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Unsettling the South through Postcolonial Feminist Theory

Author(s): Amy Piedalue and Susmita Rishi

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# Unsettling the South through Postcolonial Feminist Theory

ACROSS THE ACADEMY, POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM is often understood to only apply to “the postcolony,” that is, geographic regions now commonly referred to as “the global South.” This assumption not only fails to capture the significant intellectual contribution of postcolonial feminist theory, but actually has the effect of reproducing the same logics that postcolonial feminism critiques. These include: (1) the idea that (post) colonial describes phenomena that are fixed in certain geographies and locations (i.e., in the global South and *not* the global North); (2) the presumption of a temporality in which the colonial exists only in the past; and (3) either a denial of the contemporary realities and lived experiences of white settler colonialism or an artificial separation of these realities from those of the postcolony.

In this essay, we argue for the contemporary relevance of postcolonial feminism as a diverse body of theory offering analytical insights that extend beyond the postcolony or a singular application to “women’s lives.” In particular, we chart the significance of postcolonial feminisms as a lens through which we might “unsettle the South” and attend to all of the representational baggage carried in references to the global South. In doing so, we respond to recent provocations to develop a more relational understanding of the global North and South, within which the global South is seen as “everywhere and nowhere” at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Ananya Roy and Emma Shaw Crane, *Territories of Poverty: Rethinking North and South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015); Matthew Sparke, “Everywhere But Always Somewhere: Critical Geographies of the Global South,” *The Global South* 1, no. 1 (2007): 117–26.

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**BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY**

*Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

By Lila Abu-Lughod. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.

*Subversive Property: Law and the Production of Spaces of Belonging.*

By Sarah Keenan. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015.

*The Intimacies of Four Continents.*

By Lisa Lowe. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.

*The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty.*

By Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

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This understanding also requires an unsettling of not just the ways in which we know the global South as a location but also how and where we apply postcolonial feminism. The four books we review serve as examples of contemporary postcolonial feminist work that moves us forward in rethinking the geography and meaning of the global South, toward a more relational understanding of inequality, power, and “development.”

We begin by briefly outlining some key interventions of postcolonial feminist analysis, and then we elucidate how the books under review build on and make new pathways for a more nuanced understanding of postcolonial feminist theory. In laying out our argument, we concentrate on how the monographs reviewed here take up three significant themes: the central role of gender and sexuality in racialized imperialist projects; liberal modernity and colonial definitions of “the human”; and alternative approaches to capitalism that highlight hegemonic white property regimes. We conclude by reflecting on the significance of these monographs and our argument as feminist geopolitical critiques of the gender-race-nation-empire nexus in the midst of a global turn to the right.

We understand postcolonial feminism as an explicitly transnational and globally constructed form of critical race feminism. It engages with the textures of everyday life that give form and grounding to critiques of imperialism and yield complex understandings of the entanglements

of gender, race, and sexuality in nation- and empire-building as well as in resistance movements and anti-imperial struggle.<sup>2</sup> Postcolonial feminism cannot be treated simply as another form of feminism, or of postcolonial studies. Rather it intervenes in and changes both of these disciplines by investigating the intersections of gender-sexuality-race-nation-empire in the differing everyday contexts of women's lives and subjectivities.<sup>3</sup> Through seminal pieces such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes*, postcolonial feminists have challenged not only the erasure of women as subjects and agents within histories of colonialism or postcolonial development, but also Western feminists' racialized and paternalistic characterizations of the "Third World woman." Despite the widespread recognition of some contributions, including Mohanty's, scholars such as Reina Lewis, Sara Mills, and Ania Loomba point out that with the establishment of postcolonial studies in academia, feminist contributions have been sidelined, largely marginalizing the critical importance of their insights and dynamic unfolding of the complex relationships between colonialism, imperialism, race, and power.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the assumption that postcolonial feminism remains limited in temporal scope (to the past) or spatial application (to the postcolony or the global South) works to erase the historical contributions of this field of scholarship and impoverishes current critical theory that might benefit from closer reading in this area.

Before highlighting some contemporary interventions, then, we wish to recover the historical significance of postcolonial feminist thought. In this regard, we emphasize three analytical strengths that characterize the interventions of postcolonial feminisms. First of all, in a similar vein to Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory, postcolonial feminist interventions seek to recognize the validity and theoretical power

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2. While it is not within the purview of this essay to engage deeply with the debates and genealogies of variously intertwined strands of feminist thought (i.e., postcolonial, decolonial, Third World, US Third World, transnational, Black, and women of color), our discussion of postcolonial feminisms at times references areas of overlap or parallel innovation in several of these strands of critical race feminism.
  3. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray, eds., *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2005).
  4. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, eds., *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Ania Loomba *Colonialism/Postcolonialism (The New Critical Idiom)*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

of resistance struggles (activism, social movements, etc.). As Lewis and Mills assert, “Feminist anti-racist politics was born out of recognition of the differences between women and out of the anti-imperialist campaigns of ‘first’ and ‘third-world’ women.”<sup>5</sup> As such, postcolonial feminisms offer myriad examples, across anti-imperialist struggles around the world, of the ways in which resistance practices and movements shine new light on the operation of power and domination.<sup>6</sup>

