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Postcolonial Studies and the Specter of Misplaced Polemics against Postcolonial Theory: A Review of the Chibber Debate

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This field review provides a critical interpretation of Vivek Chibber's generative polemic, Postcolonial Studies and the Specter of Capitalism.[1] *Situating Chibber's work within a long history of Marxist critiques of postcolonial theory, as well as within an even longer interdisciplinary debate over method catalyzed but not caused by poststructuralist thought, this review argues that Chibber fails to articulate an adequately materialist account of capitalism in the colonial and postcolonial world. It then examines recent initiates of scholars of postcolonial studies to develop materialist methodologies in the wake of poststructuralism's disciplinary hegemony.*

Keywords: subaltern studies, Marxism, Vivek Chibber

Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* is a work of scholarly necromancy. It resurrects a horde of the dead: dead polemics, dead methodologies, even dead fields. As a work of scholarship, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* would seem as though it could be slotted into the decades-long disputes between socialist literary critics and their postcolonial studies peers. Indeed, the buzz that the book has received has perhaps been lost on many literary scholars; for postcolonial literary scholars, the book's arguments—that postcolonial theory mystifies the dynamics of capitalism; that poststructuralist anti-essentialism converts into a culturalist essentialism; that thinkers of difference are the real Orientalists—amount to a thrice-told tale. Repetition posing as rupture can be irritating enough, but stranger still is Chibber's insistence that postcolonial theory is, today, a hegemonic interdisciplinary idiom.[2] The classical critical critiques of socialist scholars such as Aijaz Ahmad, Benita Parry, and Arif Dirlik were launched when postcolonial theory

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1 Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso, 2013).

2 See, for instance, Rosie Warren, ed., "How Does the Subaltern Speak? An Interview with Vivek Chibber," in *The Debate on Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso, 2017), 27–28. I vulgarly tested postcolonial theory's imputed hegemony by doing keyword searches in flagship humanities and social sciences journals. Between 1985 and now, *The American Journal of Sociology* returns 1,311 essays that contain "capitalism" at least once, 138 hits for "postcolonial," and 41 hits for "subaltern." The *American Historical Review* returns similar results. A search through *Critical Inquiry* returns 472 hits

was the newest thing, at the moment of its disciplinary and institutional consolidation; just as importantly, these arguments were targeted at postcolonial theory as a metonym of a regnant poststructuralism.[3] One might agree or disagree with their particular claims, but it is undeniable that they entered a field of dispute with, well, actual disputants and that their position was heterodox to the period's scholarly commonsense.[4] Unsurprisingly, the two decades and change intervening between these classic, anthologized polemics and Chibber's contribution witnessed massive theoretical and institutional transformations. The project of poststructuralism has more or less collapsed, resulting in a general theoretical disorientation in the humanities. This waning of poststructuralism has correlated to the diminishing of the brand of postcolonial theory. Put bluntly, we are not as cool, hip, or trendy as we once were; other fields and subfields produce today's academic stars. Put with slightly more nuance, postcolonial critique no longer appears as *the* political horizon of left literary and cultural studies in the North American academy—and, under the rubric of the "global Anglophone," the field seems to be going through a round of enforced depoliticization and programmed identity loss. The field's crisis is so extreme that the Modern Language Association published a roundtable in 2007 entitled "The End of Postcolonial Theory?"[5] For good or ill, many prominent practitioners more or less declared it dead. And so the necromantic spunk of *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*: with the magician's indifference to reality as it is, Chibber reanimates postcolonial theory in order to really, really kill it this time.

Let me be clear from the outset: There is not much in "The Chibber Debate" that is of immediate import to scholars of postcolonial literature or cultural production.[6] Part of the reason is that, for better or worse, the subaltern studies that Chibber critiques is much different than the subaltern studies that literary scholars received and adapted through the nineties. The subaltern studies taken to task by Chibber is fundamentally identical with what he takes to be its metahistorical architecture, its narrative of how capitalism failed in its universalizing mission in colonial and postcolonial South Asia. Contrarily, the subaltern studies introduced into US literature

for "capitalism," 212 for "postcolonial," and 81 "subaltern." As I said: a vulgar test. Intuitively, though, I would expect postcolonial theory's interdisciplinary hegemony to look a little more hegemonic.

3 Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures* (Verso: London, 1992); Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998); Benita Parry, "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," *Oxford Literary Review* 9 (1987): 27–58. See also Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London: Routledge, 2004).

4 Neil Lazarus suggests that Chibber, on the other hand, seems to be writing for people who have very little familiarity with postcolonial studies (and, for that matter, poststructuralism). I agree.

5 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," *PMLA* 122.3 (2007): 633–51.

