which has not yet succeeded in finding a bone to gnaw in the colonial system.... That horde of starving men, uprooted from their tribe and from their clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneous and radically revolutionary forces of a colonial people.¹⁷

For Fanon, then, anti-colonial revolution can occur only after the peasants encounter the new classes, formed out of the colonial experience, but which belong neither to the peasantry nor the indigenous bourgeoisie. The latter, in Fanon’s account, collaborate with, because they profit from, the class formation which colonialism has brought about. Fanon is the first theorist to give expression to post-colonialism’s most important emphasis: the post-colonial world can never be culturally pure, if only because entirely new economic relations have created new social relations and therefore new social identities. I am reformulating a remark of Homi Bhabha who observes that

[f]or Fanon, the liberatory people who initiate the productive instability of revolutionary cultural change are themselves the bearers of a hybrid identity. They are caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation.¹⁸

Here we see, used to describe a specific political process, “hybrid” and “discontinuous”, those key terms in post-colonial theory because they refer to the most telling consequences of the post-colonial historical experience.

Colonialism disrupts indigenous histories. If colonialism’s order is to be broken, its narrative must be disrupted in turn. No rupture takes place, if a master narrative is answered by a competing master narrative. Pan-Africanism attempts to answer imperialism by homogenizing Africa’s and the African diaspora’s diversity into a single experience which moves within Pan-Africanism’s master narrative towards a single end. Post-colonialism different emphasis can be seen in Stuart Hall’s account of those aspects of society and culture to which post-colonialism shows particular sensitivity. He writes

“post-colonialism” has... become... sensitively attuned to... questions of hybridity, syncretism and the complexities of diasporic identification which

¹⁶ Ibid., 101.

¹⁷ Ibid., 102-3.

¹⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge 1994, 38.

interrupt any "return" to ethnically closed and "centred" original histories.¹⁹

Hall believes this sensitive attunement is possible precisely because post-colonialism looks consciously away from imperialism's "generalising and Euro-centric, post-Enlightenment grand narratives". In their place post-colonialism notes

the proliferation of histories and temporalities,... the multiplicity of lateral and decentred cultural connections, movements and migrations which make up the world today, often by-passing the old metropolitan centres.²⁰

This then is not a denial of history. It is however a denial of history as it is written by Western imperialism. Imperialism's grand narrative is defenseless when the binarisms implicit in a history of domination are refused: centre, margin; metropole, colony; white self, subaltern of colour. In the place of binarisms, post-colonialism looks for new spaces which privilege diversity and thus subvert the global by engaging with the local and the atypical; where dogma is replaced by ambivalence, stability by volatility and purity by hybridity.

Post-colonialism and Southern Rhodesian settler literature

A unique feature of the British Empire was the desire for political independence not only in those colonies where an indigenous population was governed from London but in settler-controlled colonies as well. The agitation for freedom did not take the same form in these latter colonies. In my own country, Zimbabwe, which as colony was Southern Rhodesia, the attempts by the settlers to become independent of British control differed from similar movements in New Zealand or South Africa for example. Southern and Northern Rhodesia were Britain's last territories colonised by companies whose authority derived from a royal charter. They were in a tradition which went back to the founding of the Carolinas and Maryland and the British colonies in India. The Rhodesian settlers had, as a result, first of all to escape the control of Rhodes's British South Africa Company before they could address a future possibly independent of London. In the 1922 Referendum in which the settlers were asked to choose their political status after the charter had come to an end, Winston Churchill, at the time Britain's Colonial Secretary, put considerable pressure on the settler electorate to opt to join South Africa as a fifth province of the Union. In fact Rhodesia's English-speaking settlers mistrusted the power of Afrikaners in South Africa and defined their difference from South Africa in terms of uncompromising loyalty to Britain. Nevertheless from a very early date Zimbabwe was occupied by whites in 1890-settler novelists refuse to show Rhodesians as English people inhabiting an exotic world; their characters instead pronounce a local loyalty.²¹ "I was a Devonshire man... I *am* a Rhodesian," says the aristo-

