The historiography of British imperialism has long been coloured by the political and methodological conservatism of its practitioners. Arising as it did from the imperial metropole in the late nineteenth century, it originally served as an ideological adjunct to empire. Its purpose was to contribute historical insights into past exercises in overseas power that could be used to inform and inspire contemporaries to shoulder their obligations as rulers of a world-wide imperial system. Decolonization robbed imperial history of most of its practical incentives. Yet it continued to cling to the methodology and mentalité of ‘the official mind’, as Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher termed it in their enormously influential work. The persistence of this paradigm is evident even in the most recent scholarship. Peruse any issue of The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, for example, and you will find a succession of articles that still tread the path pioneered by John Seeley more than a century ago. They remain wedded to the same official documentation, persist in addressing the same political, economic, and military manifestations of power, and continue to employ the same narrative conventions. They seldom stray from an adamant empiricism. On the rare occasions they do flirt with theory, it generally derives from well-worn models. P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins’ acclaimed new two-volume study of British Imperialism, which is widely regarded as the most important and innovative contribution to the field since Robinson and Gallagher, resembles nothing so much in its theoretical stance than that old war-horse of imperial theory, J.A. Hobson, with a pinch of Schumpeter thrown in for flavour. This return to the concerns of Edwardian radicalism is taken within the field for theoretical daring. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that imperial history has acquired a reputation for insularity and inattention to the methodological advances made both by historians in other fields and by scholars in related disciplines.

Perhaps because so many historians of British imperialism have been content to plough the same narrow plot over and over again, their professional domain has been invaded in recent years by a wide array of academic interlopers. Interest in imperialism and colonialism has intensified among specialists in anthropology, area studies, feminist studies, and, above all, literary studies. The latter have proven especially energetic and adept at
claiming squatters’ rights over imperial history’s unclaimed provinces. Armed with the latest post-structuralist theories, the literary invaders have opened up and exploited some surprisingly rich and provocative intellectual terrain. It is their colonization of imperial studies and its implication for the field that this essay proposes to address.

There can be no mistaking the success that literary scholars have had in making the topic of imperialism their own. Teaching positions in colonial and post-colonial literatures appear to be one of the booming fields in English departments these days. New works with titles like The Rhetoric of Empire seem to come off the presses every week. Thick anthologies of influential and representative essays have begun to appear for use as textbooks in college courses. Leading theorists such as Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have become superheroes of the academic firmament. In America, The Chronicle of Higher Education has highlighted the phenomenon with a feature story, the popular academic journal Linguafrance has attacked it in a cover story, and Time magazine has devoted several pages to a flattering profile of Said, its principal founder. In Britain, interest among the intellectual community has been equally intense. Clearly this is a scholarly industry to be reckoned with.

The problem is that historians of British imperialism have for the most part failed to reckon with it. This is a pity both for the historians, whose methodological horizons could be broadened by serious engagement with this literature, and for the literary scholars, whose theoretical excesses could be checked by the sober scrutiny of the historians. In proposing that historians enter into a dialogue with their literary trespassers, I do not mean to suggest that the two parties can be entirely reconciled with one another. Some of the differences that divide them are unbridgeable. Even so, a good deal can be gained, I believe, from historians conducting a critical reconnaissance of the territory that literary theory has claimed as its own. So let us explore.

I

The new and growing body of scholarship that concerns us here is generally known either as colonial discourse analysis or post-colonial theory. Colonial discourse analysis refers to the examination and interpretation of particular colonial texts. Post-colonial theory refers to the political and ideological position of the critic who undertakes this analysis. In practice, the two terms have become virtually interchangeable, so much so that several recently published ‘readers’ have put them in harness in their rather ponderous, mirror-imaged titles – Post-Colonial Theory and Colonial Discourse and Colonial Discourse, Post-Colonial Theory. Although objections have been raised to the teleological implications of the hyphenated tag ‘post-colonial’, its evocation of an anti-imperialist political stance and a post-structuralist theoretical one has ensured its usage. Indeed, the label ‘post-colonial theorist’ seems to carry rather more cachet among the practitioners of the genre than ‘colonial discourse analyst’, even though the latter designation is often the more accurate one. Perhaps the term ‘analyst’ has unwelcome associations with financial and/or military functionaries; certainly the term ‘theorist’ has an inflated prestige in lit-crit circles these days. For the sake of convenience and consistency, I will refer to this literature as post-colonial theory, but I caution that much of it is less engaged in developing a body of theory than in making gestures of obeisance to it.

