

Book Review Forum

Musab Younis, *On the Scale of the World: The Formation of Black Anticolonial Thought*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780520389168 (cloth); ISBN: 9780520389175 (ebook)

Commentary 1—Joseph Ward (Corpus Christi College & Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford)¹

Musab Younis' *On the Scale of the World* asks its readers to attend a vision lost, rallying its readers to be present in the interwar black Atlantic and re-see the world through the recovered perspectives of the period's anticolonial writers. In being present in this way, we briefly bracket our knowledge of how anticolonialism would later fare and instead see the world through the prism of diaspora in potentially counterintuitive ways. This "presence" achieves two things: it serves as a historical restatement of anticolonial analysis which is currently undervalued and demonstrates how, for so long, thinking at "scale" was indispensable to the project and purpose of the anticolonial black Atlantic.

When thinking about the politics of anticolonialism, academic analysis often focuses on the ambitions and failures of its highest profile actors: political leaders like Kwame Nkrumah or canonised prophetic scholar-activists like Frantz Fanon. The fates of those anticolonial leaders varied: some were deposed, some were assassinated, and some survived to forge states where the full promise of anticolonialism remains unfulfilled. In recent years, new scholarship has tried to reckon with or re-evaluate the successes of these thinker-leaders. As Adom Getachew (2019: 1) explains in *Worldmaking After Empire*, "as we reckon with the failures and limits of the postcolonial state, it is easy to miss the revolutionary implications and global reverberations" of those states' foundations. Many of the literature's more familiar anticolonialists are united by their proximity to power and their influence over the world which they sought to transform; in other words, one reason some anticolonialists have

¹ joseph.ward@ccc.ox.ac.uk

received attention over others is because they were the architects of decolonisation at its seeming inflection point.

Younis' project utilises a different cadre of writers: journalists whose political writings may not receive the same attention as prominent political leaders, though their words were as widely received. Moreover, *On the Scale of the World* asks us to inhabit an earlier time before the wave of decolonisation when extirpation seemed as likely as liberation. In the interwar period the book focuses on, Younis suggests that the battlegrounds of anticolonialism were global in their outlook and that they sought to contest white imperialism in every mechanism of its power; they were equally as ambitious in re-sculpting planetary time and the black body as they were in redrawing state borders and transforming the global economy. The nuances of their thought have been lost. Younis here is offering us a new black vision and, with it, a revival of a way to analyse the imperial machine. This vision—to invoke Michael Dawson (2001)—is not entirely reducible to black Marxism or black nationalism. Rather, the text lays out the textured, multi-faceted analysis of overlooked interwar writers to suggest that their use of politics of and at scale made something new possible. In delineating that vision—its global scope and its planetary ambition—Younis' text recovers an exciting articulation of the black Atlantic itself: a lost voice of anticolonial Atlantic innovation that started to critique the building blocks of imperial metaphysics and power.

Younis starts with Marcus Garvey's nationalism, noting that it is essential to understanding black Atlantic anticolonialism and arguing that its controversial nature (Garvey's antisemitism, his nascent respectability politics, its patriarchal foundations, its anticommunism and anti-internationalism) hides some of its more radical underpinnings. In Younis' words, there is "a powerful, anticulturalist, deeply political strand of critical thinking about race within the shell of an apparent embrace of racial ideology" (p.28). As Younis shows, Garvey's contemporaries saw him as opening a space for many waves of black Atlantic thought. Within the work of Garvey, and the work of his fellow writers at *Negro World*, there was space for reconciliation between nationalists and internationalists that stressed the mutual entanglement of their respective projects. It was a simultaneity of vision and purpose—across those within Garvey's movement and without, across the Atlantic in three continents—that made the movement such fertile ground for thinking globally.

