



Conceptualising Decolonisation: A Reflexive Essay from Portuguese Africa

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Abstract

In this article, I first address more general writings on decolonisation as simultaneously an anti-imperialist movement and a human rights emancipatory ideology, before mapping how to go about studying this elusive subject and object. Next, I suggest a series of interventions in this expanding area of scholarship by way of a reflexive practice: I discuss alternative ways to write about decolonisation as both a historical *event* and an ethnographic *moment*; attend to the experience of the transfer of state power at the end of colonialism; and focus on decolonisation as involving the mobility of people, ideas and things. Lastly, I provide an overview of what I label 'textual and visual landscapes of decolonisation' from the location of Portuguese Africa based on my own research and writing (Gupta 2019), before suggesting the contours of a future critical decolonisation studies.

Keywords: Decolonisation, Mozambique, Portuguese Africa, Goa, Postcolonial Studies, India, southern Africa, Ricardo Rangel

Résumé

Dans cet article, j'examine tout d'abord les travaux généraux sur la décolonisation en tant que mouvement à la fois anti-impérialiste et idéologie émancipatrice fondée sur les droits humains, avant de proposer une cartographie des approches permettant d'étudier ce sujet et objet insaisissable. Ensuite, à travers une démarche réflexive, je propose une série de pistes de réflexion visant à enrichir ce champ d'études en pleine expansion : j'explore différentes manières d'écrire sur la décolonisation, à la fois comme *événement* historique et comme *moment* ethnographique ; je m'intéresse à l'expérience du transfert du pouvoir étatique à la fin du colonialisme ; et j'aborde la décolonisation comme un processus impliquant la mobilité des personnes, des

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idées et des objets. Enfin, je présente une vue d'ensemble de ce que j'appelle les « paysages textuels et visuels de la décolonisation » à partir du contexte de l'Afrique portugaise, en m'appuyant sur mes propres recherches et écrits (Gupta 2019), avant de suggérer les contours de futurs travaux critiques sur la décolonisation.

Mots-clés : décolonisation, Mozambique, Afrique portugaise, Goa, études postcoloniales, Inde, Afrique australe, Ricardo Rangel

Prelude

At the 2015 WiSER book launch of his first African edition of *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe asked the telling question: 'Has decolonisation pushed [studies of] postcolonialism out?'¹ I start with Mbembe's provocation, in light of the 2015 'Fallist' movements,² and exactly ten years later, as a way to suggest that scholars located in South Africa and the larger Global South, at a moment of continuing uncertainties about the role of higher education, are rethinking how we go about decolonising and thus transforming certain spaces, not only those of the university. Did we perhaps jump too quickly into the global condition of postcoloniality and, along the way, somehow sidestep the complex processes of decolonisation that needed to take place prior to this shift? Perhaps we need to take up Mbembe's sustained critique, and dwell, or rather spend some time in this interim place, and perhaps there is an urgency to do so as we increasingly distance ourselves from these historical configurations that were anything but homogenous. This reflexive essay is one such attempt.

Introduction

Nearly twenty years ago, after my relocation to Johannesburg from New York City, a South African friend recounted to me his travels through Mozambique on a motorbike in the early 1990s. One of the stories that made an impression on him came from a Mozambican he befriended along the way, who, in a passing comment, pointed to the Portuguese colonial legacy of poor plumbing in Mozambique. When pressed further, he informed my South African friend that many White Portuguese settlers, upon leaving Maputo in 1975 in the aftermath of Mozambican independence, poured concrete down their toilets, almost as a last colonial act, to ensure that they could never be used again, certainly not by their Mozambican counterparts. At the time, I found the story deeply disturbing yet fascinating, for it showcased many of the aspects of decolonisation that I was beginning to conceptualise: that with the end of colonialism comes

optimism, frustration, and uncertainty simultaneously; how personal things can be read to understand colonialism as an individual form of possession and its fallout of decolonisation as one of dispossession; the stakes involved for those departing and the resentments they carry when forced to leave a place called home; the shifting moral landscape that comes with decolonisation and an inability to articulate colonial loss for some; and finally, a focus on who and what remains, less as a form of failure or ruin, but of potentiality instead.