6 See Achin Vanaik, "Introduction: The Chibber Debate," in *The Debate on Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, 1. The "debate" is an edited volume in the world of Marxism, one of the more famous ones being the "Brenner Debate" over the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Chibber draws heavily on the work of Robert Brenner for his understanding of capitalism; the title of "The Chibber Debate" is at once an act of canonization and homage. See T. H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

departments by Gayatri Spivak primarily offered scholars a methodology of reading, a way of teasing through the semiosis of colonialism in the name of finding constitutive gaps, identifying lacunae, and performing semantic inversions. In attempting to detonate subaltern studies' theory of history, Chibber functionally works to obviate the hermeneutic acrobatics that non-expert humanists most likely associate with the collective. If, as Chibber argues, the subalternists' assertions of South Asia's historical difference are false, and if humans everywhere are constituted by a thin bundle of needs and interests, scholars do not need complicated interpretive strategies to understand and explain historical phenomenon. Why mobilize the subalternists' heady mixture of Gramsci, Barthes, Foucault, and (eventually) Derrida when political and social dynamics (can) only ever radiate the rule of interests and needs? The point I am building toward, and that I will unravel further in the following, is that the "Chibber debate" is not really a debate at all—and certainly not between Marxism and postcolonial theory, as it is occasionally presented. The "debate" is rather a restaging of an antinomy between nomothetic and idiographic interpretive orientations.[7] It is my impression, largely borne out by the essays included in *The Debate on Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, that fields and subfields that tend toward the former generally support Chibber; fields and subfields that tend toward the latter generally oppose his argument. Indeed, Chibber can explicitly ignore "the literary criticism" because literary critics appear more or less fated to the ideographic, to the emic, to Dilthey's *Verstehen*, to the particularity and texture of the text.[8] Any postcolonial literary scholar, as a literary scholar, is entitled to shrug off Chibber's critique as being little more than the reconsolidation of a disciplinary epistemology in a discipline that is not our own. What should literary scholars care if they share affinities with the spectral "postcolonial theory" that a sociologist conjures up to banish away? They could just ghost the debate, vanish, pretend it never happened.

I would suggest, however, that literary and cultural critics should not ignore Chibber's challenge by staying within the protective magic circle of our disciplines. Nor should postcolonialists, as a defense against his polemic, act as if everything is fine in the field. Rather, we should take Chibber's polemical resurrection of our shared "postcolonial remains" as an invitation to a new life and a life of a new kind.[9] If what Chibber wants to displace in thought is, for postcolonial literary studies, already more or less moribund in institutional practice, we might take his critical desire to negate as a description or diagnosis of the shifting political and epistemological terrain of postcolonial literary and cultural studies in the present. Chibber wants to move beyond the linguistic turn; literary and cultural studies departments are currently trying to find orientation in the wake of the poststructuralism's broken hegemony. Chibber wants us to pull intellectuals from the

7 My location of this apparent antinomy is at a greater level of abstraction—or at a lower level of epistemological foundation—than Ho-fung Hung, who suggests, "This debate is, in fact, a continuation of the long-drawn debate between the Marxists and post-structuralists, or the modernists and postmodernists." I consider this antinomy needless and only merely apparent for the simple reason that I believe both interpretive orientations are regionally valid and that both can be made to enter into a supplementary relation with the other. Ho-fung Hung, "Review Symposium on Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capitalism*," *The Debate on Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, 123.

8 Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2013), 17.

9 I am taking this phrase from Robert Young, "Postcolonial Remains," *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 19–42.

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Grand Hotel Abyss constitutive of early postcolonial theory's post-Bandung origins; the emergence of mass social movements across the globe has provided scholars across the disciplines with a concrete social referent for otherwise idealist demands that we talk about as revolution.[10] We do not need to adjudicate debates that have already been substantively displaced. Instead, I suggest that Chibber's anachronistic critique affords us the opportunity to ask: What might a post-poststructuralist, materialist postcolonial studies look like, one attuned to the resurgence of emancipatory movements across the globe?[11]

In the first part of this essay, I will work through Chibber's critique of subaltern studies. Chibber's critique, it should be noted, focuses almost exclusively on Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Although Chibber has a rationale for this reduced archive, it is striking that the merits of postcolonial theory—a formation in deep debt to anticolonial and transnational feminism and feminists—could be adjudicated solely through the work of these men. My immanent critique of Chibber's argument risks reproducing these discursive parameters. My objective, however, is not to argue for the men of subaltern studies, as much as I have learned from their work. Rather, I want to demonstrate that Chibber's argument, howsoever much it might *sound* Marxish, fails to articulate a sufficiently materialist methodology for the study of postcolonial history (much less culture). In the second part of my essay, I suggest that much recent work in the field of postcolonial literary and cultural studies attempts to do just that. Postcolonial studies is going through a materialist phase; more and more, scholars are locating particular cultural dynamics within the shifting dynamics of capitalism, providing crucial insights into the contemporary recomposition of capital and the contemporary recomposition of the wretched of the earth. It is this strand of my essay, I think, that authorizes my further contribution to an already voluminous mass of criticism on *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capitalism*. Chibber's work has been catalyzing and polarizing; it has inspired celebrations, defensive reactions, and (above all) polemics and counterpolemics. This essay is hardly free of polemic, but my hope is that it is not just polemic, nor solely defensive. Indeed, my aim is to shift the field's defensive critique of Chibber onto a path of positive construction; I aim to mark and consolidate already existent tendencies in the field. The materialist field tendencies I chart are not the only ones chartable, of course. They are, however, the tendencies cast into relief by Chibber's critique.

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10 On the importance of engagement with emergent social movements for the revitalization of postcolonial theory, see Dina Al-Kassim, "Introduction" in *Postcolonial Reason and Its Critique: Deliberations on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Thoughts*, eds. Purushottama Bilimoria and Dina Al-Kassim (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), xi.

