It has been over thirty years since the programmatic statements of postcolonial theory appeared. Gayatri Spivak published “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in 1988; Edward Said published Orientalism a decade before that. At the time Ronald Reagan’s experiments were still underway, the Berlin wall still standing, structuralist antihumanism still sweeping U.S. universities. Postcolonial studies emerged in dialogue with the latter, finding a home in comparative literature departments where antihumanism achieved its most penetrating influence. Its signature commitments were articulated in the day’s reigning conventions of criticism: suspicion of normative theorizing, skepticism toward universal philosophical anthropologies, a relentless focus on language, and a wariness toward institutions.

Thirty years span a generation, at least as measured by political time. In the decades since its emergence, postcolonial theory has won undeniable institutional recognition. Yet critics now tend to speak a different language: decolonization. U.S. postcolonial studies in the age of the dot-com bubble articulated the urgent preoccupations of its conjuncture: challenging a liberal order drunk from self-satisfaction after the Cold War and deluded about its consensual foundations. Today’s calls for decolonizing society, however, answer to new and changed contexts. Where critics once put pen to paper on behalf of “alterity,” today’s scholars are reassessing regional federations, Afro-Asian anti-imperialism, Indigenous struggles over territorial sovereignty, and the New International Economic Order. They do so to intervene in debates over political economy, land restitution, institutional design, and mass politics. The geographic epicenters of criticism have multiplied, too. The archives of today’s critics extend beyond India and North Africa to the rest of the globe, from Latin America to East Asia. Weapons are borrowed from global movements for racial

The two books under review here stand in a peculiar relationship to this timeline. *Resolutely Black* reproduces Françoise Vergès’s conversations with Aimé Césaire conducted in Martinique in 2004 and published in 2005. Seloua Luste Boulbina originally published *Kafka’s Monkey and Other Phantoms of Africa* as two books, the first dating to 2008. Although they appear in translation to us now, they hail from the interregnum between postcolonial theory’s establishment and decolonization’s emergence as a premier banner for anti-imperial critique. The two books were also devised in a Francophone milieu dominated by difference-blind republican universalism. We are reviewing them in a contemporary Anglophone environment where considerations of race, empire, and settlerism have already made inroads.

Sometimes the interim between a book’s context of publication and reception diminishes its power. Not so here. These two books enjoy an untimely power of provocation. Readers will find in the words of Boulbina, Vergès, and Césaire an occasion to appreciate how far postcolonial theory took one generation—and why today’s critics sail with different ballast. Boulbina’s *Kafka’s Monkey and Other Phantoms of Africa* dramatizes the dazzling force of antihumanism animating postcolonial theory in the 2000s while offering clues for that paradigm’s exhaustion. Perhaps because Césaire was already exhausted in 2004, Vergès’s conversations with the ninety-year-old statesman in *Resolutely Black* are, paradoxically, more clairvoyant about the futures of decolonial critique.

Boulbina’s book explores how colonial language remains intact even after the demise of formal colonial rule. France may have lost Vietnam at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, Algeria may have won independence in 1962, but the syntax of “the colony” endures. “The advent of independence,” Boulbina argues, “was only the start of decolonization.” The real work lies before us. We must “flush representations out of hiding so that we can be freed from them.” Hence contemporary critics must not conflate independence with decolonization. Decolonization is a process, not an event. It does us no good “putting the cart before the horse” by “making decolonization something that precedes the establishment of independence,” as if the former teleologically pointed to the latter (Boulbina 3, 4, 11).

Boulbina flushes colonial representations out of hiding across ten chapters, the better to neutralize them. The material subjected to forensic treatment is eclectic. Chapters engage Franz Kafka, Alexis de Tocqueville, Pierre Mendès France, Frantz Fanon, Friedrich Nietzsche, Said, and matters pertaining to republican historiography, subaltern studies, and psychoanalysis. Given
this eclecticism, it is perhaps inevitable that certain chapters are more successful than others. Flashes of insight are often buried in passages that lean toward free association. Boulbina's essays are like interlocking loops, inviting the reader to approach topics from different angles. Many English-language readers will no doubt find this style onerous, but staying with it rewards them with thoughtful provocations: that colonial subjects are ambivalent toward the myths of racial ascription that help them “continue hanging on to life” (176); that redemptive history from below often traps the dominated in history as compulsive repetition; that it is psychoanalysis, not social history, that can “lift the weight that phantoms from the past impose on those still alive” (201); that in independent Algeria, becoming Arabophone did not give ordinary citizens a homeland any more than English or French did (214–23); that decolonization does not mean rescuing the speech of the silenced, but instituting a new language that lets the silenced speak after the fact (256).

