Terror and the Postcolonial

Edited by Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton
Terror and the Postcolonial
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Terror and the Postcolonial

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Introduction: Terror and the Postcolonial

Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton

As If Invoked, Like Dracula

Terror, postcolonial or otherwise, induces affect, as a number of essays in this book describe. Among the affective repercussions of acts of terror are extreme fear, galvanizing shock, vengeful anger, displacement, and, perhaps above all, paranoia – the belief that having struck once, terror will do so again, at the same place, like lightning. Or, even if it has not appeared before, the deep paranoia associated with terror is that, once conceived, once entertained in the mind, terror will inexorably arise, somewhere, and attack the body, whether national, social, or individual, just as Dracula attacks, with his type of watchfulness and cunning.

That day, 7/7/2005, “London’s 9/11” (with apposite, necromantic rhyme), it certainly did seem to this book’s editors that our theoretical engagement with terror and terrorism, defiant and skeptical as it was, had in some way called forth the configuration of terrorist events that manifested all about us. North, east, west of our meeting that day in the heart of London, bombs exploded, the repercussions of which we almost immediately felt; the aftershocks of which pulled through us, forming as we did part of a vast, moving crowd. Thus drawn in, it was as if our academic investigations – especially because they were skeptical and against current neo-imperial orthodoxies concerning the unquestioned rightness of the war on terror – had mysteriously invoked these outrages, even conjured them into being.
We had fixed the July 7 date some months before, for a meeting in Senate House to discuss the overall shape and tenor of two workshops we were planning, to which we had given the name this book now bears as its title: *Terror and the Postcolonial*. The workshops, funded in part by the British Academy, as well as by the Canadian High Commission, HARC at Royal Holloway, and the Southampton English Department, set out to address a range of questions concerning the links between postcolonial writing and theory, and the phenomenon of terror. We asked, for example, why it was that the post/colonial state sought to propagate terror? And in what ways did West/non-West divisions underpin the rhetoric of terrorism and its “real world” manifestations? How did postcolonial concepts of, for example, resistance and worldliness contribute to our understanding of contemporary terror? And how might we set about redefining the human in a situation of terror?

For the two of us located at separate institutions, Stephen Morton at the University of Southampton, Elleke Boehmer, then at Royal Holloway, University of London, the Institute of English Studies in Senate House in Bloomsbury seemed an excellent, central place to meet. This was especially the case as we had invited a few other colleagues, now among the contributors to this volume, to participate in the meeting. We were keen to gauge their different insights into the risks and difficulties involved in organizing a series of terror workshops that would seek to analyze contemporary developments while retaining historical and ethical perspective, and foreground the terror phenomenon without making of it a spectacle. In the event our colleagues never made it to Senate House that morning. They were turned away at stations proximate to London, instructed that “something had happened” in the capital and it was best not to continue on their journey.

Setting out a little earlier than the others, to confer before the discussion proper began, we two workshop conveners were geographically closer to Bloomsbury – though we hadn’t yet met – when a strange electricity made itself felt in the air. At just after nine o’clock in the morning we were, as we remember, so close to what was soon identified as the epicenter of the unfolding developments that universal confusion still reigned about the unnamed (and unnamable) “event” that had, to us palpably, taken place. All that was clear was that the Underground was being evacuated and the grille gates at the entrances to stations being shut, but the police could not or would not yet explain to the puzzled public why this was. They were taking precautions, was all they said; there could have been an electrical fault,
so they were recommending that people travel by London bus instead. (By this point, at 8.50 a.m., three bombs of the four that were to go off that day had already exploded – at Edgware Road, Aldgate, and deep in the Underground, not far from Russell Square station.) There was something amiss somewhere, some red alert, that much was evident, and the police were responding with extreme distraction.

