

The Troubled Encounter Between Postcolonialism and African History

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Article abstract

This paper examines the complex engagements between what it calls the “posts” – poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism – and African studies. Specifically, it analyzes the analytical connections and contestations between postcolonial theory and African historiography. The paper interrogates some of the key ideas and preoccupations of both postcolonialism and historiography and explores the intersections between them. It is argued that the ambivalence and sometimes antagonism to postcolonialism by many African scholars is largely driven by ideological and ethical imperatives, while the troubled encounter between African history and postcolonialism is rooted in apparent intellectual and epistemic incongruities. Linking the two is the powerful hold of what I call nationalist humanism in the African imaginary, the nationalist preoccupations of African intellectuals, and the nationalist proclivities of African historiography. Productive engagement between African history and postcolonialism is of course possible, but it requires mutual accommodation, the incorporation in postcolonial studies of the insights developed in African historiography, and within the latter of some of the constructive interventions of postcolonial theory. Ultimately, however, I believe postcolonialism has serious limits in its methodological and conceptual capacities to advance what I would call the historic agendas of African historiography.

The Troubled Encounter Between Postcolonialism and African History¹

PAUL TIYAMBE ZELEZA

Abstract

This paper examines the complex engagements between what it calls the “posts” – poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism – and African studies. Specifically, it analyzes the analytical connections and contestations between postcolonial theory and African historiography. The paper interrogates some of the key ideas and preoccupations of both postcolonialism and historiography and explores the intersections between them. It is argued that the ambivalence and sometimes antagonism to postcolonialism by many African scholars is largely driven by ideological and ethical imperatives, while the troubled encounter between African history and postcolonialism is rooted in apparent intellectual and epistemic incongruities. Linking the two is the powerful hold of what I call nationalist humanism in the African imaginary, the nationalist preoccupations of African intellectuals, and the nationalist proclivities of African historiography. Productive engagement between African history and postcolonialism is of course possible, but it requires mutual accommodation, the incorporation in postcolonial studies of the insights developed in African historiography, and within the latter of some of the constructive interventions of postcolonial theory. Ultimately, however, I believe postcolonialism has serious limits in its methodological and conceptual capacities to advance what I would call the historic agendas of African historiography.

Résumé

Cet article traite de la complexité de la dissension entre ce que l'on nomme les « après- » – le poststructuralisme, le postmodernisme et le postcolonialisme – et les études africaines. Précisément, il explore les rapports analytiques et les

1 An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, York University, May 29-31, 2006. I would like to thank Professor Joan Sangster for the invitation to attend the conference and the conference participants for their questions and comments which helped in the framing and writing of the paper.

contestations entre la théorie postcoloniale et l'historiographie africaine. L'article scrute certaines des idées-clés et des préoccupations du postcolonialisme et de l'historiographie, et approfondit les points où ils se rencontrent. On soutient que l'ambivalence et parfois l'opposition au postcolonialisme exprimées par plusieurs universitaires africains reposent en grande partie sur des impératifs idéologiques et ethniques. Quant à la rencontre hostile entre l'histoire africaine et le postcolonialisme, elle est ancrée dans d'apparentes incongruités intellectuelles et épistémiques. Le contrôle puissant de ce que j'appelle l'humanisme nationaliste de l'imaginaire africain, les préoccupations nationalistes des intellectuels africains et les tendances nationalistes de l'historiographie africaine peut réunir les deux. Une rencontre productive entre l'histoire africaine et le postcolonialisme reste certainement possible, mais cela demande des concessions mutuelles, l'intégration des idées élaborées à l'intérieur de l'historiographie africaine dans les études postcoloniales, et celle de certaines interventions constructives de la théorie postcoloniale dans l'historiographie africaine. Par contre, en dernière analyse, je crois que le postcolonialisme est très limité quant à ses capacités méthodologiques et conceptuelles pour faire avancer ce que je nommerais le programme historique de l'historiographie africaine.

Over the past three decades the literature on postcolonialism has exploded, especially in the Anglo-Saxon academies of the global North, but this has not resulted in greater clarity as to what the term actually means. Indeed, the very terminology used – postcolonialism, postcoloniality, postcolonial theory, and postcolonial studies – underscores the conceptual eclecticism of postcolonial analyses. I remain intrigued by the tensions inherent in the use of postcolonialism as a periodizing term and as a typological description and by the intellectual and ideological connections between the idea of postcolonialism and the related notion of postmodernism; between postcolonialism's chronological and epistemological ambitions; between its culturalist and materialist referents; between literary-textual readings and political-economic analyses of the real world; between aspirations of activist engagement and rhetorical dismissal of commitment for fear of accusations of totalization; between postcolonialism's professed affinities for pluralism, multiplicity, and difference and its tendency to collapse and homogenize diverse histories, structures, and racial formations, embracing in its generous transhistorical bosom the former imperial powers of Europe, the settler societies of the United States, Canada, Australia, and the ex-colonial countries of Asia and Africa; between the Northern locations of its production and the Southern origins of some of its leading proponents; between its empirical insistence on the representation, inscription, and interpretation of the particular, the local, and the different and

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its transcendental desire to become another universal, another grand narrative, another set of the great historical-cultural explanations.

The “posts” – post-structuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism – have had complex engagements with different disciplines and interdisciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. The interactions have been particularly contentious for history, women studies, and African studies.² My aims in this essay are quite modest: to investigate the connections and contestations between African history and postcolonialism, a relationship that many would agree is quite troubled. I argue the ambivalence and sometimes antagonism to postcolonialism by many African scholars is largely driven by *ideological* and *ethical* imperatives, while the troubled encounter between African history and postcolonialism is rooted in apparent *intellectual* and *epistemic* incongruities. Linking the two is the powerful hold of what I call nationalist humanism in the African imaginary, the nationalist preoccupations of African intellectuals, and the nationalist proclivities of African historiography. Productive engagement between African history and postcolonialism is of course possible, but it requires mutual accommodation, the incorporation in postcolonial studies of the insights developed in African historiography, and within the latter of some of the constructive interventions of postcolonial theory. Ultimately, however, I believe postcolonialism has serious limits in its methodological and conceptual capacities to advance what I would call the historic agendas of African historiography.

The Postcolonial Challenge

Postcolonialism is a vexed theoretical term, on which there is little agreement among its advocates on its meanings or referents. Employed in a wide range of cultural and literary disciplines, the term has become so diffuse and heterogeneous that it defies definition as to whether it refers primarily to texts and discursive practices, the construction of subjectivities and identities, or concrete historical processes. Its proponents have different preoccupations as can be seen with the famous trinity – Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak.³

2 For a detailed analysis of the ideological, intellectual, and institutional development of postmodernism and postcolonialism and their contentious deployment in the discipline of history and the interdisciplines of women studies and African studies, see Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *Rethinking Africa's Globalization Volume 1: The Intellectual Challenges* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2003).

3 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) and *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993); Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) and *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Gayatri C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988) and *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

Said, whose book *Orientalism* is considered by many a foundational text of post-colonial studies, concentrates on discourse analysis, showing the Eurocentric inventions of “others” and the discursive machinations of imperialism, and believes in the liberating potential of nationalism and the diasporic condition. Bhabha’s psychoanalytic postcolonialism rejects Said’s emphasis on domination and the binary between the colonizer and colonized, self and other, speaking subject and silent native. He celebrates hybridity and “in-betweenness,” and suggests that the colonial encounter was full of ambivalences, slippages, and mimicry out of which fluid identities were transacted and negotiated. Spivak’s Marxist and feminist-inflected deconstruction has steadily moved from colonial discourse analysis to international transcultural studies and has become increasingly critical of postcolonial studies as practiced in the US academy, which she regards as “bogus”.⁴

It seems to me that debates about postcolonialism centre on five key issues: its genealogies, boundaries, fields, locations, and ideologies. Genealogies refer to the theoretical and historical origins of postcolonialism as a theoretical construct; boundaries refer to the temporal and spatial scales of postcolonial discourse; fields refer to the units and frameworks of analysis; locations refer to the places where postcolonial discourse and theory are mainly produced and consumed; and ideologies refer to the political orientations and effects of post-colonialism. Needless to say, the import and flavor of these debates have shifted over time and according to location and context. Postcolonial theory emerged in the Anglo-American academy in the mid-1980s in the wake of the rise of post-structuralism and postmodernism. This raises questions about the relationship between postcolonialism and the other “posts.” There are those who argue that the three are quite different, that the postmodern is an apolitical description of conditions in advanced capitalist societies, while the postcolonial is concerned with global inequalities and is liberatory. To some, coupling the postcolonial with the postmodern, then, is theoretically, ideologically, and empirically misleading and unproductive.⁵

Others believe that postcolonialism and postmodernism are interlinked, but disagree on the nature and productivity of the linkage. For Ato Quayson, the two can be analytically and beneficially deployed with respect to questions of marginality and identity.⁶ Besides their shared prefix “post” and the attendant temporal and epistemological problematics this raises, both are concerned with

4 Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 358.

5 Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen, “Introduction,” in *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, eds., Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1994), 1-23; Padmini Mongia, “Introduction,” in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia (London: Arnold, 1996), 1-19.

6 Ato Quayson, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

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representational discourses and offer second-order meditations upon real and imagined conditions; only by appropriating each other can they “fully explain the state of the contemporary world.”⁷ Aijaz Ahmad and Arif Dirlik suggest a more sinister and unproductive union between the two.⁸ For Ahmad, literary postcolonialism emerged as postmodernism’s wedge to colonize literatures from the global South, so that “what used to be known as ‘Third World Literature’ gets rechristened as ‘postcolonial literature’ when the governing theoretical framework shifts from Third World to postmodernism.”⁹ Repudiated were older and more radical conceptions of postcolonialism used in the 1970s, “with specific reference to the type of postcolonial states that arose in Asia and Africa after postwar decolonization.”¹⁰ More vehemently, Dirlik calls postcolonialism a “progeny of postmodernism,” whose popularity “has less to do with its rigorosity as a concept or with the new vistas it has opened up for critical inquiry than it does with the increased visibility of academic intellectuals of Third World origin as pacesetters in cultural criticism.”¹¹ Also, thanks to the changing interests of global capitalism that have penetrated the universities through corporatization, “intellectual orientations that earlier were regarded as marginal or subversive” such as multiculturalism, “have acquired a new respectability.”¹² Postcolonialism, he concludes, is not simply the condition of a comprador intelligentsia, as suggested by Kwame Anthony Appiah,¹³ but “the condition of the intelligentsia of global capitalism.”¹⁴

Anne McClintock and Ella Shohat articulate most forcefully the question of postcolonialism’s temporality and spatiality.¹⁵ McClintock argues that while postcolonial theory disavows the binaries of Western historicism, it nonetheless postulates the totalizing binary of colonial-postcolonial and reorients and subordinates the world’s diverse histories and cultures to the grand march of a monolithic, undifferentiated colonialism, of European time. It confers “on colonialism the prestige of history proper; colonialism is the determining marker of history.”¹⁶ Inequalities of power and privilege within and among nations,

7 Quayson, 154.

8 See Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992) and Arif Dirlik, “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism,” in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, 294-320.

9 Ahmad, 276.

10 Ahmad, 276.

11 Dirlik, 295.

12 Dirlik, 305.

13 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

14 Dirlik, 35.

15 See Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism,’” in *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, 253-66, and Ella Shohat, “Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial,’” in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, 294-320.

16 McClintock, 255.

regions, classes, and genders are vaporized before the dazzling glare of a homogenizing postcolonialism, despite the ritual obeisance that is made to difference, hybridity, and multiplicity. Abandoning new empowering visions of the future, “without a renewed will to intervene in the unacceptable, we face being becalmed in an historically empty space in which our sole direction is found by gazing back, spellbound, at the epoch behind us, in a perpetual present marked only as ‘post’”.¹⁷ Shohat also criticizes postcolonialism for its problematic temporality, both with reference to the past and the present. On the one hand, she charges, its lack of historical specificity collapses and homogenizes diverse chronologies, cultures, histories, structures, and racial formations, homogenizing Asian and African countries and the settler societies of North America and Australasia, while its connotation of an “after” glosses over the continuing depredations of neo-colonialism and global capitalism.

