

# Editor's Column: The End of Postcolonial Theory?

A Roundtable with Sunil Agnani, Fernando Coronil, Gaurav Desai, Mamadou Diouf, Simon Gikandi, Susie Tharu, and Jennifer Wenzel

**W**HAT IS THE STATUS OF POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES IN THE GEO-political present? In November 2006, Sidonie Smith and Jennifer Wenzel organized a panel discussion at the University of Michigan to tackle this question and to honor Susie Tharu, an early member of the Subaltern Studies Group. Because sparks flew, because a controversial conversation emerged, I solicited position papers from the panelists—Sunil Agnani, Fernando Coronil, Gaurav Desai, Mamadou Diouf, Tharu, and Wenzel—and also from Simon Gikandi, asking them to investigate a range of topics, including the potential exhaustion of postcolonialism as a paradigm; the importance of international, interdisciplinary conversations in considering histories of colonization and decolonization; and the absence of new paradigms for tackling fresh and continuing imperialisms. As postcolonial studies seizes its status as a field, can it adapt its methods to the crises of failed states and new sovereignties? What are the field's contemporary achievements and challenges?

*Jennifer Wenzel*

Postcolonial studies today: what is the relation between the state of the field and the state of the world? If, as Arif Dirlik quips, the “‘post-colonial’ begin[s] . . . when Third World intellectuals have arrived in First World academe,” then perhaps it ends when every department has hired a postcolonialist (52). In the past two decades, postcolonial studies has been consolidated as a subfield of English studies in the United States, with new hiring in positions variously defined as post-colonial, world, anglophone, or non-Western literatures. This curricular shift is, I think, irreversible, linked to broader challenges to the canon by women writers and United States writers of color. “British

Biographical notes about the contributors appear on pages 650–51.

and American literature" will no longer suffice to describe what English departments do. But will "postcolonialism" endure as a framework for interpreting this body of writing?

Occurring, as it did, between the end of the cold war and 9/11, can the institutional consolidation of postcolonial studies be understood as a kind of peace dividend? The prospect of negotiated settlements in South Africa, Northern Ireland, and Israel-Palestine in the early 1990s lent some credence to the possibility of thinking after, or beyond, colonialism: European high imperialism's most intractable conflicts seemed on the verge of resolution, even as globalization and its emergent critiques raised troubling new (or not so new) questions about structural inequality and exploitation.

If there is now a sense of exhaustion in postcolonial studies, more is at stake than the ebb and flow of academic fashion, the demand that tired trends make way for the next big thing (ecocriticism? human rights?). Rather, the world has changed, and changed in ways that bear directly on the concerns of the field.

Empire—as theorized by boosters like Niall Ferguson rather than by critics like Edward Said—has been embraced in recent years by those who shape United States policy. Does the post-9/11 return to an expansionist, Manichaeic foreign policy imply a failure of postcolonial studies? I do feel a certain despair in this regard: our critiques have proved inadequate to obstruct or reroute the imperialist, racist logic of fighting over there to maintain power over here.

But this idea of a failure of postcolonial studies seems too simple—and too optimistic—in the light of the infamous dismissal of the "reality-based community" by an unnamed Bush administration official in 2004: "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities" (qtd. in Suskind 51). What's more startling than

the bald assertion of United States empire as a *fait accompli* is the way in which it is informed (however perversely) by Said's critique of orientalist knowledge production and its construction of reality. This empire is a post-poststructuralist, postpostcolonial empire that is able to name the effects of its own naming.

After 9/11, at the height of its institutional consolidation, postcolonial studies was caught politically flat-footed, facing criticism from right and left. In his testimony to an education committee of the United States House of Representatives, the neoconservative Stanley Kurtz blamed 9/11 on "Edward Said's postcolonial theory." Area studies after *Orientalism*, Kurtz lamented, wrested knowledge from the service of power and left United States policy makers in the dark about the Middle East and Islam. He portrayed postcolonial studies as promoting an "extremist," "anti-American" apologia for terrorism. Homi Bhabha, on the other hand, declares, in his foreword to a new translation of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, that we have been distracted by the wrong politics. "Coming to us from the distances of midcentury decolonization, Fanon's demand for a fair redistribution of rights and resources" can, Bhabha argued in 2004, reframe "a decade-long debate on social equity that has focused perhaps too exclusively on the culture wars, the politics of identity, and the politics of recognition" (xviii). This rediscovery of the wretched of the earth seems to add Bhabha's voice to long-standing radical critiques of postcolonial studies' depoliticizing celebrations of hybrid identities, cultural flows, and elite migrancy—celebrations that, it must be said, often took Bhabha's work as a point of departure.

Barbara Christian once observed that literary theory decenters the subject at the very moment that subjectivity is claimed by women and people of color. If the era of postcolonial studies is over, it ends just when the need for historically informed critiques of imperialism could not be more urgent.

*Simon Gikandi*

Lately there has been a lot of talk about the end of postcolonial theory. This kind of talk reminds me of Martin Heidegger's famous 1969 essay "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in which the German philosopher, reflecting on the question of being and time, raised the issue of what it meant to talk about the end of philosophy. "We understand the end of something too easily in the negative sense as a mere stopping, as the lack of continuation, perhaps even as decline and impotence," Heidegger noted. "In contrast, what we say about the end of philosophy means the completion of metaphysics" (56).

Our challenge here is to figure out what this talk about the end of postcolonial theory means. Is the end of postcolonial theory a mere stopping, a symptom of its decline and impotence? Or is this end the completion of a theoretical project, whose work has become ensconced as another authorized version of literary and cultural analysis? If postcolonial theory has ended, what exactly ended, and what was its task?

For me, the presumed end or death of postcolonial theory, like all narratives of endings, triggers an ambivalent response: it seems to designate, on one hand, an arrival into the institution of interpretation and, on the other hand, an evacuation from the same edifice. To talk about the end of any theory is, of course, to recognize the place it has institutionally come to occupy. Stories of endings—the end of history, the end of philosophy, the end of art—have functioned, at least in the Western tradition, as authorized moments of closure and sublation. And that is not a bad thing. The question that needs to be addressed is the meaning and function of the postcolonial thing that has reached its end, in a nonpejorative sense.

But here too I have my doubts, for postcolonial theory, as it now circulates in the institutions of interpretation and knowledge

production, is based on a series of errors and misunderstandings. I want to comment briefly on a few of those mistakes.

