

**‘Cutting race down to analytical size: UK edition’  
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At every museum, art gallery, and library in London, books about race and empire are displayed in pride of place, the covers gaudier when ‘White’ is in the title (fragility? privilege?), statelier when ‘Empire’ is. To be liberal is to engage with these interventions, to read at least one of these books, to have a few on the shelf, to never again walk through the British Museum uncritically or unironically. Of course, conservative British folk are incensed by all this wokeist revisionism, and thus the stage is set for culture war.

This dynamic is at the centre of British cultural politics and can be transposed to many other national settings. It is a story we know. For scholars of race, racism and (post)colonialism, this everywhere ‘race talk’ can be dizzying. A set of clear oppositions gets set up, and we know on which side we must stand. *We* think racism is forceful, pervasive and terrible too. *We* also want to historicise the present through the colonial. And yet, much of what we see, hear and read from this side of the barricades is unconvincing, unsettling, perhaps even reactionary. From corporate feel-good diversity initiatives to the apocalyptic doom-mongering of afro-pessimism, and all the narcissistic identitarianisms in between, it is clear that merely to agree on the centrality of race opens up more questions than it resolves. In any case, barricades and bunkers are not conducive to critical thought. Scholarship and theory must necessarily transcend the facile oppositions staged by the culture wars.

Debates and disagreement within this broad academic field partly map on to whether the work is decolonial, postcolonial, or anticolonial. While it is easy to deride afro-pessimism,<sup>1</sup> in my experience its exponents are not seriously read by many people – and afro-pessimist inclinations seem to be less prevalent now than a few years ago. What is especially popular today, as motif and sensibility, is the decolonial. In some places, this is invoked sloppily, with little attention to its theoretical specificity – students (and some academics) invoke coloniality as though it were synonymous with colonialism – and yet for others coloniality/decoloniality is summoned because the focus is on knowledge, epistemology and modernity. To talk about delinking from European thought, while writing from Europe and North America, has a peculiar appeal, usually accompanied by some vague although powerfully felt reference to indigenous epistemologies.

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<sup>1</sup> For excellent critiques, see Annie Olaloku-Teriba. "Afro-Pessimism and the (un) logic of anti-blackness." *Historical Materialism* 26.2 (2018): 96-122; Kevin Ochieng Okoth "The Flatness of Blackness: Afro-Pessimism and the Erasure of Anti-Colonial Thought. *Salvage* #7 (2020); Loic Wacquant "Afropessimism's Radical Abdication, some sociological notes." *New Left Review* 144 (2023): 97-109

It is interesting that such claims feel so alluring to people in the metropole – there is not space here to consider psychoanalytic investments in disavowal, self-flagellation, and the romanticisation of the premodern – but decolonial approaches have not gone unchallenged. Perspectives from ‘the South’ have been especially edifying (a recurring theme). The Nigerian scholar Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò distinguishes formal colonisation from decolonisation<sup>2</sup>, which demands that ex-colonies ‘forswear, on pain of being forever under the yoke of colonisation, any and every cultural, political, intellectual, social and linguistic artefact, idea, process, institution and practice that retains even the slightest whiff of the colonial past’. He is sceptical about this ‘absolutisation of colonialism and its supposedly almost undefeatable capacity to bend the will of the colonised’.<sup>2</sup>

In the South African context, Niall Reddy and Michael Nassen Smith develop similar points when reflecting on the fallist movement, although their target is ‘postcolonial theory’:

“[D]ecolonization collapses quickly into civilizational binaries: conflict is viewed as originating in the inherent oppressiveness of ideas and subjectivities associated with “western modernity,” while solutions turn on promoting ideologies that are authentically “black” or “African.””<sup>3</sup>

While their argument, and others in *Africa is a Country*, critiques decolonisation<sup>2</sup> for its disconnection from ‘material realities’ (in a *Jacobin* mode), the more interesting questions relate to conceptions of and claims to universalism, humanism and modernity. Ato Sekyi-Otu’s reflections are suggestive here:

[S]uch is the vicious paradox of some critiques of ‘universalism’ from Africa and the global South: their obsessive-compulsive Eurocentrism; their willful captivity to the very discourse they are avowedly sworn to divulge and dethrone; their exclusive preoccupation with the things the West does with words in order to enforce its particulars as universals; their trained habit, in contrast, of being utterly incurious regarding what our grandmothers do with words of evaluative judgment that have universals for their predicates. It is as if purveyors of Eurocentrism and their critics drink from the same cup and end up inebriated in separate beds but with kindred distractions. That must be the reason why ‘universalism’ is chief among those ritual anathemas of anti-imperialism or, as they say ‘counter-hegemonic’ discourse.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Táíwò, Olúfẹ́mi. *Against decolonisation: Taking African agency seriously*. Hurst Publishers, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> [https://africasacountry.com/2019/07/how-not-to-change-a-curriculum?utm\\_source=pocket\\_shared](https://africasacountry.com/2019/07/how-not-to-change-a-curriculum?utm_source=pocket_shared), see also <https://africasacountry.com/2018/11/postcolonial-theory-and-the-strong-arm-of-identity>

<sup>4</sup> Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays* (2019, pg 15)

In the British context, commentators from the left have also criticised the epistemic-centrism of decolonial studies.<sup>5</sup> Miri Davidson is writing about the synergies between decolonial studies and the nativist Right. Walter Mignolo's fateful endorsement, later retracted, of Sai Deepak's Hindutva tract is the most obvious touchpoint,<sup>6</sup> but Davidson shows how both decolonials and the New Right in Europe place emphasis on absolute and unassailable cultural and epistemological differences between groups.<sup>7</sup> Radical indigenous critique comes in many stripes, and the whites like playing to this tune too (what is nativism if not the politics of native priority, invoking firstness, autochthony, and indigeneity?). In a classroom setting I have found it useful to simply suggest to students that there is a tension between some of their heroes, and that this is something they should think about; the decolonial school cannot be made consonant with the work of Fanon, CLR James, Du Bois, Edward Said, Sylvia Wynter, Stuart Hall, etc, just because all are felt to be suitably radical. Paul Gilroy's excavation of countermodernities, reparative humanisms and the openness of lived culture provides an indispensable resource here.

