

REVIEW ESSAY

Between Problem and Critique: Whither the Postcolonial?¹

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Abstract

This essay seeks to set to work on the question of race and the futures of the postcolonial in post-apartheid South Africa through abiding by the site of the indeterminacy between problem and critique. Arguing that reading, in the robust sense offered by Gayatri Spivak and Stuart Hall, is a necessary and urgent response to the question, the paper examines the interventions of three key figures for thinking radical black thought in our time, namely Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason*, Nahum Chandler's *X: The Problem of the negro as a Problem for Thought*, and Qadri Ismail's *Culture and Eurocentrism*. Through abiding by the stakes of the work of reading in this conjuncture, I argue that it is through resisting the easy route of cultural and relativized difference that the pedagogical work of reading, and teaching reading, for the future, becomes possible.

Keywords

Black radical thought, Mbembe, Ismail, Chandler, Eurocentrism, reading, race.

In the midst of the accidental interest of whites, Frantz Fanon suggests that there is, strictly, 'no black problem.'² Writing as he does in early 1950s France, this claim is more than a little startling. Of course, anyone who has actually read Fanon, rather than merely having threaded the books through their eyeballs, knows that he is

1 This paper was first presented as a lecture at the CHR/ICGC/SARChI Chair annual winter school under the theme of 'Fragment and Form'. The school is a long-term joint project of the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape, the SARChI Chair for Social Change at Fort Hare University, and the Interdisciplinary Centre for the Study of Global Change at the University of Minnesota. The paper was dedicated to the memory of my friend, interlocutor and academic mentor, Qadri Ismail, who was a key contributor to the formation and continuation of the winter school, regularly coming to South Africa during his summer break at the University of Minnesota in order to give lectures, advise students and participate in rigorous public debate. Qadri departed from us in late May 2021, but the ripples of his life persist. I read his work here not as a tribute, but as an intervention that is both timely and out of time.

2 F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, R. Philcox (trans.), (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 13.

responding to the liberal impetus to improve the lot of the black man *as such*, the thrust of late colonialism, whether British or French. Steve Biko, writing a little less than two decades later, says the same, more forcefully: ‘There is nothing the matter with blacks. The problem is WHITE RACISM and it rests squarely on the laps of the white society’.³ Racism, here, is neither simply an attitude nor only structural. Rather, it is an epistemic formation that, as Premesh Lalu reminds us, enables a post-apartheid South Africa to imbibe the strictures of what Biko calls ‘petty apartheid’.⁴ This is not, simply, a question of *their* time, as if, since formal colonialism has somewhat ended, the world is now post-colonial. Or, to state this more pointedly, racism, an accomplice of European colonialism, has an even more powerful accomplice that has been kept in reserve: the disciplinary reason that still seeps through the humanities. As my late friend, interlocutor and teacher once phrased it: ‘The trouble with dead white men is that some of them are not men, many not white and an alarming number not even dead’.⁵ So, where do we go? As my title phrases it, whither the post-colonial? Is there ‘an other heading’? Frantz Fanon gives us a little more than a clue. He writes, shortly before declaring that there is no black problem, that ‘all I know is that anyone who tries to read in my eyes anything but a perpetual questioning won’t see anything – neither gratitude or hatred’.⁶ Reading. Reading in someone else’s eyes, a challenge that can only take place in the moment of a face-to-face encounter which, we probably need no reminder, is not necessarily peaceful; reading someone else’s ‘perpetual questioning’, a someone else who the episteme produces as black. No black problem. But perhaps, a black questioning to guide reading.

In what follows I will attempt to sketch out what might be at stake in such a task of reading. Tarrying with Fanon a little longer, we know that this reading, which for him includes both the phenomenological and the psychological, results, ultimately, in a very particular exit. He writes, memorably, that the task in this moment of ‘decision’, is to ‘change sides’, to ‘leave this Europe which never stops talking of man yet massacres him at every one of its street corners, at every corner of the world’.⁷ The particularity here is often glossed, or even ignored, as though the text in which Fanon writes would allow a simple bracketing, a valorisation of what came before, a stepping out. Rather, the text would suggest that this Europe is the name for an epistemic formation that ‘massacres man’ while speaking of the concept, at every juncture of its production of the world. The stakes of such a reading, which is not without the risk of a wager, will be read through three interventions, namely those of Achille Mbembe, Nahum Chandler and Qadri Ismail.