Shuffling out of Euston Station alongside hundreds of other Tube evacuees, one of the editors, Elleke, saw a red-faced policewoman haring over to a police car slewed crazily up against a curb on Euston Road, crying “where, where, where?” Stephen, walking up to Senate House from Waterloo Station, saw the streets emptying as if by magic. As he wandered past police cordons near Bloomsbury, and beneath the whirring of helicopters, he could not help but think of Iraq, where similar scenes and sounds were daily being played out. He wondered about the connections, causal, rhizomic, and otherwise, that linked the carnage and confusion in those streets to these. (Bilal Abdulla, who two years later, in June 2007, allegedly laid car bombs in central London, certainly claimed that his motive was to introduce the effect of living in Iraq to the British public: he wanted to give Britons “just the taste, the taste of fear”) (Attewill 2008: 4).

Meanwhile Elleke, who had successfully avoided being pressed on to one of the waiting red Routemaster buses, was heading down Tottenham Court Road from the north. Around 9.30, as she exited a Starbucks coffee shop on Tottenham Court road with a takeaway coffee in hand, a man leaving at the same time, a step in front, expressed out loud his opinion, to anyone who might be listening, that “it’s got to be a terrorist attack.” (About 20 minutes later, at 9.47, another Tube evacuee, Hasib Hussain, who had followed police directions with his lethal backpack still intact, denoted the fourth bomb on the number 30 double-decker bus, in Tavistock Square, not far from the statue of Gandhi, and about as far from Euston Station as the Starbucks shop.) By now mobile phones were no longer working; strangers were muttering to one another in the street that there was no signal to be had; and queues began forming at phone booths in the snaking, ambling way reminiscent of the pre-mobile-phone era.

Though in terms of physical proximity we editors could probably have heard the Tavistock explosion, we did not in reality (though retrospective memories are of course full of screaming sirens and dull thuds). But as soon as we met in the darkened rooms of the Institute of English Studies, where Warwick Gould, the Director, offered stoical good cheer, as well as a radio, we began remarking on the strange quirks
of fate and odd juxtapositions that were marking the morning. Throughout Senate House the blinds had been pulled down as another “precaution,” one of the many moments in the day when people responded to the events with obvious “Blitz”-type defenses. Elleke recalled how, years before, she had left a South Africa gripped by a state of emergency imposed by the apartheid regime – a country where terror attacks were daily expected, and counter-terroristic responses routine. And now, here, in the timeless heart of London, the atmosphere of emergency and non-specific alarm was being repeated, as if with hyperbolic force.

An aimless and remarkable day then ensued. Bar the occasional screaming of ambulances and police cars, London fell gradually silent. Shops closed, smaller public buildings were evacuated, the British Library shut its doors at noon. Vast and largely speechless crowds were on the move, trying to get home, reach loved ones, escape the city, process their fear. Small huddles of individuals stood clustered outside electrical shops, or wherever there were televisions that showed the unspooling events. People barely spoke, in order not to miss crucial information when it came. News channels began slowly to piece together a story of sorts: of “London’s 9/11,” the calamity that had in many quarters been expected, on this day timed perhaps to coincide with the G8 summit at Gleneagles, where Tony Blair, a key propagator of the Iraq War, was presiding.

Everywhere we editors turned on our long walk through London that day the communications and transport infrastructure was stopped, closed, locked down. The worst thing was not being able to phone home and worrying about family and friends. Until much later, when we eventually found ourselves on last trains rattling emptily out of the capital, the concept of getting home seemed the ultimate impossibility, here on this bright summer’s day in a surreal, flâneur’s London without traffic. Now, a strange quiet after-echo appeared to hang in the air following each footfall one made. It was as if the silence around one (the absence of cars, double-decker buses, taxis) was already creating an atmosphere of reverence, intoning the tiny imperceptible pauses, moments of hush, that would begin by slow accumulation to mark this inconceivable and (for many) infinitely painful Thing that had happened.

And so – leaving Senate House, wandering directionless from place to place, stopping at the Quaker building where everyone was either drinking or serving cups of hot tea, trekking down Marylebone Road in the direction of Paddington – we editors could barely name the term
which had occasioned our being here today. Terror. Terror? For us the word was so blatant, so raw, as to be close to unmentionable; so bizarrely coincidental, we couldn’t begin at the time to confront what these unfolding events meant to us. It resembled a case of delayed decoding in a Conrad novel: like his narrator Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* we were aware and yet not aware that “arrows” (that is, terror, the knowledge of a terror attack) were coming at us from all directions (Conrad 1995: 76–8).

