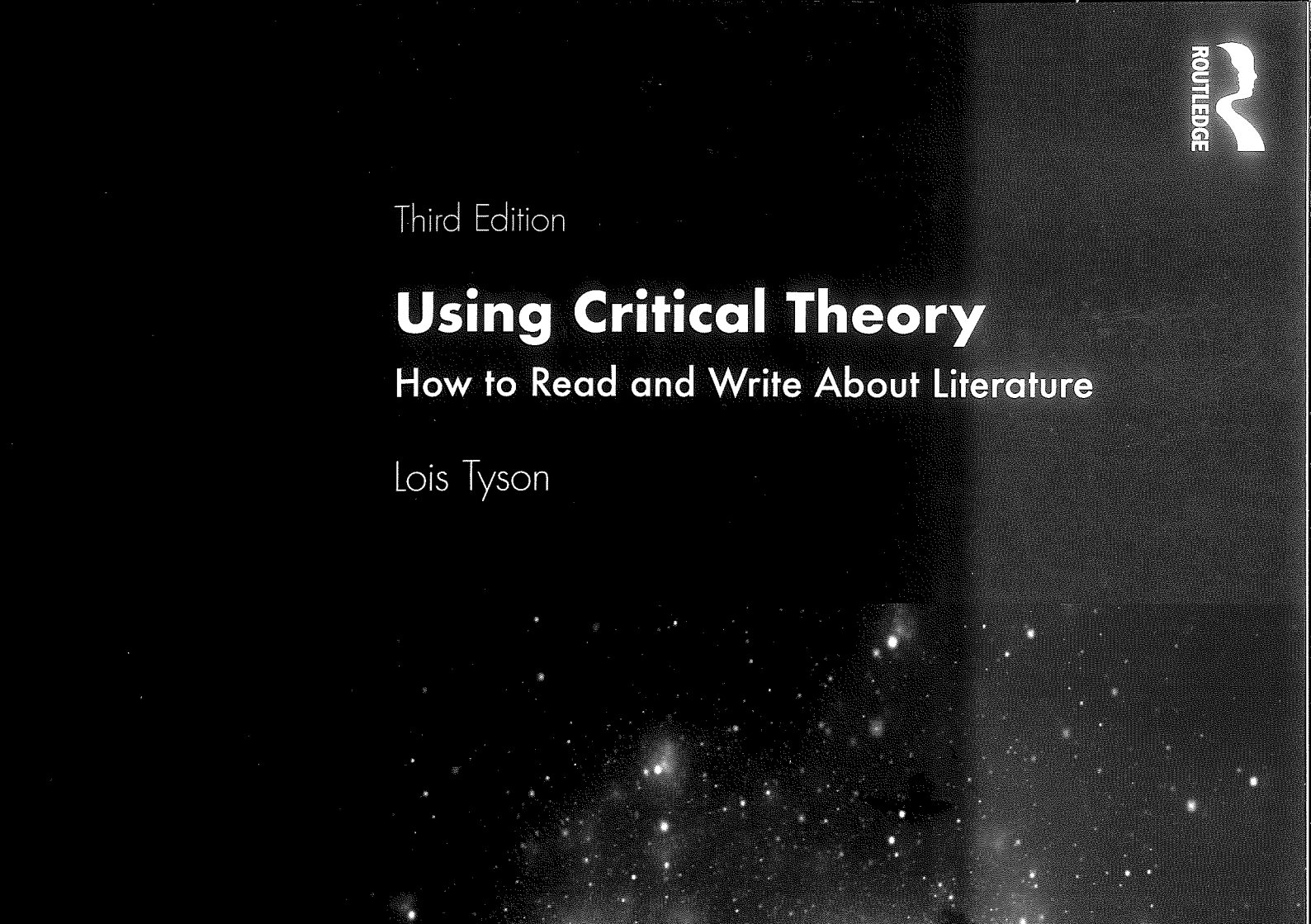
ROUTLEDGE
Third Edition
Using Critical Theory
How to Read and Write About Literature
Lois Tyson

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Chapter 9

Using concepts from postcolonial theory to understand literature

Why should we learn about postcolonial theory?

If you've read the preceding five chapters, you've seen some of the ways in which concepts from psychoanalytic, Marxist, feminist, LGBTQ, and African American theories focus our attention on different aspects of human experience. Specifically, you've seen some of the ways in which our relationship to ourselves and our world is formed by our psychological wounds, by the socioeconomic class into which we were born and to which we now belong, by the capitalist system within which we were raised, by traditional gender roles, by our sexual orientation, by our gender identification (our internal sense of our own gender, which may or may not match our apparent biological sex at birth), and by our race. Postcolonial theory gives us tools to explore how all of these factors—as well as ethnicity, religion, customs, education, disability, age, and other cultural factors that influence human experience—operate together or in conflict to create the ways in which we view ourselves and our world. Thus, concepts from postcolonial theory can help us understand human experience as the interaction of complex cultural forces working in each of us.

