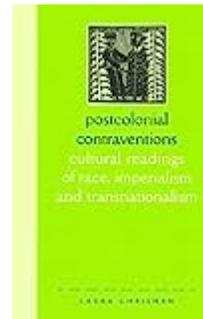




Laura Chrisman. *Postcolonial Contraventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism and Transnationalism.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003. viii + 200 pp. ISBN 978-0-7190-5827-1; ISBN 978-0-7190-5828-8.



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Methods and Manners in Postcolonial Studies

Readers familiar with the work of Laura Chrisman will have encountered some, if not most, of the essays contained in this collection elsewhere; as the author notes in her introductory essay, *Postcolonial Contraventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism and Transnationalism* brings together work produced over a period of almost a decade (p. 1). While this is the case with nine of the essays, the book also includes two new chapters, one of which is the introduction. The other, chapter 11, focuses on the work of Benita Parry, a critic and theorist whom Chrisman obviously admires. Parry's work is first referred to in chapter 8, in which Chrisman takes Robert Young to task for an attack on Parry, in his review of Gayatri Spivak's *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993)—a rather circuitous path, but that is in the nature of scholarly criticism.[1] I use the term “attack” here because “critique” would be to misread the tone of Chrisman's essay and, indeed, of Young's words. But Young's posture is important here for another reason; it epitomizes for Chrisman what she identifies in her introduction as one of the least productive aspects in postcolonial studies, a tendency for *ad hominem* writing that has become associated with a certain style of “doing” postcolo-

nial criticism.

In her introduction, Chrisman articulates a statement of intention that is polemic and conciliatory, forceful and responsive, yet, crucially, one that seeks to convey her critical stance without resorting to personal attacks. To borrow her own words on Parry and Young, her work seeks “to evaluate another thinker's ideas critically, foregrounding the underlying assumptions and the implications of the reasoning contained, and to suggest (directly or indirectly) alternative ways to conceptualise the issues” (p. 2). Chrisman's distinct position resides in this confluence of a forcefully expressed opinion on other critics' thought; a consistent emphasis on the need for, and a desire to engage in, a dialogue with them; and a plainly formulated commitment to materiality in scholarly analysis. Hence the title of my review, for two key elements seem to me to characterize this work: methodologies that draw openly on the work of others are perhaps all the more original for having to cope with anxieties of influence, and critical debates need not be devoid of good manners.

It is worth stressing, moreover, Chrisman's point that

if there is one quality that her work reflects it is the focus on the materiality of culture. At the heart of her call lies a suspicion of, and a full-blooded desire to reject, what she terms the aestheticization of culture—colonial and postcolonial—that emerges in the work of critics such as Spivak, Paul Gilroy, Edward Said, Fredric Jameson, Anne McClintock, and others, if in different ways. By aestheticization, Chrisman refers to the “presentation of art as the best or (at times) the only medium of social and political transformation” (p. 91). To that extent, in her critique of Sol Plaatje and W. E. B. Du Bois (chapter 5), for instance, Chrisman challenges the appropriateness of Afro-American cultural and political paradigms to an understanding of African intellectual movements. Expanding on an argument first set out in a well-known critique of Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), which is reprinted in this collection, Chrisman suggests that issues of nationalism and political struggle retain a degree of importance in South Africa that may not apply in the United States.[2] Consequently, she writes, “what we now need [is] the notion of a critical interrogative black Atlantic political culture, based in dialogue not emulation” (p. 92). Thus, “rather than view nationalism, organised political struggle and structural economic analysis as the polar opposites of black Atlanticism, we need to recognise more complexity in their relations; at times, I suggest, black Atlanticism and black nationalism are interdependent practices, not antinomies” (p. 91). This degree of critical and theoretical pragmatism constitutes perhaps the hallmark of many of these essays.

Working within a similar perspective, other chapters explore the work of David Lloyd (chapter 7); the discipline of cultural studies in South Africa and its unique vantage point for the development of a genuinely new way of reading culture in the context of very concrete material and political contexts; and what Chrisman calls the “transnational production of Englishness” (chapter 9), examining the way in which the anti-apartheid movement co-opted certain authors and literary texts into a broader re-imagining of that “idea that redeems it,” to resort, ungrammatically and inaccurately, to Conrad’s words in his own critique of colonialism.

At her best, Chrisman is a perspicacious reader and a provocative thinker, intensely committed to the material she examines. Her analysis of each critic’s work is painstakingly set out, supported by close textual analysis. This is particularly well demonstrated in “Gendering Imperialism” (chapter 2), in which Chrisman undertakes a critique of Anne McClintock’s reading of Haggard in *Imperial Leather* (1996).[3] Although in part a stimulat-

ing response to the polemic McClintock’s essay articulated, this is also an extremely scholarly examination of another critic’s work, precisely effective in its ability to highlight the obvious ways in which McClintock seemed intent on tailoring the text she examined to her thesis, rather than the other way round. Chrisman’s reading of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1907) in chapter 1 is equally rich, exploring patiently and persuasively the commodification of the imperial project as it is addressed in the novella. She concludes, “By looking in more detail at the ways this text engages issues of reification, bureaucracy and corporatism, we can better situate the metropole itself as Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness’” (p. 37).