Questions about the geographical and historical scales of postcolonialism have been tied to debates about its analytical fields and frameworks. One of the few areas of agreement between the friends and foes of postcolonialism concerns its culturalist thrust, which is derived from its post-structuralist underpinnings and disciplinary base in English studies. This has been a source of both its strengths and its weaknesses. Ania Loomba offers a measured evaluation of postcolonialism for the study of colonialism as a whole and literacy criticism itself. Postcolonial studies, she argues “intensify and sharpen debates about the social fabric, and make it imperative for us to weave the economic realities of colonialism with all that was hitherto excluded from ‘hard’ social analysis – sexuality, subjectivity, psychology and language. They remind us that the ‘real’ relations of society do not exist in isolation from its current or ideological categories.”¹⁸ Postcolonialism, moreover, expands our analytical vocabulary, so that it “is not just a fancy new term for colonialism; it indicates a new way of thinking in which cultural, intellectual, economic or political processes are seen to work together in the formation, perpetuation and dismantling of colonialism. It seeks to widen the scope of studies of colonialism by examining the intersections of ideas and institutions, knowledge and power.”¹⁹ As for literature, postcolonial criticism encourages the complex reading of texts, including of metropolitan fiction, which was deeply imbued with the imperial “structure of attitude and reference,” as Said calls it, and the importance of literary texts as materials for historical study.²⁰ Loomba notes, however, that “postcolonial literature” tends to be confined “to texts written in various Englishes. Secondly, post-colonial studies are located entirely within English studies, a location that not

17 McClintock, 266.

18 Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 37.

19 Loomba, 54.

20 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 184.

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only seriously circumscribes the scope of the former, but also has serious implications for its methodology.”²¹

But there have been concerns about the culturalist thrust of postcolonialism as Stuart Hall, one of the luminaries in postcolonial studies, notes.²² He argues that in reaction to the deterministic economism associated with reductionist Marxism, there has been “a massive, gigantic and eloquent disavowal” of the economic by discourses of the “posts,” “as if, since the economic in its broadest sense definitively does *not*, as it was supposed to do, ‘determine’ the real movement of history ‘in the last instance,’ it does not exist at all! This is a failure of theorization so profound, and (with very few, still very sketchy, exceptions ...) so disabling, that in my view, it has enabled much weaker and less conceptually rich paradigms to continue to flourish and dominate the field.”²³ Mishra and Hodge warn “unless *postcolonialism can reestablish vital links with Marxism it will not survive nor deserve to survive long into the twenty-first century ... because the theory has aestheticized struggle and emptied both struggle and the aesthetic itself as formations from which ideology is challenged, invoked, or altered*” (emphasis original).²⁴

Critics who maintain fidelity to Marxism, such as Neil Lazarus, or who seek a radical mission for postcolonial theory, such as Quayson, have taken these critiques to heart.²⁵ In the words of Lazarus, “most of the work in the subfields of postcolonial studies and ‘colonial discourse theory’ (and also, I would say, ‘ethnic studies’ and ‘cultural studies’) currently being produced in cutting-edge intellectual circles of Europe and North America seems to me to [be] ... paying a huge price for its own premature repudiation of systematic theory,” which in his view, is Marxism.²⁶ He seeks to liberate postcolonialism from the theoretical protocols and procedures of the dehistoricizing and depoliticizing “posts” by

21 Loomba, 96. In the early days frantic attempts were made to define “postcolonial” writing and other forms of cultural production, which some said were distinguished by an oppositional attitude towards colonialism or an ethic of resistance, or by allegory, experimentation, and innovation, or hybridization of cultures. Arun P. Mukherjee argued that this privileging of parodic texts “is distorting the field as it focuses on a very limited number of authors, the ones whose texts can give back what the theory is looking for.” See Arun P. Mukherjee, “Whose Post-colonialism and Whose Postmodernism,” *World Literature Written in English* 30, 2 (1990): 7. In short, these characteristics are neither necessarily common to the so-called post-colonial literatures nor confined to them.

22 Stuart Hall, “When Was ‘the Post-colonial’? Thinking at the Limit,” in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, eds. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 242-260.

23 Hall, 258.

24 Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, “What Was Postcolonialism,” *New Literary History* 36 (2005): 388-9.

25 Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

26 Lazarus, 9.

latching them firmly to materialist, realist, and Marxist analysis, while retaining the genuine insights and advances that have been generated within the field, for example, in its consistent critique of Eurocentrism and patriarchy.

Much of the early criticism of postcolonialism centered on its perceived affinities to the antifoundationalism of post-structuralism that, it was claimed, made it ideologically depoliticized or depoliticizing. Some of the most trenchant critiques on this score came from Ahmad, Dirlik, and E. San Juan.²⁷ For Ahmad postcolonialism is part of imperialism's ideological armory to weaken and annul struggles for national liberation, democracy, and socialism. The emphasis on hybridity, contingency, decentredness, and ambivalence strips "all cultures of their historicity and density," he writes, "reducing them to those lowest common denominators which then become interchangeable [and] produces not a universal equality of all cultures but the unified culture of a late imperial marketplace that subordinates cultures, consumers and critics alike to a form of untethering and moral loneliness that wallows in the depthlessness and whimsicality of post-modernism."²⁸ Dirlik maintains that by rejecting the so-called master narratives, including the foundational role of capitalism in history, and dismissing the Third World while remaining obsessed with Eurocentrism, postcolonial critics, in short, "in their simultaneous repudiation of structure and affirmation of the local in problems of oppression and liberation, have mystified the ways in which totalizing structures persist in the midst of apparent disintegration and fluidity."²⁹ "To put it bluntly," he proclaims, "postcolonialism is designed to *avoid* making sense of the current crisis and, in the process, to cover up for the origins of postcolonial intellectuals in a global capitalism of which they are not so much victims as beneficiaries."³⁰

The debate on the location of the producers and the production of postcolonial theory was fueled by Shohat, who located the rise of postcolonial theory and what she regarded as its ahistorical and universalizing deployment and depoliticizing implications in the contexts of North American, especially US, curricular and cultural battles. "The 'postcolonial' is privileged," she wrote, "precisely because it seems safely distant from 'the belly of the beast', the United States."³¹ Ahmad and Dirlik, then, picked up the gauntlet. They were joined by others, including later Spivak herself, who saw the postcolonial critic as an informant in the service of neocolonialism and contemporary global capitalism.³² Leela Ghandi has argued that in so far as postcolonial literature is privileged in postcolonial studies, where the colonial encounter is seen "pri-

27 Epifanio San Juan, *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

28 Ahmad, 290.

29 Dirlik, 315.

30 Dirlik, 313.

31 Shohat, 329.

32 Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.

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marily as a textual contest, or a bibliographic battle, between oppressive and subversive books,” in the end such privileging works, “if accidentally, to privilege the role and function of the postcolonial literary critic – whose academic expertise suddenly provides the key to all oppositional and anticolonial meanings.”³³ Wittingly or not, postcolonial theorists, according to Ming-yan Lai, end up marginalizing the counterhegemonic voices of intellectuals who are located outside the discursive and political preoccupations of the northern metropolises, either because they are focused on power relations and politics in the post-independence nation-state, or because they were subjugated under non-European colonialism as in the case of East Asia, where Japan was the colonial power.³⁴

For Walter D. Mignolo a lot is at stake in the politics of the spaces of knowledge production; the loci of theoretical enunciation are themselves deeply etched with colonial difference. He compares world systems theory and dependency theory which “was a political statement for the *social* transformation of and from the Third World, while world-system analysis was a political statement for *academic* transformation from First World countries.”³⁵ Dependency theory has largely been displaced by the “posts” and neoliberalism, but when it first emerged after the post-Second World its “impact on the decolonization of scholarship in Latin America was immediate and strong” because it stemmed from the region, while the postmodern debate “reproduced a discussion whose problems originated not in the colonial histories of the subcontinent but in the histories of European modernity.”³⁶ Thus even for radical theories, there is “irreducible colonial (epistemic) difference between a leftist social sciences project *from* the First World and a liberation *of* the social sciences (and philosophy) from the Third World” (emphasis original). For him “the critiques of modernity, Western logocentricism, capitalism, Eurocentrism, and the like performed in Western Europe and the United States cannot be valid for persons who think and live in Asia, Africa or Latin America ... It is crucial for the ethics, politics, and epistemology of the future to recognize that the totality of Western epistemology, from either the right or left, is no longer valid for the entire planet.”³⁷

33 Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 141-2.

34 Ming-yan Lai, “The Intellectuals Deaf-Mute, or How Can We Speak Beyond Postcoloniality?” *Daedalus* 126, 4 (1998).

35 Walter D. Mignolo, “The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, 1 (2002): 63.

36 Mignolo, 63-4.

37 Mignolo, 85-6. For a more thorough exposition of his engagement with postcolonial theory and his critique of the “coloniality of knowledge”, the geopolitics of knowledge, and the need to explode and transcend sharp, but in reality blurred and shifting, dichotomies, such as civilization/barbarism; first world/third world; developed/underdeveloped, East/West, see Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Clearly, postcolonialism is a house of many mansions, whose diffuseness makes it difficult to define or to critique. The term “postcolonial” is often used in chronological, epistemological, and concrete senses even by the same author.³⁸ Postcolonialists usually discuss the experiences associated with colonialism and its present effects for both the imperial powers and the ex-colonial societies. Postcolonialism longs to be a theory of colonial and postcolonial social formations, of concrete historical processes, as well as an ideological interrogation of texts, images, and discourses. Thus, as with postmodernism, there is a tension, a creative one in deft hands, between the temporal and typological tendencies, and the spatial and social scales of postcolonialism. Maintaining the balance between the descriptive and critical inflections, and the analytical and political agendas, is not easy for any theory; some postcolonial scholars are unable to walk the tightrope without tripping.³⁹

Africa’s Ambivalent Postcolonialism

It has been widely noted that many African and Africanist scholars tend to be ambivalent or utterly hostile to postcolonial theory. On the surface this is surprising in so far as Africa and African studies have been central to the political, ideological, and intellectual insurgencies that led to the dismantling of European empires and the disintegration of Eurocentricism celebrated by postcolonialism. This is to suggest that African studies, together with other area studies, and developments in Africa associated with decolonization and struggles against Western hegemony played a role in the deconstruction and decomposition of the modernist mentalities and methodologies that the “posts” rail against so much. One could even argue that the fragmentations, ambivalences, contingencies, hybridities, and multiplicities associated with the “posts,” as conceptions and conditions, were articulated and experienced, with unsettling urgency and persistence, from the bloody dawn of colonial conquest and the violent negations and negotiations it entailed for the cultural cartographies of African peoples. In a sense, then, Africans saw some of the “posts,” through historical forces that were not entirely of their own making, before they were belatedly discovered in Euro-America. In short, African scholars and

38 It is important to note that even chronologically the colonial sequence does not recover the same period from one postcolonial author to another. For Stuart Hall it is from the first maritime contact of Europe with other peoples (1492) to the end of apartheid (1994). For others it extends beyond 1994 to end in 1997 with the restitution of Hong Kong to China. This is contested by people who believe that the colonial moment is still with us with the subjugation of indigenous people in the US, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and India.

39 Mamadou Diouf (personal communication) points out that postcolonial theorists do not look for such analytical narrative and closure, but actually seek to keep the tensions between description and theorizing, between the local and the global; in less deft hands, however, the tensions degenerate into confusion.

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scholarship are deeply invested in the destruction and deconstruction of European hegemony – economic and epistemic, political and paradigmatic. Ironically, it is precisely this ideological and intellectual investment that accounts for the unease with which postcolonialism is regarded.

Many African writers, artists, and other cultural producers do not describe themselves and their work as “postmodern” or “postcolonial.” As the Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo, proclaimed –

[p]erhaps the concept [of postcolonialism] was relevant to the United States after its war of independence, and to a certain extent to the erstwhile imperial dominions of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Applied to Africa, India, and some other parts of the world, ‘postcolonial’ is not only a fiction, but a most pernicious fiction, a cover-up of a dangerous period in our people’s lives.⁴⁰

Her point is that the “post” in “postcolonialism” cannot be a temporal and existential “after” colonialism since Africa continues to be ravaged by the legacies of colonialism and the ravages of neocolonialism. Yet this is precisely the point that postcolonial theory seeks to make about the enduring power of colonialism and the colonial encounter. Thus, Aidoo’s argument is not, in itself, a critique of postcolonial theory, which adumbrates colonialism’s very persistence, but a critique of the postcolonial condition, a cry of anguish against Africa’s continued exploitation, marginalization, and underdevelopment. It is an *ideological* critique.