Postcolonial theory developed the concepts we'll study in this chapter because, as its name implies, this theory emerged in an attempt to understand people from different cultures in terms of an important experience they all had in common: colonial domination by a superior European military force. Europe's invasions of non-European peoples began at the end of the fifteenth century with the military competition among England, France, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands to find new sources of wealth around the globe. By the end of the nineteenth century, England had the largest colonial empire, which covered a quarter of the earth's surface and included India, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and Ireland, as well as significant holdings in Africa, the West Indies, South America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Probably the most damaging effects of colonial domination were experienced by non-white populations, whose own cultures were completely or almost completely destroyed as British government officials and British settlers imposed their own language, religion,

government, education, codes of behavior, and definitions of intelligence, morality, and beauty on the conquered peoples.

The British Empire is called a *colonial* empire because it gained new territories by the establishment of *colonies*: settler colonies—the sending of British settlers to set up communities in the territories Britain wished to control—or invader colonies, which were created by colonizing the native populations conquered by British military force. Even when colonization occurred without the aid of military conquest, the white settlers themselves, in their desire to expand their ownership of land and natural resources, eventually killed off, drove away, or colonized the native peoples who stood in their way. The colonization of native peoples was achieved by imposing English language, religion, dress, and other cultural practices upon them and by forbidding them their own native cultural practices.

Britain began to lose its colonial holdings after World War II, and British military rule of territories outside the United Kingdom is, for the most part, at an end. Nevertheless, the attempts of formerly colonized peoples to regain their own cultures, re-establish their own language, run their own political affairs, and develop a sense of national self-esteem have been difficult because so much of their pre-colonial history, language, and culture were lost after a century or more of British domination. In other words, the colonizers picked up their guns and went home, but the devastating effects of their colonial rule remain behind. Because conquered peoples were affected by British control from the first moment British rule began, the word *postcolonial* refers to the experience of conquered peoples from the initial point of British contact to the present. Postcolonial concepts, therefore, are intended to help us understand the experience of being colonized, the experience of living under colonial rule, and the experience of adjusting to national independence after colonial rule has ended.

British postcolonial populations include not only those that had been conquered by the British military and ruled by British officials—such as the populations of India and those of much of the West Indies, Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia—but also those native populations subjugated by white settlers and governed today by the majority culture that surrounds them, such as Australian Aboriginal peoples and Native Americans in the United States and Canada. Finally, many postcolonial theorists believe that postcolonial populations also include non-white peoples who have minority status in Britain, Europe, and the United States—for example, in the US, African Americans, Latinx[1] Americans, and Asian Americans—because, like colonized populations, these peoples have been deprived of much or all of the culture, language, and status they enjoyed in their homelands or have experienced the

1 *Latinx*, as opposed to *Latino* or *Latina*, is a gender neutral, nonbinary term (a term not based on sex or gender identification) that refers to a person of Latin American origin or descent.

loss of cultural traditions due to powerful socioeconomic pressures to conform to the dominant culture.

Postcolonial concepts can also help us explore the ways in which multiple forms of oppression—for example, classism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism,[2] and racism—can combine in the daily experience of members of political minorities; the ways in which members of these groups have overcome these kinds of oppressive forces and worked together to build better lives for themselves and their communities; and the ways in which such struggles are represented in literature. Postcolonial concepts will thus enable you to combine and expand what you've learned from the critical theories you've used in preceding chapters. Don't be surprised, then, if you notice that some of the postcolonial interpretation exercises we do later overlap with some of our interpretation exercises from previous chapters. Although postcolonial concepts will often help us see a literary work from a perspective quite different from the perspectives offered by the other theories we've studied, postcolonial concepts will sometimes combine the insights offered by other theories in an effort to show us, for example, all of the cultural factors influencing characters' behavior or plot events.

