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Rethinking Postcolonialism: Capitalism as an Imperial Force in Twentieth-Century American Literature, 1900-1940

Andrew Spencer

Department of Media, Art, and Text,
Virginia Commonwealth University

In discussions of Postcolonial Studies, American literature is essentially excluded. Given its status as former imperial power, the United States is, it has been argued, specifically outside of any conversation that involves writing from the perspective of a colonial subject. This paper argues that such a perspective is applicable to the early twentieth-century American literature too, as they represent the sinister workings of the powerful capitalist system. It is my contention that Capitalism works as an imperial force in the lives of its subjects, controlling them in a way no different from an imperial force controlling colonial subjects. Canons are necessarily convenient constructions, but engaging with literature means the exploration of power-relations that are scribed into it, and it is precisely this notion that can lead to a blurring of this inside/outside boundaries.

Keywords: postcolonial studies, American literature, Orientalism

By its very definition, Postcolonialism is something of a moving target in literary discussions. Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge describe it as “a slippery term” (377), and Jasper Goss says that we have come to a point in literary criticism where “there is a degree of uncertainty and debate that exists as to what makes a particular stance, discourse, work, or condition postcolonial” (239). Despite the seemingly unstable nature of the term, most scholars are in agreement that American literature – especially that of the twentieth century – is specifically excluded from Postcolonial Studies. However, in this essay, I will argue in favor of including American literature under the rubric of postcolonialism. I will demonstrate themes present in that body of literature that reflect those found in more traditionally-accepted Postcolonial literatures and, because of those shared

thematic qualities, I will argue that the postcolonial canon should be expanded to include twentieth-century American literature.

Edward Said wrote of the colonial subject, “Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’)” (*Orientalism* 43). These terms are mirrored, thematically speaking, in Karl Marx’s critique of capitalism, in which he establishes the socio-economic binary composed of the bourgeoisie (those who control the methods and means of production) and the proletariat (those who serve as laborers supporting the bourgeoisie). Marx’s proletariat are essentially the same as Said’s “strange,” and the bourgeoisie “the familiar.” On the surface, this might seem to be a semantic argument; I am simply substituting one term for another. However, it is the power dynamic inherent in the bourgeoisie/proletariat relationship that is the focus of my argument, as I see that dynamic reflecting the same forces at work in the relationship between imperial powers and colonial subjects. It is that particular way of looking at economic forces at play in American culture that informs my reading of American literature from 1900 to 1940, and it is this power dynamic that shifts the conversation from one of neo-Marxism to one of postcolonialism.

As Americans ceased to qualify as colonial subjects in the 18th century, it perhaps seems counterintuitive to describe twentieth-century American literature as post-colonial. However, it is my contention that the United States’ capitalist system serves as an imperial force that colonizes American citizens, shackling them to a never-ending cycle of laboring in order to acquire those things that have come to symbolize the so-called “American Dream.” In other words, these authors were writing both from the perspective of colonized people and about other colonial subjects.

James T. Adams was the first person to suggest that there was such a thing as the American Dream, and that suggestion did not come about until 1931. Adams wrote, “[T]here has also been the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with the opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (374, italics original). This dream was represented, at least in part, by the vast array of material possessions that were available to any American who might be able to afford them. Those goods were marketed to the audience of potential buyers through the medium of advertisements, which served as the catalyst that drove the growth of the American commercial culture in the early twentieth century.

A by-product of that material acquisition was the ability for Americans to elevate their own social positions. Through both financial gain and the subsequent

purchasing of increasing numbers of goods that befitted that financial gain, individuals were able to climb the social ladder in ways that were heretofore inconceivable to a vast number of people. Scott and Leonhardt write of this idea of social mobility:

Mobility is the promise that lies at the heart of the American dream. [...] There are poor and rich in the United States, of course, the argument goes; but as long as one can become the other, as long as there is something close to equality of opportunity, the differences between them do not add up to class barriers (2-3).

In other words, despite the class differences that are inherent – even requisite components – in a capitalist system, there is also an opportunity for anyone within the economic system to change their particular socio-economic status. All that is necessary to effectively facilitate that opportunity is the education of the masses as to the existence of products that promise to enable their climb up the social ladder. And that educational tool is advertising.