Thus, I recount this traveller's tale to suggest some of my broader interests and investments in connecting India and southern Africa, historically and ethnographically, via the Indian Ocean, through the analytic of 'decolonisation' and the category of experience. By locating its politics in the personal, in everyday moments and individual and collective acts, this vignette also illuminates certain aspects of decolonisation that have yet to be researched and that, in some sense, point to its unresolved qualities (of messiness, trauma, loss and resilience) that are part of postcoloniality itself.

In the discussion that follows, I will suggest that it is these kinds of analytic entry points accompanied by rich ethnographic details that have the potential to shed light on the long-term consequences of decolonisation. Specifically, I approach decolonisation as both a historical *event* and an ethnographic *moment*; attend to the experience(s) of the transfer of state power; and focus on decolonisation as involving the mobility of people, ideas and things. By way of organisation, I first address more general writings on and about decolonisation before making an intervention in this area of scholarship through my own recent writings. Lastly, I provide a brief overview of what I have labelled 'textual and visual landscapes of decolonisation' from Portuguese Africa, which I addressed in my book *Portuguese Decolonization in the Indian Ocean World: History and Ethnography* (2019). This essay works by way of layered forms of reflexivity – on the category of decolonisation itself; on past research and writings by a range of decolonisation experts; on the problems and promises of adopting a critical lens towards decolonisation studies; and, finally, on a move towards suggesting the contours of a future African decolonised landscape.

Studying Decolonisation

Prasenjit Duara begins his 2004 edited volume, fittingly entitled *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*, with a critical caveat: 'from a historian's perspective, decolonization was one of the most important political developments of the twentieth century because it turned the world

into a stage of history' (Duara 2004: 1). He continues, stating that 'there are remarkably few historical studies of decolonisation as a whole, despite the importance of the subject' (2004: 1). His twofold reminder is an excellent starting point for suggesting that European decolonisation was, firstly, about an institutional and legal transfer of power from a colonial power to a newly independent nation-state. He writes:

Decolonization refers to the process whereby colonial powers transferred institutional and legal control over their territories and dependencies to indigenously based, formally sovereign, nation-states. The political search for independence often began during the inter-war years and fructified within fifteen years of the end of World War II in 1945 (Duara 2004: 2).

Yet as the lessons of history have proven, decolonisation was far from being a smooth transition; rather there were difficulties built into this widespread 'process' that took place largely in the aftermath of the Second World War, and that have begun to be raised as a critical area of enquiry over the last twenty years. It is these difficulties that I explore in my book in relation to decolonisation processes in Portuguese India and southern Africa. Linking India and Africa through decolonisation itself is a crucial move that complicates our often unilinear, one-nation perspective on decolonisation.

It is also important to recognise, following Duara's critical interventions in this burgeoning area of studies, that 'decolonization represented not only the transference of legal sovereignty, but a movement for moral justice and political solidarity against imperialism. It thus refers both to the anti-imperialist political movement and to an emancipatory ideology which sought or claimed to liberate the nation and humanity itself' (2004: 2). Duara's last point is an important one, for decolonisation has the potential to signify two different aspects of this process, one material and one ideological, that are often difficult to disentangle from one another. This is a point to which I shall return.

Humanitarian discourses of decolonisation emerged in the foundational writings of figures such as Frantz Fanon, who was fighting (and furiously writing) against French colonialism in Algeria in 1961, and Amílcar Cabral, who was doing much the same against Portuguese colonialists in Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau throughout the 1960s. It was Fanon who famously wrote in his essay 'Algeria unveiled': 'colonialism must accept the fact that things happen without its control, without its direction' (Fanon 1965: 63). And it was Cabral who wrote in 1969: 'The Africans of the Portuguese colonies will destroy Portuguese colonialism. It may be the last colonial regime to go, just as it is the last in terms of technical and economic development, and the last to respect the Rights of Man. But its days are surely numbered'

(Cabral 2007: 65). I mention Fanon and Cabral here because they are two well-known political figures among many who have raised the issue of the profound psychological effects of colonialism, and who endure as philosophical figures and writers who are integral to decolonisation studies.