First, there is what I will call an epistemological error—namely, the confusion of postcolonial theory and the condition of postcoloniality, the assumption that a theory developed to account for the place of the "other" subject in the narrative of European identity has anything to do with "other" geographies and their cultural traditions. To be fair, postcolonial critics themselves have rarely made this error. Their primary works are marked by a bifurcation of systems of knowledge production and systems of reading, divided between the narrative of the other in the European narrative and the people who live in the other places—the global South—who cannot claim to be other. Most of us are aware of the distinction between the task of reading texts that emerge in the crisis of postimperial Europe and the task of accounting for the narratives of decolonization in the nation-states that emerged after decolonization.

Second, there is an apparent error in the infrastructure that has been developed for the reading of postcolonial cultural products, such as texts. It is a universally acknowledged fact that postcolonial theory doesn't make sense to literary and cultural scholars outside English. Or, to put it in more modest terms, in order for postcolonial theory to make sense to other linguistic and literary traditions, it has to be transformed or disfigured. The Anglocentrism of postcolonial theory has often been explained in terms of the imperial imperative that underwrites English as a discipline or field of study. But there is a simpler explanation: postcolonial theory emerged as a reaction against the institutionalization of English as the discipline of empire. In its beginnings, it was haunted by the legacy of the "great men" who invented English literature, from Walter Raleigh in the first two decades of the twentieth century to F. R. Leavis in the age of decolonization. Taken out of this local

history, postcolonial theory becomes just another branch of poststructuralism.

Third, there is the problem of literary history. It is another universally acknowledged fact that many of the critics who are unhappy with postcolonial theory point to its failure to account for the foundational literary texts of the colonial experience and the epistemology of decolonization or to engage with literatures produced in indigenous languages. I find the failure of postcolonial theory in this regard to be the most interesting because it points to an imperative for a critical project of the future: a rethinking of the relation between theory and literature and a reflection on postcoloniality as an epistemological project. Let me elaborate. In a strict sense, a postcolonial reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is impossible; his later novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988) opens itself to all sorts of postcolonial readings, and many abound. R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand resist postcolonial theory; yet Salman Rushdie has made it the enabling condition of his great novels. Why? This question demands a powerful accounting of the politics of time and postcoloniality and a recognition of the epistemological moment that created these texts, which must now be recognized as its horizon of meaning and expectations.

Finally, despite these errors, I celebrate the end of postcolonial theory because it inaugurates thinking about the theory's history, its coming into being in the world, as it were, a historical accounting that may not rectify the errors I have recounted but will show why they emerged in the first place. As Marx observed in relation to the theory of labor, a category can become valid only when the conditions that created it have unfolded historically.

#### *Fernando Coronil*

A heavenly match is getting undone. Just when the field of postcolonial studies has arrived and the world has become more openly

imperial, neither partner of this coupling seems particularly relevant to the other. Has something gone awry, or has this marriage between knowledge and the world, like so many matches made in heaven, simply failed to work once it landed on earth?

In my view, this discussion of postcolonial studies springs from a growing concern with the ever more clearly inadequate connection between "the state of the field and the state of the world" (Wenzel, above). While such modernist frameworks as globalization and imperialism, despite their limitations, help us understand global transformations, the field of postcolonial studies, for all its achievement and promise, throws limited light on the world we now face. Why?

Here I explore this question from my position as a Latin American working in the United States in anthropology and history departments. My exploration takes the form of three reflections that seek to illuminate a path connecting knowledge and the world.

1. *Postcolonial studies as necessary.* After Edward Said's path-breaking book *Orientalism* (1978), postcolonial studies became an indispensable reference for at least two reasons. First, it produced a lucid critique of Western metaphysics that exposed the scandal of Eurocentric categories and imperial metanarratives. Second, it stimulated a plethora of studies that examined neglected dimensions of imperial domination and subaltern subject formation. No longer privileging political economy, these critical studies turned culture, broadly understood as forms of representation, into a center of analysis. It expanded our understanding of the subaltern by treating gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, in their intersections with class, as fundamental sites of subjugation. The *post-* of postcolonialism became at once a temporal and an epistemic marker, a critical lens through which to view the complexity between knowledge and power in multiple domains, past and present.

2. *Postcolonialism as insufficient.* As postcolonial studies became institutionalized in academia, its limits became more evident for at least two reasons. First, the field focused so exclusively on northern European colonialism (mostly anglophone) that it ended up looking at colonialism through provincial eyes. It challenged Western canons, yet it erected itself as the postcolonial canon. While it provincialized Europe, it universalized itself. Anthologies of postcolonial studies neglected other colonialisms; some scholars even argued that Latin America was never colonial because it was not colonized like India or Indonesia. Second, informed by various theoretical “turns” and “posts” fashionable in the 1980s, this field came to celebrate fragments disconnected from structures and cultural constructs seen independently of the mundane conditions that made them possible. Although it claimed that its *post-* addressed past and present, the field focused on fragments of the colonial past. It was thus unable to examine postcolonial empires as changing imperial formations.

3. *Earthly alliances.* It is telling that at the end of his life Said, widely considered the pivotal figure of postcolonial studies’ founding trinity (together with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha), divorced himself from this field, asserting that he did “not belong to that.” For him, postcolonialism had become a “misnomer” that did not sufficiently recognize the persistence of neocolonialism, imperialism, and “structures of dependency” (2). But instead of having to choose between heavenly marriage and earthly divorce, we can perhaps look forward to alliances based on more mundane foundations. Horizontal exchanges between sites of imperial domination would change the field of postcolonial studies not just by including new partners in its discussion but also by transforming its terms and references. A view of colonialism as starting from the fifteenth century would offer a different understanding of modern colonialism and colonial modernity; adding 1804 (Haiti’s

political independence) and 1825 (continental Latin America’s political independence) to 1947 (India’s political independence) as landmarks of the temporal shift from the colonial to the postcolonial (typically restricted now to 1947) would facilitate the study of the imperialism of postcolonial empires, a subject long examined in the Americas, given the region’s lengthier history of postcolonial but neoimperial relations. Perhaps we could then recognize that 9/11 names not only 2001 of the United States but also 1973 of Chile, when Salvador Allende was overthrown by a United States-backed coup. In the light of this deep imperial history, we would be better prepared to place the post-9/11 resurgent imperialism in a larger imperial landscape.