What is perhaps trickier (because closer to home) is when thoughtful, well-read and politically engaged individuals rely heavily on invocations of the West, The Global South, and imperialism, and one senses their detachment from the emergent realities of a complex global order, widened by their felt need to make big, bold and radical claims. There are several analytical problems at play here. I find it helpful to think of this tendency as the anticolonial mode; it is broadly leftist/Marxist and endorses anticolonial nationalisms only to the extent that they are part of a broader internationalism. In this account, the point of understanding the horror of racism is to better arm liberation, struggle, and perhaps revolution. The afropessimists are derided for their antipolitics, the decolonials for their reduction of power to knowledge, but there is agreement on the ongoing force of Western imperialism and White supremacy. Of course, one can hardly dispute that Western violence and white racism matter, but there comes a point where such shorthands obstruct thought and analysis, where they lose their descriptive purchase on the world. What I want to consider in this paper is whether it might be useful to decentre race and the colonial. Jacob Dlamini has spoken

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<sup>5</sup> Kevin Ochieng Okoth, Decolonisation and its Discontents: Rethinking the Cycle of National Liberation, 2021 <https://salvage.zone/decolonisation-and-its-discontents-rethinking-the-cycle-of-national-liberation/>

<sup>6</sup> "Sai Deepak builds a strong decolonial argument disengaging from modern Western orthodoxy of the either/or, and proposes instead the decolonial logic of neither/nor. He does it by means of a detailed and careful reconstitution of knowledges, ways of knowing and patterns of sensing that were destituted and continue to be so in the name of progress, democracy and economic development, all under the mantra that more is better" - Walter D. Mignolo

<sup>7</sup> Miri Davidson, 'Sea and Earth', *Sidecar* 2024 <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/sea-and-earth>

about cutting race down to analytical size,<sup>8</sup> and this represents my first working attempt.

Clearly, my timing feels off. Questioning the force of racism appears strange, even dangerous, as Trump returns to office, enlisting the military to detain and deport millions of racialised migrants, and further emboldening the radical right across Europe. The global right is centrally concerned with immigration, demography, birth rates, and national decline, scanning the border for signs of contamination and promising greatness through ethnic and national coherence.<sup>9</sup> In this context, the challenge might instead be to consider how racism inevitably gets reworked in new conditions (climate breakdown; digital/platform capitalism; polycrisis),<sup>10</sup> and how racialisation works through metonyms (nation, religion, gender). If racism is a 'scavenger ideology',<sup>11</sup> then the challenge is to track its slippery and historically specific formation. For many, this requires a definition of race as that which differentiates and produces expendable life on the basis of fixed and immovable difference. Racial difference might be more or less biological, but geography, culture and descent always provide its raw material. Racism is about making hierarchies of human type to exclude different/inferior groups from social and physical space. With this more maximalist definition of racism, we can proceed to analyse how racial conceptions and racist practices function at different scales.

This is compelling. It has organised my teaching and writing hitherto. And yet, I want to ask what happens when we loosen our grip on the racial, emphasising a radical scepticism with regards to claims about race, racism, and racialisation, noticing when our claims are vague, imprecise or primarily normative (racism helps us name the horror and dehumanisation, and so it becomes our crutch, granting our writing some ethical purchase and narrative direction). In this sceptical mode, we might instead try on some different goggles – especially important when so many people seem to be wearing ours and missing the point. I am encouraging scholars of race and racism to develop a curiosity about what other analytics are available. This is not about downplaying, rejecting or abandoning the analysis of race, or about equivocating on the need to unmask and challenge racism (although the fact that I need to write such a qualification reflects the thorniness at play). Such an exercise is not to banish racism from our lexicon, but perhaps by letting go of race, however temporarily, some new frequencies become audible.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies/publications/2020/aug/sprc-conversation-jacob-dlamini>

<sup>9</sup> Zhang, Chenchen. "Postcolonial nationalism and the global right." *Geoforum* 144 (2023): 103824.

<sup>10</sup> See Bhattacharyya, Gargi. *The futures of racial capitalism*. John Wiley & Sons, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Mosse, George L. *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2020.

## Race as remainder

I have suggested that both decolonial and what I am terming anticolonial approaches can be critiqued for their sense of where we are historically, for their tendency to emphasise that the world remains colonial (or at least neocolonial and imperial). As the second line in Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* reminds us, however, providing the kind of jolt we need: "Europe is no longer the center of gravity of the world. This is the significant event, the fundamental experience, of our era".<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this suggests that returning to the postcolonial might best serve our interests. As has been well rehearsed, the post in postcolonial does not imply straightforward *afterness*; if colonialism were no longer structuring the present then there would be really no need to describe the world as postcolonial. We are after the period of formal colonialism and yet recognise that race and colonialism have been at the centre of the forging of the planetary, the development of government and economy, and the histories of science and art. That said, *we are* post-slavery, post-colonial, and post-apartheid in ways which matter.<sup>13</sup>

This paper is motivated by a niggling sense that because it is more fashionable to emphasise continuity (the *plus ça change* complex), particularly within the broad field of race, ethnicity and postcolonial studies, there is a danger that our analysis of the contemporary becomes largely irrelevant. What happens when we emphasise what is discontinuous instead, what has changed and is changing, the rupture and the new and the emergent? Where and when might racism be – following Raymond Williams – a residual cultural force rather than the dominant one?<sup>14</sup> How would we know if we were

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<sup>12</sup> Mbembe, Achille. *Critique of black reason*. Duke University Press, 2020, 1.

<sup>13</sup> My typology of post, anti and de is necessarily flattening, but a useful heuristic. If we exclude the decolonial for a moment (a fairly discrete body of work coming out of Latin America), then we can consider the fervent critiques of postcolonial approaches from left/anti-colonial positions (see for example the work of Vivek Chibber and Aijaz Ahmed). Stuart Hall's 'When was the postcolonial' discussed these debates thoughtfully in an earlier time, concluding: "Here, then, we find ourselves between Scylla and Charybdis, between the devil and the deep blue sea. We always knew that the dismantling of the colonial paradigm would release strange demons from the deep, and that these monsters might come trailing all sorts of subterranean material. Still, the awkward twists and turns, leaps and reversals in the ways the argument is being conducted should alert us to the sleep of reason that is beyond or after Reason, the way desire plays across power and knowledge in the dangerous enterprise of thinking at or beyond the limit". While I share some reservations about the primarily literary mode of some postcolonial theory – if for no other reason than because it is not my discipline, and I therefore find it challenging and sometimes abstruse – it seems our analysis is best served by following Hall's advice and avoiding the construction of camps. My relevant if impressionistic observation here is that among 'postcolonial scholars' there is perhaps greater resistance to anachronism. Chakrabarty was early to write about the climate of history, and Spivak in 2022 remarked: "I am much more interested in the fact that these debates are held within (subsumed) in a new conjuncture in the self-determination of capital– finance capital, cloud capital, informal economies. Capitalist globalization ideologically encourages a lingering within discourses of colonialism because, even as it attempts to run capital outside of the boundaries of states, it secures itself by indexing states in the name of 'development'" (Spivak interview, *Epistemic Daring*). I would also like to claim Achille Mbembe within the postcolonial grouping for the purposes of this observation.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and literature*. Vol. 114. Oxford University Press, 1977.

