

Being and Becoming Anticolonial

The Life of Sayyid Fadl and the State of History

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ABSTRACT History has been difficult to dislodge from its colonial trajectory in spite of at least a half-century of post-Orientalist critique. Accordingly, a critical theory that is genuinely global in its lineaments is difficult to establish as practice without more decolonial histories of the modern world. This article thus moves on two fronts in order to meet the stated objectives of expanding the field of critical theory while tracking “untimely traditions” and the horizons they’ve drawn. It will offer a history of anticolonial practice that was simultaneously theorized within a distinct Islamic mystical tradition and against a globally emerging conception of state sovereignty (on which much of history writing wittingly or unwittingly concentrates). These political and intellectual histories converge around the biography of a nineteenth-century itinerant Sufi, Sayyid Fadl Ibn Alawi. The critical potentiality of this life will be extrapolated into the present by considering the death-defying horizons opened by the newly expanded repertoire available to a mystical tradition, which allows reflection on the anticolonial as an ontology refused and yet a promise. Finally, the article seeks to answer a question that was only treated partially in the author’s recent book *For God or Empire*. Does the mysticism of this tradition devolve into apolitical practices, or does its survival and even proliferation compel a revisioning of emancipation in history and in theory?

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How might anticolonial thought and practice make an offering to critical theory and critique today? Here I argue, through the excavation of a nineteenth-century Sufi-in-exile’s writing and career, that they have nothing left to offer but possibly a promise of thinking the human and life anew in relation to nonhumans and non-life; however, for that promise even to be intelligible in secular academe, we require other histories and genealogies of worldmaking, which in turn require a more consistent recognition and refusal of the politics and theoretical assumptions of historians that bind them intimately and passionately to states.¹ Conversely, terrains untraveled by theories seeking routes to freedom or seeking to deconstruct the

always-already unfinished business of emancipation² are, for historians, concrete places and times inhabited by peoples represented as Other, who despite repeated decolonizing retorts of identity (or the historian's appeal to contingency) remain Other to theory. Good theory needs good history, and vice versa.

From a certain perspective, this representational dilemma invested with high stakes for Global North to South relations has been rendered moot as geopolitical and economic power pivots (back) toward Asia. However, if modern sovereignty has been and remains steeped in an interconnected global history, then the “worlding” that takes place in theoretical texts or any text of ideas produced in “the West” or in “the East” still confronts the dilemma. Thus, representations of global history in any language must negotiate the question of sovereignty, if only because of the predominantly national geography and distribution of archives.

Anticolonialism heightened the significance and secured the sacredness of national sovereignty, even as it sometimes sought its repudiation. From this perspective, the potential of anticolonial thought to make any new offerings at the feet of critical theory is fraught with the problem of power and sovereignty. More fundamentally, this potential depends on how we conceive the “transition” from tradition to modernity. The methodological and theoretical debates around that question have filled innumerable scholarly volumes, and it is now more often than not an object of sarcasm or indifference. Yet in everyday life, the question remains moot in a myriad of global contexts, from religious movements and secularist anxieties to the antivaxxers and the technocratic faithful. The clash, or the play, of temporalities in the making of anticolonial moments is largely an unexamined historiographical problem since the transition to modernity and the rejection of the colonial has a commonly accepted timeline that presupposes a distinct, Eurocentric shape of political sovereignty.

This article does not step outside the standard timeline of anticolonial thought, but it nonetheless suggests that in the life and writings of Sayyid Fadl Ibn Alawi (ca. 1824–1900), we might glimpse an anticolonial moment that has repeated historically in widely divergent periods but has not appeared *as such* because the modern horizon of freedom has been so securely tethered to the sovereignty of state. Put differently, narratives of decolonization have necessarily elided the always-already colonial dimension of worldmaking and restricted its meaning to a field of modern world history. Plural histories of the anticolonial as a certain stance on freedom that presupposed other objects became difficult to retrieve. Fadl wrestled with the burden of modern sovereignty in the second half of the nineteenth century, and most secular accounts of his life emphasize that trajectory. Indeed, he tried unsuccessfully to translate a tradition of Sufi emancipatory practices of the self and pastoral care into a politics of state.

By the end of his life, however, he came to the realization that the journey of the soul to God, conceived of as the greatest struggle (jihad), ultimately could not

be rationalized in terms of modern discipline, biopolitics, or even an Islamic political theology. That realization took place during a career in which he was regarded by empires as an “outlaw” with rebellious tendencies (British) and a troubling personality with sacred charisma (Ottoman). Fadl was from the imperial perspective a quintessential nineteenth-century fanatic, activist, rebel, or adventurer. He may even have fancied himself as such at different times. Nevertheless, his final reflections before his death return to divine sovereignty and its relationship to creation (all life and nonlife), which poses intriguing questions about his sense of freedom. Was freedom in fact an idea accessible to the senses? Was it lost when politics and state were drawn into an intimate universal(izing) embrace? Could freedom be regained in renouncing politics and rededicating oneself to tending the soul? Were those necessarily opposed and the only two options for emancipation? Was it always already an individualized experience, or could there be a collective dimension?

Positing somewhat speculatively and tempestuously that there are multiple temporalities implied in the space between being and becoming anticolonial as evinced in the life of this one Sufi-in-exile, whose genealogy and genealogical imagination troubled his learned politics, I have sought a historical anchor in the work of a near contemporary, W. E. B. Du Bois, whose life was in a certain way diametrically opposite and opposed but whose early thought also showed striking similarities. The article turns first to the tradition of “anticolonial” Sufism. This section offers a view of the history that was recovered and the theory of history that that recovery precipitated. It is divided into two subsections. The first provides a brief biography of the thinker and activist at the heart of the narrative, Sayyid Fadl. The second treats the evolution and implications of his thought and politics for conceptualizing modern sovereignty, anticolonial history, and emancipation via the interlocution of Du Bois. Du Bois was never a slave owner as Fadl had been, was a secularly trained sociologist, and ended his political career a communist; nonetheless, the passing of the nineteenth century witnessed both reckoning with the temporality of freedom and sovereignty, illuminating in complementary ways the impossibility of worldmaking and the potentiality of life. This juxtaposition, while flawed in some significant ways, may, precisely because of its points of failure, make legible (dis)connected moments of the anticolonial, which the twentieth-century partitioning of the past into History made illegible.³ The article ends with a reflection on how this “particular” (theory of) history might contribute to the work of critical theory.

Religious Acts of Reading Secularly

Maps of the Living/Dead

In the life of Sayyid Fadl, the subject of my recent book, anticolonialism and the sovereignty typically posited as its end appear otherwise.⁴ Though intersecting with capitalism’s globalization and the age of high imperialism, Fadl’s life and

career straddled a rupture that was simultaneously historical and transcendental, paradoxically enabling and disabling his emerging politics. The temporalities of tradition and of change, of *revenants*, in Fadl's conceptualization of the world plotted his heroic life, emancipation, and justice along lines similar to his nineteenth-century contemporaries but also along quite different and spiraling lines, requiring perhaps what Fanon noted of "Marxist analysis," that it "should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem. Everything up to and including the very nature of precapitalist society, so well explained by Marx, must here be thought out again."⁵ What Fanon appreciated about the limits of Marxist analysis applies in Fadl's case to secular(ist) analyses in general. And what was true for the hopeful era of decolonization, when a historical rupture was actively sought as much in political-economic as epistemological terms, is perhaps doubly true now as we look back to a global past, which in the present appears still all too familiar, while the global future appears all too bleak. Thus I argue professional historians must become conscious of our own religious acts of reading history secularly, which has formed some abiding habits of thought. To this end, we must defamiliarize the world of/in history.