11 My point is not, by any means, to celebrate the apparent exhaustion of poststructuralism. It is rather that the exhaustion of this paradigm creates a condition in which we might disarticulate postcolonial studies from poststructuralism—or at least decenter the latter in our broad narratives about the field. Years ago, Ania Loomba argued that abstracted, general debates that pit Marxism against post-structuralism "often reproduce . . . reductive versions of both Marxism and post-structuralism or post-modernism, and, as such, retard . . . the possibility of a more nuanced dialogue" between participants in the debate. It does not seem to me as if the situation has improved very much. Thus, my desire is to compose a field narrative for postcolonial studies in which it is not indexed to poststructuralist theory—or, indeed, to the trio of early postcolonial theorists who, in a pars pro toto kind of way, are made to stand in as postcolonial theory. Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 248.

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Chibber's critique of the Subaltern Studies Group pivots on his critique of the collective's narration of the historical political dynamics of capitalism. If one could bracket the problem of Chibber's tone—which would not be easy—one might recognize that his book thus begins with a critical concession rarely made by detractors of postcolonial studies.[12] *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* recognizes that a key strand of postcolonial theory has long been invested in developing an understanding and critique of capitalism. Chibber's book at least begins, then, a long way from rote dismissals of postcolonial theory as simply mystificatory of or functional for the political or epistemological logics of capitalism. Put in positive terms, Chibber and the subaltern studies collective share a problematic: What were the political and economic consequences of the subsumption of South Asia into capitalism via colonialism?[13]

Chibber's opening gambit in his critique of subaltern studies is to suggest that the collective could not adequately map the effects of capitalism's subsumption of South Asia because they—and in particular Guha—fundamentally misunderstand the general political and politico-economic logics of capitalism. For Chibber, Guha's misapprehension of capitalism is lodged into the interpretive frame that he develops through his recourse to a misleading comparative shorthand. Especially in *Dominance without Hegemony*, Chibber maintains, Guha contrasts the historical successes of the Indian bourgeoisie with those of the putatively radical bourgeoisies of the English and French Revolutions. William H. Sewell Jr. neatly summarizes Chibber's reading of Guha's historical framework. Where the English and French revolutionary bourgeoisies "overthrew feudalism and established liberal bourgeois states that fulfilled the universalizing drive of capitalism, both by securing the political dominance of the capitalist class and by fashioning hegemonic political orders that extended political rights to subordinate classes[,] the Indian bourgeoisie, in its would-be revolutionary moment of decolonization, gained political dominance but failed to overthrow feudal relations in the countryside" or to establish a "genuinely hegemonic political order" like the European bourgeoisies did.[14] In effect, Guha holds onto the old Marxist concept of "bourgeois revolutions," but he does so in order to show that South Asia never had one.[15] For Chibber's Guha, the collapse of India's bourgeois revolution means that capitalism only imperfectly transformed production relations in the countryside; moreover, it means that the bourgeois state-form, with its corresponding institutions and culture of rights, never fully took hold. I think it is right to say that, for Guha, the concept and figure of the subaltern emerges from out of the heterogeneous time-space generated by South Asia's partial subsumption into the political and economic logics of capitalism; put differently, the history of capitalism in the colony does not exhaust the history of rural revolt in the subcontinent. For Chibber's

12 On Chibber's tone, see Neil Lazarus, "Vivek Chibber and the Spectre of Postcolonial Theory," *Race and Class* 57.3 (2016): 89–92.

13 As Chibber puts it, "Subaltern Studies was largely seen [after the publication of its earlier volumes] as an innovation *within* Marxist theory, not as a radical departure *from* it" (7).

14 William H. Sewell, Jr., "On Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*," in *The Debate on Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, 126.

15 For the best book on the concept, see Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012).

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Guha, the subaltern bears an additional meaning: it marks the gap between European and South Asian histories. The mission of the subaltern studies collective becomes, in part, developing particular (and particularist) analytic tools so as to mark out that differential and generate South Asian histories sensitive to the region's historical particularity.

Chibber responds that Guha gets South Asian history wrong because he gets English and French history wrong. It's simple: there were no bourgeois revolutions in Europe. Through a critical overview of scholarship on the European revolutions, Chibber argues that these processes were not presided over by a bourgeoisie that achieved hegemony by incorporating subaltern classes through the extension of liberal rights that helped fuel capitalist modernization. As he relates it, the revolutions' economic impact was minimal. Far from ushering in capitalist social relations, the English Revolution at most "accelerate[d] trends that were already firmly in place"; the French Revolution, meanwhile, may have diminished the power of the nobility, but it had the effect of "strengthening . . . peasant property," not creating agrarian capitalist relations (77). In other words, the revolutions either occurred within the social context of capitalism or failed to engender capitalist social relations; in neither case did the revolutions launch a capitalist social order. Nor did the revolutions usher in democratically oriented states premised on the incorporation of subaltern classes into its fold through the extension of liberal rights. In pursuing their claims against their respective monarchies, the English and French bourgeoisies never imagined that "power [should] devolve beyond members of the ruling class," and the persistence of illiberal regimes in the revolutions' wake bears witness to this fact (65). In sum, the aim of Chibber's rejoinder to Guha's comparative history is to deny the distinction that Guha draws between the European bourgeois revolutions and the failed bourgeois revolution in India. Per Chibber, the historical dynamics of Europe (or, rather, a small part of it) and South Asia are in fact incredibly *similar*. As South Asia is revealed to be unburdened by a particular historical trajectory, historians and social theorists do not need to—and, Chibber will argue, should not—develop a particularist analytic toolkit to unpack the region's colonial and postcolonial history. "Only if the history of power in India really does depart from that of its European predecessor must we reject narratives based on the European experience," he insists (128).

