**“A Conversation about Postcolonial Study – An Interview with Professor Stephen Slemon”, by Yukuo Wang. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, Issue #2, 2005, pp. 167-75.**

*Q: Before we come to the "serious" topics, can Chinese readers know a bit about your own learning experiences in postcolonialism? This might interest them, and it would help them know more about the research you're devoted to now.*

A: I suppose my real interest in the foundational questions of postcolonialism -- that is, in the question of how the rise of the European Empires from the 16th century onwards affected so much of the non-European world, and how that world responded to those many acts of colonial intervention -- began with my experiences as a young boy. When I was ten, my father, an electrical engineer, was sent by the Canadian Government to a newly built engineering college just north of Mangalore, in South India. This was the time of the so-called green revolution, and my father's job was to help establish teaching and research in electrical engineering at the Karnataka Regional Engineering College. The Canadian government funded him through something called "The Columbo Plan". My father took his family of six with him, and during the year we lived there I attended classes at the middle school at St. Aloysius College in Mangalore. This was a magnificent boy's college, one established by Jesuit missionaries in the 1870s, and by far the leading academic institute for school boys in the Karnataka region. My brother and I, however, were the first "white" boys to attend St. Aloysius. This meant that I learned at a relatively young age what it was like to be not just the alien outsider in a culture not his own, but also to be the privileged outsider. In the normal course of a year, every boy in sixth standard at St. Aloysius would come in for his moment of ritual punishment before the rest of the class. I was never punished. And it was not because I always did the work.

Much later, I did a Master's degree in Canadian literature at the University of British Columbia, under the outstanding supervision of W.H. New, a world expert in Canadian and Commonwealth literary studies. I took a seminar from Bill New which covered literature from across the "new literatures in English": that is to say, we read works from Australia and New Zealand, India, Papua New Guinea, East, West, and southern Africa, and the Caribbean. I loved reading the texts Bill set for the course. But at the same time I was bored by the general practice of literary criticism. It seemed to have no politics. It seemed to have no aim. And so I took a decade to do other things on the Canadian West Coast. During that decade I read books purely for pleasure. I discovered once again what it means to read without having a pencil in the hand. And then I fell into a replacement teaching job at a local college, and discovered to my surprise that college-level teaching was actually fun. I knew that if I wanted to do more of this I’d better have a Ph.D., and that if I was going to write a Ph.D dissertation I'd better do it in an area where I liked reading the books. And so I went to the library in search of those professors, those major research universities, where Commonwealth literary works were talked about in interesting ways. I

expected that those universities would be in England: the discovery that this was not so was perhaps my first act of critical decolonization. The search lead me to Helen Tiffin, at the University of Queensland in Australia. And I discovered something else. Helen was then writing the kind of criticism that really talked to me. Helen wanted to understand other cultures; she genuinely wanted to know how literary texts worked in the places they came from. And I could tell from the way that she saw critical writing as having a necessary commitment to the principle of social change.

And so in 1985 I arrived at the University of Queensland, to discover -- fortuitously, again -- that Helen was just beginning work with two collaborators -- Bill Ashcroft and Gareth Griffiths -- on a critical textbook that would go on to become the cornerstone document of the emerging field of "postcolonial literary studies". That document would eventually be called -- after considerable negotiations between the co-authors -- "The Empire Writes Back". I got to be there at precisely the moment where the field of "Commonwealth literary studies" was finding a new voice, and a new energy, under the "postcolonial" name.

*There are two questions concerning your previous answer. First, can you elaborate on the point: "I was bored by the general practice of literary criticism: it seemed to have no politics. It seemed to have no aim."? This could help readers know the change and development of literary theories in the English-speaking world. Besides, when you refer to The Empire Writes Back (published in 1989) as "the cornerstone document of the emerging field of "postcolonial literary studies", when do you think "Postcolonial Studies" start? By the way, the Chinese translation of this book was published in Taiwan in 1998.*

The point is often made that the professional of “English” has *always* been political. Gauri Viswanathan’s brilliant monograph *Masks of Conquest* (1989) shows how the formal study of English literature began in the Bengal Presidency of British India in the 1830s – an armature of Empire. The study of English literature, it was felt, would help the British – and here I am quoting Thomas Macaulay’s infamous “Minute” on Education from 1835 – to “manufacture “a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” A decade later, the formal study of English literature – that is to say, the art and practice of literary criticism – came “home” from the colonial laboratory, and was used as a way of managing workers’ demands for educational improvement in the 1840s. In the 1850s it was again used to manage demands for participation: this time, by women. In 1920s the British Government made the study of English a formal requirement in English schooling. The *Newbolt Report* on Education announced that such study would help produce “a new element of national unity, linking together the mental life of all classes” – that is, it would package and displace class issues into the sentiments of nationalism.

Needless to say, English literary criticism has done everything it can to disavow its origins in colonialism, hegemony, and patriarchy. Its most notable disavowal was the development of the so-called "New Criticism", which announced that literary texts were in no way part of the social and political fragment: rather, they were autonomous documents and should be studies as free-standing structures. "A poem should be motionless in time/ As the moon climbs", wrote Archibald MacLeish. "A poem should not mean/ but be." But history has a shadow, and the practice of literary criticism cannot jump over it.

I took my Masters Degree in the 1970s, just when literary criticism in the Western academy was finishing up with new criticism, and before the time that criticism took its political and poststructural turn. Our experience as students was generally this: we loved reading the literature, but we hated reading analytical documents that pretended to explain it. The paradox of formal study in English was that you trained yourself to write professional documents of a kind that you didn't want to read.