If the aim of connecting knowledge and the world is to help make the world more fit for all, this connection must illuminate connections: the ensembles of relations linking parts and wholes, human creations and the conditions of their creation. One who lives in a house does not dream in the same way as one who lives under a bridge. If we dream of a world where all can sleep without dread of waking up, we must strive to produce what Said called nondominative knowledge. For those who undertake this task, the field of postcolonial studies is necessary but insufficient. Let us hope that the arrival of this field signals not its end but creative departures toward this urgent aim.

### *Sunil Agnani*

What does it mean to talk about the end of postcolonial theory? Some of my colleagues have implied that such talk may have to do with expectation among some progressives in the United States academy that empire would eventually come to an end. Postcolonial theory would be obviated by the delegitimization of a system organizing the international order, one shown to be a mask for the dominance of certain interests.

If the type of critical thinking that we associate with the term *postcolonial* has been superseded by globalization or rendered irrelevant in the face of resurgent imperialism, it is worth thinking about the period in which it was formed in the United States academy—the 1980s and 1990s—in the spirit of Fredric Jameson's "periodizing the 1960s." At the outset, we can note that two pivotal figures never accepted the rubric *postcolonial* to describe their own writing: a contrapuntal method and secular criticism were Edward Said's preferred self-descriptions, while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak turned to the global or even planetary and set out to write a critique of postcolonial reason. It is worth asking, if we pronounce the field of postcolonial studies defunct, why neither of them was particularly invested in the word. Understanding this will undercut the implicit belief that somehow the continuity or even expansion of structures akin to the age of high imperialism in the nineteenth-century classical empire after the events of September 11, 2001, shows the uselessness of the field. It is more important to consider what kinds of projects were enabled by the varieties of books, authors, and scholars associated with Said's and Spivak's ideas and also with decolonization in the post-World War II period—the most significant genealogy of postcolonial thought. There were always multiple strands in this body of thought; our focus should be on this visible fragmentation or opening of the field rather than on its end.

Said's distinction in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* refers to *world* in the sense of the effects of politics, the social; to *critic* with a view to the biographical formation of the one who reads; and to *text* as a confluence of historical factors, plus an immanent literary history. Postcolonial thought should be considered a response to a historical condition as much as a system of thought, with a particular focus on the *worldliness* of the text. However, it would be a mistake to consider it a repeatable set of hermeneutic principles applicable to all texts.

Augmenting a view of the field by considering Spivak is also a way of pointing to the contrasting paths in this literary-critical corpus. Like the broad range of Martin Heidegger's students in an earlier generation, who span the spectrum from left to right (Marcuse, Arendt, Lowith, Strauss), one might arrange a broad array of responses among Paul de Man's affiliates. Recalling that Spivak is one of his students provides an unusual genealogy and accounts for her shuttling between different emphases: feminism, deconstruction, and Marxism—a tension throughout between formal analysis and the politics of reading. Aware of this, she refers to the technique as bringing each critical language to its "productive crisis" (*Post-colonial Critic* 111 and *Outside* 53). Focusing on material conditions of labor (close to the traditional focus of a Marxian analysis) and on subaltern groups that fall outside the circuits of capital while working in literary studies was bound to produce some difficulties. One resolution of these tensions has been not to depend on the social sciences as a way out of the potentially limited purview of literature. Instead, she focuses on the way the humanities must "supplement" the social sciences and considers the reading of literature a training for the ethical (*Death* 27). These issues are at the core of *Death of a Discipline*, her recent book on comparative literature. Her pronouncements have not been limited to comparative literature; for years she has rejected a discussion of a field of postcolonial studies, pronouncing the postcolonial moribund in an age of globalization. To discuss the postcolonial was to rely on a notion of state sovereignty derived from an earlier period in world history. In fact, the history of decolonization largely demonstrated the failure of this independence with the emergence after World War II of new global fetters on national sovereignty.

From Spivak's emphases and interests one can also point to a source for the differences between her and Said—the incompleteness of Palestinian nationalism, which played a central role in the tactics, the moments of doubt

and optimism, underlying Said's thought, as opposed to the pessimism of postnationalism, postindependence failures and the gradual integration of national elites in the world economy that is increasingly the Indian experience. I do not wish to reduce the thinking of Spivak or Said to a state or nation experience, but it helps illuminate the objects of their critique.

Three decades after the 1978 publication of *Orientalism*, there are necessarily split legacies on the questions of colonialism and culture. Dipesh Chakrabarty's work (*Habitations of Modernity* and *Provincializing Europe*) explores what falls out of the epistemic grid of understanding produced by European Enlightenment categories through examining phenomena such as *adda*, the bazaar, as a space between public and private in his consideration of "garbage and modernity" (*Habitations*, ch. 5). There is an obvious tension in the field—worth heightening rather than hiding—between an interest in an "other West" (Ashis Nandy's term, referring to a persistent, internally critical element in Europe [48–49]) and a second strand of criticism growing out of the early nationalist critiques, which in turn gave rise to what became institutionalized as early postcolonial criticism and theory. A third strand looks for languages and practices that are rooted in the idiom of vernacular languages and disappear if looked at through external categories.

Postcolonial theory is not premised on the prophecy of the imminent decline of empire as such. Rather it is constituted as a response to or critique of empire's existence: the lesson from the French and British empires seems to serve surprisingly well in the present (beyond the screening of *The Battle of Algiers* in the White House). We overlook the fact that founding texts like *Orientalism* never ignored American imperialism when focusing on imperial dominance. The closing section of that book is entitled "Orientalism Now" and keeps a steady gaze on America, as did Said's regular pieces over the ten years

(1993–2003) he wrote for *Al-Ahram*, the Cairo English-language weekly.

To conclude, *postcolonial* as a historical term was extended to a type of criticism. The fact that the extension of this term has failed as an enduring or repeatable reading practice does not mean the term is bankrupt. Its emptying may instead be a sign of a productive crisis from which the field (or whatever it transmogrifies into) will benefit.