¹⁹ Hall, "When was 'the Post-Colonial'?", 250.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

²¹ Over three hundred novels by and about Rhodesians were published, mostly in England, be-

cratic hero of Gertrude Page's *The Rhodesian* (1912).²² The English protagonist of Cullen Gouldsbury's *God's Outpost* (1907) comes to realize, after some years in Rhodesia, that "the chain that links the sentiments of the colonies to the Mother Country is but the veriest gossamer".²³ In Harding Forrester's *Benedicks* (1932) one of the characters remarks during a visit to England, "England has done with me and I with her.... That's the penalty we pay we who wander."²⁴ Later the narrator calls the settlers "Africa's little white step-children".²⁵

A great deal of post-colonial theoretical attention in Canada and Australia has been directed towards that moment when the white-settled colonies write back to the metropole denying that their purpose is to reproduce the metropolitan norms in the colony, but instead to affirm themselves as "other". Post-colonialism does not see its end in the establishment of alternative centres. As the best known popularising account of post-colonialism observes "the concept of dominance as the principle regulator of human society is recognized but challenged." When the idea of a British norm is rejected, "the hegemonic centrality of the idea of 'norm' itself" is denied.²⁶ Along with norm the need for centre is abolished.

This is, however, an ideal account of the new, white, Anglophone nationalisms. In most white-ruled Commonwealth countries nationalism was confirmed by dominion status and this process usually involved a doctrinaire re-centering on the new nation. White Rhodesians themselves attempted to assert their right to a new nationhood when, in 1965, Ian Smith unilaterally declared Rhodesia independent of Britain. Superficially UDI, as Smith's rebellion came to be known throughout the British Commonwealth, has all the appearance of colony claiming to speak on equal terms with the metropole. In fact rather than being an attempt to assert the right to be heard of multiple voices, Smith's rebellion was an attempt to give continuing life to the imperial discourse which had died in Europe during Britain's and France's invasion of Egypt in 1956. UDI did not challenge the concept of dominance but was an attempt to perpetuate racial dominance. Central to white African nationalisms whether in Rhodesia or in South Africa's apartheid was the refusal to allow local black Africans any authority in national political processes. Rhodesia's settlers regarded the hybrid and the syncretic in Europe first with distaste and then alarm: with UDI, white settlers defied the metropole with a reaffirmation of the pure and the monocentric. Rather than being carnivalesque, allowing a mocking dialogic voice to challenge the voice of authority as post-colonial worlds have the potential to do, Smith and his followers, first by censorship and then through the deaths of tens

fore 1980. For the majority of these titles see J. Pichanick, A. J. Chennells and L. B. Rix, *Rhodesian Literature in English: A Bibliography (1890-1974/5)*. Gwelo: Mambo Press 1977.

²² Gertrude Page, *The Rhodesian*. London: Hurst and Blackett (1912), 16.

²³ Cullen Gouldsbury, *God's Outpost*. London: Eveleigh Nash 1907, 36.

²⁴ Harding Forrester, *Benedicks: A Rhodesian Repercussion*. London: John Long 1932, 217-8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

²⁶ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. London and New York: Routledge 1989, 37.

of thousands of people in the Zimbabwe Liberation War, tried to silence any competing voices.

Reading Doris Lessing as a post-colonial writer

The most famous Southern Rhodesian novelist is Doris Lessing.²⁷ The first four of her quintet *Children of Violence* are set in 1930's and 1940's Southern Rhodesia (which is called Zambesia in the sequence) and Lessing looks sceptically at the easy claim many Rhodesians made to a nascent nationalism. As with other Rhodesian novelists, Lessing's settlers explicitly see themselves creating a culture which will break with the tired, class-obsessions of the English. When the young people in *Martha Quest* organise a sports club, they refuse to allow class to influence membership. Such divisions are "not in the spirit of the country. This wasn't England.... [T]his was a new country".²⁸ Lessing, however, does not allow the colony to remain in simple opposition to England, demanding and receiving from the settlers a single, uncomplicated loyalty. During the Second World War when the Royal Air Force establishes training bases in Rhodesia, the arrival of the English air-men is eagerly awaited:

[f]ew of the settlers had not been brought up with the words Home and England in their mouths, even if they had not been born there; it was their own people they were expecting and more: themselves, at one remove, and dignified by responsibility and danger.²⁹

In fact the first men to arrive are men from the ranks, drawn from what in peace-time is the British working-class. These men had

to people who above all had always had enough to eat and plenty of sunshine ... a look of incompleteness.... [T]hey could not own these ancestors; their cousins from Home were a race of dwarfs, several inches shorter than themselves.... They were not glorious and rebellious individuals—for above all, emigrants to the Colonies have been that.³⁰

When Britain declares war on Germany, the settlers, however, feel dissatisfied with the predictable rituals and emblems with which the news is greeted: patriotic English songs, the national anthem, the king's speech and the Union Jack. Only when a former British officer, retired in the colony, talks about the battles in which Britain was engaged in the First World War do the hours, after

²⁷ Doris Lessing has lived in England since 1950 and from 1954 until Zimbabwean independence was prohibited from entering Rhodesia so that she is usually thought of as British. Her recent books *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (London: HarperCollins 1992) and *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* (London: HarperCollins 1994) emphasise the importance to her formation as a novelist of the twenty-five years she spent in Rhodesia as a child and young adult.

²⁸ Doris Lessing, *Martha Quest* (*Children of Violence* Vol 1). London: Michael Joseph 1952, 176.

²⁹ Doris Lessing, *A Proper Marriage* (*Children of Violence* Vol II). London: Michael Joseph 1954, 212.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

the declaration of war, which “they had been living through, so formless and unsatisfactory, achieve[]... their proper shape.”³¹ For all the sense of difference from England and the English which Lessing’s settlers feel, their most important historical context is not local but English. With the Allied victory in 1945, young and old among the settlers in the novels would share the confused emotions of an elderly English-born woman at the victory parade:

This little town, this shallow little town, that was set so stark and direct on the African soil—it could not feed her, nourish her.... [T]he representatives of majesty were only “the Governor and the Governor’s wife”—no it wouldn’t do. And the troops would have black faces or at least some of them would be black, and the dust clouds that eddied about the marching feet of the band would be red.... [She] was no longer in Africa, she was in Whitehall, by the Cenotaph and ... the personage who bent to lay the wreath was Royal.³²

These are the contradictory emotions of an exile, the double consciousness which is inseparable from colonialism and which is the very consciousness which post-colonialism most valuably theorises. Significantly Rhodesia’s most important writer identifies the post-colonial condition long before it was adequately theorised.

Post-colonialism and African literature

Rhodesia and South Africa are extreme examples of the silencing of the black voice in Africa but the right of blacks to interpret their own experience through literature was a right which had to be asserted all over Africa. From Nigeria, Achebe famously remarked of his own work

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past)... did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them.³³

The first wave of modern Francophone and Anglophone novelists and poets writing in the 1950s and 1960s produced an art which was experienced as a polyphony precisely because their work was read in the context of the writings of the white African “expert”. Some novelists more consciously allowed multiple voices to compete in their work. The early Mongo Beti novels *The Poor Christ of Bomba* and *Mission to Kala* are typical Francophone examples.³⁴ In both novels indigenous culture is shown to possess a cohesion and authority which

³¹ Ibid., 157.

³² Doris Lessing, *Landlocked (Children of Violence Vol IV)*. (1965) London: Panther 1967, 79.

³³ Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays*. London: Heinemann 1975, 45.