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3 S. Biko, *I Write What I Like*, A. Stubbs (ed.), (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2010), 25. Emphasis in original.

4 Premesh Lalu, *Undoing Apartheid* (Polity Press, forthcoming November 2022).

5 Qadri Ismail, *Culture and Eurocentrism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 1.

6 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 13. The work of reading that I locate in Fanon’s injunction resonates with that offered by Gayatri Spivak in ‘Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography’ in G. C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Routledge: London & New York: 1998) where she argues that ‘[a] functional change in a sign system is a violent event’ (197), that should be understood as ‘a theory of reading in the strongest sense’ (198). This is a politics articulated by Derrida in his lecture on the question of Europe, see J. Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), which is not to argue for equivalence or identity, but, perhaps, a shared orientation.

7 F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, R. Philcox (trans.), (Grove Press: New York, 2004), 235.

In his *Critique of Black Reason*, Achille Mbembe positions his intervention in a moment of what he recognises as destabilisation. Europe, in this time, is 'off-centre'.⁸ Geopolitically, perhaps. In fact, this off-centredness of Europe might, to channel Fanon yet again, only be a mask that keeps us within the script of Fanon's '*this Europe*'. Because the role of blackness in European self-imagination has not been thought, Mbembe suggests, we are nearing a moment of the universalisation of what he calls the black condition. For Mbembe, this condition is in both the first and the last instance one framed through an economic imperative, that of capital in its various stages. But, in this reduction to the waste of extracted life, there is another more subtle impetus at play, one that he calls the 'hopeless attempt to support a failing I'.⁹ Of course, this is a failure that marks both European and black, a wound that cuts both ways, if differently. We could diverge into a consideration of this failure, and its attempts at suture which largely marks European philosophy, at least since Descartes but certainly since it called itself such after Hegel, but this is not the heading of our reading.¹⁰

Mbembe is interested in producing a reading, in his *Critique of Black Reason*, that examines how 'black reason' structures both the European episteme and the responses to it. If the black condition is first and foremost an economic effect, and through this extendable to the world at large, able to become a universal condition, it is also an effect that has been produced as a by-product of the governmentality of modernity. Race, it seems, emerges as a technique of sovereignty: 'our critique of modernity will remain incomplete if we fail to grasp that the coming of modernity coincided with the appearance of the *principle of race* and the latter's slow transformation into the privileged matrix for techniques of domination'.¹¹ This is a principle which works to negate the idea of a common humanity, even as it seeks to extend humanity to the common.¹² However, in his quick traversal of the production of the black man through colonialism, slavery and the continued need to maintain French rule across an emancipated empire, Mbembe also argues that race, not the principle, but a recognisable difference, comes first, historically.

The 'stampede of Europe', in this reading, opportunistically seizes race, and makes of it a principle of governmentality that is used, within France, as a pedagogy of discipline and culture.¹³ Race, in a sense, marks the example. In the civilisational metaphor of the family, at a material, symbolic and psychic level, the black man becomes the child, as a state out of which the properly French have matured and, there-

8 A. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, L. Dubois (trans), (Duke University Press, 2017), 1.

9 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 4, 32.

10 P. de Man, 'Sign and Symbol in Hegel's Aesthetics' in A. Warminski (ed.), *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

11 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 45, 55 (my emphasis).

12 The shift marked here has been carefully delineated by Stuart Hall in S. Hall, 'When was "the post-colonial"? Thinking at the limit' in I. Chambers and L. Curti (eds), *The Post-Colonial Question: Common skies, divided horizons* (London: Routledge, 1996), 252 where he suggests that the 'floating' signifier of race functions in a system of inclusionary exclusion.

