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## Guest Editor's Letter

*Janet Roitman*

Over the past several years, France has been rocked not only by violent demonstrations in the *banlieues* (city outskirts) but also by raging debates regarding the place of “postcolonial studies” in the French archive and in current scholarship. This special issue of *Public Culture* hopes to ascertain the contours of that debate with specific aims in mind. First, and minimally, this collection of essays serves to illustrate the ways in which “postcolonial studies” is apprehended today in a European venue. While often taken for granted as an academic label, the present debate in France is driven by divergent and sometimes remarkable assumptions about what such forms of inquiry entail. Second, this special issue aims to consider the ways in which the intense exchanges among scholars, public media figures, and politicians are a symptom of disagreement over the status of French colonial history and over the category of race in the construction of contemporary national narratives. Third, and in a related manner, the essays that follow consider how these varied and conflicting understandings of “postcolonial studies” and the nature of empire give rise to fierce disagreement over the status of race and immigration in France—if not Europe—today.

To do so, this issue on “racial France” juxtaposes three texts: “Postcolonial Studies: A Political Invention of Tradition?” by Jean-François Bayart, “Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France” by Ann Laura Stoler, and “Provincializing France?” by Achille Mbembe. These three articles are followed by commentaries by Robert J. C. Young, Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas, Sandrine Bertaux, Ranjana Khanna, and Marnia Lazreg. The contemporary relevance of

Throughout this special issue, authors have used French versions of standard texts, with English versions, where they exist, indicated in footnotes. All translations from French in this introduction are my own. I would like to thank Plaegian Alexander and Stephen Twilley for their patience and their hard work; Yann Arthus-Bertrand for his quick fix; and Dilip Gaonkar, Claudio Lomnitz, and the Editorial Committee of *Public Culture* for their strong support.

the contours of this general debate is taken up in two Doxa essays: one by Leela Gandhi on postcolonial studies, the predicament of democracy, and the problem of historical inscription and the other by Sylvie Tissot on the recent French ban of the *niqab* (the “integral” veil) and the banishment from public space that this legislation entails for certain categories of people.

Dominique Malaquais in her photo-essay, “Imagin(IN)g Racial France,” annotates a series of commanding images of works by artists reflecting on possible alternative publics. Most of these artists take up the icons of the French nation, the various tropes of empire, and especially the matter of historical inscription. As the Collectif 12 artists ask, what form of enunciation is the person without a country, without a passport, without an archive? The question of forms of language emerges starkly here in both word (the colonizer’s language, Francophonie, patois) and image (the flag, documents, commodities)—in all their fraught ambiguity. And thus the impossibility of the postcolonial situation is summarized as a form of “reverse orientalism”: Marianne as a tease, in the images of the Parisian-based, Congolese-American artist KaKuDji (Malaquais, in this issue: 19). Or, in the words of Serge Gainsbourg, “Je t’aime . . . moi non plus” (“I love you . . . me neither”).<sup>1</sup>

### The French Debate

To begin, the stakes of the debate over postcolonial studies in France today are well presented through an emblematic intervention by Bayart. Bayart’s position on the role and merits of postcolonial studies for French scholarship and French politics has been the subject of much controversy, having inspired reactions from scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, in other parts of Europe (notably, Holland), and in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> Bayart (in this issue: 65) argues that postcolonial studies is “largely unnecessary” to French scholarship today and, further, that it is by and large irrelevant to an appreciation of the contemporary questions of race, immigration, and citizenship in France. For Bayart, following Georges Balandier’s seminal article of 1951, “La situation coloniale: Approche théorique,” the postcolonial can be defined as a situation that is “shared by all our contemporaries” (Balandier 2007: 24). As Balandier reiterated more recently, “We are all, in different ways, in a postcolonial situation”—an astute point that Bayart (in this issue: 56) takes up in order to underscore “the importance of the colonial period in the process of globalization undergone in the nineteenth and twentieth

1. Quoted in Malaquais, in this issue, 21.

2. This text is the basis of Bayart 2010, a book published very recently in France.

centuries.” Along those lines, Bayart takes issue with the widespread assertion, or assumption, that French scholars have rejected postcolonial studies; such claims essentialize “France,” as is wont, he argues, with scholars of postcolonial studies. “France” becomes an imaginary landscape, denied of its heterogeneity and internal conflicts. Bayart thus wonders what exactly is on trial in the denunciation of the alleged “French” repudiation of postcolonial studies. A monologic notion of France? French academe? The current French political regime? Moreover, he contends, if one puts “French society” on trial, one must not forget that the denizens of the *banlieues* are equally protagonists of the French nation-state (Bayart, in this issue: 58).