Arguing that advertising has the inherent ability to spark in consumers a desire for more possessions, twentieth-century advertising executive Earnest Calkins once wrote:

Advertising is that subtle, indefinable, but powerful force whereby the advertiser creates a demand for a given article in the minds of a great many people or arouses the demand that is already there in latent form (qtd. in Wills 34).

Furthermore, David Potter echoes Calkins' words in his argument that advertising has the power to shape consumer behaviors in terms of personal acquisition and consumption:

We are dealing [...] with one of the very limited groups of institutions which can properly be called 'instruments of social control.' These institutions guide the life of the individual by conceiving of him in a distinctive way and encouraging him to conform as far as possible to the subject (37)

In other words, advertising manipulates consumers' thinking and breeds a continually-growing desire to acquire more and more commodities.

One of the foundational tenets of this desire for material acquisition is the phenomenon identified by Karl Marx as *commodity fetishization*. On this topic, Marx writes:

[T]he commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears [...] is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. [...] I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities (165).

According to Marx, consumers of commodities attach an arbitrary value to a specific good, a value that has no direct relation to that good's actual material worth.

Echoing Marx, Herbert Marcuse says, "The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed" (9). Consumers came to believe that specific commodities dictate to others who they are as individuals. And producers were happy to oblige this commodity fetishism by making more and more goods, and in turn employing advertising agencies to market those goods to consumers. The partnership between producers and advertisers was – and continues to be – a symbiotic relationship, as the pair of businesses team up together to continually reinvent artificial needs and stoke the fires of innate human desire for newer and better commodities. These artificial needs suffuse a particular item with a perceived specific characteristic which, in the eyes of the consumer, contributes to the individual's desired public persona. This construction of a person's outward appearance, in turn, fosters a sense of class consciousness that infiltrates every level of the social ladder in a capitalist society.

It may be argued, then, that human vanity lies at the core of Marx's commodity fetishism. Consumers see a life they wish to lead – albeit one that is itself no more than an imaginary product of marketing – and they seek to emulate it. Here we see the concept of mimicry that Homi Bhabha argues is inherent in any colonial existence. Bhabha writes, "The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is double vision that is a result of what I've described as the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object" (126, italics original). By mimicking those seen as somehow superior to themselves – be it their appearance, their possessions, or their very existence – consumers seek to dismantle their own class deficiencies by assimilating themselves into that perceived world of those whom they view as leading superior lives.

Despite their best efforts, however, the consumers are never able to fully realize their goal of complete assimilation. Instead, they serve as a sort of one-off copy, a

near-mimic. They can look the same, but they will never achieve full membership in the higher socio-economic class; they will never fully be what they emulate. This failure leads them to try a new product, a new commodity, a new strategy that will perhaps be the one to grant them that lofty goal. The process of trying-and-failing shackles the consumer to an endless repetitive cycle of laboring in vain as an economically colonized subject. They perpetually remain in an economic version of Bhabha's liminal world of "not quite/not white." They lie stagnant in the status of colonial subject, forever enslaved by capitalism and the commercial culture it fosters in society. As Richard Pollay argues, imitation of the scenes portrayed in advertisements

requires [...] the prior acceptance of an unworthiness of one's own life experiences. [...] By constantly showing us that the grass seems greener elsewhere, we're led to look askance at our own immediate environment and experience. We may not be sure where the action is, but we suspect it's almost always somewhere else (303).

However, no matter how hard we may try to mimic what we see portrayed in advertisements, we will never actually achieve that full level of satisfaction that is promised in those ads. There will always be, in Pollay's words, greener grass somewhere else in fields where we want to be.

Another point worth noting here is the basic foundational principle of capitalism, namely that of supply-and-demand. Adam Smith invoked the metaphor of an invisible hand in his treatise on capitalism in 1776, *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith's contention was that a capitalist economy is guided by natural laws (the invisible hand) that work to determine the market value of a commodity. The more people who want the desired item, the higher the price they are willing to pay, and therefore the more the item will cost. As the supply of the item decreases and the demand for it increases, the price goes up. Alternatively, when there is an abundance (surplus) of the item and a shortage of buyers, the price goes down due to the limited demand and, hence, a lower price that consumers are willing to pay. This theory applies to both physical commodities that one might buy in a store and to things like cars and homes. It even extends to one's own labor. In theory, this practice works well. But the reality is quite different. As I will show, by incorporating the manipulative effects of the commercial culture in the United States, members of the bourgeoisie in early twentieth-century America were able to turn Adam Smith's theory in to what might best be called a rigged game that skewed the odds heavily in their favor at the expense of the proletariat.