13 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), 64. See also C. Guillaumin, 'Race and Nature: The System of Marks', M. J. Lakeland (trans), in *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1995), where Guillaumin argues persuasively on the mode through which culture comes to be stamped as nature through an opportunistic attachment to perception (140).

by, imbuing the French with the liberal impetus of trusteeship.¹⁴ This obscuring, or masking, of race through the liberal metaphor of improvement, to the careful reader does raise a question; Mbembe has also deployed the black condition as a metaphor of objectification through capital, not as a sign of from where the world has come, but now of where it is heading. As Ismail has shown in his reading of Tylor, this potential slide was also always already part of the arsenal of culture, of the metaphor of improvement. How, though, in Mbembe's argument, does liberalism operate to secure a racial difference while maintaining the broader claim towards emancipation? To be blunt, the French episteme, achieves this through relativising difference. In other words, 'it does not ... set aside the fiction of a racial subject or of *race in general*', rather, it reifies race inside cultural difference.¹⁵ Every particular has its universal, and every universal, it seems, produces its particulars.

In the midst of Mbembe's very quick history, a schematic sketch if you will, he powerfully places the slave as the image of blackness. 'In African history there is, then, a figure of the commodity that has as its main signifier the "family member who was sold or handed over to be killed" in return for goods.' This is not just any slave, or any African; but that one and those, scarred and moved through the Atlantic slave trade.¹⁶ This mode of subjection, that Mbembe describes, is not however unique to the African or black subject. Subjectivated by way of desire, the figure of the slave as an image of the black condition emerges, again, as a metaphor for the subject of neo-liberal capitalism. Of course, black reason, as Mbembe calls it, does not only operate to objectify and marginalise those marked as black. What, precisely, is black, he asks? It is a name that is given, that locates the bearer as always outside. As a naming through a master discourse, what start does the identification 'I am black' make?

If the weight of this naming is historical, then, Mbembe suggests through engaging a series of literary interventions, the self-identification of oneself as 'black' must carry a futural orientation. It is, perhaps, following Césaire and Fanon to offer a reading at the edge of Mbembe's text, a name that comes to us, from a people that are not yet, remembering the weight, that makes a new name necessary.¹⁷

14 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 66-78. For an indication of how this was rationalised in the South African context, see A. Hoernlé, *South African Native Policy and the Liberal Spirit: Being the Phelps-Stokes Lectures, Delivered before the University of Cape Town, May, 1939* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1945). Race features in Hoernlé's lectures as the primary ontological marker in South African society (125) as, he suggests, the racial claim cuts across both a sense of 'class' (19) as well as 'culture' (46). In particular, he diagnoses the liberal spirit in South Africa as hinging on a sense of race: 'the "man" whose birthright is liberty, is an Englishman, or at least a White man, and [...] no non-European is a "man" within the meaning of the formula' (127).

15 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 89.

16 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 117. Blackness, in short, is a name for this calculable reduction, a reification that is signified by the slave. There is something in this reification, the calculable reduction of life, that Mbembe seems to suggest echoes across what we call neoliberalism, to the extent that it is facilitated by the digital. See also, G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1972], R. Hurley, M. Seem and H. R. Lane (trans.), (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), especially the first chapter 'The Desiring Machines'.

17 Here, perhaps, it holds the line that might offer the world a gift, a new face. See Aimé Césaire's lecture on 'Culture and Colonisation', where he suggests that the work is not to 'build a future black culture from a preconceived plan', but rather to clear the ground, to prepare the world to receive the gift from a people to come 'who have the answer' (205), in A. Césaire, 'Culture et colonisation', *Présence Africaine: Le 1er Congrès International des Écrivains et Artistes Noirs* (Paris: Sorbonne, 1956). See also S. B. Diagne, *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson and the idea of Negritude*, C. Jeffers (trans.), (London: Seagull Press, 2011). Negritude, according to Diagne's reading of Senghor, needs to be grasped in part as a method which he defines as 'the theoretical use of all available means' (5).

