

Postcolonialism and Postmodernism

Ato Quayson

The terms postcolonialism and postmodernism are both extremely elusive to classify, and the attempt to bring them together might be thought only to further compound the difficulties. For some critics, any attempt to fuse the two in a common theoretical inquiry is bound to occlude serious problems of the degree to which the unfinished business of late capitalism differently affects postmodern and postcolonial conditions. More crucially, it is also argued that the postmodern is part of an ensemble of the hierarchizing impulse of Western discourses, and that even though it hints at pluralism and seems to favor an attack on hegemonic discourses, it is ultimately apolitical and does not feed into larger projects of emancipation. To collocate the two, then, is somehow to disempower the postcolonial, which is conceived to be more concerned with pressing economic, political, and cultural inequalities (Sangari, 1987 and Tiffin, 1988). In fact, for some commentators such as Nigerian Denis Ekpo, postmodernism is nothing but another stage in the West's crisis of consciousness:

The crisis of the subject and its radical and violent deflation – the focal point of postmodern critique – are logical consequences of the absurd self-inflation that the European subjectivity had undergone in its modernist ambition to be the salt of the earth, the measure and master of all things.

For cultures (such as ours) that neither absolutized, i.e. deified, human reason in the past nor saw the necessity for it in the present, the postmodern project of de-deification, de-absolutization of reason, of man, of history, etc., on the one hand, and of a return to, or a rehabilitation of, obscurity, the unknown, the non-transparent, the paralogical on the other hand, cannot at all be felt like the cultural and epistemological earthquake that it appears to be for the European man. In fact, it cannot even be seen as a problem at all. . . . [W]hen such a being settles for the indeterminate, the paradoxical, the strange and absurd, it is probably because he bears no more resemblance to the man as we know him, especially here in Africa; he is a post-man whose society, having overfed him and spoilt him, has delivered him over to irremediable boredom. Nothing therefore, stops the African from viewing the celebrated postmodern condition a little

sarcastically as nothing but the hypocritical self-flattering cry of the bored and spoiled children of hypercapitalism. (Ekpo, 1995)

For Ekpo postmodernism has to be seen as the hubristic consequence of a desire to dominate the world, one that, linked to the universalizing rationality of science and anthropology, has to face its own unraveling when confronted by the loss of empire. For critics such as Linda Hutcheon (1989) and Steven Connor (1997: 263–8), however, there is a productive way of seeing the two as mutually reinforcing. The two may be brought together in common thematic, rhetorical, and strategic concerns, especially as these are brought to bear on questions of marginality. The conjuncture is sometimes thought to be best expressed in the literary genre of magical realism. In magical realism a happy conjuncture is settled upon: magical realism is the literary genre that simultaneously shows a suspicion towards metanarratives, whatever their provenance might be in the Enlightenment, in nationalist historiography, and in literary realism. As Stephen Slemon notes about the genre, it is one in which a sustained opposition between realism and its opposite “forestalls the possibility of interpretive closure through any act of naturalizing the text to an established system of representation” (Slemon, 1995: 410). And so an affinity of concerns and strategies has been deemed applicable on behalf of both terms, at least in the area of literary studies.

In the general usage of both terms, there is an uneasy oscillation between social referencing and the analysis of representations, with this oscillation frequently being resolved by subsuming the analysis of social referents under the analysis of regimes of representation. This creates a number of serious problems which we shall comment on later. Thus, postmodernism is related to a literary and philosophical tradition of representation which could be said to have its own peculiar historical and social trajectory in Western thought. Some postmodernist critics maintain that no reality can be thought of outside the way in which it is represented and that any attempt to do so is to ignore the implicatedness of any perspective within the very object that is being described and vice versa (see, for instance, Natoli, 1997: 5–8, 21–5). Because the desire of what passes under the rubric of postcolonial theory is also frequently concerned with representational discourses, postcolonialism also regularly takes representations as the primary target of analysis, with material conditions being accessed only insofar as they can be related in varying ways to representational regimes. A simple way of viewing this similarity would be to see both theoretical terms as being the descendants of what has been called the “linguistic turn” in the social sciences and humanities, but this approach is not always helpful as it does not take account of the different emphases the two areas place on the relation between representation and a possible praxis, something to which we shall attend more fully in the third part of this chapter.¹

There are other areas of perceived overlap between them. The prefix “post” in postcolonialism and postmodernism aligns them both to similar problematics of temporal sequence and transcendence in relation to their second terms, colo-

nialism and modernism. The relation of temporal or other supercession raises problems of continuity and rupture for both terms, something which has been pointed out in different directions by critics alert to the easy triumphalism inherent in such “posts.” Alex Callinicos (1989) shows how much the definitions of postmodernism actually reproduce definitions that had been applied to high modernism, while Anne McClintock (1992) provides a stimulating critique of postcolonialism and shows how much, in its implicit temporal trajectory, it ends up reproducing elements of Enlightenment notions of progress which it seems inclined to challenge. On the other hand, the “ism” in both indicates their shared mutuality as second-order meditations, which, even though not coalescing into clear-cut ideologies, nonetheless seek to distinguish themselves from central positions in their various fields of inquiry. Both are thought to be second-order meditations upon real (and imagined) conditions in the contemporary world and are to be taken seriously as contributing to an understanding of the world in which we live.

2 The Concerns of Postmodernism

A fruitful way to proceed in defining the potential conjunctures and distinctions between the two terms is to attend to their different theoretical inspirations and ultimate social referents. As a means of mapping out the theoretical terrain of postmodernism, it is perhaps best to typify it according to a number of regular concerns. These concerns get different treatment in the hands of different critics, and there are bound to be disagreements on what things are most representative of the postmodernist paradigm.

A key area of dispute is how postmodernism is to be related to modernism. Ihab Hassan, one of the earliest commentators on postmodernism, addresses the question by discussing schematically the differences between modernism and postmodernism. Part of his table is as follows:

Modernism

romanticism/Symbolism
 form (conjunctive, closed)
 purpose
 design
 hierarchy
 mastery/logos
 art object/finished work
 distance
 creation/totalization/synthesis
 presence
 centering
 genre/boundary

Postmodernism

paraphysics/Dadaism
 antiform (disjunctive/open)
 play
 chance
 anarchy
 exhaustion/silence
 process/performance/happening
 participation
 decreation/deconstruction/antithesis
 absence
 dispersal
 text/intertext

root/depth	rhizome/surface
interpretation/reading	against interpretation/misreading
narrative/ <i>grande histoire</i>	antinarrative/ <i>petite histoire</i>
master code	idiolect
paranoia	schizophrenia
origin/cause	difference- <i>différance</i> /trace
determinacy	indeterminacy
God the Father	The Holy Ghost
transcendence	immanence

(Hassan, 1985: 123–4)

These are mainly stylistic oppositions and it runs the danger, as others have pointed out, of reducing complex relations to simple polarizations. The significant thing, as Harvey (1989: 42–65) shows in his discussion of this table in the context of the wider questions of definition more generally, is that Hassan draws on a variety of fields as diverse as linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, rhetoric, political science, and theology in setting up the distinctions. Thus, Hassan's table attempts to encompass all aspects of contemporary society and culture and how elements within them distinguish them from modernism and mark them out as postmodernist. These schematic polarizations, though useful as a starting point, are by no means beyond dispute. In the area of architecture, for instance, there have been disputes about the ways in which contemporary buildings are either modernist or postmodernist. One such disagreement has been on the status of John Portman's Bonaventure Hotel, between Charles Jencks and Fredric Jameson, with the first seeing the hotel as late modernist and the second interpreting it as postmodernist. (See Jencks, 1980: 15, 70 and Jameson, 1991: 38–45.)