Most students of colonial history and historiography, including myself, grew up reading Kenyan novelist and theorist Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o famously titled and damning critique of colonialism's effect on language, *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), a treatise very much influenced by the writings of Fanon and, in particular, his book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). Here I return to Duara's earlier comments concerning decolonisation's doubling effect as a movement and ideology that in some sense continues to make it a slippery and unsettling subject of study. Yet it also makes it a compelling topic; the fact that these threads are so deeply intertwined suggests that there is so much more about the material and ideological complexities faced at the end of empire that need to be considered more carefully.

Writing about Decolonisation

Very briefly then in this next section, I want to outline some of my thoughts in treating decolonisation as a subject and object of analysis. More generally, the critical project of postcolonial studies has been one of 'deconstructing Master narratives, unsettling binaries and admitting marginalized knowledges' (Jacobs 1996: 29). These works have looked to the strengths and vulnerabilities of colonialism and its attendant colonial subjectivities; the political and economic enduring effects of colonialism as a postcolonial condition; the continued cultural links between metropole and colony in the aftermath of empire; and finally, the difficulty of giving voice to those silenced by colonialism itself (Chatterjee 1993; Cooper and Stoler 1997; Chakravarty 2000; Dirks 2001). Interestingly, or perhaps paradoxically, many of these studies focused on the postcolonial condition have tended to overlook the crucial link, or rather historical step, the one that transformed colonies into independent nation-states: that is, the physical act of decolonisation itself. Instead, European 'decolonisation' has been rendered an undifferentiated act that occurred in almost the same way in various parts of the world, largely in the aftermath of the Second World War. Its cultural distinctiveness in particular contexts has been largely negated in favour of studying the more sweeping experience of postcolonialism as an enduring political and historical condition, one focused (and rightly so, in many ways) on the story of the colonised triumphantly taking over, as an enduring political condition, but one that steps or jumps over or brushes aside the specific experience of a place's decolonisation.

Postcolonial critic Jane Jacobs also attests to the difficulty of writing about decolonisation. She argues, quite persuasively, that decolonisation is the 'least meaningful signifier of what might be thought of as postcoloniality' (1996: 22). It is a premise I have written about elsewhere, suggesting that the concept of 'decolonisation' has been poorly understood, let alone recorded, historicised or theorised (Gupta 2007); it has often been viewed as an unproblematic given, an insignificant signifier in the transition from colony to post-colony. As Achille Mbembe argues, it was a foundational moment that was not only based on an ideal of 'universal human emancipation' (2010) but also fundamentally reshaped peoples and states of the West and, I would argue, in relation to and in the Global South itself. I suggest that it is only in the more recent past, as we increasingly distance ourselves from certain decolonisation events and moments, and with the understanding of decolonisation as a globalised practice underwriting its own history and historiography, that it has become a possible dedicated topic of research. Thus, I am invested in looking closely at decolonisation at multiple entangled levels: how it has been recorded, archived, historicised, theorised and experienced, and finally, as conditioning postcoloniality itself. I also want to make the case that postcolonial studies, as an area of enquiry, needs to consider certain enduring affective qualities not often associated with decolonisation.

Historian Raymond Betts points out in his book *Decolonization* (1998) – now considered a classic in decolonisation studies – that the word 'decolonisation' only entered the lexicon during the 1930s but did not attain popularity until thirty years later, that is, only when the concept had been put into practice. Betts also points to the difficulty of conceptualising 'decolonisation'. He writes:

It is an awkward and inelegant word, therefore, in a way, appropriate to the subject it attempts to describe. Unlike the phrase 'end of empire' which has a certain poetic economy suggesting a grand and sweeping occurrence, 'decolonization' is work-a-day, rather like other 'de' prefixed words that denote cleansing changes (Betts 1998: 1).

Furthermore, Betts rightly points out that,

Decolonization was not a process but a clutch of fitful activities and events, played out in conference rooms, acted out in protests mounted in city streets, fought over in jungles and mountains. Its results pleased no one. It was too hastily done for some, too slowly carried out for others, too incomplete in effect for most. The subject is historically loose ended; there is no end to discussion of it (Betts 1998: 2).