Later, of course, I did discover that some literary critics in this period -- Fernández Retamar, from Cuba, for example, or Wilson Harris, from Guyana – were in fact writing criticism of the kind that I would come to regard so highly. By then, however, I had made my own critical commitment towards a criticism that would be adequate to the literary achievement of postcolonial writers, and this helped me find things in earlier critical writing that I had not been able to see before. Bill New's own critical writing from the early 1970s is a good example of this: read it now, through what we have learned from postcolonial critical theory, and you discover that a postcolonial criticism in English existed well before Edward Said published his brilliant monograph entitled *Orientalism* in 1978.

Throughout the 1990s, however, the academy devoted rather a lot of time to the general project of defining and archiving "postcolonialism" and "postcolonial critical and cultural theory". One school of thought – primarily based in the United States – claimed that Edward Said has invented the discipline. Another claimed that all rivers ran from the psycho-social icefields of Frantz Fanon. Yet another school of thought claimed that the headwaters of postcolonial criticism were to be found in the obscure country of Commonwealth literary criticism, which had come into being as an accidental by-product of the old Commonwealth scholarship program, which brought talented students such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka from Nigeria, or Kendrick Smithyman from New Zealand, to Leeds University in the 1960s. But the critical document that really set the cat amongst the pigeons – at least in the way I tell the history -- was *The Empire Writes Back*. In taking its title from Salman Rushdie – "the empire writes back to the centre" – and in setting up a model for how postcolonial texts "abrogated" capital-E "English Literature", and appropriated that literature for small-e post-colonial "english" aims, *The Empire Writes Back* set up a teachable model for approaching postcolonial literary as social and political *work*. That book has done more to set the direction of postcolonial critical practice than has any other document, although many have been unhappy with this direction, and

many have noticed that almost all of the critical claims made in *The Empire Writes Back* have been around for quite some time, and everyone has noticed that *The Empire Writes Back* has now been overtaken by other critical documents, which have refined postcolonial criticism, and redefined postcolonial criticism, and even transmuted postcolonial studies into new disciplines, such as globalization studies. That is why I call *The Empire Writes Back* the cornerstone document for postcolonial literary criticism. Cornerstones are of course just corner stones. Buildings shift around them; the ground shifts under them. Sometimes the buildings fall down.

Q: *Many Chinese scholars are supposed to accept the claim that Edward Said has invented the discipline of postcolonial studies, and some try to trace it to Frantz Fanon. However, few Chinese scholars trudge through the headwaters of postcolonial criticism "found in the obscure country of Commonwealth literary criticism." As far as I am concerned, I appreciate Gregory Castle's comments on your contribution to postcolonial studies as "meta-critique," like Robert Young's. Would you please introduce to Chinese readers your responses to "no politics" literary criticism? How do you define "postcolonial studies?*

My position has always been that "postcolonial studies" – however it configures itself: as postcolonial literary theory, or postcolonial critical theory, or postcolonial cultural theory – has never been a unified field of theory, but instead has been a meeting point for a set of unresolved – indeed unresolvable – debates about the relation between representation and politics. In 1994 I pointed out that – and here I'm quoting from an article entitled "The Scramble for Postcolonialism" -- that rather than defining anything with singularity or precision, the term "postcolonialism" was being used by various fields of study to describe a remarkably heterogeneous set of subject positions, professional fields, and critical enterprises. I wrote: "I've seen it used as a way of ordering a critique of totalizing forms of Western historicism; as a portmanteau term for a retooled notion of "class", as a subset of both postmodernism and post-structuralism (and conversely, as the condition from which those two structures of cultural logic and cultural critique themselves are seen to emerge); as the name for a condition of nativist longing in post-independence national groupings; as a cultural marker of non-residency for a third-world intellectual cadre; as the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power; as an oppositional form of "reading practice"; and -- and this was my first encounter with the term -- as the name for a category of "literary" activity which sprang from a new and welcome political energy going on within what used to be called "Commonwealth" literary studies. The obvious tendency, in the face of this heterogeneity, is to understand "post-colonialism" mostly as an object of desire for critical practice: as a shimmering talisman that *in itself* has the power to confer political legitimacy onto specific forms of institutionalized labour, especially on ones that are troubled by their mediated

position within the apparatus of institutional power". My previous answer to you explains why the discipline of English Studies is especially troubled in this regard.

An uneasiness with fact that Postcolonial Studies is not one thing has inhabited the discipline for virtually all of the time that it has been with us, and management strategies are everywhere within the discipline. One of the most fervent of these has been the fight over the term "postcolonial" itself: whether the "post" means after or against or something else, whether "colonialism" is really an accurate naming of that which effected the power that needed, or needs, to be changed, whether "postcolonialism" doesn't somehow suggest that the long moment of colonialism and its various hegemonies has now come to an end. The suitability of the term "postcolonialism" has been everywhere debated, and what has struck me most about this debate is its underlying assumption that other fields of study -- "Medieval studies", for example, or "Renaissance Studies" – are named accurately, and that it is the work of the discipline of Postcolonial Studies to meet that standard and get its own name right. I think this is a false assumption: none of the field names within English Studies is capable of describing the heterogeneity of activities that take place within the field they attempt to study. In my view, this long fight over terminology has distracted many workers in and around the field of postcolonial studies from what ought to have been their real work.