Bayart maintains that issues explored by scholars of postcolonial studies have been elaborated previously by francophone intellectuals, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi, and that postcolonial studies proceeds with a misguided analysis of processes of colonization and empire. In response, Bayart turns to French historical research on empire for examples of a historical sociology of the varied processes of colonization, which he privileges over what he sees as the binarism of the metropolis/colony distinction that, in his view, mars postcolonial studies. Arguing for the study of simultaneous processes of co-optation and domination, of collaboration and resistance; for the study of “pancolonialism,” or the ways in which empires can be characterized as the “first multilateral system of modern globalization”; and for the study of colonial empires as generated by successive waves of imperial conquest, Bayart (in this issue: 79) apprehends colonial empires as empires *tout court* and thus claims to avoid a normative characterization of colonial hegemony.

The question of the very possibility of separating out social scientific inquiry from normative positioning is taken up by many authors herein. But Stoler enters the fray with force, asking direct questions of both Balandier and Pierre Bourdieu. She notes that both scholars inhabited the role of the public intellectual and spoke to the matter of accountability. Balandier (1996: 8), an influential scholar of Africa, registered great discomfort regarding the extent to which, throughout his professional life, he had been “present to History” (*présent à l’Histoire*). This expression echoes the corollary, being “present to oneself” (*présent à soi-même*), a highly self-conscious state, a state of heightened self-awareness, a state of normativity. Likewise, she reminds us that Bourdieu, who wrote in the war-ridden 1960s about Algerian workers and “the colonial system,” waited some thirty years before articulating the profound dilemma brought on by the stark separation between “theoretical work” from “ethnographic practice” demanded by academic institutions (Stoler, in this issue: 130). The point for Stoler is not to

assess the extent to which either Balandier or Bourdieu lived up to the normative or ethical dilemmas presented by their respective field sites or scholarship. Her point is to ask why certain questions or problems become “safe” for enunciation, debate, and narration. And this is the question she puts to the current debate over postcolonial studies in France today: why now?

Part of Stoler’s response is to note that the debate is not novel. She recalls a previous renaissance of French colonial history that occurred some ten years ago and signals the fact that such history was then characterized as “forgotten” or “lost.” Given the significant library of colonial historiography that already existed, this reclaiming seemed surprising, belated, and symptomatic. Stoler (123) thus views the exuberance of the more recent turn to colonial history and to postcolonial studies not as a novel moment of discovery but rather as an expression of this constant return to renewed claims for “discrepant histories.” Nonetheless, what distinguishes past debates from present debates is the extent to which past memory-work for the same period—which produced, for instance, narrative accounts of Vichy politics—does not incite the kinds of passions we witness today. Stoler asserts that acknowledgment of collaboration with Vichy and admission of the violation of Algerian populations generally have been depicted “not as central features of the republic but as its very *negation*” (142; my emphasis)—a simple *dérive anti-républicaine* (an antirepublican lapse).

In Stoler’s view, present passions elicited over the relevance of postcolonial studies are similarly indicative of the problem of the status of the republic; today, however, the conclusion about colonialism being an exception, or a negation of republicanism, is not taken for granted. Because the category of “race” is now posited as constitutive of the French Republic despite—or because of—the very fact that “race” has no legal status in France, systematic exclusions can be viewed as inherent to the grammar of republican values—a matter taken up by commentators often associated with the French “postcolonial wave.” However, while affirming the import of the “racial state,” Stoler (122) takes issue with the idea that one could effectively recuperate the history of empire for redemptive politics, arguing that empire has not been “forgotten” and thus cannot simply be restored to a proper historiography of the republic. The focus, then, on the belated turn to postcolonial studies in France—whether with enthusiasm or with suspicion—elides the most significant question of the conventions of knowledge production that have made the history of a racialized polity marginal to academic inquiry.

Mbembe objects to the very characterization—belated or not—of postcolonial studies by French scholars today. He maintains that approaches to colo-

nial histories subsumed under the rubric of postcolonial studies are crucial to understanding the production of subaltern status and the constitution of historical subjects. Mbembe does not review the history of postcolonial studies. Instead, he objects to the claim that postcolonial studies is a symptom of an American obsession with identity politics, as the standard French argument would have it. To prove his point, he reviews the conditions for the production of knowledge in France, which establish the epistemological grounds for exclusion, marginalization, and invisibility. For Mbembe, the current — often vicious — debate over the status of postcolonial studies is indicative of a French postcolonial malaise, related to the deep trauma of Algeria and the present predicament of maintaining a color-blind republic. Indeed, Mbembe views present disputes over the status of postcolonial studies as indicative of two contemporary dilemmas facing France today: first, the problem of thinking the republic without its colonies and, second, the paradox inherent to the republican myth of French exceptionalism, which necessarily entails claims to universality.

