

## Anticolonialism as Theory

THE QUEST FOR FREEDOM HAS been at the heart of postcolonial critique for over four decades. And yet influential versions of postcolonialism over the years have not always drawn upon anticolonial solidarities and epistemologies of decolonization. This special issue seeks to theorize anticolonial thought and its expansive reach into the present as part of a larger project to fathom the legacies and futures of postcolonial studies. The task feels especially urgent today when decolonization has become a watchword for many distinct communities, affording the opportunity for robust theoretical debates about forms of relation, coloniality, and dissent in the twenty-first century. How do such previously forged political concepts as violence, revolution, collectivity, utopia, universalism, or alienation mutate today? How might new theories of psychoanalysis, existentialism, and phenomenology inform our understanding of old and continuing forms of empire? How do changing formations of race, caste, class, gender, nation, indigeneity, and sexuality reshape anticolonial aesthetics, epistemologies, and ethics, prompting fresh discussions of the status of humanism, of civilization and barbarism, of fascism and neofascism?

In order to learn from anticolonial insurgencies to rethink our crisis-ridden present, it is first necessary to pause and rediscover the relation between our historical conjuncture and the many histories that have led to it. The versions of postcolonial theory most visible in the Anglo-American academy since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) often viewed anticolonial thinkers as caught within the national liberation paradigm and hence inattentive to gendered and subaltern constituencies, as well as insufficiently antiessentialist in their approach to the desired social, economic, and cultural liberation.<sup>1</sup> The lack of fit between the agendas of the postcolonial intellectuals located in the metropole and the Third World majorities whose voices they translated or mediated was also famously captured in various flashpoints—from the Salman Rushdie affair to the debates about subalternity and the native informant, hybridity and nativism.

The shift to the vocabulary of the global did little to resolve these concerns. In a foundational essay, “Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality,” Simon Gikandi warned that, while the logic of the Enlightenment was being deconstructed by postcolonial theorists in the West, it was still dearly held on to by those in the Global South seeking the fruits of modernity. Invoking the letters left behind by two Guinean children whose dead bodies were found stowed away in the cargo hold of a plane in Brussels in 1998, Gikandi reminded us that the boys “were neither seeking cultural hybridity nor ontological difference.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, he insists that “postcolonial theorists may have sought to forget the nation in order to become global, but the nation has not forgotten them.”<sup>3</sup> The return of extreme nationalisms and of various forms of fundamentalism was perhaps most forcefully staged by the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, which reshaped the academic future of the study of postcolonialism in startling and still poorly understood ways.

It is in this context of the post-9/11 hysteria over terrorism that we must situate the recent history of postcolonial studies. As Julian Go writes about his doctorate in sociology in the 1990s at the University of Chicago, the “chatter . . . had become all about subalternity, Orientalism, colonial discourse, and colonial mimicry.”<sup>4</sup> And yet it became a universally acknowledged truth in the twenty-first century that the currency of the field had been spent. It may help, accordingly, to more fully periodize the rise of the frame of the global in direct relation to the perceived decline of the postcolonial specifically as a post-9/11 phenomenon. Alongside the massive retrenchment of US military and imperial power around the globe, 9/11 also consolidated a liberal backlash to the gains of the culture wars of the 80s and 90s. The investment of US liberalism in old and new forms of empire should not be underestimated and in fact demands new modes of theorizing the persistence of empire. As the hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 underscored, not much separates liberal and left responses from those actively championing new forms of imperial control. Torn between a thoroughly colonial desire for a forever war and a reactive endorsement of President Biden for daring to leave Afghanistan, no matter the cost to Afghans, the stated end to the war on terror was reminiscent of so many other scenes of the end of empire, focusing not on the rights or destinies of Afghans themselves but on the melancholy of the would-be civilizer’s failure and sad resignation to the assumed return to native savagery.

Declarations of the end of the field further fail to clarify if it is theory itself that is superseded or if it is postcolonialism specifically that has become exhausted. No one, I trust, is suggesting that the end of the currency of postcolonial theory marks the end to the Anglo-American

academy's engagement with most of the world's populations. In an era when liberal politics of cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and cross-cultural exchange often championed in humanistic inquiry seem anachronistic at best, how might core concerns of postcolonial analysis—the status of the nation-state, the power of nationalism, and the continued control of national boundaries on our lives—rearticulate in the age of migration? What explains the coincidence of the rise of the bland frame of the global Anglophone with the historical emergence of such authoritarian figures as Narendra Modi, Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Rodrigo Duterte?