Whether it's the now Old World history of capitalism's expansion and its political ramifications or the new global history of connected and interrelated change, the intelligibility of struggle as a modality for living life with a salvific end (de)forming political-theological horizons requires, as Giorgio Agamben shows us, another genealogy of how operations of power came to manifest themselves in the modern, secular forms of economy and government, which conjured in their own mysterious ways the kingdom and the glory.⁶ Stretching Agamben to the Indian Ocean world, my study of Fadl's life and its relationship to the political from a transregional, transhistorical perspective illuminates, on the one hand, radical change at the level of states and empires as they reconfigured the terms of sovereignty. On the other hand, it shows that those reconfigurations—and the genealogy from Aristotle to the church fathers—alone did not a global history make, to the extent that Fadl's life in its full, paradoxical glory as the messy, real life of a historical individual *and* as the potential, perfect form of life yet to come required other genealogies and other frames for seeing. This history is not easy to write, and in part this is *because* the routes to freedom are many, and the subject of freedom, as Saba Mahmood brilliantly demonstrated, is in theory always-already secular and liberal even for poststructuralists.⁷ But before getting to what a history of worlds unseen by critical theory might do for it, I first outline Fadl's biography.

Fadl's inheritance at birth, in early nineteenth-century Malabar, across the ocean from his ancestors' burial sites, was as significant as any other in the world at the time and presently. He inherited the genealogy of the prophet Muhammad, and hence a title, "sayyid," and a tradition that was as deep and as broad as any other.

He also inherited, through his Malayali mother Fatima, the legacy of Cheruman Perumal.⁸ What he would make of the title and the traditions of oaths and gifts was in part a reflection of his singular personality, but it was also the effect of a time out of joint. His father, Sayyid Alawi, was born in the mid-eighteenth century in Tarim, Hadhramawt, in southern Arabia, and he migrated to a part of India's Malabar coast a few decades before the area was reduced to a district ruled by the British East India Company (EIC). Establishing himself before knowing subjugation to a colonial power, he had the time to develop resources for worlding the world, while exploring mystical dimensions that unmade the world, with a confidence that would be denied his son. In recognition of Sayyid Alawi's piety and purity, his burial site in Mampuram, not far from the fabled medieval port of Calicut, became a shrine (*maqam*) that remains a site of pilgrimage, or more precisely, visitation (*ziyara*), for those seeking the blessings of the saint. For Fadl, the shrine of his father and the many other sayyid gravesites like it scattered around the Indian Ocean should have been at once joyful and mournful reminders and resources for living and thinking life, made possible by the mobility of his particular Sufi tradition, the Alawi Way.⁹ However, those sacred geographies—his patrimony—were to be overlaid with imperial maps and legal concepts that drew harder and faster boundaries between peoples, lands, and waters mediating the sacred and the secular in a radically new, universalistic frame.

Sayyid Alawi's death in 1844 was the occasion for Fadl's voluntary departure for Arabia, where he studied with the leading ulama of the time in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. When he returned in 1849, a series of Muslim uprisings or violent "outrages" were reported by the British. The magistrate, H. V. Conolly, attempted to tie these to the "fanatic preacher," Sayyid Fadl, and to the continuous little revolts that Malabar had been plagued with since its conquest.¹⁰ According to British accounts, the Hindu-Muslim hierarchy of Malabar had been upset since the mid-eighteenth century by the recurring invasions of Mysore from the north, during the rules of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan. And the Muslims of the region resented the EIC for trying to restore to Hindu landlords what it theorized as their rightful and legal property.

The new dispensation was adequately captured in a strange but not unexpected place, a Malayalam language primer written by a member of the EIC's Bombay Medical Establishment: "In fulfilling these important duties [customs, the mint, and administration of justice], in which the cause of *humanity* and the Company's interests, as well as those of individuals, are alike concerned, a proficiency in the language of Malabar is necessary to give full scope to the judicious and humane regulations framed for the administration of that Province."¹¹ In writing this, Robert Drummond followed in the footsteps of his more illustrious EIC colleague, the "founder" of modern Orientalism, William Jones. Jones's language study in Bengal

led him to methods that could be used to demonstrate the familial ties of Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin—in effect “discovering” the Indo-European group of languages. The latter’s motivation in seeking a certain kind of origin to *logos* was juridical as much as philological. Jones served on the Supreme Court in Calcutta and wrote in a letter to a friend, “I can no longer bear to be at mercy of our pundits . . . who deal out Hindu law as they please, and make it at reasonable rates, when they cannot find it ready made.”¹² Drummond’s repetition of this analysis of law’s fickleness and malleability in the hands of Natives served as a justification for translation in(to) colonial rule.

The more important gesture in his case for language might be the invocation of “humanity” as a *legal* reason of state, a reason that did not exist in colonial settings and was needed for justice and good government. Samera Esmeir follows the legal trajectory of the human that grew out of this vague humanity in its later colonial career in Egypt (1882–1936). “The human is chained to the power of modern state law not simply because the state’s laws are imposed on the human, but because they decide its status as human. What assumptions about the human enable this magical effect, effectively binding it in a compulsory fashion to the power of the law?”¹³ By attempting to answer this question in the colonial context, Esmeir illuminates a central yet previously hidden genealogy of modern law’s formation through its decisions about humanity. The inherent coloniality of modern law’s claim on the human was occluded in contexts where the state’s formation and the emergence of the human as a subject of rights were part of a much longer process.

Sayyid Alawi had successfully avoided repeated summonses to appear before the Malabar magistrate to answer for Mappila Muslim attacks on government property and on Hindu landlords. His policy of noncooperation was based on his refusal to recognize the new dispensation as anything more than another Christian crusade, certainly not an unfolding of reason’s sovereignty over the world. Therefore, his answers in the form of *fatwas* (learned responsa) mined the Islamic legal tradition and unsurprisingly recommended jihad in the defense of Muslims and their way of life. However, the fatwas that circulated in Malabar in the 1830s and were regularly confiscated by the EIC officers who deemed the texts incitements to violence, were far more complex than a simple call to “Holy War” against infidels. The collection known as *Al-sayf al-battar* (*The Sharpest Sword*) deals with all manner of questions about difference and how Muslims were to live in a world of Others. It has been interpreted by many who have read only the title or select fatwas to be a text with a singular message: kill infidels.¹⁴ However, a more comprehensive view of how power in the world of human making tends to failure appears when the fatwas are taken together and especially when read with the addendum, ‘*Uddat al-umara* (*Preparedness of Princes*), which Fadl attached in the Cairo printing of the text after his exile in 1852.¹⁵ I will return to that view below.

Partly with the fatwas as evidence, the Malabar magistrate was finally authorized to arrest Fadl on the charge of incitement to rebellion and other outrages, if he thought it wise. Knowing that his hand was weak and any misstep could cost him his career, Conolly, who was adamant that the Alawis had long been the masterminds of Muslim revolts in Malabar, chose to negotiate. The fear was of a costly rebellion if the revered sayyids were arrested or harmed. Conolly convinced Fadl that leaving Malabar voluntarily, as if going to Mecca on pilgrimage, was the best way to save face and to convince the government that he was not the cause of the violence in the area. Fadl agreed to a deal in which he believed his return would be possible; he and his family left Malabar. However, for the remainder of his life and the lifetimes of his children and grandchildren, the British vigilantly blocked their return to India, blacklisting them for their kinship with “the Moplah Outlaw.” This was clearly retribution for the assassination of Magistrate Conolly in 1855, which was believed to have been conducted by Mappilas grieving the loss of their leaders—Fadl was exiled, and his father’s shrine was sealed off.