As this analogy suggests, the terror we experienced that day felt to us invoked, called up, and we, interpellated by it. Truly it seemed as if we had brought this thing upon us and so could not call it by its name, its common-or-garden street name – terrorism; a terror attack – lest we risk further ensnaring. Briefly, Elleke wondered whether she would continue for the rest of her life to find herself locked into repeat patterns of terror events, as if postcolonial existence meant being shuttled like this from one terror zone to another – as bizarrely anticipated in her novel about Irish-South African terrorism *Bloodlines* (Boehmer 2000). Still preoccupied by the relationship between the war in Iraq and these London events, Stephen reflected on the metaphorical language of foes within and without that the state mobilized to justify its recourse to security measures, metaphors which aided and abetted the very acts of terrorism they claimed to repress.

We also could not avoid comparing the sight of the streaming crowd of hundreds upon hundreds walking the long straight road from Euston Station to Paddington (and skirting the Edgware Road’s no-go zone), to images we’d seen of crowds on the move elsewhere in the world: 1947 Partition, China’s Long March. The analogy of the Blitz and the Blitz spirit did indeed press everywhere on our senses – in those widely made and shared cups of tea, in the rueful toughing-it-out smiles perfect strangers exchanged with one another. Shades of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, too, were unmistakable, in the crowds flowing (whether over London Bridge or everywhere else), in the intimations of a ruined city. Terror effects, projected outwards, hurtling, bringing pain, anger, fear, were already transferring into the quotidian in these concrete, predictable ways, translating into the stories and images we were outlining for one another, about the day we’d shared, ever since that moment when, at 8.50 a.m., London life had seemingly changed.
Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton

Terror, the Colony and the Postcolony

Terror; counter-terrorism; terrorism; war on terror; Islamic terrorists; terror cells; solutions to terror: the vocabulary of terror has in recent years become the bass note to Western government rhetoric, if not to political and journalistic discourse more broadly. “One person’s terrorist is the next person’s freedom fighter” is an oft-heard truism (Walter 1969: 5), which implicitly concedes that we all perceive some overpowering horror against which our counter-terroristic standards, our values of freedom and heroism, are defined. For early twenty-first-century Western societies, it seems, terror represents the ultimate fear, the unsaid that can only be condemned, never condoned; and one of the few near-taboo subjects of comedy. The Iraqi journalist Muntadar al-Zaidi, who threw his shoes at the former US President George W. Bush during a press conference in 2008 in a high-risk gesture of defiance, may seem to offer a counterpoint to this taboo by targeting a figure associated with the “war on terror”; however, the incident predictably led to his arrest and imprisonment. The subjective violence of the real world, writes Žižek, the violence that takes the form of mass murders, genocide, and rape, masks the underlying objective violence of capital, systemic, anonymous, that informs “real-life developments and catastrophes” throughout (Žižek 2008: 10–11).

Yet how do we understand this phenomenon of terror, that seems at once so contemporary and so age-old and constant; at once systemic, yet convulsive; so archetypal, but of its nature so evanescent? Is terror a historical force that flashes up at moments of crisis in the inchoate forms of the sublime; or is it by its very nature heterogeneous and chameleon-like, a form of auto-immunity, taking expression from the methods and approaches of its individual terroristic exponents? Is terror chaos or crisis; catachresis or cataclysm; a gradually unfolding process or single spontaneous instant, if with long-lasting painful effects (Walter 1969: 5)? The Oxford English Dictionary distinguishes between terror as the emotional state, as might be attributed to a tale of terror; and terrorism, or a system of terror, as when a person or group adopts a policy of intimidation intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted. Yet this latter free-floating, liberal understanding of terrorism denies the fundamental point that terrorism as political violence is the ground upon which sovereignty is in many cases defined in the colonial present.
Introduction

Within the overarching context of this post-9/11 world, *Terror and the Postcolonial* posits a relationship between three terms: terror, the colony, and what has been called the “postcolony” – which refers to the effective continuation of the authority structures of the colony in the post-imperial nation despite “flag independence.” The colonial forms of present-day terror or the terror of the postcolonial, we editors submit, demands a turn (back) to certain modes of imperial history in order to understand and to explicate these apparent continuities. In particular “postcolonial terror” requires that we turn back to the colonial archive of violence and repression, to records of the colonial formations of sovereignty, policing, and surveillance, which find such prominent afterlives in counter-terroristic formations today. Moreover, postcolonial terror reminds us of resistance to these (post)colonial formations – resistance that historically has taken a variety of different forms, including sedition, sabotage, insurgence, and, of course, armed conflict, themes that several of the essays collected here explore.