To put it differently, to say that postcolonial theory has transformed scholarship across the humanities over the last five decades is neither grandiose nor debatable. And yet its impact has been curiously diffuse, variable, and incredibly vulnerable to crude attacks. Nowhere is this clearer than in the naming wars around the rubric of the postcolonial that have seemingly endless momentum. Who doesn't remember rolling their eyes at earnest discussions about the hyphen in *post-colonial* in the 1990s? Which teacher of postcolonial studies has not had to explain—in the classroom, in a promotion dossier, in a hallway conversation, or during a job search—that “post” does not mean “past” and that it is precisely the charge of the field to think deeply and substantively about the ongoing legacy of colonialism? And yet the discomfort lingers, prompting those of us who work in the field to wonder if we should just jettison the baggage, rediscover our footing and grounding all over again, and move on to new vocabularies without looking back at the foundations of postcolonial theory. This special issue, the symposium that generated it, and the association that it inaugurates have chosen the opposite route.

The symposium on “Anticolonialism as Theory” that is the occasion for this special issue is the first of five such planned symposia that envision the futures of postcolonial thought in the North American academy. Helmed by the newly founded Association of Postcolonial Thought, these efforts hope to regenerate and foster the study of empires past and present, alongside epistemologies of decolonization, solidarity, and relation. A comparative, cross-generational, interdisciplinary, and transmedial initiative, the association aims to provide a hub for the exploration of empire and its varied afterlives. An expansive understanding of postcolonial theory in the twenty-first century drives these endeavors—seeking to not only reflect on the foundations of the field (institutional, political, historical, cultural, and aesthetic) but also to enable the field to flourish in promiscuous and recombinant fashion. Doing so requires work across and athwart disciplinary frames, alive to institutional and professional contingencies and to the realities of academic labor practices. While the study of traditional objects of inquiry—the aftermath of European imperialism in Africa, Asia, Latin

America, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and elsewhere—remains valuable, the association is galvanized by the analysis of other forms of empire and anti-imperialist efforts, ranging across vibrant dialogues on questions of race, indigeneity, gender and sexuality, abolition, ecology and matter, affect and critique. We understand postcolonial critique as a comparative project, inclusive of the literature and culture of former European colonies, alongside insurgent minority cultures from across the globe and the claims of Indigenous peoples to cultural and territorial sovereignty. Inspired by new energies in US ethnic studies, innovative forms of minoritarian analysis, and fresh ways of theorizing relation, the association hopes to provide a space of imagining what Adom Getachew terms “worldmaking after empire.”<sup>5</sup>

To think anticolonialism as theory is to explore how a return to the discourse on colonialism may help reframe some of the challenges and social movements of our century—the Arab Spring and its diffusion, the Occupy protests, the Movement for Black Lives, land-back campaigns, abolition, struggles for restitution of looted artifacts, new forms of ecological protest, and battles for the rights of refugees and displaced populations. This special issue accordingly views anticolonialism in a temporally and geographically expansive sense. While the mid-twentieth-century writings of such thinkers as Amílcar Cabral, Aimé Césaire, C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon, Claudia Jones, and M. N. Roy, among many others, continue to provide generative sites of engagement, the morphing character of postcolonial studies in the twenty-first century also demands new forms of thought beyond instrumentalization. Robin D. G. Kelley famously described Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* as “not a solution or a strategy or a little red book with pithy quotes. It is a dancing flame in a bonfire. . . . It is revolutionary graffiti painted in bold strokes across the great texts of Western civilization.”<sup>6</sup> In a similar spirit, we seek to revive anticolonialism as theory that allows us to live in the catastrophic present and to imagine forms of dissent against neocolonial formations and mutating forms of empire.

Doing so requires rethinking the meaning of anticolonial thought as well. The anthropologist David Scott has compellingly insisted on the fundamental difference between the two “problem spaces”—the freedom-seeking movements and thinkers of the mid-twentieth century and the tragic dispirited postcolonial present. Lamenting that “anticolonial utopias have gradually withered into postcolonial nightmares,” he asks us to fully reckon with the failure of postcolonial regimes and to recognize that the potential of radical nationalism, socialism, and revolutionary transformations of the mid-twentieth century is now exhausted. Instead, our time suffers from “the loss of hope; the slowly settling loss of any acceptable future.”<sup>7</sup> That is to say, the failure of mid-twentieth-century decolonization to reverse colonial plunder, to redeem a collective past, and to plot a livable

future weighs down our present conjuncture with the burden of unrealized hopes and the dread of impending doom.