A second significant intervention of feminists in postcolonial studies has been in recovering the importance of intimate spaces and everyday life as critical sites for understanding imperial power. This move enables “an examination of the texture of imperial rule” that cannot be accessed through attention to state-relations and imperial ideology alone.<sup>7</sup> We see this in Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather* as she traces the textures of race, sexuality, and gender in the production of British colonial conquest.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Mrinalini Sinha, in her *Specters of Mother India*, utilizes the historical controversy around a piece of imperialist propaganda about Indian women’s sexual practices in order to showcase what she calls an “imperial social formation,” or the historical formation of contemporary interdependencies and interconnections and their uneven effects.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, from a critical engagement of race and gender together, postcolonial feminisms offered some early insights into what Adrienne Rich dubbed “the politics of location,” or the idea that we must see ourselves, our lives, and our knowledge as situated and embodied and our identities as relationally produced at the intersections of gender, race,

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5. Lewis and Mills, *Feminist Postcolonial Theory*, 4.

6. See examples in Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); and Amrita Basu, ed., *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women’s Movements in Global Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

7. Lewis and Mills, *Feminist Postcolonial Theory*, 6–7.

8. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

9. Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 17.

sexuality, and class.<sup>10</sup> This politics is central to interrogating whiteness as a core feature of imperialism and colonization, as well as to establishing the possible grounds of solidarities between feminists differently located by power, privilege, and oppression. It also challenges hegemonic knowledge paradigms that naturalize the European white male perspective as the site of “objective reason” and invalidate the knowledge of gendered and racialized subjects at the margins (of society, of the academy, of the globe, of the city, etc.).<sup>11</sup> In this way, postcolonial feminisms foreshadow the current argument being made for validating what Raewyn Connell dubs “southern theory.”<sup>12</sup>

In the last decade, several scholars across the social sciences have made forceful arguments for the need to recognize, validate, and learn from theory generated in the South.<sup>13</sup> In many instances, this provocation has been misread as a simplistic call to add empirical *variation* to social science arguments by drawing on the “empirical uniqueness”

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10. Adrienne Rich, “Notes Towards a Politics of Location,” in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (London: Virago, 1986). See also Caren Kaplan, “The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Practice,” in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, ed. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Mary E. John, *Discrepant Dislocations: Feminism, Theory, and Postcolonial Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
  11. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat, eds., *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism, and History* (New York: Verso, 1992).
  12. Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007). We intentionally use southern theory in lower-case form (which is in line with Connell’s own usage), as a means of marking the kind of unsettling we argue for in this essay. In our view, southern theory should not be limited by a cartographic invocation (of “the South”) that suggests a fixed or homogenous geography, but rather should focus our attention on power and the imperial present.
  13. Connell, *Southern Theory*; Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving toward Africa* (Boulder, CO.: Paradigm, 2012); Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (Abingdon, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2014); Roy and Crane, *Territories of Poverty*.

of places and lives in the global South.<sup>14</sup> However, this scholarship, situated across different disciplines, in fact shares a postcolonial feminist concern with correcting the implicit global North perspective that pervades social theory and academic knowledge production. Connell proposes the idea of southern theory to call attention to “periphery-centre relations in the realm of knowledge,” highlighting relationships over fixed categories of places, but pointing to the ways in which “social thought happens in particular places,” and emphasizing “that the majority world does produce *theory*.”<sup>15</sup> This insistence on *placing* knowledge production clarifies the embedded Western/northern origins and identity of so-called universal knowledge, particularly around ideas of modernity.<sup>16</sup> As Ananya Roy and Emma Shaw Crane elaborate, “To see from the South is not to replace one location of theory with another but instead to rethink the territory of thought itself.”<sup>17</sup> At the same time, these authors interrogate the common pattern of extracting “raw data” (quantitative and qualitative) from the South or from colonized peoples and feeding this data through the mill of social theory (always located in Northern institutions, intellectual histories, and/or geographies). In this way, southern theory attempts to extend critiques of imperial and colonial science, which postcolonial, decolonial, and Indigenous feminists have long articulated.<sup>18</sup> As Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff note, the West has been the privileged location of “universal learning” while the “non-West—variously known as the ancient world, the orient, the primitive world, the third world, the underdeveloped world, the developing world, and now the global south” has been seen “primarily as a place of parochial wisdom, of antiquarian traditions, of exotic ways and means . . . above all, of unprocessed data.”<sup>19</sup> In light of this still-pervasive practice of extraction, Connell views southern theory as a means of democratizing academic knowledge production, and Comaroff and

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14. Ananya Roy, “Who’s Afraid of Postcolonial Theory?” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40, no. 1 (2016): 200–209.

15. Connell, *Southern Theory*, viii–ix (emphasis in original).

16. Comaroff and Comaroff, *Theory from the South*.

17. Roy and Crane, *Territories of Poverty*, 16.

18. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012).

19. Comaroff and Comaroff, *Theory from the South*, 1.

Comaroff see theorizing from the South as vital to understanding contemporary problems across the globe in new light.

