

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 2—Alexandra Reza (Comparative Literature and Cultures, University of Bristol)¹

The signal intervention of this book is the argument that “by thinking”, as Musab puts it, “on the scale of the world”, Black anticolonialists in the interwar period developed a “connective, comparative, and relational approach” to the problem of imperial rule that was both “resolutely antiprovincial” and “skeptical of claims to national or imperial uniqueness” (p.4). Musab’s suggestion is that received accounts of anticolonial thought have underplayed that emphasis on the world and on globality.

That argument matters for several reasons. Let me highlight three. Firstly, it gives us a framework to understand the “apparently paradoxical relationship between nationalism and internationalism” (p.8) that, building on the work of others including Rahul Rao (2010), Musab demonstrates characterised Third Worldist thinking.

Secondly, the book pushes back on treatments of the French empire as a “sui generis polity” by emphasising the ways anticolonialists sought to analyse empire by going beyond particular imperial contexts (p.85). *On the Scale of the World* is particularly focussed on French and British empires, but the point stands more widely. In that sense the book offers us a rationale for working comparatively and connectively across and beyond the frontiers of imperial language in our accounts of imperial and anti-imperialism. I speak here as someone affiliated with language and cultural studies, where there is a disciplinary tendency to lean on the false idea of spatially distinct, even hermetic, “language worlds”.

The third point is about race and racialisation. Part of Musab’s point in the book is that this emphasis on the world-scale allowed anticolonialists to analyse and dismantle what

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he calls “the formidable power of race, the principal ideology of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism” that was itself a world-making ideology (p.4). One of the things Musab does very elegantly in the book is to sew together disparate voices drawn from a dispersed archive of newspapers and print to trace an intellectual history of anticolonial writing about whiteness, figured not as a personal affect but as a world-system. That history clearly has a presentist charge and can, among other things, help us ground a series of questions about the formation of contemporary migration and immigration regimes.

But Musab also reminds us of the ambition of that past moment in intellectual and political history, that sought not just to name, but also to undo the enclosures of imperial discourse and practice. As he puts it, “[a]nticolonial thought sought at bottom to escape the spatial and temporal fixities of imperial discourse. For that to happen, the world had to be articulated as the scale on which the politics of race was premised” (p.4). In that vision, what Musab calls the politics of race is part of a wider colonial effort of enclosure—of land, of resources, of personhood—that must be met not with an embrace of those boundaries, not by accepting the boxing-in of selves along racialised, gendered, and classed lines, but rather by a refusal to be mired in particularity. That anti-enclosure position functioned by articulating categories such as the body and the nation with the grander scale categories of the world and the globe.

That anticolonial emphasis on expansive categories of political analysis continued in later decades. When Alioune Diop, the Senegalese intellectual, founded *Présence Africaine* in Paris in 1947, for example, the journal renounced any intention to be a “French” journal (Diop 1947: 12). Rather, the editors wrote in its first edition, the journal sought to move past the French empire to consider “questions of world importance ... in order that we might one day find ourselves among the creators of a new order” (Diop 1947: 14). Those struggling against the Portuguese empire in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, too, rejected state-backed ideas of a hermetic Portuguese-speaking world, of Portuguese colonial exceptionalism, insisting instead on the connections between the logics, techniques, security infrastructures of the French, British, and Portuguese imperial projects. Musab’s book gives us an important antehistory of that later moment.

I want to add a final point about print histories. This book is part of a rising tide of scholarship that focusses on the histories of anticolonial print cultures, newspapers,

magazines, and journals. That body of work reminds us that anticolonial movements and histories of decolonisation were heterodox, collective endeavours, and their enduring valency today extends beyond their perceived leaders and intellectual figureheads. In this sense, newspapers, journals, and magazines are a particularly suggestive form: collective endeavours, too, shaped by but surpassing their editors. They can give us ways into a more peopled anticolonial history that can get us beyond celebrations of the anthologised writings of canonised anticolonialists. One passage I particularly enjoyed in Musab's book is his reading of the Toussaint L'Ouverture sequence in Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*: "Hear the white world / horribly weary from its immense efforts / its stiff joints crack under the hard stars" (Césaire 1983: 69). Musab reinserts Césaire's treatment of whiteness there into a wider discourse of writing about whiteness and the white world that was current in those decades. That reading illuminates not just the social and political context Césaire is responding to and operating within but also how he takes up and reworks that discourse.

Let me close with two points of discussion. The first is about dissidence within the anticolonial archive Musab has constructed. In the work of stitching that he has effected, Musab has very dextrously hidden the seams of the materials he's worked with, but I am interested in what processes of mediation shaped those publications in order to better understand them as published forms. Who archived them, who edited, chose, translated them? Did editors always prefer material that registered the world-scale? I think of the first collection of self-styled negritude poetry in Portuguese published in Lisbon in 1953 by the future co-founder of the Angolan MPLA, Mário Pinto de Andrade, and the São Tomé poet and geographer Francisco Tenreiro. In introducing their collection, they write that humanism and world-thinking is the signal characteristic of negritude writing in Portuguese and that they have excluded everything, for example, from Cabo Verde and São Tomé because it was too regionalist and therefore unhelpful in reaching a "global understanding of the black world" (Tenreiro and Andrade 1982: 82). Attending to those processes of selection, exclusion, and mediation can also help us understand the conditions of production of the archive, not least in terms of its divisions of labour. In particular: where are the women in this archive? If not named as writers, were they doing other forms of less visible and prestigious textual work: translating, copying, typing, printing?

The second point builds on this question of gender. At one point, Musab writes that the “distinction between home and the world, the masculine assertiveness of scope, unequal access to travel and print—all are features of this writing, as they are of a broader archive of patriarchal anticolonialism” (p.14). I worried about that masculine assertiveness of scope. In her book *The Nation Writ Small*, a study of African women’s writing from 1958 to 1988, Susan Andrade (2011) argues that whilst the texts she discusses often appear to operate only at a small scale, dealing with domestic, personal, apparently private questions, such matters are in fact social, and engage broader questions of liberation and the political. Andrade’s insight reminds us that gender-conscious (rather than gender-blind) anticolonial praxis operated with multiscale, rather than single-scale, analyses. In later decades, those attentive to the gendering of independence, often women, insisted on articulating the lived scale of everyday life to the grand project of world transformation. Musab builds a rigorous and compelling argument about how interwar anticolonialists insisted that structures of race and class could only be dismantled at the scale of the world. Work remains to be done to better understand how that world scale was claimed in the interwar years by those who also and at the same time sought to dismantle the world-making structure of patriarchy.

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