It is generally acknowledged that Edward Said’s seminal study, Orientalism (1978), is the foundational text for post-colonial theory. Its transfiguration of the term ‘orientalism’ from an arcane field of academic study to a synonym for Western imperialism and racism has been accepted and applied across a wide spectrum of scholarship, as has its central thesis and theoretical concerns. Said starts from the post-structuralist premise that knowledge is a discursive field derived from language and he draws from Foucault the insight that its significance lies embedded within systems of power. His study of Orientalism, by which he means Western representations of those parts of the world the West identifies as the Orient, seeks to show that this body of knowledge tells us little about the so-called Orient, which may or may not exist outside the Western imagination, but much about the West’s efforts to impose itself on the peoples and cultures who came under its hegemonic sway. Orientalism, then, pushes past the conventional conception of imperial power as a material phenomenon, presenting it instead as an epistemological system. Moreover, because the West’s power is linked to the cultural representations it constructs and imposes on the minds of colonizer and colonized alike, it is able to survive the political decolonization that occurred after the Second World War. Indeed, it exists even within the purportedly objective scholarship of Western academia. The full implication of this analysis is that the dismantlement of Western modes of domination requires the deconstruction of Western structures of knowledge. Hence the claim that this is a post-colonial theory.12 These central propositions have been endorsed, elaborated upon, and modified in varying respects by subsequent practitioners of post-colonial theory. Although Said has his critics within the fraternity, his influence has persisted to a remarkable degree over the years since Orientalism first appeared. Many of the weaknesses as well as some of the strengths of his enterprise have become magnified in the works that have followed its lead.

Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of post-colonial scholarship is
its theoretical promiscuity. Said draws mainly on Foucault for inspiration, but other influences on his work include Antonio Gramsci and Erich Auerbach. This odd menage create certain tensions and contradictions in his argument. Aijaz Ahmad has observed that Said vacillates between a Foucaultian position that places the origin of Orientalism in the Enlightenment project of the eighteenth century and a Auerbachian stance that traces it all the way back to classical Greece. Dennis Porter has pointed out that Said’s use of Foucault is at odds with his use of Gramsci—the former presents a totalizing conception of power that absorbs knowledge itself while the latter conceives of hegemony as historically contingent and subject to subversion. Various critics have drawn attention to the ambivalence, if not outright obtuseness, in Said’s position regarding the fundamental question raised by his study: is it possible to attain a true knowledge of the Other? For Said to charge that the West’s representations of the Orient are distorted seems to suggest that he regards an undistorted representation as attainable, but this conflicts with his post-structuralist insistence that the Orient is nothing more than a discursive phantasm. ‘Orientalist inauthenticity is not answered by any authenticity’, notes James Clifford. Such are the conundrums that arise from the effort to appropriate incompatible theoretical perspectives.

Said’s progeny have taken the turn to theory in ever more tortuous directions. As Stefan Collini has remarked with regard to cultural studies in general, it suffers from ‘a disabling deference to the idea of “theory”’. In addition to the obligatory bows to Foucault and Gramsci, post-colonial theorists have drawn upon Althusser, Bakhtin, Barthes, Benjamin, Baudrillard, Derrida, de Man, Fanon, Heidegger, Lacan, Lyotard, and other mainly post-modernist theorists. Conspicuously absent from the post-colonial canon is Marx, whose work is considered irredeemably Eurocentric. This seems rather ironic in light of the fact that, except for Fanon, none of the names cited above ever exhibited the slightest intellectual curiosity in the issue of European colonialism or the concerns of non-European peoples. Yet the fascination with such theorists, especially if they are French, continues to run high among the post-colonial coterie. The latest initiates into the canon appear to be Foucault’s contemporaries, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, whose Wilhelm Reich-inspired work Anti-Oedipus is advanced by Robert Young as an important new source of post-Saidian inspiration.