The project of unsettling the South, therefore, involves and suggests both ideological and material shifts. Feminist/postcolonial theory disrupts the false separation of East from West or North from South through attending to the sociocultural and political-economic linkages forged through empire. As Roy notes, postcolonial theory also clearly articulates the intimate linkage between a place/territory and the geographic imagination/idea of that place, such that we see, from Edward Said's work, "that Orientalism produced the effects it names."<sup>20</sup> This suggests the need to investigate linkage and relationality—whereby the global South is co-constituted with the global North through relations of colonialism, past and present. But this relationship between ideological and material place also demands that we recognize the colonial logic operative in a contemporary geographic imagination of the global South as a category able to contain and delimit a diverse set of places by virtue of appealing to their association with an incomplete modernity—with poverty, ill health, poor sanitation, ethnic conflict, corrupt governance, cultural backwardness, gender inequality, and so on.

Building on and extending this literature, we posit that unsettling the South requires (at least) two simultaneous moves. First, we must question the implicit referent for ("universal") social theory produced in the academy—that is, not simply the global North, but rather the inheritance of Euro-American paradigms of knowledge that center "rational" action and actors and seek to find (or impose) order in the "chaos" of social life. Such paradigms are rooted in the history of colonial science and conquest and carry with them racialized and gendered characterizations that (dis)credit knowledge based not only on geographic location, but on the bodies and identities of the knowledge maker. The latter point suggests the importance of the second key move to unsettling the South—we must diligently challenge the presumption of geographic location built into analyses of the global South and often into critical work on the interconnections with the global North (including within arguments for southern theory). This means that indeed "the majority world does produce *theory*," but that the majority world perhaps ought

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20. Roy, "Who's Afraid of Postcolonial Theory?" 4.



not to be mapped according to borders and proximity measured by the unit of the nation-state.<sup>21</sup> Rather, we will find conditions understood as characterizing the global South (poverty, ill health, corruption, gender inequity) in the cities and rural areas of North America, Europe, and Australia, just as we will find conditions thought to define the global North (high consumption, modern infrastructure, new technologies, the expectation of fulfilled human rights) in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia.

In this characterization of the South, we might find southern theory emergent from such distinctive sources as farmers' movements in India, the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, Indigenous sovereignty movements in Canada and Tanzania, and the poverty politics surrounding cross-class alliances and antagonisms in the United States and Argentina.<sup>22</sup> Postcolonial feminist theory suggests we might instead view south as a flexible and mobile marker that draws our gaze to the operation of imperial power, manifest in complex inequalities articulated at local and global scales. While global economic inequalities, lived at intimate scales, provide some crucial data for such a countermapping, we are not suggesting this unsettling of the South can or ought to be accomplished through analysis only of capital, economic markets, or class. Rather, we insist that this unsettling requires the kind of relational thinking that centers and pivots around tracing the *operation of power* within and across place and time. As we have already suggested, feminist postcolonial theory has trail-blazed and evolved this kind of relational understanding of power. The books under review extend postcolonial

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21. Connell, *Southern Theory*, ix (emphasis in original).

22. Sangtin Writers, "Still Playing with Fire: Intersectionality, Activism, and NGO-ized Feminism," *Critical Asian Studies* 41, no. 3 (2009): 429–45; Ahmad Greene-Hayes and Joy James, "Cracking the Codes of Black Power Struggles: Hacking, Hacked, and Black Lives Matter," *The Black Scholar* 47, no. 3 (2017): 68–78; Michelle Daigle, "Awawenitakik: The Spatial Politics of Recognition and Relational Geographies of Indigenous Self-Determination," *The Canadian Geographer*, no. 2 (2016): 259; Dorothy Hodgson, "'These Are Not Our Priorities': Maasai Women, Human Rights, and the Problem of Culture," in *Gender and Culture at the Limit of Rights*, ed. Dorothy Hodgson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Victoria Lawson, Sarah Elwood, Santiago Canevaro, and Nicolas Viotti, "'The Poor Are Us': Middle-Class Poverty Politics in Buenos Aires and Seattle," *Environment and Planning A* 47, no. 9 (2015): 1873–91.

feminisms in critical ways, which offer us some new and renewed pathways for unsettling the South in critical theory.

#### THE IMPERIALIST UTILITY OF SAVING MUSLIM WOMEN

Do you love your country as much as I do? Are you sick and tired of being labeled a racist simply because you believe politicians should put America and Americans first? When did love of country become synonymous with racism? . . . When did supporting Sharia acts of barbarism, like mutilating the genitals of little girls, make one a defender of human rights?<sup>23</sup>

These remarks, spoken by Brigitte Gabriel, founder and chair of the self-styled grassroots national security organization ACT for America, serve as the opening lines of a digital call to arms inviting Americans to participate in ACT's America First rallies on September 9, 2017.<sup>24</sup> Later in the video, Gabriel goes on to proclaim, "This march is a battle cry for national security, patriotism, and American exceptionalism. It's a battle cry for the heart and soul of this nation." Dubbed the "largest grassroots anti-Muslim group in the country" by the Southern Poverty Law Center, ACT for America's previous rallies have drawn armed militia groups and white nationalists.<sup>25</sup> Thus, there is much to say about the role of Gabriel and ACT in creating a platform for hate speech (and thereby fueling hate violence) "at a time when violence against Muslim, Arab, South Asian, and Sikh communities is reaching historic highs" in the United States.<sup>26</sup> However, a postcolonial feminist lens also invites us to