Mbembe is very clearly writing from his corner of the world, where Black Reason, as he puts it, has been instrumentalised towards violence and separation. Here, he seeks, very briefly, to posit a consideration of the aesthetic, of the hero, (why, for example, does Fanon spend more than three quarters of *The Wretched of the Earth* on psychology and aesthetics, if it is not a critique, in itself, of violence?) and of a process of self-invention.¹⁸ As he puts it, 'for which rights should Blacks continue to struggle? Everything depends on the locations in which they find themselves, the historical contexts in which they live, and the objective conditions which they face.'¹⁹ All of which immediately draws sympathy and support, and, yet, begs the questions: Why the capital 'B' for black, why the use of the third person pronouns 'they', which distances the reader, and then, finally, why valorise the particularity of context, the specificity of relativised difference, if that is in itself the mechanism of neoliberal governmentality that it has learned from race?

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The force of these questions indicates the extent of the wager. The identification, 'I am black' of Césaire or Fanon, always risks the possibility of being returned as a racism.²⁰ This does not mean that the wager should not be ventured. Rather, one might need to guard more carefully against such a return. In Nahum Dimitri Chandler's exquisite reading of the intervention of W. E. B. Du Bois in his *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*, such a lesson is ventured.²¹

Chandler structures his intervention through the concept of 'anacrusis', which carries a double valence of 'striking back' as well as a musical technique of borrowing from the last bar to open the first, a technique that should cause the reader to think of Césaire's assertion 'I am black' as described by Mbembe. Quite simply, then, in Chandler's narrative, the physical and epistemic beats that produce the 'Negro' – colonialism, slavery, Jim Crow, police action, 'stand your ground' laws in the USA – both create what is called the black condition, and offer an opening, a possibility of a backbeat, that might produce some difference into the repetition. Recalling that Du Bois begins his autobiographical *The Souls of Black Folk* with a preposition, 'between', Chandler argues that attending to the trembling of the intervention, the simultaneous raising and destabilising of boundaries that the preposition makes possible, offers a strategy. The preposition resonates, conceptually, with blackness. As a signifier, blackness requires whiteness to produce its meaning, which leads Chandler to call blackness a 'project of white purity'.²² Rather, recognising that blackness, in a word, is the *différance* of whiteness, allows us to read how the 'dogmatism in the midst of the enlightenment' around measuring and specifying the 'negro' (Chandler's signals are

18 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 178. The work of reading, as Spivak shows us, can also alter how we consider the status of violence in Fanon's text.

19 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 176.

20 Cf. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, B. Massumi (trans.), (London: The Athlone Press, 1988), especially the chapter on nomadology: '1227: Treatise on Nomadology' (351-423).

21 N. D. Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

22 Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro*, 16.

Kant and Hegel), is all, actually, about the ‘white man’.²³ This terrain, to borrow a term from one of these enlightenment dogmatists, Kant, the realm within which a concept carries its force, is what needs to be overturned. The double consciousness that is so readily identified with Du Bois’ intervention is not, then, only about the black man’s location in society, how he sees it and is seen in it, but is also about a practice that might destabilise a terrain.

To make this argument, Chandler suggests that Du Bois must be read as operating within the moment of a critique of enlightenment thinking. Specifically, the challenge to the ‘I’ brought about by a thinking of difference, exemplified by the figures of Saussure, Freud and Boas. Whereas these three are readily seen as challenging the terrain of enlightenment rationality, Du Bois, as the *différance* of that episteme, is bracketed as an African Americanist.²⁴ In other words, Du Bois, as a black man, is made to deal with social justice, not the structure of the episteme. *Différance*: a hierarchy of signification that not only differs, but also defers. This is a theoretical term that immediately signifies the apparently post-structuralist thought of Jacques Derrida (the Arab Jew who, vividly, passes as French in order to unsettle a terrain, give it another heading, cf. *The Other Heading*) and runs the risk of Chandler being dismissed as reading Europe through the black man’s text (a critique that echoes the very bracketing that Chandler identifies). However, Chandler is much more careful in his use of Derrida for his intervention (and it should be said that the footnotes of Chandler’s text are a wealth of very sharp readings of Derrida). Derrida, in short, gives us a language which is legible as theory due to his place in the episteme, that helps us to more fully understand what Du Bois was always already about.