And so I have opposed all at attempts to draw the define "the postcolonial", or "postcoloniality", or "postcolonialism", or "postcolonial studies" as singular things, and I have resisted all attempts to unify the field of Postcolonial Studies into a single project with a specific critical methodology. If you will permit me to quote myself once again, let me read this from a forthcoming essay on Wole Soyinka and the postcolonial canon. "I believe that postcolonial studies is wrong to attempt to congeal the various modes and forms of postcolonial social thought into a postcolonial*ism*, and that the obvious lines of political and methodological agreement in the discipline are precisely *not* what the current readers, anthologies, textbooks and guides in the industry ought to be tracing. I stand for an attention to the inconsistencies and incoherences in postcolonial thinking, not for their institutional unification. These inconsistencies are useful allies in our search for more equitable postcolonial futures and our work for genuine political change."

Q: *Can you give us some examples of "postcolonial thinking" in literary studies concerning the issue of race? It has been one of the three debated issues since 1960s—Gender and Class might be the other two equally significant and foregrounded issues. Since postcolonial studies deal with "the relation between representation and politics," how does a modern writer represents and how can modern readers approach the texts engaging racial problems? For example, Wole Soyinka and Toni Morrison may represent racial problems differently.*

You've asked a good question. I have not the wit to give you a short answer, so let me instead give you a very long one.

Disciplinary boundaries are always unstable things, and there is no firm dividing-line between "postcolonial thinking" and other kinds of critical thinking within literary studies. But perhaps I can try to locate postcolonial thought as something that takes place between two general arguments about race – oscillating between them at times, combining them at others. The first of these arguments is made best, perhaps, by the Ghanaian philosophy Kwame Anthony Appiah, who points out that the doctrine of "racialism" need not, in itself, rise to the level of "racism". "Racialism", says Appiah, is a hypothesis about group characteristics: it holds that all members of a presumed group share certain characters with one another, and that they do not share those characters with members of another group. Were such an hypothesis to refuse to make value judgments, says Appiah, it could *in theory* stop short of being "racist". Were it to make observations solely about physical characteristics – without judgment – and not attempt to distribute moral or temperamental or intellectual characteristics between groups, "racialism" could remain value-neutral. But, says Appiah, "racialism" in practice never does stop short of making value judgments. There is no basis for such value-judgments, and so "racialism" as well as "racism" should be rejected on ethical grounds. But more importantly, perhaps, "racialism" should be rejected because it is a false doctrine. There simply are no identifiable characters that can confidently be distributed among *all* members of a putative human group, and that *are not* shared with members of another putative human group.

Informed by this approach to race, "postcolonial thinking" takes a universalist approach to matters of "race". You can see it in documents such as Wole Soyinka's foundational essay "The Fourth Stage", which Soyinka published in a festschrift for the renown Shakespearean pedagogue, G. Wilson Knight, whom Soyinka knew at Leeds University. At the level of direct argument, Soyinka's essay is a treatise on dramatic transition – on the vortex beyond the stages of the ancestors, the living, and the unborn, the stage upon which the Yoruba tragic protagonist recapitulates Ogun's mythic battle of agential will against the abyss of dissolution in the project of establishing a the conditions for a continuing cultural health. Performatively, however, it is also claim about English literary canonicity. It is also saying something about a transition Soyinka thinks is talking place within "English" literary tradition itself. Soyinka is promulgating the notion of Yoruban culture as a divided thing: on the one hand, separate and different from English in its cultural forms, but on the other hand, universal and constitutive of the new canon that is emerging within English studies. I read this essay as a gesture of cross-cultural mutuality, explanation, exception and friendship, as something that performs of postcolonial intellectual negotiation. It puts the idea of racial difference on the table, but ultimately with a view to overturning it in the service of a new universalism.

Before I move on to the second argument about race, however, I want to say something about why I put quotation marks around the term "postcolonial thinking". In a nutshell: I agree with Appiah's general point about taxonomies. There really are no intellectual principles or hypotheses that are (1) shared by "postcolonialists" and (2) held by those who are not "postcolonialists". If the postcolonial is to make sense as a conceptual category, it must be from beyond the foundational assumptions of taxonomic critical thinking. Otherwise, postcolonialism just becomes another in the endless refractions of nineteenth-century anthropology – one of the disciplinary cornerstones for racism in modern times.

The countervailing movement in "postcolonial thinking" about the issue of race is perhaps best exemplified by the great Martiniquean theorist, Frantz Fanon. Fanon's Fanon's great project was to think through colonialism not at the level of appropriated labour but at the level of pyschic alienation: Fanon wrote of how the soul of colonized peoples experienced a "death and burial" because of the inevitability that the experience of living under colonialism necessarily isolated colonized peoples from what he called their "local cultural originality". For Fanon, colonialism entailed irreparable loss, and so in answer to the question: what comes after colonialism? Fanon's answer was: nothing different, unless *total* substitution, a *new* language, a fully *new* humanity, could somehow be brought into being. For Fanon, the genuinely *post*-colonial could only be thought about at the level of an impossible imagining: this was Fanon's *new*-man (he called it), and in fact Fanon could not theorize this new man, this new, unalienated psychic state after colonialism, and so instead he wrote that new man, postcolonial culture, could only enter history through radical and violent transformation. Corrections in gender politics and psychoanalytic theory notwithstanding, this tenet in the postcolonial dialectic -- Fanon's split subject -- radiates through postcolonial thought in just about every register. It the central position that echoes in what Albert Memmi called the two answers of the colonized; it continues in Ashis Nandy's thesis of "loss and recovery of the self under colonialism"; it informs the way in which the historian Partha Chatterjee's reframes Benedict Anderson's hypothesis of the modern nation as an "imagined community", which Chatterjee re-reads through the double-positioning of anti-colonialist nationalist movements when they finally achieve the postcolonial nation state. And of course, Fanon's split subject is the ur-text of all of Homi Bhabha's work: Bhabha's project begins in an attempt to locate an impossibility at the heart of Fanon's alienated self under colonialism, and more importantly an impossibility of any kind of re-consolidation of that self through compartmentalized terms like colonizer and colonized, or Europe and its Others, or centre and periphery. Bhabha's first step is to locate that impossibility; his second step is to theorize that impossibility itself as the very definition of a postcolonial location of culture.