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23. Brigitte Gabriel, "America First' Rally - ACT for America," YouTube video posted by ACT for America, July 31, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLBFgaEbiFc>.
  24. Following the backlash to white supremacist violence in Charlottesville and a series of anti-hate rallies in Boston and across the United States, ACT for America canceled the planned rallies and instead declared September 9, 2017, to be a day of "online action."
  25. Stephen Piggott, "Who Is the Real Brigitte Gabriel?" website of the Southern Poverty Law Center, March 23, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/03/23/who-real-brigitte-gabriel>.
  26. South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), "Civil Rights Coalition Denounces ACT for America's Anti-Muslim Online Campaign; Calls on the President to #CounterACTHate," press release, September 8, 2017, <http://saalt.org/category/press-releases>.

zoom in on Gabriel's invocation of female genital cutting (which Gabriel and ACT reference as a homogenous, Islamic practice of "mutilation") within the first thirty seconds of a four-minute video. Likewise, through attention to the ways in which gender and sexuality become entangled in racialized imperialist projects and representations, we recognize the significance of "Female Genital Mutilation" and "Honor Violence" dominating ACT for America's webpage on "Empowering Women & Protecting Children." This strategic deployment of concern for "the genitals of little [Muslim] girls" demonstrates what Lila Abu-Lughod describes, in the first of the books reviewed here, as "the erotic charge" of narratives about honor crimes and "peculiar" forms of violence experienced by some Muslim women (and discursively attached to all Muslim women).

*Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* represents Abu-Lughod's concentrated effort to bring her decades of ethnographic work in Egypt and the Middle East to bear on popular discourses of Muslim women's rights. Her persistent return to the textures of everyday life, accessed through ethnographic methods and long-term relationships, serves both to contextualize and specify the diversity of Muslim women's lives, experiences, and identities, as well as to reveal the geopolitical and geoeconomic entanglements that rarely feature in the culture war discourses of "the clash of civilizations" and "the West vs. the rest." In responding to the question invoked by her book's title, Abu-Lughod illustrates a central feature of postcolonial feminist analysis by demonstrating, with dexterity and a wide range of sources, the absolutely central role of gender and sexuality in racialized imperialist and nationalist projects. The book insightfully draws out and critiques the political work accomplished through deployments of familiar tropes of Muslim women's victimization at the hands of their men, their "antimodern culture," and their religion. Abu-Lughod demonstrates the salience and significance of the *figure* of the Muslim woman at the center of various moves to imperialist projects — from justifying the US invasion of Afghanistan following September 11 as vehicle for "saving" Afghan women from the Taliban (and Islam in general); to authorizing (under the guise of "development") a whole manner of outside interventions into homes, locales, and geographic places labeled as "Muslim"; to the discursive construction of Muslim men as the monstrous Other, always carrying the potential for violence — from sexual

assault to honor killing to terrorism.<sup>27</sup> Abu-Lughod does not limit her analyses of the intersections of gender-sexuality-race-nation-empire to a flattened understanding of “woman” as gender-object, but rather carefully documents the gendering of both Muslim women and men through not only simplified and imposed rights discourses, but also through the titillating and lingering attention on sexuality and sexual violation in narratives of the oppression of Muslim women (by Muslim men and/or Islam) and the “saving” of said women (by Western values, people, culture, economy, law, and so on).

Ethnography figures prominently in Abu-Lughod’s postcolonial feminist analysis of the new common sense of “going to war for women” (54–80) that authorizes moral crusades in the name of saving Muslim women (81–112). Yet her advocacy for, and use of, ethnography avoids the tendency to reduce the global South to a place of data recovery for Anglo theory. In this sense, she follows a feminist and postcolonial model of politicizing the geographic and social locations of knowledge production. This process entails challenging the “worldly effects” of traveling theory emanating from seats of power, which through its mobility and dominance denies the legitimacy of the theoretical productions of marginalized actors and places.<sup>28</sup> Abu-Lughod thereby demonstrates the difference between theorizing *from* ethnography (in global South places, or “the Muslim world”) — wherein the lives and articulations of “Muslim women” form the basis for understanding their rights, vulnerabilities, needs, and desires, *as opposed to* taking ethnographic data as fodder to be run through the mill of critical social theory based in the histories and present-day paradigms of the West or the global North (i.e., liberal modernity and Enlightenment political philosophy). Abu-Lughod’s insistence upon building our understandings of Muslim women’s lives directly from the sites at which they are forged need not apply only to Muslim women (or women in general) who are geographically located in places traditionally encompassed in the global South. Rather, this approach

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27. Sophia Rose Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

28. Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Amy Piedalue, “Understanding Violence in Place: Travelling Knowledge Paradigms and Measuring Domestic Violence in India,” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 22, no. 1 (2015): 63–91.

highlights the theoretical interventions that emerge from sites of marginality and struggles for equity (for Muslim women and other subaltern subjects) and challenges liberal conceptions of “justice” and “rights.”<sup>29</sup>

#### THE (UNHAPPY) MARRIAGE OF LIBERALISM AND COLONIALISM

If racialization is understood not as a biological or cultural descriptor but as a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans, then blackness designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot.<sup>30</sup>

In *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lisa Lowe employs a new approach to reading state archives that reveals the relations between discretely organized repositories and unsettles not only the archive, but our understandings of the histories of both colonialism and modern liberalism. Her title invokes the often ignored interrelationships between European liberalism, settler colonialism in the Americas, the transatlantic African slave trade, and the transpacific (specifically East Indies and China) trades, which constitute the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century emergence of an “Anglo-American settler imperial imaginary” (8) that continues to be elaborated today. More particularly, Lowe also refers to the intimacies of these continental encounters as “the circuits, connections, associations, and mixings of differently laboring peoples,” which the coupling of liberal political philosophy and imperialist political economy eclipse through the universalization of the “Anglo-American liberal individual” (21). Lowe insists that these intimacies are not fixed, nor does her project attempt to assemble them in a singular frame, but rather to attend to their historical and genealogical linkages. As Lowe describes her project:

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29. Amy Piedalue, “Beyond ‘Culture’ as an Explanation for Intimate Violence: The Politics and Possibilities of Plural Resistance,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 24 no. 4 (2017): 563–74.

30. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

To observe that the genealogy of modern liberalism is simultaneously a genealogy of colonial divisions of humanity is a project of tracking the ways in which race, geography, nation, caste, religion, gender, sexuality, and other social differences become elaborated as normative categories for governance under the rubrics of liberty and sovereignty (7).

Lowe thereby builds on postcolonial feminist analyses of the nexus of gender, race, nation, and empire, yet she makes a distinctive contribution by carefully tracing the histories underlying the production of a globally articulated system.<sup>31</sup> Through this process she demonstrates that “the modern distinction between definitions of the human and those to whom such definitions do not extend is the condition of possibility of Western liberalism, and not its particular exception” (3). This contingency and relationality of modern liberalism and colonialism identified by Lowe might be understood as parallel to an Orientalist logic, by which the European self is constructed through the composition and representation of a homogenous, oppositional other.<sup>32</sup> Yet Lowe significantly extends such critique by venturing beyond the representational (as part of a cultural imperialism) into consideration of the material realities and effects of constituting the human (in imperial centers) *through* the exclusion and exploitation of those defined as less than human (in peripheral colonies). In the process, Lowe reveals the significance of a gendered racial taxonomy that constituted a colonial hierarchy of the human and not merely a binary of self/other or human/non-human.

The term *unsettling* aptly describes the work of Lowe’s project in several registers — methodologically, epistemologically, even ontologically. At the same time, her unique approach disrupts a host of commonsensical or dogmatic understandings of the past and present, including the history of modern liberalism, historical and contemporary trajectories of “freedom,” the notion of a gradually inclusive definition of “the human,” the influence of abolition and moral arguments against slavery, and the significance of Asia and the figure of the Asian in the imbricated worlds of liberal political philosophy and colonialism. We find that

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31. Akin to an elaboration of Sinha’s “imperial social formation” in her *Specters of Mother India*.

32. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

these interventions, disruptive in their own right, also each play a role in unsettling geographic imaginations of the global South. In addition, we find Lowe's approach to be a compelling example of one avenue for generating southern theory. In her "unsettling genealogy of modern liberalism," Lowe does not simply take her analysis of various strands of colonial archives and consider them through the lens of Northern social theorists.<sup>33</sup> Instead, she makes Enlightenment social theory part of the archive through which she retheorizes the history of modern liberalism. She reexamines central figures of European liberal political philosophy (John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, Georg Hegel, Karl Marx) in terms of how their ideas contributed to modern liberalism's foundational contingency: the material and biopolitical operations of colonialism. At the same time, she repeatedly draws on the epistemologies, histories, and counternarratives theorized within the anti-imperial intellectual tradition (W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, Fernando Ortiz).<sup>34</sup>

In tracing this genealogy of modern liberalism, Lowe challenges accepted histories of an emancipatory progress from slavery to freedom accomplished through the evolution and spread of liberal political philosophy. She does this by drawing out (from the colonial archive and European philosophers' writings) the ways in which a racial taxonomy subdivided the meanings of "human" and "freedom," thereby suturing (and *rational-izing*) the rupture or seeming contradictions of liberalism with slavery, indenture, and settler colonial genocide and seizure. Histories of transatlantic slavery often emphasize the significance of the Slave Trade Act (1807), which abolished the British slave trade, and the Slavery Abolition Act (1833), which ended formal chattel slavery within the British imperial possessions, as key moments of the process of abolishing slavery in the Americas. Lowe reconsiders these legal actions, demonstrating that these acts of abolition did not displace colonial divisions

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33. See Lisa Lowe, "Other Humanities and the Limits of the Human: Response to Lisa Rofel and Stephanie Smallwood," *Cultural Dynamics* 29 nos. 1–2 (2017): 94.

34. Stephanie Smallwood and Lisa Rofel also make note of Lowe's significant engagements with this anti-imperial intellectual tradition: Stephanie Smallwood, "Reading the Archive of Liberalism with Lisa Lowe: Reflections on The Intimacies of Four Continents," *Cultural Dynamics* 29 no. 1–2 (2017): 83–88; Lisa Rofel, "Inextricable Relationships," *Cultural Dynamics* 29 no. 1–2 (2017): 88–93.



