

Race and Postcolonialism, 1

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Blackness of Blackness: The Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey"

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Let's start with an easy question. What are you majoring in? Most all of you will answer "English." And what is "English"? A language, like French and Italian and German and Chinese? When I'm asked on an airplane, "what do you do," and I say "I'm an English Professor," most people reply "Oh, then I 'd better watch my grammar!"--as if "English" denotes the field of studying correct grammar, spelling, composition, etc. But most of us would say that "English" is where you study literature--from England? Not exclusively; literature in the English language. Mostly, though, that is limited to literature in English from England and the United States: so what about other literature written in English, from places like Canada, West Indies, Australia, South Africa, or India? Does that count as "English"?

That's what this next unit of theory is about. We've been talking about ideology and discourse — ideology being the ways that our beliefs (and hence actions) are shaped, and discourse being the construction of knowledges or ideas that influence our beliefs (and actions). This next unit of theory follows from these ideas, looking at how the "discourse" of "English" operates to define a field of study--English and American literature--which carries with it a particular set of ideological beliefs and practices informed by those beliefs. In brief, the field we call "English" is defined through ideas about nationality: the entities we call "England" and "The United States" demarcate the boundaries of what we study in the "English" department. But those ideas of nationality designate more than just a geographical boundary: what is "English" is what has been claimed by England as belonging to English culture, as well as the island of Britain (and Scotland and Ireland) itself. There is thus a history, and a politics, connected with the idea of "English" as an area of cultural study.

Let's think about history first. From the late 17th century through the middle of the twentieth century, England extended its national rule to countries and areas all over the world: to North America, to Africa, to the Islamic world of the Middle East, to India, to Asia, to the West Indies, South America, and Polynesia, creating English colonies in these lands and, in most cases, taking over the administration of government, so that English laws and customs ruled the people who lived half a world away from the country "England." You can think here about the history of the U.S. as an English colony: we rebelled against being governed by a distant land, and fought a war to become independent of English rule. Our history as a British colony is somewhat unique,

however, as “we”--meaning the people who became “Americans” when the nation of the United States was founded--were formerly British citizens who succeeded so well in colonizing the coastal regions of North America, and in subduing the indigenous population of Native Americans, that we shifted national identification away from Britain and named ourselves something else (Americans). Most of the British colonies of the 18th and 19th centuries did not rebel and form their own nations--largely because the people of those nations were non-whites, non-Western people. British colonial rule (and all other Western nations who formed colonies, such as France and Germany) depended on seeing the indigenous populations of these colonized areas as inferior, as therefore needing the “advanced civilization” offered by Western culture. In fact, as Edward Said argues, the West (or Occident) PRODUCED the non-white, non-Western cultures and peoples as inferior through a variety of discourses which stated the terms of their existence as inferior.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. One of the impetuses for colonization was, of course, the spread of capitalism: colonies offered sources of raw materials, cheap labor, and new markets for Western goods, and the history of colonialism is very much caught up in the economics of capitalism. But colonialism couldn’t be confined merely to the economic realm: when a country like England colonized a non-western region, it exported its legal, religious, educational, military, political, and aesthetic ideas along with its economic regime--what Marx would call the superstructure, and Althusser would call the Ideological State Apparatus, or ISAs. So that, in places like Africa and India, British colonial rule meant teaching the indigenous people about the superiority of Western practices: through setting up systems of police and courts and legislatures following British laws, through sending missionaries to convert natives to Christianity (largely Anglicanism, the Church of England) and establishing churches and seminaries, and through setting up schools to teach British customs, British history, and the English language to children and adults, in order to make them more like British citizens. And with these ideological exportations came British/Western “culture,” in the form of music, art, and literature--so that, regardless of the ancient literary traditions of India, China, or the Arab world, inhabitants of these colonized areas were taught that Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton were the “greatest” authors who ever wrote. In short, British cultural standards were upheld and all other notions of culture, of art or literature or philosophy, were denounced as inferior and subordinated to Western standards.

And this is part of what the “English” department was originally designed to do--to study and to assert the mastery of “English” literature as the most important literature (of the most important and advanced civilization) ever known. “English” departments were thus part of establishing the hegemony (meaning the dominance) of English culture worldwide.