I would like to suggest that African ambivalence or antagonism to the “posts” rests on *ideological* and *ethical* arguments. This is evident in the interventions of several scholars who are themselves sympathetic to postcolonial studies. The observations by Olaniyan Tejumola, the Nigerian literary scholar, underscore the ideological thrust of African responses to postcolonialism:

I know no African scholar – and perhaps very few scholars of Africa – who would invoke the ‘posts’ in my title without an automatic rush to qualification, if not outright dismissal. Postmodernity, a historical condition that is said to have emerged out of the contradictions of overdeveloped modernity in Euro-America, cannot possibly have much to say to societies upon whose backs that modernity was built and for whom it still remains a mirage today ... As to postcoloniality, whose literal meaning is time-space after colonialism, what greater evidence of its inapplicability to Africa can we find than the continent’s world-historical debt peonage to its former colonizers, its chokehold by foreign-owned multinational corporations, and its invasion by ever more irresistible weapons of Euro-American imperialism?⁴¹

40 As quoted in Mongia, 1.

41 Olaniyan Tejumola, “Postmodernity, Postcoloniality, and African Studies,” in *Postmodernism, Postcoloniality and African Studies*, ed. Zine Magubane (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2005), 39-60.

Thus, both postmodernism and postcolonialism are seen to be inapplicable to African realities because Africa has transcended neither modernity nor coloniality.

Tejumola argues that African critics of postmodernism find fault with, first, its decentering of the subject; second, its privileging of culture; third, its use of abstruse language; and fourth, its preoccupation with colonialism. Postmodernism “deconstructs not just the imperial European Subject but all claims to subjecthood that would authorize or be the rallying point of knowledge or collective action or policies. This is where African critics interested in constructing a resistant subject or identity against unending Western imperialism part with postmodernism.”⁴² Moreover, for scholars committed to the project of African emancipation, postmodernism is troubling for its apparent cynicism against all truth claims, against revolutionary projects, against collective politics. Postmodernism privileges culture since it –

focuses on the instruments used by culture to produce meanings, such as narrative, discourse, and other institutional regulators of symbolic interactions.... It holds that whoever controls the realm of cultural meanings controls the means of self-perception and, therefore, power.... However, many African critics see in postmodernism’s cultural turn *culturalism* that dehistoricizes culture and demeans and sacrifices the concrete sociopolitical struggles that most African scholars believe to be where the solution to the continent’s unending exploitation by the West lies. Most strands of African anti-imperialist thought do not consider culture to be a primary terrain of such struggle.⁴³

According to Tejumola, in the view of many African scholars the use of obscure, self-consciously “theoretical” language further underscores “postmodernism’s elitist class character and its disconnection with the lives of the masses, for whom such language is nothing but another characteristic and incomprehensible indulgence on the part of university eggheads who do no real labor.”⁴⁴

Tejumola seeks to debunk some of these critiques, arguing that postmodernism’s deconstruction of the subject and its suspicion of foundational and teleological projects and narratives of knowledge and action are liberating for the African humanities in that they open new intellectual spaces for African knowledges and encourage reflexivity. As well, the metaphysics of postmodernism resonate with those of many African cultures. But resemblance does not entail engagement or mean that the “posts” have derived any of their concepts

42 Tejumola, 40-41. Like postcolonialism, postmodernism, as well as critiques against it, is heterogeneous, and here Tejumola not only refers to a variant of postmodernism, but to a particular set of critiques against his chosen variant of postmodernism.

43 Tejumola, 41-42.

44 Tejumola, 42.

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from African thought.⁴⁵ For Tejumola it also seems pointless to attack postmodernism's culturalism, for postmodernism is indeed "a cultural and discursive practice, not an economic or political discourse as such." As for elitist language, all intellectual discourses in academe, he insists, are elitist, often incomprehensible to the so-called masses that have their own discourses. And it cannot but be preoccupied with colonialism because it is about the cultural and cognitive ravages of the colonial encounter. Instead of outright dismissal, he argues for what he calls "discriminating engagement," that is, "engagement that foregrounds our interests rather than our difference, even if our interests ultimately include implications of our difference."⁴⁶

It is possible to see African scholars' alleged antagonism to, and Africa's absence from, postcolonial theory as more apparent than real. According to Pius Adesanmi, there is "*an appearance of African absence* from the production sites of postcolonial epistemologies ... the trouble with Africa is not so much in the area of production as it is in the area of naming and privileging what has been produced" (emphasis original).⁴⁷ Adesanmi contrasts "the overwhelming presence of Indian thinkers in the field, the centrality of their thought to the epistemology and the concomitant production of India as the major subject/object of postcolonial theorizing [that] all serve to underscore the problem of African presence and participation."⁴⁸ He attributes this discrepancy to the temporalities and spatialities of postcolonialism – the geographical and institutional locations of those who produce knowledges privileged as postcolonial. Both the "writers whose works provide the raw material for the theoretical preoccupations of post-

45 Donald Wehrs traces the dominant conceptual framework of postcolonial theory to Jean-Paul Sartre and his associates who did not take seriously non-Western historicity, agency, and rationality. He notes: "Despite a guilty conscience about depending upon Western-derived analytical matrices, postcolonial theory continues to exhibit a lack of interest in non-Western cultures' articulations of meaning and value.... Postcolonial theory remains wedded to ways of conceiving the relation of the non-West to the West, and of conceiving human motivation and political agency more generally, that emerged from a distinctively European mid-twentieth century intellectual climate in which non-Western peoples and societies were understood to be in principle incapable of historical emancipatory agency until 'jump-started' by Western material and conceptual colonial violence". See Donald Wehrs, "Sartre's Legacy in Postcolonial Theory; or, Who's Afraid of Non-Western Historiography and Cultural Studies?" *New Literary History* 34 (2004): 761-2.

46 Tejumola, 52. It is instructive that much of Tejumola's discussion centres on postmodernism rather than postcolonialism — on which he says little as if the two are the same. He tends to oversimplify the critiques of postmodernism and postcolonialism made by many African scholars. His attempts to buttress his arguments through reference to contemporary social realities in Africa are hardly convincing and betray the simplistic readings postcolonial scholars are sometimes prone to once they veer off literary-culturalist readings of texts and discourses.

47 Pius Adesanmi, "Africa, India, and the Postcolonial: Toward a Praxis of Infliction," *Arena Journal* 21 (2004): 176.

48 Adesanmi, 175.

colonialism” and “the thinkers whose works are considered as emblematic representations of postcolonial theorizing” tend to be based in the West.⁴⁹

The result is that postcolonial theory has become increasingly conflated with diasporic writers, identities, and representations. The association of postcolonial criticism with writers based in the global North and writings in European languages leads to the continued repression and marginalization of African language literatures and authors based on the continent, as well as African literatures in European languages whenever their concerns cannot be absorbed into the postcolonial obsession with empire.⁵⁰ In effect, postcolonial theory perpetuates, indeed reinforces, the Anglocentric orientations of old Commonwealth criticism it claims to have transcended. In so far as the bulk of African intellectuals remain in Africa despite the “brain drain” during the decades of structural adjustment in the 1980s and 1990s, the weight of diasporic discursive imaginaries in African scholarship, Adesanmi argues, is slight.⁵¹

More crucial, it is the work of scholars from the global South speaking what Adesanmi calls the “language of discourse” that enjoys institutional respectability in the Euro-American academy. He draws an intriguing comparison between Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and Chinweizu’s *The West and the Rest of Us*.⁵² Both expose the exploitative historical relationship between Europe and its Oriental and African “Other”, respectively. Yet the institutional fortunes of the two books vary enormously: Said is required reading, while Chinweizu’s book, published in 1975, three years before Said’s canonical text, is not. The reason is that “*Orientalism* speaks the language of discourse while *The West and the Rest of Us* speaks the language of concrete historical materiality.”⁵³ Thus, Adesanmi argues, the appearance of an Indian presence and an African absence in the production of postcolonial knowledges can, in part, be accounted for by the fact that Indian scholarship is as immersed in the language of discourse as African scholarship remains wedded to the language of historical materiality.⁵⁴ In so far as the language of discourse is inescapable and here to stay, Adesanmi maintains,

49 Adesanmi, 177-8.

50 See Karin Barber, “African-Language Literature and Postcolonial Criticism,” *Research in African Literatures* 26, 3 (1995): 3-28; Wumi Raji, “Africanizing *Antigone*: Postcolonial Discourse and Strategies of Indiginizing a Western Classic,” *Research in African Literatures* 36, 4 (2005): 135-154; Pius Adesanmi, “Third Generation African Literatures and Contemporary Theorizing,” in *The Study of Africa. Volume 1: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters*, ed. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (Dakar, Senegal: Codesria Book Series, 2006), 39-60.

51 Adesanmi, “Africa, India, and the Postcolonial...”.

52 Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slavers, and the African Elite* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975).

53 Adesanmi, “Africa, India, and the Postcolonial...”: 184.

54 In this example, Adesanmi makes an elemental error; Said is of Palestinian, not Indian, descent.

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African scholarship needs to adopt the Indians' praxis of infliction, by inflicting the narrativization of African history in this language, "the only language that the Euro-American academy is prepared to validate."⁵⁵

This is an intriguing analysis, but open to debate. One could make the same argument that the bulk of Indian intellectuals remain in India and those based in Euro-America constitute a tiny minority. Also, one could point to African texts and scholars that speak in the language of discourse that are or ought to be quite influential in the Euro-American academy. Examples include Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, V.Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*, Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*, and Ato Quayson's *Postcolonialism and Calibrations*.⁵⁶ More importantly, Adesanmi's argument about Indian scholarship embodying the language of discourse is too simplistic, for there are different schools in Indian history and literature that engage in very contentious debates precisely with the same opposition between approaches wedded to the language of discourse and others to the languages of historical materiality. Even the renowned Subaltern Studies group has experienced this opposition, as marked in the shift from a more material to a more discursive focus. This is not to deny that many African scholars are ambivalent about postcolonial theory. Even Adesanmi ends his essay on a cautionary note, warning against "inflicting the West on Africa rather than inflicting African intellection on postcolonial and cultural theory [for] the West has had six hundred years to prove that it does not need my help to inflict herself on Africa."⁵⁷

African scholars' generally troubled encounter with postcolonialism is rooted in the problematic engagement between Africa and Europe in modern times that has engendered *mutual suspicion* reflected in Euro-American contempt for things African and African contestation of things Euro-American. This is spawned by intimacy between Africa and Europe in the modern era, and the reality that both have mutually constituted each other, as well as the fact that the contributions of Africans in the diaspora and on the continent were central to the creation of the Atlantic world — out of which the current modern world system sprang — as histories and sociologies of the Black Atlantic have amply demonstrated.⁵⁸ The

55 Adesanmi, "Africa, India, and the Postcolonial...": 191.

56 See V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), and Ato Quayson, *Calibrations: Reading for the Social* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

57 Adesanmi, "Africa, India, and the Postcolonial...": 196.

58 While Paul Gilroy erases Africa in the constitution of the Black Atlantic and its contributions to modernity, Joseph E. Inikori reinserts Africa and reconnects Africa and the African diaspora in the construction of Atlantic modernity. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Joseph E. Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Development* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

“West” is not solely a Eurogenic creation; Africa is embedded in its very bosom, in the material and discursive foundations of the “West” as the embodiment of “modernity.”⁵⁹ The African diaspora in Euro-America — numbering in the scores of millions — is a testament to the African face of the “West”. Migrating intellectuals or theories between Africa and Euro-America are mediated through this historic relationship. For societies and academies that have denigrated their own African descended populations for centuries, it is not surprising they would disparage knowledges produced by African scholars including those of recent migrants. Also predictable is that cognitive responses to Euro-America among the recent migrant African intellectuals are conditioned by longstanding epistemic struggles by the historic African diasporas against Euro-American racism that has sought to dehistoricize and dehumanize Africa and Africans.