looking at the remainder? Racism, as the classificatory system that has functioned as the central axis of human differentiation in the modern world, has a long half-life – how could it not? – and that means racial conceptions and racist practices continue to shape politics, economics and culture. But the conditions which thrust race into the centre of systems of knowledge and power no longer hold; the racial does not sit within either international relations, scientific debate, or culture as it did in the 1930s or the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Suggesting that race is a remainder and residual does not mean we can let the guard down, but it does suggest that race-centric analyses might be less insightful than they were in an earlier period. This is why cutting race down to analytical size might prove salutary: not only to counter the disenchantment we experience when confronting facile references to white supremacy, imperialism, and the global South, but to re-energise and retool us in the difficult task of interpreting our nightmarish and bewildering present.

### Racist world order

Race constructs a hierarchy of human type with European man at the apex. The emergence of race-thinking was coextensive with the development of European hegemony from the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century onwards, wherein the awareness of humanity's planetary condition and the discovery of the physical laws of the universe were entangled with varied attempts to categorise human beings and societies into distinct groups and to identify the truth of race in the body. As Paul Gilroy explains, race provided the novel elements of environment and organism with a potent articulating principle.<sup>15</sup> We can track the move from religious systems of differentiation to anthropological ones, which then evolve into scientific racism and ultimately eugenics. This is not a linear or uniform story, nor was race inevitable, rooted crudely in material relations (as though ideas follow straightforwardly from economic arrangements). Perversely, it is only with modern ideas of abstract equality and freedom – unleashed by the bourgeoisie in their will to free property relations – that new justifications for status inequality and hierarchy were required. New biological conceptions of being human came to justify inequalities of resources and rights, as ideas of progress, evolution and degeneration made extinction thinkable.<sup>16</sup>

At the high point of European Empires, ideologies of white superiority mapped onto international relations; the colonial nomos of the earth was one in which 'peace and law would dwell inside [Europe's] borders— which would increasingly be drawn on a planetary scale— while the chaos and conflict that Marx would later name "wild justice" reigned, catastrophically, outside'.<sup>17</sup> Race as an axis of differentiation referred to the distinction between Europe and its Others; the West and the rest; citizens and

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<sup>15</sup> Gilroy, Paul. "Lecture I. Suffering and inhumanity Lecture II. Humanities and a new humanism." *Tanner Lectures* 69 (2014).

<sup>16</sup> Lindqvist, Sven. *Exterminate all the Brutes*. Granta books, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Gilroy, Paul. "Lecture I. Suffering and inhumanity, *Tanner Lectures* 69 (2014: pg 32).

subjects; the rule of law and the rule of the jungle. But if Europe is no longer the centre of gravity of the World, this raises questions about the meanings of race. When Du Bois described the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as the problem of the colour line, he was identifying what he saw as the crucial coupling of power and difference at the high point of European imperialism.<sup>18</sup> No neat line divides the world today, even as we routinely superimpose old maps onto the present.

Thirty years after publishing *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, Immanuel Wallerstein reflected that, when writing the book, he and Balibar had conceived of race, nation and class as three different pairs of glasses for broadly the same phenomena – categories which overlapped perhaps 80%.<sup>19</sup> Such a claim seems more difficult to sustain today. If race is supposed to map onto the distinction between core and periphery in the world system, what is to be made of a world that is becoming increasingly multipolar, in which there are different cores, hubs and centres (China, ASEAN, the Gulf, BRICS+)? Perhaps racial frames still explain cultures of nationalism and class relations in some settings – the US, South Africa, Israel, Europe? – but it is not clear that in much of Asia (where most of the world lives), or in Africa (where most of the world is projected to live), race is quite so salient. Perhaps those of us who write about race and racism are area studies scholars of Europe, North America and Australia – which is often where we live! – but that is a rather different proposition to larger claims about racist world order. Are we speaking to the rest of the world or not? Or is another symptom of US hegemony, waning though it may be, that one can speak from a very particular place as though it were the world.

Even as racial ascription is still a reasonable predictor of wealth and income – but note correlation may simply reflect the residual and the remainder – surely the most remarkable pattern in recent years is the intensification of inequality *within* national and regional settings. Everywhere the billionaires take a greater share; everywhere gated communities pockmark the urban; everywhere increasing swathes of humanity become uninsurable, North and South.<sup>20</sup> Emergent geographies of privilege and abandonment complicate the core-periphery/West-rest frame. Not unrelatedly, the forces of ultra-nationalism and postliberal authoritarianism connect, borrow and sustain one another in ways which disorient those focused on white supremacy (Israel and India; Philippines and Hungary).<sup>21</sup> And further, with liberalism under attack in the

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<sup>18</sup> ‘Fatal coupling of power and difference’ was a phrasing used by Stuart Hall to describe race: (1992) *Race, Culture, and Communications: Looking Backward and Forward at Cultural Studies, Rethinking Marxism*, 5:1, 10-18). It has been repurposed by Ruth Wilson Gilmore in several pieces (see *Abolition Geography*). It is a phrasing I return to throughout the essay, more or less explicitly.

<sup>19</sup> On YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhPLDgHewAo>

<sup>20</sup> Davis, Mike, and Daniel Monk, eds. *Evil paradises: Dreamworlds of neoliberalism*. The New Press, 2011. See the FT Series: the Uninsurable World. <https://www.ft.com/content/11ef021c-d95b-44d4-b8f8-e9b2624d3ff7>

<sup>21</sup> Seymour, Richard. *Disaster Nationalism: The Downfall of Liberal Civilization* (London: Verso, 2024).

US and Europe, so that 'wild justice' comes home, while climate breakdown is wilfully expedited (drill baby, drill!), we must ask: what kind of nomos of the earth is this?

### Nationalism reigns

Part of what complicates the idea of a racist world order is the proliferation of aggressive nationalisms. Given the everywhere character of anti-immigrant and majoritarian political energies, is racism in the West not just one particular version of this wider tendency written into the international system of nation-states? Put crudely, is the racial character of racism in Europe only a peculiar feature of the primary xenology which is nationalism?