In terms of specific application of this idea of the colonizing force of capitalism in twentieth-century American literature, consider the story of Sinclair's immi-

grants in *The Jungle*. They, like so many of the immigrants who came to the United States in search of a better financial existence, see the manifestations of prosperity all around them: people who own homes, people who wear nice clothes, people who have enough to eat. They are blinded by this culture of excess – especially compared to the Lithuanian subsistence life they had left behind – and become enamored with the idea of owning their own home. In their desire to achieve this component of the American dream, they fall prey to a real estate scam perpetrated by fast-talking salesmen and color brochures of the supposedly new home he is selling. They end up subjects of the domination of a faceless bank that holds the loan – and their personal well-being – in its hands. The bank, as an imperial agent, destroys the family unit and facilitates the death of many of its members.

One of the defining characteristics of postcolonial theory is that the literature it examines is written from the perspective of a colonized person, and that characteristic is present in *The Jungle*. Sinclair, like his characters, had also lived the life of a financially colonized citizen within a capitalist structure. Born in 1878 in Baltimore, Upton Sinclair was the son of an alcoholic liquor salesman father and a strict Episcopalian mother. His father's family had been wealthy Southern slaveholders who, following the end of the Civil War and Reconstruction, saw their family fortune lost. His mother, however, was the daughter of a railroad magnate, and her parents (with whom young Upton oftentimes spent time during the summers of his youth) retained their wealth and lived a very luxurious lifestyle. This first-hand experience with the stark differences between those with financial means and those without would inform much of Sinclair's later writing.

Throughout his childhood, Sinclair witnessed the power that money could wield over an individual, both in terms of his father's failed multiple failed attempts at making a living and his maternal grandparents' excessive wealth. But he also lived under the yoke of a strict religious upbringing, something that would further control his behavior and his life at the time. Thus, I would argue that Sinclair was writing from the perspective of one who had experienced the oppression fostered by imperial rule, and my reading of his novel is informed by that perspective.

Returning to *The Jungle*, we see a family that is also colonized by this same economic system that Sinclair witnessed throughout his childhood. The Rudkus family members were naïve to the colonizing effect of the loan they obtained in order to purchase their new home, and soon the interest payments (of which they were ignorant at the time of signing) begin to drain their limited resources. Despite their best efforts to keep the house, the bank forecloses on it, and the family is evicted. The home they once occupied is, in turn, re-sold to another immigrant family who is promised, just as the Rudkuses were, that it is brand-new and has

never before been occupied. It is clear to the reader that the Rudkus family is not the first family to have occupied this “brand new house,” nor will they be the last. The process begins anew for yet another unwitting victim, and the colonization process continues. In capitalistic terms, there will be a seemingly endless supply of potential buyers for houses like this one, which fosters the demand for those houses. Adam Smith’s invisible hand serves to secure equally invisible shackles to those unwitting and naïve consumers.

Michael Schudson says of American consumer culture that it is “taken to be a society in which human values have been grotesquely distorted so that commodities become more important than people; [...] commodities become not ends in themselves but overvalued means for acquiring acceptable ends like love and friendship” (7). This description of consumer culture provides an encapsulation for the idea that marketing efforts on the part of advertisers create an artificial demand for a given product, luring in buyers with promises of improved lives, increased happiness, easier work, or any one of countless other implied benefits. Capitalism is predicated on this cultural phenomenon of demand, itself a by-product of advertising’s influence on the perceived value of a particular commodity. In other words, consumers operating within a capitalist framework are convinced of the powers of a particular commodity to improve their existence, and dedicate a portion of their labors to acquiring that particular commodity. They are, in the words of Karl Marx, wage slaves, working to produce goods or services that enrich their employers, and subsequently use the proceeds they gain from that work to purchase goods that they have been convinced will make their lives better (and thereby further enriching the bourgeoisie). At that point, the laborer starts the process anew, focusing on a different commodity that will further improve his life, and the cycle begins again.