For Chibber, that is pretty much the ball game. On the basis of this revisionist argument, Chibber claims that Guha's narrative of the inability of the Indian bourgeoisie to achieve hegemony—and so, for Chibber, the entire framework of subaltern studies— simply "fails." It fails because Guha's "understanding of the European experience is fatally flawed, and all his conclusions about India ride on his European counterfactual" (101). I find all of these claims remarkable. If you speak academic Marxist sectarianese, you will note that Chibber is mostly critiquing Guha for not following the creed of "political Marxism"; Guha's claims about European history depart from the narrative provided by Ellen Meiksins Wood and George Comninel. But one would be right to wonder about the extent to which Guha floats propositions about European history at all, much less relies upon them. Indeed, Chatterjee argues that an epistemologically modest Guha does not "offer any propositions of his own that might be construed as a historical sociology of bourgeois revolutions in England

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and France"; he rather critiques liberal claims made about those revolutions.[16] I largely agree with Chatterjee's counterclaim, which has the merit of showing how Chakrabarty's conceptualization of a "hyperreal Europe" was anticipated in Guha's critique of the liberal metahistory that programs social scientific epistemologies. But I am really just struck by the absurdity of a debate in which the viability of a project of South Asian historiography seems to depend on nonexperts duking it out over what really happened at Putney.

Indeed, this dispute over the history of two European revolutions and their paradigmatic status is opened in the service of an argument that is by turns trans-historical and anti-historicist. By insisting that there is no historical link among liberal rights, a rising bourgeoisie, and capitalism, and by further arguing that it was the laboring classes and not the bourgeoisie clamoring for a regime of liberal rights, Chibber's aim is to decontaminate what he calls "Enlightenment ideals" and "Enlightenment universalism" of critical suspicion by urging that they were never contaminated in the first place. Capitalism, he stresses, does not require nor ineluctably install Enlightenment ideals, as liberal right, in the polities it incorporates; such rights are won by laboring classes acting together on the basis of common interests. Where, per Chibber, subaltern studies' historical narrative of Indian capitalism led the collective to bracket an analytics of rights and interests because capitalism abandoned its "universalizing mission," Chibber's disarticulation of Enlightenment universalism from capitalism means that the former retains an analytic and political force regardless of capitalism's universalization—which for Chibber was successful anyhow. The second half of Chibber's book correspondingly shifts from the idiom of the historiographic to that of the philosophical-anthropological. Against Chatterjee's and Chakrabarty's attempts to understand worker politics in ways irreducible to analytic categories derived from those putatively coming from the Enlightenment, Chibber argues that subalterns' actions, however seemingly mediated by cultures and values foreign to the Enlightenment, are ultimately legible as rational responses to needs-based interests; moreover, he insists that the chain of rationality linking need to interest to action will ultimately be translatable across cultures and languages because this rationality is universal. One could construct, Chibber suggests, a "universal history" of "the political struggles of laboring classes in East and West" on the basis of a "single objective need": "the simple need for physical well-being" (197). Culture doesn't matter; spirit is a bone.

If cultural mediation does not matter because humans qua humans are universally endowed with a rationality with which they attempt to secure their "physical well-being," culture is further nugatory because capitalism, the world's primary destructor of that well-being, operates in indifference to culture. Chibber argues that capitalism does not universalize "a particular normative order"; in particular, capitalism does not generalize an order of bourgeois or liberal right (100). Rather, "[c]apitalism universalizes market dependence," which he also glosses as "a particular strategy of economic reproduction" premised on individual capitals' quests for expanded profitability (100, 111). Chibber draws this definition of capitalism from the work of Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood, and he uses it to delaminate the analytic category of

16 Partha Chatterjee, "Subaltern Studies and *Capital*," in *The Debate on Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, 31.

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capitalism from the historically concrete ways in which capitalism organizes the social. For Chibber, someone like Chakrabarty takes jute mill workers burning incense on their machines or the importance of interpersonal, violent coercion to organizing colonial labor as indicating the persistence of non-capitalist logics within the world of capital. Chakrabarty's interests in such phenomena are, of course, well pedigreed in the history of Marxism; getting a grip on the persistence of the seemingly archaic into the modern has been a staple of Marxist social and cultural inquiry since Marx. Marx himself gives us the analytics of "formal" and "real subsumption"; he prefigures Trotsky's articulation of "combined and uneven development" in his writings on the Russian post-emancipation agrarian commune. Lenin on agrarian capitalism, Luxemburg on imperialism, Mariátegui on the ayllu, Rodney on underdevelopment, the New World Group on the plantation . . . the bibliography of Marxist and near-Marxist work on capitalism's relation to the non-capitalist social forms it encounters, conscripts, or creates in the process of its reproduction would be staggeringly long.[17] But Chibber is less interested in understanding how capitalism works in a concrete case —after all, his argument is largely interpretive, without new empirics—and more interested in asserting that the concept of capitalism, as market dependence, is superordinate to any of the diverse or diversifying modes in which it locally installs itself. If there is market dependence, there is capitalism. The rest is just details.

