

## AFTERWORD

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A handbook, pronounces the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is ‘a compendious book or treatise for guidance in any art, occupation, or study’. It is designed, adds Wikipedia, ‘to be easily consulted and provide quick answers in a certain area’. That this particular Handbook does not stay within the formal definitional boundaries of its genre says a lot about the essentially insubordinate nature of postcolonial studies at the level of critical temperament. And it points to a foundational truth about postcolonial studies as a discipline, one that too many of its practitioners have for too long disavowed.

Everywhere in this document one finds evidence of a profound, and in my view enabling, incoherence to the ‘art’ of postcolonial studies. Graham Huggan, in his General Introduction to the Handbook, suggests alongside R. Radhakrishnan that postcolonialism might usefully be characterized as ‘a combination of revisionisms’. Walter Mignolo, in the volume’s first section, defines postcolonialism as a ‘radical undoing of modernity’, while—also in this section—Ann Laura Stoler grounds the practice of postcolonial studies in a principle of critical refusal, of ‘unquestioned identification’ of any kind. In their means of approach as in their objects of study, the chapters in this Handbook do not sit easily alongside each other at the level of critical argument. Nor do they submit to the demands of methodological unity. They cannot collectively seek to position themselves against the yardstick of global coverage. Instead, they turn again and again, in their methodological singularity, to what Huggan calls ‘a continuing obligation to complexity’ in the material itself: the cultural backgrounds, the literatures, the histories, the ecologies, the politics. Together, in discordant combination, they eschew the unity of sweep and scope, pursuing instead a rather less visible modality of the scholarship of equity: one that lies implicit in an attention to detail. This Handbook provides no ‘quick answers’. Indeed, it abjures the very idea of postcolonial studies as a definable field, a completed project, or designated area. It refuses to map out for its readers a route towards disciplinary occupation.

One answer as to why this is so might be found in the time of the volume’s publication. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the formal discipline of postcolonial studies, as it is generally understood, has grown well beyond its founding moment of academic urgency in the western academy and has now settled into more multiply

identified modalities of institutional living. It should go without saying that anything that gestures towards the institutional age of a scholarly field implicitly posits exactly the kind of unity to the discipline that this Handbook so steadfastly refuses; and, in fact, all kinds of critical studies that one might now call ‘postcolonial’ were already in an advanced state of preparedness within the university system globally, and were doing various work under various disciplinary banners, by that time in the early and mid-1980s when the humanities and social sciences disciplines in the First World collectively discovered postcolonial critique as a necessary complement to their own disciplinary first principles for knowing, and woke up to the long histories and capacious arts of empire’s many and various others. The 1980s, however, were also a time when post-structuralist critical theory within the western academy came into a specific cross-disciplinary alignment with, among other confluents, ‘Commonwealth’ or ‘New Literatures’ studies, social theory after the Frankfurt school, and the scholarship of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, and the postcolonial disciplinary formation that arose in the aftershock of *that* particular combination of intellectual forces was shaped profoundly by an internal desire for quick institutional recognition of the discipline itself. That desire was rightly fuelled by a strong sense that the First-World academy had for far too long cognitively traduced those many cultures inflected but not just made by empire: cultures whose peoples were and remain subjects, not objects, of their own histories, social frameworks, and codes of recognition. Still, as a by-product of that early rush to disciplinary stability a lot of what would be seen as standing in for the field of postcolonial studies found itself shaped by a drive for theoretical consistency—as though all things ‘colonial’ needed somehow to align—and a teleological insistence on disciplinary completion—as though all forms of counter-imperial representation were in political wont of procrustean disciplinary inclusion. In that period of rapid, institutionally mercantile, expansion for the field of postcolonial studies, a sizeable part of what counted for postcolonial critical practice repeatedly pushed forward the idea of the discipline itself as a unitary enterprise, designed to bring those many histories encapsulated within 500 years of European global domination—and 500 years of productive resistances—together into a single, and above all teachable, critical master narrative. In the wake of that disciplinary salient, too many of postcolonialism’s most enabling tools for critical construction, which had been so carefully elaborated in their first, exploratory scholarly formations—‘colonial discourse’, ‘hybridity’, ‘the empire writes back’, and so forth—found themselves transformed into quasi-universal blueprints for human activity across the registers of modernity’s many and variegated forms of imperial domination and postcolonial response.

In the disciplinary lull that followed that early, heady moment of institutional growth, postcolonial studies found itself increasingly challenged by the striking imbalance between postcolonial advance within the academy, on the one hand, and postcolonial retreat in the material world, on the other. At the level of the nation state, the world might have *seemed* to be changing in positive ways. Hong Kong decolonized in 1997, Macao in 1999 ... might a genuine ‘end to empire’ be in sight or at least conceptually possible? But far from ameliorating the global income gap, the formal political change from colonial to what Kwame Nkrumah once called neocolonial economic relations,

or what theorists like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have more recently called the economic relations of Big-E, post-national ‘Empire’, produced greater, not lesser, economic disparity in the world at the millennium. The richest 10 per cent of the world’s population now commands 42 per cent of the world’s wealth, the poor just 1 per cent (World Economic Forum 2011). By every measure except a temporal one, the political world after the formal end of empire seemed increasingly less ‘postcolonial’ than it had been before the discipline of postcolonial studies took root within the institution. How could critical work within the university—on critical ethnography, on subaltern historiography, on cultural representation—hope meaningfully to engage with a desperately unequal, and progressively more unequal, material world?

