

FORUM: THE RISE AND DECLINE OF “COLONIAL HUMANITIES”

Introduction: Colonial Humanities and Criticality

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the premise that the humanities are still in urgent need of being decolonized and deprovincialized, this forum, titled “The Rise and Decline of ‘Colonial Humanities,’” offers insights into the development of the humanities disciplines in what are often referred to as “area studies” (a field itself subject to criticism) since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The forum’s perspective on “colonial humanities” acknowledges the violence perpetuated in the name of Euro-American humanities and calls for an in-depth and sustained investigation into the construction of racism and prejudice across our fields. Case studies focus on the “local” development of philology in Turkey (Leezenberg), on critical “coauthorship” with local scholars in literary and historical studies (Berber/Amazigh studies) in Algeria (Merolla), and on the need for increased criticality and self-awareness in the fast-changing field of lexicography (Sear and Turin). The forum is rounded out with a commentary and reflection by Shamil Jeppie.

This forum focuses on the history of “colonial humanities” and the associated criticism. Postcolonial investigations offer a welcome and critical analysis of knowledge created by dominant conceptualizations of (former) colonial spaces and their cultures. The history of the humanities—in contrast to the history of the natural sciences—is still a relatively young field of inquiry and, as such, will benefit from the insights of postcolonial criticism. This forum offers new insights on colonial humanities in the history of humanities with regard to area studies as well as a reflection on critical thinking in these fields of research.¹

1. We thank Susan Arndt for her input in the writing of this introduction and for her contributions to the organization of the panel “The Rise and Decline of ‘Colonial Humanities,’” presented at the “The Making of the Humanities VI” conference, University of Oxford, Somerville College, September 28–30, 2017.

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As we finalize this introduction, “Black Lives Matter” demonstrations show us, once again, that racism remains one of the most intractable challenges of the twenty-first century. While systemic racism shapes our encounters with one another and influences our individual and collective experience of being human, antiracism movements gain momentum once again, through the tireless work of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) scholars, writers, and community members. With this forum, we wish to participate in this discussion. From the perspective of our different specializations, areas, and methodologies, we share a common understanding that the humanities have played an important, if shameful, role in bolstering racism and racist sentiment through colonialism. After all, racism exerts power and affects structures, institutions, knowledges, and moralities—including academia.

Colonialism is deeply entangled with the creation of “race,” and the long history of structural racism and violence with which it is associated dates to at least the late eighteenth century.² By “colonial humanities,” we refer to humanities disciplines (philology, linguistics, literary studies, history, art and music history, etc.) that, shaped as they are by European colonialism, have created and reinscribed systematic prejudice. This initial notion of colonial humanities is, however, complicated by other ways in which the concept of coloniality can be understood. To illustrate, although colonization is commonly regarded as the external cultural hegemony and occupation of a group of foreign people over another group or groups, the term can also reference internal cultural hegemony that one group of people imposes on their neighbours or even fellow citizens.

This distinction leads us to ask: what is the relationship between colonial humanities and the study of the humanities in locations that can be understood as having experienced some form of “internal colonisation”³ in Eurasia, Africa, the Americas, and Australasia? To what extent does using the concept of colonialism help get at an understanding of processes of state “modernization”? Or, to be more explicit, to what extent do the Austrian empire, Russian imperialism, the Ottoman empire or Modern China constitute empires, and what kind of colonialism do they embody? And could internal domination be better understood in terms of “internal colonisation” as applied to minority contexts in Europe and in other continents, for instance, in the case of Mexico, South Africa, and Papua New Guinea?⁴ Moreover, even in the forms of

2. Amos Morris-Reich and Dirk Rupnow, eds., *Ideas of “Race” in the History of the Humanities* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

3. Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011); Charles Pinderhughes, “Toward a New Theory of Internal Colonialism,” *Socialism and Democracy* 25, no. 1 (2011): 235–56.