As can be seen from the debates on terminology, the discussion of what constitutes postmodernism often highlights borrowings from linguistic metaphors and their application to social and cultural discourses. Indeed, easily tracable to the theoretical genealogy of postmodernism has to be the poststructuralism(s) that proliferated in the 1960s. In fact, for some, postmodernism is the operationalization of concepts developed initially within poststructuralism. At a rather basic level, it is the split in language between the sign and its referent, the understanding that language does not actually name an objective reality, that has acted as the main import from poststructuralism into postmodernism. This split between sign and referent is then taken also to be homologous with a series of other splits, such as those between history and its narrative representation, and between the author's intention and the meaning(s) of the text.

At one level, then, postmodernism can be typified as a vigorously antisystemic mode of understanding, with pluralism, borders, and multiple perspectives being highlighted as a means of disrupting the centralizing impulse of any system. This in itself has a fascinating history in Western philosophy and has been discussed

by Robert C. Holub (1995) in terms of the ways in which, from the period of German Romanticism, the maxim, the apothegm, the aphorism, the anecdote, and the essay were used as a discursive means of expressing the irreducibility of human subjectivity to totalized frameworks. Holub analyses this in relation to three historical moments in Western philosophy: the elevation of the fragment into a legitimate literary and philosophical genre in the early writings of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis; the scrupulous plurality in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche and his attempts to take apart the fundamental categories of Western thought through various attacks on conceptions of the subject, value, representation, causality, truth value, and system; and, finally, the critique of totality expressed in poststructuralist thought. Holub comes to two important conclusions in his account. The first is that the three phases have different understandings of totality. For the Romantics he discusses, the fragment, though seeming to stand in contrast to any totalized whole, was thought to actually be capable of capturing the essence of totality. Thus the fragment was ultimately itself totalized and wound up being a “religiously recuperated totality” (1995: 89). In Nietzsche’s work, on the other hand, it is evident that his robust attacks on totality are themselves undergirded by an implicit impulse towards totalization. This is best seen in the oppositions in the antagonistic value scales he frequently sets up in the course of his philosophizing, which he labels variously the Dionysian and the Apollonian or Socratic, the Greek and the Judeo-Christian, or describes by the oppositions good versus bad and good versus evil. Holub notes that on all such scales two common features are evident: the first term is always valorized over the second and the second and nonfavored designation or category is viewed as an “outgrowth of sickness, deceit, deception, or an illicit attempt to gain and secure power” (p. 94). In poststructuralist thought, exemplified for Holub by the work of Jean-François Lyotard, the same entanglement with a totalizing impulse is evident, particularly in his implicit claim to oversee all historical development while tracing the factors that have led to the postmodernist loss of belief in metanarratives (p. 98). The important thing for us here is not so much whether Holub’s own account fully explicates the central antisystemic impulses behind postmodernism or not, but that historically, the antisystemic focus on fragments and other forms of apodictic discourses has been related to specific historical and aesthetic configurations.

Lyotard, in his book *The Postmodern Condition*, provides another dimension to the antisystemic disposition in postmodernism. Among other things, Lyotard argues that both scientific knowledge and ordinary anthropological knowledge are governed by narrative. However, there is a historical break from about the eighteenth century, when science suppresses forms of knowledge that depend upon narrative. The crucial distinction comes when the mode of assigning truth value in scientific knowledge is set apart from the ways in which such assignments are achieved through narrative in ordinary knowledge. For Lyotard, the central feature of the postmodern condition is an incredulity towards metanarratives produced by science, Marxism, and Enlightenment theories of progress, and one

of the ways in which the postmodern is set to counter the institutions and discourses that seek to validate such metanarratives is by way of “the atomization of the social into flexible networks of language games” (1984: 17ff). Lyotard’s position might be fruitfully aligned to that of the Frankfurt School’s contention that scientific universalism comes at the price of the peripheralization if not distortion of specificities. For Adorno, Horkheimer, and others in the Frankfurt School tradition, there was always an excess of social and historical reality over and above the appropriative grasp of conceptualization that Enlightenment thinkers produced in generating a basis for scientific rationality (see Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997). For postmodernism, it is precisely this problematic excess that is widened and rendered into the dominant epistemological truth of existence under late capitalism, and a number of strategies are produced to support this key informing premise. These include a focus on indeterminacy, ambiguity, and deferral; on the deliberate fragmentation and misarticulation of the text, whether this is conceived of as social or literary; on the proliferation of aporias where meaning is deliberately made unretrievable; and a carefully parodic style that appropriates everything from tradition, history, and other genres and respects nothing. There is a focus on surfaces, on play, on the dissolution of boundaries, and on narrative and other jumpstarts that do not necessarily lead anywhere. The key theoretical terms in postmodernism are dissemination, dispersal, indeterminacy, hyperreality, normless pastiche, bricolage, *différance*, aporia, play, and such like.

The third major concern of postmodernism to be highlighted in our account has to do with the way in which the contemporary condition of globalized economics and culture are interpreted. Again following on from the implications of the linguistic turn already mentioned, postmodernist thinkers have attacked economic models of the interpretation of social reality in favor of more attention to representation. Marxism was the prime candidate for critique, and the nature of the postmodernist rereading of Marx is best seen in the work of Jean Baudrillard. Classical Marxism has a three-tier interpretation of the growth of the market and its central feature, exchange-value. For Marx, the phase of industrial production is that in which things are produced primarily for exchange; use-value becomes secondary to exchange-value, unlike the case that might be thought to have pertained under feudalism, where only a small proportion of what was produced as handicrafts, agricultural products, etc. was available for exchange. The third phase discussed by Marx is when abstract values such as love, virtue, knowledge, previously thought to be immune from market forces, themselves enter into the realm of exchange-value. For Baudrillard in works like *The Mirror of Production* (1975) and “The Orders of Simulacra” (1983), it is no longer possible or desirable to separate the second from the third stages, since in the “postindustrial world” (Bell, 1973) all abstract human qualities, images, and representations have become part of the economic world. Thus, Baudrillard argues that a “political economy of the sign” has come to predominate contemporary life, to the degree that all reality, including the economic, is ultimately

understandable in relation to signs. Television, the media, and popular culture then become significant areas of analysis for postmodernists because it is in these areas that the economy of the sign is best seen in its varying operation.