#### *Mamadou Diouf*

My brief presentation first focuses on how African scholars are engaging with the concepts postcoloniality, globalization, and post-modernity. Tejumola Olaniyan, for example, considers that both postcolonialism and post-modernism fail to account for the contemporary African condition (39–41). According to the main voices in the African debate, the third phenomenon we are concerned with, imperialism, has been ravaging Africa from at least the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade. Since then Africa has been under imperialism in its different disguises. More than fifteen years ago, the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo said that postcoloniality was a concept relevant to the United States (after the War of Independence) and to the imperial dominions of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand but that when applied to "other parts of the world" it was "a most pernicious fiction," one powerfully complicit in the maintenance of imperial rule and domination in Africa (152).

In this context, African literature underscores issues of continuity, not discontinuities, resurgences, and "posts." Achille Mbembe has violently and sarcastically delineated that orientation, not necessarily with justification. The debates and controversies around postcolonial and globalization studies are strongly determined by the geographic, epistemological, and ideological locations of participating scholars as well as by the scholars' qualification to engage with politics and to speak with

authority about Africa. The irony of the present situation is that the greater number of interventions, including the most hostile ones, come from scholars in Western institutions (United States and Canadian, in particular). With a few exceptions, francophone scholars and institutions are not especially active in the debate. In Africa, postcolonial studies speaks English, not French.

The field's contentious relations with African studies could be explained by many factors, historical, political, and epistemological. The development of African studies was initially associated with attempts to locate blackness in the intellectual and geographic space of Atlantic modernity and reinstate black civilization and cultures (the African renaissance) in the framework of human history and civilization. According to W. E. B. DuBois, the introduction of African studies in United States academia put an end to this solid link between black activism and African studies, which became dominated by other ethical and political engagements. Afrocentrism could be understood as an effort to reintroduce the link. The absence of an ethical dimension in postcolonial theory is precisely what Simon Gikandi insists on in exploring the theory's key concepts. He notes that most African scholars interpret the erasure of moral references from poststructuralist or postcolonial institutions of interpretation as the abandonment of "any serious engagement with the fundamental question of human value," in particular essentialist categories such as community (17). Both the resistance to Western epistemologies (connections and contestations) and the search for a nationalist but leftist "liberation project" offered a space of deployment for "dependency theories and vernacular Marxisms" in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, according to Walter Mignolo (85, 63). Finally, Africa is not powerfully featured in postcolonial studies in comparison with India and the Commonwealth territories of the former British Empire (Adesanmi). The

location of the black continent in the geographies of knowledge derived from European invention and representations, from the age of the discoveries (V. Y. Mudimbe's colonial library), remains crucial in the epistemologies governing the *mise-en-sens / mise-en-scène* of Africa (Korang). Against the central references to textuality, discursive practices, and construction of subjectivities and identities, most African scholars (while recognizing the contribution of postcolonial studies to a better understanding of social, cultural, and epistemological processes—in particular, the intersections of subjectivity, sexuality, power, ideas, knowledge, and institutions) emphasize concrete historical processes to pay attention to the violence, cultural and political domination, and economic exploitation of colonial and postcolonial rules. Thus, to avoid the intellectual trap of postcolonial studies, African scholars have been busy engaging with its genealogies, boundaries, fields, locations, and ideologies. I refer to Anne McClintock's critique of colonialism as a determining marker of history; Ella Shohat's identification of postcolonial studies' homogenizing of diverse cultures, chronologies, and racial formations; and Stuart Hall's rejection of deterministic economism.

In the context of globalization, the engagement with colonial and postcolonial studies, as well as with new approaches to imperialism and empire, offers African and Africanist scholars (historians, literary and cultural studies scholars, anthropologists) many opportunities to refine their toolboxes. While revisiting critically many of the concerns that have animated African studies, a developing literature is exploring new territories such as the politics of knowledge production, the gendered geographies of literature, arts and the public space, and participation in the global humanities and social sciences conversation (Zezeza, *Intellectual Challenges* 229–93 and *Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters*). Mudimbe's *The Invention of Af-*



*rica* (1988), Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House* (1992), and a very close critical reading of Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993) have played key roles in the transition from utter hostility to critical engagement around issues of chronology (the colonial and the postcolonial time frame), ideology, economic exploitation, ethnicity, and the politics of recognition and redistribution. The new literature focuses on particular modes of cultural production, performances, narratives of modernity, and wider issues of political and moral economies to explore the African presence as well as the ways in which Africa is featured on the world stage.

#### *Gaurav Desai*

Last year, the MLA's Discussion Group on Postcolonial Studies in Literature and Culture successfully petitioned the organization to be recognized as a full-fledged scholarly division. The Executive Council noted the tremendous interest and growth in the field, marked not only by overflow audiences year after year at the sponsored panel at the annual convention but also by the more than three thousand declared members affiliated with the group. To anyone skeptical about the future of postcolonial studies, the message is clear: the insights of postcolonial studies are so much a part of the profession that they are here to stay. And yet, as someone who was involved in working on this petition, I worry that because the insights are so well assimilated and we have received the institutional recognition that we have sought, we may become complacent and avoid the hard work of continually testing our convictions and beliefs in the light of the changing world around us. Many thought that the radical edge of postcolonial studies, with its passionate anticolonial history of struggle and its insistence on recognizing the workings of neocolonialism in newly independent nations, would, in an increasingly interconnected, post-1989, neoliberal world,

soon dissipate into an intellectual enterprise worthy of no more than historical curiosity. The simultaneous rise of a postcolonial orientation that was rather friendly to global flows and formations, that was skeptical of what it saw as the parochialism of older nationalisms, and, without ever publicly admitting it, that jumped on the neoliberal bandwagon, having given up hope of any feasible alternative world order, suggested a sure decline in the field's radical orientation.

Ironically, 9/11 and the reimagining of the world as us versus them led to the resurgence of rhetoric and action increasingly marked by colonial overtones. The preemptive strike against the sovereign nation of Iraq, based on falsified information, was not only a violation of international law but also a fundamental assault on the very nature of political sovereignty. And yet much of the subsequent war protest in the United States has focused not on this violation but on the consequences of the war—the lives lost, the resources squandered. One of the challenges of postcolonial critique is to reassess the relevance of sovereignty in the contemporary world. This task becomes all the more difficult in a world that has seen, and continues to see, genocides that are either sanctioned by or ineffectively curbed by the state. Kofi Annan in an important article has suggested that this is where the claims of sovereignty clash with the need for outside intervention. If sovereignty is supreme, then even in the presence of the worst atrocities, the world can do no more than watch. If sovereignty is to be jettisoned, then, as some argued in the case of Iraq, such atrocities can only too easily be invoked as excuses for war.