Writing about decolonisation as a political and material reality suggests that it was messy and complicated, occurring in a wide variety of legal settings throughout the world at very different moments in time, and with very real consequences, and that dramatically altered the livelihoods of all those involved, not only those directly in the service of the colonial state. In other words, things changed dramatically, in both good and bad ways, and overnight. We need to interrogate not only the universality of the event of decolonisation, but also look to its particularities, as a moment of closure and possibility at the same time, and in relation to specific historical and cultural contexts. Yet there are still obstacles in doing so, as historian Fred Cooper rightly points out, for tracing distinct patterns of decolonisation due to the teleology of the subject matter. He writes:

Patterns of decolonization are particularly difficult to unravel because we know the end point: the emergence of the independent state from colonial rule. It is tempting to read the history of the period from 1945 to 1960 [1975 in this case] as the inevitable triumph of nationalism and to see in each social movement taking place within a colony – be it by peasants, by women, by workers, or by religious groups – another piece to be integrated into the coming together of the nation. What is lost in such a reading are the ways in which different groups within colonies mobilized for concrete ends and used as well as opposed the institutions of the colonial state and the niches opened up in the clash of new and old structures. Whether such efforts fed into the attempts of nationalist parties to build anti-colonial coalitions needs to be *investigated, not assumed* (1997: 406, my emphasis).

Thus, rather than assume that certain coalitions between old and new took place in the space opened up by the end of colonialism, we must examine each case carefully for what these alliances and networks looked like on the ground, even those communities caught in between, like the minority groups I write about in my book that were left out of Mozambique's nationalist story of colonial independence. The work of postcolonial studies more generally – including Betts on delineating the genealogy of the term decolonisation itself, and Cooper for suggesting that we must first unravel its deeply imbedded teleologies – have contributed the foundational blocks for excavating and writing intricate histories of decolonisation.

Anthropologising Decolonisation

In this section, I turn to an exciting set of studies that have expanded the corpus of critical decolonisation studies by approaching decolonisation as both an historical event and anthropological moment, with multiple enduring effects and affects. For the case of India, anthropologist Veena

Das has traced the violence that ensued with Partition after the British quit India in 1947. She writes: 'decolonization in South Asia was accompanied by the creation of artificial states, and these were accompanied by unprecedented collective violence. The communal riots during Partition have, in this sense, been called the birthmark of the new nations of India and Pakistan' (Das 1997: 58). She identifies Partition as a 'critical event' in India's history, a space in time where the individual and the collective must be equally considered, and that cannot be overlooked as anything but integral to the shift from colony to something post through a process of decolonisation. She also shows through fine-tuned ethnographic work and a focus on the personal voices of pain that India's aftermath very much still carries residues of this violence in the everyday. Lastly, Das provides a productive anthropological framework for studying decolonisation. She writes, 'the essays in this book have a double location. They identify certain critical moments in the history of contemporary India and then redescribe them within the framework of anthropological knowledge. In the process, it is not so much that new anthropological objects are created as that *old* concepts, being asked to inhabit unfamiliar spaces, acquire a *new* kind of life' (Das 1997: 1, my emphasis). This is exactly how I approach the term decolonisation itself.

Additional writings focused on understanding decolonisation at the level of political transition have looked to the Bandung Conference of 1955, held in Bandung, Indonesia, as a moment of heightened Afro-Asian solidarity amid colonial independence. This remarkable event saw representatives of twenty-five new nations of Asia and Africa come together, fifty years after the Russo-Japanese War. Key players included China, India and Indonesia. Prasenjit Duara, whom I cited earlier, writes that this conference 'aimed to express solidarity against imperialism and racism and promote economic and cultural cooperation among these nations' (2004: 3). It gave way to the beginnings of the Non-Alignment Movement in 1961, a wider Third World force in which nations avowed their distance from both the United States and the Soviet Union during the height of the Cold War. Even as it was a failed movement in some sense, the idea of the 'Bandung spirit' endures.

Historian Christopher Lee has put together an important collection of essays written by a range of scholars on Bandung and its 'political afterlives' as he calls them, in his book entitled *Making a World After Empire* (2010). He presents Bandung as a 'historical moment and site generative of intersecting vantage points and their storied outcomes' (2010: 3). His understanding of Bandung and decolonisation studies as generative of something else, forges

a new direction within this area of study as well. Lee argues that even as decolonisation continues to ‘present a problem of narrative and analysis’, it is best approached as a ‘situated process’. It is one that:

requires attention to local case studies as well as broader patterns of event and meaning across space and time. Rather than signaling a linear diplomatic transfer of power from colonial to postcolonial status, decolonization equally constitutes a complex dialectical intersection of competing views and claims over colonial pasts, transitional presents, and inchoate futures (Lee 2010: 7–8).