Fadl remained in Arabia until 1879, though he undertook two missions to Istanbul during this period to secure the financial support of Ottoman sultans for himself and his household and political leverage for their return to India.¹⁶ He was recruited by warring tribes in the Dhofar region to play peace broker, a role sayyids in the region had performed for centuries. Fadl viewed Dhofar, located between British-controlled Aden and the Omani sultanate in Muscat, as part of the Hadhrami homeland of his sayyid ancestors. Hence, receiving oaths of loyalty from the tribes and unofficial recognition from the Ottomans, he became the prince (*amir*), at least for three years. A tribal uprising partly driven by famine and partly engineered by the British and the Omanis, who had become dependent on the British, led to his ouster. Fadl made his way to Istanbul, where his family joined him, and he lived out his life as a “houseguest” of Sultan Abdulhamid II (reigned 1876–1909). Despite repeated pleas to be allowed to depart for Dhofar or India, it seems the sultan felt it was more politic to keep Fadl close at hand in Istanbul, where he died and was buried at the dawn of a new century.

Political Theology: Jihad against the World

Although during the Istanbul years Fadl remained in contact with India, the Hijaz, Hadhramawt, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Britain, and the United States through his kin, acolytes, agents, and diplomatic sources, which makes his political “intrigues” (as some of his contemporaries and later historians preferred to characterize his engagements) fascinating in themselves, I want to shift gears to think about the secular limit on interpretation that renders a history of life and agency, as Fadl saw it, always only partial and often inaccurate. This inaccuracy then becomes critique’s own limit. Our histories of modern sovereignty and (un)related moments of

freedom need significant revision if we hope to think the life of Fadl critically and critically rethink life.

Agamben notes,

Christian theology is not a “story about the gods”; it is immediately economy and providence, that is, an activity of self-revelation, government, and care of the world. The deity articulates itself into a trinity, but this is not a “theogony” or a “mythology”; rather, it is an *oikonomia*, that is, at the same time, the articulation and administration of divine life, and the government of creatures.¹⁷

The roles of free will and political will became entangled and debated for centuries within this economic-theological resolution to the problem of sovereignty, only to be ostensibly resolved again, Agamben avers in the last sentence of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, with “modernity, removing God from the world, [which] has not only failed to leave theology behind, but in some ways has done nothing other than to lead the project of the providential *oikonomia* to completion.”¹⁸ Rather than contest this complex genealogy of sovereignty in (post-)Christian modernity, for our present purposes—in order to make legible the promise of life in relation to the political in Fadl’s thought—we accept Agamben’s critical view onto a moment of impossibility of the political idea in the West.

Agamben’s revision of how the modern government of men with its theological economy of souls produced a willing subject has been helpful less for thinking the political than for thinking transitions. The successful ordering of the world in terms of governmentality and biopolitical techniques of subject formation was contingent on historical asymmetries and differential state capacities, the nuances of which require at least a minimal sense of the political economy of empire to make legible. I would submit that if political life has been rendered inoperative in the ways that Agamben and others focused on the West contend, then perhaps it is precisely by looking elsewhere historically and in the present that politics might reappear anew. More polemically, for an exhausted Europe of obedient subjects willingly marching to oblivion, the antidote—to at least the provincialism of theory—might be found in those spaces wherein projects of the providential *oikonomia* are not quite so complete, and political theology is not a foregone conclusion secreted into and constitutive of the secular state.¹⁹

This point has been made perhaps unsurprisingly by two philosophers of bio-power and deconstruction. Michel Foucault’s inspiration to turn to pastoral forms of power as related to his interest in the “political spirituality” of the Iranian Revolution has received much attention but less so Jacques Derrida’s semi-Orientalist fantasy of Islam. The latter offers the evocative proposition that if thought in demographic terms, Islam poses the “greatest, if not only, political issue of the

future, the most urgent question of what remains to come for what is still called the political. The political, which is to say, in the free play and extension, in the determined indetermination, of its meaning, in the opening up of its meaning, the democratic.”²⁰ Derrida’s foray into Islam and politics is in his cautious style qualified by a deconstruction of democracy as never itself and always already suicidal. So, if Islam offers a resistance to democracy (or democratization) as the product of a tradition that believes it has a stable basis and meaning in Aristotle’s *Politics*, then a political potentiality might be located in Islam, where “thinking life otherwise, life and the force of life” continues in dynamic and contested forms.²¹

A condition of life that was not separate from Fadl’s thought was the political and economic trials of his flock back in India. As land poverty became an explosive issue especially among its Mappila populations, Malabar’s upheavals continued with intermittent episodes of violent resistance until the massive rebellion of 1921, two decades after Fadl’s death. The fatwas mentioned above were surely part of that continuous anticolonial resistance typical to a colonialism that historians usually think of as political and economic projects of European empires overseas. If colonialism also penetrated and transformed habits of thought everywhere—that is, was productive of the modern subject—then the question emerges of whether overthrowing and replacing colonial regimes with national sovereignty and the citizen is synonymous with emancipation. In that regard, the fatwas were also anticolonial in another way, one buried in subsequent decades of nationalist sediment and hence reappearing as objects that could only be explained as motivated by religion or morality or violent political extremism. The fatwas as part of broader and longer Islamic and Indian Ocean discursive traditions indexed a form of life that had always posed a challenge to projects of worldmaking—even of the ulama who issued them in response to ethicopolitical problems—that simultaneously enabled and disabled claims to political sovereignty.

The excavation of this paradoxical, anticolonial form of life is made difficult precisely because it references neither an ontology nor a dialectical movement but rather a promise. Moreover, that promise, as an ancient one reappearing in the Indian Ocean world, seems untimely in ways that Marxism, even if regarded in terms of messianic temporality, does not.²² While Marx’s problem-space was not radically other from Fadl’s or even his father’s, it offered an answer that was concrete, utopian, and very much in keeping with the times.²³ Nevertheless, despite their overlaps, the problem-spaces of political economy and of Islam in its Alawi Sufi trajectory in the nineteenth century, through the very same global forces that made a new kind of capital accumulation possible, were also on opposite sides of an increasingly racialized world. Geographically, the world carved out by racial capitalism had multiple north-south divides, which were illuminated long before the current global circulation of and identification with Black Lives Matter.²⁴

Illuminations and critiques of that world might be better illustrated through an improbable comparative look across the Atlantic. When the younger W. E. B. Du Bois wrote about the souls of Black folk and the faith of the fathers, we hear a not entirely faint echo of Sayyid Fadl remembering his own ancestors and his Mappila flock in Malabar:

Those who have not thus witnessed the frenzy of a Negro revival in the untouched backwoods of the South can but dimly realize the religious feeling of the slave; as described, such scenes appear grotesque and funny, but as seen they are awful. . . . The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a “boss,” an intriguer, an idealist,—all these he is, and ever, too, the centre of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in number. The combination of a certain adroitness with deep-seated earnestness, of tact with consummate ability, gave him his preeminence, and helps him maintain it.²⁵

Du Bois tracks religion and the structure of religious experience among Black Americans pre- and post-Emancipation along lines that are remarkably like the Alawi—voluntary—diaspora that took shape around the Indian Ocean beginning from the sixteenth century. He brilliantly captures the further development of religious life that came with the expansion of the Black church in US urban centers, yielding by the fin-de-siècle what he termed a veritable “government of men” within and in response to the global problem-space delimited by “the color-line.”²⁶ Fadl, whose career tracks with this timeline of political and religious change, caught between two increasingly governmentalized empire states, regarded the same historical moment as one fraught with dangers for a form of life that ensued from centering the soul and divine sovereignty. The injunction to remember God and his servants (the prophet, the companions, and Alawi saints), which was often performed with a “frenzy” by Mappilas and other acolytes, recursively confronted forms of worldmaking that curtailed the ecstatic moment of freedom engendered in the process of seeking an annihilation of Self. While Fadl’s and Du Bois’s are two (or more) radically discordant interhemispheric histories, we should not shy away from comparison.²⁷ The transformation of many Sufis around the Islamic world into rebels, captives, and fugitives is a theme that has been explored by historians.²⁸ But connecting their rebellions—and their forms—to a globalizing political economy centered on New World slavery, European industrial production, and abolitionism still requires more research and theoretical development of apposite concepts, if we are not to assimilate them to the grand narratives of empire and capital.²⁹

What we will notice between the fatwas and the guide for princes and Fadl’s last “mystical” writings in the years before his death is a tarrying with pragmatic

questions of government written in a pastoral and biopolitical language. However, from these ample sources an *Islamic* theory of anticolonialism cannot be said to emerge. Rather, what the texts together illustrate is a certain polysemy to what otherwise were thoroughly Islamic concepts: *jihad* (struggle, strive), *al-dīn* (religious totality), *tawba* (repentance), *nafs* (soul, self), *al-sharʿ* (law), *ʿahd* (oath, covenant), *ahl al-bayt* (prophet’s family), *dhikr* (remembrance), *waliy* (saint), *tajdīd* (renewal), *mulk* (sovereignty), and so on. Here we have space to consider only one of the concepts most relevant to our claim of anticolonial critique as promise: *jihad*.

