



Daniel Carey & Lynn Festa (Eds.) (2009).
The Postcolonial Enlightenment. New
York: Oxford University Press

The Postcolonial Enlightenment dates from 2009 but has never received the attention it most definitely deserves, especially so from scholars in the field of letters and from those nations coping with their colonial past and with the future of literary theory, be it post colonialism based or Enlightenment oriented. The collection of essays works to remedy the lack of sustained critical investigation into Enlightenment via eighteenth-century studies and, in doing so, explicitly organise the postcolonial structures which shape contemporary academic thinking. The title represents its measured mission statement, namely to “determine the usefulness of postcolonial theory for reading the Enlightenment and the eighteenth century, and to explore the insights that alternative views of the historical and philosophical phenomenon of Enlightenment may offer to postcolonial theory” (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 3). The text grounds itself as a first serious attempt towards revealing the various navigations and dialogues between postcolonialism and Enlightenment(s). The essays are concerned more with addressing how historical and cultural differences are structured rather than a voluminous documentation of those very structures, an attribute of the work which warrants praise. The collection moves from the single subject, through classifications and categorisations of peoples, and finally into the nation and universalisms - the evolution from micro to macro consistently seeking to reorientate the relation between 18th century and postcolonial theories.

Prior to a critique of individual sections and essays, it is important to note some fundamental strengths and flaws of the overall collection. The broad mix of essays, ranging from American to Indian focus, from fact to contrapuntal readings of fiction and from particulars to universalisms, whilst a dauntingly large spectrum for so small a space, merits commendation. Furthermore, these far-reaching essays do not often stray beyond their bounds and if they do, it is most regularly

in the form of a finger pointing to the many, and worthwhile, future research possibilities. There is however a fundamental lack of cohesion between the essays and a lack of clear cumulative focus. What the collection seeks to achieve is noted rather vaguely and indirectly in its introduction, but the essays often fail in working together and complementing each other, resulting in a collection that appears at times rather disjointed from itself. The overall reorientation of the relationship between postcolonial studies and Enlightenment is achieved, but each essay tends to reorientate to a different angle without due reference to the overall readjustment – essentially culminating in a listing of directions without the building of a compass. The lack of both communal and individual clarity and cohesion represents a relatively minor grievance, but a noteworthy flaw which detracts from the overall impression and achievement of the work.

The text begins with two essays which provide a strong foundation upon which the collection as a whole builds. Aravamudan and his essay *Hobbes and America* works to “uncover the suppressed colonial contexts and occluded premises of writers such as Hobbes, and by doing so fashion an alternate genealogy of key Enlightenment concepts such as ‘sovereignty’” (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 39). The exposition of suppressed colonial contexts represents a broad ambition the text as a whole seeks to actualise, with the two opening essays intricately exploring notions of sovereignty and subject. The deep-rooted, but often neglected, prejudices regarding Enlightenment’s aspiration to move humanity from a seemingly terrible natural existence to Eurocentric society based on government and order are thoroughly deconstructed during Aravamudan’s essay. He writes how “Hobbes’s theory initiates a sovereign attitude that erases the historical past, consolidates the national present, and looks forward to an imperial future” (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 70). The nature of progress, an Enlightenment fixation, thus melds with colonialism and positions conquest as the means of the process forward. Hobbes’ sole model of political sovereignty is carefully exposed as a merger of conquest and consent, or as Aravamudan puts it “The voluntary alienation of man’s liberty in the state of nature” (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 61) whereby both the individual and family structures become pre-political artefacts of progress.

Similarly, in David Lloyd’s thought-provocative essay *Pleasure and Pain in the Colonial Context* autonomous art, art disconnected from religious or political ends, becomes a symbolic marker of Enlightenment progress. Art which is emancipated “from the demand to furnish gratifications, differentiates the civilized or developed society from the primitive or underdeveloped one, as a taste for autonomous art distinguishes the cultivated from the uncultivated individual” (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 73). The capacity for disinterested contemplative pleasure becomes an attribute of the civilised man and forms a source for discrimination in the savage who subordinates himself via immediate, natural pleasures. The essay demonstrates how 18th century colonialism utilises such Enlightenment arguments as an implicit defence of its actions.

The Kantian idea of a formal reflective universal common sense is threatened by the native's primitive 'charm of sense', destabilising the whole universalism and highlighting something problematic which must be rectified. Lloyd's writing of how "the black woman appears as a kind of abyss in the text where the sublime and the beautiful collapse into one another" (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 98) albeit without due reference, into the following section concerning categories and classifications - the differentiating features between such 'abysses' when placed side by side and almost always theorised from a cautious distance. A further investigation into how the definition of the sublime subject (or lack of subject) is abstracted and the complexity of definition somewhat circumvented by instead resorting to classification formation is unfortunately ignored. Given how the text operates under an individual to universal paradigm it may have strongly benefited from the inclusion of an intermediary essay tackling a direct question on the metastasis from individual subject to categorisation, thereby abridging the two discreet sections and strengthening the work as a whole.