Furthermore, this postindustrial scenario is thought to proliferate a number of important social and cultural features. As David Harvey puts it in *The Condition of Postmodernity*:

Postmodernism also ought to be looked at as mimetic of social, economic, and political practices in society. But since it is mimetic of different facets of those practices it appears in very different guises. The superimposition of different worlds in many a postmodern novel, worlds between which an uncommunicative “otherness” prevails in the space of coexistence, bears an uncanny relationship to the increasing ghettoization, disempowerment, and isolation of poverty and minority populations in the inner cities of both Britain and the United States. (Harvey, 1989: 113–14)

Harvey contextualizes this within a larger discussion of shifts in economic patterns. Like Baudrillard, he believes that postmodernity is due to the vast assimilation of more and more areas of life to the logic of the marketplace in place of the clear division of economic interest between labor and capital along with clear patterns of social antagonism and identification. There is now a “space-time” compression brought on by accelerations in travel and communications. Under these conditions, production is now organized on a global scale, with the manufacturing process being spread out across many countries and plants with each being responsible for a minor part of the finished product. This contrasts sharply with the model he describes as exemplified in the carmaker Ford, where cars of the same make were made in the same plant and distributed to thousands of consumers all over the world. Such a form of production was centralized, dedicated to the mass production of minimally varied items, and was driven by economies of scale demanding and providing stable and continuous patterns of employment. In the post-Fordist era, economies of scale are replaced by economies of scope, where shifts in demands of taste and fashion are met by increased differentiation in the product (Harvey, 1989: 125ff). Within such contexts, and given the “uncommunicative otherness” that reflects the ghettoization of minority populations, one then sees how multiculturalism becomes the “praxis” by which a sense of identity is negotiated within a seemingly incomprehensible post-modern social realm.²

2.1 *Genealogies of postcolonialism*

Like postmodernism and poststructuralism, postcolonialism designates critical practice that is highly eclectic and difficult to define. A possible working definition for postcolonialism is that it involves a studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects, both at the local level of ex-colonial societies, as well as at the level of more general global developments

thought to be the after-effects of empire. Postcolonialism often involves the discussion of experiences of various kinds such as those of slavery, migration, suppression, and resistance, difference, race, gender, place, and the responses to the discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy, anthropology, and linguistics. The term is as much about conditions under imperialism and colonialism proper as about conditions coming after the historical end of colonialism. A growing concern among postcolonial critics has also been with racial minorities in the West, embracing native and African Americans in the US, British Asians and African Caribbeans in the UK, and Aborigines in Australia among others. Because of these features, postcolonialism allows for a wide range of applications, designating a constant interplay and slippage between the sense of a historical transition, a sociocultural location, and an epochal configuration (Slemon, 1994). However the term is construed, a central underlying assumption is that there is as much focus on the discourse and ideology of colonialism as on the material effects of subjugation under colonialism and after.

Some of the overlap between the antisystemic concerns of postmodernism and those of postcolonialism can be gleaned from a definition of postcolonialism advanced by Homi Bhabha, one of the key theorists of the field:

Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of “minorities” within the geopolitical divisions of east and west, north and south. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic “normality” to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the “rationalizations” of modernity. To bend Jürgen Habermas to our purposes, we could also argue that the postcolonial project, at the most general theoretical level, seeks to explore those social pathologies – “loss of meaning, conditions of anomie” – that no longer simply cluster around class antagonism, [but] break up into widely scattered historical contingencies. (Bhabha, 1992)

Lyotard’s understanding of the incredulity towards metanarratives that he argues defines postmodernism is evident in Bhabha’s formulation here, with the difference that Bhabha’s formulation seeks to highlight the fight against perceived inequalities as being central to postcolonialism.

It is generally agreed that the single most influential work to define the purview of the term was Edward W. Said’s *Orientalism*, published in 1978. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Said’s main thesis was that the Western academic discipline of Orientalism was strictly speaking a means by which the Orient was produced as a figment of the Western imagination for consumption in the West and also as a means of subserving the ultimate project of

imperial domination. Said's main ideas have been both criticized and extrapolated across various disciplines, and it is mainly thanks to his book that what is known as colonial discourse analysis gained coherence. Among studies inspired by his work have been those by Gauri Viswanathan (1990), looking at the introduction of the paradigm of English studies in India and the degree to which it attempted to shape local attitudes to empire; Patrick Brantlinger (1988), which looks at the forms of imperial ideology as perceivable in the literary writings of the period 1830–1914; Martin Bernal (1987; 1991), which through a careful analysis of the sources of Greek civilization sought not only to show that this was heavily indebted to the influence of a black Egyptian civilization but, also, the degree to which the discipline of classical studies in the eighteenth century sought to obscure this contribution in the dominant disciplinary paradigms that were in use; and Valentin Mudimbe (1988), which showed that the notion of African systems of knowledge had always been governed by Western forms of knowledge.

Even though Edward Said's work provides a useful starting point for defining the field of postcolonial studies, it is important also to take account of the composite genealogy of its formation. This can be fruitfully linked to what Benita Parry has noted, in an echo of Bhabha, as the "wide-ranging retrospect taken in the 1980s on the exclusionary forms of reason and universality composed by a Western modernity complicit with imperial expansion and colonialist rule" (Parry, 1997: 4). Directly significant for postcolonialism was the gradual and increasingly important research done in the areas of feminist, multicultural, minority, and gay and lesbian studies. The impulse they shared in common with postcolonial studies was the desire to contest the centrality and authority of distinctive systems of domination, jointly contributing to deciphering systems of representation thought to have been either designed or appropriated to validate institutional subordination and silence the voice of competitors. This major critical and retrospective glance was itself filiated to the broader criticisms of Western philosophy which, though having a long history, gained a special coherence in the hands of poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, and others from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Quite often, work of a thorough interdisciplinary nature was pursued, such as that by Gayatri Spivak in her linking of Marxism, feminism, and an eclectic cultural criticism, or that of Homi Bhabha himself, which combines Lacanian psychoanalysis with discourse theory.

Even though postcolonial theory and criticism has been heavily influenced by developments in Western philosophy, it is also the case that this has been joined to an impulse to formulate non-Western modes of discourse as significant ways of challenging the West. Though this idea is first forcefully spelt out in Ashcroft *et al.*'s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), it is perhaps Bart Moore-Gilbert who provides a more interesting genealogy of this tendency, particularly as he is able to show how some of the key concepts in postcolonial theory were worked out in the writing and criticism of authors such as Chinua Achebe, Kamau

Braithwaite, Wilson Harris, Wole Soyinka, and others (Moore-Gilbert, 1997: 152–84). Postcolonialism is seen by some of its practitioners as the paradigmatic antihegemonic theoretical orientation, with colonialism taken to be the archetypal and most brutal expression of hegemony; any theoretical tendency that sees itself as antihegemonic is then easily taken to be affiliated to postcolonialism. For others, however, it is its productive circularity that calls the postcolonial object of study into being while allowing unreflexive notions of nationhood, race, and identity and even of colonialism itself to be deployed without attention to the specificities of each discipline, or, indeed of particular local conditions (see Ahmad, 1992 and Thomas, 1994: 33–65).

Another inspiration behind postcolonial theory is the theories and processes of decolonization of the 1950s and 1960s. The centrality of thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, and C. L. R. James ensures that this link is kept alive, even though there is as yet no steady coherence in how these thinkers have been appropriated. There have been increasingly strong calls for a firmer acknowledgment of this dimension of postcolonialism's genealogy, especially because the work of decolonization is thought not to be completely over (see, for instance, Williams and Chrisman, 1993, Ato Sekyi-Otu, 1996, and Benita Parry, 1997).