I want to push back against what I think is a widespread tendency to conflate the historical failure of national liberation to bring about social and economic transformation with the failure of postcolonial theory to grasp past, present, and future forms of empire. I do not minimize the profound failure of the postcolonial nation-state. But I'm troubled by rhetoric that conflates the failure of the nation as a container for hope, the failure of decolonization movements in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean as a politics, and the failure of postcolonial studies as a field. The dominant critical trap today is this allure of narratives of failure. And while current critical fascination with the failure of decolonization comes from a different conceptual vocabulary, I worry that it echoes the deeply flawed discourse around failed states that gained currency in the wake of 1989. Labels like "Failed State Index" (recently rechristened "Fragile State Index"), as numerous scholars have noted, only anoint the West as the norm from which the postcolony is destined to deviate, unable to climb the ordained ladder of development and frozen in Manichean opposition to an equally static First World. Ann Stoler's suggestion in *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* that political concepts both "conceal the scenes of their making" and "intervene in the allocation of power," and her invitation to contest the naturalization of the noun "colony" to the extent that it does not seem like a political concept at all and to further theorize its persistence into the present, is thus a useful reminder.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as Getachew and Karuna Mantena recently argue in their attempt to decolonize political theory, anticolonial thought was never simply limited to a critique of Eurocentrism alone, as it is often construed, since the hegemony of "Western political thought as the sole object of critique and analysis" endures.<sup>9</sup> Instead, we should remember that the primary object of anticolonial theory was "an attempt to reconstruct viable political futures in the aftermath of European domination." Anticolonialism should thus be seen as having both "critical" and "reconstructive" aims.<sup>10</sup> Attending to both aims allows Getachew and Mantena to connect the work of anticolonial thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Mahatma Gandhi to contemporary theorists like Sudipta Kaviraj, Partha Chatterjee, and Mahmood Mamdani. Arguing that "anticolonialism as political theory is a distinct genre," they also move beyond the immediate political goals of the writers to derive epistemic claims—"immanent to the colonized world—that are capable of being rejuvenated and/or mobilized to realize the project of liberation."<sup>11</sup>

Evincing a similar sense of the expansive possibilities afforded by a return to anticolonialism, the essays that follow propose readings of far-flung empires past and present, as well as innovative approaches to how we

might fathom the coloniality of power in the twenty-first century. In “Qabyo: Anticolonial Temporality and the Poetics of Ruination,” Farah Bakaari explores Somali poetic constructions of the anxieties of independence and the paradoxes of the nation-state. Moving beyond frequent invocations of the “she-camel” or *maandeeq* as a figure for the Somali state, Bakaari proposes the temporally ambiguous term *qabyo*—a state of ruination as well as a process of remaking that not only allows for contingency and lack but also imagines the possibility of survival and repair. In “Anticolonialism’s ‘Homosexual Territory,’” Mrinalini Chakravorty takes us to contemporary queer writers of color (including Andrea Abi Karam and Dionne Brand) who tackle Fanon’s disavowed and often incongruous thoughts on sexuality in order to reimagine the sexual politics of anticolonialism. She proposes a new wayward method of reading: of queer fabulation, of centering desire rather than power, and of citational practices that foreground the erotic. In “Heliology: On the Metaphor of Decolonization,” Nijah Cunningham also turns to Fanon, but to range over metaphors of the sun in Jacques Derrida and Achille Mbembe, alongside Keïta Fodéba’s performance poem “African Dawn,” reproduced in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Heliology thus speaks to crucial epistemological challenges posed by the unraveling of Western modernity’s claims to reason. In “Siphon, or What Was the Plot? Revisiting Sylvia Wynter’s ‘Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,’” Kaneesha Cherelle Parsard similarly foregrounds questions of poetics, drawing on and “quarreling” with Sylvia Wynter’s claims by proposing *siphon* as the appropriate figure for fathoming the literary-historical conjunctures of West Indian emancipation. In “On Sitting: The Death of Sitā,” Leela Gandhi unravels a genealogy of nonviolence as a concept. She insists that such an account exceeds any search for an “untrammelled cultural origin” since nonviolence “emerges bloodied, out of a field of violence.” As a formal experiment, Gandhi’s essay encourages “speculative entanglement” with the epic poem *Rāmāyaṇam* across historical figures, fictions, mythologies, and contemporary discourses in India, such that the development of Indian philosophical thought attributed to the *Upaniṣads* refuses to stabilize outside of endless performance. Shakirah E. Hudani decenters the imaginary of the postcolonial state in “Gates to the City: The Meanings and Morphology of Transformation on Nairobi’s Periphery,” outlining an anticolonial ethics grounded in an everyday politics of hustling and nonalignment. Investigating the affective tenor of the city, Hudani teases out the remainders of “anticolonial circuitries at the scale of the everyday.” Christina León’s “Knots in the Throat: Raquel Salas Rivera’s Ballasted Entanglements” takes up questions of translation, and refusals to translate, in the work of the Puerto Rican poet to theorize “a translational praxis and trans poetics.” She rehistoricizes the cobblestones or *adoquines* of Old San Juan within two colonialities—Spanish