Mbembe juxtaposes what he regards as provincial Parisian debates, which involve a guarded approach to social science practice that is marked by the defense of disciplinary boundaries and claims to authentic narrations of history, on the one hand, to what he considers transnational, interdisciplinary work being completed on the contradictory and ambiguous nature of imperial projects, with constant attention to possible counterhistories, on the other. Often, for better or for worse, this latter style of work is denoted as “postcolonial studies,” an approach that, although subject to criticism in his previous writing, is appraised by Mbembe as the healthy product of the cross-fertilization of cultural and intellectual production transpiring in diverse worlds, be they African American, Franco-African, Anglo-Caribbean, Sino-Indian, Latin American, or Franco-Caribbean. But these diverse worlds should not be reduced to linguistic or national registers, since postcolonial studies has taken a range of categories as its object of analysis, including sexuality, gender, and the production of difference, more generally. For Mbembe, postcolonial studies does not represent a theory or a method; rather, it is best characterized by its object of critique, which is not merely colonialism or colonization but also slavery and enslavement. The ultimate issue that postcolonial studies serves today is the production of a historical subject that is both socially and politically visible, which can utter the “I am” of contemporary political citizenship. In that sense, he finds postcolonial studies relevant to both the critique of citizenship and the elaboration of a democratic theory that can account for transnational and diasporic communities, or for the genealogies of the colonized and the enslaved.

As is made clear by the texts assembled in this dossier, there is something ludicrous about attempts to characterize or define “postcolonial studies,” as if one could do that once and for all. Postcolonial studies is not a theory, nor is it a method. As Young says (in this issue: 170), postcolonial studies is not a single project; rather, it is a “field of debate” established by “areas of inquiry.” In that sense, it is a manner of formulating questions. The various works that could be assembled under its label are best construed as having a common object of critique, be that the concept of “the colonial” or “empire” or “identity” or “the subject.” The sole aim of postcolonial studies is not the mere denunciation of colonization or empire, nor is it merely to document the efficacy of domination or the cleverness of resistance. Perhaps postcolonial studies helps us better understand processes of subjectivation, as some contributors to this volume suggest. Such processes are evidently complex and make use of difficult philosophical categories, the subject and subjectivity, which are often translated, without explanation, to account for practices of the self (see commentary by Lazreg and Khanna). But, at its best, postcolonial studies has produced compelling accounts of the epistemological bases for both the production of difference and historical forms of regulation (of bodies, of populations, of practices, of discursive formations, etc.), thus constantly generating alternative narratives and counterhistories in a relentless effort to displace the fault lines of power-knowledge.

In that sense, while widespread recourse to the kinds of studies that are readily labeled “postcolonial studies” has indeed given rise to a hegemonic form of scholarship, as Bayart insists, that scholarly work almost invariably produces diverse accounts of the problems at hand. That is, postcolonial studies is not concerned with elaborating the sociology of colonialism, for instance, because categories such as “the social” and “social groups” are not assumed a priori and are not attributed with the stable characteristics necessary for sociological analysis. As all authors herein maintain, the problem is to take heed of the ways that academic research reproduces the categories of imperial ethnology and sociology. This vigilant stance is the very starting point for postcolonial studies.

Of course, the question remains: to what extent can contemporary academic scholarship rid itself of such categories or, more specifically, from the epistemology and practices of nineteenth-century disciplines? Consequently, in the words of Lazreg (in this issue: 182): “The incipient turn to postcolonial studies in France may not augur a new era for social scientists from the South. On the contrary, it may mean an appropriation of themes and issues that are repackaged in ways that