The three essays centring *The Postcolonial Enlightenment* engage with Enlightenment categories and postcolonial classifications. However, as aforementioned the jump from discourse on the individual subject to such groupings without an intermediary body results in a rocky landing and some stumbled criticism. The essays do, however, remain necessary and worthwhile inclusions. Of particular note is Daniel Carey's *Reading Contrapuntally: Robinson Crusoe, Slavery, and Postcolonial Theory*, the only essay in the collection which focuses on a single work of fiction when elaborating on a 'postcolonial Enlightenment'. The essay deftly and intricately highlights Enlightenment philosophy which may be contrapuntally retrieved from the text, for example how "Crusoe has already imagined himself as an innocent, wronged party, and presumably feels he has a justification according to the law of nature not only to execute those who intend to kill him but furthermore to preserve the lives of a few of these offenders for his own use as slaves" (Carey & Lynn, 2009, pp. 116-117). External Enlightenment ideals impinge upon the fictional text, validating Crusoe's appropriation of slave labour. The highly intriguing investigation which utilises 18th century legal structures strengthens the analysis and transmutes Friday's condition from one of seeming colonial slavery into a more complex system of patriarchy:

As a subject, he may owe his service but he is not held as property; his condition is voluntary since he is free to leave. While remaining dependent on Crusoe, he includes himself in the just commonwealth established by the man who saved him. As a subject he enjoys civil status incompatible with slavery. This is undoubtedly a patriarchal system of rule, with Crusoe substituting himself for Friday's actual father; the group as a whole becomes his 'family', incorporated into an aristocratic household and receiving the benefits of his patronage. (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 123)

The neglected references of the text supply contrapuntal readings, through which Enlightenment notions of sovereignty and the subject are interrogated. Felicity A. Nussbaum exposes the equally unvocal, but nonetheless present, distinction between the oriental and negro subject. The essay argues that “Once abolition legislation was enacted, the concept of the subject of despotism was largely reserved for the ‘Oriental’ who needed to be freed from political tyranny, not through abolition but through the liberation of imperial expansion” (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 145). Thus the abolition of slavery is reconfigured as an aid to imperialism through its exploitation of Enlightenment rhetoric on progress and political emancipation.

A similar rethinking of Orientalism is attempted within Siraj Ahmed’s essay *Orientalism and the Permanent Fix of War* where it is argued that Orientalism originally functioned as a means to facilitate a radical new form of property ownership making possible a political economy founded in war. The essay works in unison with Nussbaum’s, but the connection is never fully elaborated upon, missing a great opportunity to embellish both essays and their arguments. The convincing claim is summarised as follows: “When colonial Orientalism and the colonial rule of property are placed, as they in fact occurred, side by side, their underlying logic reappears: that logic involves neither a will to know nor the rise of a capitalist modernity, but rather the reorientation of property towards war, the fundamental historical shift that Orientalism served to facilitate and then as now to obscure” (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 201). This echoes Nussbaum’s overriding argument that “The will to control territory may sometimes be deeply embedded and veiled within emancipatory efforts” (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 139). Again the burden of blame is shown to bypass the coloniser. Colonial actions are interpreted and implicitly validated by Enlightenment rhetoric on progress, or as Ahmed notes for J. Z. Holwell and Alexander Dow, two East India Company Orientalists, via presumptions of legitimacy spawned by a coloniser-serving Orientalism (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 181).

The Postcolonial Enlightenment’s third section operates at the national, colonial and universalism level. Again, a more sustained effort in explicitly bringing the three standalone essays into complementary contact would have proved greatly beneficial to the overall synthesis of the book. Garraway’s essay on speaking natives and the French Enlightenment addresses “the ways in which Enlightenment writers’ appropriation of the native voice and subject position may in fact contribute to the silencing of the Other, thus potentially nullifying the anticolonial implications of their discourse” (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 210). The manufacturing and listening to particular fictional native voices bears a striking correlation with contemporary World Literature concerns regarding the prioritisation of postcolonial writers over their current ex-colonist counterparts – a link never made, even in passing. The limitation of space works against these three essays, each encountering so vast a theme as universalism without the necessary room to breathe.

The concept of an 'enlightened' colonialism within the 18th century is diagrammatically pieced together. In *Universalism, Diversity, and the Postcolonial Enlightenment* Carey and Trakhulun note how "Enlightenment ostensibly allows no place for cultural diversity, or rather, diversity exists only in order to be overcome" (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 240). The means of usurping diversity and restoring universality is achieved via a consensus that colonially-encountered native peoples existed at a different stage of anthropological development and "History was thus the answer to difference and would comfortingly transform the other into the same" (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 248). Whilst history was the answer, the European apologetic's concerns regarding anachronistic colonial presence are, as Garraway notes, satisfied by Enlightenment literary critiques involving the aforementioned fictionalised empire subjects – giving the colonised a fictitious voice through which to speak and continue to galvanize European support of colonial endeavours. Such criticism extends into the concluding coda of the text, whereby an awareness of such Enlightenment-enabled 18th century colonialism becomes an increasingly necessary antidote to purge the rise of neo-imperialism.

The book's conclusion highlights the contemporaneous requirement and significance of reorienting the relationship between Enlightenment and postcolonialism. In a scathing critique of what neo-imperialist Niall Ferguson's terms 'Anglobalization', the entire text is recognised an impassable monument through which such a selective reading of history and present decolonised poverty becomes absurd. Indeed, as Suvir Kaul writes "awareness guards against the revitalization of the claims of today's proselytizers and practitioners of imperialism" (Carey & Lynn, 2009, p. 324). In closing, *The Postcolonial Enlightenment* thus represents an important work whose self-appointed task is to analyse the backbone of contemporary postcolonial theory through the lens of Enlightenment philosophy prevalent during 18th century colonial endeavours. One commendable by-product of such a deep analysis is the creation of a bulwark which successfully counters, if not ridicules, modern neo-imperialism's claims. Whilst certain essays are perhaps too isolated from the rest of the collection, detracting from a sense of concentrated effort, upon close study and further study the book as a whole acts as one identifiable work. Kaul defends the book by writing that such "analyses will continue to illuminate the foundational material and cultural importance of overseas trade and colonies in the making of modern bourgeois culture, in land and class relations, and in the development of industry - both in Europe and in colonized territories" (Carey & Lynn, 2009, pp. 316-317), a claim illuminating *The Postcolonial Enlightenment* as a starting point for much future, and indeed necessary, research.

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