The infiltration of these varied theoretical influences into post-colonial studies makes for a literature that is often dense and sometimes impenetrable. Arguably the most fashionable figure in the field at the present time is Homi Bhabha, whose ruminations on the cultural effects of colonialism draw inspiration from post-structuralist psychoanalysis and post-modernist theories. Conspicuously absent from the post-colonial canon is Marx, whose work is considered irredeemably Eurocentric. It is easy, of course, to mock almost any academic genre for its jargon, but what makes post-colonial theorists especially vulnerable to criticism is the claims they make for the relationship between language and liberation. As they see it, the key to emancipation from colonial modes of thought is the objective of Kenyan novelist and essayist Ngugi wa Thiong’o has referred to as ‘decolonizing the mind’. His strategy for doing so has been to reassert the use of his native tongue (although this does not extend to the programmatic tracts in which he presents his rationale for doing so). The strategy adopted by the post-colonial theorists is to subject the language of the colonizers to critical scrutiny, deconstructing representative texts and exposing the discursive designs that underlie their surface narratives. This is seen as an act of transgression, a politicized initiative that undermines the hegemonic influence of Western knowledge and brings about the ‘cultural decentering of the [European] centered world system’. Bhabha, for example, presents his work as an effort to turn ‘the pathos of cultural confusion into a strategy of political subversion’.

For the sake of argument, let us accept the post-colonial theorists’
assertion. Let us agree that the non-Western world remains in thrall to the
discursive system of the West, to the system that Said identifies as
Orientalism. How do the post-colonial theorists propose to liberate these
hostages? By writing in a manner that is utterly inaccessible to most of
them? By writing as the acolytes of Western theorists? By writing to mainly
Western audiences from mainly Western academies about mainly Western
literature? By writing? These questions may seem unnecessarily harsh, but
they force to the fore the premise that stands at the heart of post-colonial
theory’s sense of itself—the notion that the sort of recondite textual analysis
it practises offers a weapon to break free from the cultural and indeed
political oppression of the West. One need not be a Marxist materialist—
though this stance has supported a healthy scepticism regarding post-
colonial theory—to consider this proposition as dubious, if not delusional.

The issue that concerns us here, however, is not what this literature can
or cannot do to decolonize the minds of contemporary non-Western peoples,
but what it can or cannot do to deepen our understanding of the history of
colonialism. What complicates this issue is that post-colonial theorists hold
contending views about the value of historical analysis. For post-modernist
purists like Homi Bhabha, history is nothing more than a text, a ‘grand
narrative’ that operates according to the same rules of rhetoric and logic as
other genres of Western writing. As such, its significance is limited to the
part it plays in the discursive field that the post-colonial critic seeks to
dismantle, rather than the contribution it makes to our knowledge about the
nature of colonialism. Bhabha keeps out the stuff of history by plucking
random works of literature and other texts from their contextual soil and
sealing them in the hermetic chambers of a psychoanalytic essentialism.
Suspicion of history as an accomplice to the West’s discursive drive to
dominate the Other is a disturbing motif within a significant element of
post-colonial theory. Edward Said’s position is an ambiguous one,
professing on the one hand the importance of a historicized understanding
of Orientalism, while suggesting on the other hand that the discipline of
history is itself implicated in the Orientalist enterprise. John MacKenzie
complains that Said’s efforts to achieve a historicist untainted by
Orientalist assumptions are essentially ahistorical, a charge that I think
overstates the case, obviating the opportunity for interdisciplinary
dialogue. The same accusation can be made, however, against some of
Said’s confederates. Gayatri Spivak praises the members of the Subaltern
Studies group for engaging in what she regards as the deconstruction of a
‘hegemonic historiography’ and urges them to break from the premises of
historical analysis altogether. The influential cultural critic Adib Nandy
denounces historical consciousness as a ‘cultural and political liability’ for
non-Western peoples. In The Intimate Enemy, his best-known work, he
proclaims that his aim is to present ‘an alternative mythography which
denies and defies the values of history’. This view of history as a
mythography concocted by the West to further its hegemonic ambitions is
one that Robert Young argues to be at the core of the post-colonial critique.
He traces the intellectual genealogy of this effort to expose, decenter, and
deconstruct what are seen as the totalizing claims of ‘white mythologies’, or
history as it has been practised in the West. For historians who have come
under the influence of post-colonial purists, this attack on history has
occasioned considerable hand-wringing. Some of the younger members of
the Subaltern Studies school of Indian historiography in particular have
begun to agonize about whether it is possible to write history when ‘Europe
works as a silent referent to historical knowledge itself’. This is a real and
serious epistemological problem, and I do not wish to demean the struggle
to reconstruct history from a non-Eurocentric perspective. But this is not the
agenda of the post-colonial purists, whose efforts instead are directed
against an historical mode of understanding altogether.