“[T]he road from national genius to a totalized cosmology of the sacred nation, and further to ethnic purity and cleansing, is relatively direct. There are those that argue that this is only a risk in those modern polities that have mistakenly put blood at the center of their national ideology, but blood and nationalism appear to be in a much fuller and wider embrace in the world as a whole. All nations, under some conditions, demand whole-blood transfusions, usually requiring some part of their blood to be extruded”<sup>22</sup>

Arjun Appadurai suggests that the fundamental idea behind the nation state, that of a national ethnos, is inherently dangerous, concerned as it is with the sacredness of the nation, the purity of its people, and the coherence of the social whole. I am reminded here of Primo Levi's cautionary remark in the conclusion to *The Drowned and the Saved*: “Few countries can be considered immune to a future tide of violence generated by intolerance, lust for power, political fanaticism, and racist attritions.” Ethnocide is always on the horizon within processes of nation-building, and decolonisation brought about the universalisation of the nation-state form. As Nandita Sharma demonstrates, one of the first things newly independent states tend to do is to introduce (restrictive) immigration and nationality laws. In a world of passports, new states must obtain the requisite legal and policy instruments to meaningfully nationalise and territorialise their populations. Mamdani has shown how the politicisation of ethnicity under indirect rule functioned to overdetermine ethnic conflict within new nations. But we might ask: if majoritarianism and claims to indigeneity emerge in postcolonies too, on the African continent, in Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America, then why do we need to centre race in analysis of the global North? Peter Geshchiere's simple observation that very similar claims to indigeneity and autochthony were being aired in Cameroon and the Netherlands in the early 2000s strikes me as a stimulating point of departure. Again, it suggests that claims to localness, exclusive belonging, and ethnic coherence exceed the racial.

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<sup>22</sup> Appadurai, Arjun. *Fear of small numbers: An essay on the geography of anger*. Duke University Press, 2006, pg 4.



It is of course overly flat to stage racism and nationalism as an either-or. And yet, repeatedly underlining their articulation and identifying the ways in which racism constantly emerges out of nationalism still works best in a North Atlantic context. It is not always obvious how such a racial frame speaks to the nationalisms of non-Western countries. Seriously engaging with the histories and afterlives of fascism can help us approach the problem of the articulation between racism and nationalism in more productive ways. This was Paul Gilroy's move in *Against Race* (and since). Meanwhile, experimenting with descriptions of contemporary disaster nationalism in terms of incipient fascism opens up interesting lines of thought<sup>23</sup> – as does engaging with debates about fascism in India.<sup>24</sup>

It is true that contemporary European nationalisms are overdetermined by imaginaries of Europe as the domain of enlightenment and civilisation. And yet, civilisationism and consanguinity characterise contemporary Chinese, Korean and Japanese nationalisms, all of which trade on ideas of fixed ethnicity and the exclusion of foreigners defined in proto-racial terms.<sup>25</sup> Saudi Arabia and the Gulf have a strong sense of political membership based on ethnicity and religion; the ASEAN nations exhibit sometimes fraught ethnonational configurations but most are characterised by strong anti-immigrant sentiments; while in South Africa, anti-immigrant pogroms, mostly targeting other African migrants, strangers from across the Limpopo, have surfaced repeatedly in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

European far right parties might emphasise the world historical conflict between Christendom and Islam (the Crusades redux) and feel themselves to be acting in defence not only of religious particularism but against barbarism in general. And yet, all around the world national projects defined in religious terms seek purity through the excision of non-believers. Fundamentalisms of different kinds gather force, and what makes them fundamentalist is the rigidity of religious identification, which starts to bleed into maximalist definitions of racism.

And what about our definition of colonialism and imperialism? Chinese state institutions and companies forge relations with client governments that appear to be cast in a familiar imperial mode. In what sense might they be racialising or racist? The Right in India wants to decolonise, plotting the rebirth and purification of the ancient Hindu nation through the excision of 200 million Muslim interlopers. Hindu majoritarianism and caste hierarchy cannot be properly historicised without an account of colonial government, but neither can they be reduced to symptoms of

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Seymour, *Disaster Nationalism: The Downfall of Liberal Civilization*, (London: Verso, 2024).

<sup>24</sup> Banaji, Jairus. *Fascism: Essays on Europe and India*. Three Essays Collective, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Dikötter, Frank, ed. *The construction of racial identities in China and Japan: Historical and contemporary perspectives*. University of Hawaii Press, 1997. Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.

British divide and rule or made synonymous with race.<sup>26</sup> It is common to assert that Tibet and Kashmir have been colonised and that Xinjiang and Assam are subject to anti-Muslim repression in ways which resonate with broader currents of islamophobia, and yet are these not best described in terms of the usual course of nation-making and state building – however dreadful and unjust?<sup>27</sup> In other words, doesn't national incorporation often feel like foreign/colonial rule, especially in the hinterlands, and at least in the early phases?<sup>28</sup>

At this stage it might have become unclear who I am quarrelling with; surely most scholars of race and racism do not claim their analyses explain the whole world. Neither are they necessarily averse to discussions of nationalism and fascism. And yet, within theorisations of racism there is a haziness about where racism ends and other types of xenology begin. This is unavoidable, but I am trying to hint at a tendency to prioritise race in the analysis, to make it primary, in ways which might not fit the current moment.

### Race maximalism

Scholarship on racism necessarily emphasises that racism is historically specific, that racism is mercurial and deadly slick,<sup>29</sup> that racism works through metonyms and scavenges from adjacent ideological repertoires (class, gender, nation, religion, language). This is important because otherwise we have no answer when far-right mobs attacking Muslims reply that they cannot be racist because Islam is not a race; or when politicians claim that it is not racist to control immigration, even as migrants seeking entry to Europe are described as swarms and cockroaches. The recognition that racism is effective because agile and incoherent might therefore warrant a more expansive definition. Ghassan Hage for example suggests that: "As far as my argument is concerned it is good enough to call "racist" any bundle of practices which aim at problematizing, excluding, marginalizing, discriminating against, rendering insecure, exploiting, criminalizing, and terrorizing and harbouring exterminatory fantasies against an identity group of people imagined as sharing a common and inheritable determining

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<sup>26</sup> For some, caste as an inherited, fixed and hierarchical system of social stratification is seen to provide a useful analogy for the condition of African Americans – see e.g. Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The origins of our discontents*. Random House, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> For accounts of China and India as colonial/imperial states see Osuri, Goldie. "Imperialism, colonialism and sovereignty in the (post) colony: India and Kashmir." *Third World Quarterly* 38.11 (2017): 2428-2443 and Anand, D. (2018). Colonization with Chinese characteristics: politics of (in)security in Xinjiang and Tibet. *Central Asian Survey*, 38(1), 129–147.