Migrant Indian or Asian scholars do not come with or carry the same historical baggage of existential and epistemic racism in the Euro-American society and academy. Indeed, the “posts” may have provided them institutional entry in so far as they silence combative discourses of resistance against racism that still resonate among the historic African diasporas. The role of postcolonial theory as a discursive weapon of containment against rebellious minority intellectuals can be seen in Sara Suleri’s vituperous attack of “the excesses and limitations of marginal discourses,” especially “black feminism’s failure to move beyond the proprietary rights that can be claimed by any oppressed discourse.”⁶⁰ Suleri was vexed by bell hooks’ caustic observation that many of the purveyors of postcolonial discourse are often dismissive of African Americans. Henry Louis Gates also wonders whether the postcolonialists from the global South are not simply sophisticated narcissists acting out their predicament of exile and dislocation.⁶¹ Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani ask: Why is it “that Black and Chicano critics [in the US] have in the main not rushed to embrace the term as adequate to their present condition?”⁶² For Gloria Davies postcolonial interventions, far from being lodged at the borders of established

59 This simple *historical* point is often missed by many postcolonial critics who invest the “West” with the self-referentiality of autogenesis and discuss it as such in opposition to its numerous others including Africa, as is evident in Kwaku Larbi Korang’s “Where is Africa? When is the West’s Other? Literary Postcoloniality in a Comparative Anthropology,” *Diacritics* 34, 2 (2004): 38-61, an otherwise insightful essay which questions ethnographic constructions of African difference as seen in Christopher Miller, *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

60 Sara Suleri, “Women Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition,” in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, 342.

61 bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1989); Henry Louis Gates, “Critical Fanonism,” in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, eds. Robert C. Davis and Ronald Schleifer (New York: Longman, 1994).

62 Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani, “Crosscurrents, Crosstalk: Race, “Postcoloniality” and the Politics of Location,” in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, 350.

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mainstream scholarship, are “instead constitutive of an institutionally approved, even applauded, mode of inquiry preferred by some research funding agencies and academic publishers” in an academic and cultural market in which “doing theory” by socially ungrounded migrant or minority professionals of color is privileged and provides an institutional sanction to reinforce, not subvert, the system of metropolitan or neocolonial knowledge production.⁶³ Postcolonial theory’s obfuscatory language and inflationary rhetoric ensure that even its critical mappings of cultural imperialism in Euro-American canonical texts and political claims to redress injustices are often lost.

The ambivalence of African scholars to postcolonialism is not engendered by epistemic considerations only; some are troubled by the ethical implications of certain key concepts and tropes of postcolonial theory. Simon Gikandi, the distinguished Kenyan literary scholar, singles out the notion of “difference” — the valorization of difference in postcolonial theory, the vilification of African difference in Eurocentric discourse, and the violence of colonial inventions of ethnic difference in postcolonial Africa.⁶⁴ He argues that African fiction is largely preoccupied with moral considerations, the “moral narrative of human freedom”, and the question of “what it means to be African in the modern world.” It is the occlusion of this moral economy from the “institutions of interpretation that now operate under the orbit of poststructural or postcolonial theory” that accounts for “Africa’s absence from the theoretical configurations of our time.”⁶⁵ While the “posts” offer important critiques of “Eurocentricism and its veneer of humanity,” they have unfortunately abandoned any serious engagement with the fundamental question of human values. “If now,” Gikandi contends, “more than ever before, an African tradition of letters is concerned with securing the humanity of the African, whose body and soul are now threatened by catastrophes unprecedented in the history of the continent, the narrative of human beings, rather than subjects, which recent African writing has foregrounded, seems at odds with some of the major claims of poststructural theory.”⁶⁶

For African intellection “difference” has little virtue in so far as in Eurocentric thought Africa has always been figured as the site of inferior difference, a discourse that still pervades contemporary readings and representations of Africa, which are rooted in the “colonial library.” Given how deeply ingrained the notion of African difference is in the Euro-American imagination and epistemological order, post-structural and postcolonial theories of differ-

63 Gloria Davies, “Professing Postcoloniality: The Perils of Cultural Legitimation,” *Postcolonial Studies* 1, 2 (1998): 171-182.

64 Simon Gikandi, “Theory, Literature and Moral Considerations,” *Research in African Literatures* 32, 4 (2001): 1-18.

65 Gikandi, 3.

66 Gikandi, 4.

ence merely reinforce Africa's alterity, Africa's invention as a site of radical difference. For Gikandi, therefore, "poststructural theory — and its postcolonial variety, which initially held up the promise of deconstructing Eurocentricism, have actually reinscribed and reinforced it in both overt and surreptitious ways."⁶⁷ But a lot more is at stake than Africa's stigmatized difference. He asks, "[f]or a generation conditioned to believe that difference is the essence of identity, how does one make the point that this difference is also the source of some of the most ghastly events of our time?"⁶⁸ as illustrated by the moral ruptures, the performativity of such evil events as slavery and genocide including, most recently, the Rwanda genocide engendered by the colonial invention of ethnic difference. The African experience, both externally with Europe and internally with colonialism and its aftermath, belies the notion that the great evils of our time were committed through the negation of difference by Eurocentricism and its foundationalism. This raises, for the African intellectual, a critical question, namely, "the efficacy of Western theory and its translation to *other* sites of analysis"(emphasis original).⁶⁹ In Euro-America the valorization of difference might be used by minorities to create new spaces of self-representation, to dismantle the edifice of Eurocentricism and the foundational fictions of unitary national identity – of Englishness, Americanness, Frenchness, or Canadianness — "but in Africa, theories of difference are used to marginalize social groups because of their ethnicity, region, or sexual orientation (just as they do in the West!)." Surely, the humanistic crises confronting Africa require ethical responses grounded in "theories and categories that have fallen out of favor elsewhere, such essentialist categories as community, being, and morality."⁷⁰

Gikandi's ethical appeal echoes Kwame Anthony Appiah's nuanced and ambivalent postcolonialism. In his famous essay, "Is the 'Post-' in 'Postcolonial' the 'Post-' in 'Postmodern'?", Appiah seeks an African habitation in the world through an inclusive humanism, not difference (either the nationalist difference of African exceptionalism or the Eurocentric difference of African alterity). The deconstructivist and relativist impulses of postmodernism facilitate Africa's

67 Gikandi, 6.

68 Gikandi, 11.

69 Gikandi, 16.

70 Gikandi, 17. Gikandi's essay elicited a spirited response from Kenneth W. Harrow, who criticized Gikandi's censure of postmodernist difference on the grounds that Gikandi confused difference with diversity and that ethically African and Western experiences are indeed mutually translatable. However, Harrow's critique does not invalidate Gikandi's point that difference or 'othering' has been at the very heart of Africa's construction in the European imaginary and colonial practice with tragic consequences and that its valorization by the "posts" does little to subvert the epistemic and existential violence of Eurocentrism *for* Africa. See Kenneth W. Harrow, "Ethics and Difference: A Response to Simon Gikandi's 'Theory, Literature, and Moral Considerations,'" *Research in African Literatures* 33, 4 (2002): 154-160.

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translation into, and its transaction with, the world, but only to a point, for they are space-clearing gestures in the service of late capitalist commodification, in which the differentiation and valorization of postcolonial objects and subjects is still negotiated through the mistranslation of Africa's exoticized otherness. The persistent reification of African difference that Gikandi notes for African literature in the post-structuralist American classroom, Appiah observes for African art in the postmodernist American museum; it is a denial of the Same, of an ethical universal humanism, to which African cultural production and politics gestures. It is in this context that Appiah posits an African postcolonial specificity in the shared transnational or global modern/postmodern condition. He contends that all aspects of contemporary African life, especially popular culture, "have been influenced, often powerfully by the transition of African societies *through* colonialism, but they are not all in the relevant sense postcolonial. For the *post* in postcolonial, like the *post* in postmodern is the *post* of the space clearing gesture."⁷¹

African popular culture, he argues, freely incorporates borrowings from international cultural forms, unmindful of issues of neocolonialism or cultural imperialism. This means, on the one hand, that postmodernism is relevant

to these forms of culture: for the internationalization of the market and the commodification of the artworks are both central to them. But it *does* mean that these artworks are not understood by their producers or their consumers in terms of postmodernism: there is no antecedent practice whose claim to exclusivity of vision is rejected through these artworks. What is called 'syncretism' here is made possible by the international exchange of commodities, but is not a consequence of the space clearing gesture.⁷²

Indeed, African novels "of the second stage — the postcolonial stage," which are seen as bearers of postcolonialism, are not unambiguously postcolonial. To be sure, they —

are novels of delegitimation, rejecting the Western imperium, it is true, but also rejecting the nationalist project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie. And, so it seems to me, the basis for that project of delegitimation is very much not the postmodernist one: rather, it is grounded in an appeal to an ethical universal; indeed, it is based, as intellectual responses to oppression in Africa largely are based, in an appeal to a certain simple respect for human suffering, a fundamental revolt against the endless misery of the last thirty years.⁷³

71 Appiah, 149; emphases original.

72 Appiah, 149; emphases original.

73 Appiah, 152.

These novels are *postcolonial* in so far as they, like the *post* in postmodernism, challenge “earlier legitimating narratives”, but, as Appiah notes, they challenge them —

in the name of an ethical universal; in the name of *humanism* ... And on that ground [they] are not an ally of Western postmodernism but an agonist, from which ... postmodernism may have something to learn. [For] humanism can be provisional, historically contingent, antiessentialist (in other words postmodern), and still be demanding. We can surely maintain a powerful engagement with the concern to avoid cruelty and pain while nevertheless recognizing the contingency of that concern. Maybe, then, we can recover within postmodernism the postcolonial writers’ humanism – the concern for human suffering, for the victims of the postcolonial state ... while still rejecting the master narratives of modernism.⁷⁴

Kwaku Korang finds much to recommend in Appiah’s “accommodationist” postcolonialism, for its “exemplary conjunctural navigation and negotiation betwixt and between.”⁷⁵ In it the accommodationist thesis of Africa-for-the-world does not preclude the nationalist thesis of Africa-for-itself; nor has Africa-for-itself forgotten to name its obligations to the world at large.” Recognition of this mutual inscription — between the Africa-for-itself of the nationalist scholars who tend to reject the “posts” as another export of Euro-America cultural and cognitive imperialism and the Africa-for-the-world of the cosmopolitans wholeheartedly enamored by the “posts” — offers a productive space for Africa’s interrogation of the world and the world’s interrogation of Africa. It is vital, Korang insists, “that Africanist accommodationist negotiation in the ‘posts’ be vigilantly self-aware; that it come wearing the protective armor of a healthy rejectionism.”⁷⁶ He is equally critical of both the strong “rejectionist” and “accommodationist” positions, finding the former tendency far more widespread than the latter in African studies and among Africanists. He singles out Denis Ekpo’s work as representative of the zealous accommodationist perspective.⁷⁷

Ekpo argues postmodernism may superficially appear to be of little concern to Africans because they did not create or wallow in modernism, with the materialism and deification of reason that postmodernism thematizes and wants to exorcize. However, through colonial conquest Africa was imbricated with

74 Appiah, 155; emphasis original.

75 Kwaku Larbi Korang, “Useless Provocation or Meaningful Challenge? The ‘Posts’ Versus African Studies,” in *The Study of Africa. Volume 1: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters*, ed. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (Dakar, Senegal: Codesria Book Series, 2006), 465-490.

76 Korang, “Useless Provocation or Meaningful Challenge?”, 487.

77 Denis Ekpo, “Towards a Post-Africanism: Contemporary African Thought and Postmodernism,” *Textual Practice* 9, 1 (1995): 121-135.

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the culture of modernity, and modern African thought was irretrievably locked in the grammar of the European logos. Consequently, from its inception modern African thought acquired an *a priori* isomorphic relationship to the logic, metaphysics, and rhetoric of modern European thought, so that it is vulnerable to the same postmodernist critiques. In fact, modern African thought, like modern European thought, finds itself in a performative impasse. It can only be liberated from its logocentric trap by postmodernism, since it is the most radical and disruptive critique of the various logocentric games that modern European rationality plays. Indeed, postmodernism, Ekpo contends, furnishes the modern African mind with access and insight into the production mechanisms and ideologies of Western texts as well as the opportunity to get into real power games of European modernity and gain cognitive control over the West. Ekpo's reduction of all modern African thought to affective and undifferentiated Afrocentric master narratives is as overgeneralized as his condemnation of activist moralism is oversimplified.

