

On the Scale of the World: The Formation of Black Anticolonial Thought

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*“Interplanetary war, interplanetary shame, interplanetary
disgrace, interplanetary crime, interplanetary murder.”*

– ALPHA BLONDY, INTERPLANATARY REVOLUTION (1984)

Musab Younis, originally from Manchester, completed his MPhil (2012) and DPhil (2017) in International Relations at Oxford, under Andrew Hurrell,¹ where he later served as a College Lecturer in Politics at St Peter’s College. From 2018 to 2024, he was a Lecturer and then Senior Lecturer in Politics at Queen Mary University of London before returning to Oxford in 2024 as an Associate Professor of Political Theory. His research focuses on international political thought, theories of race and racism, empire, and anticolonialism during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, connecting historical perspectives on empire with contemporary political theory. His work explores anticolonial political

thought, especially Black and African anticolonialism, the history of race and racism, and issues of space, scale, and globality such as the North vs. South division of the world. He is currently working on a monograph about the intellectual history of global inequality, tentatively entitled *The Pillage of Distant Worlds*, while also simultaneously pursuing projects on the intimate politics of imperialism, demographic catastrophism, settler colonialism, and the concepts of speed and self in anticolonial thought. He has published academically on anticolonialism, race, nationalisms, transnationalism, internationalisms, labor, etc. Moreover, Musab Younis has published articles in the *London Review of Books*, the *Guardian*, *Prospect*, *Baffler*, and *n+1*, among other outlets.

On the Scale of the World begins with a map of the Atlantic, including but not limited to: the United States of America, Canada, Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Tobago, Central America, Cape Verde Islands, coastal West Africa, the Sahel, the Maghreb, and Western Europe. Younis explores the concept of “the Black Atlantic” (2). From the late 19th century through the Interwar period of the 20th century, Black writing developed a planetary “counter-narrative” (3, 12) to the colonial drive to omnipotence, omniscience, and consequently panopticism. Younis wrote that Black Atlantic writers were “skeptical of claims to national or imperial uniqueness” (4). This inevitably meant reframing how geography scales the world, and how nationalistic and imperialistic ideologies create space on “the scale of the world (*l'échelle mondiale*),” as described by Henri Lefebvre.² Race, which “operated in starkly temporal ways,” meant “to be sealed in the past, alienated from the present, written out of the future, or seen as always slipping back to a prehistoric state” (4). The colonized subject is, thus, stuck in “an immobilization in both space and time,” which was “essential to imperial power” (ibid.). Therefore, anticolonial thought sought to escape these “spatial and temporal fixities of imperial discourse” (ibid.). In other words, the imperial world necessarily was built upon a scaling within which the ideology of race was premised. Therefore, Black Atlantic writers of this period focused on the scale of the global and the planetary, which was a prerequisite to accessing overrepresented Euro-American racial theory, so that it may be “turned against itself” (5). Younis, on the other hand,

proposes even further “a set of scalar perspectives at once embodied and global, thus questioning the notion that positioned critique is antithetical to the planetary” (8). The impetus behind this method is “provincializing discourses of colonial rule” (ibid.) that cause “planetary dysphoria” (156). Even in the here and now, the United Nations (successor to the League of Nations) is predicated upon colonial universalisms, as well as Euro-American cosmological and cultural assumptions (15), which became “an enforcer and legitimator of a world order that remained fundamentally imperial” (16). One Lagos-based journalist wrote in the *Comet* in 1935, “Ours may be a voice crying aloud in the wilds of the African Bush. But in the African Bush, away from the turmoil of super-civilization, one has time for mature reflection” (19). According to Younis, “Black writers identified race as a form of global hierarchy rather than a natural division of humanity,” which consequently created a “hierarchical turn” in Black Atlantic international theory (ibid.). Younis reminds us that according to Frantz Fanon, decolonization “sets out to change the order of the world” (21). This global project of decolonization could include many different, contradictory approaches to nationalism and internationalism for worldly reconfiguration (20-21), that is, “a counterpolitics of scale,” which is not forged “in an abstract setting but precisely in the face of the provincializing strategies adopted by the rulers of the world” (159).