still contrive to save the French nation from itself.” But is it even feasible to imagine a “South/South” debate that completely avoids the mediations of “northern” academe? This question is reviewed by Bertaux (with reference to Diouf 1999) and Lazreg (with respect to Algeria), who concludes that “the parameters of the former colony’s historiography are still set by the center of the colonial empire” (Lazreg, in this issue: 183).<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, as Stoler insists, there is no reclaiming “history” for redemptive purposes: there is no settling of historical scores. And of course, in keeping with her point, postcolonial studies is not concerned primarily with establishing either the historicity of colonialism or an authentic history. Such a project relies on a teleological representation of knowledge, or the notion that historical knowledge is “a continent whose geography can only be uncovered once” (Baneth-Nouailhetas, in this issue: 222). Moreover, in Young’s quite candid formulation (in this issue: 172): “History is not the only way of thinking about the world.” In other words, establishing “the truth” is not necessarily a matter of verifying “historical truth.” It is therefore significant that the current debate over postcolonial studies in France has been centered almost entirely on the problem of history. “If anything,” Bertaux observes (in this issue: 208), “the mobilization against postcolonial studies indicates that history is no object to be hijacked in France.” While French scholars are averse to identity politics, there is, as she claims, a lively politics of history. One might surmise that these disparate tropes for assessing and accounting for the postcolonial predicament—history versus identity—are examples of what Baneth-Nouailhetas describes as divergent registers of enunciation, which engender noncoincident propositions and hence misunderstandings.

Much like this first discrepancy between the respective tropes of history and identity, the current debate opposing “history” to “memory” can be characterized as an iteration of the alleged distinction between science and ideology (Bertaux). Postcolonial studies generally addresses the contingent nature of these distinctions. While not concerned with the primacy of history, such work is fundamentally preoccupied by the epistemological foundations of the constitutive categories of knowledge and social science narrative (“identity,” “memory,” “history,” “ideology,” “science”) and thus does not presume the ontological supremacy of history. Clearly, then, Lazreg’s concerns about the false hopes attributed to postcolonial studies by some French scholars is both unwarranted, since such

3. Which implies that the proponents of postcolonial studies—and especially those housed in Western universities—“are caught in the bind of having to hunt with the hounds while at the same time running with the foxes” (Owomoyela 1994: 96).

scholarship provides the basis for immanent critique, and legitimate, since French anthropologists had little to say about the 2005 riots, but yet even less to say about the very categories used to “measure” the assimilation of immigrant groups in a 1996 demographic survey administered by the French state (Bertaux).

In that sense, the most pressing question is perhaps not the primacy of sites of cultural and intellectual production or producing historiography from outside the confines of the “Western episteme.” The ultimate irony, expressed back in 1990 by Young in *White Mythologies*, is that what we now call “French theory” was the product of the French colonial situation, a point reviewed herein by Young, Stoler, Mbembe, and Baneth-Nouailhetas. Putting primacy aside, postcolonial studies has inquired into processes of subjection and the efficacy of regulative concepts for the elaboration of specific lives and politics. This takes us beyond the binary logic of domination versus submission. Thus Bayart (in this issue: 76) provides an apt description of empire as being “based on co-optation as much as on occupation and on support as well as submission. It is a mode of ‘domination’ (*Herrschaft*) that generates obedience, rather than a simple regime or system of ‘force’ or ‘might’ (*Macht*). It does indeed consist in a certain ‘governmentality,’ at the intersection of techniques for domination over others and techniques of the self.” This description of the “imperial situation” coincides nicely with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s assertion that the nature of contemporary political claims are

tacitly recognized as coded within the legacy of imperialism: nationhood, constitutionality, democracy, socialism, even culturalism. In the historical framework of exploration, colonization, decolonization, what is being *effectively* reclaimed is a series of regulative political concepts, the supposedly authoritative narrative of the production of which was written elsewhere, in the social formations of Western Europe. They are thus being reclaimed, indeed, claimed, as concept-metaphors for which no *historically* adequate referent may be advanced from postcolonial space. (Spivak 1993: 48; my emphasis)

Bayart concurs (in this issue: 77), arguing that the very concepts of development, nationalism, and immigration “are derivatives of colonial hegemony and contribute to its reproduction.”

In attending to the epistemological bases for the constitutive concepts of imperial formations and the social sciences, postcolonial studies potentially creates the conditions of possibility for “third languages.” First and foremost, the genealogy of postcolonial studies is transnational and multilingual, as illustrated by the quite

dizzying list of contributors set forth by Young in his commentary—a sort of “thick description” of postcolonial studies. Of course, vehicular languages were the essence of empire: as Bayart says (in this issue: 83), “Rome thought of itself in Greek,” and, as he notes, these languages are generated not just linguistically but also through material culture. But the study of the effects of such mediations cannot be pursued through reductive modes of analysis.