Others have also criticized the unadulterated postmodernist effusions evident in Ekpo's work. As Korang points out, Ekpo not only "caricatures African modernity by reducing it, in cognitive and socio-cultural practice, to an unreconstructed Afrocentricism," and betrays an un-reflexive advocacy for Euro-America, he also fails, on his own post-structuralist grounds, to dismember the Western logos for

[T]his logos returns, preserved for Africa *in* (a reformed) Africanist thought, in the form of the postmodern West valorized as a knowable *positivity* and imitable *totality*. The West is re-centered again, even more securely in a would-be post-Africanity, in spite of its apparent displacement. The West is not only the source of the African disease, it *only*, it appears, must be the source of the cure (emphasis original).⁷⁸

Even more troubling — and here Korang returns to the ethical imperative — is Ekpo's sublation of the Africanist moral-humanist proposition in the technocratic world of post-Africanity. Ekpo's postmodernist cynicism

upholds only one supreme value—efficiency. The classic case of the post-modern cynicism advocated by Ekpo in twentieth century Europe would be Adolf Hitler. Hitler did not ask whether killing millions of Jews ought to be done but whether it could be done, and if so how efficiently... We have to wonder what an African intellectual is asking for if he insists that morality and humanism should have no place in the technocratic world of post-Africanity. From a cynical postmodern perspective, genocide can only be seen and justified as the efficient management of human resources through the culling of

78 Korang, "Useless Provocation or Meaningful Challenge?", 474.

'excess' or 'deviant' populations. In the name of efficiency, postmodern cynicism, in other words, would normalize the horrors of Rwanda and apartheid South Africa.⁷⁹

The African ambivalences about the "posts" reflect the ideological and intellectual imperatives of what I would call nationalist humanism, the tendency to put ideas through the wringer of African historical experiences, a powerful discursive inclination to interrogate analytical paradigms, including the "posts", through the prism of the historic and humanistic imperatives of African nationalism, the struggle by Africans to recover and reaffirm their history and humanity so cruelly seized by modern Europe through the mechanisms of imperialism and colonialism and the ever-mutating discourses of Eurocentricism. Whatever the differences among African intellectuals, and there are many, and even when they oppose elements of colonial and postcolonial nationalism as noted by Appiah, nationalist humanism, I submit, remains the foundational matrix that frames their imaginary and social thought. As Korang and Thandika Mkandawire have demonstrated in their fascinating histories of colonial and postcolonial intellectuals, nationalism has loomed large in the minds and activities of African intellectuals.⁸⁰

As a professional formation, African intellectuals of course have complex histories. Given the continent's vastness and diversities, African intellectual traditions, tendencies, and trajectories are articulated in an astonishing array of languages and idioms, both indigenous and foreign, secular and religious, scholarly and popular, scientific and ideological, abstract and pragmatic, which one cannot adequately map out in an essay such as this. Suffice it to say, ever since Africa's tragic encounter with an imperial Europe from the 15th century, the formation and imaginary of African intellectuals have been deeply affected by the changing dynamics of that encounter, which forced African societies and their thinkers to reckon with the state of their own social development and global civilizational presence. From the 19th century, as the bayonets of imperial partition imposed a new cartographic, cultural and cognitive reality upon the continent, the themes of "African regeneration" or "African renaissance," of Islamic, Christian, or traditionalist reform, began to seriously engage African

79 Korang, "Useless Provocation or Meaningful Challenge?", 476.

80 See Kwaku Larbi Korang, "Intellectuals: Colonial," in *Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century African History*, eds. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and Dickson Eyoh (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 465-490, and *Writing Ghana, Imagining Africa: Nation and African Modernity* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2003); Thandika Mkandawire, "African Intellectuals and Nationalism," in *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender, and Development*, ed. Thandika Mkandawire (London; New York: Zed Books in association with CODESRIA, 2005), "Intellectuals: Postcolonial," in *Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century African History*, eds. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and Dickson Eyoh (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 274-280.

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intellectuals. The figures and idioms of the engagement have been changing from adoption/appropriation and accommodation, as seen in the emergence of the Afro-Victorians and Afro-Cartesians, to resistance, rejection, and revision/subversion.

It is possible to identify, following V.Y. Mudimbe's notion of "libraries", four "libraries" in Africa's intellectual history – the Islamic, Christian, indigenous (for lack of a better term), and colonial. In many countries these "libraries" live side by side and they collaborate as well as compete for hegemony. Most discussions of African intellectuals tend to focus on the intellectuals produced within the tradition of the "colonial library", who dominate contemporary Africa and Africa's worldly transactions. Much has been written about the double consciousness of these intellectuals, the alienation and ambivalence of their loyalties and ambitions as a "caste" or a middle-class fraction that straddled, often uneasily, coloniality and its modernist claims and nativity and its supposed atavism. They learned to talk in both indigenous and imported languages. As embodiments of the African-European confrontation and compromise, they were supremely confident of their mission, despite the endless assaults of colonial condescension, as progenitors of an African narrative of renewal, a narrative of African modernity. The search for a new African narrative liberated from the epistemic colonization of Europe entailed a nationalist struggle to remake history, not within terms of their own choosing or summoned from a pristine past, but out of that very, and continuing, violent encounter with Europe. It was a struggle to subvert and transcend the imperial coding of Africa as a Hegelian "blank darkness," to renew and refurbish the image of Africa, for Africa itself and for the world at large, by an intelligentsia that was immersed in both African and European ontological and epistemological orders. This bilingual, indeed, multilingual intelligentsia had a trinity of dreams – for purity, parity, and personhood – for African difference from Europe, equality with Europe, and humanism denied by Europe. It sought to reclaim African autonomy and authenticity, rebuild African power and productivity, and rehabilitate Africa's abused humanity and history. This, then, was essentially a nationalist intelligentsia animated by the humanistic need to bring Africa into worldly representation and recognition, to affirm an African personality that was both unique and equal to others.

The nationalist imaginary sought Africa's political, cultural, and economic renewal. This entailed independence and nation building, which, in turn, rested on and raised larger cultural and civilizational questions. The project of cultural revival and reconstitution was complex and contradictory. Some sought to strip the "native" of the alienations of Euro-American modernity and force her to return to the "authentic" and pristine values of a precolonial past – one that was, however, more often than not invented through the conceptual registers of colonial anthropology. Others sought to create a new cultural synthesis out of

Africa's indigenous and imported cultures. Philosophers and others talked of African modernity as a project and process marked by, as modernities elsewhere, both societal modernization and cultural modernity, or African modernities — in the plural — as contingent, distinctive, and connected to modernities elsewhere.⁸¹ Underlying the discourses on African modernity or culture and society is the question of what constitutes “Africa.” This question has exercised the minds of African intellectuals for generations. The great 19th century Liberian intellectual Edward Blyden introduced the notion of Africa's triple heritage — Africa as a constellation of Islam, Christianity, and indigenous cultures — a concept that was later reworked by Ghana's celebrated philosopher president, Kwame Nkrumah, and popularized by the eminent Kenyan scholar Ali Mazrui.⁸²

The overriding ambition of Africa's colonial and postcolonial intellectuals has been to overturn Europe's cognitive apparatus of itself and its African “Other” by affirming the historicity and humanity of Africa and Africans. It is a nationalist humanism that transcends the narrow confines of nationalism as conventionally understood. In these days of indiscriminate dismissal of nationalism, either inspired by the delirious discourses of globalization or the antifoundationalist anxieties of the “posts”, it is critical to distinguish between the repressive nationalisms of imperialism and the progressive nationalisms of anticolonial resistance, between the nationalisms that led to colonial conquest and genocide and those that sought decolonization and liberation for oppressed nations and communities, between struggles for domination and struggles for

81 See the influential work of the following philosophers, Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); D.A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994); Emmanuel C. Eze, ed., *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997). For insightful discussions on African modernities see Jan-Georg Deutsch, Peter Probst, and Heike Schmidt, eds., *African Modernities* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), Ashley Dawson, “The Short Century: Postcolonial Africa and the Politics of Representation,” *Radical History Review* 87 (Fall 2003): 226-236, and Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). For an elaboration on colonial modernities as a category see Saurabh Dube, “Introduction: Colonialism, Modernity, Colonial Modernities,” Special Issue, *Critical Conjunctions Foundations of Colony and Formation of Modernity, Nepantla: Views from South* 3, 2 (2002): 197-219.

82 See Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “Africa: The Changing Meanings of ‘African’ Culture and Identity”, in *Horizons: Perspectives on a Global Africa*, eds., Elisabeth Abiri and Håkan Thorn (Göteborg, Sweden: National Museum of World Cultures and Göteborg University, 2005), 31-72; Edward Wilmot Blyden, *A Vindication of the African Race: Being a Brief Examination of the Arguments in Favor of African Inferiority* (Monrovia: G. Killian, 1857) and *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1887); Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonization* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964); and Ali A. Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (Boston: Little Brown, 1986).

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freedom, and between the reactionary, reformist, or revolutionary goals of various nationalisms. Socially, nationalism has always had diverse ethnic and civic dynamics, spatially, territorial and transnational dimensions. Its ideological and intellectual referents and representations also vary. Not only were African nationalisms diverse in their composition, objectives, and tendencies, for Africa, indeed as for much of the world, the nation-state remains a crucial site for the organization of social life, a meaningful and coherent space of struggle for emancipation and empowerment from the ravages of contemporary capitalist globalization and domestic inequalities and authoritarianisms.⁸³

Given the onerous weight of Africa's recent past — going back to the Atlantic slave trade — it is hardly surprising that African intellectuals have been preoccupied with the fundamental ontological, epistemological, and ethical questions of what it means to be African and human, questions largely banished from the post-structuralist and postmodernist universe. These questions have centered on four sets of problematics and projects in African discourse: decolonization and development, nation building and democratization, cultural renewal and diversity, and Africa's regional integration and global presence. Nationalist humanism has withstood new theoretical waves that have arisen from time to time and lashed against its sturdy foundations. More often than not, new ideas and ideologies — from Marxism to dependency to feminism to the “posts” — have been incorporated into its strapping, spacious complex.

Postcolonializing History

History and historians have had a complex and problematic relationship with the “posts,” one characterized by advocacy, ambivalence, and antagonism. The “posts” arrived at a time when the once insurgent paradigm of social history had become part of the establishment and was heavily invested in protecting its newly acquired privileges of professional institutionalization from new rebels armed with post-structural, postmodern, and postcolonial theories.⁸⁴ The new approaches questioned univocal conceptions of universal history, the notion of singular modernity, and the enduring binaries of historical scholarship, such as tradition and modernity, myth and history, the West and the Rest.⁸⁵ In facilitating the proliferation of pasts and memories and the emergence of new social

83 For a recent discussion of African nationalisms, see Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “The Historic and Humanistic Agendas of African Nationalism: A Reassessment,” in *Power and Nationalism in Modern Africa*, eds. Toyin Falola and Salah Hassan (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, forthcoming).

84 Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon, “Social History as ‘Sites of Memory’? The Institutionalization of History: Microhistory and the Grand Narrative,” *Journal of Social History* 39, 3 (2006): 891-913.

85 Dube, 197-8.

constituencies of historical actors from nations and ethnicities to cultures and genders that were previously excluded, the “posts” enriched history, but this also made history more difficult to produce as it became harder to construct coherent narratives around some of these very constructs. Because the “posts” suggest the pluralities but repudiate some of the practices of history, they are both welcomed and rejected by many African historians, who believe that it is possible to formulate historiographies that are not Eurocentric, to write history with multiple pathways that focuses on varieties of human experiences and connections and tells stories of change without presenting linear tales of progress.

In the early 1990s some Africanist historians expressed concern, to use the title of Meghan Vaughan’s essay, whether postmodernism had “passed us by.”⁸⁶ While cognizant of some of the pitfalls of “postmodernist thinking and post-colonial discourse analysis,” Jane Parpart argued that they could not —

be tossed out simply because they conflict with longheld views. Postmodern theorizing ... reflects the fundamental restructuring of the world political economy, and the emergence of a world where new voices, backed by new wealth, are challenging Western hegemony, and the universal pretensions of western theory. Africa is part of these changes, and those who study about and seek to explain Africa cannot place the continent outside the questions of the postmodern era in which we all live.⁸⁷

One of the loudest proponents of the “posts” in African history circles is the Cameroonian historian, Achille Mbembe, who is sharply critical of nationalist historiography and scholars, whose work he faults for being historicist, economicist, instrumentalist, opportunistic, fatalistic, and even racist.⁸⁸ He is quite dismissive of African histories and memories of slavery, colonialism, and victimhood, derides nationalist and Marxist visions of liberation, progress, and development, and denies the existence of unadulterated African identity, authenticity, and difference. At the same time, he claims that imperialism is exhausted and racial identities, including whiteness in South Africa, are disappearing; the world is marching towards a brave new world of globalization, from which Africa risks being excluded unless it abandons its nativist claims to

86 Meghan Vaughan, “Colonial Discourse Theory and African History, or Has Postmodernism Passed Us By?” *Social Dynamics* 20, 2 (Summer 1994): 1-23.