<sup>28</sup> Of course, the problem might be about confinement, surveillance, repression, and denationalisation – where we recognise that demands sovereignty among minorities in these sites are ultimately a call for freedom from military occupation – and yet there is often an assumed or automatic rendering of organic rights to self-determination. In other words, there are still unanswered questions about what constitutes colonial arrangements.

<sup>29</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*.

feature”.<sup>30</sup> He suggests that there are non-white racisms that fit this definition, even if his focus is on white anti-Muslim racism. This maximalist definition clearly serves Hage well, but this is quite a broad bundle of practices, against groups who are constructed in highly varied ways. Howard Winant takes this maximalist definition a step further:

“Race has been fundamental in global politics and culture for half a millennium. It continues to signify and structure social life not only experientially and locally, but nationally and globally. Race is present everywhere: it is evident in the distribution of resources and power, and in the desires and fears of individuals from Alberta to Zimbabwe. Race has shaped the modern economy and nation-state. It has permeated all available social identities, cultural forms, and systems of signification. Infinitely incarnated in institution and personality, etched on the human body, racial phenomena affect the thought, experience, and accomplishments of human individuals and collectivities in many familiar ways, and in a host of unconscious patterns as well”.<sup>31</sup>

For Winant, racism becomes everywhere and everything. But should all xenologies be described as racial? Chetan Bhatt critiques Winant on this point:

“To pluck just one regional example here: how are National League for Democracy protests, communist or Buddhist insurgencies, Karen or ‘God’s Army’ revolts against the Burmese military dictatorship, or even Buddhist–Muslim violence, racial conflicts? Such ventures that couple anti-racism with a universal racialisation suggest a different sociologic, partially related to the Euro-American export of a racial theory of everything”<sup>32</sup>

No one would deny that many people are systematically oppressed, excluded, expelled, rendered expendable, and made waste, often on the basis of ethnic difference. However, it is not always immediately clear what race has to do with it, unless in a somewhat tautological sense: race is that which makes expendable, that which is enacted by the process of making expendable, that which is produced by expendability. If international relations no longer map onto the colour line; if citizenship, however hollowed out, has been universalised; and if race has been written out of law and science; then in what sense are such varied xenologies racial?

It is useful to pause and reflect on such a maximalist definition implies: that all relations of exclusion, marginalisation, discrimination, violence, and domination that reference culturally defined difference can be thought of as racism. But doesn’t all politics involve forging communities of shared fate through claims about belonging,

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<sup>30</sup> Ghassan Hage, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Winant, Howard. *The World is a Ghetto*. Pg 1.

<sup>32</sup> Bhatt, Chetan. "Contemporary geopolitics and 'alterity' research" *Researching race and racism* (2004): pg 21.

which necessarily requires drawing distinctions: who is inside and outside? As states, empires and markets penetrate the lives and territories of all of humanity, cultural and ethnic differences seem destined to be at the centre of questions of the political. This is not to naturalise or psychologise difference but to suggest that if politics is about territory, peoplehood, and the distribution of life, land, and labour, over expansive geographies that are unevenly developed, then the fact of differentiation and hierarchy justified through ethnic differences seems unsurprising. Admittedly, this risks being a view from nowhere, a mode of argument that writes out histories of domination, perhaps history altogether, and yet isn't Howard Winant's also a view from nowhere? In *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson argues that in medieval and feudal Europe, processes of invasion, settlement, and state-building involved the exaggeration of "regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones". This is interesting, but I am less convinced that these processes are specific to "European civilization" and unsure that a concept of racialism can hold these longer histories of ethnic classification and violation.<sup>33</sup>

To call the more general coupling of power and difference racial is fine on its own terms – racism can be the word we give to all xenology and that which we seek to unmask and resist. However, it becomes a problem when racism is then also in the same breath conflated with Europe, whiteness, and colonialism. It cannot be both. Either racism is defined as xenology in general, or it is defined more minimally, as a Euro-American problem of whiteness, with a specific history in European modernity and a genealogy like the one Sylvia Wynter tracks – Man<sub>1</sub> and Man<sub>2</sub> – in which case racism might have little to say about India, China, autochthonous conflict in Africa, and nationalist resurgence globally. Or perhaps the argument is that xenological modes of thought germinated within European modernity have now been generalised; racism is immanent to the nation-state form (a European and modern export); and capitalist competition overdetermines the relevance of theories on innate human hierarchy. This is convincing, but it does not allow us to keep naming racism solely in terms of white supremacy. Surely, if there is a connection between nativism in North and South then it demands that we at least pause when invoking whiteness, the Global North and neocolonialism in the analysis.

### Racial capitalism

The phrase 'racial capitalism' has become increasingly popular in activist and academic spaces in recent years. This is a conceptualisation which tends towards maximalism; racism is defined not solely in relation to biology, or any necessarily coherent theory of human difference, but in terms of the differentiation of populations within processes of capital accumulation. The development of capitalism has involved

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<sup>33</sup> Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. "Revisiting "Racial Capitalism":" *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 64.2 (2023): 173-181.

not simply the uniform drive to exploit propertyless waged workers (homogenisation; proletarianization) but has continually involved the expropriation of unfree and dependent labour – with transatlantic slavery as the most obvious example. Distinctions between who can be exploited and who expropriated drive processes of racialisation.<sup>34</sup> This can be understood at different scales, and at the global level we could once observe that the distinction between Europe and its colonies, the West and the rest, the White and the non-white, mapped onto the arrangement of uneven capitalist development in core and peripheral zones, with an attendant bifurcation in the distribution of rights.

It is well known that theories of racial capitalism were first developed in South Africa. In the 1970s, South African Marxists showed how non-capitalist modes of production in the Bantustans sustained life for migrant labourers, therein allowing white employers in towns and industrial sectors to pay workers below the wages required for their subsistence (e.g. Legassick, Wolpe, Alexander, Magubane). This economic analysis of racism, which confronts questions of racial stratification, spatialisation and migration, and the reproduction of the labour force in non-capitalist sectors, remains extremely generative.<sup>35</sup> Stuart Hall picked up on some of these ideas and transposed them to debates outside South Africa in his article ‘Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance’, a piece which is most remembered (solely remembered?) for its killer line: ‘race is the modality in which class is lived’.<sup>36</sup> Re-reading this piece one is struck by the Althusserian intensity of Hall’s theoretical workings on articulation, determination, and modes of production. While some of the discussions around race and capitalism today remain systematically Marxist, even marxological – note debates about whether race is essential to the logic of capital – many of the invocations of racial capitalism operate at a more general level.

