Postcolonial Theory Meets the Portuguese-Speaking World An Interview with Robert J. C. Young

Emanuelle Santos

The University of Warwick

Robert J. C. Young has become a familiar name to those who endeavor into the field of Postcolonial Studies. Author of numerous essays, articles and books, among which readers in the field could highlight his *White Mythologies* (1990), *Colonial Desire* (1995), *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001) and *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (2003), Robert Young has, for over two decades now, consistently contributed to postcolonial theorization, a critical tool that has been largely—though not unproblematically—employed by those concerned with the cultures and societies that speak Portuguese.

In this interview Robert Young talks about both the current state of affairs and the future of postcolonial theory, while also addressing its potentiality and validity for understanding the diverse postcolonial realities of the Portuguese-speaking world.

ES: In your article titled “Postcolonial Remains”¹, published recently by *New Literary History*, you propose a reanalysis of the pertinence of the postcolonial body of theory to address problems of the contemporary world. Why do you believe a review to be necessary to the field?

RY: The idea was that actually the postcolonial has been going for quite a long time now, so if we take Edward Said as the opening, or the opener, and

*Orientalism*² as the founding text of postcolonialism, that is 1978, which is 35 years ago. The postcolonial has had its own momentum, has done different things and it certainly spread out into different disciplines in extraordinary way, but I was struck by the fact that in the US there is a quite strong currency of people saying that “oh, postcolonialism is over.” So, in the beginning of that article I reference a piece in the MLA called “The end of postcolonial theory?”³ which is ambiguous because it could mean “the aim” of postcolonial theory, but most people read it as being “the end” of postcolonial theory. And so we had graduate students saying “I can’t work on that because the PMLA says it’s over.” So there are two things there: one was, I wanted to respond to that, obviously. I think that in the US there is a strong tendency for academia in the Humanities to follow trends that come more or less almost with the speed of the election cycle, like every two years, and people are always wanting to know what is the new thing and whether things are dated or not. I had a student who was criticized for using Jacques Derrida in his PhD because it was dated. It is ridiculous, would you say “Hegel is dated?” Or Kant? So I wanted to respond to that but also, at the same time, I felt that precisely because the postcolonial had been absorbed into so many different disciplines—to my amazement—maybe not into economics, although there have been some attempts to develop a postcolonial economics, but certainly into things like theology, law, medieval studies, classics—that it became much harder to think about what the core of postcolonialism was, or whatever it was trying to do, or whether indeed there was a core there.

It is also true that there was the big rush of postcolonial theory by Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak in the 1980’s. But the number of books that have followed that and have really impacted at a theoretical level, in a very strong way, is quite small. You have Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe*,⁴ for example, which in a way is a response to my book *White Mythologies*,⁵ because it is about how can you do history differently from a Third World perspective, so it has given another spin on that. Meanwhile Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*⁶ has now been with us for a couple of decades. It has been extraordinarily generative, but perhaps people have finally absorbed its arguments now. It’s probably true to say therefore that there has been a sense the postcolonial was over to the degree that although lots of work was being done

at the archival or the historical level, you couldn't point to the production of new theory in the same degree. That led me just to stand back and try to think about what was still there and what was happening. The other thing I thought though, that I will say in my lecture at the Second Annual Conference of the Postcolonial Europe Network⁷, is that it is also not entirely coincidental that after Afghanistan and Iraq people were saying that the postcolonial was over—because maybe they just don't want to think about the fact that imperialism of a kind is not over. It is a different kind of imperialism, of course, but the situation that postcolonialism was trying to address in the 1980s in a different way, has developed and is still there. So, it is not really enough for me to say that it is over because the very phenomenon it is trying to deal with is not over. I was trying to think about that and think about how we might address those issues, but it is very hard and particularly because it is a temptation in postcolonial studies to feel we should be addressing the events of the day, because that's what is happening. That is maybe something you can do through journalism as Said did, but not really through academic work, since things change so fast that you can't, for example, write about what's happening in Syria now except as a journalist, for if you write it as an academic whatever you say will have changed by the time the thing appears in print, which takes months... years. I was trying to stand back and think therefore what at a different level can we think about, what areas of culture and politics that the postcolonial was originally designed to engage with are still current, where it has succeeded, and where has it failed, and what new things have occurred. And that's where I got the idea of remains. What's actually still there, what has emerged that wasn't obvious before, but maybe we can see now things that we didn't see in the 80s and the 90s, and then what kind of new figurations can we think through for more utopian possibilities for the future. That is, broadly speaking, what I was trying to sketch out in that piece.

ES: And that is a striking piece.

RY: It has had some divided responses,⁸ shall we say.

ES: Which is always good.

RY: Yes I'm glad because you want to provoke a response, which is better than none. Funnily enough, actually, I gave a version of it in Portugal at Coimbra, which was only a part of it (it was maybe the first two parts of it) and they were very hostile to it. They said they didn't like the stuff about Cordoba and that being a model. There was a negative reaction there, so I was quite surprised because I thought that it might seem more related to the kind of work that they do but... no.

