

# ON POSTCOLONIALISM

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*For Rachel Signer the postcolonial is the unavoidable condition of contemporary life for everyone.*

Any monolithic descriptive term necessarily emerges as an abstraction of particularities, and in so defining itself, will reduce important complexities to the lowest common denominator. Thus, the concept of “the” postcolonial is indeed problematic, although it fills the unglamorous but functional role of being an umbrella over many ambiguities which characterize life in the world. Some of the troubling aspects of the term might stem from the question of identity, which is constantly being debated in the context of historical understandings of race, class, and gender. Other problems arise with the prefix, “post,” as an indicator of structural change. If independence from colonialism was meant to free the Slave from its Master, then the question remains, why hasn’t this succeeded - and, one might add, what would such success actually look like? For this reason, “the” postcolonial” comes to refer, albeit begrudgingly, to an incomplete phase in which spatial and temporal chains have yet to be broken. As time goes on, however, it appears that the chains are not always connected to an obvious target, but rather, they are wound tightly around the activities and dreams we engage with.

In other words, the term “postcolonial” is complicated by the reconfigured shape which Empire has

morphed into. No longer is it necessary for Britain to control South Africa’s government in order to continue capital investments and profits, as neoliberalization has ensured flexible labor forces, nearly unrestricted access to environmental resources, and a constant demand from unsatiable consumers for cheap goods. This is to say that, in our postmodern world, as the nation-state has been increasingly deterritorialized and networks of commerce have stepped in to produce the neoliberal subject, we wonder what it means for a nation to be “postcolonial” and independent - if it means anything at all.

Perhaps these ambiguities have rendered the term “postcolonial” something of a floating signifier, which can make its usage vague and misleading. “Postcolonial” can signify a positive or negative value judgment depending on the predicate it attaches itself to. Thus it is that “postcolonial writers” are seen as revolutionary vanguards who wage intellectual warfare against the structures of injustice which defined their own upbringings. Meanwhile, the “postcolonial condition” is portrayed as one of extreme inequalities, corruption, excessiveness, hybridized identities, and general confusion. Clearly there is a discursive difference here between “the postcolonial” as a site of critique, and as a world in which one lives, struggles, and makes compromises with faulty social contracts. Furthermore, it seems that, if we are to take “postcolonialism” to be a temporal stage following independence from an oppressive and exploitative master, then there are various struggles which have been left out of the discussion of the term. Wouldn’t Olympe de Gouges be a postcolonial writer, then? Was Harvey Milk, the first homosexual mayor of a city in the United States, also a postcolonial politician? If “the” postcolonial

can only refer to a formal (past) relationship with a European nation-state, then the term appears to be limited.

In a 2007 volume of the journal *Critical Interventions*, Senegalese, U.S.-based visual artist Modou Dieng holds the view that “postcolonialism” can be distinguished from “postcoloniality,” the former being the lived-conditions of previously colonized nations, and the latter being those of the colonizing nations. He describes the contemporary American scene as a “collage of cultures,” made of “juxtaposition and superposition.” He writes: “Postcoloniality is by essence a transgression of all that is established, of stereotypes and taboos. It is the acceptance of the multiple. It expresses a clash or constellation of cultures which allows the artist to construct from various materials a hybrid home called Art.” Here, Dieng is articulating another problem with the term “postcolonialism,” which is that it re-creates illusions of binaries in a world which is increasingly defined by networks of power and accompanying regimes of subjectivity. He does, however, suggest a hopefulness that is produced within the postcolonial world, based in the convergence of multiple histories and the creative potential of such meetings.

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One might say that postcolonialism, and the postcolony, cannot be reduced to any one condition, place, or theory. The postcolonial is the world we live in, and

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1 Dieng, Modou. “Transgression: African Contemporary Art and a Postcolonial World.” *Critical Interventions* 1, July 2007. David Krut Publishing, Johannesburg.

we are it. It is a way of being in this world, a world of fragmented histories swept under the rug, in which each and every one of us dwells in inquietude and confusion. Yet, it is a world which requires, above all, conviviality. And such being-together will only come with a recognition of the inseparability, as it has always been, of the Self and the Other. For “the” postcolonial to take the shape of post-Orientalism, it must first reach post-binarism, which means that critiques of the world must concurrently be critiques of ourselves, the norms we live by, and the institutions we construct through them.