It is of course Cedric Robinson who is credited with popularising the term, even if he did not live to see its proliferation. While his book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* only references ‘racial capitalism’ a handful of times, readers have found the concept productive. As his most famous student, Robin DG Kelley, relays: “The first European proletarians were *racial* subjects (Irish, Jews, Roma or Gypsies, Slavs, etc.) and they were victims of dispossession (enclosure), colonialism, and slavery *within Europe*”.<sup>37</sup> On my reading, most recent adherents of racial capitalism are less interested in historiographical debates about the 1000 year history of European civilisation, and more committed to a broad emphasis on (anti)capitalism at a moment where contestations over the substance of anti-racism are at stake. In short, racial

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<sup>34</sup> Fraser, Nancy. "Expropriation and exploitation in racialized capitalism: A reply to Michael Dawson." *Critical Historical Studies* 3.1 (2016): 163-178.

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. Levenson, Zachary, and Marcel Paret. "The South African tradition of racial capitalism." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46.16 (2023): 3403-3424.

<sup>36</sup> Hall, Stuart. *Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance*. na, 1980.

<sup>37</sup> Robin DG Kelley, ‘What did Cedric Robinson mean by racial capitalism’, *Boston Review*, 2017.

capitalism signals a desire for an anti-capitalist, anti-racism. Robinson's emphasis on the Black radical tradition, which recalls histories of slave rebellion and anticolonial struggle as a form of anticapitalist agency, is also appealing.

But while debates around racial capitalism are extremely rich, they are often in my view characterised by a rather outmoded geography, a North Atlantic frame of reference. This is partly because they have been dominated by US scholars, but also because something about the framing – anti-racism means anti-capitalism – has come to lend itself to sweeping claims about global order, the North and South, and imperialism, in ways which feel anachronistic rather than conjunctural.<sup>38</sup> One might find statements like this one, written by Oliver C. Cox in 1948, paraphrased and made wholly applicable to today:

Our hypothesis is the racial exploitation and race prejudice developed among Europeans with the rise of capitalism, and that because of the worldwide ramifications of capitalism, all racial antagonisms can be traced back to the policies and attitudes of the leading capitalist people, the white people of Europe and North America.<sup>39</sup>

As Stuart Hall reminds us, “[r]acism is not present, in the same form or degree, in all capitalist formations; it is not necessary to the concrete functioning of all capitalisms”.<sup>40</sup> The tendency within discussions of racial capitalism is to imagine that in fact racism is always immanent to capitalism and often this works to extend the centrality of white supremacy.

Consider Ruth Wilson Gilmore's much cited definition of racism as ‘the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death’. Elsewhere Gilmore writes, ‘capitalism requires inequality, and racism enshrines it’.<sup>41</sup> These punchy formulations are forceful. Left-wing anti-racists like them because they centre material questions (state violence, exploitation, death). However, the concept of ‘group differentiation’ is broad and raises questions about what makes the group a racial one. Gilmore connects anti-racism to anti-capitalist struggle, engaging with activists and social movements as much as academics. Indeed, a strong case has been made for reading “racial capitalism as a strategic, rather than a purely analytic, concept – a concept forged and developed in

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<sup>38</sup> Arun Kundnani, for example, who published the book *What is anti-racism? And why it means anti-capitalism* (2023, Verso), wrote in a comment piece that ‘the poor of the global south are as equally entitled to the world's resources as the wealthy residents of the north’. The title of the book and this kind of statement risk being somewhat platitudinous. It is likely that this mode of argumentation is being driven by publishers seeking catchy and eye-grabbing titles and claims, but perhaps some kinds of simplification do not serve us in the long run.

<sup>39</sup> Oliver C. Cox, *Caste, Class and Race* (1948).

<sup>40</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance’, pg 338.

<sup>41</sup> See Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Abolition geography: Essays towards liberation*. Verso Books, 2022.

struggle”.<sup>42</sup> Gilmore’s insights have been extremely generative and there is nothing wrong with forwarding a one sentence definition of racism which can be debated and put to work. What I am interested in is why such definitions of race and racism have become so popular; and with how and why they travel in the ways that they do. Too often racial capitalism is invoked to signal a radical perspective rather than to develop one.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps, then, racial capitalism is better thought of as an opening rather than a metatheory. Some people deploying the term are less interested in whether capitalism is always already racial, and instead pursue a more open-ended theorisation of the ways in which capitalism renders some people expendable and surplus through extra-economic political and ideological configurations of human value and difference. The work of Gargi Bhattacharyya is instructive here. Bhattacharyya wants to understand how political and economic systems divide the dispossessed and exploited. Racial capitalism is a frame for describing the forms of differentiation which delineate what counts as work and non-work, production and reproduction, valued life and surplus humanity. Bhattacharyya examines how ‘positioning as a population vulnerable to non-waged forms of value extraction can be understood as a racializing process’ – and therefore emphasis is placed on contemporary dynamics of incarceration, bordering, platformisation, social reproduction, care and debt.<sup>44</sup> In response to my assertion that broad definitions of racialisation and expandability are somewhat circular, Bhattacharyya might reply that they provide a kind of method, one which is broad and messy because that which is being signified by racism is broad and messy. The most important thing is not whether racial capitalism is your theoretical lens or not, and nor should our goal be simply to negate and disprove those who take a different tack, but whether the framework helps us explain our present conjuncture. And yet, I agree with Loic Wacquant that this requires ‘the hard work of epistemological elucidation, logical clarification, and historical elaboration’.<sup>45</sup>

### Unfreedom of movement and racialisation

Another productive way to theorise racism is in relation to the government of mobilities, or what Mimi Sheller calls ‘differential (im)mobilities). Sheller argues:

“[A]ll racial processes, racialized spaces, and racialized identities (including whiteness) are deeply contingent on differential mobilities. Racial boundaries are formed, reformed, and transformed through mobile relations of power. Race

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<sup>42</sup> Levenson, Zachary, and Marcel Paret. "The South African tradition of racial capitalism." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46.16 (2023): 3403-3424.