Fanon's experience of "racism" – not as a "doctrine", but as a subject-splitting social and psychic phenomenon – was foundation to this larger formulation he would

arrive at in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*. His earlier document, *Black Skins, White Masks*, locates that experience. In a chapter entitled "The Fact of Blackness", Fanon elaborates the problem outwards from a moment: a young boy looks at him, points, and says to his mother: "Look, a Negro!" Fanon elaborates how this "white gaze" dissects, how it annihilates individuality. In this inevitable and unavoidable moment of interpellation, "the black man" *becomes* his skin colour and is shattered into tripartite structure: a body, a race, a history. He now becomes the psychic agent in this process. Now seeing himself through the eyes of this pointing white boy, "the black man" objectifies *himself* – he re-enacts his "social death" – and thus reinforces the original trauma. Clearly, this is not a conceptual place that one can live in, and for Fanon, there are important consequences of this realization. Fanon has trained himself brilliantly in the intellectual traditions of the European Enlightenment, but he cannot take refuge in his the tradition. Even at its most liberal ("you are civilized despite your skin colour"), this tradition must now be seen as inalienably "racist": refracted through the psyche, Enlightenment thought reconfirms Fanon's absolute Otherness in relation to white men and leaves him feeling rage, shame, and nausea. A door closes. Where then can he turn? Sartre counsels him to adopt the stance of "anti-racist racism"? But for Fanon, this stance is foundationally flawed, for it rests on a dialectical hypothesis which looks like this. Thesis: the supremacy of "the white race". Antithesis: *négritude* – the hypothesis, developed by African and Caribbean intellectuals in Paris in the 1930s, that a racial "essence", inherited from ancestral Africa, is a unifying and stabilizing principle for black people everywhere, that "blackness" is a positive element that gives one back one's pride. The synthesis: "human society without race". However laudable Sartre's ultimate goal, Fanon cannot go that way, for it positions "blackness" – and all that it contains: solidarity, opposition, "black zeal" – purely as the negative term in a progressive dialectic. Sartre's suggestion simply make it Fanon's "negro consciousness" "a transition, the root of its own destruction". And Fanon will insist: "My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack It *is*." And so for Fanon, the "Fact of Blackness" is "racism" is history's shadow, and you cannot jump over it. Black people are compelled to internalize the stereotypes that dominant others have of them. They cannot resolve those internalisations by taking refuge in a tradition that implicitly rejects them, nor can they resist it by taking refuge in a political stance that accepts the false doctrine of "racial essence" as the intermediate step between racial violence and its future resolution in some as-yet undisclosed universalist term. So for Fanon, "race" is a violence which is unresolvable within the kind of dialectical thinking that is simply "read off" from the category of "class". "Racism" has an inescapable parlarity, and within its social syllogisms there is no harmonizing third term.

Homi Bhabha has explored the connection between Fanon's position on race and the kind of understanding about race that Toni Morrison pursues in her literary writing. He says that there is something "unhomely" in the house of fiction when one attends to the voices that do not simply "speak" about issues such as racism, its violences, its

internalizations, its resistances. The house he is referring to here is 124 Bluestone Street, and the book is Morrison's brillian novel, *Beloved*.

I started out by saying that postcolonial thought takes place between two general arguments about race – roughly, Appiah's on the one hand, and Fanon's on the other. By making this claim, I am *not* trying to say that postcolonial thought is somehow inconsistent or disorganized. Indeed, I am trying to say the opposite. In his important book *White Mythologies* the Cambridge scholar Robert Young points out that one of the unifying principles of postcolonial thought is its rejection of the "historicist" thesis that one human history unites all humanity and is capable of describing all modes of power and alterity. Historicism, Young argues, attempts to locate a single cause or "motor" behind social causality – for Hegelians, it is the master/slave dialectic; for classical Marxists, it is the relations of production. Some have proposed other terms for such the historicist "motor" – race, gender, sexuality, etc. Many have said that postcolonialism is really just an attempt to make "colonialism" yet another historicist single motor. In my view – and this I draw from Robert Young -- postcolonial thought is grounded in a sustained methodological rejection of the "single motor" theory of historical causality. This means as postcolonial thinkers , we need *always* to attend to "race" and "racism" when we turn to the "texts" of social action and reaction, when we seek to understand literary representation in the colonial and postcolonial world. But we must never think of "race" and "racism" as single-motor principles.