What happens when history is set aside? Some recent examples of post-
colonial scholarship suggest that it leads to a wilful neglect of causation,
context, and chronology. The authors of The Empire Writes Back: Theory
and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures blithely pour the literatures of
Africa, Australia, the Caribbean, the United States, and other regions of the
world into the same post-colonial pot, ignoring their profoundly different
historical experiences except insofar as their ‘complexities and varied
cultural provenance’ are taken as signs of the decremental pluralism that
identify them as post-colonial literatures. Laura E. Donaldson
acknowledges the need to address ‘concrete historical circumstances’ in the
introduction to her Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender and Empire-
Building, but this appreciation is quickly forgotten as she flits from Jane
Eyre to Uncle Tom’s Cabin to The King and I (the novel, the play, and the
film) as well as a bewildering array of other texts in an analysis that
confounds colonialism with racism, sexism, and oppression in general.
One of the most egregious examples of this aversion to history is David Spurr’s
The Rhetoric of Empire. Subtitled ‘colonial discourse in journalism, travel
writing, and imperial administration’, this astonishing book insists that the
same discursive forms recurred over more than a century in the diverse
generes of writing that Western travellers, officials, and others produced
about the profoundly varied peoples across the globe with whom they came
in contact. In this ‘global system of representation’, it seems to make no
difference whether the rhetoric is British, French, or American, whether the
author is Lord Lugard, André Gide, or Joan Didion, whether the text is a
colonial report, a scholarly treatise, or an article in National Geographic, or
whether the place is nineteenth-century South Africa, early twentieth
century Mexico, or the contemporary Middle East. All are indelibly
advanced as evidence of the depth of the West’s discursive drive for
domination. It might be supposed that reductionism could not be carried
much further, but Spurr shows otherwise. Following in the footsteps of
Derrida, he tracks his quarry all the way back to writing itself: ‘The writer
is the original and ultimate colonizer, conquering the space of consciousness
with the exclusionary and divisive structures of representations.’ Rarely
does a theory chase its own tail with such single-minded intensity.2 We will
not trouble Spurr with such obvious questions as whether he too is complicit
as a writer in this colonization of consciousness or whether the imperial
implications of writing are also applicable to the literatures of non-Western
societies. We will merely observe that his analysis is entangled in what post-
colonial theorists might call a ‘double bind’: it seeks to convict historically
specific parties of historically specific crimes while exonerating itself of any
accountability to historical specificity.

II
Fortunately, other literary scholars have shown far more sensitivity to the
historical record in their work. While operating under the general rubric of
post-colonial theory, these scholars have rejected the anti-historical
orientation of the theoretical purists. They recognize the distinction that
exists between history as a text and history as a tool, between its presence
as a discursive product and its use as an analytical practice. By placing their
arguments in an historical context and testing them against the historical
evidence, they have enriched our understanding of the imperial experience
in ways that historians have been slow to appreciate.

Mary Louise Pratt, like David Spurr, concerns herself with the rhetoric
of European travel writing in her book Imperial Eyes, and like Spurr, she
ranges freely across centuries and continents.29 Unlike Spurr, however, she
does not conflate one century or continent with another. She takes some
care to place the texts she has selected within the contexts of their particular time
and space and she readily acknowledges the appearance of discordant dis-
courses along the way. While her main aim is to trace the taxonomic
impulses of an emergent European hegemony from the eighteenth century
to the present, the story she tells is far from the univocal, unilinear one
presented by Spurr. For many historians her enterprise still may seem
unduly speculative and her arguments insufficiently grounded in the empiri-
cal record, but her efforts to establish the historical textures of her texts
make her study of European travel literature much more nuanced and
sophisticated than certain of its counterparts.