The first chapter, “The Nation and the World,” explores Marcus Garvey and his *Negro World* newspaper, highlighting the contradictions in Garvey’s ideology, which oscillated between racial essentialism and Black cosmopolitanism; his belief that economic conditions, rather than color, are the root of racial prejudice; and his resistance of Euro-American imperialism through a vision of Black nationalism that emphasized both a global solidarity among colonized peoples and a focus on national sovereignty, all while acknowledging Garvey’s complex views on race, colorism, and the promotion of Blackness as a means of planetary cosmological transformation.

Chapter two, “The Structure of the World,” examined the *Gold Coast Leader’s* West African writings, which argue that race is integral to Africa’s exploitation within the imperial system, identifying white supremacy as its ultimate goal and calling for African nations to unite

in anticolonial resistance on a planetary scale; this resistance, rooted in traditional West African thought, challenged imperialism's spatial and economic confinements that immobilize Africa, critiqued colonial capitalism for perpetuating Africa's underdevelopment, and framed WWI as Europe's own self destruction in "competition to dominate a globally bifurcated system erected upon the exploitation of colonized peoples" (69).

"The Whiteness of the World" is the title of the third chapter, which begins by explicating how American eugenics were adopted in Europe, where even Marxists said not to "forget that the first waves of Orientals and Slavs that are breaking on France presage the invading flood which threatens to submerge that which is left of our civilization and health of our race" (71-72). This was during a time when France was the foremost destination for immigrants in the industrialized world, and "over the course of twenty years, its foreign-born population almost tripled—a demographic shift unknown to other European nations until after the Second World War" (72). During the expansion of "indirect rule," the spread of "scientific" racism was resisted by Black francophone writers based in Paris on a planetary scope, which meant that Whiteness was "an instantiation of a planetary structure" (74). In other words, chapter three, "examines how Whiteness became a world-gesturing category in France and anglophone West Africa," in which Whiteness "disoriented the spatial and temporal underpinnings of assimilationist hopes" (*ibid.*). Black Atlantic critiques of colonialism became "optimism with suspicion," aspiring to transcend the "scalar bounds" and "spatial limits" of an imperial Whiteness "that shaped the lives of those involved in the colonial encounter on an intimate scale" (98).

On the other hand, chapter four, "The Body and the World," begins with the *Gold Coast Leader* expressing alarm at "the great influx of Europeans into our country" (100). The English, on the other hand, writing in the London *Outlook*, said, "except for the nomadic savage, [Kenya] lies empty of mankind, as did the Western prairies of America fifty years ago" (101). It is as if the Black body is erased from the world "and the *dolce far niente* of the African native is doomed to disappear" (102). In other words, Younis examines, in this chapter, "colonialism's

corporeality” and “one’s own personhood in relation to the vast and apparently impersonal scale of global order” (103). He contends that conceptions of the Black body and the process of settlement in “spatiotemporal and comparative terms” (127) undermined colonialism’s corporeality, and thus, *homo æconomicus*’ position in the planetary order.³ Finally, in chapter five, “The Time of the World,” Younis suggests “that we consider more carefully the ambivalences we find in anticolonial writing on time” (129), which “focuses on the racial-temporal matrix that sapped the sovereignties of Haiti, Liberia, and Ethiopia, the interwar period’s only officially recognized ‘Black states’” (132) “... within a global racial order” (133).