of the human, which relied on a racial taxonomy as well as gendered constructions of family and domesticity, and which employed liberal reasoning to distinguish between those capable of self-possessed freedom as citizens of a polity and those at varying distances from this civilized form. In this way, by drawing in the transpacific and the material and representational role of “the Asian coolie,” Lowe reveals how the import of migrants from China, and then South Asia, as indentured laborers played an ideological role, as colonial administrators positioned the figure of the Asian as *between* (freed) slaves (i.e., African and African-descendant peoples) and full citizens (civilized, white, European peoples). The colonial argument for this move drew largely on the perception that Asians possessed greater potential for “civilizing” (in no small part due to the presumption that Asian peoples were more inclined to familial and domestic relations nearer to the liberal ideal). At the same time, the colonial archive shows that decisions to end the slave trade and abolish slavery did not derive primarily from abolitionists’ moral arguments (which often employed liberal principles). Rather, those decisions depended far more on fear of Black revolution (generated by dramatic revolts and everyday practices of enslaved peoples) and on a desire to revive and expand falling profits in the sugar industry (12–13). The indentured labor of Asian “coolies” became a material fix as well—a means of adding cheap labor to maintain and grow profit margins, while quelling the threat of Black revolution through abolition (despite the maintenance of many of the conditions of slave life for African-descendant peoples).

Here we find a theoretical argument about historical and contemporary hierarchies of social, political, and economic life that not only centers interconnection and its uneven effects, but locates the *live* unfolding of colonialism as *scattered across the globe*, irrespective of received histories that locate colonialism in the past and mark North/South and East/West as clean geographic divides that are either natural categorizations or the geographic effects of empire. This unsettles the South without erasing power, but rather through a postcolonial feminist lens that insists on *questioning* colonial (and in this case also, liberal) categorizations rather than merely reacting to and thereby reifying them. We see this as a critical intervention in southern theory in part due to the evidence it provides for the travel and continued salience of colonial divisions of the human. These divisions are not a thing of the past. It is



rather, as Lowe writes, “the pronounced asymmetry of the colonial division of humanity that is the signature feature of liberal modes of distinction that privilege particular subjects and societies as rational, civilized, and human, and treat others as the laboring, replaceable, or disposable contexts that constitute that humanity” (16). Rather than serving as modern liberalism’s gradually inclusive category on a progressive and linear trajectory, “the human” in Lowe’s “unsettling genealogy” emerges as a subdivided taxonomy, within which gendered and racialized categorizations function to rationally divide variously colonized peoples from the promise of “freedom.”

#### HEGEMONIC WHITE PROPERTY REGIMES AND ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO CAPITALISM

Race matters in the lives of all peoples; for some people it confers unearned privilege, and for others it is a mark of inferiority.<sup>35</sup>

While Abu-Lughod explodes the premise of “white savior narratives” that seek to rescue Muslim women and Lowe shatters romantic histories of modern liberalism through analysis of the defining role that whiteness plays in colonial divisions of the human, in *The White Possessive*, Aileen Moreton-Robinson extends postcolonial feminist engagement with whiteness and white supremacy to forge new ground in the theorizations of property and possession, vis-a-vis whiteness. Moreton-Robinson begins her book with the contention that in order to create the field of Indigenous studies and enable the recognition of Indigenous forms of knowledge production, Indigenous scholars have focused largely on cultural difference. This emphasis on using cultural difference as an analytic helped counter how Indigenous peoples, indigeneity, and Indigenous knowledge were “known by outsiders” (xvii), but also fueled an “ethnographic entrapment” (xvi). This early scholarship, while extremely important, developed alongside traditional disciplines that shaped this scholarship, but undertook little to no rigorous engagement with Indigenous studies. So while nation, race, ethnicity, and gender (among others) have shaped and formed Indigenous scholarship and been “operationalized” in the daily struggles of Indigenous people, these areas have been

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35. Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, xiii.

largely ignored as analytics in Indigenous studies (xv). Moreton-Robinson argues that in order to escape the “ethnographic entrapment” of Indigenous studies and lives, a different mode of critique is needed: “One that opens up the field of Indigenous studies to become a site of knowledge production that is exogenous in approach, and one that requires reconfigurations of normalizing power to be studied” (xvii). We understand Moreton-Robinson’s call to see nation, race, ethnicity, and gender as analytics, as an intervention that might bring Indigenous studies into closer conversation with a feminist postcolonial framework.

In particular, Moreton-Robinson uses the work of feminist theorist Andrea Smith to make a case for the need to unsettle race in Indigenous studies rather than to ignore it. Moreton-Robinson unsettles race as a marker of difference by elaborating her argument that whiteness operates as a form of possession, which is formed at the cost of Indigenous sovereignty. Forwarding Cheryl Harris’s legal analysis in her seminal article “Whiteness as Property,” Moreton-Robinson shows how whiteness operates as an entitlement to land as well as other sociodiscursive attributes.<sup>36</sup> Through examples based in Australia and the United States, the book demonstrates how “patriarchal white sovereignty” naturalizes whiteness through law and creates whiteness as property — as a right to possession and as a regime of power dependent on Indigenous dispossession. Through the institutionalization of patriarchal whiteness as law, white possession is normalized and circulates as social mores, colloquial knowledge, and decision-making. While analyzing Indigenous citizenship, Moreton-Robinson shows that those categorized as “others,” such as recent immigrants, refugees, and so on, are often outside the protection afforded to those deemed completely “sovereign.”<sup>37</sup> Their status as sovereign is unevenly distributed based on their perceived proximity to whiteness. By examining Indigenous sovereignty and whiteness studies together, Moreton-Robinson makes clear that white supremacy is fundamentally based in the possession of Indigenous lands and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and opens the field for a discussion on Indigenous sovereignty. She extends postcolonial feminist understandings of

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36. Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91.