The differences between postmodernism and postcolonialism become starker when their different social referents are disentangled from their representational domains and brought out into the open. Postmodernism references a particular sociocultural configuration in the West and theorizes globalization from an essentially Western standpoint, generalizing about global economics and culture as it is seen from the vantage point of the Western metropolis. As has been noted earlier, postmodernity is the era of surfaces, of the flattening out of effect, of multiple and shifting subjectivities, and of the total subordination of the real under the irreality of the images generated by visual culture. For postcolonialism, however, even though all of these might be granted as pertaining to postcolonial existence, the central problem is really the double vision that a peripheral existence in the world engenders. This doubleness can be theorized in many ways. Du Bois provides something of a significant lead in the area of African American subjectivity when he writes in *The Souls of Black Folk* that the African American is a product of double consciousness: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (1997: 615). Coming from different theoretical and personal inspirations others such as Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) and others have also theorized the same idea in postcolonialism both in the domain of subjectivity and in that of language more generally.

3 Reading across the “Posts”: Towards a Methodological Agenda

Without attempting to read the two fields in their fullest comparative possibilities (something which would be self-defeatist if not utterly hubristic) I want at this stage to focus on two areas as a means of pointing out possible directions that such a comparative approach might take. The two areas I want to focus on are 1) that of the problematic nature of identity formation in the light of aestheticized images of privilege, and 2) the “political unconscious” of popular filmic and televisual images of otherness and the implications these have for the *reception* of otherness in the metropolitan West. I do this by drawing examples from postcolonial and postmodern texts, as well as with reference to the popular television series *The X-Files*, among others.

3.1 *The social life of images*

Something of the potential for a fruitful cross-reading of concepts between postmodernism and postcolonialism can be extrapolated from Arjun Appadurai’s introductory essay to *The Social Life of Things* (1986). In this superb essay, Appadurai boldly joins Baudrillard with Simmel, Mauss, and others to define how exchange value is created for commodities through what he carefully elaborates as their “social life.” This, he shows, is not a secondary offshoot of exchange relations but is part and parcel of economic exchange and the creation of value in all societies. His comments are much too complicated and rich to be properly summarized here, but for my purposes I want to focus on the comments he makes about the work of Sombart (1967). Sombart argues that the principal cause of the expansion of trade, industry, and finance capital in the West was the demand for luxury goods, principally on the part of the newly rich, the courts, and the aristocracy. He locates the source of this increased demand, in turn, in the new understanding of “free” love, sensual refinement, and the political economy of courtship during this period. To Sombart fashion becomes a driving force for the upper classes, who are satiated only by ever-increasing quantities and ever-differentiated qualities of articles of consumption (Appadurai, 1986: 36–7). Appadurai makes a direct link between Sombart and certain postmodernist theorists before adding his own interpretive gloss to Sombart’s ideas:

In his emphasis on demand, in his key observations about the politics of fashion, in his placement of economic drives in the context of transformations of sexuality, and in his dialectical view of the relationship between luxury and necessity, Sombart anticipates recent semiotic approaches to economic behaviour, such as those of Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Kristeva, and others.

. . . For our purposes, the importance of Sombart’s model of the relationship between luxury goods and early capitalism lies less in the temporal and spatial specifics of his argument (which is a matter for historians of early modern Europe),

than in the generalizability of the *logic* of his argument regarding the cultural basis of demand for at least some kinds of commodities, those that he calls luxury goods.

I propose that we regard luxury goods not so much in contrast to necessities (a contrast filled with problems), but as goods whose principal use is *rhetorical* and *social*, goods that are simply *incarnated signs*. (Appadurai, 1986: 37, 38)

Following Appadurai, we can see how a focus on commodities as incarnated signs allows us to discern more clearly the economic basis for the dual consciousness that I spoke of at the end of the last section. Two literary examples will help bring this point home. In 1915, a play was produced by the Ghanaian nationalist Kobina Sekyi called *The Blinkards*. This play seemed on the surface to be merely a dramatic satirization of the up-and-coming newly rich who (mis)appropriate what they think are forms of Western bourgeois civility and luxury items as a means of giving themselves a distinctive standing among the local population. There is much that is pathetic and hilarious in Sekyi's dramatization of the concerns of this class of people. Among other things, Mrs. Brofusem, who has returned to Ghana with her husband after a brief spell in England, insists on speaking English to her husband and her servants. What is more intriguing, however, is that she also insists that her husband smoke his cigars and drop the ashes on the carpet in the living room. The English, she insists, do this to give the carpets a special look. But she is not the only one afflicted by this misapprehension of bourgeois domestic social practices; as the action unfolds a local farmer, Mr. Tsiba, brings his daughter to live with Mrs. Brofusem, so she can be brought up in the proper ways of civilization as only the redoubtable Mrs. Brofusem is thought to be able to instill. But Mr. Tsiba is inspired by an odd sense of doubleness, part of which is due to the fact that he keeps a small book with him of English sayings and proverbs which he tries to translate directly into his understanding of life. The results are unsettling:

MR TSI: Mrs Brofusem, some book I have reading say "All modest young ladies blush at certain times." I look in the dickhendry, and I see "blush" means to "redden in the face," also I look "modest," and I see "chaste." I know "chaste": the minister explain this to me. But I think "blush" is some English powder for face. I have never seen it here. Order some for my daughter I have many cocoa . . .

MRS BROFUSEM: (*Laughing*) Ah! Blush: Your daughter can't be able to blush.

MR TSI: (*Offended*) You mean my daughter too raw? I say I give her to you free, gratis. Make her blush. I will pay.

MRS BROFUSEM: I mean her skin don't allow it to be clear when she will blush.

MR TSI: But she has fine black skin, – velvet black. My great-grandmother he say, in old times, the blackest ladies are most beautifullest. I think my daughter's skin is alright.

MRS BROFUSEM: You don't understand –

MR TSI: Ma'm I went to standard sever. I understand –

MRS BROFUSEM: I don't men to say you don't understand English. How can you talk what you don't understand? You understand English but you don't know

that white peoples' skin is transparent; so you can see the blood running into their faces when they are having some emotional state.