Likewise, postcolonial studies cannot be reduced to an anglophone adventure or an Anglo-American trend: because imperialism gave rise to the adjectives “Afro-Caribbean,” “Anglo-Indian,” “Latin American,” “French Caribbean,” “Anglo-African,” and so forth, postcolonial studies is necessarily multilingual and transnational. Baneth-Nouailhetas observes that anglophone scholars might very well be French citizens or denizens of francophone states, making the national referent (France versus the United States) entirely inappropriate. She also contends that the writings of Césaire, Senghor, Memmi, and Fanon are more suitably depicted not as “French involvement” in anticolonialism but rather as “involvement in French” with anticolonialism (Baneth-Nouailhetas, in this issue: 222). We should pursue, she urges, the genealogies of these sites of third languages: the universities of ex-colonies, for example, which were imperial institutions and satellites of the metropole and yet which generated novel forms of discourse and specific ways of conceptualizing the relationship between history and language. The question she sets forth, as articulated by Chinua Achebe, stands as a constant enigma: “Does my writing in the language of my colonizer not amount to acquiescing to the ultimate dispossession?” (Achebe 2009: 119). He concludes: “The truth is that we chose English not because the British desired it but because, having tacitly accepted the new nationalities into which colonialism had forced us, we needed its language to transact our business, including the business of overthrowing colonialism itself in the fullness of time” (Achebe 2009: 120).

As Achebe suggests, this question of language extends beyond the matter of agency; it raises the issue of the very status of knowledge and the constitution of a subject of history (“overthrowing colonialism itself in the fullness of time”). A distinct but related point is made by Jean-Claude Milner (2006) in his writing on the conditions of possibility for the historical constitution of *le juif de savoir* (the Jew of knowledge, or the historical figure of the Jew as fundamentally “of knowledge”).<sup>4</sup> Milner examines each nomination—Jew, knowledge—in light of

4. It is intriguing, as an aside, that Milner's scholarship has not been brought into dialogue with those claiming the “postcolonial wave” in France. See especially Milner 2003. I thank Paul Rabinow for recommending his work to me.

the other, seeking to elicit what is solicited in a singular manner by those carrying the name “Jew,” on the one hand, and what is affected in a singular manner by the designation “knowledge,” on the other.<sup>5</sup> His genealogy of *le juif de savoir* is an assessment of the “intersection” —or the coming together (*mise en intersection*)—of “Jew” and “knowledge” during a specific temporal duration: the time period during which “assimilation” had become a point of reflection and accord in Europe. This period, from the end of the eighteenth century to the onset of the Second World War, was likewise qualified by a linguistic space, which was defined by the German language: *Mitteleuropa*, or the totality of sites where German functioned as both the language of culture and the language of knowledge. For Milner, “German Judiasm” is thus Judaism of the German language, or the ensemble of Judaisms of *Mitteleuropa*, which all took the German language to be the language of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> And this knowledge-culture is best specified as *Wissenschaft*—the stuff of empire and universities.

Milner demonstrates that the very idea of “knowledge” animating French Jews during this time of potential assimilation was defined by the conscious horizon of German, even in their aims to detach themselves from it.<sup>7</sup> He says that “in order for knowledge to author, or to authorize (*autoriser*), the emergence of the Jew of knowledge, it had to become modern knowledge,” and he then asks, “What must we understand by ‘knowledge’ and what must we understand by ‘modern’?” (Milner 2006: 15). In reply, Milner pursues what he defines as the fundamental problem set forth in both *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things*, two of Michel Foucault’s early works on the constitution of modern forms of knowledge and driven by two primary questions: “What were the discursive conditions that made possible the myth of Germany as the seat of modern knowledge (*l’Allemagne savante*)?” and “What were the discursive conditions for the myth of *Wissenschaft*?” (Milner 2006: 16–17).<sup>8</sup>

5. Milner’s project is vast, as he admits. To render it feasible, he sets clear logical limits and considers specific spatial and temporal parameters, both elaborated in his introduction. His text is both extremely dense and remarkably succinct. My summary can only be inadequate. Read Milner 2006.

6. “Whatever their passports, when they had the right to possess one, the knowledge that animated them was enunciated on the horizon of the German language” (Milner 2006: 11).

7. On the distinction between French and German models of assimilation and on political versus social assimilation, see Milner 2006: 27–35.