The concept of *jihad* is polysemic in theologically and historically complex ways that will not be fully rehearsed here.³⁰ Suffice it to say the very possibility of a uniquely *Islamic* dynamic of worldmaking and its refusal, which oscillated between the historical and the transcendental, could be said to hinge on the interpretations of *jihad*. In this regard and within this broader history-theory, the Alawi Sufi tradition of Sayyid Fadl could only exist by opening up the conceptual boundaries that came to define, for the lack of better terminology, “orthodox” Islamic tendencies—Sunni and Shiʿi—specifically ones that developed in alignment with the imperial rule of Turkic dynasties across the “Balkans-to-Bengal complex” from roughly 1500 AD.³¹ When the Alawi genealogical-cum-mystical diasporic formation took shape around the Indian Ocean world, its members often found themselves in places where Islam was either nonexistent or practiced in some syncretic form that partook of practices and beliefs of local societies.³² The Sufi way to God, which periodically earned the ire of literalist and traditionalist ulama in the Islamic heartland for its esotericism, viewed sometimes as bordering on heretical pantheism, was well primed to engage the heterogeneity of Indian Ocean worlds.

The Sufi engagements did have pedagogical and missionary goals. However, while those—along with economic and worldly political agendas—are often the focus of studies and polemics, the Sufi devotion to a form of emancipation that was at once Islamic and in excess of the Islamic, which gave it an unusual anticolonial character, is rarely noted unless and only if already assimilated to other narratives and ideologies: commercialism, imperialism, nationalism, Marxism, Islamism.³³ Fadl’s life, career, and writings demonstrate, in their excess (of ideological positioning) and remainder (of a Sufi tradition), that the concept of *jihad*, which has recirculated globally in the post-Cold War era, speaks (to) freedom in ways that its assimilated meaning typically occludes.³⁴

With the appending of a guide for princes to the fatwas in the 1850s, *Al-sayf al-battar* became more than an immediately necessary, local response to the invasion by Christians. Although focused on addressing the perilous moment faced by the Islamic world as European expansion in the Old World intensified, the expanded text became more concerned with time (*waqt*) even as it became less historical. Muslim sovereignty over lands was less significant than sovereignty over a way of

life, or living as Muslims in remembrance of God and in anticipation of the *yawm al-din*, *qiyam al-sa'a* (day of judgment, time to come).³⁵ Consequently, critique was directed only in part at the invaders, who were to be resisted if possible, but in the main the targets were other Muslims, particularly ulama and ministers, who had forgotten that absolute sovereignty was God's and had thus gone astray, putting the worlds of Islam in danger. Therefore, in Fadl's intervention to reframe the fatwas postexile, the "lesser jihad," as a struggle involving arms was typically classified, lived up to its name; in terms of significance, it was the "greater jihad" that preoccupied him. At least in this moment of deep uncertainty, when he had been stripped of home (*dar*), he felt more the need to address the outer failures of Muslims and the necessary inner correctives than to reflect on British agency.³⁶

Sayyid Fadl's matters of concern originally emerged in a problem-space that was, as far as the historical record goes, always pluralistic in terms of legal jurisdictions, and the relations to land reflected that plurality.³⁷ The gradual transformation of those complex relationships, culminating in exile from home, could not have but activated intense emotions in Fadl. For a Sufi student of Qur'an and the tradition, conscious of inhabiting at once a historical and prophetic temporality of the call to/from God, home and its (re)making in the world carried a deeply religious charge. So, at the very end of his life, he revisited what makes for individual and collective freedom and security, and the answer shifted away from the sovereignty of state, the idea with which he carried in the 1870s and 1880s. He wrote in the 1890s,

There are four markers of men of God. The first is that they fear none other than God. The second is eliminating the love of the world [and worldliness] from their hearts. The third is good works and the fourth is being responsible for that which prophets and messengers expended their souls and bodies, that is, making manifest *al-shari'a* [God's way/law] with compassion for the *umma*.³⁸

Given these markers or marks of a believing folk, that the jihad to elevate one's self through exercises of the soul was more commendable from the perspective of, and under the tutelage of, a sayyid on the Alawi Sufi way is perhaps unsurprising, particularly when the worldly implications of a failure to militantly remember God appeared more dire than they had in six centuries. But what value or force did this form of jihad offer in a colonial world of increasingly uniform legal and political borders, wherein sovereignty was vested in the disembodied secular space of the state, which claimed bodies and to some extent souls? As that world's reordering intensified, Fadl, who learned and transmitted the history and teachings of ancestors, who celebrated his father for the revival of religion (as a *qutb*, a rare "axis of the ages"), faced the prospect that the condition of possibility for jihad, the greater struggle, was being hollowed out. Therefore, his response after his exile and with

the realization that his mobility could now be determined by a mere worldly Great Power, was, contrary to his reckoning later, to claim some of the terms of modern sovereignty for a Muslim empire-state and for himself.

There was already an ambivalence in the textual complex that generically joined fatwas and mirrors for princes. After all, the printed Cairo text had a prayer to the Ottoman sultan in the margins of its pages, and we find the virtues of the *ahl al-bayt* (the family and companions of the prophet) as ordained guides and governors in the body of the text. The paeans are inscribed in the wake of Fadl's sudden expulsion from British subjecthood and branding as the Moplah Outlaw but prior to his becoming an Ottoman citizen with ministerial status. Hence, on the one hand, we read of the soul's approach to the divine as a moment of refusal of the world and an attempt to exceed historical time; on the other hand, the guiding and reforming role of Alawi sayyids in specific historical contexts was deemed indispensable for the future of Islam, when the present was marked by corrupt Muslim leaders and officious ulama. That straddling the transcendental and the historical appeared as crisis was not new as a condition of colonial modernity; however, restoration of the lost balance became more difficult, if not impossible. In this middle phase of Fadl's life, it is the sense of sayyid responsibility for the care and shepherding of Muslims in and through the world that is emphasized in his actions and writings, opening the historical door for biopolitical terms of sovereignty.

The reality of living in exile, classified an outlaw by the emergent global hegemon, shaped a resistance at first marked by camouflage and invisibility (1850s–1870s), perhaps a reflection of the father's prior noncooperation, which was predicated on the simple, clear principle that political power corrupts. The adherence to such a severe principle, while he ministered to a flock enduring the effects of the dislocations that ensued from the EIC's conquest of Malabar, was to some extent possible only in a time of inchoate colonial governmentality. Similarly, for the son, the Ottoman state's incomplete modernization along disciplinary and biopolitical lines meant a window of relative autonomy remained open. The “crowning” moment of this autonomous period was Fadl's election by tribal representatives to serve as their intermediary, in recognition of his sayyid status, which endowed him with a special power—*baraka*—whose possession, marking one as touched by God, was meaningful and effective only to the extent that it was in turn gifted as a blessing to others.