In its attention to the renewed valence of and threat to sovereignty in contemporary times, a rigorous postcolonial critique would have to pay attention to the unevenness of political realities around the world. As any discussion with members of the Hawai'ian sovereignty movement or with activists in Puerto Rico would show, political sovereignty

is still a fraught issue for many constituencies, even close to home. In many such places, a related point of contention is indigeneity, yet another political force whose valence and manifestations need to be rethought and recalibrated. On the one hand, the politics of indigeneity and autochthony seem defensible enough—how can one reasonably deny the rights of indigenous peoples who have been colonized to the fruits of their own labor and land? On the other hand, in a world that has seen mass migrations across continents over a long period of time, is it reasonable to allow for a strictly regulated indigenous politics, which in its most exclusionary stance can lead to ethnic strife, mass expulsions, civil wars, and genocide? How are we to read the politics of indigeneity in the context of Rwanda, or of the Asians expelled by Amin in Uganda, or of the Fijian Indians? How, again, are we to read it in the context of that continued conflict between Israel and Palestine, where both parties appeal to a politics of indigeneity, albeit while referring to vastly different historical time frames?

These are only two of the most vexing issues that confront the study of colonialism and postcoloniality today. If postcolonial studies is to continue to have a purchase on our imaginations and our conscience, it will have to articulate new ways of thinking about such challenges. To do so, it will have to overcome two major obstacles: first, its own political orthodoxies, which have often dictated and limited the parameters of its thought; second, the dangerous post-9/11 rise of a thought police in this country, whether in the guise of “watchdog groups” that seek to defame intellectuals whose politics they abhor or of legislatures that pressure universities to punish those whose speech may be occasionally distasteful but should nevertheless be protected under the principle of academic freedom. Submitting to either of these pressures will seriously jeopardize the innovation and energy that many of us have come to associate with postcolonial thought.

### *Susie Tharu*

I will try to lay out a couple of contradictions that cut fairly deep into the field of postcolonial studies. Explored further, these may help us get a better grip on the sense of ending that several panelists note. In India—and from Mamadou Diouf’s comments, it would appear in Senegal too—the feeling has been in place for some years that postcolonial, to put it mildly, is not a useful category. These are contradictions that concern all of us but especially touch those, like me, who work primarily in non-Western and ex-colonial locations.

1. Generally speaking, in the Western academy those of us who work on areas outside the Eur-Am matrix are, to invoke the Althusserian formulation, always already recognized and hailed as postcolonial. Yet I have serious problems with this categorization. My affiliation in Hyderabad is with the School of Critical Humanities, in Kerala with the School of Letters. I also work closely with Anveshi, a nonuniversity research center that is invested in what is sometimes termed new political studies. All three represent recent attempts in India to create institutional spaces responsive to transdisciplinary work that promises fresh and more meaningful debates on the reality of our lives. I teach cultural studies, literary theory, and feminism. My current research encompasses social medicine, legal theory, the *dalit* assertion of the 1990s, and contemporary visual culture. In these contexts subaltern studies, for example, is thought of as critical or poststructuralist historiography; it is generally acknowledged as having rendered earlier forms of history writing unviable, as having opened up the past for new kinds of entry and use, and as having introduced new themes and a more tentative, less apocalyptic tone into the humanities. But postcolonialism’s engagement with this body of work stays largely riveted to the speechless subaltern.

The problem is that as a category, postcolonial is both too diffuse and too narrow.

Postcolonial theory encompasses everything in India, or for that matter in the Third World. Its scholarship and theory are not bound to or by location. Yet it is, at the same time, restrictively attached to an isolated and definitive problematic: colonialism. I will loop back to this issue after I have laid out the second contradiction.

2. A survey of the proliferating genre of readers and handbooks on postcolonial studies indicates that *Orientalism* is universally acknowledged as a founding text. Furthermore, there is reasonable consensus that Said's work and the postcolonial turn more generally are important because they called to ethical account a continuing scholarly investment in colonial power and infused a sorely lacking conceptual rigor into the study of the non-West (let's not call it the Orient).

What is puzzling, however, is the bizarre transformation of *Orientalism's* thesis as it traveled into the postcolonial niche. And, following on that, the odd form that the call for accountability and rigor appears to have assumed. *Orientalism*—and Said could not have made the disclaimer stronger—is far from being about the Orient. On the contrary, its subject is the Euro-American academy and the power/knowledge axis of that institution. Some research that followed initially—early subaltern studies, Viswanathan, Mudimbe, some of Spivak's less-cited essays—actually deepened and gave additional charge to this critique of the disciplines and mainstream knowledge forms. Yet quickly and imperceptibly, in a wholesale reversal, Said became the protagonist/antagonist of debates that were largely restricted to anthropology, the old area studies, or Commonwealth literature—and, believe it we must, to the old Orient itself. Anthropology, both worst hit and quickest to recover, found new life theorizing its own colonial formation as well as that of its objects of study. With the dismantling of area studies and the discrediting of Commonwealth literature, scholars in those fields were repatriated

to new niches in mainstream disciplines that were now dignified with the up-to-date and politically correct term *postcolonial studies*.

In less than a decade, the revolutionary scope of Said's critique had not only been contained, it had boomeranged. Abandoning the responsibility of engaging Western power/knowledge in its entirety, the new postcolonial studies, with anthropology in the lead, has concerned itself with a problematic designed to unearth residual or continuing colonialism in the ex-colonies. This is the untold story that accompanies and in fact precedes the widely circulated account of postcolonial studies as coinciding with the arrival of Third World critics in the First World academy. The untold story explains why these new figures, however dispersed their specializations or interests, gradually found themselves herded into a special room waiting in the mansion of the Western academy. International graduate students, fresh from their own worlds and reluctant to make this transition, wander its corridors wondering why so little makes sense to them.