*Does Fanon's "alienated self" still work in the modern world and how can "African-Americans" or "African-Canadians" construct or reconstruct their own identities in the 21th Century? Where does Homi Bhabha's "postcolonial location of culture" lead to? Do you think the African-American separatists can really help rebuild a "real", "essential" black nation or trace or confirm the original black culture?*

This is an immensely thoughtful set of questions, Yukuo, for they raise an issue that we should always find troublesome: what is the actual relation between critical theory and grounded social practice? It is not just a question of whether a specific theory from "then" still works "now". It is also a question of *who* it is that various social theories recognize and respond to, under what conditions they do their work, who produces such theories, whose interests are being served by the theories at hand, and who theory excludes or forgets as it goes about its business of describing of social explanation. My own view is that no critical theory ever fully "works" in approaching something as enormously heterogeneous as a "world". This is one of the reasons I have arrived at my own commitment to *postcolonial* theory – to paraphrase Bhabha. In my view, postcolonial theory's rejection of historicist, or "single-motor" approaches, to social causation is a necessary first step towards what some would want to dismiss as theoretical pluralism (or theoretical randomness, or theoretical inconsistency) but what I prefer to think of as theoretical humility. And so to answer your first question directly: I do not know whether or not Fanon's

notion of the divided self pertains in part to the present-day experiences members of specific communities, African Americans, or African Canadians, or really any global peoples, as they are variously constituted, and as they understand themselves. What I attempt to do, as a literary critic, is attend to representations, and I read theory as a form of representation. And so on the question of the extent to which Fanon's notion of a divided self grabs hold of an actual world: I am persuaded that there are important similarities between the divided self that Fanon seeks to think through, and W.E.B. DuBois' argument about divided awareness in *The Soul of Black Folks*, for example, or Zora Neale Hurston's difficult navigation between authenticity and essentialism for black "folk life" in the United States. And there are important differences too. Not one of these writers is fully consistent in what he or she has to say. None of them could claim to represent a whole people, or any specific person wholly. In teaching a document such as Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, I would want to set before my students the possibility that a genuine conversation is going on between this novel and DuBois in the United States, Garveyism in the Caribbean, and négritude in Paris, and that part of what it does is anticipate the arguments Fanon will later make as he meditates on that border zone of identifications that places him between France and Algeria in his clinical work, and between racist Enlightenment rationality and anti-racist négritude essentialism philosophically. I would explore some of the historical linkages between these many positions, and I would invite them to consider the idea that some *part* of the project of these writers, some of the time, in some places in their documents, pertains to this conversation. I would not want them to fasten onto any one of these various proposals with the kind of force that would permit them to think that explanatory power for even one literary document. This means that I would always seek out those places in the document where something in representation seemed to exceed the formulaic capture of explanatory critical theory. I would always try to keep theory in dialogue with the complexity in the literary material itself. It goes without saying that this entire dialogue would also have a lot to say about a Toni Morrison novel, or a Soyinka play, or George Elliot Clarke's brilliant poem-cycle about African-Canadian experience in the Halifax area of eastern Canada: *Whylah Falls*. Just about any theoretical proposal – and Fanon's "divided self" is one of them – can be reduced to a single-motor hypothesis for social explanation. My hope is that we can attend to such proposals without this conceptual reduction. My stronger commitment is to the difficulty in the material, for that, in my view, is the beginning of a postcolonial commitment to a more equitable social world.

But let me now try to say something in response to your second question, about Bhabha's location of culture. Many seem to think that what Bhabha has done is produce another single-motor hypothesis of what postcolonial modernity looks like at "the" location of culture. His name often appears in critical literature as the cited authority for someone's attempt to define what a contemporary social "identity" looks like in some given place. I don't think this kind of claim is at all where Bhabha's "location of culture" is leading us to. His "location of culture" is really a

book-length project, but perhaps I can get my point across here by picking up just one component within the general argument – Bhabha's notion of "liminal space". I've often seen Bhabha's term "liminal space" used as an identifying marker for where diasporic, or migrant, or subaltern communities live, and for how they experience a world that is marked by a condition of being both between worlds and less than fully in either one of them. But Bhabha's project as I read it is not directed towards the of describing contemporary "identities" or – to use the term you put forward in your question – essences. When he writes about "liminal space" as a component within the "location of culture", he is not trying to designate an "in-between identity" but instead is approaching a location of culture "in-between the *designations* of identity". Liminal space, Bhabha writes, is a space that "upsets the binary logic by which identities or differences are constructed". From within this space, displaced and exploited individuals and collectives *necessarily* voice a part of the language of *their* right to signify, and this takes place *against* the claims of authorized power and privilege, So what he is saying is that subalternity is not "simply" speaking from the margins, or from the periphery, or from below – to use a few spatial metaphors. Bhabha wants us to think about what these spatial metaphors don't quite capture when they set out to designate social identities. He wants us to think about what *else* we need to listen for when we attempt to hear the voices of occluded and oppressed others.

Bhabha develops the concept of liminal space through two stages. The first acknowledges the force of spatial metaphor in the work of designating identities; the second attempts to push beyond that spatialization towards that place in-between identificatory identifications themselves. The first is drawn from the critical writing of the African-American artist Renee Green, who talks about "liminal space" architecturally through the metaphor of the stairwell. The stairwell is "a pathway between upper and lower areas" -- this is Green's metaphor for that location of culture occupied by those multiple human subjects like Green herself whose lives are pitched in-between the designations of identity, on the locus of the "connective tissue" that "constructs the difference between upper and lower", for example, or black and white, sane and mad, gay and straight, and so on. The second stage for the concept of liminal space comes when the metaphor of the stairwell is pushed out of the synchronic, out of architecture, and into *time*. For Bhabha, the social productivity of liminal space, which empowers a right to signify from the place in-between stable positions of identity, is not just given by the social condition of marginalization, or diaspora, or dispossession. There is a further complexity to attend to: and this is the significatory complexity of what Bhabha calls the time lag.