Within the context of an aggressive British imperialism around the South Arabian coast, Fadl interpreted the tribes' oath to obey him in 1875 as a license to establish and lead a government in Dhofar. In a letter to the Babiâli (Sublime Porte) in Istanbul, he describes how, having arrived under the “banner of victory representing the eternal State,” “the council, constituted of Uluvi sayyids [Alawi sayyids] and tribal chiefs, appointed [him]—this humble and simple emir, your well-wisher

slave—to the task of issuing fetwas” and outlines plans for “public improvements . . . dependent upon the measures to facilitate and increase its commerce and trade.”³⁹ “For this to happen,” he states, “the ships bearing the banner of the exalted Ottoman Sultanate that stop at the illustrious province of Yemen should also come to the port of the aforementioned district, Zafar. . . . Since it befits the sublime dignity of the eternal State to favor this loyal slave—proud to be your slave and kind to his servants—and his family with grace, we have dared to explain the situation—although it’s not up to me to say so. In this respect and in all circumstances to command belongs unto him to whom all commanding belongs.” The wording of this letter reflects a hybrid governmental-economic logic that straddles the long history of an Islamic Indian Ocean and the shorter history of a modernizing, imperial Ottoman state.

Fadl’s flirtation with the *dispositif* of the modern state appears to come to a sudden halt or reach its crisis once he becomes its literal prisoner. Though the realization that he was a prisoner and just another replaceable conscript took a decade of living in Istanbul and failing numerous attempts to retake Dhofar or to return to Malabar. With those failures in the 1880s came diplomatic fallout and a growing sense in the palace that Sayyid Fadl, the Moplah Outlaw, was more a liability than an asset in the great Ottoman struggle with Britain for Arabia. Accordingly, we find entreaties from Fadl to the Sultan toward the very end of his life for permission to simply leave Istanbul to whatever destination. Indeed, we find letters addressed to the British prime minister and Queen Victoria herself. In the years of exile, invisibility, political power, plotting and negotiation, he was forced to engage the state—Ottoman and British—in its recently reformed and expanded capacity.⁴⁰

That state even in its nascent stage (as with the EIC) may have been more legible to a colonized subject, particularly a blacklisted one.⁴¹ Fadl was surely always ambivalent about its emerging form and substance. From 1852, if not sooner, he could see the need to engage it—a need that Sayyid Alawi could not see. However, all along, the faith of the fathers (the deep and broad tradition of Sufi gnosis overlapping with Islamic history, law, and theology) served as a resource for elaborating a distinctly Islamic approach to tribe, to sultan, to ulama, to Muslims, and to the stranger in general. That use of the tradition to address humans, ideas, and things at a time of transformation in the conceptual and practical dimensions of sovereignty, to proffer a recognizable anticolonial activism, seemed to yield a certain amount of worldly influence for Fadl. But it also seemed to guarantee his obsolescence. However, rather than renounce the tradition or continue along the lines of translation between traditions, as many did, he doubled down on that which was distinctive about his sayyid-Sufi way within the grander Islamic tradition.

This he did in an outpouring of what I’ve called his Sufi writings, from which I quoted above. There, we are exposed to the explicit drawing of a limit to the legal

(*sharʿai*), ritual (*ʿibada*), and normative grounds of what we might regard as a conventional Islamic life. In a sense, he returned to fundamental constitutional matters. In part, this is merely a repetition of the teachings of the master Sufi, Ibn ʿArabi (d. 1240), who had elaborated the need for al-sharʿia and following the tenets of worship as much as a call for their transcendence. The knowledge and piety acquired through orthodox Islam was significant and yet lacking, if the quest for perfection aspired to God as much as living a good life in the world. Fadl found himself in the space between living life here and aspiring to a there, having failed to bridge the two as the world proved too big and too fast-moving—even in its ability to arrest movement. This is in a way an old and unsurprising story of modernization and the retreat to esotericism, messianism, and mysticism found in various places around the world in the nineteenth century.⁴²

A radical recontextualization of the Sufi texts that Sayyid Fadl generated at the end of life might, however, still give way to surprises. I believe that by returning to the faith of his fathers after a long period of attempting to adapt and to resist, he recognized that a secularization of theological concepts—which was in effect the product of his actions and inscriptions—was a dead end, a prison of the soul. There were indications earlier on that he had doubts about the path he had chosen, when at a time of political peril for himself and the entire Islamic world he was compelled to follow the contours of sovereignty’s reconfiguration—Malabar Muslims had to be liberated, a flag had to be planted on the soil of Dhofar, life had to be managed, and all of that required greater exploitation and exchange of the earth’s resources. A new politics became compulsory.

Fadl’s moment of aporia is mirrored nicely by Du Bois reflecting on shattered dreams and the effects of political-economic constraints on Black lives in the United States from the end of Reconstruction. Against that backdrop, he traces the transformation of religious life from the quest for freedom into institutionalized escapism and moral policing, with church leaders and members “warily avoiding unpleasant questions both within and without the black world, and preaching in effect if not in word: *Dum vivimus, vivamus*.”⁴³ A form of bare life was the lot of emancipated Black people.

He examines the Negro church in this chapter to further unpack the “ethical paradox” of Black souls living a “double life,” caught between higher spiritual ideals and the political-economic exigencies of survival for most and even a modicum of prosperity for some. He concludes, “Some day the Awakening will come, when the pent-up vigor of ten million souls shall sweep irresistibly toward the Goal, out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, where all that makes life worth living—Liberty, Justice, and Right—is marked ‘For White People Only.’”⁴⁴

Although Fadl occupied a starkly different (and for a while, in terms of slavery, diametrically opposed) social and political context from Du Bois, who wrote

The Souls of Black Folk in a time of Jim Crow laws and lynchings, on the one hand, and rapid industrialization and “progress,” on the other, from their distinct problem-spaces they both nonetheless regarded their historical presents as untenable, a real valley of the shadow of death, and they both seem to pose the question of emancipation and justice in similarly fraught terms. It is in a space of critique vis-à-vis Euro-American secular liberalism and its promise of freedom that Du Bois and Fadl occupy common ground. For the sake of Black souls betrayed by Emancipation declared from on high, Du Bois retraced the rich genealogy of African American religious practices. For the sake of Muslim souls imperiled by European imperialism and colonialism, Fadl returned to the faith of the fathers for answers that he no longer felt he could peg to the Ottoman state and its shrinking empire.

Emancipation and annihilation, freedom and death, became or became once again intertwined for Fadl as an ending loomed. They constituted spaces and times, which, in modernity, were to be overcome and reconfigured along other axes. Emancipation, understood as freeing oneself of worldly fetters, which now included the very stuff of modern forms of political life, could not be accomplished without the help of sayyids, angels, spirits, and other guides. Fadl wrote *This True and Merciful Way* (*Hadhihi al-tariqa al-hanifa al-samha*) as one such guide. It was a guide to the Alawiyya, its long chain of sayyids and saints, its wise teachings, the performance of dhikr, and the fundamental truthfulness of the Way.⁴⁵

The text begins with the teaching of al-Arif Billah Abd al-Rahman bin Abd Allah bal-Faqih Ba Alawi. A fundamental pillar of the Alawiyya is explicated here in the very first line: “The time of the social yields no benefit in the absence of kinship” (*la tufid tul al-mujalasa ma’ adam al-mujanasa*).⁴⁶ Engseng Ho has extensively mapped the genealogical imagination and practices of the Alawis over the *longue durée*, so the intricacies of its development as a “society of the absent” in a diasporic context need not be rehearsed here. For the purposes of establishing the life that Fadl was heir to, beholden to, and challenged to forsake, we need only note the juxtaposition of sociality and intimacy, of which kinship is the primary and operative modality. Under the larger rubric of Islamic society and Islamic conceptions of sovereignty, the weight of the genealogical was felt strongly even as it was regularly contested—hence the need to reiterate it at the fin de siècle in the face of new challenges, specifically the governmentalization of the state.