Various other works of post-colonial scholarship have engaged in a
profitable if often provisional association with history. Gauri Viswanathan’s
flawed but intriguing study of the British effort to introduce the study of
English literature into the curriculum of Indian schools draws much of its
force from the author’s immersion in the early nineteenth-century debate
between Orientalists and Anglicists about how to make Indians more
amenable to British rule.30 The self-proclaimed ‘historicist’ reading of
British explorers’ accounts of East and Central Africa that Tim Youngs
proffers is successful in showing that these representations of Africa were
shaped in significant ways by class-specific preoccupations with identity
that had their impetus in Britain itself.31 Jenny Sharpe overcomes the sim-
plistic assumptions that often accompany discussions of gender and race in
the colonial realm by placing her study of rape as a trope in Western fiction
about the Raj within the context of the shifting patterns of power from the
pre-Mutiny to the post-independence era.32 Patrick Brantlinger’s sweeping
survey of British literature and imperialism in the nineteenth century
succeeds as well as it does partly because it understands that the British
empire was a widely varied phenomenon that inspired different responses in
different places and at different times.33 Each of these works evidences a
significant degree of sensitivity to the historical record, and although historians in the relevant fields can doubtless demonstrate that distortions
and simplifications persist, the fact remains that these examples of
engagement with imperial history by post-colonial theory demand our atten-
tion.

This increased fraternization with history has inspired its practitioners to
question some of the cruder premises that post-colonial theory brought to
the study of imperialism. One of the most dismaying of these is the tenden-
cy to essentialize the West, a discursive practice no less distorting than the
West’s tendency to essentialize the Orient.” In Said’s Orientalism and much
of the scholarship it has inspired, the West is seen as an undifferentiated,
onimpornt entity, imposing its totalizing designs on the rest of the world
without check or interruption. Ironically, this stress on the power of the
West countenances the neglect of that power as it was actually exercised in
the colonial context, ignoring ‘its plural and particularized expressions’.34
Further, it fails to appreciate the uncertainties, inconsistencies, modifica-
tions, and contradictions that afflicted Western efforts to impose its will on
other peoples. Marxist-inspired critics in particular have taken post-colonial
theory to task for ignoring what Sumit Sarkar calls ‘the microphysics of
colonial power’.35

With the appearance of more historically attuned studies like those cited
above, we have evidence that post-colonial scholarship is capable of more
subtle and persuasive treatments of the West and its widely varied imperial
agents, interests, and aims. Javed Majeed’s Unraveled Imaginings, for
example, shows that Sir William Jones, Thomas Moore, James Mill, and other major British interpreters of India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries constructed profoundly different versions of the Orient to serve profoundly different purposes, purposes that were often directed as much towards Britain as they were towards India. Monolithic conceptions of the East and its intentions have also proved increasingly unsatisfactory for many feminist scholars, whose analyses of the role of white women in colonial societies have exposed an obvious fissure in the facade of a homogeneous ruling elite. While some feminists have sought simply to acquit Western women of complicity in Western imperialism, others have understood that the construction of colonial power was a far more complex and contradictory process than the theoretical purists suppose. As Jenny Sharpe observes: 'The notion of a discourse that is traversed by an omnifunctional, free-floating power breaks down any distinction between relations of domination and subordination' – by which she has in mind in particular the distinction that confronted white women as members both of a colonial race and the subordinate gender. These sorts of distinctions are essential for making sense of the ambiguous, ambivalent positions of memsahibs, poor whites, and various other subordinate or marginalized groups within white colonial society.