Bhabha often devotes his readings to those moments in history, or those moments in literary texts, where what is being said walks a desperate line between a condition of "too much meaning and a certain meaninglessness," and his great project is to attend to that which we do not hear in the otherwise agential voices of subaltern groups who reclaim history for themselves. He wants to keep in play a productivity for

those voices that will sometimes only come later. Rather than allowing a spatial notion like Green's stairwell to rise to the level of a metaphor for where it is that people actually live – as a description of their double or "between-places" identities – Bhabha seizes onto that spatial notion as a *partial* claim for where the voices are coming from and where they are leading, and he uses the notion of the "time lag" to mark a foundational and productive "unreadability" in the representation itself. He wants us to pay serious attention to the question of what it is that identitarian claims *must* look like when they vast emerge from between the stable markers of both subaltern dominant identities. He wants us to recognize the metaphor, feel its force, but also attend to the unreadability within it that is directed towards future re-readings. This future-oriented direction in the articulation of diasporic, marginalized, or subaltern social identities is that necessary second stage Bhabha's argument about "liminal space" and "the location of culture. This is the space where the given conditions of lived experience for suppressed and oppressed groups -- colonial subjects, disenfranchised subjects, subjects enthralled through discourses of gender and race and sexuality -- this is the space where those subjects participate in a "temporality of continuance" with the past and the future of meaning making; this is where the closures of the single historical moment open into the social possibilities embedded in the structure of unfolding and changing narrative; and this is where it is that some of those social gestures rendered from "beneath" or "below" or "outside" the field of dominant vision commit themselves to the revisionary possibilities of history.

So let me end this – again! – very long answer by saying that in my view, a postcolonial project is all about building equitable futures, not about rebuild pre-colonial, "real", or "essential" cultures of the past. It goes without saying that such an equitable global future requires redistribution in historical valuation, and this means that cultures that have been fragmented or traumatized through the colonial encounter need certain forms of rebuilding so that they can come into equal partnership in the future-oriented postcolonial project. On this point, Fanon was right: you cannot imagine an equitable postcolonial future whose foundation is the European Enlightenment, pure and simple. Part of the argument for why this must be so is, of course, a basic and unavoidable argument about human inclusiveness. Much of what is happening now within the general field of "globalization theory" seeks to avoid this obvious point. But part of the argument is also just this simple: dominant, "white" cultures do great violence to themselves when they persist in knowing so little about other cultures, past and present. Most white North Americans know next to nothing– and this is just one example – about any of the very many aboriginal cultures on the continent that have so much to say about what it means to live in this geopolitical area, and to negotiate across cultures in the long-term project of living here. The ignorance of white folks is part of what postcolonial studies seeks to redress.

*Thanks for your detailed and profound answer to the question. I agree with you*

*concerning the postcolonial project "about building equitable futures, not about rebuilding pre-colonial, "real", or "essential" cultures of the past." However, if the foundation is biased and conditioned, how can those "oppressed" and "occluded" claim the equitable future? Do they have to reread and deconstruct those texts -- for example, African-Americans wish to reread American canonized texts and try to reclaim their own "true" positions and the scholars of the Third World try to reread the classic and imperial texts?*

You have asked the most important of all questions within postcolonial thought, and you must forgive me in advance for necessarily failing to answer it adequately. The dream of an equitable future is a human universal. All cultures, at all times, have articulated such dreams, and no single culture, no single theory, can claim a monopoly over this dream, for it pertains to everything that grows in the fields of vision, hope, and planning. And so it goes without saying that no theoretical approach – single-motor or otherwise – can now claim to know "the" answer to what a truly equitable global world would actually look like, let alone how such a world might come to be achieved. Postcolonial thought has some specific contributions to make to what must necessarily be a sustained and collective *dialogue* about equitable futures, and as your question points out, many of these contributions are grounded in a pressing need to redirect the settled thought of history – or to use Wilson Harris's term, the "phenomenal legacy" – into ways of imagining human communities in non-racist, anti-sexist, and genuinely *post*colonial terms. One of the substantial arguments advanced within postcolonial thinking is that such ways of imagining human similarity and difference, though often easy to name, are desperately hard to effect. Much of the work of postcolonial theory has been to attempt to explain this difficulty, and to give it a cultural history.

But your question goes specifically to the role that "oppressed" and "occluded" peoples can – or might, or must – play in the work of imagining that future equitable world and attempting to establish it. I cannot help but feel that your question instantly reveals a troubling hubris in postcolonial critical work. And so let me establish a starting point for this question. If postcolonial thought cannot work in the service of equity for the future, then in my view it has nothing of importance to contribute to a critical dispensation in the present. At the same time, an equitable future is so pressing yet so distant a demand that one reasonably feels challenged at the level of hopefulness. Whether or not there is a synthesizing third term to this postcolonial syllogism of the future remains an open question. But it is there, in that third space, that postcolonial critical thought must necessarily direct its attention.

A recent United Nations survey shows that of the 4.4 billion people now living in what the West likes to call the "developing countries," 3⁄5ths are without basic sanitation, 1⁄3rd without safe drinking water, 1⁄4 without adequate housing, and 1⁄5th beyond the reach of basic health services. Compare that to the unprecedented social

gluttony of present-day Western societies at the level of consumption, the callous disregard of first-world elites for the disenfranchised within their own nations, and what you just begin to discern is a world in which people *everywhere* are desperate not only for participation in social debate but also for the basic conditions upon which they can manage to have hope for the future. The hispanist, Mary Louise Pratt, has argued that many of those who live in the margins of "neo-liberal globalization" have arrived at the conclusion that hope is *not* a rational human affect for these times, and have rearranged their social imaginaries correspondingly.