It is in the identification of the colour line as the problem of the 20th Century that Du Bois places his question of difference. It is not the name of a boundary or border; it is the marker of *différance*, whereby white wholeness is produced through black fracture.²⁵ To paraphrase Hegel, if the white man writes history, the black man waits at the doorstep. After Derrida, it seems, Chandler suggests we can read Du Bois differently. ‘It [the colour line] pertains to the very way in which the itinerary of the question of the transcendental and the question of being, respectively, are announced within modern thought’, and later ‘while historical in reference, [the colour line’s] value lies in its capacity to stand as the heading of a problem for thought and not, in the final instance, as the name simply given and ready to hand actuality’.²⁶ The

23 Chandler, X: *The Problem of the Negro*, 23. This is an argument similarly produced by Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks* where he states that ‘[a]s painful as it is for us to have to say this: there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white’ (xiv). On the concept of difference and how this pertains to reading, and the politics of reading, see J. Derrida, ‘Différance’ in *Margins of Philosophy*, A Bass (trans.), (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1982).

24 Chandler, X: *The Problem of the Negro*, 47, 70. In making this argument Chandler is in agreement with Souleymane Bachir Diagne’s reading of the philosophical intervention of negritude grasped through the lens of Senghor’s writing. See Diagne, *African Art as Philosophy*.

25 Chandler, X: *The Problem of the Negro*, 59, 66.

26 Chandler, X: *The Problem of the Negro*, 71, 73. The way in which the line operates both as a marker of difference and as a resonance that allows for a different reading, where the work of listening is recognised as a politics of reading, draws strongly from Hortense Spillers’ writing on the line. See for example, H. J. Spillers, ‘Moving on Down the Line’, *American Quarterly* (Special Issue: Reading America), 40, 1, Mar. 1988, 83-109. The force of a line, its inventive potential as well as the weight of its inertia, is presented in Mudimbe’s nuanced essay ‘What is a Line?’ in V-Y. Mudimbe, *African Fault Lines: Meditations on Alterity Politics* (Scottsville: UKZN Press, 2013), 27-59.

importance of this stems from the irony in modern experience: that cycle keeps beating, even though, after Althusser, for example, we now recognise that the subject is a non-static, non-essentialised, in-between that is only crystalised as a subject in the moment of the hail. In Du Bois' own reflections on his genealogy, Chandler notes, it is apparent that he could have been either white or black (the descendant of a white man and a slave mother). And yet, this X marks him as hierarchically deficient, a black man. Paying attention to Du Bois' 'constitution as a subject' is not a case of 'self-reflection', but rather of what, Chandler reminds us, Spivak calls 'de-identification: a sort-of reflexive account that is precisely a referring of the subject to those structures that mark and organize its active emergence'.²⁷ It is what we might, following her essay on subalternity, refer to as being politically scrupulous. In a similar mode, then, to that of apartheid South Africa, the *différance* of race functions through recognition in the social. And that recognition is produced socially, inscribed within a cultural frame. One, it would appear, is not equally 'in-between'. The *différance* of the colour line differs *and* defers, and, to this extent, it serves a broader function in society. It assuages the anxiety of whiteness – every statement weighing the black man affirms the white.²⁸

It is in the figure of the slave who, in a move that resonates with Mbembe's intervention, emerges as an exemplar of the subject produced through the colour line, not just marked by difference, but also deferred from the realm of the fully human. This is a founding violence that underwrites the emergence of 'the modern' and is, following the work of Hortense Spillers, disclosed as a denial of the humanity of the slave premised on the recognition of that very humanity. A structural 'exorbitance' that Spillers defines as 'ambivalence'.²⁹ The difference of the system, the recognition of race as a simple fact, or what Biko called 'petty apartheid' and Mbembe called 'relativized difference', is not available as a ground for resistance. According to Chandler, this is because that difference masks the *différance* of the colour line, the differing of race and the deferment of humanity, that is integral to the formation of whiteness. Nonetheless, that *différance* must be abided by, as he phrases it, and I quote at length:

It is with this double implication of the example – of the subordinate in general, the African American in specific, and the slave in particular – of subjectivation as arising only in this torsion of a doubled reference that a certain sense of possibility can begin to be remarked [...] The sense of this path of subject constitution, if there is such, as a movement of ambivalence, makes possible in turn a naming of an operation or process moving within the system that exceeds, or remains exorbitant, to any projection of the his-