ES: Would you specify a bit what kind of reactions your article got in Portugal? Which were the comments that called you attention the most?

RY: I gave it twice, once in Lisbon where there was a more polite reception, shall we say, and once in Coimbra. I forget at what department it was, but it was more in the context of development and it certainly wasn't literary.

ES: Was that the Center of Social Studies, known as CES—Centro de Estudos Sociais?

RY: Yes that was it. Their response to the idea that there could be a model of tolerance that you could find in Islam was basically an anti-Muslim one. They just immediately came in saying that Muslims are intolerant about this, or that they discriminated against so and so. All which of course, in many cases can be true, but equally you could say that Western society is full of examples of intolerance, nonetheless they still have a model of tolerance that you can look at in Locke and so forth. I was just trying to consider the model of tolerance in earlier Islamic societies and try a strategy that has a sort of anti-orientalist structure where you look at other societies in terms of asking what models can they offer us, other practices of everyday life or thinking, rather than trying to characterize them from your own perspective. Basically trying to learn from another cultural and historical environment, which I think is more productive.

ES: What were your expectations when you chose that topic to give as a lecture in Portugal?

RY: I am not sure that I had expectations; I was just working on it at the time, so I thought it would be interesting to get some responses. But also particularly because Portugal was part of the Moorish empire, so I thought it would be interesting to see how people responded, but clearly it was still an environment where for some people that was a history to be rejected, shall we say.

ES: Along your work on postcolonial theory you often highlight that the body of theories that orient postcolonial thought “have been developed out of traditions of resistance to a global historical trajectory of imperialism and colonialism”⁹. Having in mind what postcolonial thought has been becoming, as well as the contemporary challenges posed to it, how would you describe the relationship between anticolonial and postcolonial thought?

RY: Yes, postcolonial thought has come out of a tradition of resistance, of subversion, of people resisting a formation of a society organized according to a dominating power and particularly trying to develop ways of validating their own culture as a way of proving their own worth, and therefore their own right to independence, which was what I was talking about today¹⁰, in a different way, in terms of Palestine. One of the things that Edward Said did was that he was at the forefront of a real push of cultural production to give the Palestinians some cultural capital so that they could be ‘a people’, that you could say ‘oh, yes, Palestine, Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish, Anton Shammas, etc.’. That, for me, is attractive because it affiliates very obviously with leftist lines of thought which relate to other kinds of forms of oppression, such as class or disempowered people, because it is not only in colonial situations where people are disempowered and where hierarchies operate, as issues about race and class often show. All those things affiliate to each other, gender being another one, they are all addressing a comparable scene. It is just that the issue through which they are discriminated against, the focus of discrimination, comes for different reasons: but whether it is because you are an Algerian or you are a woman, the structure is almost exactly the same in many cases.

The danger, I think, is that postcolonial studies can become a kind of generic Thirdworldism or Third World Culture, where anything can be

considered postcolonial if it has got a bit of the non-Western world or a bit of race in it. So that in the literary domain, for example, you can say you work in postcolonial studies because you are studying, let's say, R. K. Narayan and then what people can produce is a piece of work that, to me, doesn't have anything postcolonial about it, because it is a much more conventional piece of literary criticism just analyzing what R. K. Narayan says. I pick R. K. Narayan because I do not see him as somebody who's really resisting the status-quo, so he's not an author who has the qualities that would affiliate him to the postcolonial profile. It has become, sometimes, a way of talking or either writing novels or writing about novels that simply portray different cultures, which in fact is something that goes back to the 19th century at least. People would write a novel about Brazil, you would read it to learn something about Brazil, and it has a certain liberal quality to it. Somebody like Pierre Loti in France would be a good example, his novels have just a general exotic quality that people want to relax with and be mildly titillated by. For the postcolonial to have any meaning it needs to be more than that, and it needs to address material that has a certain mode of politics, which is not simply telling us about another culture, but raising difficult issues either about that culture or about the relation of one culture to another. It should, in some sense, make you feel uncomfortable, and challenge the way you think. So to that extent I think that the postcolonial needs to focus more on certain kinds of literary writing. Writing that takes you out of the comfort zone.