MR TSIBI: Ah! What fine big words you use. "Transparent – Transparent." Wait (*Takes out a pocket Dictionary, and looks in*) Ah! here it is: "Transparent – that may be seen through, clear." (*To himself*) Well, my daughter's skin is clear, my skin is clear, my wife's skin is clear, my wife's skin is clear. We get no sickness. (*Reflects a moment*) Oh, "see through": I see! I see! Very funny. "Transparent" is like glass: no colour; so it is the blood make him red. You call that "blush." All right! Teach Barbara all the things . . . (Sekyi, 1974: 32–3)

It is interesting to note how the hapless Mr. Tsiba has to trace the liminal meanings of English words through the dictionary. In piecing such meanings together, of course, it is evident that he is never able to come to a full understanding of their meaning. This is of course a function of his semiliteracy; but more important is the fact that the dictionary essentially atomizes the meanings of words and treats them largely in isolation from their full cultural context. The inklings of a postmodernist problematic are in evidence here. But this has to be seen alongside the larger colonial and postcolonial problematic of double consciousness. Mr. Tsiba is bringing his daughter to be trained so that her "market value" in the marriage world can be augmented; in choosing this option he simultaneously enters the realm of imagined Western fashion and thus allows the further consolidation of a Western idea of selfhood which, as Sombart argues, comes from the sexual economy that ultimately undergirded the industrial expansion of the eighteenth century in the first place. But Mr. Tsiba has to square these new ideas of feminine desirability which he wants for his daughter with indigenous ideas of beauty. As he recalls it, his great-grandmother always said that the darker the skin, the more beautiful. Because the play is essentially a comedy, it resolves the contradictions happily, allowing us to laugh at these people on stage while remembering the more tragic ways in which this doubleness was played out in the social life of the newly educated classes of the period.³

Another good example of the incarnated signifiatory valence of commodities, this time taken from African American literature, is provided in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. This jump to African American literature is strategic.⁴ *The Bluest Eye* is at a primary level about the crisis of identity faced by the teenage Pecola Breedlove, who, because of the dysfunctional nature of her family and her own lack of beauty and grace, craves for blue eyes in the forlorn hope of gaining herself acceptability. But the "blue eyes" have entered a commodified domain; they are no longer just part of the white man's anatomy. Aided by marketing, the proliferation of images of blue eyes on dolls, cups, films, and even sweets, blue eyes become a disembodied object of aesthetic intensity. Though this is by no means the place to pursue a full study of this phenomenon, it would be interesting for example to trace how this objective fact – blue eyes – is detached from its objective domain and then transferred into the domain of commodi-

fication, accruing an exchange value through its social life, and becoming a desirable commodity to “own” as a means of identity affirmation. One might, in such a study, cast a passing glance at the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckelburg in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, which, implanted on an oculist’s fast-fading billboard, nonetheless create the social conception of the eyes of God in the novel. One might also want to study the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the popular culture that they spawned, the ways in which the “I am black and proud” of the likes of James Brown was a reaction to this commodification of blue eyes and white ideas of beauty. How do such objects shift epistemologically from a human domain through a quasi-theological one and into an area of aesthetic commodification? What are the moments of intensity in this process and what social formations disguise AND support their transformations?

The important thing for us at this point, however, is the effect that the desire for blue eyes has on Pecola. Partly at the mercy of an image culture, and partly because of the domestic crises of lovelessness she is constantly exposed to, she gets a split consciousness. For it is patently clear to her that she cannot get blue eyes, and yet she insistently desires them. When she does finally get the blue eyes, through the agency of the religious charlatan Soaphead Church, she is completely split within her psyche and becomes mad. She can only attain the aestheticized object of a commodified image culture by tragically doubling herself, being her own ontological interlocutor with an immediacy only allowed the insane.

Are these examples postcolonial or postmodern? They appear amenable to both perspectives. In both cases things, both abstract and concrete, are interpreted as efficacious signs of identification and become invested with desire. They are first and foremost incarnated signs, and mark, as Appadurai points out, a “register of consumption.” But they are signs that are not entirely free of power; there is a certain discursivity in both cases that places the desired objects within cycles that define a nebulous but regulative capitalist or Western or white area of power. Mrs. Brofousem and Mr. Tsiba in Sekyi’s text define themselves in relation to a Western bourgeois civility, one that cannot be fully attained precisely because the incarnated signs of luxury they activate and aspire to conceal behind them is a complicated hinterland of Western cultural significance. For Pecola, the problem is obviously more pressingly ontological. Having blue eyes is not in itself enough; for the blue eyes to be efficacious in giving her a sense of worth, she would also have to be part of the middle-class ethos defined by the family captured in the words of the primer with which Morrison opens her text. Without reducing the two theoretical perspectives to simple polarities, we might say that the key dimension that postcolonialism forces us to consider is that of agency, whilst the postmodernist angle would make us settle on the economy of the image and the potential for the proliferation of subject positions. For postcolonial theory, the question of agency is crucial because merely identifying the purview or ambit of the regulative parameters set up by images is not enough.

The next step has to be how such images ought to be subverted or how, if at all, their effects are to be challenged with a view to setting up a better order of effects. As the Igbos of Nigeria succinctly put it: “When we ask where the rain is hitting us, it is to prevent us from getting wet in the future,” or, in another useful formulation, “The anthill survives so that the new grass will have memory of the fire that devastated the savannah in the previous season.”

3.2 *Films, TV, and freedom*

Following this thread on agency, it is important to note the difference between postmodernism’s interest in image culture and the multiplication of realities, and postcolonialism’s focus on the politics of representation. For some postmodernists, the proliferation of images is a reflection of a problematically empowering subjectivity, one that allows people greater leeway in continually reimagining themselves. This is how Douglas Kellner puts it in *Media Culture*:

My analysis suggests that in a postmodern image culture, the images, scenes, stories, and cultural texts of media culture offer a wealth of subject positions which in turn help structure individual identity. These images project role and gender models, appropriate and inappropriate forms of behavior, style, and fashion, and subtle enticements to emulate and identify with certain identities while avoiding others. Rather than identity disappearing in a postmodern society, it is merely subject to new determinations and new forces while offering as well new possibilities, styles, models, and forms. Yet the overwhelming variety of possibilities for identity in an affluent image culture no doubt creates highly unstable identities while constantly providing new openings to restructure one’s identity. (Kellner, 1995: 257)

Even though this notion of freedom cannot by any means be taken as a generalizable opinion, it is interesting that it is asserted at all as a form of the possibility for the individual’s appropriation of the postmodern moment. In postcolonial theory, the emphasis is placed elsewhere. Whereas representations, especially residual colonialist ones, proliferate everywhere, it is by no means the case that the mere recognition of their proliferation gives access to freedom; such proliferations must be understood in their social content and historic projects before they can be aligned potentially to questions of freedom.

Something of the difference in the implications of the two positions for the issue of freedom may be glimpsed from the implications that televisual and filmic images of otherness have for postcolonial diasporas, and beyond them for multicultural agendas in general. It is significant to note, along with Robert Stam and Ella Shohat (1995), that the beginnings of Western cinema coincided with the intensification of empire in the late nineteenth century. This had a correlation with the content of films, especially as the medium was used for documentary and propaganda purposes in the heyday of empire. And Stam and Shohat additionally make the point that the popular images of the cinema helped to

secure an image of otherness whose efficacy it is difficult to deny. From Tarzan to Disney's Aladdin, the popular televisual and filmic media have succeeded in creating images of otherness that, even though a part of the proliferation of images that postmodernists speak of, nonetheless attempt to stabilize subliminal images of otherness whose contestation can never be completely successful until their import in a hierarchical world is fully grasped.