<sup>43</sup> Loic Wacquant made cognate arguments here Wacquant, L. (2024). The trap of “racial capitalism” *La Pensée*, No 418(2), 145-153

<sup>44</sup> Bhattacharyya, Gargi. *Rethinking racial capitalism: Questions of reproduction and survival*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. Bhattacharyya, Gargi. *The futures of racial capitalism*. John Wiley & Sons, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> Wacquant, L. (2024). The trap of “racial capitalism” *La Pensée*, No 418(2), 145-153

is a performance of differential mobilities. And racial projects are concerned with the management of mobilities.”<sup>46</sup>

A mobilities lens facilitates the analysis of racialisation *in relation to* nationalism, migration and bordering, providing a broader frame that connects mobility and immobility, speed and flow, movement and freedom. It also chimes with what is best about the ‘racial capitalism’ frame, representing an open-ended materialism that can elucidate relations of production, distribution and, importantly, consumption and leisure. In previous work, I have found it useful to describe regimes of differential (im)mobilities as constituting, or at least helping to describe, historically specific forms of racism and racialisation. Transatlantic slavery is perhaps *the* paradigmatic system of race-making, and while racial difference was fixed in law under slave codes, slavery might best be described in terms of unfreedom of movement: kidnapping from the continent; the middle passage; and incarceration and labour discipline on the plantation. This is why struggles for black emancipation have always been about the right to move unchained.

The zenith of racist statecraft has involved varied systems and techniques which order movement to enforce racial distinction and hierarchy. Segregation, apartheid, concentration camps. Fanon’s colonial city was a world of compartments, a world split in two, a microcosm of colonial international relations. And yet, clearly these geographical descriptions no longer hold in any straightforward sense. Describing, mapping, and analysing the regulation of differential (im)mobilities provides a method for thinking about racism in agile ways. Emphasis can be placed on substantive freedom – in a context where racism too easily gets reduced to discrimination and insult – and on historical process and specificity: a mobilities lens can respond to new kinds of encampment and gated enclosure.

However, what I am particularly interested in pushing here is the idea that such a method might actually reveal racism’s explanatory limit. This can be registered in how confounding the phenomena we might describe with a mobilities lens have become. The science of logistics is now at the heart of business management and political economy. Logistics is about accelerating a world on the move, while also securing against risks through complex possibilistic reasoning.<sup>47</sup> Access to movement and speed are unevenly distributed and often reproduce racial divisions, but this is not the camp or the plantation, and it might hint at forms of modular access and denial which are less crudely racial.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Mimi Sheller, *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes* (London: Verso, 2018), 57.

<sup>47</sup> Amoore, Louise. *The politics of possibility: Risk and security beyond probability*. Duke University Press, 2013

<sup>48</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *Surveillance, crime and social control*. Routledge, 2017. 35-39.



The government of human mobilities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century relies on infrastructures which separate people in more totalising ways, so that processes of racialisation become less immediate (note Patrick Wolfe's thesis that racialisation intensifies when the racially dominant group (colonisers) are forced to share social, political and physical space with the racially denigrated).<sup>49</sup> Migrant workers in the Gulf live in purpose built residential neighbourhoods and compounds. There is very little urban porosity, flow, spontaneity; the form of separation follows the function of labour market and citizenship segregation. Amitav Ghosh has written about how infrastructures of oil extraction preclude in advance the possibility of labour organising, the pipeline negates carbon democracy.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, millions of people work on boats, at sea, moving the 90% of trade that travels by container ship, but they are totally invisible, denied access to land, visas or labour market protections of any kind.<sup>51</sup> These infrastructures evade representation. These new techniques for organising production and distribution seem therefore to suggest different configurations of race and racism – labour market segmentation, physical segregation and legal exclusion on the basis of nationality in logistics space is something quite different to apartheid or Jim Crow.

#### The digital, datafication and risk

Race and racism also need to be rethought in light of digital technologies and their modes of classification. There is now a range of work that seeks to 'address the sociomaterial production of race' within the context of algorithmic systems and big data. Phan and Wark's short paper raises a number of interesting questions about 'the challenges of studying race within regimes of computation, which rely on structures that are, for the most part, opaque; in particular, modes of classification that operate through proxies and abstractions and that figure racialized bodies not as single, coherent subjects, but as shifting clusters of data'.<sup>52</sup> Their question, 'What becomes of racial formations in post-visual regimes?' is an astute one. Their answer, 'in this new regime, race emerges as an epiphenomenon of processes of classifying and sorting—what we call 'racial formations as data formations', is, in my view, less compelling. There remains, to me, a nagging doubt about whether race still holds explanatory power when the relation between body and mass, individual and category, is no longer operative.

It may be that algorithms produce groups of differentially valued people, making decisions on who should be policed, who should be denied credit, who should be pulled for questioning at the border, in ways which replicate and reproduce extant racial distinctions. Given racist training data, algorithms reach racist decisions; hence: 'garbage in, garbage out' (there is no better encapsulation of what I mean by the

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<sup>49</sup> Wolfe, Patrick. *Traces of history: Elementary structures of race*. Verso Books, 2016.

<sup>50</sup> Ghosh, Amitav. "Petrofiction." *New Republic* 206.9 (1992): 29-34

<sup>51</sup> Khalili, L. (2021). *Carceral Seas*. *Millennium*, 49(3), 462-471

<sup>52</sup> Phan, T., & Wark, S. (2021). Racial formations as data formations. *Big Data & Society*, 8(2).

remainder than ‘garbage in, garbage out’, however). What is less clear is that such power to classify and differentiate is necessarily racialising. As algorithms take in a wider range of data on associations and transactions, do the outputs and decisions on access and denial, differential valuation, and risk inherently produce racial formations? If new patterns emerge, do we have the analytical breadth to distinguish between those data points which act as proxies for and reproduce race (neighbourhood, criminal record, religion), and those which do not? The logic of these computational systems is radically individualising, overcoming the abstract generality of racial ascription and instead basing decisions on innumerable data on people and things.