Despite all that the book aims to cover, there are some myopias and lacunae that can be identified. Most notably, despite his digression on gender and sexuality (123-127), Younis’ engagement with gender theory appears to be a tertiary and peripheral afterthought, rather than an overarching approach to the archive. Younis’ critique of “mothering” (126) puts it in contradistinction to Marxist-feminism, yet fails to acknowledge mothering’s planetary anti-imperialist collectivist orientations.⁴ In spite of his fourth chapter being about bodies, his monograph is marred by a disengagement with negative stereotypes about Black femme corporeality, such as the full-figured “jezebel” trope.⁵

Also, despite conceding that Younis’ own archive is “within a tradition of patriarchal anticolonialism” (123), a more detailed outline of the patriarchal nature of the archive earlier in the monograph could have further elucidated Black Atlantic femme and queer resistance during the interwar period. In addition, Younis’ focus on print culture was to the occlusion of contemporary oral histories of the interwar period. Print culture can be frozen in time, but what Younis does well is to thaw these texts for theoretical exploration in the *here* and *now*.

Moreover, a further explication of the narrow archive chosen would have assisted in understanding the omission of important interwar Black Atlantic texts relevant to this period, such as W.E.B. Du Bois’ “The Souls of White Folk,” or his large project on WWI, intended to be as large as *Black Reconstruction*.⁶ This would have bolstered his arguments regarding African troops in the Rhineland and Marcus Garvey’s move to include

North Africans within Blackness (23-37). Additionally, why *only* focus on the Black Atlantic at the expense of interwar East African and South African thought? Did they not have a global and planetary vision? Why exclude West African lusophone authors?⁷

While Younis arguably overrepresents Marcus Garvey's role during this period, what he does well is challenge the notion that Garveyism is mere pseudomilitaristic "Black Nationalism" or "self-help and capitalist uplift" (29). According to Younis, inherent to Garvey's oeuvre are his contradictory notions of "nationalism and internationalism" (*ibid.*), his oscillation "between the narrow and the expansive, the particular and universal" (28). In other words, Musab Younis convincingly argues that Garvey's "colored cosmopolitanism" destabilizes "racial essentialism, and push[es] at (even dissolve[s]) its boundaries" (*ibid.*). Therefore, destabilizing—even dissolving—arguments that Garveyism is merely an "American Black nationalist movement."⁸

While the archive that was used is described by Younis as "anticolonial," his monograph marks a welcome addition to contemporary postcolonial theory, which is widely applicable across various academic disciplines.⁹ This is evinced by the way in which Younis closes his book, "The concerted attacks on the three sites of Black sovereignty, [Haiti, Liberia, and Ethiopia], in the interwar order foreshadowed the ways in which formal decolonization could exist alongside global stratification. This contradicted the idea that decolonization constituted a true normative revolution in world politics... the international order



Figure 1. Algerian premier Ahmed Ben Bella (left) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (right), 1962.

that emerged after the Second World War in fact drew profoundly on the stratifications of political time that had emerged during the colonial period” (153-3). Put differently, “Haiti, Liberia, and Ethiopia proleptically showed that statehood represents no easy escape from the hierarchizing temporal power of race” (155).¹⁰ Younis suggests that “we now live in a planetary age rather than a global one. The globe is ‘a humanocentric construction’; the planet is a concept ‘that decenters the human’” (156). He concludes by stating, “...the pan-African project for a united polity on the continent represents the clearest attempt at maneuvering Black Atlantic critique into international politics” (158). In the Post-war period after WWII, the Amazigh people (Berbers) claimed nationalistic African indigeneity, while also adopting both pan-Africanism and pan-Arabism, despite the tensions between the two.¹¹ Mu‘ammar Qaddāfi (1942-2011) famously expanded his earlier notions of pan-Arabism to also include pan-Africanism, a pivot that caused further retaliation from the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), leading up to the infamous 2012 Benghazi scandal.¹² Perhaps, some lessons from Musab Younis’ monograph—such as the interwar solidarity between the “pan-Oriental” and “pan-African” (32) movements—could do us some good in the *here* and *now*, as alleged “plausible intent to commit genocide,” “war crimes,” and “crimes against humanity,” continue in Palestine, East Turkistan, the Rakhine, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Azerbaijan, in sharp defiance of the United Nations’ International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.¹³