Another reason for that is, since the beginning of this century there has been an increasing interest in the idea of world literature, which has become very successful institutionally as it goes with globalization and it sounds very respectable. It has got a long genealogy going back to Goethe and for comparative literature departments it sounds perfect. So now, because comparative literature, which always used to be just European, has been postcolonialized and world literature is the result, then that leads people to say "well, what is postcolonial literature?" How do you distinguish that from world literature? That is another reason why it's important to try think about the question, are they the same thing? Is there a point in still having this category, the postcolonial, or should we call it all world literature? I think there is a difference between these

two, for postcolonial literature has a certain kind of politics to it whereas world literature doesn't have to have any kind of politics, it includes everything, from all times, and it is not necessarily related the colonial period, specifically. There is also a difference with respect to writers' particular relation to the language that they use, between writers who are, for example, non-Western writers who simply write in their native language without needing to think about it, for example in Japan, and people who live in cultures that have been colonized or are the product of settler colonialism, as in Brazil, where I suppose today the language is not really an issue (except of course for speakers of the hundred and eighty or so minority languages!). But in many places, like India, you have a complicated relation to the language before you even start: you are bearing the violence of colonial history on you when you speak, even if you are able to decide what language to write in. So that literature is, in some sense, the product of violence, either historical or contemporary. Where that violence is still an issue seems to me one thing that makes the postcolonial and a kind of writing that is different from generic world literature.

ES: When you talk about a postcolonial work of fiction makes me wonder whether you believe there are postcolonial fictions per se. Do you believe it to be something that lays within the fiction, inherent to it? Do you believe it to be a perspective with which we read that fiction? Or do you believe it is both things combined? In the case of the African literatures written in Portuguese, for example, this is a much-contested area, in which we can find those who would call its works postcolonial and those who would see those very same works as belonging to national literatures. So, to which extent would you see a work as national, postcolonial in itself or would you say the approach depends on the perspective of those who read it?

RY: That's an interesting question. One of the things that postcolonial is at odds with is nationalism in general. It involves a critique of nationalism and the assumption that cultures are national and that the best way of reading literature is through specific nations, or that you should cut literatures down in that way. The question is whether it is necessary for each country to have its

own literature, particularly if people are writing on the same language or very similar languages. Is it really so rational to separate them completely as if they have got nothing to do with each other? Or does it make more sense to put them together, as in linguistics, for example? It is certainly the case in English now that whereas there used to be an English literature, an American literature and a Canadian one, etc., now so many people speak English and want to write in English that it is becoming harder and harder to keep this sort of classification. In addition people travel, so Salman Rushdie for example is born in India, comes to England and now is in the States. In the 20th, 21st centuries it is harder to keep literatures within national boundaries, and, of course, people do not read them that way either. You go into a book shop and look at the new fiction section, it is not separated into national boundaries. It is just separated up into different authors, some of whom will be translated, some not, which means that the way you or other writers read is international. Of course it is always possible to construct a national literature, and that is clearly an important activity for nations that are trying to create themselves, produce a national history, but that is a specific political and ideological project; it is not a natural or a normal thing. You don't have to look at literature in that way, literature is simply a lot of books written in a lot of different languages.

In terms of postcolonial as a way of reading or a way of writing, first of all, I don't think writers sit down and say "I'm going to write a postcolonial novel," and most writers, if you say "you're a postcolonial author" probably would say "no, no I'm just an author," because writers don't like labels. They might say I'm an English writer or a Brazilian, but typically they don't like labels. I remember getting into trouble once by announcing somebody who lives in Britain and has for decades been part of the new wave—I forget what I called him, I think "Black British" or a "minority writer." When I called him that he frowned and said, "I'm an African writer," so I was put in my place. That was his right too, and I can see reasons why he would want that, but that doesn't stop other people characterizing writers into certain groupings. I think that a lot of writers now clearly know what the postcolonial is, or they have some familiarity with the ideas of the postcolonial. You can see very clearly in some writers that they really know their stuff, they have probably taken courses on it at

university, they are influenced by it. Therefore, there are certain issues which are characteristic of postcolonial theory that will get articulated in their work, issues about power relations and colonial, postcolonial rule, race, gender and so forth.

In answer to your last question, it is always harder with literature to say “is it in there or is it how I’m reading it?” because ultimately you can’t say. It is really difficult to say what is really there in Shakespeare or in my interpretation, that’s a theoretical problem nobody has been able to solve. It is there in some sense, in the content, but of course, it is also a particular way of reading texts alert to some issues and certain problems that are really there in the interpretation. But some books are more amenable to that sort of interpretation, that is the point, and therefore there must be a degree to which they are intrinsically, so to speak, more postcolonial. But in the end it is a question to which there is no theoretical answer to, whether it is in the book or in reading the book. People spend lifetimes trying to solve that problem and you can’t say it definitively. Maybe it must be both? History is the same. Things happen, but they happen in the past and they are always retold according to the interests of those in the present.

ES: You have mentioned the political significance underlining the attempt of declaring an author or a book as national as well as the political need of putting a national literature together. Going further into this direction, we could say that any critical dispute around the classification of a work as national rather than postcolonial would be embedded in the very anticolonial thought located at the heart of what has developed into a postcolonial critical approach. As we know, postcolonial thought does have a strong anticolonial legacy that is nationalistic and, therefore, political. With that in mind one could see the very resistance to the postcolonial label, to the detriment of the national one, as a typical postcolonial struggle that recuperates nothing more than its own anticolonial political drive. In the light of this, how would you evaluate the impact of anticolonial legacy in the use and the development of postcolonial theory to date?

