

Introduction: After Post-Colonialism?

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This issue of *Invisible Culture* addresses an enormous topic with a mix of trepidation and humility: what role do post-colonial theorizations of identity and politics play in contemporary visual culture? How are the methodologies of thinkers such as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Edward Said, and Dipesh Chakrabarty (amongst many others) articulated today? What possibilities and limitations do various forms of theorization (post-colonial, neo-colonial, post-post-colonialism, or Cosmopolitanism) offer to a consideration of visual and cultural practice concerned with identity and place?

As guest editors, we chose this topic because it is one that we find ourselves grappling with in our own research. Maia Dauner's doctoral dissertation work addresses the tactics of artists who creatively stage racial identities in order to highlight the very unstable ground upon which these identities rest. She wonders, how is race deployed in these practices and how does it continue to be performed? Cynthia Foo's work also explores similar territory, seeking to consider the role of chaotic, amateurish, audience-involved performances that straddle the lines between art and real life. We felt that many of the factors influencing the reception and interpretation of cultural works reflect the ambiguous status of post-colonial theory today. With more and more interest—academic and otherwise—in the phenomenon of globalization, cosmopolitanism, and transnationalism, we felt the time had come to return to the field of post-colonial theory, and to some of the debates that shaped the field and laid the groundwork for subsequent discourse.

A return to post-colonial theory is not a call to refute scholarship in other fields; nor is it an attempt to place post-colonial theory as an originary source against which subsequent interpretations or investigations are to be measured. Instead, we would like to suggest that discussions of contemporary visual culture that engage theories of cosmopolitanism, globalization, and

transnationalism can be enhanced by re-considering some of the ideas generated by engaging with post-colonial theory. Some of these core ideas include the assumption that racial identities fluctuate in ways that defy categorization, that global inequalities in economic, political, and social mobility are the result of a sustained systematic guarding of privilege through colonialism and imperialism, and that relationships between previously colonized populations and the populations living in former imperial centers of power continue to be strained by historical effects of colonization. We also seek to understand nuance, and, as Benedict Anderson remarks in his interview, to consider how colonized voices, which were once lost, may continue to irritate, and to resonate, through a closer examination of colonial agency.

As we reconsider the idea of what might come after post-colonialism, it is helpful to return to Homi Bhabha's discussion of the prefix "post" in his influential text, *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha suggests that the term post-modernism, in addition to describing the limits of Western modernity, announces an awareness that these limits are also the "enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices."¹ In this description, "post" does not signify a temporal order, but a spatial and contemporaneous relationship with modernity. When we ask what might come after post-colonialism, we would like to examine the limits of post-colonial theory. Where does post-colonial theory cease to function as a mode of analysis or thinking about the world? How and why are these limits created? What lies beyond these limits and how does it influence our current understandings of identity and place? The articles included in this issue of *Invisible Culture* begin to ask how post-colonial theories share boundaries with theories of transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and globalization. It also seeks to question what these theoretical areas of cross-over offer contemporary art and cultural practice, and how they might do so.

This issue opens with Cynthia Foo's interview with Benedict Anderson. Anderson discusses his forthcoming biography of Chinese-Indonesian Kwee Thiam Tjing, an Indonesian patriot and anti-Communist journalist, who wrote on Indonesia's tumultuous politics during the 1920s through the 40s. Anderson describes his difficulty in obtaining information about an author who uses a pseudonym and whose writing disappears from the public record after Indonesian independence. Kwee's case is all the more

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 6.

remarkable for his playful use of multiple languages and sharp punning. Anderson finds a book of his prose in a second-hand bookstore in Indonesia in 1962; it is a work that leads Anderson to celebrate it as “the greatest piece of prose written in the first half of the 20th century by anybody in Indonesia.” Despite Kwee’s expert prose, Anderson describes his difficulty in finding a way to adequately situate Kwee, until the former reconsiders the role of the colonial-era cosmopolitan from the perspective of the colonial subject, instead of its masters’. It is a provocative examination which Anderson labels as “cosmopolitanism from below.” Foo asks Anderson to consider the possible criticism of “cosmopolitanism from below” as a romanticization of colonialism, and to describe the import of post-colonial theory in this project and in his own work in general.

Charlotte McIvor and Mark Westmoreland’s contributions discuss attempts to imagine a national body through film. McIvor examines Ethiopian-Irish actress Ruth Negga’s performance in Neil Jordan’s 2005 film *Breakfast on Pluto*. She suggests that Negga’s performance can serve as a model for conceptions of contemporary Irish belonging that addresses the historical and present participation of non-white, non-Catholic peoples in formations of Irish nationalism. She reads Negga’s brown body as a signifier of Ireland’s recent history and current policies regarding immigration, and she asks readers to consider the colonialist and colonized histories of Ireland as equally influential to contemporary identity formation. Mark Westmoreland proposes a set of “post-orientalist aesthetics” at work in the non-linear narratives of two Lebanese films, Maroun Baghdadi’s *Hors de la vie* (1991) and Jocelyn Saab’s *Once Upon a Time, Beirut* (1994). Westmoreland discusses the films and their critical reception to suggest that the post-orientalist aesthetic presentation of narratives reflect the incomplete and impossible attempt to imagine the self in post-war Lebanon.

We invite you to read this issue with a critical eye and with a view to considering the roles of post-colonial theory and cosmopolitanism in your own experiences. We hope you enjoy this issue’s provocative offerings with the same cautious curiosity with which we have assembled what has proved to be just a few approaches to a very vast topic.