

intellectual life: Blake, whose maxim “He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence,” encouraged action and that of Marx “To leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality.” Until the arrival of the full biography this is a book which presents the essential Thompson, with his virtues and his faults.

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Robert J. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge 1995).

Colonial Desire examines conceptions of race, culture, civilization, hybridity and sexuality through their development in Victorian England and America. These concepts are shown to have emerged in a complex manifold of myth, religion, science, and superstition during the height of colonialism. They were foundational to the development of the West’s self-image as the global civilizing force, and were thus structurally critical to the enterprise of colonial oppression. These concepts do indeed form a web since they are mutually supportive in composing the colonial image of race, culture and sexuality. What is truly fascinating in the book is that Young is able to show that while these structures served to legitimate the drive for English global cultural supremacy, they at the same time fueled a desire for inter-racial sex. This desire propelled an image of English culture, for Victorian England in turn defined itself by its repulsion towards this desire. Desire for a kind of hybridity, miscegenation, is thus shown in constant tension with the disgust of the alien, inferior other — the black races. This tension lies at the heart of a certain conception of “Englishness,” and destabilizes it. This is Young’s overall thesis — that culture, in the nineteenth century and now, is racially defined at the margins where the potent desire for inter-racial sex along with its taboos are located. It is here, in cultural hybridity, that colonial conceptions of culture are found, and are shown to be inherently unstable.

Young begins with some theoretical considerations about the nature of hybridity and culture. He shows that the defining feature of culture is difference — that “culture never stands alone but always participates in a conflictual economy acting out the tension between sameness and difference.”(53) This economy is perpetuated by the (typically) hetero-sexual transgression of racial lines, hybridity, which at once organizes and collapses cultural boundaries constructed around race. Young then locates these themes in subsequent chapters in the writings of Arnold, Count Gobineau, Knox, R. H. Pritchard and Nott and Gliddon, and discusses the many attempts to polarize cultures along racial lines. These polarities are variously constructed. Some revolve around supposed sexual and fertility differences between the races, with strong emphasis on the weakness of inter-racial progeny. Other polarities are constructed around conceptions of civilization. Support for these comes from anthropological evidence as well as arguments about the true nature of history and language. But, in any event, the desire to transgress the boundaries that separate cultures through inter-racial sex always lies just below the surface. This desire manifests itself in ways too numerous to mention here, but they all end with the erosion, and, inevitably, the corruption of racially construed culture. As a result, the self-claimed superiority of the colonizing culture is undermined from within by a desire for hybridity. Young’s conclusion from all this is that culture, defined racially in the colonial conception, is inherently unstable. In the case of colonial England and Englishness, this conception of culture had to fail. But Young makes the additional claim that these same structures are repeated in contemporary discussions of culture, and we must seek to overcome them. Young’s conclusion reads thus: “The fantasy of post-colonial cultural theory ... is that those in the Western academy at least have managed to free themselves from this hybrid commerce of colonialism, as from every other aspect of the colonial legacy.” This makes rather plain Young’s mission in writing *Colonial Desire*.

Young’s central claims about the artificiality of culture, civilization and race are among the more interesting in the book, for he is

adept at showing, via extensive references, that these concepts did not emerge individually to subsequently find support among one another. Instead, it is clear that they developed with reciprocal dependencies, such that race and culture at times have become as synonymous as race and civilization at others. This web of concepts would remain stable if the desire for inter-racial sex did not intercede. Obviously, then, the challenge facing Young is to show that the desire for hybridity existed in colonial times. The support for this sometimes is stronger than at other times. Direct textual evidence for this thesis is matched with rather dubious assertions, such as the following accounting of a review of Hotze's edition of Gobineau's *The Moral and Intellectual Diversity of Races*:

Amalgamation must, we should think, revolt the feelings of every member of the superior race; it certainly is a consummation heartily to be deprecated by every man who knows what is the character of the mulatto blood. This rejection of amalgamation between the races is betrayed by the literary echo that it lets slip — Hamlet's 'consummation/Devoutly to be wished.' Once again, disgust bears the imprint of desire. (138)

The appearance of one word cannot possibly support so weighty a conclusion. In general the problem seems to be that the theoretical discussion of hybridity at the beginning of the book delivers a global interpretative paradigm which occasionally anticipates its conclusion. This is also a function of the style of reasoning used to develop the key concepts. Concepts are shown to be in opposition to one another at one moment, shown to be reciprocals at another, and in the end drive some third key element which absorbs their tension and unity at the same time. In Young's book, this kind of quasi-dialectics often directs itself to its end with suspicious accuracy. Perhaps in view of this, *Colonial Desire* is best read for the many historical stones it overturns than read as a circumspect theoretical work.

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