



Empire, colony, postcolony

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reviews

BOOKS

Reviews

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Empire, colony, postcolony. Robert J. C. Young.
Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015. 224 PP.
ISBN 9781405193559. £19.99 (pbk)
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Robert Young's newest monograph, explicitly positioned as a student-facing textbook, is a slim volume which provides an overview of the historical origins, philosophical and political contours, and major critical coordinates of postcolonialism as a field. Young recognizes the scale of this task in his remark that postcolonialism as an intellectual and political project has a remit that is "almost impossibly broad" (151); indeed, this potentially overwhelming historical and conceptual range and the necessarily interdisciplinary embeddedness of postcolonial thought in multiple intellectual traditions, whilst they make postcolonialism what it is, have often made postcolonial studies challenging for students. This daunting

scope is also what makes a neat little book like this, which condenses a formidable amount of material into twelve brisk and digestible chapters, necessary and appealing. This book is a short yet comprehensive general introduction to the major debates, contexts and ideas of the field, targeted at two related markets – student and educator – and which will be of great utility to both readerships due to its focus, its wealth of concisely articulated detail, and its comprehensible and accessible style.

The book is conceptually organized, devoting each chapter to a key topic. Its narrative moves in a logical and persuasive way through an impressive selection of essential ideas, including nationalism, empire, slavery, globalization, anticolonialism and decolonization. The discussions of these topics are illustrated with a pleasingly diverse range of examples. Young draws on events related to the major European empires of the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries, as any reader would expect, but he also makes reference to more obscure historical coordinates, such as the first Viking conquests, and to modern developments, such as the rise of ISIS and the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. This helps the book feel relevant and current, as do the discussions of human rights, liberal interventionism, the Arab Spring and the refugee crisis. These current phenomena are tackled alongside engagements of more established postcolonial ideas, such as hybridity, race, identity, power and language, all of which are treated with the subtlety and skill with which readers of Young will be familiar. Young also brings the same deftness to his treatment of central intellectual figures, as a broad sample of key thinkers – Ghandi, Spivak, Fanon, Said, Gramsci – and their major works are convincingly introduced, explained, historicized and contextualized. In these respects, this book is unsurprising, as any textbook on the subject would be expected to cover such ground. Comparison with Young's earlier textbook *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001), however, may more fully explain the appeal of this pocketsize volume; both works are authoritative, comprehensive and accessible, but whereas the earlier text is encyclopaedic and exhaustive, this new book is concise, direct and immediate. In terms of both the selection of territory and the approach to it, this book is difficult to fault.

Such a book, however, must be assessed on whether it is likely to be successful as a pedagogic tool. From the point of view of the educator, there is much to recommend it. Any textbook must address a number of educational requirements, such as presenting students with definitions of terms and introductory summaries of major ideas, or locating existing critical trends with relation to the current political and cultural moment. This book meets these obligations without feeling too explicitly

teacherly, as such gestures are unobtrusively integrated into engaging prose and couched in the aforementioned richly detailed explanatory examples. It would be easy to imagine many tutors making chapters from it compulsory reading as preparation for seminars. Students, too, will have good reason to welcome the text. Young's readable style is very student-friendly: crisp, authoritative, economical and unencumbered by jargon. Nowhere, however, is he patronizing. His writing communicates considerable nuance and insight in a way that credits the reader with the ability to follow closely and absorb complex material. The book's brevity and lightness of touch will also be welcome to students, as it can be read in one sitting. The bibliography is well compiled, providing multiple starting points for further study. As a learning resource, the book will prove important and effective.

However, this practical evaluation makes the book seem merely functional, and it would be a shame to reduce the book purely to its classroom role. As well as a useful text to swell the reading list, *Empire, Colony, Postcolony* is also a powerful and persuasive demonstration of what is at stake in postcolonial thought, scholarship and activism, a proselytization for the continuing purchase of the vibrant critical tradition of postcolonialism. The book emphasizes that colonial injustice and oppression remain with us, and it underscores the ability of postcolonial critique – and other radical political traditions with which its imperatives are in harmony – to challenge and confront oppression. The final chapter, "Postcolonialism", is particularly strong in this regard as, among other tasks, it concludes the book with a discussion of migration, securitization and economic injustice. Young's engagement with this most pressing and contemporary of debates (which is also long-standing and deeply historically rooted, as Young shows) allows the book to

make a strident case for the explanatory value and political urgency of postcolonial thinking. It is true that an ungenerous specialist could consider some of the necessarily brief explorations of difficult, contested and problematic ideas superficial or even cursory; my own research specialism made me hunger for more substantial accounts of political violence, counterinsurgency and the post-9/11 war on terror, for example. But an introductory textbook is not the place to seek thorough and exhaustive investigations into the finer details of contemporary research, and the explanations it provides are consistently well judged, subtle, clear and above all, appropriate for the book’s student readership. In summary, the book is a fine educational resource, but it is by no means only of interest to generalists or uninitiated undergraduates. It is a powerful and serious little book which provides a compelling snapshot of the current state of the discipline, and mounts a lively and celebratory summation of what we, as scholars of the postcolonial, value about it.

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Indian arrivals 1870–1915: networks of British empire. Elleke Boehmer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 283 pp. ISBN 9780198744184. £26.83 (hbk)

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Elleke Boehmer is one of the very few genuine literary all-rounders, as capable of writing excellent fiction as she is works of literary scholarship. Her latest, deservedly praised, novel, *Shouting at the Dark* (2015), must have been written alongside her latest scholarly work, which examines the writings of a number of

Indians who undertook the journey to Britain in the “high imperial decades” of 1870–1915 (250).

Indian Arrivals is framed, on the one hand, by the opening of the Suez Canal and the examinations for entry to the Indian Civil Service to Indians for the first time in 1869 and, on the other, by the departure of Indian troops from the western front in 1915, which was “the first time that non-elite Indians in significant numbers shaped the military and political history, not only of Britain, but also continental Europe” (247). Boehmer explores in great detail the “depth [of] Indian involvements in British metropolitan life” during this period.

Building on her 2002 work, *Empire, the National and the Postcolonial: Resistance in Interaction*, Boehmer demonstrates through close textual analysis, excellent historical contextualization and primary archival research how the arrival of certain Indians in the imperial metropolis fostered and established networks and relationships between Indian and British friends and interlocutors. Such networks sometimes had profound effects on the development of “some of the leading literary–cultural movements, ideas, styles and identities of the day”, such as Walter Pater’s aestheticism, *fin-de-siècle* Decadence and emergent modernism. As she notes, in prevailing accounts of these cultural movements there is rarely any acknowledgement that they might have been shaped in any way by “Indian hands”, and, in recuperating the literary relationships between Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and Edmund Gosse; Naidu and Yeats; Manmohan Ghose and Laurence Binyon; and – through William Rothenstein – Tagore, Yeats and Pound, *Indian Arrivals* performs the vital task of contesting such accounts as well as substantiating an alternative narrative and perspective which reveals a “cross-border poetics” at work within a more finely grained understanding of