4. Sergio Salvi, *Le nazioni proibite: Guida a dieci colonie “interne” dell’Europa occidentale* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1973); Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, “Internal Colonialism and National Development,” *Studies*

colonization perpetuates by European states and peoples, there are important differences in how colonization was imagined and implemented, and in how colonial humanities developed as a product of the localized specifics of colonization.

We may consider, for instance, the following differences: (1) Nepal, existing in a space of non-post-coloniality, with respect to India and the British Empire; (2) Ottoman Turkey, never colonized, with respect to Egypt; and (3) Ethiopia, invaded by Italian troops but not colonized (in the sense of a prolonged colonization), when compared with Algeria and South Africa. Further, among such differences, what is the weight of the analytical distinction between “settler” and “nonsettler” colonization—a frame that has proved extremely useful in linguistic, cultural, and literary studies in the Americas and Australasia—for a critical and decolonial history of the study of the humanities in general?⁵ Finally, recent developments in ecocriticism raise pertinent questions about “nature colonization” as the ongoing plundering of territories and the subjugation of its peoples are inexorably linked.⁶ Such questions are too complex to be tackled here, but they warn us against the use of overly narrow definitions. We take “colonial humanities” to refer primarily to a perspective of/on the humanities that acknowledges the power of knowledge and the violence perpetuated in the name of Euro-American humanities, as well as the historic and persistent reality of different colonialisms. The articles in this collection contribute to “critical humanities” in area studies, that is, the work of overcoming monologic Euro-American academia, by engaging more deeply with African, Asian, and Indigenous epistemologies and scholarship and by surfacing and speaking to the racialized relationships of subordination and oppression that structure our fields.⁷

Although we focus on the history of academic knowledge since the late eighteenth century, we are cognizant that the humanities have been deeply implicated and

in *Comparative International Development* 1, no. 4 (1965): 27–37; Anthony L. Smith and Angie Ng, “Papua: Moving Beyond Internal Colonialism?,” *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 4, no. 2 (2002): 90–114.

5. Jane Carey and Ben Silverstein, “Thinking with and beyond Settler Colonial Studies: New Histories after the Postcolonial,” *Postcolonial Studies* 23, no. 1 (2020): 1–20; Aidan Pine and Mark Turin, “Language Revitalization,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, ed. Mark Aronoff (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* (London: A&C Black, 1999).

6. Val Plumwood, “Decolonizing Relationships with Nature,” in *Decolonizing Nature Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*, ed. William M Adams and Martin Mulligan (London: Earthscan, 2003), 51–78.

7. In a recent publication, Shose Kessi, Zoe Marks, and Elelwani Ramugondo use “epicolonial” to refer “to the features of coloniality that pervade and supersede systems and relations of power [which] may or may not directly traced to legacies or histories of overt or observed colonial encounters” (“Decolonizing African Studies,” *Critical African Studies* 10, no. 3 [2020]: 271–82).

involved in the development of an “imperial reason” since the Renaissance. Foundational concepts of rationality and knowledge were enmeshed and intertwined with ideas of race and gender inequality. As both postcolonial and decolonial studies point out, the ideas of Man and Humanity afforded Renaissance intellectuals the privilege of differentiating themselves from other communities.⁸ These humanists—as they are known—were able to define the world according to their hopes and experiences and to universalize their categories of understanding from their own ethnocentric positionality.⁹ This long-term process culminated in what Edward Said has identified as “Orientalism,” intended as a European projection of the Other to identify the self as superior, universal, and beyond question and interrogation. While the mechanisms of such a projection remain valid, Said’s work has been criticized for focusing primarily on English and French scholarship, and for overlooking internal differences in the European constructions of its Other, as well as for neglecting scholarship from, for instance, Eastern Europe, China, and Japan.¹⁰ “Imperial” definitions of humanity and inhumanity were constitutive of the creation of the humanities as academic disciplines and have infiltrated presuppositions and epistemologies in ways that continue to be felt in “our” paradigm of research and knowledge creation to the present.¹¹