Boulbina employs with great effect the argumentative maneuvers associated with what U.S. universities after the 1980s called poststructuralism or antihumanism. The mode of engagement is persistent suspicion. The first chapter on Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy” is a case in point. Kafka’s story concerns a monkey so thoroughly assimilated into human culture that he can speak before intellectuals. In Boulbina’s hand, Kafka’s story teaches us that assimilation is nothing but what Nietzsche understood as asceticism. The colonized subject bites their tongue and deforms their soul to appear worthy of civic inclusion. To display the wounds of assimilation would reveal one to still be an ape. Nietzsche had nothing but scorn for asceticism, but Boulbina sees it as a tragic necessity. “Asceticism is an illness, to be sure, but it is also the price of simple survival under conditions of social suffering” (15). Assimilation is the unbearable cost of trying to survive, but survive we must.

In subsequent chapters, particular speech acts are analyzed to reveal how we do not speak about colonialism; colonialism speaks us. This is clearest in Boulbina’s excavation of the unspoken colonialist representations underlying the political itineraries of de Tocqueville and Mendès France. The latter’s postcolonial statements are still trapped within a colonial system of enunciations; Mendès France’s republicanism simply restates in different words the same assumptions, the same fantasies, of a chauvinistic Indochine apologist. Boulbina twice uses the image of a “family secret” here: just like how family dramas circle around a secret everybody knows but does not mention—an allusion to Jacques Lacan’s seminar on the “purloined letter”—the scripts of quotidian French life circle around “the colony” everyone studiously overlooks. We are, Freud reminds us, always talking about what we’re hiding.
For all that forensic suspicion empowers Boulbina’s analyses, it also saddles her with some disadvantages that characterize strands of French Nietzscheanism generally. Readers of the vast literature on settler colonialism, racial formations, and histories of capitalism will balk at Boulbina’s claim that we have to think something called “the colony,” a monolithic abstraction if there ever was one. Many postcolonial theorists often reduced histories of racialization to problems of “alterity,” and Boulbina does much the same when she personifies uneven histories of racialization as “the colony.” She is alive to the nuances of Fanon’s epidermalization thesis, the politics of language learning, even Zinédine Zidane. Yet these nuances are sometimes washed away in the blinding light of unilateral statements about “the colony,” “the indigène,” “language” or “history.” Readers will search in vain for discussions of political economy, territorial rights, the differences between indirect rule and settlerism, cultural suppression and administrative subordination. For better or worse, Boulbina shares the anti-materialism of many postcolonial theorists in the 1990s which let their fixation on subject formation unfold in an economic vacuum.

Here Françoise Vergès’s interview with Aimé Césaire strikes a dramatic contrast. Césaire was a poet and statesman, a longtime member of the French National Assembly and the Parti Progressiste Martiniquais. Vergès is herself an established theorist and historian of slavery whose father, Raymond Vergès, worked with Césaire on the Commission des territoires d’Outre-mer in the Fourth Republic’s Constituent Assembly. There is overlap between Boulbina, Vergès, and Césaire. All of them reject assimilationist politics. Boulbina finds it life-denying, and Césaire agreed: “assimilation was alienation, the worst possible thing” (9). They all reject the uncritical romanticism of identity. “Nothing is worse than listing off identities as alibis,” Boulbina writes, because “identity itself [is] an Indo-European institution” (201, 233). Césaire wanted “identity” added to the republican trifecta of liberty, equality, and fraternity, because “you must be yourself first” before you can have fraternity (8–9). But he had no patience with sectarianism: “It doesn’t matter who wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Man. What matters is that it exists. Criticizing it as a ‘Western’ creation is simplistic. Who cares?” (42). In fact, young Martinicans should read “everything: Greek, Latin, Shakespeare, French literature from the classical period, the Romantics, etc.” (27). Culture belongs to everyone; no group should monopolize it.

Despite similarities, Césaire’s reflections on the 1946 departmentalization law underscores the contrast between Boulbina and him. According to the former, our urgent task is to flush colonial representations out of hiding because they lurk everywhere. All of language is potentially contaminated. “No
language,” Boulbina reminds us, “constitutes a homeland” (234). Césaire knew this better than most; Surrealism appealed to him precisely because it attacked the conventions of French language which Martinican poets were imitating. As he reflected, “They wrote cute things, which we called doudouisme” (8).

