

# Neocolonial times

Introduction to *Neocolonialism*

Robert J.C. Young

This volume of *The Oxford Literary Review* on 'Neocolonialism' follows that on 'Colonialism'<sup>1</sup> — not as its supersession, the insistent wave of the new of modernity, but rather as its adjunct, the charting of the continuing effect of colonialism today. Much of the attraction of the study of colonialism lies in the safety of its politics of the past. Neocolonialism, on the other hand, is concerned with the more awkward effects of colonialism in the present. The means of administration may have often moved from coercive regiments to regimes supported by international aid and the banking system, the 'white man's burden' may have been transformed by the wind of change into the TV appeal for famine in Africa. But the burden of neocolonialism remains for all those who suffer its effects; and responsibility cannot be ignored by those who find themselves part of those societies which enforce it.

The specific address of this volume began as the examination not so much of neocolonialism abroad as in our particular historical moment and domestic space: starting with the continuing effects of colonialism in contemporary Western academic disciplines and institutional practices, and moving, more generally, to

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J.C. Young, ed., 'Colonialism', *Oxford Literary Review* 9 (1987); 'Neocolonialism', *Oxford Literary Review* 13 (1991).

neocolonialism as the enduring effect of the history of colonialism in the metropolis: from the exclusivities of the education system to immigration and refugee laws, to the everyday acts of often unconscious racism, its legacy lives on. But such survivals in the U.K. could not be studied separately from their endurance in the world outside: Ireland, the Middle East, the Caribbean, Africa, South Asia.... The spatial geography of colonialism echoes in the interstices of our present times.

Nor can history itself escape reappraisal in the repetitions of its reprisals. We are talking, with neo-colonialism, about the legacies of history, not as a textual archive, but as the continued productivity of history in the present. Nowhere is this marked more trenchantly than in the urban centres of the West where local culture has become hybridized by once migrant groups, and where assimilation, still often assumed to be a one-way process, has developed a form of diasporic internationalism, undoing the ideology of race and nation by initiating a new epoch in our cities. The exotic no longer beckons in the East but has become a part of the everyday of the West. This complicates not only the traditions of contemporary culture but also those paradigms of our political heritage, from the privilege of class to the liberalism whose tolerance is strictly limited to other relativisms — which is not to forget the presence of the direct survivals of colonial ideology, of racism, inequality and injustice.

Colonialism's 'neo', nevertheless, has broached the borders of Western modernity: if there is a postmodernity, then it is, let it be said, a Western phenomenon, a breakdown of totalizing systems that itself claims to be totalizing. If the postmodern marks modernity's own limits, the living on of a history in the present which modernity was concerned to deny, it signals a recognition

of the undoing of its own cultural hegemony. The 'post' in modernity becomes the belated scar of that hidden colonial history which formed modernism's own contemporary culture, and thus the unequivocal sign of its own temporality.

Neocolonialism thus comprises not only the half-hidden narratives of colonialism's success in its continuing operations — but also the story of a West haunted by the excess of its own history.

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