This contention is given even greater relevance if seen in the light of the changing demographics of cities in the West and the historical implications these have had for imagining individual subjectivity. The Western city, as an idea and peculiar place for the meeting and mingling of strangers, was an important organizing paradigm behind modernism. Many well-known characters of the modernist novel struggled for an identity within the hustle and bustle of the city, and this struggle for identity provided the rationale for their interiorization and the focus on the mediation of the external bustle through the psychology of the individual. While modernism relentlessly defined the individual against an engulfing urban background, it also succeeded in producing an important opposition between interiority and exteriority, the masses and the individual. But, crucially, it also subsumed under this typology a dialectic of otherness, in which the individual sensibility was shown to have to shore up a sense of (in)coherence in the face of the burgeoning and spreading city. These typologies by no means die with the waning of modernism, and postmodern culture has repeatedly returned to a number of these typologies in the face of the changing demographic configuration of the city. There is, for instance, a more subtle logic to be seen at play in the noir films of the 1950s, where filmic techniques sought to inscribe the typology of otherness on the landscape of the city itself. In the various metropolitan cities in which noir was set, such as Los Angeles, New York, Detroit, etc., it was clear that a postwar movement of nonwhite populations was moving into the major cities and, thereby, producing anxiety about urban space. The noir films of the fifties confronted this phenomenon, but not directly. They grappled with otherness by inscribing the polarities of race and of good and evil within the dynamics of filmic technique itself. This was realized in the foregrounding of the affectivity given to the perambulations of the civic hero in the dark, mean, and lonely streets of the city. Julian Murphet puts the point succinctly in his nuanced analysis of the "racial unconscious" of film noir: "These run-down, dark, mean and empty streets resound with the fear and hatred of a race/class faction that has lost its hold over them. The anger and bewilderment of the protagonists as they run along these avenues, casting nervous glances into every niche and side-alley, is as much an expression of bereaved loss as it is of haunted terror." (Murphet, 1998: 29)

If noir is taken to be a "modernist" filmic genre, supremely subtle in conceptualizing the shaping forces of otherness in the city, it is no less true to say that this concern retains its force in current popular TV series such as *The X-Files*. *The X-Files* is a curious hybrid. On the one hand it is clearly a police-detective drama, with a subliminal sexual synergy between the two cops, Scully

and Mulder. (It is perhaps not idle to note that Scully always keeps her lips partially apart, even when she is not speaking, in a barely concealed sexualized gesture much reminiscent of advertisements in women's magazines.) More important, though, is that the series is specifically about the esoteric crimes that consistently baffle the established protocols of investigation and which the police protagonists of the series are always brought in to tackle. "The truth," as the opening words in the title score says, "is out there."

The series is predominantly set in the city, and in many respects extends one of the concerns of the noir genre, namely the ontological inscription of otherness onto the geography of the city itself. In one particular episode called "Teliko: The Case of the Missing Pigment," this concern with an ontological otherness manifests itself at both the explicit level of the story as well as at the level of the cityscape. The episode opens with a flight from an African country which we later learn is Burkina Faso in West Africa. One of the passengers gets up to visit the toilet, and, while washing his hands, looks up and sees something off-camera that obviously frightens him. The scene is cut back to the passengers in the plane and we see a flight attendant asking people to prepare for landing. Asking about the whereabouts of the missing passenger, she goes to the toilet and, on seeing the body of the man, now dead, screams. He is chalk white and no longer black. The action begins.

We are next taken to the police department where we follow Scully and Mulder on their early attempts to make sense of a spate of strange deaths of black men from inner city areas. The cadavers, all African American, are distinguished by their uncanny chalk whiteness. Things resolve themselves into a clearer pattern when a new character is quickly introduced who happens to have traveled on the flight from Burkina Faso (and of whom we caught a brief glimpse coming from another toilet in the plane). He is Samuel Aboah, and seeks emigrant status that would allow him to remain and work in the United States. As the program unfolds we are gradually given more information about Samuel Aboah. He is visited by a black social worker who promises to help him get his papers; captures another victim in whom he induces a kind of trancelike state by shooting him with poisoned darts from a small reed-like object; is momentarily interrupted by the police inserting the reedlike object into the nose of his victim; and is later captured and sent to hospital but makes a dramatic escape. There is a final showdown in which the black social worker and Mulder are almost made victims of Samuel Aboah before he is shot in the stomach by Scully.

This truncated account by no means conveys the tension and mystery/thriller-like impact of the episode as the two detectives attempt to unravel the mystery of the missing pigment. But the "truth" is pieced together methodically. It turns out that Samuel Aboah is a member of a tribe in Burkina Faso who have been rumored to regularly kill other tribesmen, and, magically, to leave them chalky white. For the Burkinabe victims of this strange plague, this can only be the sign of a feared magic. But Scully unearths a more rational explanation. Aboah's tribespeople are, according to her, in an earlier stage of evolution, when their

bodies lack the capacity for producing the life-sustaining melanin that is the cause of the black pigment. But without it they cannot live. Their solution to this is to kill others and to somehow drain them of their pigmentation to supplement their own deficient supplies. This is what leaves their black victims chalk white.

A number of things need to be noted if this remarkable episode is to be fully understood in relation to the typology of othering that we noted earlier. The first thing is the subtle integration of the esoteric, in this case located in Samuel Aboah's mysterious vampire powers of draining melanin, with the discourse of illegal immigration. At a point during the film, Scully asks Mulder why this melanin deficient African tribesman should want to come to America in the first place. His answer is revealing. He has come, M. says, for the same reasons that all people come to America, to enjoy freedom, a place to live, and work. However, this universal desire for American life is in this episode criminalized, firstly by the fact that Samuel Aboah is nothing other than a melanin-extracting vampire, and secondly by the fact that he seems so desperate to get residence that he is prepared to use any means, fair or foul. Thus, the esoteric in this particular episode is no other than the illegal immigrant.

Samuel Aboah is an "illegal" in another respect also. He is an illegal immigrant into a more advanced stage of human evolution. It is perhaps not entirely accidental that his surname is the Akan name for animal. In his case he is underdeveloped even in respect to other African tribespeople. When he comes to the United States, his entrapment in an earlier stage of evolution reveals itself also in the curious tools by which he captures and works on his victims. Opposed to the guns of the detectives, his mouth-blown weapon is a throw back to superseded stages of civilization. Curiously enough, however, this evolutionarily retarded species is linked in the program to a more modern African in the person of the Burkina Faso ambassador to the United States. It is from him that Mulder learns of this strange tribe in a story the ambassador tells from his childhood about the death of a cousin of his. The ambassador, it turns out, has the body of the man killed in the plane secretly sent back to Burkina Faso for a post-mortem in the hope that some light might be shed on his own cousin's uncanny death. But the tale the ambassador tells is clearly supposed to be opposed to Scully's more elaborate and scientific explanation. Aboah is to civilization what the Burkina Faso ambassador is to Scully: evolutionarily and scientifically retarded species, respectively.

If this play with otherness manifests itself in such a blatant way, it is folded back into the informing logic of *The X-Files* by being staged in the recognizable geographical background of the inner city that gets incessantly revisited in the series. The inner city is a chronotope. As Bakhtin defines it, the chronotope is a time-space organization that calls up a specific affective response and allows us to relate an image to specific spatiotemporal and historical coordinates. Many of *The X-Files* episodes end in chases through dark streets and alleys. Even though these dark streets are by no means racially coded, it is also the case that inner cities, especially in the United States, have a specific demographic charac-

ter. The chronotope of the alleyways and dark streets, then, serves to signal a concern with the otherness of the cityscape even as a variegated racial (and class) demography is written onto it.