The discussion of Jameson, Said, and Spivak (chapter 3) follows neatly from the earlier examination of *Heart of Darkness*, especially insofar as their work privileges what Chrisman identifies earlier as the textuality of colonialism, rather than its material bases. She concludes the chapter thus: “What emerges from their work is the challenge of producing an account that neither aestheticises space nor renders it a synonym for existential aporia but is sensitive both to phenomenological and political processes, to human production of as well as production within space” (p. 68). While I wonder if “what emerges from an examination of their work” as undertaken by Chrisman might be a more accurate way of summarizing the chapter’s function, this chapter is nevertheless a clear examination of three key figures in postcolonial studies.

Unfortunately, in spite of an emphasis on critical subtlety, all too often Chrisman seems to me to adopt a position that is as extreme and potentially simplistic as some of those whom she critiques. Perhaps I too am biased toward the textual production of colonialism, but it seems to me that Chrisman’s analysis, on occasion, comes close to “doing a McClintock.” Dialogue involves both a critique, and hence a qualified rejection, of the views expressed by others and recognition of the ways in which even the limitations of their work will have facilitated new forms of thinking. The discussion on Jameson, Said, and Spivak achieves this quite successfully, but not so with some of the later essays. I have a little difficulty with the way in which some writers simply cannot seem to do anything to Chrisman’s satisfaction, while others can do no wrong. This is evident in her treatment of Parry’s and Gilroy’s work, as well as that of Achebe and Plaatje.

In her final chapter, discussing Parry’s contribution to the field of postcolonial studies, she writes: “I hesitate to bring in a negative dimension to the discussion of Parry’s work, though I imagine that she would pre-

fer me to do this rather than deliver an unconditionally glowing account of my fave rave” (p. 171). Quite, but why does she not experience similar queasiness when writing on McClintock or Anthony Appiah? Contrary to what the author seems determined to convey here, the work of African intellectuals and critics, such as Ntongela Masilela and Appiah, is far more nuanced than Chrisman allows. That their writings come through as aloof, ignorant, or (un)wittingly subscribing to neo-colonial subject positions often is less a reflection of their work than it is of Chrisman’s interpretation of it. If Sol Plaatje’s writing can evince insights into the condition of South African black people in relation to that of Afro-Americans, as Chrisman insists, he does not do so in isolation. Both Appiah and Gilroy can write about the African Diaspora in ways that are every bit as rewarding as Plaatje’s.

The insight Chrisman detects in the positions of Achebe or Parry is one that she clearly denies in other critics’ work. In fact, Chrisman’s critique of Gilroy’s 1993 book comes close to the *ad hominem* attack she spends considerable time rejecting throughout the work. Gilroy’s text may have its flaws, but to imply that its popularity within academia (a space Chrisman refers to as if she wrote from outside it) is simply the result of the gullibility of academics is disingenuous. Gilroy’s text captured a mood, if that is the right term, in the discipline of postcolonial studies, that sought to move away from readings of power and powerlessness, agency and victimhood as forever neatly organized along dichotomous lines. Whatever flaws we might find in *The Black Atlantic*, its contribution towards a subtler understanding of Afro-Diasporic cultural formations has endowed the field of postcolonial studies with a range of productive theoretical positions. For these reasons, Chrisman’s awed reading of Achebe’s “critique of cosmopolitics” leads her to oddly unsettling assertions on notions such as cosmopolitanism, a position that, again, is associated with those critics whom she dislikes or distrusts. In her discussion of Achebe’s position in *Home and Exile*, she writes: “Global communication, ultimately is only liberatory for those sovereigns or states that own the communication structures. For those who do not own them, these international structures simply amplify the depth and range of their unfreedom” (p. 160).[4] These are pretty despondent sentiments. Moreover, much as it could be argued that the words are a reflection of Achebe’s own take on the condition that Chrisman writes on, these are her words, not his. And the point I would like to pursue here is that although we might want or need to read culturalist critics such as Homi Bhabha, Appiah, and Said with a

pinch of salt, or whatever other spice we might settle for, in order to contravene idiomatic structures, this should not allow us to insist on the lack of agency of subalterns that most of us, Achebe included, know primarily as observers. Achebe’s position may be backed by the experience of a life lived between the extremes of power and powerlessness of an African who has journeyed to the heart of empire (the new one), but even he is no more representative of the whole of Africa than Don DeLillo is of the United States or Zadie Smith of contemporary Britain.

Chrisman describes her collection of essays as a call “to diversify the field” (p. 1) of postcolonial studies, and the book’s broad set of subjects of study would seem to support this claim. The chapters vary in quality and purpose, but overall they are eminently readable, illustrating why Chrisman has become an influential, if understated, voice in postcolonial studies. Ironically she occupies a place not dissimilar from Parry’s own position in the field. Moreover, despite the uneven quality of the work as a whole, the way the various essays allow us to follow Chrisman’s intellectual journey over a period of time is one of the strengths of this kind of book. There are contradictions, and roads less travelled; there are points excessively labored, and sometimes a strange feeling that one or two essays might well have been reconsidered in some sense. I have no brief to defend Robert Young, but the chapter on him seems completely out of place in the context of this book’s aims and intentions. That said, this is a timely collection of essays, bringing together Laura Chrisman’s unique contribution to postcolonial studies in a way that makes her writing easily accessible to scholars and students working in the field.

It seems rather churlish to end on this note, but I was surprised by Manchester University Press’s rather relaxed approach to the text as a material product. Final proofreading was patchy, and on a few occasions the omission or inclusion of a word completely changes the meaning of Chrisman’s text (pp. 27, 29, 42, 95). The reader is always able to detect the intended meaning, but I could not help resenting how unfairly it reflects on the text as a whole.

Notes

[1]. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[2]. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

- [3]. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995). [4]. Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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