In this regard, the time or duration of the social formation was assumed to have a history and politics that repeatedly diverged from the Alawi way, which presupposed a series of relations made possible and extended to humans by the grace of God, with sayyids and mystics playing leading roles. In the case of the Alawiyya, the kinship that truly mattered was that linked to the prophet Muhammad. The nature of Alawi kinship was at once historical, when regarded from the perspective of the timeline of the social, and transcendent and universal, when consid-

ered as an exemplary practice on a path to oneness with God and the suspension of time. All other relations of souls to bodies and people to each other remained chaotic and ephemeral, returning to dust when deficient in the remembrance of God. Without the unifying power of God, souls remained but “conscripts” (*junud mujannada*) and bodies a bundle of contradictory passions (*al-ajsamu amzijatun mutadadatun*). Within this cosmology, prophets and their descendants mattered: they helped facilitate a glimpse of the unity of life.

In reaffirming the universality of God’s truth, sovereignty in its various worldly guises could not but become a problem. But the historical problem-space for which Fadl offers his guide was very different from that of his genealogical antecedent al-Faqih while not entirely dissimilar from that of his contemporary Du Bois. The standard solution grounded in genealogy was surely rehearsed extensively. Each person’s birth and existence on earth is analogized to the familiar blank slate of human essence or nature (*kullu mawludin yuwladu ala al-fitra*) and the language that has always preceded it, which was recursively inscribed upon it. The person born unmarked is conditioned into a tradition: “Judaized, Magiized, or Christianized” by fathers and mothers. Then, in the familiar monotheistic move, divine government, by definition impossible and inoperative on earth, is deputed to caretakers: “The shepherd of a flock [*abu al-ra‘iyya*] is its sultan.”⁴⁷ The genealogical ties binding person to person were indispensable to any community existing at any time. But without the knowledge and wisdom of God, which is self-knowledge, an empty existence—the soul a mere conscript to the will of bodily desires—remains.

The four marks distinguishing righteous people are reiterated in this text.⁴⁸ That the fear of God is paramount is of course foundational to monotheism, but when this primary sign of the righteous is recontextualized, situated within the problem-space of a life that tracked with the transformation of sovereignty, then its significance for life and its ends has a critical valence that is at once (trans) historical and antihistorical. Freedom is like a particle produced out of the collision of these temporalities, a collision that ostensibly any willing subject could effect.

There is no way to establish definitively a crisis of conscience or its absence when it comes to the historical life of Fadl, a life thoroughly enmeshed in questions of sovereignty in diverse settings spanning half a century and a vast geography, from Mampuram to Istanbul. Nonetheless, the unity of life, sought sincerely or not, flashes across the pages of *This True and Merciful Way*. “Unity of life” is a slightly modified translation of the fundamental Sufi concept of totality, *wahdat al-wujud*. The translation is both a modified rendering into English of a contested theological idea (usually given as “the oneness of existence”) and a reinscription as an analytical category that aims to demonstrate the political and ethical implications of its deployment in this specific historical context. In some ways it approximates the “form of life” as developed in Agamben.⁴⁹ Even as Fadl’s use of histori-

cal and genealogical terms suggests a submission to the legal and normative sharʿi order of Islam, his Sufi terms of intimacy among all creation, and between creation and God, reveal the insufficiency of juridical forms as well as a quest to exceed, if not its bounds, its boundedness. Therein was presupposed a simultaneously historical and transcendent temporality forming the Alawi sayyids' horizon of secular and religious experience for centuries and informing their actions in the world. Moreover, in their contemplations of God and their exercises of the soul, a state of immanence conceivably dissolves all other states. Thus, even as a biological life was necessarily lived out on this earth abiding by its human terms (secular and religious), the Alawi way promised access to life, to life-as-other (*al-akhira*), and to life-as-unity.⁵⁰

Taken to its extreme, this unity as the site of liberation renders all sovereignty inoperative. In the glimpses of that unity, death played an integral part, as did the rituals that surrounded it—subjects that defy and are in turn usually overlooked by modern historians. Yet struggling with closeness to God over fear of God was a crucial aspect of being Alawi that Fadl would have been unable to ignore, especially as his biological life neared its end. What he may have made of it, and the unity of life it reflected, must be queried even if the answer necessarily remains speculative because the struggle, the jihad, continues into the present and can claim to encompass all lives and (non)life forms.

History's Theory, Theory's History: Chasing after Ghosts

For Fadl, it was precisely the form that Ottoman sovereignty took by the end of the nineteenth century and the form of the political subject it compelled, making it indistinguishable from Christian states, that was part of the problem of Muslim freedom; similarly, for Du Bois, the growing indistinction between African and American religious life in the face of capitalist modernity was the problem of Black freedom. In his final texts, then, Fadl's reiteration of the significance of the ahl al-bayt and specifically the Alawi Sufi genealogy, his recapitulation and elaboration of the levels an acolyte must master in his jihad to approach God, and his retracing of arguments about the superiority of gnostic knowledge were not just standard Sufi fare for a sayyid approaching the end of his life and fearful of the hereafter. If anything, the final texts were an attempt to reconnect his life with his father's, with the latter's shrine, the Mampuram maqam, and in turn his Malabar Muslim constituency, an ocean away.⁵¹ The traversing of the ocean, which worldly powers—colonial and Muslim imperial—repeatedly prevented him from doing since his exile in 1852, could only be accomplished by conjuring again the spirits of ancestors, their shrines as connective portals, jinn, angels, and oceans existing beyond time-space. In this conjuring, in this struggle to connect, life was being thought otherwise, and thinking this jihad to experience unity of life continues

among a multitude of Muslims today. Its political potentiality remains undertheorized, if not entirely unknown to critical theory.

In order to make “proper” sense of Sayyid Fadl’s anticolonial life and have it speak to theory, it is necessary first to acknowledge that even the most radical reading practices can flounder in the face of unfamiliar traditions. It is not that critical theorists’ techniques of making sense of texts are inadequate; it is that the objects they target for recuperation or critique are still quite selective, and that selectivity has theoretical and world-historical implications. Whether regarded as a formal field developing in and from the Frankfurt School or as the many forms of critique that its luminaries and their predecessors inspired or informed since the rise of the Nazis in interwar Germany, a set of stock European figures from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries—and sometimes drawn from the ancients—form a canonical base from which the terms of emancipation have been thought. The broad field of critical theory with specific and evolving matters of concern, which were understandably shaped by the very tragic context of its formation, cannot seem to emancipate itself from that context. In the main, this proves to be a recursively self-flagellating quest for the truth of the political and the human in the same places, even though, from a very commonsensical point of view, canon formation would seem to run against the very grain of a theory that aspires to being critical, rather than being tied to personalities, places, or times. At this juncture in history “we” would be justified in querying what reason there might be to remain canon-bound other than the absence of a will to *other*-knowledge.⁵²

We can find in Peter E. Gordon’s recent *Migrants in the Profane: Critical Theory and the Question of Secularization* much that aligns the thrust of critical theory with the thought of the later Fadl.⁵³ In an interview about the book, Gordon notes:

For the Frankfurt School theorists, exile was not only a biographical trauma, it was also a figure of thought: the image of what does not fit into a seamless totality of reason, of what remains “negative” and, in its negativity, serves as a point of leverage for critical practice. What Georg Lukács elsewhere calls “transcendental homelessness” becomes, one might argue, the condition of possibility for critical theory itself.⁵⁴

The trauma of exile has not been explored here, but the condition of “transcendental homelessness” was surely the animus of Fadl’s varying responses to sovereignty’s marked transformation from the mid-nineteenth century onward. The profane and the secular with which he tarried became sites of an aporia in the thinking of life, freedom, and unity. Thus, in the moment of realizing a historical rupture, he plotted exilic life in relation to unseen kingdoms and agencies, thereby renouncing the world in ways that interwar and postwar critical theorists would have found typical of mystics and ultimately a political surrender, a resort to an

extrahistorical principle that potentially undermines the ideal of free and public critical discourse.