³⁴ Mongo Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, trans. Gerald Moore (*La Pauvre Christ de Bomba*, 1956), London: Heinemann 1971; *Mission to Kala*, trans. Peter Green (*Mission Terminée*, 1957), London: Heinemann 1964.

forces the young protagonists, whose colonial education has acculturated them in French culture, to confront an alienation which they recognize only when they are judged by their native culture: what France has taught them to patronise possesses a sophisticated wisdom, quite capable of patronising them in turn. In *Mission to Kala*, on the other hand, the priest recognizes the missionaries' complicity in colonialism only when he has to confront the fact that Catholicism's attraction in Africa is directly related to the colonial situation:

"Look... the whites come here to ill-treat the blacks, and when the blacks feel really miserable they will run to me and cry: 'Father, Father, Father...' all those who didn't give a fig for me before: And I am supposed to baptize them, to confess them and bury them. And this happy turn of events I owe to the wickedness of the whites!... But I, also, am a white man."³⁵

Beti uses his novels to show Africa addressing the shallow ignorance of Europe: the young men educated in the French system re-discover their own dignity when they glimpse themselves from cultural perspectives they have been taught to despise. Father Drumont, on the other hand, only knows himself and his life's work when he sees it through the eyes of the colonial victim. These shifting perspectives displace centres of knowledge and subvert sites of authority in a manner which is wholly familiar to post-colonial theorists.

Another early post-colonial Francophone novel, Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*, can usefully be read against Achebe's historical novels. Sembene was a Marxist and in fictionalising a historical episode which speaks to the Senegalese present, Sembene turned not to the pre-colonial past but rather to the Dakar-Bamako railway strike of 1948. Sembene's heroes are the proletarians, a new class which the railway has created and the confrontation between blacks and whites in the novel is shown primarily to be a confrontation between capital and labour. For Sembene colonial capital has created new people for whom the past is simply irrecoverable:

When the smoke from the trains no longer drifted above the savanna, they realized that an age had ended—an age their elders had told them about, when all of Africa was just a garden for food. Now the machine ruled over their lands, and when they forced every machine within a thousand miles to halt they became conscious of their strength, but conscious also of their dependence. They began to understand that the machine was making of them a whole new breed of men.³⁶

In the thirty and more years since the publication of those early texts, African literature in English and French has become enormously varied both thematically and formally. The initial elation of the early 1960s at the seemingly endless potential of the newly independent states has made way for a literature

³⁵ Beti, *Mission to Kala*, 113.

³⁶ Sembene Ousmane, *God's Bits of Wood*, trans. Francis Price (*Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*, 1960). London: Heinemann, 1970, 32.

which registers extreme disillusionment at the corrupt governments which have for twenty years disfigured Africa. Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) is an extended satire on the new leaders who draw their political identity from the colonial rulers whom they have displaced. An added subtlety is provided to the narrative by Achebe's choice of a narrator who, even while he is criticizing the new leaders, reveals himself to be as corrupt as they are.³⁷ On the other side of the continent, in Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who in an early novel like *The River Between* (1965) had sought to arrive at some sort of accommodation between Christianity and the Kikuyu religion, became a much more rigorous cultural nationalist in his later novels.³⁸ The corrupt politicians in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) are shown to be betraying the popular struggle against colonialism, which in turn drew its strength from a culturally coherent people. Ngugi more than any other African writer is Cabral's successor. His later novels argue that Africa's salvation lies in its drawing inspiration from the people themselves and their culture which he defines as a consequence of "the process of a people wrestling with their natural social environment. They struggle with nature. They struggle with one another".³⁹ Ngugi has for many years argued that imperialism controls minds as much as it does economies and political processes. He implies, however, that we cannot remain untouched by other cultures when he argues that education should expose young people to "all the voices coming from what is essentially a plurality of centres all over the world.... [T]his multiplicity of cultures, literatures and languages should [be] reflect[ed]" in university syllabuses throughout the world.⁴⁰