And that brings us to the question of theory and the specific form that rigor seems to take in postcolonial studies. In addition to being more theory-educated or -literate than many other specializations in the humanities, postcolonial studies is, like its twin today, anthropology, an exceptionally self-reflexive field. At least half the pages in any reader discuss the field itself. Postcolonial studies is exercised about its constituency, mode, who it speaks as or for, and so on. In fact, it walks a knife's edge between correct politics and correct theory. But such large-scale political or conceptual correctness is not all. Given the heterogeneity and the unstable unity of hegemonic formations, such global radicalism may well be nothing. After Marx we are persuaded that concepts should be designed as instruments to cut with (tools for change, not for description) and after Foucault that knowledge has always been an instrument of power. The tough question is, given its location and its concerns,

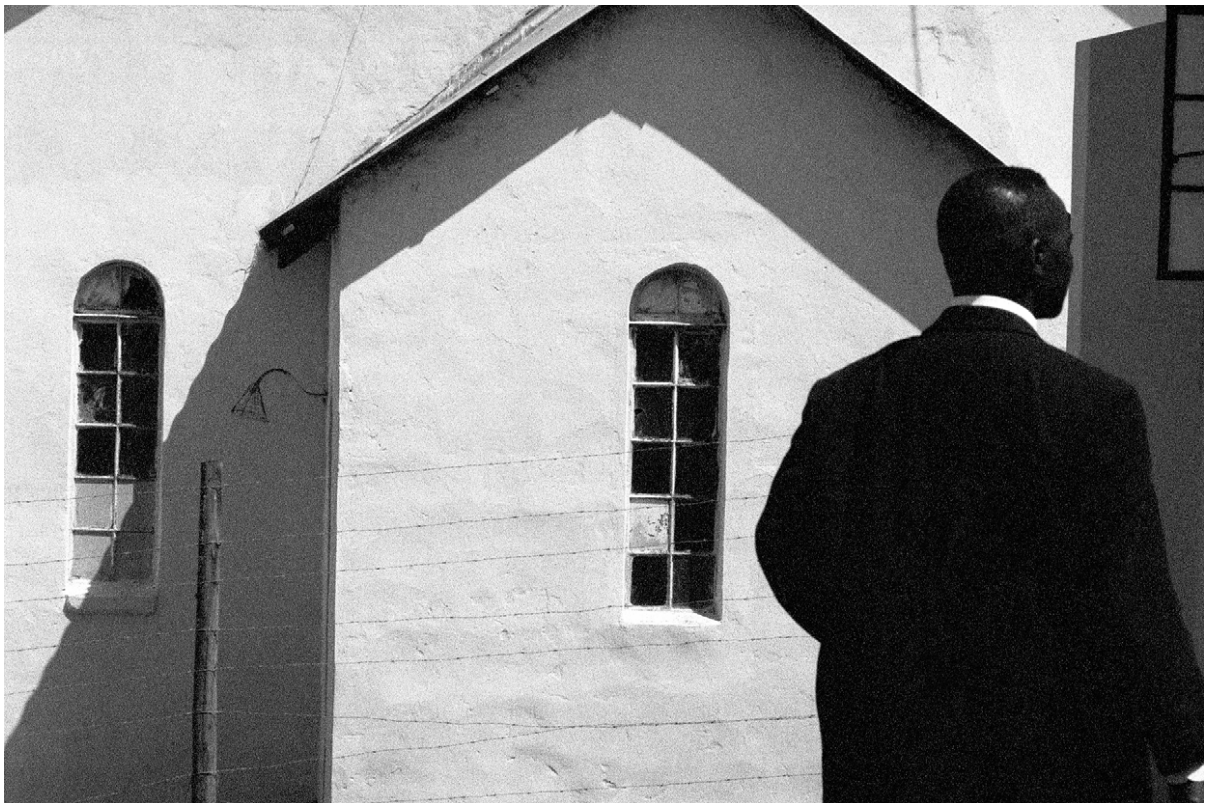
what and how is postcolonial studies cutting? And, following on that, how does it problematize its world? When we ask these questions, the deep-set difference between postcolonial studies and the new transdisciplinary work that I referred to earlier becomes clearer.

For example, any graduate student of history, anthropology, or literature in the United States can probably write with authority about the conceptual irregularities in *Orientalism*, critique the series *Subaltern Studies*, point to what has been left out of a study, pounce on a binary, and so on. One only has to apply the ready-made instruments of ready-made theory to do that—so much so that many young people today find it unnecessary to read any of these texts, let alone take them seriously. Yet living as I do in a place where these texts are still pored over and endlessly discussed by those who do not seem to appreciate their theoretical inadequacies, I find that the challenge is to understand the complex transfor-

mations these texts achieve and set in motion. It is their success—or, better put, the enigma of their success—rather than their theoretical or political incorrectness that draws me.

Another example involves the history of colonialism. The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and more so the imperial archive are the homing grounds for postcolonial studies. The field turns to history to probe the durability of colonial power, which it locates everywhere. What is often overlooked is that the genealogical method was actually developed as a means of estrangement, as a way of loosening the hold of an entrenched problematization and making it visible. In other words, it is the task of scholarship and theory to turn colonial history into history. However, given its long-distance interest in the Third World, the various difficulties of investment in the actual intellectual and political tasks that confront specific Third World countries, and the politico-professional demands of the Western academy, postcolonial

Edward West,  
*Bendinephupo*.  
Color photograph,  
28 × 42 in. (71.1 ×  
106.7 cm).



studies is poorly positioned and ill equipped for the complexity of the task.

But should it return to embrace its Saidian history, maybe another story can begin.

### Commentary

**Fernando Coronil:** In my view, our discussion has helped illuminate Jennifer Wenzel's core question: how are we to respond to the inadequate connection between the field of postcolonial studies and the state of the world? Gaurav Desai's and Simon Gikandi's suggestions that the arrival of postcolonial studies in academia marks its end, death, or rebirth make clear that its fate as an academic field is an interesting but secondary question. The fundamental question is the relevance of postcolonial studies as a critical body of knowledge that can problematize the world and cut into it, as Susie Tharu demands.

We may find it useful to approach postcolonial studies through a double register. From one perspective, we can evaluate it generously as a heterogeneous and productive field, although, as Sunil Agnani notes, some of its fundamental figures may deny they are part of it. There is much to be gained in defining this field broadly and recognizing the role it has played in sharpening the critique of colonialism. From another perspective, we must historicize it and recognize its limitations, particularly with respect to the examination of imperial formations, past and present. As Peter Hulme has observed, even Said, who indeed addressed United States imperialism, confined it to a narrow temporal and spatial frame. For me, the point of bringing Africa and Latin America into a discussion that has been too Anglocentric (as Mamadou Diouf and I argue here) is not just to add more participants in this dialogue but also to modify its terms (see also Coronil).