Chibber describes this radical decomplexification of the social in positive terms through the articulation of two universals: that of labor and that of capital. People need to eat, they strive to secure their well-being; meanwhile, capitalism universalizes market dependency such that people need to work to satisfy their needs, even as that work is exploitative. As Sewell suggests, this critical package functions within Chibber's argument as "a solvent or a deflator"; armed with his two universals, Chibber wants to minimize and then efface subaltern studies' claims regarding the different historical dynamics of capitalism in Europe and South Asia.[18] Indeed, I would suggest that this solvent is so strong that particularity itself is liquidated in the process. On the one hand, the universalism of labor takes human subjectivity as an anthropological constant; Chibber both assumes and asserts some "universal facts about human psychology" as a means of refusing the particularist hermeneutics of collective action developed by Guha, Chatterjee, and Chakrabarty (285). Human action shifts from variable to constant; strikingly, Chibber pushes a kind of rational choice theory, more derivable from neoclassical economics than his vague notion of "the Enlightenment," in the service of anti-capitalist critique.[19] This procedure of converting variables to constants is paralleled with a twist in Chibber's take on capitalism. Chibber confuses capitalism's globalizing tendency (which is a reasonable Marxist presupposition) with capitalism's success at universalizing itself (which is not). Capitalism's generation, reproduction, and extension occurred and occurs across an obdurate, institutionally diverse social time-space. Market dependence is not engendered all at once, *especially* if the polity in question is filled with small-holders and peasants with independent access

17 For a ranging compendium of various ways Marxist thinkers in the global south have theorized historical unevenness, see Harry Harootunian, *Marx After Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

18 Sewell, "On Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*," 129.

19 Sewell, "On Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*," 129.

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to subsistence or the means of production. In many ways, subaltern studies—by which term I include the volumes of inventive historiographical labor done by the collective, not just the three important men singled out—is an exploration of peasant resistance to the bumpy, conflictual intensification of market dependence in the colony and post-colony. That is to say, then, that the actual practice of subaltern historiography does not seem to depart very much from what Chibber desires, minus the facts that (a) the collective examines the implantation of capitalist economic logics over time, which necessarily entails capitalism's negotiation with particular non-capitalist institutions and formations and that (b) the collective explores (and invests causal power in) the particular idioms, norms, and cultural affordances that incited and incite subaltern resistance, not taking as given the idea that "universal facts about psychology" provide a sufficient heuristic for understanding the particularities of a historical event or tendency.

The method Chibber develops against subaltern studies strikes me as profoundly non-materialist—at least if one takes one's cues from the tradition of Marxist historical materialism. Chibber is less interested in the dialectical, temporalized, and temporalizing interpenetration of the universal and the particular, the abstract, and the concrete; generally, he argues for the indifference, as well as the analytic superiority, of the former term to that of the latter. A profound philosophical idealism thus underwrites the book, even if it uses terms that, for whatever reason, we associate with a Marxist lexicon.[20] Indeed, one of my fears is that *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* will become another occasion for scholars in the field of postcolonial studies to throw Marxism away. But *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* is a book that owes little to a Marxist historical materialism; Chibber has himself noted that the book is not especially interested in maintaining fidelity to Marxist thinking.[21] What Chibber stages, rather, is something of an interdisciplinary *Methodenstreit*, the nomothetic against the idiographic. Tellingly, one could substitute the word *universal* with *law* in Chibber's account without damaging the analytic work done through the term because Chibber is interested in postulating regularities and constants in the name of building a manageable account of the social that addresses what he takes to be the primary contradictions of modernity. Historical sociology, for Chibber, would be an account of how these laws instantiate themselves, but always in ways that preserve the functional regularity of the law instantiated. Disciplinary history—and especially the mode of social microhistory—obviously tends to work much differently. This debate ultimately resolves into one over the explanatory power, and explainable objects, of each discipline.[22] Such debates can certainly be valid and generative,

20 It is routinely forgotten—especially at a moment in which we are told scholars are rediscovering capitalism and class—that discussing capitalism and class are not per force radical activities, and certainly not per force Marxist in either an epistemological or political sense.

21 Chibber, "Making Sense of Postcolonial Theory," *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, 98.

22 The back and forth between Chibber and Spivak also shows an important difference in disciplinary standards of method, argumentation, and interpretation. Spivak is frequently irritated by Chibber's assertion that one or another thinker is simply "wrong," a positivist impulse amplified by the fact that Chibber is interpreting theory, which humanists tend to relate to outside of a paradigm of falsifiability and verifiability. Chibber responds that he is theorizing for the "empirical disciplines," which presumably entails a different methodological orientation. Again, for Chibber, literary and cultural studies are not really in the picture. The problem—and the point at which the necessary epistemic generosity required

particularly *within* a discipline. (I am thinking here about the debates between formalist and substantivist economic anthropologists, which inflects the debate between James Scott and Samuel Popkin on peasant rationality. Symptomatically, Chibber dissolves this debate in a one-sentence footnote putting Scott on the side of his rational-choice antagonist [166n28].)[23] In this debate, however, it appears as if Chibber is outraged that history and anthropology aren't historical sociology.

In recoding this debate as an interdisciplinary squabble, my point is not to save Marxism from postcolonial counter-critique, nor to offer a weak "Not *all* Marxists!" disclaimer. Taking Chibber's book as a moment of failed interdisciplinarity should, I think, allow us to reject his diagnoses while holding onto his provocation and critical desire. Chibber wants a conception of postcolonial history adequate to the dynamics of capitalism; so did the subalternists; so too do I; and, as it turns out, so too do many scholars working in the field of postcolonial literary and cultural studies today.