However, this judgment emerging out of the reality of fascist Europe and reproduced by contemporary critics such as Gordon was by no means shared by all in critical theory circles. Benjamin, whom Gordon assesses as “unruly” and “self-contradictory” in his thought, critically juxtaposed historical materialism and messianism in ways that prove discomfiting for his interlocutors into the present.⁵⁵ I posit that the “problem with Benjamin” does not seem to be his lack of coherence in the resort to the theological for the purposes of critique but is rather a conception of modernity and modern subjectivity that narrowly associates political freedom with a kind of pluralism ostensibly only possible within societies committed to a secular public sphere that is *ideally* neutral. While philosophically this may be more coherent, historically it is untenable and raises again the question of philosophy’s history. In other words, what does philosophy know of the world and its historical ruptures? And how does that knowledge continue to limit the delineation of the properly philosophical? The usually silent referent when history is invoked remains “the West.” That West, in its secularizing, demystifying drive in the nineteenth century and its self-correcting trajectory in the twentieth, constructed and reaffirmed “religion.” And *that* religion was a formation incapable of embracing “modern pluralism.” This history of religion’s fabrication is a global history, yet it is not necessarily *the* history of religious experience or thought. The contextual variations in Islam alone are manifold and typically elided in philosophies of religion. Thus, the claims around pluralism are usually made in ignorance of the diversity of religious outlooks on difference and the Other, even when a gesture toward the existence of diversity as a possibility within religion is made. What the diverse forms offer substantively in terms of critical debate and pluralism rarely register on the radars of secular theorists or many historians.

This point is mostly a rehashing of the postcolonial critique about representations of the Other developed from the end of the Reagan-Thatcher era.⁵⁶ But I add rather polemically that this form of Eurocentrism is unshaken because positive histories that move beyond critiques, including the postcolonial, of Orientalism are still in short supply and have largely not affected the grand narratives that shape our sense of ourselves as citizens and critics—or as minor producers who are also mainly consumers of often vague ideas about how the global past unfolded until the moment of critique and of exercising a political decision. Those vague ideas often have underlying them more specific concepts like the “Asiatic mode of production,” “Oriental despotism,” and “jihad.” However, unlike the prior uses of philological knowledge to define the hallmark of *modern* philosophical distinctions among epochs and civilizations, any critical theorist worth her mettle will blast enormous holes through those tropes rather than take them to be history. Yet

remaining in the latter's place then would be a vacuum. The vacuum is filled with complex self-undoing notions of power and emancipation that nevertheless do not always track with the histories of the colonized (nor the uncolonized) "East." Or, as the example of Du Bois demonstrates, the freedoms imagined by critical theorists do not always map onto the actual history of slavery, even as it can paradoxically serve as *the* event that enables humanity to emerge.⁵⁷

A figure such as Sayyid Fadl has a hard time piercing the veil between religion and theory, despite traversing a conceptual landscape that is very much theory in its purest form: a grappling with general principles. The most general and most fundamental for Fadl was God and the paradoxical relationship with creation—of absolute alterity and potential identity, of unbridgeable distance and self-annihilating closeness. That one can say the centering of God is religion par excellence and fails to meet the minimum criteria for being critical is in itself an effect of the historical vacuum. I have had to avoid deeper dives into Fadl's texts because the very contexts for them are in the main unknown to most who "do theory."

Fadl's life does not only have to be an object of devotees' hagiographic inscription, antiquarian interest, or a feeder for *better* theory. If the "life" in question was also theorized by the living and by the dead (as indeed it was: life belonged to God hence it was shared by other humans and animals past, present, and future and could be invested in texts, relics, shrines, and other things), then a vast and rich field of intellectual history remains to be plowed. We are tasked, however, with thinking about anticolonialism in relation to critical theory. And the answer that begins to appear from Fadl's final problem-space at the close of the nineteenth century is that *no contribution* to critical theory as such is forthcoming until the ongoing revision of world history also becomes part of our common sense, such that we might see (again) the gap between anticolonial as being and as promise and the power(s) of heterogenous forms of life in that in-between space, in the *barzakh* between the living and the dead—until sovereignty is not, as I've argued elsewhere, the critical denouement.

Unlike the radical critiques developed by the translators among the colonized who successfully led or contributed to the movements that we typically think of as anticolonial, from Mahatma Gandhi to Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah to Gamal Abdel Nasser, some of whom have made it onto the radar of theory, Fadl's final thoughtful act was to rebel in a fashion that was no longer intelligible as having political ramifications in a thoroughly ruptured and reconstituted problem-space delimited by modern sovereignty.⁵⁸ In his journey back/forward through the Sufi tradition of his forefathers, another sort of emancipation was sought. As Esmeir notes in the case of Egypt at the same time, "Modern positive law colonized Egyptians by turning their humanity into law's own teleology. It takes a particular kind of rebellion, not just any rebellion, to break these chains."⁵⁹ She hints later at a site

of rebellious potentiality in the work of the Muslim modernist and mystic, Tawfiq al-Jawhary (d. 1940), who was active in the decades following Fadl's death and, unlike the latter, conversant with figures like Darwin. Yet like Fadl, Jawhary's ethical vision, informed by Sufi temporalities and rhizomatic relationalities of life/nonlife, was neither a repetition of the medieval nor a complete renunciation of the world but a response to and an effect of the transformation of modern sovereignty and its new claims on humanity. They were both out of time in their preternatural ability to see that being human was not a praiseworthy or absolutely emancipatory end in itself but in fact posed new dangers for creation. In the age of political "maturity" and modernity, however, with the end of the Great War, their views were not destined to be meaningful to those with anticolonial nationalist or internationalist perspectives.⁶⁰ "While [these ethics] may not have determined the course of history, they created a field of potentialities for the thinking of other forms of life."⁶¹

Thus, for an anticolonialism that is also a positive claim to freedom to offer something to critical theory, the offering must not already be wrapped in the sovereign's robes. It cannot simply be a rehearsal of *Hamlet*, an adaptation of Hobbes, or a stretching of Marx and Agamben. A positive history of the world that makes the operations of power legible in a nonbinary, nondialectical mode must become our new world history if any anticolonial offering is to critically revitalize theory.⁶² This new knowledge marks the (im)possibility of worldmaking past and future as "the transformation of the world through a transformation of our representational practices."⁶³ The stakes involved in reconceiving *our* human history as truly *ours* and not just of one group or one group's fantasies of others is captured in Talal Asad's reflections on the responsibility for humans in a secular regime of human rights: "Of course everybody generally has an opinion about the customs and beliefs of other people ('other cultures'), regarding them as good, bad, or indifferent. But in my view that fact is less interesting than the question of the kind of violence (moral, legal, military) that *judgements* justify."⁶⁴ It has been my contention that for a more critical theory, or for a critique of our time, which is capable of emancipating itself from its own traditional moorings and thereby finally being a part of world history, we must actually un/re/do our history.

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Ocean World (2019), and recipient of the 2020 Wallace K. Ferguson Prize of the Canadian Historical Association.

