

EDITORIAL II: THE PRAXIS OF DECOLONISATION

...a statement on the political responsibility of the critic: the critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present.

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*¹

The same narrative that underpinned centuries of colonialism, governs the current assumption that the state of modernity is to be aimed at universally. Centred around ideas emanating from strands of the European Enlightenment such as secularism, democracy and progress on the one hand, and equality, autonomy and individualism on the other, modernity represents the imaginary culmination of forms of statehood and expressions of personhood. Whereas colonialism operated primarily through political, military and economic control, modern discourse manifests predominantly at the level of epistemic and ontological hegemony. What remains unchallenged is the conviction that the West embodies the epitome of humanity at large. This constitutes the model to which non-Western peoples have to conform, lest they be considered backward and uncivilised.

Although it is easy to discern the brutality of colonial territorial occupations, often it is still difficult to perceive the imposition of modes of knowledge-production and concepts, such as rationality and individualism, as profoundly damaging forms of dominance that ultimately enable the perseverance of colonial dynamics. The apparent invisibility and the pervasiveness of this form of Western hegemony is an indication of its successful implementation. As Anibal Quijano's (2000) concept of 'coloniality of power' illustrates, the legacy of colonialism outlives the formation of independent states in the form of racial, political, sexual and cultural hierarchies that perpetrate and reinforce the centrality of Western societies.² The coloniality of power, in manifesting as the continuation of power structures that were established over centuries of colonialism, reveals the oftentimes-fictitious nature of the current postcolonial era. The difficulty in detecting the continuity of colonial forms of dominance lies in the naturalisation and universalisation of the modern discourse, a process by which—Western and non-Western—conditions of subjectivity are pre-inscribed within Western epistemic and ontological frameworks.

Following Bhabha's exhortation in the opening quote, it is the unspoken and unrepresented realities subdued by Western modernity, experienced in part by some of the Editors themselves, which we wish to bring to the fore through the contributions to this volume. It is precisely as a result of the persistence and ubiquitous presence of the colonial discriminatory discourse, that decolonisation can occur at innumerable junctures and take on multiple expressions; in fact, it existed from the very first acts of resistance to the colonial enterprise. Within academic writing, decolonisation has taken on a variety of approaches and methods, emanating from all regions of the world. From the early revolutionary

¹ Bhabha Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

² Quijano Anibal. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–80.

writings of Frantz Fanon (1925-1961)³ to the postcolonial pronouncements by Edward Said (1935-2003),⁴ Gayatri Spivak (1942-)⁵ and Homi K. Bhabha (1949-),⁶ the emphasis was on uncovering the histories of colonised people and exposing the power structures that sustain(ed) colonialism. With the turn of the millennium, Latin American scholars such as Anibal Quijano (1928-2018),⁷ Walter D. Mignolo (1941-)⁸ and Ramón Grosfoguel (1956-)⁹ have instead brought to the fore processes of delinking from the colonial matrix of power and expressions of radical alterity sustained by peoples at the margins of the Eurocentric narrative. No account on decolonial scholarship would be complete without mentioning the seminal works of African scholars, such as those of Archie Mafeje (1936-2007)¹⁰ and Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (1957-),¹¹ who criticised accepted representations of African societies within Western and European epistemology, providing much-needed alternative portrayals. The recent focus on difference and ontology, alongside the established attention to power and resistance, is testimony to the vibrancy of postcolonial and decolonial efforts.

As a departure from Bhabha's view, it is our conviction that the unspoken and unrepresented realities are not only matters of the past, but that, as decolonial projects advance, they will emerge in their full-fledged presence as significant protagonists of new geographies no longer organised around one centre and histories no longer governed by linearity. The praxis of decolonisation, as we understand it, is tripartite: the recognition and display of the irreparable damage that has been inflicted by centuries of colonial violence; the acknowledgment and affirmation of subjectivities that fall outside the purview of Western modes of thinking and expressions of being; and the re-dimensioning of Western political, economic, epistemic and ontological superimpositions and the resolute condemnation of their claim to universality.

With the variety of approaches and areas of study represented by the articles of this volume, we hope to reflect the dynamic nature and the vast outreach of decolonisation. With the focus on praxis, instead, we wish to encourage the next step into the direction of a truly postcolonial world where alternative histories cease to be alternative and margins become new centres of a mandalic polity. Importantly, it is also a world where English as the medium of this collection, London as the venue of its publication, and Western as the

³ Fanon Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin Books, 2001 [1961].

⁴ Said Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1979.

⁵ Spivak Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 66–111. Basingtoke: Macmillan Education, 1988.

⁶ Bhabha Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

⁷ Quijano Anibal. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–80.

⁸ Mignolo D. Walter, and Walsh E. Catherine. *On Decoloniality. Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. London: Duke University Press, 2018.

⁹ Grosfoguel Ramón. *Colonial Subjects. Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective*. London: University of California Press, 2003.

¹⁰ Archie Mafeje. *Anthropology in Post Independence Africa: End of an Era and the Problem of Self-redefinition*, African Social Scientists Reflections Part 1, Heinrich Böll foundation, 2001.