I do not look to Ngugi as the African writer pointing to the direction which African writing is likely to take. He may conceptualise a plurality of centres but in the end his cultural racism is too strong to allow him to pursue the contradictory implications of that insight. He has for many years argued that blacks should read black-authored literature whether it comes from Africa itself or the African diaspora.⁴¹ A homogenised black experience becomes both authoritative and normative. I prefer the way in which Fanon places African culture and will close this essay by glancing at three writers who seem most obviously to give expression to one of Fanon's many meanings. During colonialism and the decolonisation struggles, Fanon argues, "the constant principles" of national culture "served as a safeguard". After independence however, Fanon distances himself from artists who

turn their back on foreign culture, deny and set out to look for a true national culture, setting great store on what they consider to be the constant principles of national art. But what these people forget is that the forms of thought and

37 Chinua Achebe, *A Man of the People*. London: Heinemann 1966.

38 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The River Between*. London: Heinemann, 1965.

39 Ngugi, *Moving the Centre*, 27.

40 *Ibid.*, 10-11.

41 See for example "On the Abolition of the English Department" in his *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*. London: Heinemann 1972, 145-50.

what it feeds on, together with modern techniques of information, language and dress have dialectically reorganized the people's intelligences... [which] are now undergoing extremely radical changes.⁴²

The artist who wishes to be true to this dialectically transformed world must come in Fanon's words to the "zone of occult instability where the people dwell".⁴³ Homi Bhabha uses parts of that passage to argue for the inadequacies of a rhetoric which tries to maintain as separate

totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in the Utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity.⁴⁴

It is easier to create a Utopia than struggle with imaginative existence within a "zone of cultural instability".

Increasingly African literature has shown itself less concerned to bewail the losses Africa has suffered through colonialism than to come to terms with its multiple effects. The Angolan novelist Artur Pestana dos Santos, who wrote under the pseudonym of Pepetela, in his novel *Mayombe*, traces the debates and factions within a group of MPLA guerillas during the war against Portugal. The novel is partly a subversion of Marxist dogmatism. The commander, who is the voice of truth in the novel, accuses the party of becoming a religion persecuting dissidents as though they were heretics.⁴⁵ He criticises one of the guerillas trained abroad for "not see[ing] the current conditions, [for] want[ing] to apply the scheme as he has learned it.... His truth is absolute and ready-made". The guerilla is accused of "schematism" which is "intellectual idleness" and "evasion".⁴⁶ In a European context these debates will be read as familiar attacks on the intellectual authoritarianism of Marxist Leninism. In Africa, where anti-colonial struggles presumed easily identifiable categories of good and evil, *Mayombe* can be seen to invoke the diversity of the local and the contingent and to insist that this must inform any discussion of future political strategies. Throughout the novel, differences among the guerillas on the basis of region, "tribe," and language are shown to be as damaging to the success of the struggle as anything the Portuguese army can do. Near the beginning of the novel, a guerilla of mixed race whose *nom de guerre* is Theory takes over the narration, anticipating the dominant idea in the novel:

I carry within me the irreconcilable and that is my driving force. In a Universe of yes and no, white and black, I represent the maybe. Maybe says no for someone who wants to hear yes and means yes for someone who wants to hear no. Is it my fault if men insist on purity and reject compounds?... [P]eople are

⁴² Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 181.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁴⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge 1994, 34.

⁴⁵ Pepetela [Artur Carlos Mauricio Pestana dos Santos], *Mayombe*, trans. Michael Wolfers (1980). Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House 1983, 77-8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

divided in my view into two categories: Manichaeans and the rest. It is worth explaining that the rest are rare: the World generally is Manichaean.⁴⁷

Mayombe takes it for granted that colonialism is wrong. There are, however, few more striking rejections in African literature of the binarisms of good and evil within conventional anti-colonial polemic. As Theory's remarks suggest, Africa's reality is to be found in the diverse, the balanced and the tentative.