The practice of colonialism, imperial definitions of (in)humanity, and their combined and prolonged effects on the histories and epistemologies of the humanities are, however, only part of the story. Learned knowledge of the world has of course developed elsewhere, independent of theories and methods fashioned in Europe, as well as in productive “dialogue and conflict” with them.¹²

8. Walter Mignolo, “Who Speaks for the ‘Human’ in Human Rights,” *Hispanic Issues Online* 5, no. 1 (2009): 7–24; Sabine Broeck, “Neue Geisteswissenschaften als Transcultural and Decolonial Humanities: Einzelne Aspekte und Aufgaben,” in *Lost and Found in Translation*, ed. René Diedrich, Daniel Smilovski, and Ansgar Nünning (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher, 2011), 73–82.

9. Will Bridges, “A Brief History of the Inhumanities,” *History of Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2019): 1–26.

10. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); Edward W. Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered,” *Cultural Critique* 1 (1985): 89–107; Bernard Lewis, “The Question of Orientalism,” *New York Reviews of Books* 29, no. 11 (1982); Fred Halliday, “‘Orientalism’ and Its Critics,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 20, no. 2 (1993): 145–63; Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies* (London: Allen Lane, 2006); Asher Susser, “The Orientalism Debate: On Recognizing the Otherness of the Other,” *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 9 no. 3 (2018): 247–58.

11. Bridges, “Brief History”; Femi Osofisan, “Les ‘humanités’ contribuent-elles à l’humanisation?,” *Politique Africaine* 4, no. 100 (2005): 165–70. See also the response to Bridges by Susan Arndt, “The Ethics of (Lacking) Responsibility in the Humanities: A Comment on Bridges’s ‘A Brief History of the Inhumanities,’” *History of Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2019): 27–39.

12. Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *On the Origin of*

The long histories of the study of philology, linguistics, literary studies, and of other humanities disciplines has profoundly affected the orientation of the articles collected in this forum. Some of the contributions belong to what has come to be known as “area studies,” a field historically entangled with the imperial origin of the humanities disciplines and Orientalism.¹³ A pertinent example is the division between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. The separation of the “two Africas” contributes to the persistent and unwelcome divides among African studies, Middle Eastern studies, and Mediterranean studies in academic institutes and museums. Several scholars have offered rich methodological critiques of the two Africas and the rhetorical figure of “Black Africa” as the “real Africa” in history, anthropology, and literary studies, leading to the racialization of Africa and of African studies.¹⁴ The constructed divide between the two Africas lays bare the fact that the colonial constitution of the “areas” and their epistemic borders does not always match empirical and historical data. Through sustained and indeed growing criticism from postcolonial and decolonial studies, area studies (seen as a form of multiculturalism) are shrinking in some academic quarters, unable to shake off the perception that they contribute to reinforcing essentialized approaches to culture and identity.

Yet area studies have also matured considerably, entering a new phase of reflexivity and dynamism, looking beyond the boundaries of cultural areas and zones that were imagined to be stable, and increasingly welcoming diverse voices and positionalities.¹⁵ The three articles in this forum collectively interrogate the legitimacy of the general disciplines.¹⁶ The disciplines, in regard to both their theories and methodologies, are often

Global History, inaugural lecture delivered Thursday, November 28, 2013 (Paris: Collège de France, 2016).

13. See David Szanton, “Introduction: The Origin, Nature, and Challenge of Area Studies in the United States,” in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. David Szanton (Berkeley: University of California, 2004), 12–26.

14. Daniela Merolla, “Beyond ‘Two Africas’ in African and Berber Literary Studies,” in *The Face of Africa: Essays in Honour of Ton Dietz*, ed. Wouter van Beek, Jos Damen, and Dick Foeken (Leiden: African Studies Centre Leiden, 2017), 215–35.

15. Arjun Appadurai, *Globalization and Area Studies: The Future of a False Opposition* (Amsterdam: Centre for Asian Studies, Amsterdam, 2000); Bastien Bosa, “Discuter des ‘aires culturelles’ grâce aux ‘airs de famille’: Réflexions sur les modes d’organisation de la recherche dans les sciences sociales,” *Revue d’anthropologie des connaissances* 1, no. 3 (2017): 455–77.