RY: Anticolonial thought wasn’t always just nationalist, you have quite a few attempts to conceive it otherwise. Communist internationalism for example, was pretty strong in its day or also pan-Africanism, pan-Arabism, those were

also anticolonial. But of course, the easiest anticolonial movement to organize is national because if you are trying to arouse the troops on the ground it is much harder to say, “let’s identify with people five thousand miles away.” It is much easier to get the country involved, or the colony involved, if it is done at a local level. Even there though, though the national is very much part of the struggle and central to the struggle; Fanon for example was already critiquing the pitfalls, as he says, of national consciousness even before independence. He was very alert to the way that, particularly after independence, where nationalism is achieved, it can go very wrong very quickly and become very discriminatory. The fact that the postcolonial often involves a critique of nationalism isn’t just a sort of willful reversal, it is already there in much of the theory. It was anticipated in much of even earlier anticolonial theory, that’s why they are interconnected, why one is the legacy of the other.

The postcolonial is a bit like what Said said—of course, he was working for a national state at the time, but he also declared “the first critic of the Palestinian state, when it is established, will be me.” That is what intellectuals are supposed to do, try to keep ideals on the rails, so your function changes depending on what you’re dealing with. The other thing is that, again, once the nation-state is established and sovereignty is established, that solves one set of problems, but it doesn’t solve all the other sets of problems, for example gender inequality. Political sovereignty doesn’t do anything for gender at all, and arguably it even potentially makes gender relations worse. So you’ve got to take onboard that sovereignty isn’t the only thing that a country should be striving towards. Sovereignty ought to be the state which facilitates other transformations within the society that it then makes, and that is what the postcolonial is also trying to do, it is trying to focus on these second-stage transformations that are necessary in terms of gender, in terms of minorities, for example, and also inequalities of wealth and so forth. The idea that, somehow, with sovereignty the struggle is over is unfortunately not the case, as we know.

ES: If we take a country like Angola, for example, in which the anticolonial nationalistic movement that fought for the freedom of the country is now the party that has been for more than 30 years in power. When it comes to the

analysis of the literary works of this country, a postcolonial approach is mostly used to the affirmation of the national element, usually versus an “other” that is either the “colonial” or the “Western,” relating both to colonialism and globalization. As a result, even though a critique of the current state of affairs of the Angolan political situation is to be found on contemporary literary works, it has still been very little addressed by postcolonial-oriented literary criticism that, as you pointed out, should be committed to a critique of the sovereign state. Do you think that the very political commitment of the postcolonial critic with the anticolonial nationalist ideology that animates much of the theory can be a disadvantage for a critical approach towards the postcolonial societies of contemporaneity?

RY: First of all, Angola is not somewhere I know well. Of course, any postcolonial society where the national party that was there for independence is still in power many years later is likely to be dubious by definition, because that is not often achieved through democratic popular vote. Occasionally it is, Mexico sort of was, but I don’t think is the case of Angola, and the same in Algeria.

You can see why it is very hard for a party, after all the real struggles of fighting a war, to then just give up power and think that being voted out of office is actually a positive achievement—and people get used to being in power. But giving up power, like argument, is central to the democratic process. To fail to do that would make it very hard for somebody to be actively postcolonial in their cultural politics within that kind of society. Even for a writer it is tricky. Writers are better at being critical because they can do it in more subtle ways, they are not stating things in an overt way when they tell stories. You can interpret them in different ways, since fiction or poetry are more open. But the case of somebody like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o shows that once you start raising your finger in a postcolonial state that is not democratic, you are going to go to jail. A depressing number of postcolonial novels or autobiographical pieces of writing are about being in jail, and fighting a postcolonial state that is no improvement on the colonial state, or it is bad in a different way.

This situation, however, does bring out the tension between resistance to colonialism and the issues that follow afterwards, in terms of the society

that follows. One of the problems, which is the same problem of any revolution, is that people tend to focus on the revolution rather than on the society that follows, which was why socialism was useful since it at least gave people some kind of ideal for the society that followed (what kind of ideals do we have today?). Too often though, that socialism then just meant non-democratic, autocratic rule, so that wasn't necessarily successful. Many socialist countries that moved in that direction, Cuba would be an example, tended, in practice, to shift into a form of nationalism in order to sustain the choice for socialism. Ideologically, nationalism is much stronger in Cuba than socialism as a way of trying to keep the country together. José Martí, for example, is the real rock on which the Cuban Communist Party builds itself. Martí wasn't communist of course, but they have put those together; and in a way they have to. Any government of that kind, in order to survive, will always end up doing that. The postcolonial is basically at odds with that kind of society that you're talking about. It will be critical, but then that will have to be from the outside and you wouldn't probably be able to do it from the inside in that situation.