Despite the alleged concern of postcolonial studies with such matters as colonial power and anti-colonial resistance – that is, with terroristic repercussions of the colonial within our contemporary, postcolonial condition – it is noteworthy, however, that postcolonial studies has to date largely neglected the back-history of today’s postcolonial or late colonial terror. Although terror appears endemic to how power operates in the so-called postcolony, postcolonial histories, and cultural and literary studies, have devoted close-to-minimal energy to the scrutiny of contemporary imperialism, and the traditional colonial and terroristic forms it takes. Terror may well be a dominant form through which the colonial is reiterated in the postcolonial world; yet, bar the exceptions represented by names like Achille Mbembe and Derek Gregory, this is an issue that postcolonial studies till very recently has been hesitant to confront. Related to this, postcolonial scholars also tend to skirt around perhaps one of the most pressing postcolonial issues of our age, the contemporary neo-imperial hegemony of the United States (though the election of Senator Barack Obama as 44th President may have an interesting impact on that global notoriety). Hence, in the editors’ opinion, the importance of a collection of essays that examines the intercalations of terror with not only colonial but also postcolonial processes and representations.

True, the surfeit of scholarly books on terrorism produced in response to the incidents of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent declaration of the “war on terror,” suggest that terrorism has not only
been constituted as an object of contemporary knowledge, but also that it defines the twenty-first-century Western zeitgeist. Yet there are significantly fewer studies that probe the deeper histories of the present, and address what is in fact at stake in the constitution of terrorism as an object of knowledge in the social sciences and humanities. Such studies might in principle confront – yet in fact sidestep – such questions as: How do we interpret the colonial contours we discern within the dimensions of present-day terror? What exactly does the emerging field of terrorism studies reveal about the political and cultural values of contemporary Western culture and its histories of violence? Might our growing body of terroristic knowledge work in ways that are complicit with postcolonial counter-terrorism? To what extent does an academic preoccupation with terror and terrorism provide intellectual and rhetorical support for the continuation of a war on terror without a foreseeable end – a war that is in many respects impossible and unfeasible, waged on an abstract concept, “terror”? This book seeks to address urgent yet relatively neglected questions such as these, that might be encapsulated in the following bluntly expressed ethical concern: What is the critical vocation of postcolonial studies during and beyond the “war on terror”?

By approaching the question of a critical vocation for postcolonial studies with respect to terror, Terror and the Postcolonial offers a response to the critical task outlined by Priya Gopal and Neil Lazarus in their 2006 special issue of the journal New Formations on postcolonial studies “after Iraq.” This task is “to work towards the production of a new ‘history of the present’ which takes on both the history of imperialism and the history of resistance to imperialism in the long twentieth century” so as to reassert the postcolonial critic’s radical calling (Gopal and Lazarus 2006: 9). As the two co-editors suggest, the so-called war on terror demands that postcolonial studies interrogate and re-interrogate the histories of violent colonial occupation, and also resistances to such forms of occupation, and the terroristic or subterroristic shapes and rhetoric these histories and forms have taken. Such a retrospective analysis necessitates, too, a reassessment of the continuities between historical formations of colonial sovereignty, policing and the use of force, and their reappearance in the current wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Northern Pakistan, as well as in Europe and the United States. Forms of reappearance also include the establishment of detention camps or “spaces of exception” at Guantánamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and other locations, as Derek
Introduction

Gregory’s work discusses, and the introduction of emergency police powers in cities like London to justify the shoot-to-kill treatment of suspected suicide bombers (see Stuart Price). As with the detention camps, the latter is a development that blurs the boundaries between the rule of (international) law and the declaration of a state of martial law.