But flushing out representations through close reading isn’t enough when the problem is structural dependence in a hierarchically organized global order. Césaire authored the controversial 1946 departmentalization law with Raymond Vergès and Gaston Monnerville. The law transformed Guyana, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Réunion into overseas departments of France. Critics sometimes attacked the law as capitulating to assimilation, Boulbina’s life-denying asceticism. Vergès is no doubt right when she suggests that, even now, we must recall the departmentalization law critically (48). But Césaire was alert to the political realities of the 1946 law, its promises and limitations alike. It was, he admitted, a concession to assimilation, but a wildly popular one: “Never had a law been more popular: by becoming full French citizens, we would have a right to family allowances, paid leave, etc.” (15). For Césaire, autonomy wasn’t necessarily secured through national independence. The latter could just as often lead to economic dependence in a stratified global order. Sometimes it was worth bending the language of the colonizers in unauthorized directions. If assimilation meant extending sécurité sociale to overseas territories, departmentalization would amount to one of the greatest acts of economic vengeance in modern history. Metropolitan politicians knew it. Vergès quotes the Finance and Budget Committee that assessed Césaire’s departmentalization law: “to achieve this goal (equal standard of living), French citizens, taken as a whole, would have to agree to a 25–30 percent reduction in their standard of living for the benefit of our overseas compatriots. . . . We must therefore take a strong stance against applying equal standards of living” (66).

Was departmentalization in 1946 a vector for assimilation, a continuation of “colonial language?” Probably, at least according to Boulbina’s arguments. But that only underscores how much Boulbina’s methodological approach can miss the mark, however carefully it treats language. Césaire knew departmentalization was a gamble, and subsequent history suggests it was a poor one. But he also knew the meaning of assimilation was not philosophically given. Whether assimilation extends or undermines the legacies of colonialism depends on the political and economic context in which it is demanded. In any case, purging language of hidden colonial representations will not mean much if it does not also improve the quality of life for Martinicans. The aftermath of colonial domination will never end. We must, Boulbina herself acknowledges, do our best to survive.
Césaire was no crass social democrat. Political theorists will find his position on reparations a matter of continuing controversy. He criticized reparations in his interview with Vergès for implying that cash transfers could repair an “utterly irreparable” past. No amount of economic redistribution can mend the wounds of colonialism. Its scabs clutter our language and psyches in all the ways Boulbina’s book traces. Cash transfers should happen, but they ought to be understood as the enactment of a universal moral duty borne by wealthy nations toward poorer ones (17–8).

This commitment to universalism, so pathologized by postcolonial theory, is one reason why Césaire’s remarks are apt to be misunderstood in the Anglophone world where discussions of reparations are very much alive. Césaire was not afraid of universalism. He refused to allow Europeans to monopolize this precious treasure. In her elegant postface, Vergès underscores how untimely Césaire’s position now appears. Critics formed in the crucible of postcolonial theory, like Boulbina, were trained to reveal the lurking provincialisms lying in any universalism. The critic’s task was to unmask universalisms for what they always are: an instrument of hegemony. Fair enough. But, Vergès reminds us, not all universalisms are constructed the same way. The universalism desired by her father’s generation was not just a ruse for hegemony. They were “government officials with communist ties, trade unions demanding equal rights, [using] a ‘republican vocabulary,’” men and women “left out of France’s grand narrative of decolonization” because they enjoyed nothing of the romance attributed to the protagonists of national liberation. Even so, their talk was not cheap. They pursued “the universal” before postwar conservatives transformed it—and assimilation—into a homogenizing, repressive ideal. Doubling down on “difference” is no substitute. “There are,” Césaire argues, “two ways of being forgotten: by being isolated into a distinct group or by being subsumed under the banner of universalism” (76). Anyone subject to racial tokenism knows this to be true.

There is an image in Resolutely Black that suggests one reason why today’s critics of empire may find the history of decolonization more useful than Jacques Derrida. Vergès and Césaire are driving into Saint Pierre, the old capital of Martinique before a devastating volcanic eruption leveled it in May 1902. At their intersection stands a kapok tree whose “charred trunk was a reminder of its having been a victim of the 1902 volcanic eruption.” After sleeping for half a century, the tree began to blossom again. “Césaire often came to admire this tree, which, more than a century old, didn’t just survive a catastrophe but, with its new growth, proved nature’s indifference to catastrophes” (xxvii–viii). Colonialism was, and is, a catastrophe of immeasurable scale. Boulbina’s pow-
erful book teaches us how to search for the catastrophe's enduring scars and signs. But Césaire and Vergès dare us to spite those wounds, to blossom and grow mighty.

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