ES: Achille Mbembe once affirmed¹¹ that there is a difference between thinking about the “postcolony” and “postcolonial thought” in which while the latter “calls upon Europe to live what it declares to be its origins, its future and its promise, and to live all that responsibly” the first would demand a “a way of reflecting on the fractures, on what remains of the promise of life when the enemy is no longer the colonist in a strict sense, but the ‘brother?’”¹². Do you agree with Mbembe's statement? Would postcolonial thought be better fit to address relationships between states rather than within states?

RY: Interesting. I think yes and no. What he is pointing to is that, in a way, there are two arms, two axes of postcolonial thought. One is a sort of European self-critique injecting the history of colonialism and racism, slavery, into the profile of European history and not masking it over in a way that still happens in some extent, but much less so now. Equally my first book, *White Mythologies*, was about a critique of the Eurocentric theories of history, it wasn't postcolonial in some sense, it was about theories of European history. The point

was that European philosophers of history only thought of history as European, they didn't allow for any other forms of history at a philosophical level. To that extent they were repeating a kind of colonialist attitude which certainly saw Europe as the center and wrote off the rest of the world as unimportant. The fact that they did that at a philosophical level is more amazing than that they did it in terms of the history of say France. So there is a European auto-critique. There is an American auto-critique in a different way, where issues of race are foregrounded though this has its own name, critical race theory. That also relates to issues about immigration, migrants, immigrants, multiculturalism which again, as in the work of Bhabha, is a European or North American question. Maybe South American too, given that Brazil and the rest of South America are some of the oldest postcolonies. That is obviously different from somebody working in Angola or Mozambique, or say Mbembe in South Africa or the Cameroons, for whom of those questions are at most tangential in their relevance. They are not irrelevant however because of the history of imperialism and power relations at the level of knowledge. European modes of knowledge still get presented as universal models that everybody works with, so you probably have to unlearn in the colony in more or less the same ways you might need to unlearn within Europe. That legacy of European thought is Eurocentrism.

Where people in India, for example, initially found postcolonial thought irrelevant, it was because they thought issues about migration and hybridity didn't have something to do with them at the time. Now India has changed so dramatically, and today hybridity as well as migration is certainly an issue. Internal migration is a huge thing in China and it is a question for India too because so many Indians have migrated, not only between the countries of South Asia, but also to Europe, Fiji, the Caribbean. There are also problems within India that are urgent, which generally don't seem important from the perspective of Europe, which would be something like the question of caste, for example. From a European point of view, as you can see in general in the way that people talk about India in the papers, the enormous inequities of caste and the effects of that are not talked about. It's the same in Sri Lanka and other places, such as Japan, which have that social concept and practice. It is always going to be the case that in individual places will have their own particular

cultural, social and historical problems, but even so they might be able to pick up, say, questions of racism in the way that, let's say, Paul Gilroy describes it for the British society. Although that is not going to be exactly relevant for their society in general, it is not irrelevant either. In the case of Brazil, for example, the way that racism gets played out will be different, but it is not as if that kind of discrimination doesn't occur. The theory doesn't have to be a universal "one size fits all," it is a cluster of ideas. It is not even a theory in a coherent sense, it is a set of interrelated ideas about certain issues, and everybody is free to take or not take what they want, and to put it in combination with other things too. It is actually quite translatable in the sense that there is no reason to have a perfect translation, you can draw from it what seems helpful and things that are irrelevant are just going to be irrelevant. You don't have to decide whether to take it or not, it is not "all or nothing" or "one size fits all," it is just a conceptual resource as a way of thinking about society and how it operates.

ES: Do you feel any resistance in looking at Brazil on postcolonial terms? If you do feel it, what do you think of it?

RY: I feel it in institutional terms, yes. The Latin Americanists keep very separate, they don't want to mix much with the postcolonials. Robert Stam for example is an exception, he is very open and interested, but sometimes there is a sense a) of feeling threatened and then b) that somehow 'all these postcolonials are making such a big fuss and there's such interest in them, why wasn't anybody interested in us because we have been doing this for ages'. But maybe they hadn't been quite doing that, although related to it, it wasn't quite that.

But of course, there's a lot of interesting work being done by Latin Americanists now and in the past, theoretically and also in literary terms, Roberto Fernández Retamar or Walter D. Mignolo, for example. It is a very rich field and I always try, in any opportunity I have, to pull them together. However I don't know if there is a real resistance outside academia, I think probably people don't care.

People will be interested if something is relevant to them. Of my books, the only one that has been translated into Portuguese is *Colonial Desire*, which is the book about race and the history of racial relations. That make sense

because that's something that would be relevant for people in Brazil in a way that maybe another one is not. So, again, I think people take what works for them and that is how it should go. But the big flowering of postcolonials was either Said, who was interested in the Middle East and Palestine—which is a very specific issue—or the Indians, who are not dealing with a settler colony. There were different scenes in both cases so it is not surprising they didn't just immediately come together, but of course they are related. We could say that Latin Americanists are the theorists of settler colonies, postcolonials the theorists of exploitation colonies.