And so when postcolonial thought talks about conceptual frameworks for global inclusivity, or when it turns to the question of what critical approaches might assist in the project of building equitable futures, it needs to remember – and this is what your question points out – that the paradigmatic "others" of imperial privilege, though they comprise the centre of a postcolonial critical imagination, live beyond the horizon of the academic, first world, institutional worker's gaze. An easy step would be to restate this to say that "the subaltern" lives beyond the reach of "the theorist", but this would forget the crucial point that all people imagine, and plan, and that therefore "theory" is everywhere. Those paradigmatic "others" labour in ways that most university workers find unimaginable, and their probable futures are ones that academic postcolonial thought seeks most passionately to forestall. But in pursuing that goal, academic postcolonialism should not surrender to the false sense that it can actually answer your question. You ask: given the seeming certitude of a continuing foundational inequity in global human arrangements, how can the "oppressed" and "occluded" actually claim "the equitable future"? An answer to this question would require a complete and sufficient theory of progressive social change, *and* it would entail a claim to *know* those others – the wretched of the earth – both in their various singularities and their entirety. Postcolonial theory's most influential critic, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, has directed most of her critical thought against that claim to know. From Enlightenment thinkers like Kant all the way through to postmodernist theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari, Spivak argues, there is a structural inseparability of the philosophical from the sociological "other". The legacy of that inseparability is a structural *need* for Western "theory" to speak in the name of that "other" – Spivak's term is the "subaltern" – in order to consolidate the Western self as an ethical and coherent disciplinary subject. That need is grounded everywhere in the West's great projects, and what it does is to posit "the other" as the object of some seemingly "just" critical intervention, or representation, or advocacy, or interest – "the worker", the "Native/Other", Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's "multitude" – in order to conceptualize the Western theoretical enterprise itself as the prime actor in an intellectual or conceptual rescue mission. The agency for change is arrogated to the theorist, not to the oppressed or the occluded. And so the old alibi for Empire continues!

And so were I to answer your question directly – what is it that postcolonial thought

prescribes to those "others" of that machinery the West likes to call "global progress" at the level of critical social action – my answer would instantly call down the postcolonial critical project itself, which must ultimately privilege listening over speaking.

But no-one should be satisfied with a discipline that exquisitely refuses to answer a difficult question on fastidiously articulated ethical grounds, and so let me reiterate what I think it is that postcolonial critical thinking has to say about this overwhelmingly important question of the role that oppressed peoples might or must come to play in the fashioning of ethical and equitable global futures. The key point is that we need to acknowledge that theories of equitable change, and the agency for effecting those theories, are *everywhere* in human culture. Postcolonial "theory" cannot in itself have access to all of those theories, nor can it have recourse to some genuinely cross-cultural public sphere for mutuality, exchange, and participatory debate. And so postcolonial critical practice must proceed not simply with caution but also with imagination. We cannot believe that our own individual pictures of participatory culture are everyone's pictures. We cannot pretend to know what human enablement looks like to different peoples in different places and times. We cannot lay out a single blueprint for desirable global change. But what we can do is suggest *some* ways of doing *some* kinds of imaginative critical work, and we can attempt to understand those critical methods in relation to the genuine difficulty of the material. And so in specific answer to your question, there is indeed a usefulness to some pedagogies of "reading" a usefulness to the work of critical interrogation into literary canons, indeed a usefulness to re-reading and rewriting socially postioned 'master' texts towards non-hierarchical structures of power. Such techniques can be useful within a general project of what Ngugi wa Thiong'o calls a "decolonization of the mind." But such techniques need not be necessary to that project, and they are never in themselves sufficient. At best, they are tools in a critical toolbox.

*We are coming to the end of the interview, lasting over a year by emails. What would you like to say to Chinese readers concerning Chinese issues? China is a bit different from other colonized countries. It was once a semi-feudal and semi-colonized country. And you've written several essays about Chinese politics and Chinese culture: for example, "Imperialism Is Gone, Domination Remains" is about 1999 Macau's return to China, and "Climbing Mount Everest" is about the political interpretation of the climbing*.

*Besides, I do wish to ask you about the similarities or intersections between Postcolonial Studies and race theory, marxism, globalization studies and transcultural studies. My last question is "what do you think the new development(s) might be in Postcolonial Studies" in the future? Thank you.*

Yes, we are coming to the end. I've enjoyed this exchange, Yukuo, and want to

thank you for your perspicacity in questioning. I regret the length of time this has taken, but I have to tell you that many of your questions have required me to think hard about how to answer, and that has contributed to the delay. Over the past twenty years, "postcolonial studies" has come into being as a formal area of study – constructed as it is on a very wide range of conceptual and methodological foundations, and differently understood it is practiced. It has consolidated itself as a formal area of study – curious that a discipline ostensibly dedicated to the improvement of Fanon's "wretched of the earth" should in places serve in the first instance as a modality of first-world careerism! And postcolonial studies has found itself under attack as an area of study, the main argument against it being that it names a mode of social oppression that is no longer relevant to the kinds of human oppression that maintain the current systems of global modernity. This very diverse set of foundation points for postcolonial studies, and these many changes that have taken place within the discipline, make it difficult, therefore, to supply direct answers to what would seem relatively answerable questions, such as some of yours. I have had to seek ways to balance my own understanding of postcolonial studies with what others think the field to be, and that balancing act has not always been easy.