As striking as *Mayombe* is in its refusal to deal with anti-colonial, Pan-Africanist certainties, is the South African writer, Njabulo Ndebele's novella "Fools".⁴⁸ The story was written when the end of apartheid seemed improbably remote and only armed resistance likely to bring to an end that racist tyranny. Ndebele structures his story around, on the one side, a young revolutionary, Zani, who has just left school and who is determined to raise the political consciousness of the people of his home town. Contrasting with him is a late-middle-aged school-teacher, Zimani, who long ago has stopped actively opposing the regime. A structure of this sort would conventionally end with the optimistic activism of youth drawing disillusioned age into political commitment or at least age would regret the passivity of its lost youth. In fact Ndebele provides an ending which transgresses the convention with a sudden shift into surrealism from what is otherwise a realist narrative. Two carloads of Boers⁴⁹ drive up to where blacks are having a picnic. The two groups shake their fists at one another but then as the whites start to open the doors of their cars, the blacks run away "whereupon the Boers bang[] their car doors shut, and dr[ive] away laughing and waving their fists in derision".⁵⁰ Both sides have played out their anticipated racial rôles within South Africa: white aggression, a momentary show of black resistance which collapses before more purposeful white action. At this stage, the narrative could allow Zani to intervene. In fact, he flees finding he is no match for the black school principal who is organising the picnic and another Boer who has come up with a whip. The principal returns to the picnic, and the man with the whip now confronts Zimani who characteristically does nothing and stands still. "What are you doing here?" the white man shouts. "Why don't you run into those trees where you belong?" But Zimani refuses to run, refuses to play out any expected rôle. The white is stronger than he is and if he fights back, he will be beaten. By not fighting, he refuses

to give him the kind of victory he wanted. I felt sure that no amount of violence against me would give him any self-respect. He was of the same substance as his whip. I offered no resistance as he lashed at me. I just stared at him.... I wanted to scream.... But my silence was my salvation; the silence of

47 Ibid., 1-2.

48 Njabulo S. Ndebele, "Fools", in *Fools and Other Stories*. Harlow: Longman 1986, 152-280.

49 The whites are referred to as Boers throughout this scene. In South African English, Boer used to mean only Afrikaners. In the 1970s black nationalist movements used Boer to refer to all whites in South African and Rhodesia. Ndebele is probably using the word in this more inclusive sense.

50 Ibid., 268.

years of trying to say something without much understanding; the silence of desperate action. This would be the first silence that would carry meaning.⁵¹

And then Zimani begins to laugh and as he laughs the Boer starts weeping.

I knew I had crushed him... with the sheer force of my presence. I was there, and would be there to the end of time: a perpetual symbol of his failure to have a world without me. And he went away to his car, a man without a shadow... a member of a people whose sole gift to the world has been the perfection of hate.⁵²

I suggested that this scene is surreal for its meaning operates symbolically rather than literally. Apartheid was a totalizing scheme of how South Africa's various races should relate to one another. Zimani's refusal to run before the Boer's whip creates a rupture within apartheid's narrative. At the same time he refuses to play the other rôle apartheid expected of blacks: people rising in angry rebellion against their oppressors. His silence signifies that dislocation for he has as it were taken command of his own meaning. By denying a meaning to his silence, he has moved beyond the meanings with which apartheid limits the possibilities of black lives. Multiple meanings can be made to fill that narrative break. Any scheme of racial domination such as imperialism or apartheid assumes self and other, presence and absence. By being a presence when Boer's whip or apartheid commands an absence, Zimani confronts and overthrows every end to which apartheid demands that his life as a black person should be directed. In this scene his identity is constructed neither in opposition to nor in collaboration with apartheid.

The African writer who most articulately defies the idea that post-colonial identities must be constructed in opposition to empire is the Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera. In his critical writings, poetry and fiction, Marechera defied conventional black-nationalist pieties: he wrote of "literature as a unique universe that has no internal divisions. I do not pigeon-hole it by race or language or nation".⁵³ On the vexed question of European influences on African writing, he remarked that the African writer profits from Europe's "head start in written literature... he does not have to solve many problems of structure-they have already been solved." Influences are not pernicious: "they are a type of apprenticeship".⁵⁴ While Ngugi was proclaiming that the African writer should write in national languages,⁵⁵ Marechera mischievously remarked, "I took to

⁵¹ Ibid., 275.