The term *postcolonial literature* refers to literary works written both by members of colonized or formerly colonized populations and by members of the colonizing (white) culture in colonized or formerly colonized nations. Examples of the former include the works of Salman Rushdie (India); Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua, West Indies); V.S. Naipaul (Trinidad and Tobago); Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Kenya); Witi Ihimaera (New Zealand); Albert Wendt (Samoa); Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Australia); and Nigeria's Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Examples of the latter include the works of Katherine Mansfield (New Zealand); Miles Franklin (Australia); Jean Rhys (Dominica, West Indies); and South Africa's Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink, Athol Fugard, and J.M. Coetzee. And as we noted earlier, because the experience of such ethnic political minorities as Native Americans, African Americans, Latinx Americans, and Asian Americans has much in common with the experience of formerly colonized populations, postcolonial concepts can often help us interpret the work of these writers, too. Finally, given that the primary purpose of postcolonial concepts is to help us understand the complex experiences of being colonized by a culture other than our own native culture and of resisting that colonization, we can use postcolonial concepts to analyze the works of any author—regardless of her or his time and

2 Cissexism is institutionalized discrimination against transgender people. It is based on the belief that transgender people are unnatural and, therefore, inferior to cisgender people, that it, to people whose gender identification matches their biological sex at birth. To learn more about cissexism and other transgender issues, see Chapter 7: "Using concepts from gay, lesbian, and queer theories to understand literature."

place of birth—that we feel can help us understand something about those experiences. For as we'll see in the "Basic concepts" section later in the chapter, our consciousness—our sense of self, our sense of our own culture—can be colonized, can be "taken over," by a new culture without a single shot being fired. And the culture that colonizes our consciousness doesn't have to come from a foreign country. It can exist right within the borders of our own nation.

Remember, although it's important that you read through the following list of concepts, don't be too concerned if you don't feel you thoroughly understand every one. You'll begin to understand these concepts much better when we use them, later in this chapter, to help us interpret the literary texts that appear at the end of this book. Remember, too, that I'm offering you my own literary analyses in the interpretation exercises provided later in this chapter. You might use the same postcolonial concepts I use but come up with different interpretations of your own. If you disagree with any of the analyses I offer in these exercises, don't be afraid to look in the literary work in question for evidence that will support your viewpoint. A literary work can often support a number of different interpretations even when readers are using concepts from the same theory.

Basic concepts

Colonialist ideology

Colonialist ideology is based on the colonizers' belief in their own superiority over the colonized, who were usually the original inhabitants of the lands the colonizers settled in or invaded. According to colonialist ideology, the colonizers were civilized; the colonized were savages. Because their technology was more highly advanced, the colonizers believed that their entire culture was more highly advanced, and they ignored or swept aside the religions, customs, and codes of behavior of the peoples they subjugated, often forbidding them to speak their own language or to teach it to their children. Children in colonized nations were taught the language, customs, and beliefs of the colonizers in schools set up for that purpose. While colonization by military force is generally a thing of the past, *cultural colonization*, often called *cultural imperialism*, has taken its place in many countries around the globe. For example, American fashions, movies, music, sports, fast food, and consumerism (or "shop-'til-you-dropism") have dwarfed other nations' own cultural practices or turned them into little more than tourist attractions, as is evident, for example, in parts of the Philippines, Japan, and Mexico.

We can also see colonialist ideology operating within the borders of a single country. In the United States, for example, many middle- and upper-class suburban Americans believe the myth that people living in Appalachia are not only poor but stupid, dirty, and untrustworthy; that the homeless are lazy and lack willpower; and that Native Americans prefer welfare and petty thievery to

gainful employment. You can see colonialist ideology operating in the practice of *othering* and in the relegation of persons deemed inferior to *subaltern* status.

Othering

One of the clearest symptoms of colonialist ideology is the practice of othering: judging those who are different from ourselves as inferior, as somehow less than human. For example, the colonizers saw themselves as the embodiment of what a human being should be, the proper "self"; the peoples they conquered were different, "other," and therefore inferior, subhuman. Othering divides the world between "us"—the civilized, the moral, the intelligent—and "them": the "savages," the immoral, the unintelligent. The "savage" is usually considered evil (the *demonic other*). But sometimes the "savage" is perceived as possessing a "primitive" beauty or nobility born of a closeness to nature (the *exotic other*). In either case, however, the "savage" is *othered* and, therefore, not considered fully human.

Examples of othering include, for example, the treatment of African American men as demonic others who might "turn violent" without much provocation, the assumption that gay men are unscrupulous sexual predators, and the treatment of beautiful Asian women as exotic others. Indeed, postcolonial theory has a special term for the othering of Asian and Middle Eastern peoples by Western nations: *Orientalism*,[3] which is the Western belief that people of Asian and Middle Eastern origin are sneaky, cruel, evil, unchaste, and sexually perverse.