A critical question remains to be answered. In what ways can a TV series such as *The X-Files* be submitted to a postmodernist reading? It is a curious hybrid form, embodying a belief in the supernatural as a principle of relativizing scientific rationality. This is captured most critically in the fact that the other people in the police department regularly scoff at Scully and Mulder's often bizarre explanations for events. However, and this is a regular movement in the series, the esoteric is always submitted to veridical police procedures and, ultimately, shown to be explicable in scientific terms. But the scientific terms of explanation no longer remain the same. The contact with the supernatural leads to various kinds of short-circuiting of the rational procedures to be applied. In the pigment episode we have described, for instance, this short-circuiting is shown in the fact that no rational explanation is offered for how the draining of the melanin out of Samuel Aboah's victims is supposed to have been done. Also, no explanation is given for how, even granted that he is able to drain his victims of melanin, he is able to inject or take it into himself to give him his life-sustaining blackness.

Police departments in all big cities face increasingly strident criticisms about their competence in combating crime. Crime, the "other" of the civic and of law and order, is frequently seen to be uncontainable. But it is uncontainable for specific social causes. The genius of *The X-Files* is to transfer these causes onto the esoteric, while simultaneously placing emphasis on the supremacy of a newly-sensitized mode of police work. All the esoteric characters in *The X-Files* are strangers, visitants from elsewhere, not fully integratable into the spheres of civil order. Most of them reside on the social peripheries of the city (naturally, one might add), but this periphery often coincides with destitution, and the more run-down areas of the city, where the lower classes and racial minorities are traditionally known to reside. The esoteric is coded along a specific chronotope of the city, which, like the genre of film noir, hides a particular racial unconscious. The discourse of scientific, veridical police procedures are always shown to be found wanting; however, this apparent questioning of the efficacy of police procedures is not meant to completely replace it with a postrealist or esoteric procedure. On the contrary. The postrealist or esoteric is shown to subtend the rationalistic discourse of science. Ultimately, just as the esoteric other is contained by the handcuffs of scientific police procedures, so the social other, whether racial minority or lower-class fraction, is contained by the apparatuses of power.

How, we might ask, does all this fit into a postcolonial understanding of the world? What sustains *The X-Files*' imagining of otherness is not merely the strangeness of the esoteric, but its coding as opposed to the Law and to civic order. Mapped onto the chronotopes of the dark alleyways of the inner city, this other of the civic order is then easily imagined as that other which resists the

Law or, more usually, fails to be fully integrated into the civil order. In the Teliko example I have noted from *The X-Files*, this other is of course the illegal immigrant who lives among the ethnic minorities of his own color and preys upon them. Thus, the image of otherness in *The X-Files* is conjoined to a major concern of political systems in the West: how are illegal immigrants to be surveilled, checked, and policed, considering that they are so “different,” so given to “uncivilized” behavior, and so utterly and irredeemably other? It is not only police departments that are interested in surveilling otherness. The police represent one of the institutional apparatuses that most strongly articulate this interest. But the interest in surveilling otherness is dispersed everywhere, sometimes making itself manifest in the constantly asked “where do you really come from?” question put to newly arrived immigrants, to second and third generation children of immigrants, and, most irritatingly, to those of mixed descent in the various postcolonial diasporas of the West. For, the question “Where are you from?” is never an innocent one; it is a question of origin that, posed to particular subjects and in particular contexts also involves a question of return (see Visweswaran, 1994: 114–40). Thus the city chronotopes of *The X-Files* and other series like them have to be seen in a general popular anxiety about the very constitution of Western identity in general. This cannot be taken solely as a postmodernist question of the dissolution of the centrality of the West; it is a postcolonial one as well because the demographic changes in the West today cannot be thought of outside the various histories of empire (and slavery, in the case of the United States) which stretch back into previous centuries. And the mass media are critical in the dissemination of specific understandings of the West’s history and its relationship to the rest of the world. A postcolonial perspective allows us to see how these media relate to continuing problems of racial anxiety in the world today, and how we might think of a way of transcending such anxiety.

4 Conclusion: Postmodernism as Postcolonialism

I would like to conclude polemically by suggesting that postmodernism can never fully explain the state of the contemporary world without first becoming postcolonial and vice versa. The cross-reading of the two domains that we have attempted provides some pointers to possible directions. The first thing to note is the need to simultaneously factor images, tropes, and texts into specific socio-cultural domains while at the same time attempting to alienate them from themselves by reading them against other images, tropes, and texts that do not seem to share historical similarities. The purpose of this would in my view be not only to “read awry,” as Slavoj Žižek (1991) puts it, but to force the phenomenon under analysis into a mode of alienation or estrangement from itself by means of which it would be made to deliver a truth-value that ramifies far beyond its own domain of circulation. This does not preclude the filling in of context. On the contrary,

the specification of historical context is one of the first principles to be observed. But this has to be aligned to a more pressing requirement. Following the insights about the proliferation of perspectives that postmodernism offers, it is useful to try and fill out as many dimensions of context as possible, even when these might seem to contradict each other at various points. In our transfer of Appadurai to a reading of Sekyi and Morrison, for instance, we applied his ideas to two texts from very different contexts, one being that of late nineteenth-century cultural nationalism in West Africa and the other being that of early seventies African America. The point of it was to estrange the two texts from their normal grids of interpretation and to show how a similarity of effects could be said to have impinged upon the formation of subjectivity in both contexts. In this comparative approach, it would be critical to attend to certain inherent dangers in comparative analysis. Marilyn Strathern makes interesting observations about precisely these problems in respect of anthropology. Observing in *Partial Connections* that “complexity is intrinsic both to the ethnographic and comparative enterprise,” she points out how, in the attempt to demonstrate the social and cultural entailments of phenomena, simplification is necessary for complexity to be made visible (1991: xiii). She adds further:

The perception of increasable complication – that there are always potentially “more” things to take into account – contributes to a muted skepticism about the utility of comparison at all. However, anthropologists do not produce this sense of complexity unaided. *Their discipline has developed in a cultural milieu committed to ideas of pluralism and enumeration and with an internal faculty for the perpetual multiplication of things to know.* (Strathern, 1991: xiii, xiv, emphasis added)

Her remark about the cultural milieu, in the West, of pluralism *and* enumeration is particularly relevant for any cross-reading, comparative or otherwise. For the impulse towards pluralism and enumeration conjoins the objectivist impulses of scientific rationality with its implicit negation in the detailing and proliferation of phenomena that constantly threaten to outstrip the capacity for description. But these impulses have to be relocated within grids that allow for challenges to be posed to any overweening systemic or hegemonic rationalization: not, it has to be noted, as a means of merely negating the systemic or the hegemonic, but to bring these into dialectical confrontation with their denied logics. This would be to engraft provisionality into any systemic analysis even while finding ways of making ethically grounded proclamations about the projects we pursue.