This is important because race has relied on a particular relation between individual body and racial group. Racial science dreams of accurately typologising the human species into distinct types. To develop such typologies, racial science experimented with the measurements of bodies – skulls, faces, genitals – and the classification of phenotypical markers – hair, eyes, bones, blood. Paul Gilroy’s suggestion, at the turn of the century, was that developments in genomic science and digital imaging might help us move beyond those scientific fallacies and therein the very epistemological frames of racial thought.<sup>53</sup> Developments in algorithmic and AI decision making raise similar questions, because neither the racial body (visualised and material/animal) nor the suggested type (crude groupings into distinct sub-human categories) are sustained by the techniques or theories of these systems. Instead, we are entering a postsocial horizon, where a highly disaggregated and predictive set of calculations on risk and the future are activated through the processing of immense amounts of data. What race means in this context is unclear. What race helps us understand about this process even less so. Although I recognise that biological determinism is not going anywhere: the selected, Silicon Valley, billionaire bros are rallying behind Trump, regularly citing ‘racehorse theory’,<sup>54</sup> which suggests that eugenic thinking may be resurgent. And yet, it is not clear that datafication equals racialisation, or that our first impulse should be to find evidence for such a claim.

Algorithms might produce categories or classes of people who are devalued in ways which overlap with and reproduce racial distinctions. But this does not mean that these technologies have a ‘racial logic’. If racism is necessarily about naturalising and eternalising difference, homogenising racial groups, and excluding them on that basis, then are we not witnessing a turn to something more motile and flexible and modular?

### Anti-racism and the ethics of opposition

In this paper I have suggested that scholarship on race and racism often invites us to name contemporary crises in ways that feel out of time. Put spikily, it is as though race

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<sup>53</sup> Gilroy, Paul. "Race ends here." *Ethnic and racial studies* 21.5 (1998): 838-847.

<sup>54</sup> See <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-10-05/trump-debate-white-supremacy-racehorse-theory>

and colonialism become speakable at precisely the point when they have lost their purchase on our present – as if the speakability of race and empire were inversely proportional to their explanatory value.

We must disabuse ourselves of comforting myths of a world split in two. If minoritised citizens in the North *need* race to afford them added solidarity and connection with people in the ‘Global South’, then is this not another kind of narcissism? For people situated as I am, in a country like Britain, it might be more honest to say that my concern with racism is not a biographical matter; it is not about me, I am not very interesting. My father’s stories about racist terror on these same streets are not my own; I don’t get to harness their authoritative, experiential power. To begin to say that is to make it possible to identify the limits of race as analytic; indeed, loosening ones grip on the racial might be primarily a psychoanalytic challenge.

Returning to Raymond Williams, is it possible to suggest that what is dominant in the cultural process is not necessarily racism but a universal project of self-optimisation, a set of processes which are radically individualising and thus do not primarily reproduce fixed group differences but instead enlist difference as the material for play, intrigue and self-making? As digital communication collapses geography, race loses its coherent ordering function. As new poles of capitalist overdevelopment emerge, and inequalities within nation states widen, privilege and wealth are no longer so neatly colour coded. And while life chances still correlate with ‘race’ globally, we are also witnessing what Achille Mbembe calls ‘the becoming black of the world’ (although floating this argument with students tends to be met with visceral unease).

Perhaps given the ascendancy of radical right political formations, *we do not know what is dominant and what is residual*: the fierceness of contestation makes it too early to call. Nationalist revanchism runs alongside radical and disembodied individualisation and ordinary multiculturalism. In recent writings Paul Gilroy has talked about the blockages that produce repetition, so that far-right pogroms targeting asylum seekers in the UK echo white riots in the 1950s.<sup>55</sup> We must also consider that white racism might become especially violent and pathological precisely because racialised status hierarchies are threatened. We talk about ‘the great replacement’ as a conspiracy theory but the idea that whites will become a minority in countries like Britain is backed by demographic projections. Other readers might dispute my emphasis on the multipolar world order, suggesting instead that US and by extension Western hegemony remains intact, which demands that we renew our analyses of imperialism, racism and white supremacy. I am energised by the prospect that such arguments might be made rather than assumed.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Gilroy, Paul. "Working with "Wogs": Aliens, denizens and the machinations of denialism." *Communication, Culture and Critique* 15.2 (2022): 122-138.

<sup>56</sup> See e.g. Stevenson, Tom. *Someone Else's Empire: British Illusions and American Hegemony*. Verso Books, 2023

Racism might still be the best term we have for those forms of ethnic differentiation which produce hierarchy, violence, and dehumanisation. But racism needs to be incorporated into a conjunctural analysis of new forms of statecraft, vectors of social abandonment and atomisation, and historically specific ideologies of unassailable cultural difference. Racism would thus become one indispensable term among others, to be turned in different ways, as part of a lively account of present circumstances. I have suggested it might be useful to view nationalism as the primary xenology, spanning north and south, east and west. We might still find it necessary to theorise the articulation of nationalism and racism, but we cannot seriously imagine that nationalism is only bad when white people do it, or that chauvinism in the South can only be condemned after we have dutifully blamed it, ultimately, on colonialism. Our accounts will be strengthened by a resistance to thinking in anachronistic geographies, along with a certain curiosity and openness as to how digital technologies might be classifying individuals and groups in new ways.

A final note. The attachment to race as an analytic often functions to make it more difficult to affirm any outside or beyond – to notice where racial thinking loses its hold, to see racialisation as a result of contingent struggles, or to identify resources of hope in lived culture. This might mean, following Gilroy, that racism’s victims and critics end up fetishising ‘racial thinking’ – while also summoning the ghosts of anticolonial martyrs, as though they can get us out of our very different predicament.

Balibar has written of ‘racism without races’, Memmi ‘racism without racists’, and David Theo Goldberg ‘racisms without racism’. Perhaps to end I will make the case for ‘anti-racism without racism’, a position in which we are opposed to all forms of xenology and ethnoracial domination - standing ‘as a counterpoint and resistance to barbarism and dehumanisation wherever we find it’<sup>57</sup> – but recognise that the ‘racism’ being negated is a placeholder pending further analysis (the same argument can be made for anti-fascism). Maybe one day to be anti-national will have the same kind of cultural resonance and ethical force as anti-racism. Until then, we might agree on our commitment to anti-racism so that we can disagree more constructively over analytical questions. Despite Wendy Brown’s persuasive writing on the importance of distinguishing academic from political work,<sup>58</sup> it is hard to imagine any neat separation between university and movement, student and activist, is and ought, being resolved any time soon, perhaps especially in this field. I am not sure that ‘anti-racism without racism’ gets us out of trouble, but it is one attempt to make scepticism less perilous and critique more productive.

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<sup>57</sup> Bhattacharyya, G. (2024). Antiracists who are anticapitalist, anticapitalists who are anticolonial. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 48(3), 588–594.

<sup>58</sup> Brown, Wendy. *Nihilistic times: thinking with Max Weber*. Vol. 9. Harvard University Press, 2023.