If post-colonial theory is to move toward a more nuanced, historicized understanding of the colonial experience, it also has to overcome its tendency to abstract the colonized Other as an undifferentiated, unknowable category. Given their ideological loyalties, this may seem a rather surprising position for the proponents of post-colonial theory to take, but it derives directly from their answer to a crucial question: can the deconstruction of the West's misrepresentations of the Other open the door to a true representation? Most theoretical purists say 'no', arguing that any effort to retrieve the experiences and attitudes of the colonized is doomed to failure because it is inescapably enmeshed in the positivist premises of Western knowledge. Homi Bhabha argues that the best that can be done is to monitor the traces of the colonized inscribed in the margins of the colonizer's discourse, an enterprise enigmatic enough in its interpretation of silences, ambivalences, and contradictions to escape almost any kind of external assessment. Gayatri Spivak insists that the voice of the colonized subject, and especially the colonized female subject, can never be recovered – it has been drowned out by the oppressive collusion of colonial and patriarchal discourses. The implication of this stance is made clear by Gyan Prakash, who declares that the 'shift to the analysis of discourses' means the abandonment of a 'positivist retrieval' of the experience of the colonized and the search instead for the random discursive threads from that experience that have become 'woven into the fabric of dominant structures'.

While Prakash is seduced by the prospect that the 'relocation of subalternity in the operation of dominant discourses leads... to the critique of the modern West', others are appalled by this abandonment of the effort to recover the 'subaltern' or colonial subject's experiences. Critics complain that the Derridean turn in post-colonial theory denies agency and autonomy to the colonized, whose struggles against colonial rule and strategies to turn it in their favour are too abundant and abundantly recorded to be dismissed as mere echoes in the chambers of Western discourse. Apart from Prakash, few historians are likely to adopt the stifling stance of the theoretical purists, and there are signs that an increasing number of practitioners of post-colonial studies have begun to break away from it as well. Robert Young concedes in his latest book that the discipline has 'reached something of an impasse' growing in part out of a realization that 'the homogenization of colonialism does also need to be set against its historical and geographical particularities'. And Sara Suleri complains in _The Rhetoric of English India_ that post-colonial theory 'names the other in order that it need not be further known', and that its practitioners 'wrest the rhetoric of otherness into a postmodern substitute for the very Orientalism that they seek to dismantle'. Even Edward Said has recently warned against viewing the West and the rest as essentialized dichotomies. He has retreated from his earlier position regarding the pervasiveness of Western power by examining the work of Yeats, Fanon, and other voices of cultural resistance to that power.

Whether figures such as Yeats and Fanon are entirely representative of colonized peoples' reactions to colonial rule, however, is open to question. What Said's use of them signifies is post-colonial theory's residual obsession to its literary studies roots, with its privileging of canonical authors. Hence the almost ritualistic re-examination of Charlotte Brontë, Kipling, Conrad, Forster, and the like in volume after volume of post-colonial scholarship. While recent efforts to extend the post-colonial inquiry to non-Western writers should be regarded as an important step forward, it remains the case that attention tends to focus on those Westernized authors who have obtained at least provisional admission into the Western canon, such as Achebe, Naipaul, and Rushdie (though Naipaul's status, in particular, is questioned by some post-colonial theorists because of his contrarian political views). It would be useful if post-colonial scholarship made more effort to situate these writers within the class structure of their home societies and the cultural context of a transnational intelligentsia so as to avoid simplistic generalizations that their work embodies some nationalist or 'Third World' essence. It would be even more useful if it freed itself from the constraints of a canon altogether. The recent upsurge of studies of travel literature can be seen as one of the ways it has sought to do precisely that,
but the abiding limitation of this genre is its Eurocentric character. While some practitioners of post-colonial theory have managed to take up topics and texts that are entirely outside the bounds of any Western-derived canon, the most interesting instances generally have come from scholars trained in disciplines other than literature. Thus, one of the challenges that continues to confront post-colonial theory is to open its inquiries to a wider range of voices, especially those from colonial and ex-colonial territories.

III

What, then, does post-colonial theory offer to British imperial history? With its mind-numbing jargon, its often crude essentializations of the West and the Other as binary opposites, and, above all, its deeply ingrained suspicion of historical thinking, one might well wonder if it has anything to offer. In John MacKenzie's view, it does not.

