

Unsettling  
Colonial Modernity  
in Islamicate  
Contexts



# Unsettling Colonial Modernity in Islamicate Contexts

Edited by

Siavash Saffari, Roxana Akhbari,  
Kara Abdolmaleki and Evelyn Hamdon

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*To the people of Palestine and Standing Rock, on the frontlines of resistance against the violence of settler colonialism.*



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## FOREWORD

SHERENE H. RAZACK

In 1991, a few weeks after I began teaching at the University of Toronto, I met with a student who was doing research on Muslim women from several different countries. It struck me as unusual that all of the women in the research sample identified first as Muslim, and only second, if at all, as members of a particular nation or region. I suggested to the student that the identity “Muslim” was not one that came first with everyone. I offered my own case as an example. Although I come from a Muslim family, my first impulse always is to call myself a Trinidadian, and to identify as someone from the Caribbean. Indeed, my first book, published in 1991, quaintly describes me as “a Canadian of West Indian origin.” Expressing her frustration at my inability to grasp the nature of her research project, the student angrily retorted that as a stigmatized minority, “Muslim” was not a category I could disaffiliate from. For me then, however, stigma and racism wore many faces. Anti-Asian racism has not only targeted Muslims. In the 1970s and 80s, anti-Asian street racism took the form of “Paki” bashing in Toronto and in Vancouver, where I spent my undergraduate years, someone who looked like me could still also be called (anachronistically) “damned Hindu” by white boys joyriding in a convertible. By the 90s, the Sikhs and their turbans fascinated racists everywhere. The student was clearly ahead of her time, as far as anti-Muslim racism went, however. By 9/11, I had come to agree with her that one could no longer disaffiliate. Regardless of my own history and inclination, I had become “legible” in Canada first and foremost as a person of Muslim origin. The legibility quickly became global. I remember, for instance, a kindly waiter in a remote small town in Australia who, in 2002, asked me if I preferred my sausages to be halal. Light brown skin and a South Asian looking appearance was enough to tip him off as to my imagined dietary needs.

The editors of this collection borrow the term “Islamicate” to refer to “the dynamic mosaic of social and cultural life forms that exist not only in Muslim majority societies, but also in diasporic Muslim communities.” In using the term “Islamicate,” the editors take for granted that “Muslim” is

how we all must identify. They acknowledge that their collective thinking was shaped in the post “War on Terror” years when Muslims everywhere came to be considered as the enemies of the West, and when wars and colonial occupations and the intensive regimes of securitization they require, are first and foremost racial projects, widely understood apocryphally as a clash of civilizations. Considered as both new and old enemies of the state (the crusades have a ghostly presence), where do those of us identified as Muslims stand on the landscape of settler colonialism? How can our practices of solidarity disrupt the native/non-native binary and still recognize the pressing issue of Indigenous sovereignty? This collection is informed by these questions. Its approach is to follow the ghost of colonialisms past as they haunt the colonial present, tracking nation building in Islamicate contexts, in the dynamics of anti-Muslim racism (the editors use the word Islamophobia), and in the creative ways we might renegotiate modernity without descending into nativisms and fundamentalisms.

If, for the editors, the vexed question of identity joins the vexed question of who is a settler, the answer lies in anti-colonial alliances that acknowledge “the *white* nature” of colonialism. On this point I wholeheartedly agree. To take just one example, whiteness goes almost completely unacknowledged in contemporary discussions sparked by Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A televised interview with the commissioner, Mr. Justice Murray Sinclair, named to the Canadian Senate in 2016, reveals a scene played out regularly on television and at elite institutions across Canada. A resolute and patient Justice Sinclair explains that Canadian teachers must be prepared to teach about Indigenous peoples. He is careful to note that this means teaching about how Indigenous lives are devalued and he mentions several Indigenous communities where there have been what is called an epidemic of suicides. The television interviewer, Steve Pakin, of TV Ontario, appears to only hear that non-Indigenous teachers must now be trained to teach about Indigenous culture and he aggressively challenges Justice Sinclair that this would put non-Indigenous teachers at risk of being accused of cultural appropriation.<sup>1</sup> In ten seconds, we can go from the widespread dehumanization of Indigenous peoples and their extraordinarily high suicide rates, to the challenges non-Indigenous peoples face in solving the problem of assisting Indigenous peoples into modernity. Muslims do not face the colonial game of improvement in the same way as do Indigenous peoples, and our eviction from humanity is

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<sup>1</sup> [http://podcasts.tv.org/theagenda/video/2369250\\_480x270\\_512k.mp4](http://podcasts.tv.org/theagenda/video/2369250_480x270_512k.mp4)

differently organized, but we also regularly confront white innocence and a colour line of modernity/pre-modernity, in our case an insistence that the problem is our violent religion and culture.