8. This reading of these two works by Foucault is *un forçage intentionnel*—an intentional forced reading, which serves a rule of interpretation: that the locution “modern knowledge” designates a configuration that has as its elemental referent the German language. Significantly, Milner highlights that Foucault’s work on the myth of *Wissenschaft* was made possible only by the imminent demise

Milner takes Hannah Arendt as paradigmatic of this structural coincidence between the period of assimilation and the emergence of “modern knowledge” as signified by *Wissenschaft*.<sup>9</sup> When Arendt refers to herself as an assimilated Jew, she calls forth a singular referent, which is, according to Milner, both necessary and sufficient: “her relation to the German language.” In her 1963 correspondence with Gerschom Scholem, Arendt allows: “If I must ‘come from somewhere,’ it is from the German philosophic tradition” (quoted in Milner 2006: 42). And in the 1964 interview by Günter Grass, titled “What Remains? The Language Remains,” she attests that all that remains of assimilation after Nazism is nothing other than one’s maternal language.<sup>10</sup> Milner’s conclusion, like hers, is the co-constitution of language and “knowledge” (Milner 2006: 42–44). The *juif de savoir* is constituted by modern knowledge.

Thanks to modern knowledge, the Jew can finally accede to something. Thanks to this something, it ceases being a Jew and becomes Man, the Man of absolute knowledge. Thanks to the position of Man, he can enunciate himself as Jew without love or hate, without shame or pride—because enunciation as Jew in the field of knowledge means saying nothing. In the silence imposed upon any speech whatsoever, he can take part in knowledge without fear of troubling words encountered on a detour along the road. Even if the name “Jew” comes back to memory, by external insult or by internal recollection, and even if he feels an emotion, he will invoke a material, physical accident; that which is also mastered by knowledge. (Milner 2006: 74)

Here we return to Achebe’s question about the predicament of thinking in the language of the educator, the statesman, the colonizer, the slaver, the exterminator. Once that question is posed, we can then inquire into the matter of what counts as historical discourse in the first place. We can anticipate the dilemma of the status of the “third languages” of empire and the figure of the slave (to rejoin

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(*dérive*) of this discursive continent. In emphasizing this aspect of Foucault’s early work, Milner casts it as a “secret meditation on language,” which asks “how the language of classical knowledge became the language of the Revolution, and of Empire, and then, quite plainly, the language of state administration.” He likewise notes that Foucault asks how the language of *Wissenschaft* became “the Lingua Tertii Imperii, the language of the Third Reich” (Milner 2006: 17–18). It should be noted that Milner’s definition of “modern knowledge” in terms of temporality and genealogy might be contested, most notably, with reference, for example, to Galilean science, a challenge he addresses thoroughly and imaginatively in Milner 2006: chaps. 2–3.

9. “H. Arendt was a Jewess of *Wissenschaft*; after 1933, she remained one as profoundly as allowed by the irruption of Nazism and the discovery of gas chambers” (Milner 2006: 41).

10. Finally published in English in a collection of essays in Arendt 2005.

Mbembe, in this issue). Third languages are literal, vehicular languages, born of conquests, but they are equally figurative languages. Third languages raise the problem of literacy, or the alleged necessity of “representing literacy as an epistemic necessity, not simply a condition for the possibility of science, history or philosophy” (Owomoyela 1994: 80). And third languages ultimately raise the specter of that which is potentially “unattributable” (*l’inassignable*) (Mbembe, in this issue: 116).

### The Voice in the Present

Colonialism and empire now appear as central threads in the [French] nation’s unraveling republican fabric. There is intense disagreement about how they figure, whether a focus on the ‘colonial continuum’ strengthens urgent demands for social equity or is an irrelevant distraction from them, whether repentance and guilt have shaped politics or politics has replaced good scholarship. Some would argue that the Republic and Empire are now difficult to view as mutually exclusive categories. What had been a patent oxymoron, *la république coloniale*, is still repugnant to some, but for others it represents the pulse of the moment (Stoler, in this issue: 137).

Stoler is not motivated by the desire to judge whether French proponents of postcolonial studies are “right” or “wrong” in their accounting of colonial history. Instead, she is motivated by the question of relevance. Because, as noted above, she is acutely aware of the resurfacing of interest in colonial history — as a topic that has continually emerged in and out of focus in academic and political discourse — she asks why “colonial history” is now being mobilized or is now seen as pertinent in the construction of particular narratives.

As many authors remark herein, the mobilization of the “colonial archive” is both a means to debate the status of the republic and a means to establish what might constitute a “postcolonial library” (see Bertaux). The present mobilization of “colonial history” and the recent turn to “postcolonial studies” are not best apprehended in terms of an effort to get history “right” or in terms of a progression of scholarly achievements. What is significant is the disruption of the seamless boundaries of concepts and long-standing metaphorical associations, which is the ultimate effect of this recent scholarship, making the elusive “postcolonial library” true to its aims — that is, to constantly work at displacing the certainties of our constitutive categories. In other words, postcolonial critique is based on the acknowledgment of the constant instability of its own premises (see Baneth, Mbembe, in this volume). The postcolonial condition partakes of immanent cri-

tique insofar as it is not based on, and does not seek to confirm, axiomatic propositions; it is the perpetual awareness that it could always be otherwise.