But if anything is clear from what I have said, I hope it is that the field of "postcolonial studies" can provide the student or teacher with a way of connecting careful scholarly inquiry to the project of genuine social change, and that no single answer exists to how the scholar might pursue that lofty but difficult goal. The discipline of postcolonial studies has *not* arrived at a foundational claim about what it is that constitutes the primary order of social division in all places and at all times – in this it differs from classical Marxism, for example. And so scholars who work in the area of postcolonial studies have not decided – and here I am answering the last part of your question first – that "colonialism" or "neo-colonialism" somehow precedes other forms of social division, like race, gender, sexuality, age, or class. If there is any foundational tenet to postcolonial thinking, it would be this: there is no single motor behind the operations of power. Postcolonial studies, if it does anything, provides the scholar with a place to *begin* thinking about how power operates in specific places and times, and how various forms of social division (race, class, gender, caste, etc) contribute to those specific and local operations of power. Postcolonial studies also provides the scholar with a way of attempting to understand how people affected by the operations of power use these forms of social division as a place to voice their resistances to power, and as a ground from which to seek coalitions with others in the struggle. This means that as a discipline, postcolonial studies cannot exist alone. It needs productive alliances with other disciplines that also seek to understand how equities might be achieved in the future – disciplines like feminist studies, race studies, queer studies, globalization studies, marxist studies, diaspora studies, indigenous studies. It needs to be institutionally predicated across the human sciences – in literature studies, history, anthropology, sociology, political sciences, human geography, sociology, and "area" studies. And it needs to seek out allies beyond the reach of economic and educational privilege – that means that

postcolonial studies needs to be something other than just a conflation of university-based forms of study: it needs to listen as well as to speak.

China, as I see it, simply *must* be part of what postcolonial studies looks at, and where it comes from. Some earlier forms of postcolonial studies failed to think sufficiently about the place of China and Chinese people in colonial and postcolonial relations, because China was not for the most part subsumed under the project of Euro imperial expansion. But this earlier kind of postcolonial thinking was one that recognized only one-step linkages between our present and the direct colonial overtures of the past. Such a position overlooked the basic idea of neo-colonialism as the logical heir to colonialism, and almost everyone who now works in the discipline accepts Kwame Nkrumah's argument there comes a time when direct colonialism proves much less efficient than indirect or "off shore" economic colonialism, and so imperialism remains but colonialism finds other modes of continuance. (As an aside: the title of newspaper editorial you quoted in your question -- "Imperialism is Gone, Domination Remains" – is not one I would have chosen!) No place on earth is now outside the time of exploitative modernity. And China's place in our thinking about this world now, and its relation to the past, should be, simply, everywhere. We should not forget the extraordinary historical importance of locations such as Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Macau to the colonial project. We should not overlook the resonances between colonialist history, on the one hand, and present conflicts over national and local political autonomy, on the other. Issues about Tibet in relation to China are as much in the news as are issues about Kashmir's relation to India, Quebec's relation to Canada, or East Timor's relation to Indonesia. These are issues that obtain everywhere in postcolonial politics and culture, and our discussion about them should be widespread. And we cannot ignore the extraordinary role that China is now playing in today's global culture. Many things could be said about this – China's new market aggressiveness, for example, or China's favoured position as a site for Western manufacturing, where – it is sometimes argued – strong state regulation helps forestall the threat of worker insurrection and job action. But the point I wish to make is that China , vast as it is, and variously positioned as both colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed, within the structures of neo-colonialism, is *exactly* what the highly ambivalent discipline of postcolonial studies ought to be looking at as it continues to understand social and political inequity at the level of cross-cultural relations. Postcolonialism is no longer – as others have argued -- a club in which some nations have membership and others do not. Ethically, postcolonialism makes sense only as a future-oriented project grounded in principles of equity cross-cultural mutuality. At present, most Westerns – myself included – are disgracefully ignorant of Chinese histories, languages, literatures, and cultures. We all have work to do in helping to make this change.

There is much to be pursued in a dialogue between postcolonial studies, on the one hand, and, Chinese experiences inside the nation, and in the world at large, on the

other, and that dialogue is now taking place everywhere that social and critical theory is being pursued. Indeed, it has been taking place for some time. Postcolonial studies would not have achieved its present nuances in critical thinking were it not for the work of postcolonial theorists from the Chinese diaspora – theorists such as Rey Chow, or Ien Ang, or David Palumbo-Liu, to name only a very few. Lily Cho, a former student of mine who now teaches at the University of Western Ontario, tells me that there is a critical movement afoot that seeks to balance Paul Gilroy's "black Atlantic" thesis with sustained critical focus on the foundations of colonial world relations in the Pacific, not the Atlantic, ocean. And scholars throughout mainland China are sorting through what postcolonial studies has to say, examining its relevance, deriving from it what is useful, and bringing those critical principles into alignment with extraordinarily substantial and established Chinese modes and practices for literary, critical, and theoretical pursuit.

You ask: "what do you think the new developments might be in Postcolonial Studies". The discipline of postcolonial studies is not as adept at predicting futures as it is in imagining them, and the project of an equitable human future remains a formidably difficult one. But if I were to make a prediction for what it is that will comprise the next great roar in postcolonial critical thinking – a roar that begins in subaltern and slave resentment under direct plantation colonialism and that echoes through the extraordinary innovations and resistances in those early arts and literatures; a roar that finds voice in the powerful nationalist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that lead, after so much struggle, to the great decolonising histories of national independence; and a roar that continues now, though so many cannot hear it, in the countless efforts by the global many to achieve enfranchisement within contemporary modernity and participation in public debate – if I were to predict what it is that will comprise the *next* great roar in the discipline, my prediction would be: the voices of critical thinkers from mainland China.

Our dialogue, to this point, has been too little. It is people like you who are making this change. It is therefore for me to thank you, Yukuo, for your good work in the service of cross-cultural understanding and eventual mutuality. Let us hope that our emailed conversation – long as it has been in the making! – proves simply to be a small moment in a very big process of sustained conversation and shared commitment to future equity and genuine social change.