16. We use this term “general disciplines” to refer to the debate concerning the relationship between area research focused on a specific region and non region-specific disciplines that are usually defined by their theories, concepts, and methods. These disciplines include, among others, history, literary studies, musicology, and history of art, as well as (in the social sciences) anthropology and sociology. See Claudia Derichs, “Shifting Epistemologies in Area Studies: From Space to Scale,” *Middle East—Topics and Arguments* 4 (2015): 29–36.

based on local data and ideas derived from European approaches and understandings, which brings us back to the concept of “imperial reason,” which served to establish local European categories as being putatively universal.¹⁷ In short, it is necessary to decolonize both area studies and general disciplines.

In any case, we need to proceed toward the deconstruction of colonial humanities and, in the process, work to decolonize the history of humanities. Together, the contributions to this forum posit that a resolutely comparative approach, which includes intellectual and methodological contributions from various global knowledge centers, will help not only to advance the foundations of area studies but also contribute new epistemological foundations for the work of “critical” humanities. In the process, we hope to contribute to the development of a new space of intellectual confluence where it will be possible for contradictions and discomfort to be openly acknowledged and embraced.

The forum explores different forms of agency by people under different modalities of colonial rule and in different temporalities, without the pretense of covering every area, subject, and agency or of proposing a univocal, homogeneous approach. We offer a relatively constrained selection of topics from which we hope to make clear the many questions that the entanglement of the study of humanities disciplines and the practice and ideology of colonialism raise in the transnational study of the humanities.

In *Archaeology of Babel: The Colonial Foundation of the Humanities*, Siraj Ahmed criticizes the colonial scholarly enterprise of engaging with philological studies of Indian texts by highlighting their neglect (and ignorance) of the relationships of dominance and subordination located in these texts. Consonant with such a critique, a central approach taken by the contributors to this forum is to address the intertextuality of works by imperial and local scholars while also highlighting criticisms raised by the latter of the former. Focusing on the history of colonial humanities, the first two articles (about Turkish and Berber/Amazigh studies by Leezenberg and Merolla, respectively) highlight how colonial scholarship—globally diffused through imperial adventure and the extractive appropriation of the world and its peoples—was built on existing local knowledges, which were then reinterpreted and narrated into paradigms set by European interpreters. In so doing, colonial scholarship imposed powerful imperial positions on existing local knowledge systems. At the same time, whether or not this was recognized by the voices and pens of the powerful, colonial scholarship functioned as a form of

17. Derichs, “Shifting Epistemologies”; Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge, eds., *Area Studies at the Crossroads: Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

“coauthorship,” entrenched with revisions and subversions by generations of local intellectuals (with their own, historically founded, social and cultural hierarchies, as ably demonstrated by Ahmed in *Archaeology of Babel*, though not always publicly acknowledged).

A second thread explored in this forum is the study of the history of colonial humanities as it reflects and affects current practice and ethical relations. What we refer to as the current “decline” of colonial humanities is still a power-coded encounter of multiple global agents, resulting from revisions and subversions, and from a whole body of scholarly reflection and debate. In the final essay, Victoria Sear and Mark Turin offer a discussion of lexicography and reflect on how colonial thinking has made an impact on the legacies of their disciplines. The three essays enter into dialogue with one another, illustrating how the debate on the history of the humanities and the demise of colonial humanities is in full swing.

A point to raise is that of our own positionalities. Sear and Turin, for example, underscore their positionality as “settler scholars” in an Indigenous space. Michiel Leezenberg and Daniela Merolla point out that they are writing from countries and institutions that were at the core of the colonizing enterprise and ideologies, which necessitates a different kind of (self-)criticism. In the case of commentator Shamil Jappie, from the University of Cape Town, positionality is complicated by the very thorny configuration of racialized speaking, writing and power in past and contemporary South Africa. Accepting the constraints and limitations imposed by these individual positions and subjectivities, our goal has been to build this forum through a dialogue on research practice inspired by critical reflection and to uplift the work of scholars whose important ideas and theoretical contributions have been rendered less visible through the exclusionary colonial gaze.