The next plank of reading postcolonialism and postmodernism together is of course to try and grasp the social life of ideas, whether these inhere in images of fashion, as was the case in the Sekyi and Morrison texts, or in popular cultural images of otherness, as was observed in the example from *The X-Files*. The point here is to unearth incipient or fully-formed social values both in their formation (in terms of process) and historicity (in terms of completeness from the perspective of the moment of analysis). In doing this we would arguably be going a

step further than Appadurai by moving the discussion of commodification from the domain of things to embrace that of images as well, while sidestepping the more extreme forms of postmodernist and postcolonial interpretations that hyperinflate images and take them as unmediated stand-ins for society and culture. Thus the images of otherness in *The X-Files* were related in our account to general problems of the surveilling of immigrants and racial others in the West. The key thing would be not to dubiously hyperinflate, but to read such images alongside other socially relevant configurations. Finally, however, any cross-reading has to have a commitment to integrate the analysis into a larger affirmative project. This is by no means easy when both theoretical domains (but more especially postmodernism) run shy of making definitive ethical and evaluative statements about the phenomena they engage with. The fear of being thought prescriptive and hegemonic is one that most people no longer think worth risking in a world of pluralism. I happen to think otherwise. Recognizing that there is much destitution, poverty, and sheer despair in the world, it seems to me increasingly imperative that the risk of appearing prescriptive is one worth taking if one is not to surrender completely to a debilitating anomie brought on by the comprehension of persistent social tragedies. Those who lose their limbs to landmines, are displaced due to refugee crises, or merely subsist in the intermittent but regularly frustrated hope that the world can become a better place, cannot wait for complete moral certitude before they take action to improve their existence. It is partly in the implicit (and often real) alliance with those who, to appropriate a phrase from Julian Murphet, “keep running all the time simply to keep pace with events,” that we ought to take courage to make ethical judgments even in the full knowledge that we may be proved wrong. To this larger picture, and in the service of this larger affirmation we ought to commit our critical enterprises. Both postmodernism *and* postcolonialism have a part to play in this.

Notes

- 1 The “linguistic turn” has now been noted to have influenced developments in various disciplines. See for example, Sherry B. Ortner (1984), Bryan D. Palmer (1990); and, from a more social theory perspective, Quentin Skinner (1985).
- 2 This is not the place to discuss how multiculturalism becomes the preferred praxis of postmodernism, but for critical accounts, see Slavoj Žižek, “Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism” (1997); Kobena Mercer, “‘1968’: Periodizing Postmodern Politics and Identity” (1992); Peter McLaren, “White Terror and Oppositional Agency: Towards a Critical Multiculturalism” (1994).
- 3 The notion of the double consciousness of the period given full treatment across the West African region in the various essays in *Self-Assertion and Brokerage: Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa*, eds. P. F. de Moraes Farias and Karin Barber (1990).

- 4 Even though there are significant differences between any putative postcolonial condition and that of African America, it is arguably the case that the history of slavery and the peripheralization of blacks in that culture makes them amenable to a postcolonial analysis. For a recent discussion of this point, especially in relation to new multicultural pedagogies, see the special issue of *Wasafiri*, no. 27 (1998) devoted to African American literature, especially the interview by bell hooks and the essay by Julian Murphet on Anna Deveare Smith and the question of the staging of racial identification.

References

- Ahmad, Aijaz. (1992). *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso.
- Appadurai, Arjun. (1986). "Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3–63.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. (1989). *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge.
- , ——, and —— . (1994). *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Baudrillard, Jean. (1975). *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster. St. Louis: Telos Press.
- . (1983). "The Orders of Simulacra," trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Bleitchman, in *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Bell, Daniel. (1973). *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Bernal, Martin. (1987). *Black Athena*, vol. 1. London: Free Association Press.
- . (1991). *Black Athena*, vol. 2. London: Free Association Press.
- Bhabha, Homi. (1992). "Postcolonial Criticism," in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Dunn. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. (1988). *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Callinicos, Alex. (1989). *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Connor, Steven. (1997). *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, 2nd edn. Oxford: Blackwell; first published 1989.
- de Moraes Farias, P. F. and Karin Barber, eds. (1990). *Self-Assertion and Brokerage: Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa*. Birmingham: Centre for West African Studies.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1997). *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: W. W. Norton, 613–740; first published 1903.
- Eagleton, Terry. (1997). *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ekpo, Denis. (1995). "Towards a Post-Africanism: Contemporary African Thought and Postmodernism," *Textual Practice*, 9, no. 1: 121–35.
- Fanon, Frantz. (1967). *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markham. New York: Grove Press; first published 1952.
- Harvey, David. (1989). *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Hassan, Ihab. (1985). "The Culture of Postmodernism," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2, no. 3: 119–32.
- Holub, Robert C. (1995). "Fragmentary Totalities and Totalized Fragments: On the Politics of Anti-Systemic Thought," in *Postmodern Pluralism and Concepts of Totality*, ed. Jost Hermand. New York: Peter Lang, 83–104.
- Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. (1996). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Continuum.
- Hutcheon, Linda. (1989). "Circling the Downpost of Empire," *Ariel*, 20, no. 4: 149–75; rpt. in Ashcroft *et al.*, 1995.
- Jameson, Fredric. (1991). *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Jencks, Charles. (1980). *Late Modern Architecture*. London: Academy Editions.
- Kellner, Douglas. (1995). *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*. London: Routledge.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.
- McClintock, Anne. (1992). "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-colonialism,"" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 291–304.
- McLaren, Peter. (1994). "White Terror and Oppositional Agency: Towards a Critical Multiculturalism," in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Theo Goldberg, Oxford: Blackwell, 45–74.
- Mercer, Kobena. (1992). "'1968': Periodizing Postmodern Politics and Identity," in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paul Treichler. London: Routledge, 424–37.
- Moore-Gilbert, Bart. (1997). *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*. London: Verso.
- Mudimbe, Valentin Y. (1988). *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press and James Currey.
- Murphet, Julian. (1998). "Noir and the Racial Unconscious," *Screen*, 39, no. 1: 22–35.
- Natoli, Joseph. (1997). *A Primer to Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (1986). *Decolonising the Mind*. London: James Currey.
- Ortner, Sherry B. (1984). "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26, no. 1: 126–66.
- Palmer, Bryan D. (1990). *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Parry, Benita. (1997). "The Postcolonial: Conceptual Category or Chimera?" in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 27: 3–21.
- Said, Edward. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Sangari, Kumkum. (1987). "The Politics of the Possible," *Cultural Critique*, 7: 157–186; rpt. in Ashcroft *et al.*, 1995.
- Sekyi, Kobina. (1974). *The Blinkards*. London: Heinemann.
- Sekyi-Otu, Ato. (1996). *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Skinner, Quentin. (1985). Introduction to *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Slemon, Stephen. (1994) "The Scramble for Post-Colonialism," Ashcroft *et al.*, 1994.

- . (1995). "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse," in *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sombart, Werner. (1967). *Luxury and Capitalism*, trans. W. R. Dittmar. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Stam, Robert and Ella Shohat. (1995). *Unthinking Eurocentrism, Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Strathern, Marilyn. (1991). *Partial Connections*. Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Thomas, Nicholas. (1994). *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Tiffin, Helen. (1988). "Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 23, no. 1: 169–81.
- Viswanathan, Gauri. (1990). *Masks of Conquest: Literary Studies and British Rule in India*. London: Faber.
- Visweswaran, Kamala. (1994) *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Williams, Patrick and Laura Chrisman. (1993). Introduction to *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Žižek, Slavoj. (1991). *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- . (1997). "Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 225: 29–51.