and English—but also calls attention to their imbrication within grammars of gender to rethink the body in transition. Jill Jarvis turns to the transmedial artworks of Tuareg poet and painter Mahmoudan Hawad in “Forget Decolonizing: *Atomic Visions* from the Radioactive Sahara,” exposing the ongoing impact of French nuclear imperialism from Algeria to Niger. Jarvis challenges common notions of French energy independence by examining Hawad’s *furigraphie* or “fury-writing,” an aesthetic practice that insists upon the contemporary reality of radioactive colonialism rather than conjuring up repressed colonial ghosts.

Ranging in focus from the blue bricks of Old San Juan to the nuclear bombs dropped in the Sahara desert, from ideas of state formation drawn from Somali poetry to the practices of hustling in the streets of Nairobi, from metaphors of the sun to those of the siphon, from satires of academic prose to genealogies of nonviolence, these essays not only yield fresh readings of anticolonial thought in the present; they also stretch and reshape disciplinary boundaries. The status and critical purchase of anticolonialism as theory equally refuses to stabilize across these explorations. We hope that these essays serve to revitalize the interdisciplinary study of anticolonial thought, in relation to varied geopolitical sites and moments.

At the same time, we also recognize legitimate and meaningful challenges for the field in the twenty-first century. For instance, we need spirited theorizing of the relation of postcolonial studies to the question of race and racial formation in the United States outside of tired narratives of competition or supersession. Such a necessary conversation should remain attentive to both correspondence and difference, to desires for collectivity and realities of historical contingencies.<sup>12</sup> Next, a dialogue with Indigenous studies is long overdue and requires tackling questions of sovereignty, land-back campaigns, and settler colonialism.<sup>13</sup> Third, the morphing and often camouflaged nature of empire in the twenty-first century requires attention, across new and old arenas of conquest, capture, surveillance, detention, and garrisoning. The urgency of failing infrastructures, attacks on truth, democracies in crisis, and the routinization of climate catastrophes also poses specific challenges to the study of empire in a reimagined world order, threatened everywhere by failure.

The risk of what Olúfémi Táíwò has termed “elite capture” also looms large.<sup>14</sup> Consider how Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s petition for “decolonizing the mind” is a specific injunction, grounded in the politics of language in African literature, part of a demand to abolish the English Department in Kenya in 1968.<sup>15</sup> In recent years, though, we have seen the call for decolonizing go viral—across corporate efforts toward diversity and inclusion and frequent reduction to symbolic forms of restitution or antiracist education—as the term mutates to apply to anything from cuisine to fashion to

sports. To consider the varied uses of decolonization today thus demands literacy across multiple histories and academic fields. As María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo notes in relation to Critical Latinx Indigenities, one may well ask, “do we really need another paradigm for thinking about racial and ethnic identity?”<sup>16</sup> She analyzes “paradigm drift” as a dominant aspect of how theory circulates today, and, keeping this in mind, the association prizes the transmission of historical memory for scholars of postcolonial studies. The history of our field and its vital contributions to the humanities and social sciences is too often disavowed. This is why the Association of Postcolonial Thought prioritizes cross-generational dialogue at its symposia and refuses to feature plenaries or provide honoraria to faculty speakers, while supporting the attendance of graduate students and contingent faculty. Because too many younger scholars face failing or absent infrastructures, we also place a premium on developing mentoring networks across institutions and areas of study too often siloed.<sup>17</sup>