Given that pedagogical condition (see Mbembe), one might ask: how is “colonial history” being conceived as useful, functional, or relevant for the *formulation* of certain questions? In sum, “what animates effective rather than idle colonial history is not its timeliness—how well it fits current politics and the stories long rehearsed—but how deeply it disrupts the stories we seek to tell, what untimely incisions it makes into received narratives, how much it refuses to yield to the pathos of moral outrage, or to new heroes, subaltern or otherwise” (Stoler, in this issue: 144). Recent scholarship, cited at length in the texts below, brings new questions to bear on colonial history so as to rethink what constitutes critical orientation and, most important, to “[endow] the colonial past with a politically active and progressive *voice in the present*” (Stoler, in this issue: 125; my emphasis). Such histories of the present are not concerned, for example, with producing ethnic or racial accountings so as to correct past wrongs or in a spirit of redemption. “France’s colonial history is far more than the ‘backdrop’ to how the ‘solutions’ for security are now framed” (Stoler, in this issue: 133). In other words, effective history is generated out of questions that are formulated from alleged imperatives, such as, to take an obvious example, the assertion that “human security” is defined by the spatial containment and segregation of populations (Stoler and see especially Tissot).<sup>11</sup> As in virtually all other parts of the world, France now confronts the “native question”—or the visibility and audibility of the native—in the heart of the metropole (see Mbembe, Bertaux, and Tissot).

The idea that “race constitutes . . . the wilderness of European humanism” (Mbembe 2006: 119) is not new or radical.<sup>12</sup> But it is difficult to deal with, let alone undo. The difficulty partly lies in the fact that “race,” while clearly a social construction, is not merely an imaginary social category. Race, Mbembe argues (in this issue: 116), is what regulates empire; it “regulates their language, their perceptual schema, and their imaginaries.” This is not a particularly shocking or novel statement. But it does raise the basic issue: that is, “the political, personal, and scholarly dispositions that have made the *racial* coordinates of empire and the racial epistemics of governance so faintly legible to French histories of the present” (Stoler, in this issue: 122 [my emphasis]; and see Lazreg). Of course, the denial that race is inherent to “the grammar of republican values” (Stoler, in

11. See all the articles herein for the very numerous references to research on the question in France today.

12. Also quoted in Bayart, in this issue: 61. See also Milner’s reading of Foucault, mentioned in note 8 above, and on humanism, read Milner 2006: 27–35.

this issue: 126) or the refutation that race is the elemental principle animating both colonization and slavery, and thus forms the basis of the fraught unity of contemporary humanity (Mbembe), amounts to a denial of race as constitutive of the modern republic (French or otherwise).

In that regard, Stoler and Mbembe find it more than curious that in France, where critical social theory and the analytics of difference were forged and thrived, the topic of the racial state that emerged in imperial formations has been veiled in silence. The crucial question, posed herein, but central to much work that seems to ride the postcolonial wave in France, is to consider the criteria for what is deemed “social science” and hence to inquire into the conventions and modes of knowledge production that have consistently elided and eclipsed the subject of the “racialized polity” or “the racial state”—a question pursued in all the texts that follow. To repeat, this critical accounting of the contours of what constitutes “French scholarship,” of what counts as “history,” of what constitutes the “colonial republic” in its contemporary forms, and of the status of the “native question” in the *banlieues* is not inscribed in a final account that would settle scores. These genealogies produce voices in a temporality of the present and hence establish the possibility for differential futures.

### Languages of the Demos

It is conceivable that these differential futures designate the prospects for the demos in our world today. This does not mean that multiple languages or cultures need to be preserved or cultivated so as to ensure the future of democracy. It seems fairly clear that “culture” serves the ends of colonial or imperial republics just as well as “race.”<sup>13</sup> Calls for a multiracial democracy or a multicultural democracy are not necessarily calls for the transformation of contemporary political democracy. Instead of merely preserving political democracy, a critical point of reflection might rather be the possible future languages of a potential democratic ethos. Almost all contributors to this volume mention the oft-noted problem of the “non-democratic foundations of democracy.” But some raise the matter of an “ethics of mutuality” (Mbembe, in this issue: 118) that entails not reifying difference but recognizing and even cultivating the conditions for the production of difference. Ultimately, what is at stake is the problem of what constitutes the political. Or,

13. A case that has been made ad infinitum (cf., for example, Clifford and Marcus 1986) and yet which seems without effect: see, for example, Tissot’s account of the current campaign against the *niqab* and, by extension, the alleged failure of practicing Muslims to accede to correct “cultural practice.”

in the words of Khanna (in this issue: 193), what is at issue for analysis is “how memory and notions of the subject constitute not a different political perspective but an understanding of the very notion of the political.”<sup>14</sup> In the end, this brings us to consider the very constitution of what is even reckoned as “a subject.”