87 Jane L. Parpart, “Is Africa a Postmodern Invention?” *Issue: Journal of Opinion* 23, 1 (1995): 16-18.

88 Achille Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-Writing,” *Codesria Bulletin* 1 (2000): 4-19; “At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa,” in *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 22-51; “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony,” *Africa* 62 (1992): 3-37; “The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarly in the Postcolony,” *Public Culture* 4 (1992): 1-30.

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uniqueness, sovereignty, and self-determination. Mbembe's Africa is a conflicted sign, text, archive, or library, to use his terminology, marked by absences, by lack, whose actualization lies in its absorption into the universal. Indeed, he suggests that the classic borderlines – symbolic, cultural, structural, and territorial – of Africa or Africanity are vanishing, although every chance he gets he gratuitously stresses Africa's pathological exceptionalism, noting that Africa is a space marked by unusual banality, violence, and corruption. The contradictions and shortcomings in Mbembe's postcolonial history are quite evident in his book, *On the Postcolony*, in which he begins with the familiar African complaint about the devaluation and dehumanization of Africa in the Western imaginary, but the Africa he produces in his text is equally beastly; he traffics images of Africa that are no different from those of Hegel, as Quayson observes in a rather sympathetic review.⁸⁹

If there is one country where the "posts" have found their most auspicious home on the African continent it would be South Africa. Graham Pechey even claims that "South African writing has never been anything other than postmodern (as a whole practice, as an institution), though not always (technically, in the sense of its internal textual relations) postmodernist." Lewis Nkosi disagrees, noting that it is white, not black, South African writers who claim affinities to postmodernism; the latter are too preoccupied with nationalist (modernist) agendas and questions of agency. In fact, many black writers are either not aware they are postmodern, or are actively hostile to postmodernism. Thus, there is a bifurcation between black and white writing rooted in the material and ideological realities, hierarchies, and differentiations of colonialism and apartheid. More generally, Nkosi asks: "What possible readings of indigenous African-language literature can pass unmolested through the grid of current postmodernisms?" He doubts whether the "posts" have much to contribute to the readings or creation of works of African literature written in the indigenous languages.⁹⁰

89 Quayson argues that Mbembe's Hegelian depiction of Africa is not a reflection of "any conceptual weakness in Mbembe's methodological schema as from the fact that the object of study – Africa – is being examined from the standpoint of an implicitly historicist and developmentalist perspective" under which Africa always falls short of Western benchmarks. To claim that we are doomed to produce denigrating accounts of Africa is to excuse poor scholarship by Africans who indiscriminately mimic Western narratives of their own societies. See Ato Quayson, "Breaches in the Commonplace: Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*," 16 August 2001, www.h-net.msu.edu (accessed October 29, 2001).

90 Graham Pechey, "Post-Apartheid Narratives," in *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, 165; Lewis Nkosi, "Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa," in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy 1970-1995*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 84. Nkosi's concerns are shared by other critics. For example, Louise Viljoen attacks the fact that Afrikaans literature has been ignored in postcolonial criticism, which largely focuses on English-language writings, while Michael Chapman, commenting on his own book, notes that whereas *Southern African Literatures* leans toward – rather, years after – a theory and practice of reconstruction, the tendency in Western literary history is toward the

The appeal of the “posts” for some white South African scholars lies in the fact that they provide political and intellectual possibilities to identify both with trendy theory from the Euro-American academy thus affirming, in discursive terms, South Africa’s exceptionalism as an outpost of western civilization, and with the historically oppressed majority in the post-apartheid era by recognizing the coloniality of South Africa while abjuring discussion of real transformation.⁹¹ This is to suggest the “posts” are attractive to those who seek respite from dealing with the structural deformities of post-apartheid South Africa. Postcoloniality not only foregrounds race (a familiar discourse in a country bred on apartheid) rather than class (a threatening discourse to the ruling elites), it is often celebrated for the temporal closure it marks: “We were colonial; we have become postcolonial; no further fundamental transformations are required.”⁹² Nicholas Visser contends the rise of postcolonialism coincided

deconstructive mode”. See Louise Viljoen, “Postcolonialism and Recent Women’s Writing in Afrikaans.” *World Literature Today* 70, 1: (1996): 63-72 and Michael Chapman, “The Problem of Identity: South Africa, Storytelling, and Literary History,” *New Literary History* 29, 1 (1998): 93.

91 The well-known British scholar of West African popular culture, Karin Barber, echoes the view of South African exceptionalism when she writes: “More than anywhere else in Africa, South Africa’s history of industrialization, class formation, labour, and the accumulation of wealth makes it comparable, despite the peculiarity of its racial formation, to social histories of Europe. Similar questions can be asked and similar styles of analysis attempted ... In South Africa, the European paradigm of the powerful (if fractured) elite guarding a cultural canon which is taught in schools and supported by official institutions seems more readily usable. Here it may be more meaningful than in other parts of Africa — or even than in present-day Britain, come to that — to think in terms of dismantling the canon and validating the cultural experience of the excluded.” See Karin Barber, “Cultural Reconstruction in the New South Africa,” *African Studies Review* 44, 2 (2001): 182. In contrast, Laura Chrisman warns her South African colleagues about the pitfalls of insulated institutionalized cultural studies disengaged from cultural production and cultural policy as it wallows in formalism and textualism. Cultural analysis should be about more than signifying practices, the linguistic turn, or self-reflexive naval-gazing.

More explicitly, she warns of the danger of post-apartheid South Africa celebrating and allegorizing itself as the epitome of emancipated society, of ‘post-coloniality’, thereby falling prone to the idealistic versions of cultural theory, perceiving “itself as having transcended all those structural conditions which generate and require a theoretical emphasis on self-reflexivity, history and materialism.” She advises that South African cultural theorists have more to gain from other regions in the global South, including Latin America, as well as their own African neighbours, and even more importantly, would do well to insert South Africa into and analyze the incredibly rich, dynamic, and complex forms of cultural production and consumption, both past and present, all around them instead of wallowing in “texts.” See Laura Chrisman, “Appropriate Appropriations? Developing cultural studies in South Africa,” in *Transgressing Boundaries: New Directions in the Study of Culture in Africa*, eds. Brenda Cooper and Andrew Steyn, 188 (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1996), 188.

92 Nicholas Visser, “Postcoloniality of a Special Type: Theory and Its Appropriations in South Africa,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 27 (1997): 93.

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with the transition from apartheid and echoed the problematic visions of both the entrenched liberal-pluralist orientation and the theory of “colonialism of a special type” that guided the liberation movement. South African scholars who embraced postcoloniality, he suggests, seem to prefer a moderate version stripped of the more provocative and subversive assertions, thus turning it into the latest expression of liberal pluralism.

The new political dispensation brought by the end of apartheid ushered in a period of soul searching among South African historians, which facilitated the entry of the “posts.” The dominance of the Marxist-inspired radical tradition, which had risen in the 1970s in opposition to the reigning liberal and nascent Africanist traditions, and which focused on social and economic history, was called into question as the certainties of the apartheid era evaporated in the face of calls for a “new history to complement the ‘new South Africa’.”⁹³ In the 1990s there emerged, on the one hand, public history for national redemption and reconciliation and the commodified history of heritage studies and, on the other, new postmodernist and postcolonial approaches that struck at the conceptual roots of radical history with its structuralist approaches. By the end of the 1990s, according to Alan Cobley, the question to be addressed was no longer, “does social history have a future?” but ‘does history as a discrete discipline have a future?’⁹⁴ The iconoclastic intellectual climate wrought on the humanities by the post-apartheid, post-industrial, post-Marxist, postmodern, and post-positivist *weltanschauung* is the source, argues John Bottomley, of the apparent crisis affecting South African historiography.⁹⁵

Norman Etherington worries that if the predominantly white academics who espouse the “posts” “no longer profess to help us understand how the present state of things came to be, or ... assist projects of betterment, some people may conclude they are expendable.”⁹⁶ He believes there are powerful local forces that inhibit the full development of postmodernist scholarship in South Africa. In such a politically charged, deeply divided society, it is not easy to cultivate the attitude of ironic detachment, to renounce “modernist” projects, or to pronounce oneself disillusioned with the death of apartheid, as do former European Marxists who have sought refuge in postmodernism. Also, the indiscriminate celebration of cultural and ethnic differences can facilitate the return of the intellectual ghosts of apartheid. Duncan Brown offers a similar caution:

93 Alan Cobley, “Does Social History Have a Future? The Ending of Apartheid and Recent Trends in South African Historiography,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, 3 (2001): 618.

94 Cobley, 624.

95 John Bottomley, “CFP: Idealization in History,” H-SAFRICA@H-NET.MSU.EDU (accessed October 30, 2001).

96 Norman Etherington, “Post-Modernism and South African History,” *Southern African Review of Books* 44 (July/August, 1996) 10-12, 11.

[A] simple retreat from nationalism into multiplicity, division and difference can be immensely disabling in contexts, such as our own, in which rebuilding of society requires a common commitment to a sense of shared responsibility ... Specifically, I argue for what I call a recuperated or revindicated nationalism, based not on the fictions of imagined unity, but on a shared problematic: a mutual implication in a history of difference, which acknowledges local as well as global affiliations.⁹⁷

More typical is ambivalent and outright rejection of postcolonialism. The renowned Kenyan historian, Bethwell Ogot, one of the founders of nationalist historiography, takes a pragmatic view of the “posts.”⁹⁸ He notes with approval the emergence of new areas and themes of historical research that have been inspired by the “posts,” principally the growing interest in ethnicity as a historically dynamic, constantly negotiated and renegotiated, defined and redefined identity in everyday discourse. For bringing questions of ethnicity and identity and the production of knowledge and discourse to the fore, Ogot applauds the “posts,” but like many African historians he is troubled by postmodernism. Specifically, while it disavows universalism it is, in his view, itself a grand theory wedded to Eurocentric liberalism that offers no radical critique of capitalism. Moreover, its celebration of difference seems suspect for the historians of peoples whose difference was construed as a marker of their primitivity and backwardness. Also, the emphasis on the particularity, locality, and contingency of identities dissolves the cohesion of Africa as a historical unit and flies in the face of global forces that transcend individual agency. As well, postmodernism threatens well-established historical methods of studying societies, for it denies the very existence or authenticity of the domain of social reality called history.

Similarly ambivalent is the renowned Africanist social historian, Frederick Cooper, who embraces some of the postmodernist emphases, but argues that postmodernists suffer from a fallacy of self-centeredness in which they believe that they offer a more fundamental challenge to the ways of doing history than all previous “modernist” approaches, when in fact many of their critiques are as old as the modernist tradition itself.⁹⁹ Moreover, while many postcolonial scholars, especially those associated with the Indian Subaltern Studies movement “claim to be trying to ‘provincialize’ the west and its alleged values — to unmask the particularistic history beneath the claim to represent universal

97 Duncan Brown, “National Belonging and Cultural Difference: South Africa and the Global Imaginary,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, (2001): 758.

98 Toyin Falola and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, eds., *The Challenges of History and Leadership in Africa: The Essays of Bethwell Allan Ogot* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2002).

99 Frederick, Cooper, “Africa’s Pasts and Africa’s Historians,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34, 2 (2000): 298-336.

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progress — what they do often has the reverse effect — to put the west back into a timeless pedestal, an abstracted symbol of imperial arrogance rather than universal good, but still the reference point.”¹⁰⁰ And for Cooper, celebrating fragmented histories, destabilizing narratives, or dissolving structures into fragments does little to advance the writing of history (i.e., analyzing a world in which real global power coheres around powerful multinational corporations and Euro-American states) or promote clear thinking of political issues and large-scale organizing. In his most recent book, his unease with postcolonialism for its faddishness and misguided certainties is quite palpable.¹⁰¹

Then there are the rejectionists, as Korang calls them.¹⁰² The rejectionists are aggravated by what Wole Soyinka calls “the burden of memory”, Africa’s anguished experience with the barbarities of the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism, not to mention the traumas of postcolonial tyranny, which tend to overwhelm the epistemic and ethical capacities of the “posts.”¹⁰³ Korang puts me in this group. He argues that we are motivated by nationalism, to which he is partially sympathetic. He examines my lengthy critique of the “posts,” but misses the import of that critique, which was to historicize the “posts,” that is, to examine the intellectual, institutional, and ideological contexts in which they rose in the academies of the global North, and why there was discursive opposition to them in many parts of the global South, including Africa, and considerable unease among many historians and in the insurgent interdisciplines of women and gender studies, African American studies, and African

100 Cooper, 301-2. For a succinct history of Subaltern Studies and postcolonialism see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “*Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography*,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, 1(2000): 9-32. Chakrabarty traces the rise of the project from its origins in Marxist critiques against the contending imperialist and nationalist schools on Indian nationalism to its position as a preeminent tendency in postcolonial studies dominated by literary theorists. The journey from history to the linguistic turn started from the anti-elitist approach of the subaltern historians that led them to embrace history from below in a search for the autonomous domain of the politics of the people (i.e., subaltern politics, distinct from the politics of the elite), a position which challenged prevailing stagist theories of history that saw peasants as pre-modern and pre-political. This, in turn, necessitated new conscious strategies of reading the archives for the textual properties of documents to discern the representations and hidden agency of the subaltern. Ironically, what started as an insurrectionary project quickly became a safe and sedate discourse that was quickly institutionalized at elite American universities, as noted sardonically by John Beverley, “The Dilemma of Subaltern Studies at Duke,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, 1 (2000): 33-44.