¹¹ Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

educational background of its editors, are no longer matters of default, but matters of coincidence—or, as the case may be, non-occurrences. While talking back to the West and denouncing its crimes is one mode of decolonisation, we believe that a decolonial world is also one that disengages from the Western matrix of power and manifests its metaphysical and epistemological diversity through methods and languages that need no longer conform to the canons of Western academia.

We invite the readers to engage with the diverse contributions of the authors, some of which express for the first time points of view historically silenced or underrepresented, making this volume a game-changer in Western epistemological production.

RESEARCH ARTICLES

One research article that conceptualises decolonisation at the epistemological level is Romina Istratii's proposed reading of St John Chrysostom's teachings on man-woman relations, marriage and the conjugal relationship beyond the boundaries of a western feminist hermeneutics. Istratii, born in the Republic of Moldova and raised in the Hellenic Republic, leverages on her triple-positionality as a citizen of two historically Orthodox countries and a researcher located within a western epistemological framework to propose a representation of St John Chrysostom's commentaries that eschews western hermeneutics and is more compatible with an insider's theology-informed point of view. She explains that her attempt is to convey the works of this Church Father in their exegetical and cosmological context, which requires a sense of the Orthodox *phronema*, defined here as the historical experience-based conscience of the Orthodox Church. While Istratii does not claim to be fully equipped for such a task, she feels compelled to speak against on-going misrepresentations of eastern epistemology within western perception by proposing an alternative reading. This is necessary both in order to diversify the theological and gender landscape and to make visible cosmology-sensitive resources for the alleviation of pernicious attitudes regarding women and marriage within Orthodox societies that a western feminist standpoint might hastily dismiss as irrelevant.

Shifting the attention from decolonisation as act of speaking back to the West in order to rectify misrepresentations, to decolonisation as expression of radical alterities that position themselves outside the Western metanarrative, Monika Hirmer focuses on contemporary art by Telangana women. Based on interviews with the artists and analyses of their works, Hirmer argues that these women set themselves outside the purview of gendered and racial dialectics of othering that have underpinned Indian and European art for centuries. The article opens with an excursus through salient European artworks that exemplify how female bodies were deployed as tropes of otherness for the assertion of Western men's gendered selves. Successively, Hirmer provides an account of how, during colonial and postcolonial times, depictions of Indian and Western female bodies became metaphorical grounds on which racial confrontations between colonisers and colonised unravelled. Set against a context of gendered and racial othering, the art of Telangana women, in rejecting canons firmly rooted in Indian and European art, appears not only to subvert, but to completely disregard the objectifying and centre-margin dynamics governing mainstream art. Art thus becomes the locus for the unapologetic expression of these artists' radically delinked subjectivities.

Jonathan Galton's approach to colonialism, and hence decolonisation, is particularly innovative: while colonialism is mostly associated with European occupations, he explores internal colonisation within India, as it is illustrated by the "alternative history" advocated by a community of Mahars, a Dalit (formerly "untouchable") caste that converted to Buddhism en masse in 1956. Mahars see themselves as the original inhabitants of an ancient Buddhist India, which was overpowered by Aryan invaders originating from an undefined West, who imposed caste Hinduism. As part of their history, the Mahars annually commemorate the 1818 Battle of Koregaon, in which, fighting for the British, they defeated the local high-caste Hindu rulers. The celebration of the Battle provides Dalits with the opportunity to portray Hindu rulers as their oppressors, and the British as their liberators. Having conducted ethnographic fieldwork among the Mahars in Mumbai, Galton asks whether the community's alternative history can be viewed as "decolonisation in praxis" with regards to the oppression perpetrated through the Hindu caste system. By engaging with various ways in which this history and its associated scholarship is intertwined with British colonial knowledge-production, Galton suggests that an adoption of the Mahar's alternative history would at the same time be fruitful and problematic.

Dhruv Ramnath's article is an exploration of a postcolonial identity in the making. Analysing the formation of the Sharavana Baba movement, a guru movement in its early days, Ramnath asks how the Baba's Hindu identity is constructed and maintained, and where the guru positions himself amidst other Hindu and non-Hindu religious movements both, in India and abroad. Since the new religious movement of the Baba is still in the process of being institutionalised, it provides a fortuitous opportunity to observe how the Indian New Age consolidates itself with respect to other religious groups constituting India's multifarious spiritual landscape. Ramnath draws from existing academic literature on gurudom to map the initial stages of new spiritual ethics and sacred sites, as well as to observe how the new spiritual leader construes his image and negotiates his differences and similarities vis-à-vis more popular movements. The article addresses the lacuna in the literature on gurudom in the modern world through an anthropology of insight, thus offering a perspective through which this particular movement can be fruitfully understood.