Younis paints the picture of a movement where political articulation was always a form of inter-articulation. As he says, copies of the newspaper were passed around across pool halls, read aloud in groups, sold dangerously on street corners and smuggled across the sea by black sailors into African and Caribbean colonies where it was illegal. In its success, it became proof of its own message; “The ‘Negro World’ it evoked was simultaneously one that already existed” (p.31), Younis says, hinting at the performative aspect of its publication. But it also seems that part of their “scalar leap”—the process of seeing the world on the global scale—was possible because of the textured and open nature of the black communities across the Atlantic (p.62). By showing what this new globally-orientated black thought could do and was already *doing*—namely, representing the world’s vastness and how it could be thus confronted—it seems clear that black Atlantic anticolonial resistance almost required that global scalar leap. Put differently, this diasporic, global form of thinking illuminated battlegrounds hitherto undertheorised and unrealised. Within it, black Atlantic anticolonialists had no choice but to contest these newly theorised dynamics of imperial rule—whiteness as an active world-shaping force, imperially-constructed time, and imperialism’s impact on the body itself—or risk existential destruction. In one sense, the text explains that these were the battlegrounds which anticolonialists used to critique whiteness on a global scale but, through the journey of the text, it also seems like these battlegrounds became contestable *because* of the scale already present in the lives and varying politics of people across the black Atlantic. This, I think, is what is at stake when Younis describes his project as demonstrating “how diaspora produces globality and not only how globality produces diaspora” (p.9). To be present then, as a political black person in the interwar period, was an unavoidably global phenomenon. To occupy that presence, as a modern reader, is to see the rich possibilities of that still existent black globality.

In reading the text, I wondered how much the global scope of this new strand of thought—and the varying positions those black writers occupied—masked real differences in power and ambition across the black Atlantic. For example, Younis tells us how *Gold Coast Leader* articles were reprinted across the ocean with different and more incendiary headlines (p.31). This reminded me of writings about early Fanon translations which have now come under scrutiny for misrepresenting important facets and nuances of his thought (Batchelor and Harding 2017; Bernasconi 1996; Srivastava 2015). These failures of transmission can

have a significant impact because political projects do not always travel neatly across national contexts, even if they share a similar global political goal or common struggle against oppression. Clearly, there were radical implications and pragmatic benefits to the intertextuality of black Atlantic anticolonial thought. For example, Younis highlights the sarcastic citational practice, cross-cultural commentary, the bricolage of sources, and repurposing that culminated to make a new “theoretical grammar” of anticolonial resistance writing (p.50). This new grammar made new things sayable; it allowed the rearticulation of hostile discourses into counternarratives, capturing the scale of the imperial providing a platform to vindicate the black nations of the world.

However, some grammars leave certain things unsayable or, rather, incommunicable. I am interested in how the black Atlantic anticolonial writers dealt with internal incoherence and material and philosophical difference. While Younis points to the “retreat from the global”—the current orthodoxy against thinking on a global scale—as being motivated by epistemological humility or reticence, there is another explanation. Namely, the real fear that, while philosophically powerful, this new politics is strategically unreliable; in its global ambition, it does not properly reckon with the serious differences across its expanse. While the diaspora produces the globality of the black Atlantic, the reader may wonder to what extent that globality then affects and shapes that diaspora too—for better or worse.

In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy (1993: 15) suggested that the new task of the cultural historian was to “take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis” and to “produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective”. Musab Younis’ *On the Scale of the World* achieves this twice over. Not only does his text suggest that current scholarship could benefit from a more global—more ambitious—approach to thinking about anticolonial worldmaking, but also it suggests that black interwar anticolonial Atlantic writers already conceived of the world in such terms. However, as Younis demonstrates, crafting such a perspective requires more than doing cultural history. To properly learn the lessons of interwar black anticolonial Atlantic thought, one must do the hard interdisciplinary work such a project requires, whether that is social philosophy and political geography. Most importantly, inhabiting that wideness of vision is vital to capture the scale political analysis requires.

References

- Batchelor K and Harding S-A (2017) *Translating Frantz Fanon across Continents and Languages*. London: Routledge
- Bernasconi R (1996) Casting the slough: Fanon's new humanism for a new humanity. In L Gordon, T D Sharpley-Whiting and R T White (eds) *Fanon: A Critical Reader* (pp113-121). Oxford: Blackwell
- Dawson M C (2001) *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Getachew A (2019) *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Gilroy P (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Srivastava N (2015) Frantz Fanon in Italy, or, Historicizing Fanon. *Interventions* 17(3):309-328