Lee aptly suggests that revisiting moments of decolonisation ‘present[s] an opportunity for recapturing the sense of optimism, frustration, and uncertainty that characterised such occasions’ (2010: 8). His focus on the emotive or affective aspects of decolonisation is a critical area of decolonisation studies that warrants more careful analysis. Decolonisation studies, as an area of critical enquiry, is greatly indebted to, and builds on, the careful scholarship of anthropologists like Veena Das, who brings ethnography to bear on past moments of violence that were very much part of the story of India’s decolonisation. The work of historian Christopher Lee has also been crucial for developing new approaches to the study of decolonisation. The example of the Bandung moment and its ‘afterlives’ raises the issue of Afro-Asian solidarity, which is also very much part of the story of Lusophone decolonisation.

Next, I would like to outline the approach I take in my book entitled *Portuguese Decolonization in the Indian Ocean World: History and Ethnography* (Bloomsbury 2019). Once again, and following in the footsteps of the works of Das and Lee, I approach decolonisation as both an historical event, and as a series of mutually constituting ethnographic moments that are distinctive to time and place. I also carefully locate the politics of decolonisation in the personal and everyday, and as a way forward for connecting the histories of Lusophone India and Africa. I became invested in exploring the ties that bind metropole and colony together in uncomfortable, unsettling, and unexpected ways during colonialism’s dismantling. It is those shifts – material and ideological – which transformed colonies into something ‘post’ that are relevant here. Thus, my emphasis was less on studying decolonisation at the macro level of political transition that Das and Lee write about. Instead, I focused on its more understudied underbelly, as a deeply material and intimate act in which certain individuals had to interpellate larger state processes at a more personalised level. Such a nuanced perspective, I argue, can help us understand the multiple and sometimes contradictory experiences of

decolonisation, particularly from those who experienced it first-hand. In addition, this same approach suggests that we look at decolonisation as simultaneously a struggle over ownership and self-hood in a period of dramatic transition; that is, decolonisation was a process by which people and things increasingly started to stand in for each other, as individuals experienced profound personal loss, with the fear of starting over looming ahead.

My intention has also been to focus on the often-overlooked crucial link, or rather historical step, the one that transformed colonies into postcolonies: the physical act of decolonisation itself, which is telling, given that the 'de' in decolonisation denotes a removal of sorts. I emphasise the daunting task and sheer physicality of decolonisation in moving people and things across oceans and territories in a very heightened and rapid manner, and which, I argue, has not been addressed in most writings on decolonisation. Finally, I make a clear case in my book for suggesting that we need to look at the manner of decolonisation in context – its conditions of possibility – as fundamentally shaping the postcolonial contours of a specific place.

Textual and Visual Landscapes of Decolonisation from Portuguese Africa

There is a photograph by Ricardo Rangel, Mozambique's most illustrious photo-journalist, that reveals a most remarkable moment in history – it is the day of 19 December 1961 when people living in Lourenço Marques (present day Maputo) read the public decree announcing the quiet end of Portuguese colonialism in Goa (India) after 450 years of rule. The fact that Mozambique was also a Portuguese colony at the time the photograph was taken is not lost, neither on the viewer of the image nor the reader of the decree. It is this same powerful photograph that graces the cover of my book (2019) and was the impetus for my conceptualisation of decolonisation; from the first moment I saw the photograph, I knew I wanted to write about and through it.

I asked myself what was going on in the minds of this group of Mozambicans as they learned of Goa's demise and its integration into a burgeoning Indian nation-state, only fourteen years after its own independence from British colonial rule? How much did this moment make them think ahead to anticipate Mozambique's decolonisation? It is the representational details suggested in Rangel's image that were intriguing, and that opened up the possibility of thinking and writing about decolonisation from a different vantage point.