It would seem therefore that postcolonial studies “after Iraq,” or “beyond” the war on terror, entails espousing and adopting some of the more radical critical practices that it has to offer. For the editors of the essay collection *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Loomba et al. 2005: 1–2), this is something still profoundly worth doing – where those radical practices involve analyzing the colonial past in relation to “the new empires of our times”; the “world-systems of modern capitalism” to “newer transnational networks.” With their forthright assertion that postcolonial studies respond to the imperialist forms of today’s globalization by supplying it with “a historical conscience – and consciousness” (p. 9), the contributors to the volume agree, too, that the anti-imperial, decolonizing agenda of postcolonialists has become ever more pressing. In particular the collection is concerned to re-examine and re-evaluate the oppositional methodologies of the postcolonial: materialist, idealistic, progressively transnational, “post-Occidental,” humanist. It wishes to acknowledge that the rapid pace at which globalization is revealing its imperialism has not always in postcolonial studies carried over into a reawakening of its anti-Eurocentric critical strain, or to a close investigation of its collusion with the decentered and “kaleidoscopic” cultural forms of world capitalism (pp. 14–15).

*Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* does not raise terror as a primary concern, not even in its capacity as a foundation of power in the colony: this type of critique is evidently not part of its “postcolonial beyond.” Yet it is interesting to observe that the subject of terror as it is expressed in the contemporary globalized world does in fact provide a prime occasion for the radical, apparently oppositional, postcolonial methodologies advocated by the editors to come into operation in mutually co-operative and interactive ways. For example, the terroristic violence through which modern states randomly assert their authority, and through which globalizing forces propagate themselves, demands attention to how local experience is linked into the broadest structures of global power – that is, demands an intermeshing of conventional subject-area binaries. It also involves challenging the simplistic
dichotomies of the anti-modern as being the main alternative to
the modern (in that terror can be the instrument of both), and of
the national as rigidly counterpoised to the transnational (as these may
collaborate in their deployment of terroristic practices). In other words,
to turn again to Žižek, tracing the taken-for-granted colonial ante-
cedents of present-day terror offers powerful ways of showing up the
invisible “objective violence” of society: it exposes the systemic vio-
lence that supplies the “zero-level standard” against which subjectively
violent acts of terror are perceived (Žižek 2008: 1–6).

Terror, the Logic of Unilateral Orientalism

The reticence of academic postcolonial studies ever since Fanon as
regards terror may be explained in part by the ways in which the
discourse of terrorism is historically overdetermined by Western
imperialism, as our repeated juxtaposition of the terms “terror,”
“colonial,” and “postcolonial” underlines. So, in an essay published in
the Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram, entitled “Punishment by Detail”
(2002), Edward Said presciently noted how, in the Western media,
there was “such repetitious and unedifying attention paid to
Palestinian suicide bombing that a gross distortion in reality has
completely obscured what is much worse: the official Israeli . . . evil
that has been visited so deliberately and so methodically on the
Palestinian people” (Said 2002). This sentence is significant, first,
because it clarifies the way in which a discourse of terrorism serves
the political interests of the (in this case Israeli) state and its policies
towards its others (Palestinians) – and also of course of the US state
that supports it. But it also gestures at a historical relationship between
imperialism and the discourse of terrorism. For the “gross distortion
in reality” that Said diagnoses in the Western media’s representation
of suicide bombing is a contemporary example of what Said calls
“orientalism” in his influential eponymous 1978 study: a “distribution
of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological,
historical and philological texts” (1978: 12).

Already in 1988, in an essay entitled “The Essential Terrorist,” Said
observed how terrorism had “displaced Communism as public enemy
number one” in American public discourse; and how this elevation
of terrorism had “deflected careful scrutiny of the government’s
domestic and foreign policies” (p. 149).3 Citing a book by the then
Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, Benjamin Netanyahu, Said
described how Netanyahu’s definition of terrorism was flawed because it depended “a priori on a single axiom: ‘we’ are never terrorists; it’s the Moslems, Arabs and Communists who are” (p. 152). Similarly, for the South African apartheid regime, opponents of the state such as Nelson Mandela were labeled as terrorists whereas the regime’s supporters were hailed as brave defenders of law and order (Boehmer 2007). These were the axioms, the deadly orientalist logic, through which state repression at the time was justified and defended.