Such a conclusion, I suggest, profoundly misjudges the potential of post-colonial theory to enrich the inquiries of imperial historians. For all its faults, this body of scholarship has inspired some valuable insights into the colonial experience, and historians would do well to take notice. It has reoriented and reinvigorated imperial studies, taking it in directions that the conventional historiography of the British empire has hardly begun to consider. It has raised provocative, often fundamental questions about the epistemological structures of power and the cultural foundations of resistance, about the porous relationship between metropolitan and colonial societies, about the construction of group identities in the context of state formation, even about the nature and uses of historical evidence itself. These preoccupations are in no way limited to the literary proponents of post-colonial theory: similar inquiries have arisen among anthropologists, area studies specialists, feminist scholars, and others whose methods may seem somewhat less inimical to imperial historians, but whose concerns are often no less challenging to their practices. This essay, however, has focused on the literary scholarship inspired in large measure by Said because it has been the most audacious in its application of post-structuralist theories and the most uncompromising in its relationship to historiographical traditions.

The principal aim of this scholarship has been to reframe and reassess Europe's impact on the rest of the world—and the reciprocal effects on Europe itself—by shifting the focus from the material to the cultural realm. The contribution of post-colonial theory to this effort lies first and foremost in its appreciation of the relationship between knowledge and power. Said's central premise, derived from Foucault and embraced by other post-colonial theorists, holds that the imperial power of the West was bound to and sustained by the epistemological order the West imposed on its subject domains. While imperial historians have attended to the issue of power since the inception of their field of study, and while their inquiries have given rise to a sophisticated body of work that traces the exercise of power from coercion to collaboration, the fact remains that the circumstances that allowed relatively small contingents of Europeans to acquire and maintain authority over vastly larger numbers of Asians, Africans, and others represent one of the most persistent conundrums to arise from the study of Western imperialism. The post-colonial theorists have opened up a new and intriguing avenue of inquiry into this problem by probing the assumptions and intentions that underlay the efforts to give meaning to the colonial encounter. They have argued that these discursive practices were every bit as expressive of power relations as the more conventional manifestations of those relations in politics and other material realms. Henceforth their work has been more successful in suggesting an intent on the part of colonial rulers than in establishing an effect on colonized subjects: this has been a recurrent point of criticism of Said and his student Gauri Viswanathan, for example. However, they have been helped in their endeavours by others, notably historical anthropologists like Bernard Cohn, whose path-breaking work on British India has demonstrated a direct relationship between the acquisition of knowledge about subject peoples and the imposition of authority over them. The marriage of this research to the insights from post-colonial theory has shown that a fuller understanding of the West's success in imposing itself on the rest of the world requires a deeper appreciation of its cultural and ideological dimensions.

Post-colonial theory's insight into the pervasive nature of Western constructions of the Other has made it clear that much of what we thought we knew about societies that had been subjected to colonial rule was distorted by the discursive designs of the colonizers. This realization has compelled scholars to re-examine the circumstances under which particular peoples became identified as members of particular tribes, castes, races, faiths, nations, and other culturally-defined collectivities. Once again, the theoretical positions advanced by the post-colonial contingent have converged with the empirical researches of others, particularly specialists in the anthropology and history of ex-colonial societies. An exceptionally lively and important body of scholarship has arisen that examines the colonial construction of collective identities. What had long been thought to be the primordial affiliations of tribe and caste, for example, are now seen to have assumed much of their modern shape as a result of contestatory processes arising from the efforts of colonial authorities to impose order over subject peoples who sought to resist those demands. Similarly, religious communalism and other markers of group identity such as race and ethnicity appear to have taken new and more vibrant forms under colonial-
ism as a result of its determination to classify and categorize. The influence of post-colonial theory has been felt in studies of peasant consciousness, of gender and sexuality, of the body and disease, and of imperial ideology. Our understanding of the nature and impact of colonialism has been profoundly reconfigured as a result of these and other works, and at the heart of this reconfiguration lies the post-colonial premise that the categories of identity that gave meaning to colonizers and colonized alike cannot be taken for granted: they must be problematized and presented in the context of power.