For my book, I became interested in reading the medium of photography (and Ricardo Rangel's images, specifically) in ethnographic and creative ways. I moved away from them as forms of evidence or historical truth claims, choosing rather to enter inside their frames to 'open a wider lens onto the world' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011) and as sites where history and anthropology are played out (Edwards 2012). As Elizabeth Edwards argues 'photography can communicate about culture, people's lives, experiences and beliefs, not at the level of surface description but as visual metaphor' (Edwards 1999: 58). I harness photography's ambivalences and 'incisive possibilities' (Edwards 1999: 54) that is, the medium's 'potential to question, to arouse curiosity, tell in different voices or see in different eyes' (Edwards 1999: 54).

I was equally invested in positioning Rangel as a historical figure working in certain spaces and places, and under restricted political conditions (where access or privilege was sometimes granted, at other times denied by colonial censors). I was very much attuned to the fact that he brought his ethnographic sensibilities to bear on the events and moments he chose to act upon, and the photographs he produced. My conversation with and impressions of Ricardo Rangel began in April 2008 when I first met him at the *Centro de Documentação e Formação Fotográfica* in Maputo, and have played a pivotal role ever since. Writing about Rangel's photography, visual historian Patricia Hayes writes: 'In the sense of the term aesthetic as a state of feeling, then it is not simply the boundaries of the sayable and visible that are being stretched by Rangel, but the boundaries of affect' (2009: 10). Her description is a powerful one that confirms the sense of urgency required in viewing decolonisation through an ethnographic lens, given the rapidity with which we are further distanced from these disquieting moments in history, with all their unanticipated effects and affects for those living through very distinct processes of decolonisation.

What follows is the five interconnected ways in which I set up my study of decolonisation. In the shift from colony to postcolony, the story of how a place becomes an independent nation-state, as it undergoes a distinct process of decolonisation, is often overlooked, misunderstood, or sidestepped. Here I am invested in dwelling (for quite some time) in this interim to return to Mbembe's provocation with which I started my reflexive essay, in the awkward and cramped space that lies between the fine line of (the end of) colonialism and its something post.

I first approached the study of decolonisation in the case of Portuguese Africa through a combined historical and anthropological lens, drawing on different eyewitness accounts (written, oral and visual) of the transfer of

state power. It is a way of trying to engage the state and state processes ethnographically following the innovative work of Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat (2001). And for some of the Catholic Goan Indians living in Mozambique that I wrote about in my book, and who were caught up in these monumental changes, it was a double process of decolonisation, first for Goa in 1961 and then for Mozambique in 1975.³ Here I understand decolonisation as not a smooth political transition but rather one that was messy and complicated for those in colonial power, those disavowed of it, and those who were caught in between. I also argue that the manner of a place's decolonisation – that is, its very conditions of possibility – shape the contours of its postcolonial landscape. Precisely because Portuguese Goa was forcefully integrated into a larger Indian independent nation-state that was formerly a British colony, is what foresaw the movement of so many Goans to East Africa in search of continuing a certain way of being in the world. That Portuguese Mozambique had been ruled indirectly from Goa up until the mid-eighteenth century is also part of this story. It is due to these multiple factors that the cases of Goa and Mozambique (India and Africa) are historically and ethnographically enmeshed.

Secondly, I became interested in focusing on the materiality of decolonisation as a physical act that involves the mass movement of people, ideas and things across vast oceanic spaces within a shortened, scheduled time frame (for both Mozambique and Angola, it was over six months in 1975). In addition, it required deploying ships, caravans, cars, planes, troops, and crates. In the case of Mozambique, some 450,000 White Portuguese were given six months to depart their former colonial homes for the metropole, where they would be labelled *retornados* and treated as second-class citizens. Some 70,000-odd Portuguese soldiers were also conscripted to help get them out. It is here that colonialism reveals how much it was, in fact, a history of possession, with decolonisation showing its fallout, as a painful process of dispossession, and not only for those (Portuguese) formerly in power.

