

The Postcolonial Unconscious

Neil Lazarus

299 pages, 2011, \$30.95 CAD (paper)

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Reviewed by Derek Hook, Birkbeck University of London

The opening chapters of *The Postcolonial Unconscious* stress the role of literature not only as a means of relaying the historical and material conditions of a given time and place, but as a vehicle for conveying the *consciousness* of various (post)colonial contexts. One of Lazarus's aims is to draw attention precisely to the phenomenological dimension of such literature, to foreground attempts to capture or represent the "structure of feeling" of lives lived in particular ways, in particular places and times, framed by particular conditions of existence, and predicated on particular meanings, values, and assumptions (79). Ultimately this depends on a writer's ability to find the words, concepts, figures, tropes, and narrative forms to mediate between and thread together—in ways which are not merely plausible but, more importantly, intelligible and transmissible—what are in fact discrepant and discontinuous aspects of reality (80). This is hard to improve upon, as a bench-mark for what historical literature can, and should, aim to achieve, and it directs us to the political role of the post-colonial imagination, something alluded to in the book's title, which of course chimes with Frederick Jameson's (1981) *The Political Unconscious*.

A related issue comes to the fore in respect of discussions of the postcolonial imaginary, and it points to one of the more important contributions Lazarus makes to the broader field of postcolonial studies. I have in mind here the author's ability to invoke a sense of what that emotive topic of "land"—perhaps still the most pertinent facet of material dispossession in the postcolonial African context—might mean. In a gloss on the work of James Graham, he speaks of a fraught discourse in which "land" is struggled over and negotiated in all of its meanings: as abstract expanse, as ground of subsistence, as domesticated territory ("home" or "country"), as reservoir of history and culture, and as potentially privatisable "property" (57).

The topic of land and what it might mean in (neo)colonial settings is closely related to the issue of anticolonial nationalism, a topic which has—as Lazarus rightly notes—often represented something of a blind-spot in what we might refer to as poststructuralist forms of postcolonial theory. Indeed, scholars schooled in such a tradition have often exhibited a near allergic reaction to the question of nationalism. Nationalism is typically viewed, and not without reason, as exclusionary and chauvinistic, as a typically narcissistic—and not infrequently racist—mode of social formation. What this means is that such scholars (and I count myself amongst them) have often battled to appreciate exactly how crucial a role forms of African Nationalism, to take an example, have played in the anti-colonial era. Lazarus aptly

qualifies the nature and impetus of anticolonial nationalism in the following way:

But “nationalism” here is not at all the cramping, reductive, and authoritarian discourse typically identified, and uniformly deplored, by postcolonial critics. On the contrary: in the historical context of anticolonialism, this nationalism is the engine of collective daring, ingenuity, and capacious social imagination ... (64).

In its appearance in works of literature, anticolonial nationalism is seldom narrow, sectarian, or chauvinistic; it seeks instead to open the community up to the globe ... [In] anticolonial nationalist literary discourse ... [o]ne can see, in the identification, indexing, and weighting of ... objects and relationships, history and memory, a forging of the imaginative currency, the symbolic capital, of national(ist) identification and self-understanding (65).

This is wonderfully put, and a valuable corrective to the poststructuralist tendency to dismiss nationalism as a necessarily regressive political form. Lazarus supplements this discussion by introducing the term “nationalitarian,” a concept he borrows from Anouar Abdel-Malek, who describes the nationalitarian phenomenon as having “as its object, beyond the clearing of the national territory, the independence and sovereignty of the national state, uprooting in depth the positions of ex-colonial power—the reconquest of the power of decision in all domains of national life ... Historically, fundamentally, the struggle is for national liberation, the instrument of that reconquest of identity which ... lies at the heart of everything” (Abdel-Malek, cited in Lazarus, 255).

This is an example of the breadth of reading, and of the wide variety of textual examples Lazarus brings to bear in his reconsideration of the field. While Lazarus certainly does engage a number of unfamiliar suspects within the rubric of the postcolonial—I was heartened to see a cross-section of Southern African writers considered, from Lewis Nkosi, Govan Mbeki and Thomas Mofolo to Zakes Mda and Ivan Vladislavic—he is also obliged to engage the by now canonical reference-points, the work, particularly, of Edward Said and Frantz Fanon.