⁵² Ibid., 276.

⁵³ Dambudzo Marechera, "The African Writer's Experience of European Literature", in Flora Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book of his Life and Work*. London: Hans Zell; Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications 1992, 361-8, 362.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 363.

⁵⁵ Ngugi made this decision when he was in prison in 1977; see *Moving the Centre*, 94. One of his several explanations of his choice is given in his essay "Return to the Roots: National Languages as the Basis of a National Language and Culture" in his *Writers in Politics: Essays*. London: Heinemann 1981, 53-65.

English like a duck takes to water. I was therefore a keen accomplice and student in my own mental colonization". He added, however, that for "a black writer [English] is very racist". To make it serve his purposes, Marechera recalls

discarding grammar, throwing syntax out, subverting images from within, beating the drum and cymbals of rhythm, torture chambers of irony and sarcasm, gas ovens of limitless black resonance.⁵⁶

As these various quotations show Marechera never denied that he was a black writer and was, if he chose, able to command that perspective. But that Africa and race provided the only context from which he derived his identity as a writer was something which his novels deny. In *Black Sunlight*, the narrator's double implicitly attacks both socialist realism and the realism of the African novel in the 1960s and 1970s, when he remarks, "'To write as though one kind of reality subsists in the world is to act out a mentally retarded mime, for a mentally deficient audience'".⁵⁷ The narrator thinks of what would be his fate were he to write consciously as African writer: he would have erased "the solidity out of him to make him no more than a black insider". The black insider might become a famous black writer and if the narrator sought such status his end would be to "go out like the last speck of a spectacular fireworks display of unending conferences on Black Culture".⁵⁸ In Marechera's posthumously published novella "The Black Insider", the narrator defies nationalist dogmatism, when he remarks that "[t]he sense of having lost the nation was indivisible from the nation having lost us.... Indeed had there ever been a nation at all?" He subverts the Pan-Africanist idea of an organicist nationhood by arguing that "the sort of origins we had as a nation" derived from "white pioneers and adventurers who had carved out for themselves farms and estates and had for a time exercised the pirate's right to booty". The new nation is merely "continuing the experiment under another brand name".⁵⁹

Pepetela, Ndebele and Marechera write of post-colonial Africa in very different ways. For Pepetela nationalist ideals must arise from the culturally syncretic which is colonialism's most obvious legacy. Resistance to white domination in South Africa becomes in Ndebele's novella an assertion of black presence rather than conscious black agendas or an enactment of ideologically constructed rôles. Marechera insists on a more obviously complex personal identity for both himself and his characters than could ever be constructed from race alone. Marechera's writing never allows race to be the sole basis for tyranny.

What the three writers have in common is their rejection of a particular form of realism predicated on a predictable African reality. *Mayombe's* narrative does not move to the triumphalist conclusion of a defeated imperialism but in-

⁵⁶ Marechera, "Dambudzo Marechera Interviews Himself", in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera*, 1-5, 2.

⁵⁷ Dambudzo Marechera, *Black Sunlight*. London: Heinemann 1980, 68.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁹ Dambudzo Marechera, "The Black Insider", in Flora Veit-Wild (comp. and ed.), *The Black Insider*. Harare: Baobab 1990, 23-115, 105.

stead ends with the commander's death providing an exemplary transcendence of Africa's traditional divisions; it is perfectly possible, however, that no-one in the novel will learn from his death. Ndebele's ending explicitly defies conventional African realism and Marechera's novels refuse the linearity and chronology of nationalist narrative. Marechera consciously rejected narratives where the culturally pure is displaced by the tyrannical exotic and restored by heroic peasant resistance. His narratives are invariably ruptured refusing the inevitability of any particular end. But more important for this paper is that in the work of all three writers different cultural realities are simultaneously present in the consciousness of their characters, allowing them to subvert the authoritarianism of imperial centre as well as new nationalist centres. European time and African time are both present and redolent with possibility.