Gandhi in her *Doxa* on the “new democratic dispensation” (in this issue: 34, 30), or the emphasis on the topos of democracy now articulated by a group of highly visible academic personalities, wonders how “democracy” can be claimed or even put forward without consideration of the “vexed, colonial history of the concept of universalism.” There is no separating imperialism from universalism as historical and epistemological categories. As most authors note herein, universalism is fraught with particularism; its claims are articulated as French, American, Chinese, Christian, Muslim, History, Science, and so forth. The ultimate problem posed by the epistemology of universalism is whether the subaltern could ever obtain the status of a subject; being necessarily inscribed in the concept of the subject-as-sovereign, the subaltern is inevitably condemned to a mere “subject-effect.”<sup>15</sup> Thus eliciting Spivak, Khanna (in this issue: 196) infers that the positing of the subaltern “as the neglected-other-who-was-different was to leave the notion of the sovereign subject entirely intact and [thus] reinscribe a kind of humanism.” As she says, “For Spivak, it was necessary to understand how the subaltern emerged as an insurgent ‘functional change in a sign system’ — a source of disturbance to civil and political society rather than a recognizable other whose difference had not been taken into account” (195).

From that view, the ethics of mutuality called for by Mbembe would entail the strategic transformation of a democratic ethos. Such transformation is envisaged by Gandhi (in this issue, 33), following in the steps of Mohandas K. Gandhi, as the endeavor “to dismantle all existing forms of sovereignty to conceive a polity and sociality where meaning attaches precisely to that which is naive.” This dismantling would not amount to a “strategic rhetorical inversion” or Fanon’s “positive reappropriation of pejoratives” (Gandhi, in this issue: 32). It would not entail a subject-effect (Spivak 1987) or mere disturbance. Nor would it be the achievement of a hegemonic or majoritarian position, an appropriation of sovereignty itself. For Gandhi (in this issue: 33), dismantling all existing forms of sov-

14. The reference to analysis being, for her, psychoanalytic work. In my view, much writing of the postcolonial studies brand partakes of similar intellectual work albeit with much less critical attention to the problem of positing or assuming the category of “subjectivity,” which she helpfully points out (see also Lazreg, in this issue).

15. This question drives Spivak’s essay “Deconstructing Historiography,” which is reviewed by Khanna.

ereignty means rendering the subject of experiences of suffering unexceptional, unremarkable, or “common.” Thus the scenes of “anarchist accord” elaborated in Mahatma Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* set forth situations of relationality “outside the glare of history proper” (Gandhi, in this issue: 35). If history amounts to a record of interruptions (suffering, alienation, crisis), “the *ascetic* trick . . . is in successfully resisting the temptation to achieve admission into the record upon the understanding that noteworthiness is [somehow] structurally incompatible with a politics of accord” (35). In the end, this politics would entail an epistemological revolution: significance would no longer be located in history.<sup>16</sup>

Displacing “the sovereign” surely entails more than “postcolonial studies.” Displacing the sovereign likewise entails more than oppositional politics. Displacing the very concept of “the sovereign” means somehow abolishing or effacing the ever-present subject of the juridical sovereign not just in our analyses but in our very representations of power, as long argued by Foucault ([1978] 1990, 1980).<sup>17</sup> Displacing the ever-present subject of the juridical sovereign does not amount to fragmentations of sovereignty or accounts of the ways that state sovereignty has been ostensibly dislocated by “multiple” or “partial” or “variegated” sovereignties. Displacing sovereignty does not mean producing sovereigns in the plural. Instead, as Foucault argued, and perhaps in keeping with Gandhi’s “anarchist accord,” displacing the sovereign means doing away with the language of Western political philosophy and especially the language of rights. In good French tradition, this displacement involves “cutting off the king’s head” (Foucault [1978] 1990: 82).

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16. See Young and Mbembe, both in this issue. This very problematic of the production of history as a record of interruptions with respect to contemporary narratives of “crisis” is taken up in Janet Roitman, “The Anti-crisis,” forthcoming.

17. A point already made in Roitman 2005. For a genealogy of sovereignty that enjoins this line of reasoning, cf. Bartelson 1995.

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