Lazarus’s instructive chapter on Edward Said revisits the much-traversed terrain of the particular methodological strengths and failings of Said’s *Orientalism*. Lazarus’s intervention draws on a lengthy passage from *Marxism and Literature* by Raymond Williams, pointing out that Williams’s text is governed by a solidaristic and activist notion of human sociality, evident both in its reference and its language, in what it says and in how it says it: “lived identities,” “shaping,” making and self-making experience, “constitutive and constituting,” “meanings and values,” “people in the society,” “ourselves and our world.” Said’s humanist sentiments gesture in this direction as well. But because in *Orientalism* these are channelled through the Foucauldian category of “discourse,” whose massive and thoroughgoing anti-humanism is among its most striking features, they struggle to find expression there (193). This is an elegant way of making the point, and of drawing out what remains a latent dimension of Said’s important text.

Lazarus also considers in some detail Said's thoughts on the role of public intellectuals. This was, perhaps, an odd choice, when certain of Said's posthumous and less-considered writings might have represented a more intriguing point of discussion (Said's notions of late style, or cosmopolitanism, for example). I note this because Said's thoughts on the duty of public intellectuals seems—at least to me—often to verge on the banal. That intellectuals should have a political duty of some sort, along with the responsibility of, to use the regrettably Foucauldian phrase, “speaking truth to power,” is hardly a ground-breaking thesis. Ultimately, I am in agreement with Lazarus's suspicions that Said's pronouncements on intellectual life suggest “a self-justifying romanticisation of the intellectual vocation” (200).

It has by now become something of a convention to line up behind David Macey's (2000) biography of Fanon, and side with him in consigning a series of postcolonial commentators on Fanon—Homi Bhabha chief amongst them—to the dustbin of scholarly history. This, I think, is in many ways a sad state of affairs, and I was surprised to see Lazarus adopting such a dismissive attitude in his otherwise thoughtful engagement with Fanon. This is not to say that the criticisms of Homi Bhabha (in particular) are without substance. Claims that Bhabha's work often implicitly de-politicizes Fanon and neglects the force of Fanon's strident anti-colonialism certainly deserve a hearing, and in this respect I am in agreement with Lazarus. Nevertheless there is something irksome about “purist” readings that attempt to take sole possession of Fanon's legacy. Lazarus tells us, approvingly, that “Macey's book is sufficient to strip the warrant not only from Bhabha's work on Fanon ... but also from that of ... many postcolonial critics who have predicated their own commentaries on Fanon on it” (166). Here it is worthwhile bearing in mind the tenor of Fanon's own experimental theorizations, particularly in *Black Skin, White Masks*. His *bricolage* methodology—which Lazarus spends some time discussing—combined elements of psychiatry, existential philosophy, literature and autobiography in a fundamentally innovative manner. This must surely suggest that a similar degree of conceptual experimentation be afforded to those who seek not only to engage with Fanon's work, but enter into a hybrid mode of scholarship inspired by it.

One further issue: for a scholar as conceptually refined and astute as Lazarus it is surprising that he uses in his title a concept that is used in an almost entirely unqualified way, namely the idea of a “postcolonial unconscious.” The title is eye-catching enough, to be sure, but the term is not indexed in the book or adequately explained, which makes for an odd oversight given that recent work has focussed on providing a degree of rigour and precision in referring to this famously woolly term, precisely in the postcolonial and post-apartheid context that Lazarus knows so well. I have in mind here Peter Hudson's (2013) recent analysis of how the “colonial unconscious” operates in the context of post-apartheid racism.

All in all, Lazarus deserves kudos for his scholarly erudition, the readability of his prose, and his ability to re-orient the reader in

relation to the field of postcolonial studies. His suggested alternative rubrics (modes of production, land and environment, state and nation, structures of feeling) enable us to approach the terrain of the “postcolonial unconscious” afresh. This is one of the successes of this rewarding text: it invites us not only to consider again what should be within the canon, but also how that canon as a whole might be reconfigured.

Works Cited

- Abdel-Malek, Anouar. *Nation and Revolution*. Trans. Mike Gonzalez. Albany: State University of New York P, 1981. Print.
- Hudson, Peter. “The State and the Colonial Unconscious.” *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies*, 39.2 (2013): 263-77. Print.
- Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981. Print.
- Macey, David. *Frantz Fanon: A Life*. London: Granta, 2000. Print.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979. Print.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977. Print.