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Marxism and postcolonial studies, the story goes, never got on well with each other. Chibber's book is one in a long tradition that derides postcolonial theory and postcolonial studies as an idealist, mystifying intellectual formation, one that prioritizes discourse over structure, one that fetishizes the "merely cultural" instead of considering the structural constraints of capitalism.[24] One general problem with this line of criticism is that it ignores the extent to which early postcolonial studies scholars themselves diagnosed and critiqued this shift, and did so in materialist ways. As Ella Shohat puts it in a classic article, "The 'post-colonial' did not emerge to fill an empty space in the language of political-cultural analysis. On the contrary, its wide adaptation during the late eighties was coincident with and dependent on the eclipse of an older paradigm, that of the 'Third World.' "[25] As Shohat expands, seconded by Anne McClintock in an equally classic essay in the same issue of *Social Text*, the paradigm of the third world collapsed because the political project it named was materially defeated by the forces of U.S. empire and global capitalism.[26] Postcolonial studies emerged from out of this conjuncture of global defeat. More recently, Neil Lazarus argues, "The decisive defeat of liberationist ideologies within western (or, increasingly, western-based) intelligentsia, including its radical elements—was fundamental to the emergent field [of postcolonial studies], whose subsequent consolidation, during the 1980s and early 1990s, might be seen, at least in part, as a function of its articulation of a complex intellectual response to" the defeat of programs of third world liberation."[27] For Lazarus, this defeatism, symptomatized by postcolonial theory's embrace of

for interdisciplinary work breaks down—is that he is allergic to those modes of study in general. This allergen is named "post-structuralism." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital," in *The Debate on Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, 72–75.

23 See James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976); Samuel L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979).

24 Judith Butler, "Merely Cultural," *New Left Review* I/227 (January–February 1998): 33–44.

25 Ella Shohat, "Notes on the 'Post-Colonial,' " *Social Text* 31/2 (1992): 100.

26 Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism,' " *Social Text* 31/2 (1992): 84–98.

27 Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 9.

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poststructuralism, rendered the field "constitutively anti-Marxist."[28] I would suggest, rather, that early postcolonial theory's querying of the unity and coherence of the subject allegorized the depressing absence of a collective subject of postcolonial liberation. One could say, as socialist critics do, that, in the absence of such a collective subject, postcolonial theory merely made itself adequate to the ideological demands of the post-Fordist empire, seeming to celebrate as it did hybridity, the apparent collapse of state/citizenship paradigms, and the exhaustion of revolutionary hope. One could say that, sure, while also acknowledging that postcolonial theory emerged with a melancholic attachment to a lost revolutionary possibility that structured its articulation and development. It tried to find something to love in a politically hopeless place. And thus the materialist kernel of early postcolonial theory: unlike idealist socialist critics, who imagine that the political desires of the critic can serve as a substitute in the absence of a liberatory political referent, postcolonial theory recognized the destruction of that referent as a world-historical event.[29]

If Chibber's polemic reads as slightly out of sync with the times, then, it is not just because postcolonial theory's place in the academy's economy of prestige has shifted, nor solely because the exhaustion of the post-structural project would seem to deprive him of a meaningful, contemporary object of critique. It reads as anachronistic, I would suggest, because the world has shifted, and with it the "problem-space," as David Scott would say, of postcolonial studies.[30] Postcolonial theory developed in the wake of and as a response to the pulverization of programs of third world liberation, within the apparent end-of-history triumph of the empire of capital. In contrast, today's postcolonial scholars are witnessing—and responding to—the general crisis of capitalism and the corresponding reemergence of liberatory social movements around the globe. Moreover, scholars of postcolonial literature and culture are developing materialist analytic frameworks that dialectically engage the globalizing logic of capital and its relation to the concrete locales it subsumes and transforms. Obviously, a massive amount of work is published under the rubric of the postcolonial, and it would be impossible to offer a comprehensive account of the specific paths that materialist postcolonial analysis is taking. Three figures stand out to me, though, as emblematic of tendencies discernible in postcolonial studies in the wake of poststructuralism: the world-system, world-ecology, and the world-poor.

For the past decade or so, scholars in the fields of world literature, comparative literature, and postcolonial literature have attempted to mobilize the resources of world-systems theory to map the relationship between global capitalism and cultural production.[31] Although some of these encounters have been less than useful—I am

28 Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, 12.

29 In his critique of postcolonial studies' reception of Frederic Jameson, for instance, Neil Lazarus urges us to "Third-worldness . . . as a regulative ideal," an ideal "born of anticolonialist and anti-imperialist struggle." In his classic critique of Jameson, Ahmad queries Jameson's use of the term "Third World" by wondering, "Has that [i.e., the Second World and its attendant "socialist and/or communist culture"] vanished from our discourse altogether, even as the name of a desire?" I am, of course, entirely in favor of intellectuals' desiring communism. I do not think that such communist desires—much less one articulated through a kind of Kantianism!—ground cultural analysis sufficiently in a Marxist epistemology. Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, 106; Ahmad, *In Theory*, 101.