In criticizing the discourse of terrorism, Said is not of course denying that acts of terrorism take place and that their effects are abhorrent. Rather he is questioning the way in which the discourse of terrorism is used by powerful states such as the United States and its allies to describe and condemn violent acts of resistance to imperial occupation, instead of addressing the violence of imperial occupation itself. The discourse of terrorism, in other words, couched in familiar orientalist metaphors, is another way of framing the anti-colonial other and legitimating the colonial self by contrast. As in Nasser Hussain’s *The Jurisprudence of Emergency*, on British colonial law in India, where in the colony fatal tensions between the rule of civil law and absolute state sovereignty arose (Hussain 2004: 6–7), colonialism produced discourses of otherness to move toward a suspension of the law (Sharpe 1993).

A further example of the orientalist aspects of the contemporary discourse of terrorism emerges in how the fearsome yet faceless figure of the terrorist is invoked as the cause of the expansion of US and of British military power in the twenty-first century – and as requiring transnational disciplinary measures. Yet the war in Afghanistan and the military occupation of Iraq – two expressions of such disciplinary measures – are at the same time, as we well know, fully motivated by the military, political, and economic interests of the United States and Britain. Related disciplinary measures against terrorists also include American and British support for Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Lebanon, and, on the domestic front, the extension of detention laws and surveillance procedures and the suspension of habeas corpus. In all these cases the threat of the (post)colonial terrorist is presented as a primary trigger for retaliatory action. This causal logic forms a striking instance of what Spivak calls “metalepsis”: where an effect of colonial discourse (here, the terrorist) is presented as a cause; or where a focus on the emotional-aesthetic connotations of terror is made logically to override awareness of the imperial interests that produced the terrorism.
Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton

The Aestheticization of Terror

In a discussion of Kantian and Burkean theories of the sublime, Terry Eagleton asserts that “sublime eruptions like the French Revolution could be admired as long as they were aestheticized, contemplated from a secure distance” (2005: 47). Similarly, Gene Ray in *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory* has argued that the rethinking of the sublime as trauma after the events of Auschwitz and September 11, 2001 must be understood as a problem (2005: 7). For both, the experience of terror is problematically refracted into the aestheticized contemplation of the sublime – a refraction and displacement with which postcolonial critical attentions to terror may similarly be complicit.

The vicarious experience of terrorism as a spectacle, which evokes shock and fear, has also preoccupied theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek in their commentaries on “9/11,” though in ways that are more involved with the aesthetics of such spectacles than otherwise. For Baudrillard, the vision of the World Trade Center in flames after the attacks of September 11 produced the now-famed sensation of spellbound fear amongst the public (Baudrillard 2002). Yet, although he allows a complicit relationship between aghast audience and horrifying spectacle, at the same time Baudrillard cannot help but frame the terroristic event as an aesthetic phenomenon analogous to the category of terror in aesthetic theories of the sublime, as in Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant (Žižek 2002). Relatedly, Slavoj Žižek’s comparison of the Middle East to the desert of the Real in the Wachowski brothers’ film *Matrix* (1999), in his essay “Welcome to the Desert of the Real!” (2002), collaborates with the aestheticization of terror described by Eagleton in favor of examining the geopolitical determinants of terrorism as a discourse – or that with which we hope this book is most intensely preoccupied.

Instead of treating terror as a mere contemporary aesthetic or postmodern philosophical category, the contributors to this volume follow postcolonial theorists such as Paul Gilroy, Gayatri Spivak, and Luke Gibbons in interrogating the category and experience of terror from the standpoint of the colonized and the abject of history. After all, for the colonial subject, terror was no aesthetic experience or feeling, but a brutal material and corporeal experience of sovereign power in the raw. As Achille Mbembe writes both in these pages and elsewhere, citing Fanon, all aesthetic connotations of terror are complicated by the violent, terroristic exercise of sovereign power in the European colony. Indeed, terrorism, understood as political violence (pitted
against the anti-colonial insurgent or "savage" who must be civilized), constitutes the rock-bottom ground of sovereignty in the colony. From this it becomes clear that European aesthetic theory partakes in a contiguous foundation, based as it often is on the construction, and then screening out, of the non-European other as a figure of fear and terror. As in Luke Gibbons’s case for the political dimensions of Burke’s aesthetic theory of the sublime, “the sublime is present in all its terrifying force” when illegitimate political institutions “rule by fear alone” (2002: 7).