Framed by postcolonial and decolonial critical approaches, the three articles—by Leezenberg on Turkish philology, Daniela Merolla on Amazigh/Berber literary studies, and Sear and Turin on lexicography—invite the reader to consider to what extent we can speak of colonial humanities and of coauthorship, not to mention the independent development of local intellectuals, and their adoption or rejection by contemporary studies. Leezenberg’s article, “Internalized Orientalism or World Philology? The Case of Modern Turkish Studies,” questions the impact of German Romanticism and European “imperial” philology in the development of Turkish scholarship and nationalism. Inscripting Turkish studies in the context of early modern forms of non-European philological learning, Leezenberg contends that local scholars used their advanced knowledge in Ottoman languages and in the traditional study of the Arabic language to produce their own grammars. Their studies responded to vernacularization and the subsequent rise of multiple written languages in the Ottoman Empire. These were domestic processes that

demoted the influence of European philology and presuppositions about the “internalized Orientalism” of Turkish scholars and nationalism.

In “Amazigh/Berber Literary and Historical Studies: Approaching Colonial Humanities from the Perspective of Critical Humanities,” Merolla examines original studies and contemporary critical humanities to show how Kabyle intellectuals coproduced as well as defied colonial literary and historical research at the beginning of the twentieth century. Kabyle intellectuals disentangled some elements constituted in the framework of colonial humanities and offered new data and interpretations. Their insights were based on their knowledge of the Berber language, the oral sources, and the (auto)biographical experience of literature, society and colonial oppression in their capacities as scholars, native speakers, and local intellectuals. Initiating scientific debates alongside overt or covert conflicts with established French academics, Kabyle intellectuals contributed to a chain of studies that would lead to the demise of colonial presuppositions and epistemologies in the field of Amazigh/Berber research. Their example invites researchers to engage with the long-term process of decentralizing Eurocentric models and to think beyond the two Africas approach, imagining instead intercultural categories of knowledge in African literary studies.

Sear and Turin take the creation of dictionaries as a starting point in their examination of the origin and development of a field of study in “Locating Criticality in the Lexicography of Historically Marginalized Languages.” A dictionary’s purpose and a compiler’s authority have long been debated in philological societies, as scholars were acutely aware that dictionaries are not “inert documents” and that social assumptions and attitudes become embedded in lexicographic practices and decisions. Sear and Turin demonstrate that lexicography principally developed from the study of European languages that were structurally related to one another. Building on decolonial and Indigenous critical studies, and on their own research collaborations with speakers of historically marginalized and underresourced languages in Asia and North America, Sear and Turin call for a departure from colonial approaches to lexicography and a redirection toward “ethical and theoretical . . . dictionary work with nondominant languages” rather than a single specific way to practice lexicography.¹⁸ Such a reorientation, Sear and Turin argue, will stimulate the development of practices that more accurately reflect the structure of Indigenous languages and address the practical needs and intellectual goals of marginalized language communities. The four authors thank Shamil Jeppie for his careful reading of their articles and his critical commentary on the “The Rise and Decline of ‘Colonial Humanities,’” which can be found at the end of the forum.

18. Victoria Sear and Mark Turin, “Locating Criticality in the Lexicography of Historically Marginalized Languages,” in this issue.

In dealing with linguistics and historical and literary studies in their intertextual relations and with their revisions and subversions across four continents, this forum addresses the rise and decline of colonial humanities and the critical approaches needed to hasten the overdue demise of imperial and racial methodologies of research. Instead, these contributions argue for the renewal and renovation of humanities disciplines based on more diverse centres, voices, interactions, and a heightened critical perspective on the power of studying and writing.

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