The final point is that this problematizing of identity has provided an opportunity to overcome what D.K. Fieldhouse described a decade ago as the Humpty-Dumpty syndrome in British imperial history. Since decolonization, the study of the British empire has shattered into a multitude of separate fragments, with the most significant break occurring between the imperial experience as it has been portrayed from the metropole and from the periphery. By presenting a case for understanding the construction of cultural difference as a binary process – we define ourselves in the context of how we define others – post-colonial theory has insisted that the metropole has no meaning apart from the periphery, the West apart from the Orient, the colonizer apart from the colonized. The dominant party in these pairings has its own character shaped as a consequence of the shape it gives the character of the other. This is almost certainly the most significant contribution that post-colonial theory has made to the study of colonial practice. Sometimes, as in Edward Said’s effort to read plantation parings has its own character shaped as a consequence of the shape it gives the character of the other. This is almost certainly the most significant contribution that post-colonial theory has made to the study of colonial practice. Sometimes, as in Edward Said’s effort to read plantation exploitation in Antigua as the silent referent in Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park, the case for a connection between imperial periphery and centre seems strained. But just as often it has worked, supplying fresh insights into the imperial experience and its impact on Britain. Javed Majeed has made a persuasive case for viewing the development of Philosophic Radicalism in the context of colonial India in the early nineteenth century.

Moira Ferguson has shown that the abolitionist-inspired debate about colonial slavery helped to shape Mary Wollstonecraft’s critique of gender relations in British society. Robert Young has exposed the importance of mid-nineteenth century racial theory on the development of Matthew Arnold’s famous notion of culture. More generally, post-colonial theorists have shown that the ‘languages of class, gender, and race [were] often used interchangeably’, connecting imperial metropole and colonial periphery in surprising and significant ways. Evidence that historians have begun to take heed of the insights advanced by post-colonial scholarship can be found in works such as Antoinette Burton’s provocative analysis of the efforts by British feminists to appropriate the ideology of humanitarian imperialism to their cause and Lynn Zastoupil’s careful study of the influence of John

I began this essay with a rather polemical metaphor that portrayed post-colonial theory as a colonizing discipline, subjecting a province of historical studies to its alien rule. Insofar as this metaphor resonated with readers, it did so because it pandered to the widespread perception that disciplinary boundaries are akin to ethnic or national ones, abstract entities that must be patrolled and protected at all costs against outsiders. I intend now to denounce this metaphor as misleading and even destructive. It connotes a defensive mentality that hinders rather than advances scholarship and knowledge. While I have argued that there is a great deal wrong with post-colonial theory, I have also suggested that it offers interesting and useful avenues of inquiry that imperial historians would do well to examine. What we need at this stage is a full-fledged critical dialogue between the two parties, a dialogue that exposes areas of difference and delineates points of convergence. There are, in fact, some signs that this has begun to occur. John MacKenzie has made a vigorous, albeit defensive, intervention that has already stimulated debate.

My intent has been to push this dialogue in a direction that will encourage imperial historians to rethink their practices in response to post-colonial theory. Whatever the outcome of such a rethinking, it promises to take the historiography of imperialism in fruitful, if unfamiliar, directions.

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NOTES

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John Cill, Sandy Freng, Dorothy Helly, Tom Mencalf, and the members of the nineteenth-century studies group for their comments on subsequent drafts. None of them is responsible for the opinions expressed here.


7. The most notable exception is John M. MacKenzie, who has made an important intervention in the debate with Said and his followers. See his Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts (Manchester, 1993), and 'Edward Said and the Historians'.


10. The implications of this position are developed in Carol A. Breckenridge, and Peter van der Helm (15 July 1994), 12.

11. In striking how little attention has been paid by post-colonial theorists to this troubling fact. In a provocative new book, Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's 'History of Sexuality' and the Colonial Order of Things (Durham, 1995), the anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler has had the forthrightness to frame her Foucauldian analysis of European colonialism around the theme of Foucault's neglect of colonialism and racism.


See the work of Ann Laura Stoler, especially 'Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-century Colonial Cultures,' American Ethnologist, 6.

Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983), and more generally the work of the Guha-led Subaltern Studies collective.

See the work of Ann Laura Stoler, especially 'Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-century Colonial Cultures,' American Ethnologist, 6.