37. See also Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

the social construction of difference by addressing whiteness as property, which operates possessively using race and gender to disavow Indigenous sovereignty. In this way, we identify her intervention as one that might represent a trajectory of postcolonial feminism and southern theory that interrogates territory through new analytical approaches — as Roy and Crane have suggested, not demarcating north and south as fixed geographies, but rather reconsidering this geographic imaginary through an alternative lens.

Sarah Keenan, in *Subversive Property*, further unsettles the capitalist status quo where property is understood as a legal entity in isolation. Drawing on critical geography, phenomenology, and empirical work, Keenan offers an alternative understanding of property wherein “property can be understood as a relationship of belonging that is held up by the surrounding space — a relationship that is not fixed or essential but temporally and spatially contingent.” In her book, Keenan makes three main claims. First, embracing a spatial turn in attention to property and shifting the focus toward the broader spaces in which the subject is embedded can bring into focus factors that are otherwise overlooked. Using the work of feminist postcolonial theorist Sara Ahmed and feminist geographers Gillian Rose and Doreen Massey, Keenan forwards an understanding of space as more than just a background to political action but rather as “dynamic heterogeneous simultaneity” (88). Second, Keenan moves beyond the capitalist understanding of property to propose that property may be understood as a “spatially contingent relation of belonging” (65–96). This relationship of belonging is both the conventional relationship between the subject-object, as well as the often-ignored relationship between part-whole. These two relationships of belonging overlap so much that they become indistinguishable. Keenan argues that these relationships are “held up” in space and that this “holding up” is a “more diffuse, heterogeneous, spatial process than state recognition; it invokes a wide range of social responses, structures and networks” (7). Lastly, Keenan argues that each person carries their space with them and, thus, space becomes part of political action.<sup>38</sup> “The subject cannot be conceived as a discrete, autonomous political actor, but must rather

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38. See also Mishuana Goeman, *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

be understood as an entity that is inseparable from the spaces through which she moves and the spaces in which she is embedded" (8).

By "spatializing the subject," Keenan takes a step beyond earlier work in legal geography and other sociolegal fields. Embracing a spatial turn, Keenan shifts the focus of analysis away from the "propertied" as a legal subject and "on to the broader spaces in which the subject is embedded" (5), revealing the overlap between control over life and control over space. This understanding of property, embedded in Indigenous and queer theory, reflects "a spatially contingent relationship of belonging" (65), and further helps articulate postcolonial relations of power and subordination. We see Keenan's reconceptualization of property as a critical disruption of a colonial category of governance, which as Lowe argues, derives from and reinforces liberal political philosophy. Keenan enables her readers to understand and articulate relations of power and subordination as they intersect with race, gender, and sexuality in deeper, more nuanced ways. This extends postcolonial feminist approaches to the study of capitalism. Conventionally, property is understood as a capitalist relationship of ownership, where one subject owns an object. By shifting the focus to property as a relationship of belonging, Keenan reorients the discussion around property to a more relational understanding. While Moreton-Robinson shows in her book how "patriarchal white sovereignty" uses law to naturalize whiteness and creates whiteness as property, Keenan shows how space becomes wrapped up in the violence of law, and regulation extends to who and what belongs in certain spaces. Similar to Moreton-Robinson, but less overtly so, Keenan addresses the normalization of whiteness and white being through her discussion around how law privileges certain claims to property (based in certain "relations of belonging") over others (7).

Overall, Keenan and Moreton-Robinson both show how understandings of property, ownership, and subject-hood are colored by the normalization of whiteness and thus unsettle our understanding of property by bringing into focus its underlying biases. Keenan takes a step further to argue for attention to the ways in which property can also be subversive. The malleability of space provides the avenue for alternative,

nonhegemonic, subversive potential.<sup>39</sup> Through deeply researched but ostensibly unconnected case studies, Keenan shows how subversive property produces a space that holds up alternative relations of belonging (93). Keenan explores Australian cases regarding state leases on Aboriginal land and lesbian asylum seekers to the United Kingdom. At first glance, these seem unconnected, but Keenan successfully demonstrates that indeed both these case studies are about spaces of belonging. In the first case, Keenan illustrates how issues with the mandatory multi-year land leases on Aboriginal land were not about property as a bundle of rights with the ability to exclude. Rather these issues were about “property as space” as “held up” by the Australian Aboriginal relations of belonging in the face of continued attempts by the Australian government to normalize property as conventionally understood in the white world. Keenan demonstrates how property, when understood as “relations of belonging,” can “unsettle hegemonic power relations” and reorient them toward “a future that is not linearly linked to the past” (7). As a rethinking of capitalist notions of property, Keenan’s intervention builds on postcolonial feminist disruptions of imperialist territories of thought that continue to unfold in the present. This also parallels Lowe’s argument that liberal reason was/is interconnected with the expansion of capitalism through slavery, indenture, coercive labor, and Indigenous dispossession.