That postcolonialism in the Anglo-American academy was dominated by English Departments in its heyday is no secret. The Association of Postcolonial Thought also had its inception in an MLA Executive Forum on Postcolonial Studies during the Covid pandemic (chaired by me, with Sonali Thakkar, Asha Nadkarni, Poulomi Saha, and Angela Naimou as members). Alongside a host of invested colleagues across the US and Canada, we intuited that something new was afoot in the field, palpable not just in the energy of recent books that return to decolonization, evaluate empire across time and space, theorize South-South dialogue, and propose new methods of relation, but also in the urgency of geopolitical cataclysms that continue to be assessed wholly through Euro- and US-centric frameworks. On our minds was also the 2017 MLA resolution against the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement. As the association matures in the coming years, planning several symposia and special issues of academic journals, we hope to move out of the core group of scholars involved in the discussions and toward a truly interdisciplinary scope. We invite all those invested in these theoretical questions to join our efforts. While infrastructure is one of our key desires, we have not embarked on a quest for legitimacy. Rather, we hope to create opportunities to talk across geopolitical foci and imperial formations, past and present. To open up new possibilities for critique, we propose rethinking anticolonialism as theory, crisis, desire, collectivity, and alienation through vigorous debate rather than unanimity. We recognize that we all speak from a place, in certain languages and literacies, navigating disciplines and institutions with their specific demands, and yet—as the essays here reveal—we hope to find a common lexicon of debate as we think meaningfully about what it means to read, write, and teach postcolonialism in the US academy. None of us speaks for or from the Global South, and yet



its fate, visibility, and meaning remain our primary quest. This is why what Ngũgĩ called “the quest for relevance” also occupies us, and we are aware of the quixotic dimensions of such a quest, as well as the multiple ironies it conjures. Ngũgĩ has often reminded us that the colony of the mind is harder to see. But these days, as the call to decolonize goes viral, shifting from a transformation of the psychic life of the colonized to the territory of the guilty white conscience as a symbolic appeal for recognition or a performative self-cleanse, the work of postcolonial critique becomes that much more urgent. Mulling over decolonization as a political concept, Seloua Luste Boulbina insists that we must think beyond the confines of the historical alone, since “decolonization, as a decolonization to come, is a true *incalculable*.” This is perhaps why she concludes with the imperative that we also embrace: “It is impossible to decolonize; it is impossible not to decolonize.”<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

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1. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York, 1995).
2. Simon Gikandi, “Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100, no. 3 (July 2001): 630.
3. *Ibid.*, 639.
4. Julian Go, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (New York, 2016), x.
5. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, 2019).
6. Robin D. G. Kelley, “A Poetics of Anticolonialism,” introduction to Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York, 2000), 10, 28.
7. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC, 2004), 2.
8. Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, NC, 2016), 70.
9. Adom Getachew and Karuna Mantena, “Anticolonialism and the Decolonization of Political Theory,” *Critical Times* 4, no. 3 (December 2021): 360.
10. *Ibid.*, 361.
11. *Ibid.*, 366.
12. I have taken up the question of the relation between transnational US literature and postcolonial critique elsewhere, ranging over the internal colony thesis, the insights of the Black radical tradition, and the urgent need to theorize contemporary forms of empire. There I suggest that the field should be seen as having three distinct objects—a body of literature, a set of theories, and a critical methodology. See “The Transnational Turn and Postcolonial Studies,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature*, ed. Yogita Goyal (Cambridge, 2017), 53–71.
13. See Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (September 2012): 1–40.

14. Olúfémí Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (and Everything Else)* (Chicago, 2022).
15. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Oxford, 1986).
16. María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, “Critical Latinx Indigeneities: A Paradigm Drift,” *Latino Studies* 15, no. 2 (2015): 139.
17. The association’s mission statement and various ongoing initiatives may be accessed at [www.pocothought.com](http://www.pocothought.com).
18. Seloua Luste Boulbina, “Decolonization,” 24 May 2019, [www.politicalconcepts.org](http://www.politicalconcepts.org).