ES: Interesting that you've mentioned your book *Colonial Desire*¹³ because there you bring up a critical evaluation of the concept of hybridity which, in many ways, is a concept pretty much in vogue when it comes to the relations established from Portugal and Brazil towards Africa. To the extent in which you are familiar to these two contexts, how would you comment on their uses of 'hybridity'? Because on your book you don't really address these situations.

RY: That is a failing of the book and I have been planning for some years now, I don't know if it will ever happen, a second edition of the book in which I do address that. I did later write an essay about lusotropicalism¹⁴—I found it fascinating—and yes, I didn't know about it when I was writing *Colonial Desire*. Then I was focusing on what I focused on. When I went into the history of lusotropicalism, however, in terms of Portugal in relation to Salazar and the whole lusotropical ideology, I could see something related, and also importantly Mexico, where hybridity has a long history and the *mestizaje* defined as the 'mixed' who became the distinctively Mexican 'national type'.

Obviously the lusotropicalism and the Mexican case have different trajectories, but what is interesting about the Latin American case is that hybridity has not had the same sort of political valence as I described in *Colonial Desire*. What I analyze in the book are European theories of race, which were based on theories of separatism—hence South Africa and Germany. That was the idea: keep races pure. Avoid mixture. That was also true in particular areas in South America, maybe in Chile for example, where the populations had

remained relatively distinct and where there was an attempt to keep them distinct. However, it was very different in the case of Brazil, where clearly the populations weren't so distinct anymore, or in Portugal in the 1940s and 50s, where Salazar was desperately looking for some ideology to bind the Portuguese empire together. Or again, in Mexico, where the population was relatively mixed, where indigenous people were seen as being as always lesser, and where you couldn't, as you could still in Cuba, talk about pure Hispanics in a claim that you were still part of pure Castilian culture. So, from that you get the development of the idea that the mixed person is in fact the racial foundation of the nation in a very strong nationalist mode as José Vasconcelos argued in *The Cosmic Race*.¹⁵ What that implies therefore is that hybridity isn't necessarily a radical subversive or even anti-national entity as Hall, Bhabha or I had assumed. It can be that, but only if the ideology is the opposite. If the establishment is actually utilizing hybridity, than it can be easily used in the service of nationalism. In the case of Salazar it was oppressive because he used *tropicalismo* to try to keep the Portuguese empire together, and linked to that in the case of Brazil you had the whole period where his ally Gilberto Freyre claimed that they had no race problem, at which point Brazil became a model for US liberals, which is a whole extra story. In Mexico *mestizaje* was also used as a way of dominating indigenous peoples; that was a struggle that was still to come with the Zapatistas. Thus, in those cases, hybridity doesn't necessarily have the valence that it has in a more recent immigrant society of the kind you have in Europe, that is basically what I'm saying in my book and that's what I realized a bit late. But at some point, if I do get the chance, I will include that essay I wrote on lusotropicalism in *Colonial Desire*, which of course will change the structure of the argument quite significantly, but importantly.

Now I think people are generally much looser today about the idea of hybridity and things being mixed seem more normal. I'm maybe being complacent since there is this whole European right and racism, but to some degree, I don't think that the national traditions are being celebrated today in the same way, because the very concept of Europe is about hybridity or mixture. In an environment where Germans and French are claiming also to be Europeans there must be some room for a mixture, in the cultural as well as the political system. So maybe hybridity is just part of that shift and it doesn't feel particularly radical

to be pushing at things being hybrid anymore today in the way that it did in the 1980s where that very possibility seemed more unusual and challenging.

ES: During your keynote lecture at the Postcolonial Europe Network Annual Conference, you have talk about a “late postcolonialism” as a proposal to address the historicity of postcolonialism itself given the aftermath of the national liberation struggles. Could you tell a bit more about what you mean by “late postcolonialism”?

RY: I’m drawing on Said’s idea of late style and the idea of lateness that he develops which is, in his case of course, drawn from Adorno’s writings on Beethoven. The nuance Said gives to the idea is to push it to what I would call a particular theory of the postcolonial. He doesn’t use that word—because he didn’t like it—but it is a postcolonial that is basically in operation more or less in the terms I’ve described earlier, it’s a postcolonial that is going against the grain, that is resisting the status quo, that is being difficult, intractable, dealing with situations whether irreconcilable or opposites.

While I was reading *On Late Style*¹⁶ I started to think more and more in postcolonial terms. In that book, Said has a chapter on Jean Genet and his identification with the Palestinians, and he calls Genet’s last book, which is titled *Captif Amoureux*¹⁷, an example of late style, and that is when Said himself assimilates it for a larger interpretation. He makes a statement about Palestinian writers being also examples of late style, because they are using or producing cultural artifacts to resist and to go against the status quo. I’m very interested in the fact that Said does define Palestinian literature in that way because the general idea is still that the Palestinian literature is an anticolonial literature, if you see it as a settler colony, as some people argue. The fact that Said includes Genet in it means also that it is not necessarily a national literature, but that it is any literature that has any solidarity with particular causes, and that is the way I’m trying to define the late postcolonial, as arenas where those kinds of formation are in play because of situations of injustice and oppression.