Subalterns

Colonialist ideology always creates a social hierarchy—a system of social status—in which members of the colonizing culture occupy the top rungs of the ladder. Subalterns are those persons who occupy the bottom rungs of the colonialist social ladder, whether their inferior status is based on race, class, sex, gender identification, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or any other cultural factor. The word *subaltern* thus gives us a way to refer to any person at the bottom of a society's status system. Subalterns are othered by members of the colonizing culture and are deprived both of equal opportunities to better their lives and of equal justice under the law.

Subalterns include, for example, individuals othered by racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, and/or religious discrimination (such as antisemitism, or the hatred of Jews, and Islamophobia, or the pathological fear and loathing of Muslims). Among the most visible examples of subalterns in the

3 To learn more about Orientalism, see Edward W. Said's (pronounced *sah-eed*) *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978.).

United States are the homeless of any race; Native Americans; undocumented immigrants; transgender people; and economically distressed people, especially economically distressed people of color.

The dominant culture

The phrase *dominant* (or *hegemonic*) *culture* doesn't always refer to the culture of the majority population. The dominant culture during the centuries of Dutch and British colonial rule in South Africa, for example, was a white minority culture. What creates dominance, ultimately, is the military force—sometimes in the form of soldiers, sometimes in the form of police—exercised by the culture with the greatest financial resources and the willingness to use them to subjugate those it defines as subalterns.

The colonial subject

Because there is enormous pressure on subalterns to believe that they are inferior, it should not be surprising that many of them wind up believing just that. Subalterns who internalize, or "buy into" the colonialist belief that those different from a society's dominant culture are inferior are called *colonial subjects*—they have a *colonized consciousness*—whether the dominant culture in question is that of a foreign power or a culture within the borders of their own country.

Examples of the latter include women who believe they are, by nature, less intelligent or capable than their male compatriots; people from any non-white race who believe their race makes them less attractive, intelligent, or worthy than their white compatriots; LGBTQ people who believe their sexual orientation or their gender identification means they are sick or evil in ways their heterosexual and cisgender compatriots are not; and poor people who believe, no matter how hard they work or how ethical they are, that their poverty means they are less worthy as human beings than their financially successful compatriots.

One can be oppressed by colonialist ideology economically, politically, and socially without being a colonial subject as long as one maintains an awareness that colonialist ideology is unjust and that people who belong to the dominant culture are not naturally superior. In other words, one is a colonial subject only when one's consciousness is colonized. Colonial subjects usually practice *mimicry* and experience *unhomeliness*.

Mimicry

Mimicry is the imitation, by a subaltern, of the dress, speech, behavior, or lifestyle of members of the dominant culture. Mimicry is not intended to mock members of the dominant culture. On the contrary, it reveals a subaltern's desire to belong to that culture. Mimicry thus results from having a

colonized consciousness, from believing that one is inferior because one does not belong to the dominant culture. For example, during Britain's control of India, some Indians adopted British attire, hairstyles, and the like because they wanted to be considered "as good as" their British oppressors. Analogously, working-class and middle-class people in the United States sometimes make purchases that endanger their financial security because they want to resemble the upper-class members of their own country, whom they consider superior to themselves. In contrast, if one imitates members of the dominant culture without believing that one's own culture is inferior—for example, in order to keep one's job—then one is not practicing mimicry in the postcolonial sense of the word, for in this case, one is only pretending to embrace colonialist ideology in order to survive. Sadly, mimicry often includes othering members of one's own culture. That is, in order to feel that one belongs to or has the approval of the dominant culture, one adopts that culture's prejudices against the members of one's own culture.

Unhomeliness

Unhomeliness is the feeling of having no stable cultural identity—no real home in any culture—that occurs to people who do not belong to the dominant culture and have rejected their own culture as inferior. Thus, unhomeliness, too, results from having a colonized consciousness. Being *unhomed* is not the same as being homeless. Unhomeliness is an emotional state: unhomed people don't feel at home even in their own homes because they don't feel at home in any culture and, therefore, don't feel at home in themselves.

Unhomeliness is often experienced by individuals who feel torn between the culture into which they were born and the culture in which they live as adults. For example, a person born in poverty who has become wealthy may feel uncomfortable both with his wealthy friends and with his parents, of whom he's now ashamed, because he doesn't feel he fits in either world. Similar experiences of being unhomed can occur to individuals who grew up in communities of working-class ethnic minorities—for example, in Asian American, African American, or Chicanx[4] communities—but who now live in, say, a suburban community most of whose members are upper-class or upwardly mobile middle-class white people of European ancestry.