My third area of research examined the trauma of decolonisation (both singly and doubly experienced by many) as something that has largely been denied articulation as a form of loss. Even as the end of Portuguese rule in 1975 was a moment of postcolonial triumph for Mozambique, what was the experience of decolonisation on the ground, especially for those ethnic minorities (specifically for the Goan Mozambicans I write about in my book) caught between matrices of new and old power? How do we access these historical experiences of trauma, for trauma also takes on a

variety of forms, and for some I found that it was only accessible through ethnographic fieldwork and articulated through a discourse on things – for memory, nostalgia and longing often cohere in material objects – with the intimacies of politics located in the personal and personalised.

Fourth, this project of decolonisation was also one of writing post-national narratives that took its cue from the analytical work in my book. My work showcases deeply intertwined histories that not only link Goa to Mozambique across the ‘slender threads’ of the Indian Ocean (Ho 2006: 29), but also to Portugal and southern African regional histories, involving Mozambique, Angola, South Africa and annexed Namibia. Decolonisation became an entry point for bringing different governmentalities (colonial, national, apartheid) into a single field of analysis, particularly since it involved the circulation of people and things across territorial borders and oceanic waters. My historiographic interest was positioned in exposing historical and ethnographic connectivities (of people, things, and choices made) within southern Africa. It is an area of enquiry that still requires much more attention and critical analysis. Inasmuch as I can oppose writing linear histories of colonial independence, my book suggests a productive way forward to writing post-national narratives. Decolonisation here becomes the impetus for migration and diaspora-making, a swirling world of mobilities in so many directions: Goa to Mozambique, Mozambique to Portugal, Mozambique to Goa, Mozambique to South Africa, Angola to South Africa.

My fifth (and last) area of intervention had been to expand the canon of source materials we use to access narratives of decolonisation as different forms of seeing, thinking and writing about history. It is here that I juxtapose what I consider the ‘visual, the lyrical and the visceral’ (Gupta 2019). It is certain themed sets of photographs taken by Mozambican photographer Ricardo Rangel that feature in multiple chapters of my book and provide a visual landscape of Portuguese decolonisation in Lourenço Marques. Following Rui Assubuji and Patricia Hayes, I want to ask, what happens when we think about ‘photographs as history’ rather than of history (2013)? Thus, I rely on Rangel’s incredible imagery (and imaginary) to suggest the contours of individual lives and subjectivities on the cusp of colonial independence. Lyrical narratives are provided by novelist Mia Couto for Mozambique and Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński, whose writings on Angola speak to the rich details of Lusophone decolonisation happening six months later, on the other side

of the African continent. Ethnography does the analytic work to access decolonisation viscerally, that is, at the level of the intimate, and helps us locate politics in the personal.

Nor do these source materials (visual, lyrical and visceral) sit easily side by side, rather they rub up against each other to suggest my larger point – that decolonisation was always messy, always complicated, particularly when seen from the perspective of those caught up in (and having little say in) these larger governmental processes. Here I am invested in exploring politics, following Patricia Hayes, as a ‘form of experience’ (2009) through Rangel’s photographs, Couto’s and Kapuściński’s thick descriptions, and my own ethnographic observations and conversations with individuals caught up in decolonisation processes. In rethinking the matrices for the Lusophone case of decolonisation between Goa (India) and Mozambique (and southern Africa more generally), I looked closely at the implications of taking on an ethnographic approach, one that I argue opens a set of distinct research possibilities and understandings. In the end, I hope to have produced a valuable archive, not of empire, but rather of *its end*, that which is easily lost or forgotten in the transition period between empire and its post.

Even as my book has its limitations and constraints with regard to its specific Lusophone context and is the product of a certain time and space, I would like to offer my five-pronged approach to the study of decolonisation as a new form of knowledge-making, and a map of sorts for developing further a future critical decolonisation studies. It suggests a new set of foci that includes a combined historical and anthropological perspective, a closer look at the materiality of decolonisation, a recognition of decolonisation’s collective and individual traumas, a viewpoint that goes beyond the singular nation-state to involve multiple colonies and governmentalities, and finally, a turn to more creative source materials to access invaluable experiences of decolonisation. I believe my approach is one that holds within it much potential for rethinking the ‘tensions of empire’, evoked so powerfully by Fred Cooper and Anne Stoler more than twenty-five years ago (1997), for exploring historically and ethnographically the ties that continue to bind metropole and multiple colonies together in uncomfortable, unsettling, and unexpected ways, and suggest in some sense the ongoing reality that was the ‘imperialism of decolonization’ itself (Louis and Robinson 2008). It is yet another form of ‘entanglement’ in the way that Sarah Nuttall describes for post-apartheid South Africa (2009). Processes of reversing the *slow violence* (Nixon 2011) that endures in colonialism’s aftermath slowly continue, even as we must be mindful that it always differs in relation to place.