Expanding the field's temporal and spatial referents entails also transforming its conceptual categories. It makes the *post-* of

postcolonialism the epistemic and temporal marker of a more powerful perspective. This perspective would enable us to connect fragments to wholes, deconstruction to construction, the discursive to the material, (non-Eurocentric) mininarratives to grand narratives. I believe that our ability to make these connections will also enable us to make better connections between the fields of postcolonial studies (plural) and the imperial states of the world, past and present.

**Sunil Agnani:** Fernando Coronil makes a point that I agree with and would like to expand: his call to join 1804 and 1825 to 1947 as key moments in rethinking the category of the postcolonial. This is a necessary part of broadening the anglophone focus (and chronology) of postcolonial thought. My own impulse is to broaden the purview retrospectively to the European Enlightenment, since this is the period in which many of the questions of sovereignty, rights, and so on were formed, questions that returned in an inflected and contested form during the decolonization debates of the twentieth century. (Some were posed directly in the eighteenth century by the participants in the Haitian revolution, where race already tested the universalism of such terms. The evocation of Simón Bolívar by the date 1825 recalls the support Haiti gave him alongside the request that he free the slaves of South America.)

Susie Tharu's observation on the status of the term *postcolonial*—its lack of usefulness—outside Euro-America is valid. And yet it is essential to realize the term's role (in the 1980s and 1990s) in transforming English departments in the United States and changing what was considered legitimate to discuss in them. In thinking about what was enabled by postcolonial studies, we cannot overlook how it opened (some) departments to a range of faculty members and students from other disciplines and from countries outside North America and Europe, people who would have gone elsewhere. It may not have been unusual

in the 1980s and 1990s to have colleagues from New Zealand, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Pakistan, India, South Africa, and Taiwan in a department of anthropology, say, or even economics. But to find them in a department of English literature (and usually working on topics that related to or reflected this other space) was new and broadened the focus to an extraordinary degree.

Did the Frankfurt school (or those associated with it) fail because fascism continued its rise even as those scholars produced several studies analyzing it, reflecting on its implications for everyday life? To my mind, what remains important in this example is the persistence of a sharp critique in (as Hannah Arendt put it) “dark times.” Since most of our comments read as an obituary for the term *postcolonial*, it is important that we not lose sight of the persistent critique that this discourse (with its focus on the problematic of colonialism) left as its legacy today.

**Jennifer Wenzel:** I hear in this conversation an assessment of the accomplishments and limitations of postcolonial studies, and indeed a desire to find in it resources for contemporary critiques of empire “in dark times.” Mamadou Diouf’s description of African studies’ “transition from utter hostility to critical engagement” with postcolonial studies offers an example of this desire. How can what Simon Gikandi calls “the postcolonial thing” be reimagined in order better to “cut into the world” as we find it now? The crudities of United States political discourse and the brutalities of United States foreign policy in recent years only make more clear what is at stake.

Recurrent in the conversation is an urge to make connections, and to Fernando Coronil’s catalog of connections I might add “Africa to the Americas and Asia”—as an expanded historical and geographic frame that allows us to consider how the slave trade (as well as other trades) shaped relations between different imperial sites and globalizing moments. Indeed,

the field has begun to move beyond the necessary but insufficient critiques of anticolonial nationalism as a “derivative discourse” (Chatterjee) or postcolonial studies as epistemologically and institutionally Eurocentric: these alternative genealogies of anti-imperialism and postcolonialism emphasize South-South connections among activists, intellectuals, and artists in colonized sites rather than a line of influence from Europe to its colonies.

But my question is this: in this desire to connect, or in Mamadou’s articulation of continuing imperial domination in Africa or the global South, what is the place of distinction, differentiation, and historicization? In our thinking and our teaching, what difference do differences among particular imperial formations make—say, between Nigeria under colonialism and today, or between Frederick Lugard’s Nigeria and George W. Bush’s Iraq?

**Mamadou Diouf:** I would like to discuss some of the points my colleagues made about issues of temporality, spatiality, and deployments of imperialism and colonial rule and how we account for (and write about, without losing sight of the realities of oppression) struggles and the multiple narratives generated by such processes. My problem is that postcolonial studies is concerned more with the expansion of Europe than with (dis)connections among colonized societies, groups, and individuals. How does the general process—the expansion of Europe—relate to specific histories, which are more locally determined and framed in the context of the encounter? How do we place these histories and their languages and structures into the global design of imperialism and colonial rule? Histories of the revision of local libraries—their appropriation of (Mudimbe), accommodation to, and collaboration with (Desai) the colonial library—are missing or not taken into account adequately, at least for the African cases I know, because most of us don’t master African languages or Arabic or Geez (Ethio-

pian Christian liturgical language). This is how I understand Fernando Coronil's invitation to come up with a catalog of connections that may address the disconnect between postcolonial studies and the state of the world.

Engaging with this disconnect entails a need to reconfigure the chronological and spatial framework that locates Europe at the heart of the postcolonial studies enterprise (as Sunil and Fernando argue) as well as to revise the categories attached to the colonial and postcolonial time frames. The issues: Who owns the colonial library? How are postcolonial libraries connecting, subverting, distancing, or ignoring colonial modes of knowledge? To make connections, address the political economies and discourses of colonial rule, and better understand postcolonial conditions, we need to consider the following questions: Do colonial languages reflect power exclusively? Do languages of resistance escape the logics of domination and hegemony?

My response to Susie Tharu's, Jennifer Wenzel's, and Gaurav Desai's comments centers on the issue of languages and cultures, historical and social imaginaries, and arts expressed through them—and constituting them in return—in order to engage with the question of textuality. The African continent is still divided into francophone, anglophone, and lusophone areas, and the colonial languages are historically determined at the expense of African languages and Arabic. Non-Latin writing systems carried local West African aesthetic and cultural creativity before and during colonial rule. We tend to overlook the knowledge and epistemologies that run parallel to the colonial library, not necessarily intersecting with it. When the local and colonial libraries intersect, it is easy to account for the recourse to postcolonial studies. But what happens if we introduce indigenous textuality (i.e., indigeneity) in the narrative of the colonial encounter? Is this not the best way to critique Euro-American postings (representations of the "other")?