30 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

31 For a good overview, see David Palumbo-Liu, Nirvana Tanoukhi, Bruce Robbins, eds., *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

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thinking of Dimock's insistence that literary history possesses a systematicity autonomous from that of the capitalist world-system—the best of these accounts consider how cultural production mediates the political-economic logic of capitalism in a global frame that nonetheless remains sensitive to local particularity.[32] To take one example, the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) has sutured Trotsky's theory of combined and uneven development to a global analysis of cultural form in order to explore how aesthetic objects mediate the heterogeneous but unified experience of capitalist development.[33] (Trotsky's theory, it should be noted, is having something of a moment in Marxist humanistic and social scientific research on imperial and postcolonial history.)[34] So far, WReC's scholarly output seems somewhat hung up on reproducing Moretti's earlier claim that the semi-peripheries of the world-system are paradoxically sites of intense formal creativity, given the fact that the semi-periphery marks a scene of intense encounter between residual, non-capitalist modes of social being and an emergent/dominant logic of capitalism.[35] At a minimum, though, and they succeed in doing much more than this minimum, they reveal (*contra* Chibber) that capitalism does possess a cultural logic, even if their work is agnostic on how culture fits into a causality of collective political action. At a much higher degree of abstraction, Pheng Cheah thinks of the relationship between world literature and world-system as a philosophical problem of the "world" concept itself. As a mode of temporalization, literature possesses a "normative force" that worlds the world in a fashion different from—and largely opposed to—that of capital.[36] For Cheah, then, literature is resistant to the capitalist world-system, but it is not reducible to it, and perhaps has (or had) some autonomy from it—a useful position from which to consider the relationship between the capitalist world-system, the European literary system, and non-European literary world-systems.[37] Other scholars, less sanguine

32 Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

33 Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

34 See, for instance, Alex Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, *West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015). The classic work on Trotsky's concept is Michael Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* (London: Verso, 1987).

35 Franco Moretti, "More Conjectures," *New Left Review* 20 (2003): 77–78. See also Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1996).

36 Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

37 Another way of putting this point is that the world in world literature—particularly when thinking of historical world literary systems—is not identical to the world of the capitalist world-system. On non-Euro-centered literary systems and their relationship to "world literature," among many others, see Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009); Muhsin al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity?" *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1.2 (2014): 265–80; Muhsin al-Musawi, "The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters as World Model," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2.2 (2015): 281–85; Francesca Orsini, "Whose Amnesia? Literary Modernity in Multilingual South Asia," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2.2 (2015): 266–72; and Michael Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature: Sites of Reading in Colonial Egypt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

about literature's ontological resistance to capitalism, have opened up new ways of thinking about literature as a commodity, literariness as an exportable ideology of creative labor, and the representational work that literary texts do on the world stage. As Sarah Brouillette has shown, transformations in UNESCO's literary programming from its foundation in the era of decolonization through the present neatly map onto and abet transformations in the structure of the world-system; today, national and international policy makers turn to culture as a resource for (uneven) capitalist development and as a mechanism of social control.[38] Following Brouillette's line of argument, we might say that we cannot simply forget culture, as Chibber invites his readers to do, because capital eagerly embraces it. Aamir Mufti, meanwhile, has developed an impressive genealogy demonstrating that "world literature" was instituted through and remains governed by Orientalism.[39] The literary world-system reflects and *reproduces* the broader world-system of which it is a part.

It is more or less impossible to consider the crisis of the world-system today without considering world-ecology. Indeed, as the social theorist Jason Moore argues, the two systems are entangled in one linked crisis.[40] Postcolonial studies took a green turn comparatively early on, and I would suggest that a green studies that does not robustly incorporate a postcolonial analytic is destined to reproduce a rather depoliticized catastrophe humanism.[41] Indeed, Chibber's strong critiques of the Chakrabarty of *Provincializing Europe* are no longer quite operative for the Chakrabarty of climate change. Chakrabarty is now interested in how ecological collapse links humanity through a negative universal of generalized vulnerability.[42] This universal is, obviously, different from the universals that animate Chibber's critique, but I think both—the negative universal of climate change, the positive universality of labor—are inadequate to thinking through an emancipatory program in the era of the Capitalocene.[43] With his anthropological prioritization of labor, Chibber is relatively uninterested in querying how capitalism's toxic effect on humans' metabolic relationship to the world requires a rethinking (and practical overthrowing) of modern and modernizing fetishizations of labor. Chakrabarty, meanwhile, seems interested in delaminating the critique of capitalism from the perspective unlocked by the fact of anthropogenic climate change. An anti-ecological liberationism, on one

38 Sarah Brouillette, "UNESCO and the World-Literary System in Crisis," *Amodern* (December 2015), http://amodern.net/article/unesco-brouillette/. See also Sarah Brouillette, "UNESCO and the Book in the Developing World," *Representations* 127 (Summer 2014): 33–54.

39 Aamir Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

40 Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).

41 See, for instance, Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on "planetarity" in *Death of a Discipline* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2003).

42 See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (Winter 2009): 197–222; Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," *New Literary History* 43.1 (Winter 2012): 1–18; Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories," *Critical Inquiry* 41.1 (Autumn 2014): 1–23.

43 On the Capitalocene, see Jason Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016).

hand, and an ecological thinking that minimizes the planetary import of emancipation from capital on the other.