Anticolonialist resistance

Anticolonialist resistance—the effort to rid one's land and/or one's culture of colonial domination—can take many forms. Anticolonialist resistance includes

4 *Chicanx*, as opposed to *Chicano* or *Chicana*, is a gender neutral, nonbinary term (a term not based on sex or gender identification) that refers to a person of Mexican origin or descent.

such activities as the formation of underground (secret) groups who might engage in armed raids, perform acts of sabotage, rescue individuals unjustly imprisoned by the colonialist regime, attempt to gain the support of neutral foreign powers, or raise international awareness of colonialist abuses. Of course, anticolonialist resistance can also take the form of an organized, armed rebellion against a colonialist regime, such as occurred in Cuba when followers of Fidel Castro ousted US-backed Fulgencio Batista in 1959. Or it can take the form of organized, non-violent resistance to colonialist oppression, such as occurred in India when followers of Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi ousted the British in 1947. However, even when political resistance is, for the most part, impossible because the forces of colonialist oppression are so overwhelming, anticolonialist resistance can occur on the psychological level. That is, even when colonized peoples have been completely subjugated to a foreign power over the course of many generations and no longer have access to their own language or their own cultural past, many oppressed individuals manage to keep their minds free of the colonialist ideology that tells them they are inferior. This kind of anticolonialist resistance, which exists on the psychological level alone and might be termed *psychological resistance*, is perhaps the most important kind of resistance, for without it, it is unlikely that other kinds of resistance would ever occur.

Examples of anticolonialist resistance in the United States are numerous. To cite just a few, there have been the Underground Railroad, which helped slaves escape to the North before they were freed by the American Civil War; the Women's Suffrage Movement, which got women the vote in 1920; the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s; the efforts of Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and the Farm Workers Organizing Committee to help Mexican American migrant laborers; the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), which fought the federal government's refusal to fund AIDS research; and the American Indian Movement (AIM), begun in 1968 to obtain civil rights and legal justice for Native Americans.

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There are, of course, additional postcolonial concepts, but these are enough to get us started using this theory to interpret literature. Let's begin our interpretation exercises by analyzing a story that illustrates the evils of colonialist ideology in chilling detail: Ralph Ellison's "The Battle Royal."

Interpretation exercises

Understanding colonialist ideology: Interpreting "The Battle Royal"

If you heard someone use the words *colonialist oppression*, probably the first thought that would come to your mind would be that the speaker was talking about a relationship between two countries. For colonialist oppression usually occurs when a wealthier, technologically developed nation exploits a poorer, technologically underdeveloped nation, justifying its aggression with the claim that its culture—its laws, customs, beliefs, and so forth—is superior to that of the exploited nation. Ralph Ellison's "The Battle Royal" (1952; see Appendix C), however, illustrates the ways in which colonialist oppression can occur within the borders of a single country when the wealthier, more powerful segment of the population exploits those with little money and limited power, those whom it considers inferior due to race, class, sex, gender identification, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, or some other cultural category. In other words, Ellison's story shows us that the relationship between America's dominant culture and its subalterns (those with the least political power) is much like the relationship between a colonialist country and the peoples it subjugates on foreign shores.

Set in the post-World-War-II American South, "The Battle Royal" portrays a group of leading citizens—the town's wealthy white men, who are privileged in terms of, at least, their race, class, and sex—gathered for an evening's entertainment. These men obviously represent the dominant culture—that is, the segment of the population whose political, social, and economic power allows them to "run the show," so to speak. Indeed, the nature of the "show" they've arranged for themselves on this particular evening makes it very clear that they hold the power in this society and that they want those "beneath" them to know it. For it seems that the desire to display their power is the men's primary purpose in engaging the services of the white exotic dancer; the African American youths who fight in the battle royal; and the African American narrator, who gives a speech after participating in the battle royal. Clearly, the white men's behavior during each of these "entertainments" is aggressive, hostile, and intended to degrade the subaltern "entertainers," whom these leading citizens consider inferior to themselves. Ellison's tale is thus anticolonialist: it offers us an extremely negative portrait of colonialist ideology and suggests that such ideology is operating against subaltern American citizens within the borders of their own nation. We might even say that "The Battle Royal" depicts a kind of colonialist microcosm (miniature world) the occupants of which illustrate, as we'll see, both the ways in which colonialist ideology operates and some of the possibilities for anticolonialist resistance. To understand how the story accomplishes this task, we'll examine how Ellison's tale portrays: (1) the colonialist ideology of the dominant culture; (2) the subjugation of that culture's subalterns; and (3) the possibilities for anticolonialist resistance.

The colonialist ideology of the dominant culture

Although the civic leaders in "The Battle Royal" probably never heard the phrase *colonialist ideology*, it is this ideology that influences most of their