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Notes

1. For a similar argument about international law, see Tzouvala, "Specter of Eurocentrism." For two works that treat worldmaking as a political idea(l), see Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*; Srinivasan, "Genealogy, Epistemology and Worldmaking."
2. Spivak, "Ghostwriting," 82.
3. Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, 339–40.
4. Jacob, *For God or Empire*.
5. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 40.
6. Agamben, *Kingdom*.
7. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*. Also see the illuminating conversation between her, Talal Asad, and Judith Butler in Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular?*
8. For the legend of Perumal, see Jacob, *For God or Empire*, 56–59.
9. Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*.
10. On the evolving meaning of fanaticism, see Jacob, *For God or Empire*, 38–48.
11. Drummond, *Grammar*, ii; emphasis added.
12. Sharpe, "Violence of Light," 35.
13. Esmeir, *Juridical Humanity*, 2.
14. See, for example, the twenty-first-century translation from Yemen, which attributes authorship to Al-Ahdal, *The Slicing Sword*. This version includes a foreword by Anwar al-Awlaki, who in 2011 became the first US citizen to be killed by a targeted drone attack.
15. The fatwas had ceased to circulate in Malabar thanks to the British efforts to collect and destroy copies. The printed versions made their ways back to Malabar from Egypt.
16. Fadl had left India with an entourage of approximately sixty people.
17. Agamben, *Kingdom*, 47.
18. Agamben, *Kingdom*, 287.
19. Though she does not go this far, Butler has in her recent work tried to illuminate the ways in which thinking the political now from any location requires more than philosophical revisions of ancient conceptions of the polis or the forum. For her elegant critique of Hannah Arendt, from whose political concept Agamben builds, see Butler, *Notes*, 66–98.
20. Derrida, *Rogues*, 29.
21. Derrida, *Rogues*, 33.

22. On the problem of Marxist temporalities in relation to “non-Western” history, see the now classic critique by Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.
23. “Problem-space” is a critical lens David Scott develops in *Refashioning Futures* and redeploys in *Conscripts of Modernity*, in order to reanimate the spirit of C. L. R. James for the postcolonial present. “It is a context of argument, and therefore one of intervention. A problem-space, in other words, is an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs” (Scott, quoted in Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment*, 21–22). *Conscripts*, like Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, begins with a tipping of the hat to Hamlet’s famous line about time being out of joint.
24. Robinson, *Black Marxism*.
25. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 299.
26. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 305, 7.
27. That is, as long as the radical alterity, the scission made by Atlantic slavery, is on our radar. Indeed, that scission is a discovery and a condition of possibility of bridging in Saidiya Hartman’s tour de force, *Lose Your Mother*.
28. See, for example, Chalcraft, *Popular Politics*; Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism*; and Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint*.
29. The irony, if not brazen wrongheadedness, of reading Du Bois alongside Fadl appears in the British conviction that the latter, likely a slaveholder, was behind a rebellion to thwart the British-influenced abolition of the slave trade in the Ottoman Empire. Investigating this aspect of Fadl’s contradictions and ambivalences, which he was forced to confront as he himself went from being part of a migrant society to a forced migrant, is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say, his evolving relationship to slavery from the mid-century, when discourses and practices of abolition went global, though difficult to access in the available sources, would deepen the discussion of emancipation in his thought. Was the promise of an end of spiritual freedom and reiteration of God’s injunction to the righteous individual to choose the steeper path, which included favoring manumission (Qur’an 90:12–13), merely a means for maintaining uneven worldly privileges? Evidently this is a possibility, but the weight of evidence suggests it would be a shallow, anachronistic reading. The question of enslavement within Islamic history as well as modern abolitionism has received increasing attention from historians, but the route to freedom within Islam is often elided because of its arbitrariness, on the one hand, and the conservative legal consensus upholding slavery over the centuries since the death of the prophet, on the other. On the abolition debate coming to a head at the turn of the twentieth century and an excellent revision of the all-too-simplistic binary between modernizing, Western-influenced reformers and traditionalist, anti-Western conservatives, see Ghazal, “Debating Slavery.”
30. There is a cottage industry of jihad studies that focuses on “Islamic” terrorism. Alongside those are a large number of Islamic-studies accounts of the concept in foundational texts. Jihad as a conceptual and armed deployment in the contexts of imperialism, globalization, and post-Cold War geopolitics has also been brilliantly analyzed with different and nuanced conclusions on its political implications by Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad*; Devji, *Terrorist in Search of Humanity*; Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*; and more recently, Li, *The Universal Enemy*.
31. Alexander Knysh deftly demonstrates the pitfalls of deploying the Eurocentric Christian binary of orthodoxy and heresy in tracing the “polyphonic” theological, gnostic, legal,

- and philosophical thought of Muslim ulama in earlier periods, in “‘Orthodoxy’ and ‘Heresy.’” For the use of the “Balkans-to-Bengal complex” as a spatiocultural formation demonstrating the capaciousness of the category “Islamic,” see Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*
32. See al-Mashhur, *Shams al-zahira*.
 33. On women’s right to cover as a new freedom, see Jacob, “Conversion Trouble.”
 34. Darryl Li’s premise in *The Universal Enemy* is “that *there can be no general theory of jihad*, at least outside Islamic traditions.” Li, “*The Universal Enemy—*an Introduction.” We proceed from another premise: that historically traditions have borrowed from one another in mutually productive ways but often efface the relevant genealogies in moments of purification. Therefore, the potential of jihad’s entry into a “general theory” outside the Islamic tradition should not be foreclosed because of its current popularity in security discourses.
 35. The end times formed the horizon of Fadl’s thought, but it was conceived as a fulfillment of promise and a time to come, an eternal beginning or unfolding of life.
 36. Jacob, *For God or Empire*, 60–79.
 37. After the conquest, the EIC questioned the Hindu raja, or the Zamorin, whom they regarded as the traditional de jure ruler of the areas surrounding his “capital” Calicut, about tax collection. He alluded to the nested sovereignty of his kingdom, noting the traditional power of others to fortify themselves due to geographical peculiarities. Land had not been legally and economically organized into private property or plantations despite various fiscal innovations introduced during the Mysorean interregnum. Jacob, *For God or Empire*, 33. See also Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty*.
 38. Alawi, *Durr al-thamin*, 3.
 39. Alawi, Ottoman copy.
 40. Jacob, *For God or Empire*, 179–88.
 41. Stern, *The Company-State*.
 42. Jacob, *For God or Empire*, 115–28, 182–88. A sample of Fadl’s works includes Alawi, *Hadhihi al-tariqa al-hanifa*; Alawi, *Idah al-asrar al-‘alawiyya*; Alawi, *Hashiyat ba Alawi*; Alawi, ‘*Uddat al-umara*’; Alawi, *Durr al-thamin*.
 43. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 322–23.
 44. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 323. As the twentieth century dragged on in more or less the same manner, Du Bois continued to dream and to struggle for freedom at home and abroad; see Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*.
 45. This section is a modified version of my reading of the text in *For God or Empire*, 182–87.
 46. Alawi, *Hadhihi al-tariqa*, 2.
 47. Alawi, *Hadhihi al-tariqa*, 3.
 48. Alawi, *Hadhihi al-tariqa*, 3.
 49. Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*.
 50. Rendering *al-akhira* “life-as-other” when its standard translation is the hereafter or the afterlife aims to underscore the centrality of life’s many valences to Fadl’s thinking by the end of his own biological life, such that the folding and unfolding of times before and after became a visceral reality.
 51. The hagiographies in Malayalam, as well as histories produced in Malabar in Malayalam and English, in the second half of the twentieth century, attest to a certain communal recognition of Fadl’s longing and extensive efforts to return to them, as well as this mode of connectivity on multiple planes that he sought to make his last gift. Jacob, *For God or Empire*, 111–15, 150–54.

52. For an example of this querying that enables us to think (of) peace as “constitutive of otherness,” see Idris, *War for Peace*.
53. Gordon, *Migrants in the Profane*.
54. Gordon, “Critical Theory.”
55. Gordon, “Critical Theory.”
56. A much-cited (and as often wrongly interpreted) elaboration is Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”
57. Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti.”
58. For lesser- and better-known figures, see for example, Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution*; Kapila, “Ambedkar’s Agonism”; and Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and Its Discontents*.
59. Esmeir, *Juridical Humanity*, 10–11.
60. On the infantilization and marginalization of a variety of politically charged and intersecting emancipatory movements from the same time, see Gandhi, *Affective Communities*.
61. Esmeir, *Juridical Humanity*, 95.
62. This normative claim shares in some ways the insights that come from the emerging field of critical Muslim studies. See Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*.
63. Srinivasan, “Genealogy,” 145.
64. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 148.

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