By the end of the twentieth century, postcolonial studies had produced for itself, across the human sciences, a fleet of guidebooks, anthologies, special issues, and gazetteer critical articles. It had long since established its flagship journals, its major research projects, and a place for its own practitioners within the tenure track. Most English departments now scheduled courses on the literatures of empire’s others; most anthropology departments taught the cross-cultural politics of critical ethnography; most history departments embedded subaltern historiography within the curriculum; and just about everyone read at least a little ‘postcolonial theory’. But it became increasingly difficult within the formal field of postcolonial studies to believe that the fortunes of this now institutionally comfortable discipline could themselves serve as an index to the state of the global dispossessed. With the added fillip of this structural aporia, that once-confident cadre within postcolonial studies that had earlier attempted to advance the discipline as a unitary enterprise now seemed to have surrendered itself to the *longueurs* of identity crisis, as the field’s proponents looked intently at their own disciplinary structures and rehearsed the questions that had helped elaborate the discipline’s institutional foundation in the first place: what is the meaning of this ‘post’ in the name we have given ourselves? What is our canon? And who gets ‘in’? Much of what now spoke within the institution in the name of postcolonial studies found itself so captured by the self-oriented project of belated field fashioning, so embedded in the practice of disciplinary navel-gazing, that many of the most visibly self-identified manifestations of the postcolonial studies field lost their once-enabling curiosity in the knowledges of others. At the turn of the twenty-first century, postcolonial studies as a formal, predominantly First-World disciplinary enterprise had taken on the look of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight Children’s Conference* at the end of that novel: a group of dreamers who had once possessed a magical belief in transformative possibility, who had begun the work of material change in the disciplinary imaginary, who had begun to locate a form of academic citizenship beyond the myriad designations of identity, but who had then simply lost their way and become vulnerable to the allure of introspection. ‘What Was Postcolonialism?’ asked Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge in 2005, in seemingly ironic echo of their own earlier, critical, but still in many ways ebullient article on the discipline’s formation, ‘What Is Post(-)colonialism?’ Their conclusion was that for the political project of the discipline to stay true to itself, postcolonial critique must now rethink its own programme; must reconsider its own internal structural difference from its foundational intentions and

assumptions; must ‘turn away’ from postcolonialism as a putative platform of engagement and seek instead ‘other paradigms’ for a critical way of being in the world (Mishra and Hodge 2005: 399; see also Mishra and Hodge 1991).

This volume, in my view, can be read as part of that greater, more outwardly focused project of critical ‘turning away’. Its writers are not interested in returning to disciplinary psychomachia: they do not seek reflection in the postcolonial mirror. They position their separate critical projects not in the mainstream of any singular, methodologically unified academic enterprise but at the intersection between scholarly ventures the names of which are variable, provisional, strategic: postcolonial studies, globalization studies, migrancy studies, diaspora studies, transnational and transcultural studies, cosmopolitan studies, subaltern studies, critical race studies, popular culture studies—these and many more, and all of them both for and against. The writers here commit themselves to an ethical academic citizenship that is not bound by title.

‘So many disciplines have been, so to speak, postcolonialized,’ writes Robert Young in an recent essay the title of which could serve as both epithet (not epitaph) for the project of this Handbook: ‘Postcolonialism Remains.’ Young continues: ‘The postcolonial remains: it lives on, ceaselessly transformed in the present into new social and political configurations ... This remarkable dispersal of intellectual and political influence now makes it difficult to locate any kind of center of postcolonial theory: reaching into almost every domain of contemporary thought, it has become part of the consciousness of our era’ (2012: 22). *That* form of postcolonial critical consciousness will persist, whatever the institutional fortunes of the postcolonial field; and as it proceeds, it will not forget this critical first principle: that there is no single motor of historical causality, no organizing master narrative behind what it is that brought, and still brings, the multiple oppressions of race, ethnicity, class, caste, sexuality, age, and anti-environmentalism into prominence in the global dispensation, no single disciplinary redress to inequity in the material real.

I take *this* globally dispersed, non-unified, and ubiquitous intellectual project to be the real subject of this collection: a modality of the ‘postcolonial’ that is ultimately no more a singularity, no more a discipline of study, than this Handbook is an obedient participant in the genre to which it technically gives its name. ‘Postcolonial studies’ remains indeed, but as an omnibus term for what was always an unruly and disruptive set of scholarly practices—one which held in common a commitment to discern and then keep faith with an unbreakable, inevitably multiple form of global consciousness that dared to hope for, if not always believe in, the possibility of real and equitable social change. We might call that global consciousness postcolonial ‘critical thought’—but I would argue that what we call it does not really matter. Beyond the onomastics, beyond disciplinary identities, this global consciousness exists everywhere, as fully agential within the margins of neoliberal production as it is within the entitled First-World university. It cannot be enclosed within disciplinary framing.

Postcolonial critical thought, however it finds itself labelled, will continue to transform the academy. It will not submit to methodological singularity. It will necessarily interrupt the inculcation of whole-system theories. It will seek out forms of scholarly

recognition that listen before they speak. In turn, those scholarly practices that seek to approach it will have to find more equitable, mutually beneficial forms of collaboration with subaltern individuals and communities in order to do their future work. They will have to remain outwardly positioned, not inwardly administrative—to involve students who bring humility to the seat of learning. Whatever their theoretical take on the multiple hypotheses that inform constructions and conflations of the philosophical, the phenomenological, and the sociological other, postcolonial scholars of the future will have to remain, at least in part, students of other knowledges. For the subaltern knowledges of postcolonial critical thought are ubiquitous, and detailed, and difficult. They remain expansive in their capacity to imagine; and they will continue to prove unstoppable in their power to represent.

## REFERENCES

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