Texts on Terror: Honest Fundamentalists

Although postcolonial studies may to date have failed to examine in a sustained, systematic way how the foundations of colonial rule are based in terror, and how state terror models anti-colonial insurgency, postcolonial literature for its part has grappled vigorously with questions concerning imperial violence and colonial sovereignty. The role of literary, dramatic, and filmic texts to decode and explicate the contradictory operations of terror is widely explored in these pages, as are, if more implicitly, the ways in which terror may be mediated to consciousness through metaphor. So, in J. M. Coetzee’s 1980 novel Waiting for the Barbarians, for example, the reader is exposed to the relationship between violence, law, and the colonial state, as brought to the fore in the Magistrate’s reflections on his position in relation to the acts of torture that he witnesses and experiences. At an early point in the novel the Magistrate asserts that “there is nothing to link” him “with torturers” (Coetzee 1980: 48). After his own experience of torture, however, he realizes that the distinction between the normal rule of law and the violent practices of interrogation carried out under the legal order of empire is untenable. “I was not, as I liked to think,” he thinks, “the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow” (p. 148). The Magistrate is a “lie,” in other words, because the rule of law that he symbolizes is the condition of possibility for the emergency powers which allow Colonel Joll to torture the barbarians, rather than a safeguard against such practices. When the Magistrate says that Colonel Joll “is here under the emergency powers, that is enough,” he obfuscates the relationship between the rule of law and the emergency powers (p. 1). He does not question the origins of the emergency powers, and
his own position as the guardian of the Empire’s legal order, for to do so would be to acknowledge that the emergency powers are produced by the very juridical order that he represents.

In a similar vein, the narrator Changez in Mohsin Hamid’s much-discussed 2007 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* offers a series of reflections on the justification for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He observes how “a common strand seemed to unite these conflicts, and that was the advancement of a small coterie’s concept of American interests in the guise of a fight against terrorism, which was defined to refer only to the organized and politically motivated killing of civilians by killers not wearing the uniforms of killers” (Hamid 2007: 178). Here, Changez not only offers an insightful criticism of the way in which the meaning of terrorism is defined by narratives of counter-terrorism to justify the state’s use of military force; he also demonstrates that the word itself masks the ways in which the US-led war on terror serves American economic and geopolitical interests at the expense of human lives in Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. He observes: “the lives of those of us who lived in lands in which such killers also lived had no meaning except as collateral damage” (p. 178). The precarious character of civilian life in Pakistan during the US war in Afghanistan is further borne out by Changez’s story of a boy who was allegedly involved in a plot to assassinate an American development worker. This boy, as Changez explains, “had disappeared – whisked away to a secret detention facility, no doubt, in some lawless limbo between [America and Pakistan]” (p. 182).

If, as Hamid suggests, the “war on terrorism” masked an imperialist agenda, this imperialist agenda is inextricably entwined with the history of neoliberal globalization and America’s place within it. Indeed, it is significant that Changez’s disaffection with America at the end of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is also a form of disaffection with his position as a market fundamentalist in the American corporate financial firm Underwood Samson. As Žižek also perceives, systemic, invisible terror is closely bound up with, indeed imprinted by, the operations of neoliberal capitalism.

