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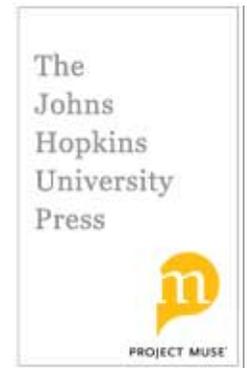
Culture and Imperialism by Edward W. Said (review)

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Book Reviews

Edward W. Said. CULTURE AND IMPERIALISM. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993. Pp. xxviii + 380. \$25.00 cloth.

Culture and Imperialism is a difficult book to review. It is both a magnificently erudite reflection upon many currents within what has emerged as "postcolonial studies" in the academy (a term which, it should be noted, Said rarely uses), and a heartfelt rumination on global patterns of domination. Broadly speaking, the book addresses the connections between Western imperialist practice and cultural production, as well as the characteristics of various resistance cultures within the so-called peripheries.

Said articulates an approach within literary and cultural studies that would actualize those "hybrid counter-energies" which "provide a community or culture made up of numerous anti-systemic hints and practices for collective human existence . . . that is not based on coercion or domination" (335). The book both outlines and (to some extent) embodies Said's proposed method of contrapuntal analysis, which requires "a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (51). Such is necessary to bridge what Said posits as the gap, with little possibility of overlap or connection, between the poles of Western Eurocentrism and the postcolonial Third World's "rhetoric of blame." It is the figure of the migrant, the "consciousness . . . of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages" (332) which can span this disjuncture through a hybrid(ized) sensibility. Said's own positionality is implicated therein; he states that his aim is "not to separate but to connect," because "cultural forms are hybrid, mixed, impure, and the time has come in cultural analysis to reconnect their analysis with their actuality" (14).

It is probably not coincidental that the problems one might find in *Culture and Imperialism* reflect those within postcolonial studies at large. One is the collapse of historical specificity sometimes demanded by the overarching generalities in the equation of the book's title. A relatively minor but telling example is Said's assertion, in his discussion of dictatorial post-independence one-party states, that "[t]he debilitating despotism of the Moi regime in Kenya can scarcely be said to complete the liberationist currents of the Mau Mau uprising" (230), a statement which omits a number of significant historical steps between Mau Mau and Moi (e.g., Moi's position vis-à-vis Kenyatta's legacy, as well as the role of U.S. support through the 1970s and 80s of that government). While it is crucial to elicit large historical patterns, the elision of more local contingencies can effectively render the non-West as always already known (i.e., as American media portrays it: riven by famine, religious "fundamentalism," and "tribal conflicts").

Also troubling is the way in which the book reflects the ascendancy of the term "post-colonial" over "Third World"; within literary critical practice, that has meant a continued, even intensified scrutiny given already-canonized Western writers and an almost total elision of non-Western writers (especially those who do not reside in the West and do not write in European languages). In *Culture and Imperialism*, there are entire chapters (or large portions thereof) devoted to Conrad, Austen, Camus, et al., whereas the sole "resistance" writer to merit an entire chapter is Yeats (with less extended discussions of such writers as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Aimé Césaire, as well as scholars such as Gauri Viswanathan and C. L. R. James). And while the subtleties of imperialist discourse are discussed at some length, there is little if any mention of how that discourse intersects with issues of gender and class (or of the studies thereof). Moreover, the delineation of

"culture" in its Arnoldian sense elicits no interrogation; rather, it is defended. Symptomatically, these gaps and elisions mark those issues and areas which academic postcolonial studies need to acknowledge or pursue.

The book is, however, at its best in the extended discussions of the canonical writers; Said's detailed and highly nuanced discussions of Conrad and Kipling, for example, are nothing less than superb. As well, his call for a recognition of the intricate relationship between representation and social formations, while not unique, is certainly long overdue in the academic mainstream. Although the Introduction states that this project began in the early 1980s, it is the legacy of the 1990-91 Gulf War—in its militarized atrocities and the media-driven American cultural complicity therewith—which emerges as the subtext of much of Said's analysis, and as the source of the sense of urgency underlying *Culture and Imperialism*. Doubtless that urgency is not misplaced; the weight of recent history rests squarely behind it.

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Aijaz Ahmad. *IN THEORY: CLASSES, NATIONS, LITERATURES*. New York: Verso, 1992.

The recent publication of Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* has created quite a stir in academic circles. Keen interest has been provoked by the ambitious task Ahmad proposes: none other than an account of "the determination of literary theory itself, as it negotiates the issues of colony and empire, by the conditions of its production and by the location of its agents in specific grids of class and institution" (320). The response to *In Theory* signals the eagerness with which scholars have awaited an inquiry into the political implications of our conceptual tools and theoretical positions. Unfortunately, despite its promises, *In Theory* is not this study.

Ahmad addresses the producers of the theories which govern the reading of "Third World" texts in the U.S. academy in the book's central chapters on Fredric Jameson and Edward Said. An accompanying reading of Salman Rushdie's *Shame* corrects what he argues are the misreadings dominant theories have fostered. His account of the conditions of the production of U.S. scholarship is completed in surrounding chapters on the development of literary theory in the twentieth century, various progressive and reactionary uses of nationalisms, their relation to the emergence of a "Third World" literary canon, and a concluding defense of Marx's position on imperialism.

Ahmad's charge against contemporary scholarship is serious: since the 1960s in the U.S. critical theory has been "mobilized to domesticate, in institutional ways, the very forms of political dissent which [social] movements had sought to foreground, to displace an activist culture with a textual culture" (1). To support this accusation, he offers the following types of claims: American radicals of the late 1960s did not believe in the desirability of socialism in the U.S. (27); that in any case those who became theorists were only marginally involved in political movements (66); and that on college campuses African American students were normalized and drained of energy for anything but identitarian politics (89). The gravity of Ahmad's accusation requires the most careful supporting documentation. But he offers no substantiation for these claims, preferring instead to build his argument through suggestive juxtapositions and to persuade by sheer repetition. This is particularly troubling in a work which emphasizes the need to document the material conditions which enable the production of scholarship.

When Ahmad does try to substantiate his claims, he turns not to the material conditions which he says are the authorizing force of his book, but to texts. The shortcomings of the