Conclusion: ‘Decolonisation now’

In this essay, I have been invested in rethinking the condition of postcoloniality through the analytic of decolonisation. The conceptualisation of decolonisation would not have been possible without the foundational writings of Fanon, Cabral, and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, or the conceptual frameworks provided by Achille Mbembe, Prasenjit Duara, Jane Jacobs, Raymond Betts, and Frederick Cooper, all of which are briefly outlined here. Material processes of decolonisation occurred in a wide variety of places throughout the world with very real and long-term consequences that are still felt today, and that dramatically altered the livelihoods of those who had to make difficult life choices about where to live (and die in some sense) in an undefined future in response to larger historical shifts that were not of their own choosing.

My set of comments and insights are an attempt to expose a way of understanding the effects of colonialism at the level of individual introspection which, in turn, exposes a whole set of new registers and articulations. In more than one sense, I am invested in understanding the devastating power of (colonial) *affect* for those persons caught in the throes of its material, political and ideological demise, in its inchoateness. I have thus adopted a reflexive approach to suggest these themes need to be inscribed in the story of decolonisation the world over.

I would like to end my essay with a sense of urgency, suggesting that the study of decolonisation, as a topic of enquiry, is even more pressing given the disturbing state of global affairs we are experiencing in 2026. In a recent special issue of *Radical History Review* (October 2025) entitled ‘Decolonization now’ (hence my title for this section), the collective of editors (Asif, Moorman, Namakkal and Nikpour) reconfirm the immediacy of this topic for further analysis in their jointly authored introduction. They write:

The articles in this issue testify to how decolonization movements, their intellectual interlocutors, and their ideas continue to demand our attention. The authors are, by and large, early career scholars, and they offer histories of decolonization that traverse different actors – from the collective to the individual to the nonhuman – in diverse geographies. Their facility with decolonial theory leads to new ways of writing histories of decolonization. Each, in their own way, keeps an eye on the now (Asif et al. 2025: 6).

Interestingly, with an ‘eye on the now’, the editors also suggest an opening up of studies of decolonisation to an expanded list of actors, including not only the collective (which has been the focus of many past studies), but also the individual (which has been my foci in this essay), and finally, the non-human which will give rise to another set of productive enquiries in the near future.

Notes

1. This launch took place at WiSER on 11 June 2015 to inaugurate the South African edition (University of the Witwatersrand Press) of Achille Mbembe's much celebrated and translated book, *On the Postcolony*, first published by the University of California Press in 2001. He also made the argument during his discussion that 'Africa has been disfigured by the dichotomy between reason and emotion or affect, and this is a false one. We need to focus on the latter more.' My writings here, in the form of a reflexive essay, stem from my book *Portuguese Decolonization in the Indian Ocean World: History and Ethnography* (Bloomsbury Academic 2019) are one such attempt to bridge that dichotomy.
2. The 'Fallist' movements include the #RhodesMustFall (University of Cape Town 2015) and #FeesMustFall (Wits University 2016) student-led decolonisation movements against structural racism within the South African educational system and university space, involving changes across curriculum, financial aid and housing.
3. The category of Catholic Goan Indian is tied to the long durée history of Portuguese colonialism and conversion on the Indian subcontinent, in a south-west region called Goa (1510–1961), surrounded territorially by British India (1757–1947). See my monograph entitled *The Relic State: St Francis Xavier and the Politics of Ritual in Portuguese India* (Gupta 2014). Throughout its colonial period and particularly in the years between 1947 (which saw India's independence from British colonial rule) and 1961 (which witnessed Goa's independence from Portuguese colonialism and forced integration into a newly independent India), a steady stream of Catholic Goans emigrated to other Portuguese colonies as a way to continue living within a Lusophone colonial world, including Mozambique where they got caught up in its decolonisation.

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