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Endnotes

- 1 University of Oxford, Professor Emeritus Andrew Hurrell specializes in theories of international relations, global governance, comparative regionalism, the history of the globalization of international society, and, more precisely, the international relations of Brazil.
- 2 Henri Lefebvre, *La production d'espace* (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1974), 31. « l'État se consolide à l'échelle mondiale; » cf. Edward W. Said, "The Scope of Orientalism," *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 31-110.
- 3 Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 282. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015>; cf. idem., "1492: A New World View," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 5-57.
- 4 Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens and Mai'a Williams, eds., *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016).
- 5 Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: New York University Press, 2019); Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion & Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).
- 6 W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, 1920), 29-52; cf. idem., *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1935); idem., "The black man and the wounded world outline," February 22, 1936. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b218-i039>; idem., "The Black Man and the Wounded World: A History of the Negro Race in the World War and After" in *Crisis* 27, no. 3 (1924): 1-6; Chad L. Williams, *The Wounded World: W.E.B. Du Bois and the First World War* (New York: Farrar, 2023).
- 7 Amílcar Cabral, *Tell No Lies, Claim No Easy Victories* (Johannesburg: Inkani Books, 2022).
- 8 Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Marcus Garvey," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 3, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Garvey>. Accessed October 5, 2024.
- 9 Cf. Leela Gandhi, *The Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy, 1900-1955* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); idem., *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
- 10 Cf. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Daniel Boyarin, *The No-State Solution:*

- A Jewish Manifesto* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022); Mohamed Abdou, *Islam and Anarchism: Relationships and Resonances* (London: Pluto Press, 2022); Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
- 11 Mokhtar Ghambou, "The 'Numidian' Origins of North Africa," in *Berbers and Others: Beyond Tribe and Nation in the Maghreb*, ed. Kathrine E. Hoffman and Susan Gilson Miller (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 153-170.
 - 12 Allison Pargeter, *Libya: The Rise and Fall of Qaddafi* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 121, 127, 235, 257; *CIA's 30-Year Plot To Take Down America's Deadly Enemy: Gaddafi | CIA Declassified*, directed by Ned Parker (2013, WMR productions and IMG: 2024), YouTube, https://youtu.be/UAvIxICQxNY?si=S39gZF_0S1kfHdn; "CIA Backed Qaddafi Assassination Try," Central Intelligence Agency, Freedom of Information Act, June 12th, 1985, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp90-00965r000100120080-3>; Edoardo Totolo, "Gaddafi's Grand Plan," *Center for Security Studies—Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich*, <https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/101447>. Accessed October 10th, 2024; Guy Martin, *African Political Thought* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 59. "After the death of Kwame Nkrumah in 1972, Muammar Qaddafi assumed the mantle of Leader of the Pan-Africanist movement and became the most outspoken advocate of African Unity, consistently calling—like Nkrumah before him—for the advent of a 'United States of Africa,'" Moussa Hissein Moussa, "Muammar Gaddafi: From Pan-Arabism to Pan-Africanism," *Afrika Koordinasyon ve Eğitim Merkezi* (AKEM), February 13, 2023, <https://www.akem.org.tr/post/muammar-gaddafi-from-pan-arabism-to-pan-africanism>; "Statement of ICC Prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan KC: Applications for arrest warrants in the situation in the State of Palestine," International Criminal Court, May 20th, 2024, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-prosecutor-karim-aa-khan-kc-applications-arrest-warrants-situation-state>.
 - 13 Amnesty International, "Amnesty International investigation concludes Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza," December 5, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/>; Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel), January 1, 2024, I.C.J., <https://icj-cij.org/case/192>; Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and Human Security, "Active Genocide Alerts," <https://www.lemkininstitute.com/active-genocide-alert>, accessed October 10, 2024.