27 Chandler, X: *The Problem of the Negro*, 81, 109.

28 Chandler, X: *The Problem of the Negro*, 101-104, 132.

29 Chandler, X: *The Problem of the Negro*, 154, 148.

torial as a realized structure, and perhaps announces both its possibility and limit.³⁰

Chandler, in other words, reads Du Bois as inhabiting the episteme against which he writes, through abiding by the colour line as a hinge on which the *différance* of that episteme turns.³¹ The wager, here, is that abiding by *différance* as a method through which to open a possibility, to cause the system to tremble from within, risks a reduction into reified difference. The limit to this wager, perhaps, lies with reading.

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Culture and Eurocentrism is a book that rigorously attends to the task of reading.³² In particular, Qadri Ismail sets out to read the conjunctures, the conceptual edges of *différance*, as these structure what he calls the Anglo-U.S. episteme. In short, to read those corners where this Europe is never done speaking of man while massacring it. This work of reading is passed on to the reader, through the invocation of, most frequently, 'the postcolonial reader', but also 'the close reader', the reader of 'deconstruction', and the 'symptomatic reader'. Quite clearly these terms are not synonyms, and if it were possible today I would ask why, in a text that is so thoroughly rigorous on almost every other detail, does this slippage take place? An easy answer is that they are all elements of a broader reader, but this is not Ismail's argument. I suggest that, in a very serious way, this book is about teaching reading, a pedagogy in the old sense of the one who walks the scholar to and from school. Particularly, it is about teaching reading from a point of view, a reading that might be adequate to our conjuncture.

What concerns Ismail in this text is the movement of an episteme. It is an episteme that, in producing the frame for guaranteeing the ascendancy of 'dead white men', produced, rigorously, the black man as waste; all the while shifting shape, full circle from Culture/Race/Nature to Society/Nature, by way of Imagination/Imitation, Culture/Cultures, and finally, to Race/Cultures. These terms signify the edges of *différance* that Ismail reads, and help us to grasp more clearly how the colonial was structured epistemically to produce race, and how this is maintained in our present through the humanities. As he at one point phrases it: 'This book argues that culture emerged at the intersection of Tylor/Arnold, concatenated with race, in response to a colonial solicitation, not to produce knowledge, if there is such a thing, but, accompliced by disciplinary reason, to abet interpellation, of the other and the subject'.³³ To be too blunt, this book is to demonstrate that we don't have culture, 'culture has

30 Chandler, X: *The Problem of the Negro*, 156. The use of 'historial', for Chandler, names a process of reading 'being' through tracking 'worldly' or 'mundane' questions of being as such, a practice that abides by the trace as a heading for reading, 'which seeks to maintain both the worldly or empirical and the movement of the transcendental as the passage of becoming, of the devolution of being, perhaps' (201).

31 Cf. J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, G. C. Spivak (trans.), (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), especially pp. 65-73.

32 Q. Ismail, *Culture and Eurocentrism* (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

33 Ismail, *Culture and Eurocentrism*, 140.

us.³⁴ Whereas Mbembe's intervention moves at speed, and Chandler is at pains to expound the theoretical force of Du Bois, Ismail's intervention unfolds through a close reading of *semantemes* (small units of meaning) as these disclose the undercurrents of the text. In following the itinerary of culture, Ismail notes that:

Unlike society, culture enables the argument that colonialism, a politico-epistemological imposition, violence, does not follow an exclusively political or economic, an exploitative, but another imperative for which a name must be found; an imperative that benefits, improves the object of culture, whether savage or barbarian, would make her subject, bring her closer to the fully or properly human.³⁵

Ismail is reading the founding texts of English Anthropology and Sociology, examining when and how the concept of culture enters the English language. The point here is not about origin but necessity: it is not simply to know the provenance of a concept, but rather to read the contours that might disclose why such a concept gets named then, in that conjuncture. *It is this necessity that he names as eurocentrism*. At a certain point, Ismail argues, it became necessary for colonialism to be transformed from a capitalist enterprise to a liberal one. The reason for this transformation, as both Mbembe and Chandler intimated, and to paraphrase Fanon, is white anxiety about attaining the rank of Man.³⁶