**Gaurav Desai:** Simon Gikandi and Susie Tharu both suggest that it is important to distinguish between the project of postcolonial studies and the postcolonial condition itself. Simon suggests that the development of the field was a direct response to and critique of the disciplinary priorities of English literary studies, while Susie suggests that we often forget that Said's *Orientalism* was, by his own admission, about Western structures of power/knowledge and not about the "Orient" itself. These observations raise the question of the historical parameters of the field and how its story is best told. For me, it also raises the pedagogical question of what we might want to introduce in the classroom as a representative sampling of texts that are concerned with the study of colonialism and postcoloniality. I take seriously Fernando Coronil's and Mamadou Diouf's admonitions about the scarcity of Latin America and Africa in the postcolonial studies canon. And I find compelling the argument for a wider historical frame and a greater attention to vernacular and other nonanglophone traditions, not because I think that greater coverage and a desire for comprehensiveness will give us a panoptic view of the subject. Rather, this approach allows us to find unexpected alliances and disjunctures between texts, historical moments, traditions, and thinkers that bring to life our task as critics. Some of the most exciting moments in my classes happen when, for instance, I introduce the Apology Bill passed by the United States Congress and addressed to the indigenous people of Hawai'i. The discussion surrounding that text in the classroom is always riveting, as students come to terms with the fact that the concern with colonialism and postcoloniality is not just some private obsession of their South Asian professor (since I am their primary point of contact with the material) but something that their own elected officials seem to have given thought to. Or the day that we discuss Frederick Lugard's idea of the "dual mandate" in Africa and students hear echoes of Lugardian rhetoric in the various justifications for the war in Iraq.

**Susie Tharu:** A question remains open. Sunil Agnani's plea for an acknowledgment of multiplicity and differences in postcolonial studies is well taken. In that spirit, would it be possible to expand on differences between Said's partisan and strategic knowledge, his worldliness as a critic, and that of Spivak and the planetary ethical edge work she prescribes? Is there a structural difference between Said's present and future we and Spivak's laboring I?

In response to Mamadou Diouf: Setting up Africanists' discomfort with "posts" as the old problem of textuality versus concrete historical reality obscures the intellectual effort to write histories of Africa—as against that of Europe (recall Dipesh Chakrabarty's claim that all history is the history of Europe). We need to read this effort as a knowledge project. The crafting of such a problematic will necessarily involve a critique of Eur-Am postings and an interest in repossessing discontinuities—for example, by considering their continuity (as Foucault does for the West). The key questions may well be, as Simon Gikandi earlier suggested, about the ethics of a knowledge formation, the form of its accountability, and consequently also its politics.

**Patricia Yaeger:** Susie, can you explain the differences between history and postcolonial history that you broached earlier?

**Susie Tharu:** The point I was trying to make is that postcolonial history is, much like the positivist history it abhors, invested in the durability and the continuing presence of the past. The temporal task of an engaged historiography—and the project is one as much of theory as of politics—is to wrest the present, to excise our time from this past, and to turn the time of colonialism into our past.

**Jennifer Wenzel:** Susie's observation that "as a category, postcolonial is both too diffuse and too narrow" is helpful, because it accounts for the discrepancy between the precision of Simon's distinctions (*Things Fall Apart*, no; *Anthills*, yes) and Fernando's sug-

gestion that we extend our notion of the postcolonial moment backward to 1804.

Simon reminds us of the error of over-expansiveness, Fernando of the geographic exclusion of entire empires. Both interventions are based on historical rather than epistemological inflections of the *post-*: after, not beyond, colonialism.

Additional examples of diffusion are evident in the backward creep in postcolonial approaches to the early modern period, or even to medieval protonational formations, as well as in the lateral drift in postcolonial accounts of post-Soviet eastern Europe, which adapt the explanatory rubric for the emergent (emigrant?) Third World to interpret the imploded Second. Not surprisingly, the reports of the death of postcolonial studies emerged at the same time that it was spotted everywhere, having been evacuated of any determinate historical content.

The institutional histories traced in these statements help us understand how we got here; Fernando's desideratum of a world more fit for all seems crucial as we ponder what to do now.

**Fernando Coronil:** Our dialogue—so ably guided by Patsy and with such thoughtful contributions by Sunil, Gaurav, Mamadou, Simon, Susie, and Jennifer—reminds me of why postcolonial studies has been significant for me. This field opened my mind. From Said's *Orientalism* to the work of the Subaltern Studies historians, it helped me not only see what I had not seen before but also see in ways I had never seen. It changed my vision.

But our dialogue has also reminded me of why I have found postcolonial studies frustrating. The field's critique of Eurocentrism and historicism has not sufficiently examined its own historical and theoretical provincialism. The vision it made possible has had persisting blinders—unfortunately made thicker rather than thinner by its success—that obscure connections among worldwide struggles, histories, empires, languages, and literatures, past and present.



From different perspectives, our dialogue reflects our appreciative evaluation of postcolonial studies but also our desire to push beyond its limits. But whether from the vantage point of postcolonial studies or not, in the end what matters is to keep developing the intellectual project this field helped advance—its critique of dominative knowledge and its pursuit of worlds that are more plural and more just.

**Simon Gikandi:** I find nothing in the debate so far to disagree with. I think the differences in emphasis call attention to three things that need to be stressed:

1. What postcolonial theory is and what work it does depend on one's disciplinary formation. Mamadou and Fernando come from history and anthropology, where the histories, genealogies, and politics of postcoloniality are focused differently. This is the great

lesson I learned from talking and listening to my old colleagues at Michigan.

2. Postcolonial theory is inflected heavily by the sites of knowledge production. I don't think the issue is simply the absence of Africa or Latin America from the debate. The absence from most of our reflections of scholars who work in the global South (like Susie) has made postcolonial theory (like all theory) a provincial American concern hiding behind the mask of universalism.

3. We need some humility in our pronouncements! Yes, we have to profess because that is what we are paid to do, but it will help if we pause over the question, how do all these debates appear to the objects of analysis—the so-called postcolonial subjects?

Edward West,  
Ngawe. Color  
photograph, 28 × 42  
in. (71.1 × 106.7 cm).

*Patricia Yaeger*



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