In the end lateness is a sort of anachronism because these are places that are belated, they shouldn’t still be like that. Most people have moved out of those places, moved beyond that situation and that is the kind of lateness that

Said is talking about. You have read my piece *Postcolonial Remains*, I hadn't connected it with late style at that point when I wrote it, but I suddenly realized that there is synergy between the idea of the remains and late style.

The idea is, basically, trying to get rid of all that might be called postcolonial but I don't think is worth calling postcolonial and to aim at focusing on things that are more particularly postcolonial. People want to work on other things that might be called broadly postcolonial, but I think postcolonial needs a bit of refocusing because it has become spread too wide.

ES: Is this broadness bringing a loss to the political potential of postcolonial thought?

RY: Yes. To its political potential and to its theoretical potential because what theory can cover everything? It is everywhere, so there is nothing there. And if you think about it, you will see that when the postcolonial was first developed, it was addressing particular situations. Of course colonialism in general was also included, but Said was particularly discussing representation of the Orient; Bhabha and Spivak, initially, were talking particularly about colonial India, colonial writers. With any theoretical writing, then people are going to use it and take it elsewhere, but I think you can't make a new theory about something that is so general that it applies everywhere. It is better to focus it and then people are going to use that idea wherever they think it might fit elsewhere.

ES: Do you think then that the problem of postcolonial theory nowadays is that people have been drawing too much from theoretical constructs that have been designed to address particular situations, thus overstretching them and not contributing to a continuous theorization in the field? If in the one hand the use of a theory designed to understand an specific situation of, let's say India—with Bhabha in mind—to address a specific situation in, for example, Mozambique, could be considered an overstretch, on the other hand that theoretical application could be a point of departure for a theorization that, coming from another specificity would, therefore, end up enriching the very theoretical corpus of postcolonial though. Wouldn't this be also valuable for postcolonial studies?

RY: I think, first of all, that there is nothing to stop anybody using theory in some other context. That is how scientists work, and that is a very productive way of thinking. Of course when they use it elsewhere it will always come out a bit different, but yes, that is the way that theories in the Humanities work too. You develop a theory out of a particular situation, a particular problem and people say, “oh yes, that really works,” so then somebody else comes along and says, “well it actually might also work for the other problem,” and there is nothing wrong in doing that. On the other hand, however, it is not doing more than developing the nuances of the theory in other contexts.

If you want to keep the ideas developing conceptually into addressing new problems then yes, something coming out of a specific situation like Mozambique is more likely to produce useful generative theoretical work than something just in general, because that is not how theory works. As I said, the particular examples of the development of postcolonial theory show that they have been addressing, if not very specific situations then at least relatively specific situations, and the amazing thing was that they did seem applicable to many people elsewhere—although that is perhaps not surprising at one level because colonialism was everywhere, so it wasn’t unique. What is interesting is to think about the specificity of what happened in Mozambique and then construct a way of thinking about that. And then when you do so, some people will say, “well that’s actually something in there that, I now realize, is how it was in somewhere else,” that is how it works.

ES: Considering your experience in the field, as well as your concern with contemporaneity, how do you see the future of postcolonial thought?

RY: If postcolonial thought has a future—and there is no reason why it has to have a future since it is just a way of thinking—it should return to focus on particular issues that still remain problematic. The world has moved on politically and culturally, there has been a reconfiguration that wasn’t there in 1980 or so; the world now seems at one level much more homogeneous after globalization and the end of communism. Socialism is still there somewhere, but we wait for the comeback which may well come as the world and its societies become more

uneven. One arena that I think has transformed dramatically is the scenario that has been very evident since 9/11, which are the relations between the West and the Muslim world.

The Muslim countries didn't have an antagonistic relation to the West in terms of capitalism because they, broadly speaking, operate on the same economic system. But they haven't embraced capitalism in the same way that, for example, India has, where they seek to imitate the US. There is a certain resistance in the Middle East which is partly historical in relation to the history of Western imperialism in the Middle East in the twentieth century and the fact that they are still living with problematic issues from that past. But I think also that they have a certain resistance to capitalism, specifically attached to different forms of Islam which is, ultimately, about a sense of wanting to maintain certain values. Although that is not the same, it is comparable to, for example, the European reaction against the development of science of the end of the 18th century which was also in league with new forms of capitalism where you have the enclosure movement in Britain when land was taken and privatized taking away the livelihoods of people who would farm collectively, leading them to migrate to cities where factories were just establishing and in need of massive labor. At that time there was already a huge resistance to the development of such kind of capitalism among intellectuals, including romantic poets, but many others too. I think we are seeing something similar going on globally, in which capitalism brings benefits but also takes them away. People have the right to not just go along with everything passively if they have strong values about morality, how to live, or about the place religion has in their lives. I can see why they feel they want to maintain those values and I respect them for that, even if they don't square with my own.