The postcolonial reader, in Ismail's argument, does not simply read for a historical trajectory. Rather, such a reader needs to 'pay attention to actual language [not] value, judgment'.³⁷ It is not simply that culture displaces nature, is pluralised through imagination, and relativised to deal with race, in other words, to keep its effect in play while postponing its racial touch; rather, in each juncture the disciplinary reason of the humanities produce such a shift through producing the black man – whether Irish or African – as not quite, while the European is produced as white (to riff on Bhabha, as Ismail does).³⁸ As Ismail shows, repeatedly, these discursive moves do not hold, not even a little bit, and while it may cause the postcolonial reader to 'pour himself a scotch' in the 'gotcha moment', it does not displace the system itself. If culture is the domain of Anthropology and Sociology, imagination, no doubt, is the domain of Literature and the aesthetic. Imagination, as a concept, emerges at a moment where the native has culture, but not quite like the European due to a lack of futurity. Only the white European, according to literary figures like Shelley, apparently, has the capacity to imagine the future, the 'native' only imitates. In a turn that might give the trend to poor theory a pause, the native does, clearly 'imagine, but poorly'.³⁹

34 Ismail, *Culture and Eurocentrism*, 11.

35 Ismail, *Culture and Eurocentrism*, 60. At the risk of belabouring a point, this is precisely the project that Hoernlé allocates to liberalism through the mechanism of separate development, what he names as apartheid, in his lectures on trusteeship.

36 Ismail, *Culture and Eurocentrism*, 22.

37 Ismail, *Culture and Eurocentrism*, 91.

38 For a sense of the mechanism through which the Irish were conceived in English colonialism as black, see Guillaumin cited above. In addition, see J. Ohlmeyer, 'Brian Friel's Making History and Colonial Ireland', Public Lecture delivered on 16 March 2022, Centre for Humanities Research.

39 Ismail, *Culture and Eurocentrism*, 78, 91.

This intervention is not anti-anthropology, although it certainly disparages those who stake a claim to cultural relativism – even the most ardent relativist will exercise evaluation under certain conditions – but, rather, seeks to disclose how the humanities is complicit with perpetuating the *différance* of the Anglo-U.S. episteme, demonstrating through a close reading of Williams’ inability to violate disciplinary sanctity, how keeping the disciplines of English Literature and Anthropology apart enabled the emergent field of cultural studies to maintain this epistemic formation.⁴⁰ As such, Ismail suggests that ‘the anthropological concept of culture has an itinerary, one that intersects with literature and, even in the relativist instance, is Eurocentric’. If Mbembe and Chandler’s indictments of cultural relativism were not enough, Ismail points out through reading figures like Boas, Fletcher and Geertz, that ‘cultural relativism produces, projects difference while staging itself as discovering, observing, describing or, for that matter, interpreting/writing, it’, with the disciplinary mechanism of the ‘field’ as its accomplice.⁴¹

Culture, it should be clear in my short reading of Ismail’s text, is, then, a hook, a clinamen, that allows the condition of eurocentrism to become established, a condition that in turn hinges on the production of another condition, that of blackness. This is why, in his final chapter, Ismail insists the target of critique should not be the simple racism of the system of black reason; it should not equally, if not quite as straightforwardly, be the marker of the *différance* of the system as this weighs on the black body, but should rather be the epistemic formation that makes this possible. Of course, as the tone of his text makes clear, it is also, always, all of these, at the same time.

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Where, then, does this leave the postcolonial? Reading the edges of our conjunctures, disclosing the mechanisms of our subjectivations in a politically scrupulous way, and unsettling the episteme at the core of its own conjunctures. ‘Calling for finishing (the critique of) dead white men. Here, there, everywhere.’⁴² It must refuse the easy routes of cultural and relativised difference; it should read, and teach reading, so as to open space for futures that are not yet, and cannot be, imagined.

40 Ismail, *Culture and Eurocentrism*, 151.

41 Ismail, *Culture and Eurocentrism*, 139, 154.

42 Ismail, *Culture and Eurocentrism*, 205.