101 Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*.

102 Korang, “Useless Provocation or Meaningful Challenge?”

103 Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). For a succinct discussion of history and memory in African historiography where the question of remembering is sharpened by debates over the methodological construct of “oral tradition”, see Richard Roberts, “History and Memory: The Power of Statist Narratives,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33, 3 (2000): 513-522.

studies.¹⁰⁴ Also, he oversimplifies my critique by reducing it to nationalist sentiment and totally ignoring the materialist thrust of my historical writing, my discomfort with the ways in which postcolonialism underplays the powerful structural and material contexts that shape historical change and the contemporary world. I am also critical of postcolonialism because it recentres colonialism in African history, and has a propensity to void this history of movement and meaning outside the colonial moment.¹⁰⁵ Postcolonialism reinforces what Mudimbe calls in *The Invention of Africa* the “colonizing structure” of Eurocentric discourses of Africa; it colonizes the periodization of African history by reinscribing the tripartite division of African history into the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial that an earlier generation of African historians struggled so hard to overturn.¹⁰⁶ Put quite simply, postcolonialism does not provide us with the methodological or theoretical tools to examine African history — the longest in the world — before the colonial interlude.

To be sure, I am quite sensitive, indeed favourably disposed, to some of the insights and contributions postcolonialism and the other “posts” have made to modern African historiography. They have helped to open up or refine important themes, topics, and trends in the field. Admittedly, some of these topics and themes were not entirely ignored by historians before, but in the hands of post-colonial theory they have gained a new emphasis, acquired fresh focus, and assumed greater prominence. If I were to isolate the key contributions of post-colonialism to African historical studies, I would underscore four: the nature of metropolitan-colonial connections, the power of colonial discourse, the dynamics of reproduction, and the reconfiguration of resistance. Prior to the rise of post-colonial studies, there was a tendency to see the metropolitan-colonial connection in one direction, to emphasize the flow of ideas, influences, institutions, and even individuals from the metropole to the colony. Postcolonialism has stressed the importance of reverse flows, of flows in both directions. The metropole was made by the imperial project as much as the colonies; Europe and Africa, whiteness and blackness, were mutually constituted. More than commodities came from the colonies: new constructs of nation, race, gender, class, and modernity in the metropole were fashioned and refashioned in the combustible furnace of empire. Nineteenth and twentieth-century imperialism reconfigured all aspects of European society from culture, science, and the arts, to ideas and practices of sex-

104 Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *Rethinking Africa's Globalization*, 229-293.

105 Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “Changing Historiographical Perspectives on Colonialism,” in *Retrospect and Prospect of African Historiography: Colonialism and Nationalism*, ed. Katsuhiko Kitagawa (Osaka: Japan Center for Area Studies Occasional Paper No. 26, 2005), 5-21.

106 V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*. As well, Jan Vansina vigorously attacks the ways in which the colonial perspective has become more determinant than the precolonial. See Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).

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uality, femininity, masculinity, domesticity, and motherhood.¹⁰⁷ These interventions have led to the “new imperial history” that brings the colonies back to the metropole and reconfigures the webs of empire.¹⁰⁸

Secondly, we are more aware of the role of colonial discourse as an incarnation and instrument of power. We understand better the discursive processes through which ideas and images of the colonized and colonizer were created, how the very notion of “Africa” was invented, as Mudimbe has demonstrated in his magisterial tomes, *The Invention of Africa* and *The Idea of Africa*,¹⁰⁹ through the conceptual registers of the new academic disciplines and the disciplining ideologies of missionary Christianity and the institutions of colonial education; how hierarchies of difference and African alterity were produced and reproduced through the temporal, spatial, and social teleologies and epistemic violence of Eurocentric history, geography, anthropology, linguistics, and philosophy; how power was located, acted out, and fought over in specific institutions and contexts, as well as among various social groups and projects.¹¹⁰ In turn, the discourses fashioned in the metropolises and the colonies intersected and circulated in complex and contradictory ways, as Zine Magubane has shown in her study on the circulation, back and forth, of the cultural imaginaries of race, class, and gender between South Africa and Britain in the

107 See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, Sexuality and the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), and Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Catherine Hall makes this point quite eloquently when she writes, “[f]rom the moment of history’s inception as a discipline, English historians have, with a few notable exceptions, constructed the nation as separate from the empire ... In writing *Civilising Subject* my imperative was to contribute to breaking the silence over ‘race’ and Englishness and their links to masculinity, and to rethink English identities in the context of imperial relations ... Racial thinking was part of the furniture of nineteenth-century society, and relations of empire were what made possible the exceptionalism of ‘the island race’.” See Catherine Hall, “Narratives of Empire: A Reply to Critics,” *Small Axe*, 14 (September 2003): 172-3.

108 Clearly, postcolonial theory has had much to do with the “renaissance” of imperial history, as Douglas Peers calls it, whose demise was widely predicted two decades before, and with the growth in discourses of globalization, transnationalism, and the field of world history. Some of the academic and public interest in imperial history is fueled by metropolitan “nostalgia for an imagined age of certainties and stable hierarchies, the experience of and debate over multiculturalism, and the realization that imperialism not only had profound consequences upon ruler and ruled alike, but that it continues to exert powerful influences on the contemporary world.” See Douglas Peers, “Is Humpty Dumpty Back Together Again?: The Revival of Imperial History and the Oxford History of the British Empire,” *Journal of World History* 13, 2 (2002): 453.

109 V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

110 According to Lewis Gordon, Mudimbe’s concept of invention has generated a lot of intellectually productive work in African philosophy. See Lewis Gordon, “African Cultural Studies and Contemporary Africana Philosophy,” in *The Study of Africa Volume 1: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters*, ed. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (Dakar, Senegal: Codesria Book Series, 2006), 438-464.

ideological world of nineteenth-century capitalism, which dissolves any contrived binaries between empire and colony but also between imperialist and nationalist, European and African historiographies and opens doors for fruitful intellectual conversations.¹¹¹

Thirdly, postcolonial analyses of the dynamics of reproduction have brought important new insights on the question of the social reproduction of the colonial order, enriching Marxist-inspired studies on labour reproduction (the formation of working classes and working class struggles) and feminist research on women's productive and reproductive roles in colonial society (in subsidizing migrant labour and the colonial economy as a whole despite their marginalization). Studies of what can be called "intimate colonialism"¹¹² have sharpened the focus on sexuality, the shifting constructions of gender and racial identities, and colonial representations. African sexuality and its control and representations were central to ideologies of colonial domination. In colonial discourse female bodies symbolized Africa as the conquered land, and the alleged hyper-fecundity and sexual profligacy of African men and women made Africa an object of colonial desire and derision, a wild space of pornographic pleasures in need of sexual policing. Sexuality was implicated in all forms of colonial rule as an intimate encounter that could be used simultaneously to maintain and erode racial difference, and create racially mixed intermediaries, and as a process essential for the reproduction of human labour power for the colonial economy, all of which demanded close surveillance and control especially of African female sexuality. Postcolonial studies have helped inspire the study of colonial masculinities, how different masculinities — dominant and hegemonic and subordinate and subversive — were produced and performed in different class, racial, institutional, and spatial contexts, and changed over time.¹¹³

Finally, postcolonialism has reconfigured studies of anti-colonial resistance. African scholarship on nationalism and decolonization used to be preoccupied with two overriding questions; first, the social content and composition of anti-colonial resistance, and second, the continuities and discontinuities marked by decolonization. By the 1980s the old accounts of elite politics and heroic resistance had largely been abandoned in favour of analyses of resistance by peasants, workers, and women, and from the turn of the 1990s more attention was paid to everyday forms of resistance and the dis-

111 Zine Magubane, *Bringing the Empire Home: Race, Class, and Gender in Britain and Colonial South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

112 See Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) and Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

113 See Lisa A. Lindsay and Stephan F. Miescher, eds., *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2003); and Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell, eds., *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

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courses among the various subaltern groups including the youth.¹¹⁴ Some historians embraced the perspectives of the Indian Subaltern Studies group and their notion of “alternative nationalisms” among peasants that took seriously both peasant action and intellectual production.¹¹⁵ In short, more historians sought to write resistance with a small “r” rather than a capitalized “R” without losing the connections between the subaltern resistances and the larger and fluid constructs of colonialism, as Frederick Cooper insisted.¹¹⁶ As for decolonization, in the 1960s nationalist scholars were inclined to see independence as ushering in a radical break with colonialism. Postcolonial theory regards decolonization not so much as false, as Fanon pronounced in his searing indictment of colonial elites, but as an irrelevant metanarrative of nationalism.¹¹⁷

The Limits of the Postcolonial Pasts

Despite these contributions, I harbour deep misgivings about postcolonialism, as do many African historians. The “posts” have apparently also found little favour among historians in other regions such in the global South such as China.¹¹⁸ In fact, postcolonialism has yet to be fully incorporated even in American studies,¹¹⁹

114 Eric Allina-Pisano, “Resistance and the Social History of Africa,” *Journal of Social History*, 37, 1 (2001): 187-198. This has also inspired studies of everyday life under colonial rule, which has served to anthropologize history and historicize anthropology, see Adam Jones, “Introduction: Historical Writing About Everyday Life,” Special Issue, *Everyday Life in Colonial Africa*, *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2002): 5-16.

115 Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

116 Frederick Cooper, “Conflict and Colonialism: Rethinking Colonial African History.” *The American Historical Review*, 99, 5 (1994): 1516-1545; *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

117 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1963).

118 Arif Dirlik, “Postmodernism and Chinese History,” *Boundary 2*, 28, 3 (2001):19-60, attributes this to the newness of postmodernism on the Chinese intellectual scene, orthodoxy and political controls within the historical profession, and the feeling that postmodernism makes little sense for a country that has yet to go through modernity; also see Liu Kang, “Is There an Alternative to (Capitalist) Globalization? The Debate about Modernity in China,” in *The Cultures of Globalization*, eds. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, 165 (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998), who tells us, “postmodernism, and related theoretical discourses such as postcolonialism, seem to be largely eschewed by the intellectual ‘mainstream,’ as newly imported Western theoretical shibboleths ill-suited to Chinese situations.”

119 See Malini Schueller, “Postcolonial American Studies,” *American Literary History* 16, 1 (2004): 171, 173, who argues that “postcolonial studies can intervene to suggest how US cultural history has always been a contradictory set of narratives with an endless entanglement of imperial and colonial experiences, and native resistances” and that it is important to bring to an end the “critical isolationism and exceptionalism in American studies.” The article is a review essay on two books by Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt, eds., *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), and Richard King, ed. *Postcolonial America* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

let alone in comparative Pan-American studies.¹²⁰ Many of the critiques of the “posts” have already been noted above. I share the concerns of those who caution against the abandonment of categories that were critical to earlier revolutionary discourses, especially nation and class, and the mischievous celebration of hybridity and borderlands, which encourage the sanitization and depiction of imperialism and colonialism as shared cultures, negotiated discursive spaces.¹²¹ As Nana Wilson-Tagoe has reminded us in her critique of Bhabha’s valorization of colonial ambivalence and hybridity, colonialism was a space and moment that entailed not just negotiations, but negations; the specificities of African subjectification and the persistent imaginings of national liberation were and continue to be written in pain and suffering, sweat and blood.¹²² The multiplication of identities, memories, and resistances surely must not be used to forget the larger contexts, the hierarchies of power between the colonizer and the colonized, Europe and Africa, the unequal impact the empire had and left behind for the metropolises and the colonies, the fact that imperial power was upheld by physical force not simply by ideas and images, that it was underpinned by material structures not simply ideological constructs, by political economy not simply by discursive economy.