The whole history of imperialism has colored this resistance in a different way. For example, the importance oil has had in the role of the Western countries in the Middle East, along with the establishment of the state of Israel, which was basically exporting what was seen as a European problem out of Europe to solve it, makes it very complicated. It is not just a straightforward thing, and that has become much clearer since 9/11 than it was before. It has become a major issue within the structure of global and cultural politics. That

is something that is harder for people in the West to get their heads around and as a result they, very often, just demonize those societies, even though demonizing people is not going to solve anything. People are not going to get anywhere other than by trying to understand what that response really involves. Demonizing it just makes it worse and makes it more political. At some level it is not a political response—I'd say ultimately—but it becomes politicized, since it is about something that is not inherently political. And until people can get that it is not going to improve.

If postcolonial studies have got a role in the future, it is to try to facilitate those forms of understanding about what is going on in the world. We have to keep in mind that postcolonial studies doesn't encompass all theories, therefore it does not solve all problems and it predominantly relates to cultural production even though it thinks about politics. So one thing you can do with it is to look at the way people are writing, making films and all forms of cultural production that are being created including writing in general, not just literary writing, since that is another kind of Western classification. Trying to think through what is going on by reading, watching, listening, and trying to theorize that, maybe in forms that would be different from the ways we have thought in the past, is what postcolonial studies should be doing. Postcolonial studies can do that because one of its advantages is the very vagueness of its term, it is not tied to any particular discipline. It comes primarily from literature but it goes well beyond literature, so it doesn't have to see things from a single disciplinary perspective, such as a sociological perspective or a political perspective. In most disciplines, you don't get an overall understanding; you get the understanding of a particular issue formulated in a particular way. Postcolonial studies can try to produce a more holistic, three-dimensional understanding, since its willingness to move between different perspectives means that it can offer a more comprehensive way of thinking both culturally and politically than specialized disciplines and areas studies. That is what I hope it will do.

Notes

- ¹ Young, Robert J.C. "Postcolonial Remains." *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 19-42. Print.
- ² Said, Edward W. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. London: Routledge, 1978. Print.
- ³ Editor's Column, "'The End of Postcolonial Theory?' A Roundtable with Sunil Agnani, Fernando Coronil, Gaurav Desai, Mamadou Diouf, Simon Gikandi, Susie Tharu, and Jennifer Wenzel." *PMLA* 122.3 (2007): 633-51.
- ⁴ Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. Print.
- ⁵ Young, Robert J.C. *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- ⁶ Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- ⁷ The Second Annual Conference of the Postcolonial Europe Network was held at the Utrecht University on April 18th and 19th, 2013. The title of Robert Young's keynote lecture was "Late Postcolonialism."
- ⁸ Young's article had four different responses that were published in *New Literary History* 43.2 (2012).
- ⁹ "Postcolonial Remains" 20.
- ¹⁰ Reference to Young's lecture given earlier that day at the Edward Said memorial Conference held at the Utrecht University between April 15-17th, 2013.
- ¹¹ Mbembe, Achille. "What is Postcolonial Thinking?" *Eurozine*. 9 Jan. 2008. Web. 10 Dec. 2013.
- ¹² Ibid. 11.
- ¹³ Young, Robert J. C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Culture, Theory and Race*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- ¹⁴ "Gilberto Freyre and the Lusotropical Atlantic", in *Terras e gentes*. Ano 2000 ANAIS, Proceedings of the VII Congresso Abralic. CD. Reprinted in *Unisa Latin American Report* 22.1-2 (2006): 5-21. Portuguese translation, "O Atlântico lusotropical: Gilberto Freyre e a transformação do hibridismo" in *Gilberto Freyre y los estudios latinoamericanos*. Ed. Joshua Lund and Malcolm McNee. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 2006. 99-122.
- ¹⁵ Vasconcelos, José. *The Cosmic Race*. Los Angeles: California State University, 1979. Print.
- ¹⁶ Said, Edward W. *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain*. London: Bloomsbury, 2006. Print.
- ¹⁷ Genet, Jean. *Un Captif Amoureux*. Paris: Gallimard, 1986. Print.

Emanuelle Santos works in the department of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick, United Kingdom. Her research focuses on the contemporary literatures of the five Portuguese-speaking African countries (Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, and Sao Tome and Principe), examining the ways in which nation and national identity have been represented in their 21st-century fiction. Considering the aftermaths of these societies' independence, her research aims both at a comparative assessment of current pathways of national discourses in literature as well as a critique of postcolonial theory, as it points to a need for supplementary theoretical tools to analyze situated realities of contemporary postcolonies.