While Moreton-Robinson examines Australian security discourse and argues that the broad conceptualizations of asylum seekers and refugees as “invaders” is rooted in “white anxiety,” which takes a white historic trajectory as truth (137–152), Keenan uses Ugandan lesbian asylum seekers to demonstrate the narrow construction of countries in the global South as backward nations with monolithic political views. Further, in the case of lesbian asylum seekers to the United Kingdom, Keenan discusses how the asylum seekers must perform their sexual identity defined narrowly by the receiving state in order to get asylum. However, by focusing on their lesbian identity and fabricating space that “holds up” some “relations of belonging,” the state is in effect creating the opportunity for the “appropriation” of lesbian property by asylum seekers.

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39. Nicolas Blomley, “Book Review: Subversive Property: Law and the Production of Spaces of Belonging,” *Social & Legal Studies* 25, no. 4 (2016), 509–11.

Keenan concedes that thinking in terms of property is strategically more appropriate than thinking in terms of identity and citizenship, as it moves the “focus of analysis away from the subject and presents a fuller picture, one that encompasses the physical as well as the conceptual and social aspects of belonging” (9). Also, vis-a-vis Lowe and Abu-Lughod, this brings into view the *material* histories and present that continue to shape social categorizations of peoples (and places). This is at once an extension of postcolonial feminist engagements with the colonial present (or imperial social formation) *and* a provocation to unsettle analyses of state-citizen relations through an alternative approach to interrogating the role of capitalist logics in defining the social and political terms of inclusion and exclusion. Using the work of Chris Andersen, Andrea Smith, and Martin Nakata, Moreton-Robinson makes a similar argument, but instead focuses on shifting the focus away from “Indigenous people as objects of study” to analyzing the conditions of their existence and “knowledges that shape and produce Indigeneity” (xviii). This parallels Lowe’s use of theorists in the black anti-imperialist tradition to expand on the violence of imperialism without objectifying enslaved, colonized, or indentured subjects. Similarly, Abu-Lughod aims to decenter the *figure* of “the Muslim woman” as an objectified and homogenized victim of oppression and to engage the hegemonic discourses that produce this figure. In a sense, their concern with the tunnel vision produced by analyses of disconnected subjects drives both Keenan and Moreton-Robinson to make a move toward an almost “subjectless” analysis, wherein attention instead falls on sociological conditions, allowing for a move away from “ethnographic entrapment” toward the creation of more nuanced theory. Indeed through this move, both authors unsettle not just common definitions of property and whiteness, but also our understandings of the global South.

#### POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST DISRUPTIONS

#### AND RELATIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Imperialism continues to unfold in the contemporary historical moment, just as anti-imperial struggles continue to resist the heteropatriarchal, racist, xenophobic, classist, ableist, settler logics that underpin justifications for dominance and oppression. Yet, these dynamics of power ought

not to be overly simplified into a domination/resistance binary.<sup>40</sup> Rather, postcolonial feminist theory pushes us to disentangle these complex relations in order to better understand the inheritances of the past and to forge alternative modes of social life for the future. As Lowe suggests in her invocation of “past conditional temporality,” while the unsettling of modern liberalism may lead us to question categories such as “justice” and “equality,” unfixing the historical past also allows us to recognize that “there may be other possibilities that remain.” And this “suggests that we struggle for alternative means to realize what might be when we examine what might have been.”<sup>41</sup>

In this review, we have argued that postcolonial feminism in general, and the monographs under review in particular, offer important insights and tools for dislodging the global South from Euro-American imperialist imaginaries of both territory and political thought. We contend that unsettling the South requires not only critique of such imaginaries, but also a departure from the usual business of intellectual extraction, whereby colonized places and peoples become objectified sources of “raw data.” We suggest instead that our imperial present and the histories it calls forth might be better interrogated through analysis that positions south as a flexible and mobile marker, which draws attention to power and inequality (rather than reproducing colonial geographic hierarchies of civility or modernity). As such, southern theory must be charted not onto the colonial maps we’ve inherited, but rather through a process of countermapping that values the insights and theories that emerge from positions of struggle and marginality.

While recent discussions of the North/South divide in theory and academic knowledge do at times build on postcolonial theory and/or gesture to feminist interventions, rarely do these arguments acknowledge the ways in which many postcolonial and other critical race feminists have argued for and produced southern theory for decades. The key strengths of postcolonial feminism described in the opening of this review essay showcase how scholars and activists have employed a postcolonial feminist lens to centralize and value knowledge marginalized within the academy. Thus, in response to some of the proponents

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40. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*.

41. Lowe, “Other Humanities,” 99.

of southern theory discussed herein, we suggest that perhaps one big hurdle to the mainstreaming of southern theory is recognizing the significance of bodies of thinking such as postcolonial feminism, which are too often siloed or marginalized as knowledge that is not universal or generalizable (while critical social theory written from the “neutral” position of white, male, European liberalism maintains a universal applicability). The point is not to say that we should make postcolonial feminist theory an abstracted, placeless mode of theorizing that erases the particular to claim universality. This would of course be contrary to this mode of analysis. Rather the point is to say that postcolonial feminisms offer lessons on what it means to theorize from the South, just as they offer critical insights into the power dynamics of imperialism, racial capitalism, and nationalism, which are relevant in the contemporary global North as much as in the historical colony. Any move to value theory from the South that does not recognize and learn from postcolonial feminisms will continue the pattern of marginalizing knowledge based on categorizations of gender, race, and sexuality.