

*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)

**Author's Response— Musab Younis (St Edmund Hall & Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford)<sup>1</sup>**

I am immensely grateful to Alexandra Reza and Joseph Ward for their generous readings of my book and their helpful and insightful comments. Reza deftly summarises the text as refusing the “colonial politics of enclosure” in all its many forms, which include retreats into hermeticism and self-isolation. I am thankful to her for pointing to a key aim of the book, which was to show how scale operates as a political strategy in terms of both domination and resistance, and for saying that this helps us to think differently about binaries like nationalism/internationalism or false singularities like the French empire. And I appreciate Ward's pointing to my insistence on the writing of underacknowledged and non-canonised writers in the Black Atlantic tradition, especially journalists and editors. I'm glad that both he and Reza find that one of the book's key strengths to be its range and disparity of voices, showing that anticolonial movements were what Reza calls “heterodox, collective endeavours”.

Reza asks a number of important questions about the print cultures I explored in the book. She is curious about the processes by which these texts arrived in the world and the “processes of selection, exclusion, and mediation” that accompanied them as they did so. Ward is also interested in difference, but another kind: the “internal incoherence and material and philosophical difference” across these texts and their authors, which might point to the global as being in some sense “strategically unreliable”.

In responding to these very important questions, I think it's helpful to say something about how this book project started and evolved over time. My longstanding interest in (and,

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<sup>1</sup> [musab.younis@politics.ox.ac.uk](mailto:musab.younis@politics.ox.ac.uk)

I think it's important to say, political solidarity with) pan-Africanism initially led me to explore Kwame Nkrumah's attempt to form a United States of Africa between 1957 and 1963. As I wrote about the fast-paced diplomacy of these early independence years (a period to which I will return in forthcoming work), I became aware of a whole world of transnational political thought circulating around the Atlantic that had formed the basis of the ideas that animated leaders like Nkrumah, Nyerere, Azikiwe, Keita, Cabral, and many others, as well as the many millions of people who participated in the independence movements and struggle to build a viable postcolonial future for the African continent and the Caribbean.

This political thought—going back to the nineteenth century, but flourishing especially during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s—was present in scholarship, but there was quite a strict disciplinary separation. The field of international relations almost without exception ignored it in favour of the realm of high politics, diplomacy, and conceptual models or grand theories of decolonisation and nationalism. Political theory was only just beginning to accept the possibility that major figures like W.E.B. Du Bois offered relevant insights to the field, and had not moved beyond a very restricted canon of Black and African thought. It was really only historians and literary studies scholars who had explored the rich and complex print cultures of Africa and the Caribbean under colonial occupation and African diasporic communities in the Americas and Europe. And even within their work, there was a split. Historians of Africa, including literary historians, focused on African newspapers; historians of the United States examined African American writing; and scholars of France usually studied francophone Black print cultures in isolation from the rest of the Black Atlantic.

So the impetus of the book was to explore, through my own primary and archival research, the print cultures described by literary scholars and historians like Brent Hayes Edwards, Penny von Eschen, Fred I.A. Omu, Stephanie Newell, Christopher Miller, Robert A. Hill, Robin D.G. Kelley, and many others—but to do so in a specifically political direction and what I hoped would be a combinatory force, with the aim of asking: what do we gain from defragmenting this capacious and interconnected world of print, seeing it as a kind of totality, and taking seriously its claims to theorise about global politics? Reza rightly situates my book as “part of a rising tide of scholarship that focusses on the histories of anticolonial print cultures”, but I think it's worth adding that my work focused not just on the history or

textuality of those print cultures but, more specifically, on their theoretical import. This is why I also turned to theorists of space and geography like Katherine McKittrick, Denis Cosgrove, Neil Smith, and Doreen Massey, as well as to theorists of race and globality and international relations. My aim was to try and insist that Black anticolonial writers were not only mired in their particularities but were also political theorists whose insights have, or should have, enduring relevance to a vast constituency.

It was this attempt to create an interplay between the specific histories of these anticolonial texts and their wider theoretical implications which animated the book, and which led me to bracket some important questions that also interest me and many others, relating to what Reza calls “the conditions of production of the archive”. In Chapter 4, I pay homage to the scholarship that has contextualised anticolonial writing within broader dynamics of gender, masculinity, and patriarchy. But I ask in that chapter if there are not also other insights in the anticolonial archive that are pertinent to thinking about how power acts on the human body. In particular, I suggest that feminist and anticolonial theory might be brought together in underappreciated ways with respect to scale, and specifically the ways in which they see intimate experiences of domination and subjection as tied to world-scale political processes.

I suggest that feminists who have insightfully conceived of patriarchy with reference to accumulation on a world scale, for example, can be understood as developing a tradition of anticolonial thought that has explored how a global political order instils itself into the human body through a process that Fanon (1967) called “epidermalization”. And I argue that in both feminist and anticolonial traditions, the pitfalls of essentialism have been evaded through a distinctly scalar approach to the subject of liberation. I wanted to ask if an exclusive focus on the gender identity of the author of a text, while clearly an important line of inquiry, risks leading us to a restricted or incomplete understanding the implications of anticolonial theory for gender, feminist, and queer theory (and vice versa). I have found especially useful here the work of theorists like Hortense Spillers and Keguro Macharia, and historians like Keisha N. Blain and Cheryl Higashida, who in different ways have used the historical experiences of the African diaspora to complicate ideas about feminism, nationalism, kinship, and what Spillers (1987: 80) calls “the traditional symbolics of female gender”.

Finally, I want to respond to Ward's very important point about difference and incommunicability across the archive of African diaspora thought. This question is particularly well explored in Edwards' (2003) *The Practice of Diaspora*; Sidney J. Lemelle and Robin D.G. Kelley's (1994) volume *Imagining Home*; the work of Paul Gilroy; and in the writing on *créolité* and diaspora from francophone Caribbean writers like Édouard Glissant and Raphaël Confiant. It's important to say here that the above writers (alongside many others) don't simply seek to highlight moments of incommunicability or difference, but to ask how and under what conditions that difference can be bridged and forms of political solidarity forged, even if only transiently and in ambivalent ways.

I think these theorists are right in their refusal to stop at the moment of the discovery of difference. My claim in the book is that the provincialism that has gripped so much of contemporary theory, which seeks to avoid the risks that attend political commitment, carries its own dangers. In particular, it risks buttressing a form of domination that seeks to atomise, divide, and isolate its subjects, the better to rule over them. This does not mean that we should simply paper over or elide divisions. But it does mean that, like the interwar anticolonialists who typically operated in extremely difficult conditions, we shouldn't stop at the moment at which we discover difference, but keep going by asking how and under what conditions collective political action remains possible. In my view, the scale of the world was a fundamental means by which anticolonialists could understand themselves as political subjects with a shared oppressor and common liberatory project without recourse to essentialised ideas of identity. A century later, the global and planetary scales have lost none of their enormous power, either in destructive or liberatory terms. Looking at the world today—at Palestine, Sudan, Haiti, the Congo, Kashmir, West Papua—shows, I think, how little choice we have, how insufficient the retreat to provincialism remains, and how immense the political stakes are for the millions of subjects who have already been marked for death by our neocolonial and necropolitical order.

## References

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