Exploring how boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are drawn in the increasingly global practice of diaspora engagement, Catherine Craven's "Critical Realism, assemblages and practices beyond the state: A new framework for analysing global diaspora engagement" shows how methods of global governance demonstrate a systematic undermining of diaspora agency. Suggesting a new analytical framework of "assemblage theory", the author presents how scholars and policymakers can contribute to "decolonisation in praxis" at the ontological level. Finding theoretical grounding in Bourdieuan practice theory, this work rethinks how actors engage with the politics of diaspora in the spaces where these practices occur. In doing so Craven supports the decolonisation of academic praxis from Western-centric ontologies, which manifest as methodological positivism and state-centrism. This critical discussion offers a way to conduct post-positivist social science research and move beyond state centrism in the study of diaspora engagement, and Craven's articulate and clear construction provides a comprehensible read of a theory heavy account.

OPINION PIECES

Roxy Minter's opinion piece makes an attempt to verbalise what she discerns to be tacit biases in contemporary aesthetic studies. The author builds her argument by drawing from Kant's theory of aesthetics, which proposed essentially that the definition of art be premised on the ability of a work to trigger "disinterested" responses via the capacities of taste and productive imagination. She contrasts this articulation with what she describes as "simplified readings" of Kant's aesthetic theories that favour autonomous art works, underpinnings of which are discerned in the works of Bourdieu and Danto with regards to class aesthetics and their validation. The author's argument comprises of various parts: contemporary aesthetic evaluative criteria are not immune to class biases and by favouring autonomous works they exclude non-autonomous works; working-class works are not only excluded within this institutionalised art arena, but they are appropriated to fit the class-based aesthetic evaluative criteria; in the end, the original intentions and connotations of the working-class art works are obscured. Minter deploys examples of tattooing and computer gaming to pronounce working-class evaluative criteria and urges a decolonisation of the institutional art arena by pointing to what could be an alternative platform not accountable to class biases and interests, the YouTube.

Simon Donald Forbes' opinion piece lies at the heart of the decolonisation debate within the academic environment and engages with the interests that could be underpinning the discourses of both those who oppose it ardently and those who promote it. In his piece, he undertakes to clarify the positions and intentions of SOAS faculty speaking in favour of decolonising SOAS vis-à-vis more simplistic journalistic representations that have portrayed such efforts as part of the widely affirmed ideological movement of "cultural Marxism" impacting on Western universities and academia in recent decades. Forbes' article helps to show that locating debates of decolonisation under concrete ideologies is not easy; for the SOAS faculty who have been raising the needs for enlarging the curriculum and reconsidering pedagogies the aim is neither to exclude nor to include, but to promote a more critical type of teaching and learning where all authors and theories are appraised and none is excluded *a priori* by tacit racialised criteria. It also means overcoming prejudices in student acceptance or faculty requirement policies that sustain inequalities. Pertinent to the focus of the volume's editors, Forbes concludes his piece by noting that perhaps the discourse of decolonisation needs to be broadened to include more epistemological questions, such as the situatedness of knowledge in history-telling.

As we explore the "decolonisation in praxis", this next article delves into what makes this practice difficult but vital. Highlighting the relevance and need for decolonisation, Tung-yi Kho's "The urgency of decoloniality" discusses the logic that reinforces the political-economic, socio-cultural, and ecological crises of contemporary modern civilisation and considers its repercussions. Drawing upon Anibal Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power, which sees modernity as an inseparable part of the colonial project, the article first examines the severity of modern day crises of civilisation that is a culmination of the European colonial project. Next, the author looks at the example of climate change to underline the urgent necessity of decolonisation. The piece concludes with some thoughts on praxis, exploring a variety of ways to engage with decolonisation. The author's differentiation of "colonisation" and "coloniality" is a noteworthy conceptual distinction that can deepen understandings of how to effectuate decolonisation.

LANGUAGES

Andrew Harvey's linguistic description "*Pakani: A Gorwaa story*" analyses the telling of a story by Aakó Bu'ú Saqwaré, a singer and knowledge-holder from north-central Tanzania. The story tells an account of the Gorwaa people and their response to mandatory military training brought on by the European colonisation of East Africa. This particular story was a part of a larger project that set out to understand and record the grammar of the Gorwaa language, a language that has been disappearing at an alarming rate due to increased urbanisation and national government policy that effectively bans local languages. Through this submission, the author seeks to correct the assumption that such descriptions seem removed from the practice of decolonisation. As a record of a language endangered by colonisation and as a story of how people who experience colonisation respond to their oppression, Harvey's work represents a part of a growing body of scholarship that illuminates the experiences and understandings of colonised people as "decolonisation in praxis."

TECHNICAL PIECE

Lastly, this issue includes its first technical piece, which we hope to make a convention at the Journal. Since the Editorial Board was only recently established and the formulation of a permanent body is still on-going, this year's technical piece is an enhanced version of the panel discussion that was held at the 'Decolonisation in Praxis' conference on publishing and disseminating research in view of decolonisation concerns. The panel was comprised of Romina Istratii, a current SOAS student involved with Open Access issues on campus, and Helen Porter, Digital Services expert at SOAS. Their interactive presentations triggered important comments from the audience and it is hoped that a wider online dissemination will prove equally fruitful.

Monika Hirmer, Romina Istratii, Iris Lim