As a result, those living in a capitalist society are essentially reduced to the status of subjects under the control of a powerful force whose authority is enforced by the commercial culture. It is much the same situation as colonial subjects who are ruled by a distant, faceless power whose lieutenants enforce the imperialist’s desires. Those people living in a capitalist system have been, in effect, colonized by that economic system. Although the power dynamics are arguably different from the traditional imperialist/colonial relationship present in a situation such as British imperialists controlling colonial subjects in India, the basic parameters are the same. An unseen power rules both sets of colonial subjects, sending their adjuncts to do the job of enforcement.

According to Edward Said, an important component of colonization is the colonial’s belief that they are somehow dependent on the invading force for their per-

sonal well-being. Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism*, “The vocabulary of classic nineteenth-century imperial cultures is plentiful with words and concepts like ‘dependency,’ ‘expansion,’ and ‘authority’” (9). These words, according to Said, are part of the imperialist mantra of bringing enlightenment to colonial subjects, the latter a population that has, up until the time they are colonized, resided in a sort of socio-economic and cultural cave. It is essentially the moral duty of the imperial forces, therefore, to rule over these unenlightened people so that they might be brought into a more progressive way of seeing the world. Of course, the imperialist viewpoint completely negates the existence of any objections from the colonial subjects, and it suggests that those colonials are lacking insight or knowledge that the imperialists possess. In other words, the process of colonization depends on the fact that the colonials are unaware of specific information possessed by the colonizers.

An illustration of this concept of dependence is found in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Forced off their Oklahoma farm land by the bank that owns it, the Joads are lured west, to California, by the promise of easy and plentiful work. Handbills are passed out in their community – themselves a manifestation of the commercial culture, as the family is used to seeing advertisements for things that promise to improve their lives – and those advertisements beg workers to move west. The ads suggest, in capitalist terms, that there is a surplus of available work and a high demand for laborers to do that work. In an ideal capitalist system, that combination would equate to higher wages. But as I will shortly show, those who are convinced by these promises of plentiful work fall victim to their own human instincts aimed at improving their lives. Because there are so many people who share the same inherent drive, the perceived lack of labor soon turns into a vast surplus, which drives wages lower and further tightens the tethers that bind the colonized laborers.

John Steinbeck, like Sinclair before him, was very familiar with the imperialistic nature of the capitalist economic system. Born in Salinas, California, in 1902, Steinbeck was the third of four children born to middle-class parents. His father lost his job at a flour mill when Steinbeck was a teenager, and then opened his own feed store with the aim of meeting the needs of local ranchers. However, this business venture failed, forcing the family to face the imperial nature of the economic system under which they lived.

While in college, Steinbeck worked odd jobs, frequently alongside Mexican immigrants in the agricultural industry that employed so many menial laborers in Southern California. Just as Sinclair experienced the dichotomy of those with financial means and those without, Steinbeck’s employment afforded him a first-

hand view of the effects of capitalism on working-class people who were barely able to earn a subsistence living. Later, he would live and work alongside the migrant workers who were collectively termed “Okies,” and used that experience as a defense against those who attacked *The Grapes of Wrath* as mere propaganda. Speaking to a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* following the book’s publication, Steinbeck said, “I know what I was talking about. I lived, off and on, with those Okies for the last three years. Anyone who tries to refute me will just become ridiculous” (qtd. in Shillinglaw 177). Again we see an author who is not only writing about the financially colonized condition, but also from the perspective of one who has experienced that colonization first-hand.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family was the fictitious representation of those Okies alongside whom Steinbeck had lived. Given their colonial state, the Joads and others like them are dependent on the potential employers in California for their very existence. In addition to being othered – they are lower-class farmers who are struggling to make financial ends meet and have been forced off their lands by banks seeking to make a bigger profit – they are also entirely dependent on the willingness of those of the bourgeoisie to provide them with wages in exchange for labor. However, it is only after selling off nearly all of their possessions and driving a dilapidated car across the country that the Joads discover the truth about the capitalist system. With so many people looking for work – with so many others who have been colonized by the economic system – the wages the California landowners are offering is a fraction of what the Joads had expected. In much the same way that a surplus of commodities paired with a lack of demand creates lower prices, a surplus of laborers and a lack of work result in lower wages. The game of capitalism is rigged in favor of the bourgeoisie.