**The Colonialism of Terror; the Terror of the Postcolonial: Essays**

Although the editors’ planned discussion on terror that July 7 day never happened, the Terror and the Postcolonial workshops themselves went
off successfully, on April 26 and June 30, 2006, as if to confirm a widely felt need for the kind of exploratory discussions on postcolonial terror that they had invited. The chapters that make up this book are based on the diverse papers given respectively at Royal Holloway, University of London and the University of Southampton, at these two workshops. Though distinctions and gradations of emphasis between the two interlinked events are difficult to pinpoint, the first cluster of papers, on April 26, concentrated on theories of terror and violence, and instances of colonial and postcolonial resistance, whereas the papers given on June 30 were possibly more situated and contextualized. In this volume, however, this binary division is overridden in favor of an arrangement into three parts: first, essays exploring theories of colonial and postcolonial terror; second, essays investigating histories of post/colonial terror; and, third, essays discussing the generic forms through which terror is articulated. What connects all the chapters, however, is this central question, approached from a number of different angles: What is postcolonial about present-day terror; or, put slightly differently, how is terror colonialist or neo-imperialist?

The collection opens with Achille Mbembe’s essay, “The Colony: Its Guilty Secret and Its Accursed Share,” which sets the keynote of the book, and of its first section on theory, by addressing the postcolony as a debased mirror of the colony, and as saturated with terror. Drawing on the political thought of Hegel, Fanon, Bataille, and others, Mbembe maps the postcolony, the social space left after colonial power has formally retreated, as a place of death, convulsed by trauma, governed by orgies of destruction and necromancy, whose history is mediated as psychic loss. The colony’s base-line experience, or “accursed share,” Mbembe writes, is the ubiquitous operation of terror, with which even fantasy life is complicit. In the postcolony, terror effects, far from being cauterized or exorcised, are repeated as the arbitrary rule of the leader, or displaced in the form of abjection. This means, however, that in Mbembe’s terms the totalizing experience of death is a foundational space for African subjectivity. He who inflicts terror himself, having once been its victim, is the quintessential contested subject of the postcolony. The line of flight out of this situation, as is the case also in Robert Young’s essay, lies in the resurrection of the dead through proper memorialization, and in the realization that some lost things can never be restored.

Derek Gregory in “Vanishing Points: Law, Violence, and Exception in the Global War Prison” continues the concern with the postcolony as the site where colonial terror is reiterated. The essay focuses in
particular on the imagery and legal status of the war prisons in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, 2001–6. With reference to Michel Foucault’s work on biopower and governmentality, and Giorgio Agamben’s on the state of exception, Gregory argues that the contemporary law of war lies at the vanishing point of international law. The space of the war prison is a space of exception produced through the law: it is therefore a space that is both inside and outside the law. Citing from documents that legitimated the practice of torture in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, the chapter concludes with an examination of how the overtly imperial leader President George Bush acted both as a sovereign figure outside the law, and as a figure who rewrote international law.

In “Sacrificial Militancy and the Wars around Terror” Alex Houen is concerned with how opposed sides fighting in current wars of terror have become caught up in mutual exchanges of sacrifice. While various Islamic groups have increasingly used and defended so-called “suicide bombing” as a form of sacrificial martyrdom, the Bush administration has been forced to invoke “sacrifices” when justifying its continuing investment in the “war against terror.” That is not to say that we are witnessing the growth of the same form of sacrifice universally – indeed, the wars of terror could be better described as wars concerning whose particular mode of sacrificial militancy is most powerful and legitimate. Nor can these various modes of sacrifice be seen as fundamentally religious, argues Houen, for sacrificial militancy has frequently been used to establish new intimacies for a community between its media, religion, politics, and economics. What makes a community’s use of sacrifice particular is thus the social syntheses it produces, and Houen outlines how this has taken place differently in Iran, Palestine, Afghanistan, and the USA. Having made reference to a range of thinkers – including Talal Asad, Ali Shariati, Martin Heidegger, and Georges Bataille – the chapter closes by arguing that media depictions of sacrificial militancy frequently continue the work of sacrifice in reifying death and transcendence for public consumption.

Vron Ware’s “The White Fear Factor” explores the links between the racial fears of the postcolonial Western world and the response of terror. The essay begins with a meditation on the contemporary image of a Stop sign in a Johannesburg neighborhood, on which “being afraid” is spray-painted. Drawing on the work of Zygmunt Bauman and Ghassan Hage, it proceeds to argue that terror has become a byword for various phenomena, such as the fear of asylum seekers and cultural strangers. Fueled by increasing economic inequalities, the