The erasures of revolution, nation, class, history, and reality turn the “posts,” even if they may have started as critiques, into legitimating ideologies of contemporary global configurations of power and production. Foreclosed are the possibilities of envisioning a world beyond the present, imagining alternatives to capitalist modernity. In so far as capitalism is not as fragmented as it is assumed, the “posts” bolster the capitalist order itself by becoming part of the ideological apparatus that sustains the inability of exploited nations and social classes, splintered in their various cultural identities, to mobilize counterhegemonically. I agree with Kanishka Chowdhury that the analytical power of postcolonial theory will remain limited unless it tempers its facile celebration of newness, cosmopolitanism, and globalization in a world reeling from endless war and deepening inequalities, incorporates a Marxist-inspired anti-capitalist critique, places its favorite tropes of disjuncture and disorder in the context of the enhanced regulatory power of contemporary global capitalism,

120 For a fascinating exposition on the advantages and disadvantages of postcolonial theory in subverting and reifying the binaries of colonized and colonizer and eliding important regional differences for Pan-American studies, see Jeff Karem, “On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Postcolonial Theory for Pan-American Study,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 1, 3 (2001): 87-116. For an intriguing look at the possible application of postcolonial theory to the US South, see Jon Smith, “Postcolonial, Black, and Nobody’s Margin: The US South and New World Studies,” *American Literary History* 16, no. 1 (2004): 144-161.

121 Arif Dirlik, *Postmodernity’s Histories: The Past as Legacy and Project* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000).

122 Nana Wilson-Tagoe, “Post-Colonial Literary Theory and the Theorizing of African Literature,” *Yearbook of Comparative Literature and General Literature* 43 (1995): 110-119.

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reconnects culture to political economy, pays attention to both localized or microstruggles and broad anti-imperialist struggles, considers how capitalist adjustments are reinstating and restructuring gender identities, restores focus on nationalism (because the nation-state constitutes the site through which hegemonic capitalism operates and resistance against it can be organized, suggesting that borders are strengthening not eroding for labour), reconnects narratives of the diaspora and the nation, and refrains from assuming that transnational space is inevitably progressive.¹²³

Postcolonialism poses an even more fundamental challenge for African historical studies: the fixation on colonialism has recentred one of the greatest metanarratives of African history that nationalist historians worked so hard to decentre and it has put Eurocentricism back on the pedestal. A similar process has been observed for Latin America where there has been a clear reversal in “efforts to rethink South America from within. The outlook, theories, methodologies, and research agendas of Eurocentric perspectives have once more been embraced” and thanks to this reorientation “the crisis of European history — assumed as universal — becomes the crisis of all history”; yet, the crisis of historical reason is accompanied by the triumph of instrumental reason.¹²⁴ Before the rise of the “posts” in the last two decades of the twentieth-century African historiography was dominated by four traditions: the imperialist tradition that arose from the 15th century out of Eurocentric travel writings and histories, the nationalist tradition that emerged from eighteenth and nineteenth century vindicationist writings by western-educated African and diasporan African activist-scholars, and the radical tradition that grew in the second half of the 20th century and included Marxist, dependency, feminist, and environmental paradigms which challenged the elitist certainties of the other two traditions. Not only did each of these paradigms offer varied conceptions and characteri-

123 Kanishka Chowdhury, “Interrogating ‘Newness’: Globalization and Postcolonial Theory in the Era of Endless War,” *Cultural Critique* 62 (Winter 2006): 149. Deepika Bahri, “Predicting the Past,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 65, 3 (2004): 484, 486, argues that postcolonial studies trade on newness by offering “material with the appearance of newness in the light of First World discovery. The marginal is always news to the dominant order.” The field rides on the “charm of novelty” for an academy which “is increasingly dependent on a publishing industry unabashedly oriented toward the market and its constant hunger for the new.”

124 Edgardo Lander, “Eurocentricism and Colonialism in Latin American Social Thought,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 519-532. Lander points out “these displacements ensue in a context of defeat of the revolutionary and reformist movements, the profound imprinting of the authoritarian experience in the Southern Cone (Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina), the crisis of Marxism, the collapse of real socialism, and the consequent loss of utopian confidence” (521) These changes are also tied to institutional transformation in the universities, including the displacement of social science to private centres and the growing formalism of economics, the introduction of new evaluation systems that valorize international (read foreign) publishing, all of which are engendered by the ideology and practices of neoliberalism.

zations of colonialism, they also differed in the place and importance they accorded the colonial moment in African history.

Imperialist approaches, which prevailed in the early twentieth century, emphasized the civilizing mission and impact of colonialism. Critiques against this tradition, combined with nationalist struggles that led to decolonization culminated in the rise of nationalist historiography, which emphasized African activities and agency. From the 1970s, influenced by a growing sense of pessimism about the developmental and democratic capacities of the postcolonial state and the rise of militant ideologies and social movements, “radical” approaches emerged, centered on Marxist and dependency theories, which highlighted the economic and social depredations and effects of colonialism, as well as feminist and environmental studies, which stressed the role of gender and ecology in the construction of colonial identities, societies, and political economies. In the 1990s, the “posts” were increasingly used to reinterpret colonialism’s complex cultural and discursive dynamics, their ascendancy followed the demise of socialist regimes and ideologies, the rise of neoliberalism, and the proliferation of identity politics fueled, in part, by the dismantling of one party state and military dictatorships and the electoral contestations of multi-party democracy.¹²⁵

Imperialist and nationalist historiographies represent almost diametrically opposed views of the place and impact of colonialism in African history, one regarding it as a decisive moment, the other as a parenthesis. To the imperialists, colonialism in fact brought Africa into history, for in their view Africa “proper,” to use Hegel’s moniker – from which North Africa was excised – was the land of the “Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit,” exhibiting “the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state.”¹²⁶ European colonialism, therefore, was depicted as a civilizing mission undertaken to historicize and humanize Africans. Not surprisingly, during the colonial period itself in-depth study of African societies was largely left to anthropology, which with its functionalist-

125 The literature on African historiographies is vast. For a sample see, R. Hunt Davis, “Interpreting the Colonial Period in African History,” *African Affairs* 72, 289 (1973): 383-400; Frederick Cooper, “Africa and the World Economy,” *African Studies Review*, 24, 2/3 (1981): 1-86; John Lonsdale, “States and Social Processes in Africa: A Historical Survey,” *African Studies Review* 31, 2&3 (1981): 393-422; Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises* (Dakar: Codesria Book Series, 1997); Bogumil Jewsiewicki and David Newbury, eds., *African Historiographies: What History for Which Africa* (Beverly Hills, California: Sage, 1986); Bogumil Jewsiewicki, “African Historical Studies: Academic Knowledge As ‘Usable Past’ and Radical Scholarship,” *African Studies Review* 32, no. 3 (1989): 1-76; Mamadou Diouf, *Historians and Histories: What For? African Historiography Between State and the Communities* (Amsterdam and Calcutta: Sepsis and CSSSC, 2003); Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings, eds., *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2003).

126 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 91, 93.

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positivist paradigms and ethnographic present, exonerated, if not extolled, colonialism, while after colonialism imperialist historians retreated to imperial history.¹²⁷ Nationalist historians offered an ideological and methodological revolt against imperialist historiography. Using new sources including oral tradition, historical linguistics, and historical anthropology together with written and archaeological sources, they chronicled the histories of African states and societies before the European colonial conquest and celebrated the growth and eventual triumph of nationalism during the colonial era. They painstakingly sought to unravel African activity, adaptations, choice, and initiative. Led by J. F. Ade Ajayi in Anglophone Africa and Cheikh Anta Diop in Francophone Africa, they emphasized continuity in Africa's long history and reduced colonialism to an episode, a digression, a footnote that altered African cultures and societies only slightly.¹²⁸ In this narrative independence marked a moment of historical recovery, in which the agency of the precolonial past was restored and reconnected to the postcolonial future. The linear and celebratory tales of nationalist historiography were later found wanting by numerous critics.

While both the dependency and Marxist scholars focused on the exploitative economic structures and processes of colonialism, the former were more interested in explaining the external forces that produced and reproduced Africa's underdevelopment and the latter preferred to concentrate on the internal dynamics. To the *dependentistas*, colonialism marked a second stage in Africa's incorporation into an unequal world capitalist system, ushered from the fifteenth century with the onset of the Atlantic slave trade. Marxist scholars sought to transcend the ubiquitous and homogeneous capitalism of dependency theory. Colonialism, they argued, entailed the articulation of pre-capitalist or indigenous modes of production and the capitalist mode of production ushered in by colonialism. The feminist and environmental historians were not tied to any particular periodization, but to many of them colonialism was so deeply implicated in the construction of Africa's contemporary regimes of gender relations and environmental management that colonialism became one of their primary objects of analysis and critique.

It can be seen that unlike the nationalists, the imperialist, dependency, and Marxist historians share the view that the colonial period is decisive in African history. But they differ in their characterization and conceptualization of its place and impact. Like the nationalists and unlike the imperialists, the *dependentistas* and Marxists see colonialism as an intrusive moment in the *longue*

127 Diane Lewis, "Anthropology and Colonialism," *Current Anthropology* 14, no. 5 (1973): 581-602.

128 J. F. Ad Ajayi, "The Continuity of African Institutions under Colonialism," in *Emerging Themes of African History*, ed. Terence O. Ranger (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968), 189-200; Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Chicago: L. Hill, 1974).

durée of African history. In so far as dependency analyses concentrate on the external determinations of underdevelopment they diminish African agency and echo imperialist accounts of African history, whereas the Marxist emphasis on internal production processes and social relations resonates with nationalist historiography. Postcolonialism has reinstated colonialism as the pivot around which African history spins; it has revived the Eurocentric/imperialist tradition and reinforced the presentist orientation of current African historiography. It has accelerated the demise of precolonial history, narrowing the temporal scope of African history. It has also circumscribed the spatial scope of African history, notwithstanding the fetish made of transnationalism and the contributions postcolonial studies have made to diaspora studies, in so far as Africa's global connections in postcolonial narratives all lead back to modern Europe.

This oversimplifies the long history of Africa's relations with Asia and even Europe itself that long antedated the emergence of the European-dominated world system of the last few centuries. That, in my view, is the ultimate danger that postcolonialism poses for African historiography: its denial of temporal depth and spatial breadth to African history, its concession to the Eurocentric epistemic and civilizational conceit of European historical preeminence. It is problematic enough to reduce world history to the last 5,000 years of recorded history, let alone subsume it to the trajectory of European history since the rise of European global hegemony only two and half centuries ago, dominance that is already waning and is unlikely to last this century. The arduous task of rescuing both African history and world history from the burdens and blindfolds of Eurocentric historiography cannot be accomplished by postcolonial theory. The project began by the nationalist historians who produced the UNESCO and Cambridge histories of Africa needs to continue, even as we discard some of their outdated questions and answers, enriched by new historical sources, methods, and theories.¹²⁹

The challenge now, as I see it, is to recentre African history by deepening and globalizing it in its temporal scope and spatial scale, taking seriously the place of Africa in world history or what some call ecumenical world history, and what I call human history. Lest we forget, Africa has always been central, and will remain so, to its peoples and to humanity as a whole, whose cradle this ancient continent is, and where much of its history on this remarkable planet resides. The larger imperative, which is as much intellectual as it is moral, is to tell the story of the entire human community in a manner that is more balanced and more accurate, that accounts for the contributions of all societies in their

129 *UNESCO General History of Africa*, 8 volumes (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1981-1993); *Cambridge History of Africa*, 8 volumes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977-1985).

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localities and complex interactions to the great human drama that started unfolding two hundred thousand years ago with the emergence of our species, homo sapiens.¹³⁰

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130 For a fuller discussion of the methodological and conceptual challenges of producing world history or human history, see Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Banishing the Silences: Towards the Globalization of African History," paper presented at the 11th General Assembly of the Council for Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), *Rethinking African Development: Beyond Impasse, Towards Alternatives*, Maputo, Mozambique, 6 - 10 December 2005; Jerry H. Bentley, "Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History," *Journal of World History* 16, 1 (2005): 51-82, sees "ecumenical world history" as a way of transcending the ideologically driven totalizing and teleological histories of both the right and the left.