At the end of the novel, the Joads come upon a dying man, and his son informs them that he has not eaten for six days. Rose of Sharon, who has just given birth to a still-born baby, offers her breast milk as the only available sustenance. While some critics have interpreted this action as a sign of the inherent moral goodness residing in human nature, the fact that the man’s only salvation comes in the form of nourishment originally intended for an infant that was born dead is much more critical of society than those interpretations might claim. The suggestion I take from the novel’s ending is that the cycle of suffering will continue. The dying man will be kept alive, only for him to be forced to continue to struggle for survival as a colonial subject within the capitalist system. There is no escape from this system because it is the force that drives human existence at the most basic of levels, the need for sustenance.

Something we see in both of these novels – as well as many other examples from

this time period in American literature – is a desire on the part of the authors to subvert the American status quo, to interrogate the notion of capitalism as a manifestation of democracy within an economic system. In that questioning of the hegemonic structure, we may read a variant of what Ashcroft and Griffiths describe as “the project of post-colonial writing,” which they argue is “to interrogate European discourse and discursive strategies from its position within and between two worlds” (196).

The idea that the acquisition of goods will result in one’s personal happiness spans all socio-economic classes, and appears in much of the literature of this period in the United States. For example, similar themes appear in Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* (1922), Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925), and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), among many others. In each of these examples, the protagonists of the specific novels ascribe to the belief that the acquisition of material possessions will enhance their lives and make them truly happy. In each case, however, the protagonists discover that what they thought would lead to personal satisfaction fails to do so, and they begin a new pursuit for a new commodity that promises the same personal happiness. The cycle continues until the characters become utterly disillusioned with their lives (as in *Babbitt*) or, alternatively, die (by electrocution in *An American Tragedy* and by murder in *The Great Gatsby*).

What this inherent desire for more suggests is a lack of agency on the part of consumers. While there is free will in terms of an individual making a conscious choice as to whether or not to purchase a particular commodity, the argument can be made that advertising practices exploit inherent human vanity in order to awaken and catalyze a latent human desire. Herbert Marcuse writes, “The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed” (9). In other words, because people have fetishized commodities in the way that Marx claimed they do, those commodities themselves have come to be representations of the persona consumers want to portray. And because of the human instinct to improve one’s station in life – or, alternatively, the outward manifestation of an improved station – it can be argued that individual consumers sacrifice their own agency when it comes time to decide whether or not to purchase a particular item that they believe will either improve their own lives or that will potentially express to others that they have climbed higher on the social ladder. Echoing the words of Marcuse, Ronald Berman writes, “American middle-class life is indeed characterized by possessions [and] those possessions have powerful symbolic meanings” (25). It is those sym-

bolic meanings contained within possessions that denies the individual the power of agency.

This lack of agency is a theme of those works that comprise the currently accepted canon of postcolonial literature. Chandra Mohanty argues that the practice of colonization results in “a discursive or political suppression of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question” (196). Because this group of subaltern colonial subjects are effectively homogenized by imperial powers, then, they forfeit their ability to act on their own volition. This lack of agency on the part of the marginalized – what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to as a lack of voice – creates a problem for postcolonialism as a field of study. If the postcolonial subject must be a part of the colonial population (a condition which deprives the subject of agency and voice), how can their voice be heard in their writing about that condition?

A characteristic of Orientalism as a school of thought which Edward Said was never fully able to reconcile in his mind was this seemingly impossible combination of being simultaneously inside and outside a particular social structure. Regarding this point, Robert Young asks, “If it is necessary, as Said demonstrates, to be inside such structures in order to make any argument at all, it is also, he argues, vital to be outside them in order to subvert them” (128). In the case of my application of postcolonial theory to both *The Jungle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, I would suggest that my re-casting of Said’s theories helps to resolve this apparent paradox. Both Sinclair and Steinbeck lived and worked among the populations about which they wrote. Sinclair spent several weeks working in a Chicago meat-packing plant prior to beginning work on *The Jungle* and Steinbeck worked as a farm laborer and spent years living with displaced farmers from the Dust Bowl who had sought work in California. Both authors were part of that world of the colonial subjects while, at the same time, apart from it. Their elevated perspective, enhanced by their time spent among the lower elements of the social ladder, enabled them to realize the ultimate postcolonial position of being attached to both worlds at one and the same time.

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