As a great deal of work on postcolonial ecology has demonstrated, however, environmental harm has been a crucial catalyst for mobilizing collectivities against the rule of capital. Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* remains the stand-out work here, demonstrating both how the global north's accumulation of value registers in the south as the splayed-out attrition of ecological systems as well as the social movements, mediated by writers, that have emerged to contest this violation.[44] Against ecocriticism's privileging of the global north, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley suggest that postcolonial sovereignty was almost necessarily forged through a reckoning with environmental harm; the decolonial impulse of reclaiming the land requires processing—epistemologically or practically—the histories of ecological violence inscribed in that land.[45] It is at this point that the seemingly anti-materialist roots of poststructuralist postcolonial theory reveal a materialist opening: early postcolonial theory's decentering of the human makes it receptive to thinking with the agency, for good or ill, of the nonhuman. The literary-critical upshot of this work is that many canonical postcolonial writers are returned to us as ecological thinkers; it appears already as if a canon of green postcolonial literature is being consolidated. In a further turn of the screw, other scholars are now attempting to articulate this postcolonial ecological perspective more fulsomely to a world-systems analysis of capitalism. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, also drawing on Trotsky, argues that the "postcolonial environment" emerges through capitalism's uneven combination of production relations, consumptive practices, and cultural fields; he develops a theory of "eco-materialist aesthetics" in order to see how the ecological gets represented through this uneven space of articulation.[46] Drawing on Jason Moore, Chris Campbell and Michael Niblett argue: "Instead of seeking to identify the political-economic *dimension* of environmental issues or the environmental *dimension* of political economy, it is necessary to grasp historical systems such as capitalism *as* ecological projects."[47] Thus, "world literature must equally be understood as the literature of the capitalist world-ecology."[48]

Chibber's universalism of labor is not suspect simply because it is insensitive to the transformation of humanity's metabolic relation with the earth. It equally ignores the world-systemic fact that less and less does market-dependent labor integrate humanity into a global society structured in dominance. Mike Davis and Michael Denning have demonstrated that an increasing mass of humanity, primarily located in

44 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

45 Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, "Introduction: Toward an Aesthetics of the Earth," *Postcolonial Ecologies Literatures of the Environment*, eds. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4. See also Sonya Postmentier, *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

46 Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English* (London, England: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010): 59–81.

47 Chris Campbell and Michael Niblett, "Critical Environments: World-Ecology, World Literature, and the Caribbean," *The Caribbean: Aesthetics, World-Ecology, Politics*, eds. Chris Campbell and Michael Niblett (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 3; italics in original.

48 Campbell and Niblett, "Critical Environments," 8.

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the former colonial and semi-colonial world, is being thrown out of the circuits of capitalist valorization as absolutely disposable life.[49] By virtue of its field history, postcolonial studies possesses a critical affinity for these populations; after all, "subaltern" was one old name for subjects cut off from participation in capitalist circuits of value but still subject to the disciplinary and distribution schema of capitalist property relations. To think across varied figures of disposable life—climate refugees, asylum seekers, slum dwellers, Dalits, the indigenous, and so on—is not to refrain from a materialist critique of capitalism. Rather, thinking with these figures demonstrates how a labor-centered hermeneutic risks mystifying the systemic crisis of the capitalist world-ecology, which can decreasingly absorb the global mass of possible labor available to it even as it continues to subject populations and states to its power.[50] Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Nielson's *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, for instance, returns us to postcolonial theory's early fascination with the figure of the migrant in order to map out postcolonial capitalism's recomposition of labor.[51] The editors of the fine volume *Reworking Postcolonialism*, meanwhile, have compiled an impressive dossier of essays focusing on "non-normative labour categories"; these essays importantly attend to the ways in which race, caste, and gender materially shape the distribution of work (and imposed non-work).[52] Indeed, the analytic categories that some socialist critics consider merely identitarian are being revealed—as they have been since at least Stuart Hall—as objective, material mechanisms in the fashioning and refashioning of the world.[53] For me, the research question for postcolonial studies today is: What happens to processes of racialization and gendering in a context where capitalism isn't so much expanding (as the rubric of "globalization" led us to think) but is rather managing a crisis of stagnation on a world scale?

There is so much more work that could be cited. Indeed, the work that I have cited largely addresses itself to the literature, culture, and history of the properly "postcolonial" period of history; I have more or less entirely left out the growing body of colonial, imperial, and interimperial scholarship on the nineteenth-century and back that inclines toward a historical materialist methodology. But that just underscores my point: there is a wealth of work in the broad field of postcolonial studies right now that cannot be situated in the polemic-ridden map of "Marxism versus

49 Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2007); Michael Denning, "Wageless Life," *New Left Review* 66 (2010): 79–97.

50 For a neat reading of these dynamics, see Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.* (London: Verso, 2016). Clover's book is largely centered on the global north, but I believe it has important implications for figurations (and disfigurations) of labor in the postcolonial world.

51 Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Nielson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013). On the figure of the contemporary refugee, see Angela Naimou, ed., "Dossier on Contemporary Refugee Timespaces," *Humanity* 8.3 (2017).

52 Pavan Kumar Malreddy, "Introduction" in *Reworking Postcolonialism Globalization, Labour and Rights*, eds. Pavan Kumar Malreddy, Birte Heidemann, Ole Birk Laursen, and Janet Wilson (Houndmills, Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 9. For another good take on disposability, globalization, and the postcolony, see Neferti X. M. Tadiar, *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

53 See, for instance, Ikyo Day's work on the interplay among settler colonialism, Asian racialization, and "alien capital" in *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

poststructuralism" without doing violence to that work. The conditions that sustained such a binary—as well as adjacent binaries of universal/particular, structure/identity, totality/fragment, and so on—no longer obtain in quite the same way. Let the dead bury the dead: the incessant re-litigation of this issue serves only to obscure the vibrant solid work being done by non-celebrity scholars. The nineties were a long time ago. The field has moved. I urge its detractors to move with it. At the very least, scholars in the field could shift our field narratives to better account for what it is that we are currently doing. Postcolonial studies has never been identical with the historicizable body of work canonized as "postcolonial theory." Recognizing this fact is not an invitation to an anti-theoreticism; it is rather a request that we think with the modes of theorization and objects being theorized in scholarship produced today.

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