As Fanon insisted, the colonial project is a *racial* project of accumulation. Today, with anti-Muslim racism at an all-time high in North America (and not just with Donald Trump as the new president of the United States), it is hard not to see the race line underpinning responses to Muslims. For instance, the argument that Muslims possess an innate incapacity for rational thought and have a pre-disposition to violence gives coherence to many a security hearing for those suspected of involvement in terrorism. Psychologists and psychiatrists serving as expert witnesses guide the court in understanding Muslims and their cultural predisposition for violence. Muslim savagery is read in the personality of the detainee, and in his practices of religiosity. ‘How many times do you pray?’ is still a popular question for interrogators. Elsewhere I have written of the sentencing of Omar Khadr by a military commission at Guantanamo, and specifically of the testimony of the psychiatrist Michael Welner, testimony that was the core of the state’s case against Khadr. Welner relied upon Nicolai Sennels, a far-right propagandist of anti-Muslim racism, who maintained that Muslims had “a catastrophically damaged gene pool.”<sup>2</sup> Lest we are tempted to believe that such positions belong only to the fringe (a fringe with legal authority nonetheless), we should keep in mind how an old fashioned biological racism lies just beneath the contemporary scientific gaze on Muslims. Socio-biological and psychological lines of argument abound whenever explanations for radicalization are being sought, for instance. Radicalization experts often blame Islam itself or the Muslim family and propose that the answer lies in greater surveillance of all Muslims. As we renegotiate our place on stolen land, and consider in the words of the editors of this collection, “the globalized condition of colonial modernity,” we would do well to consider the colour line that runs through modernity, and understand how this line both limits and enables practices of solidarity among Indigenous and racialized peoples.

An article in the *New Yorker* reminds us that the story of the Muslim Other in North America is an old story of intense racism, as well as a story of immigration. Hot Tamale Louie, an Afghan immigrant named Zarif Khan, came to the American Midwest in 1907, making his way from the frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan. He began selling tamales from

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<sup>2</sup> Sherene Razack, “The Manufacture of Torture as Public Truth: The Case of Omar Khadr.” In *At the Limits of Justice: Women of Colour on Terror*. Eds. Suvendrini Perera and Sherene Razack, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014, pp. 57-85.

a cart (as did many other Afghans). Close to Khan's old stomping ground, Gillette, Wyoming, has now given birth to a virulent "Stop Islam" movement. The Muslims in this area trace their presence to Tamale Louis's time and their history, like Khan's, is one of repeated evictions from citizenship but also historical moments of inclusion. The founder of "Stop Islam" is Bret Colvin who fondly remembers that his great-grandfather "used to shoot Indians for the cavalry for five dollars a head."<sup>3</sup> Colonial modernities have long been unsettled by figures such as Khan who was a wealthy man when he was murdered by a nephew in Pakistan, a man with a widespread reputation for enterprise but also great generosity.

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<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Schulz, "Citizen Khan," *The New Yorker*, June 6 & 13, 2016, p. 89.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book results from a two-day international, interdisciplinary conference, entitled *Unsettling Colonial Modernity: Islamicate Contexts in Focus*. The conference was held in April 2015, at the University of Alberta (Canada), located on unceded Papaschase Cree Territory in Treaty Six Territory, the traditional meeting ground and home for First Nations (Cree, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, Nakota Sioux) and Métis people. As the editors of this volume, we believe that we cannot meaningfully discuss the condition of coloniality in Islamicate contexts without having first acknowledged the continued imposition of a racially hierarchical, economically exploitative, and ecologically destructive system of settler colonialism upon the very land on which we gathered for our meeting.

The UCM conference gave us the unique privilege of connecting with a fabulous team of scholars at the University of Alberta who provided thoughtful advice and generous support both in the course of making preparations for and during the conference itself. We are grateful to faculty members whose excellent feedback as our project advisors helped us shape this project with care since its initial launch in 2014, as well as to our panel chairs whose insightful engagements with the presenters remarkably elevated the quality of the conference. Thank you Yasmeen Abu-Laban, Karyn Ball, Zohreh Bayatrizi, Michael Frishkopf, David J. Goa, Andrew Gow, Jocelyn Hendrickson, Joseph Hill, Jenny R. Kelly, Susanne Luhmann, Mojtaba Mahdvai, Ann McDougall, Iman Mersal, Sourayan Mookerjea, Nisha Nath, Michael O'Driscoll, Lahoucine Ouzgane, Joseph Patrouch, Malinda Smith, Jaro Stacul, Chloe Taylor, and Terri Tomskey.

The conference included three distinct components: keynote lectures, panel presentations, and poster presentations. We are deeply grateful to our keynote speakers, Sherene Razack and Parin Dossa, for the two magnificent talks they delivered. We also acknowledge all of our panel presenters whose remarkable research ideas constituted the intellectual core of the conference. Many thanks to Rawan Abdelbaki, Zubair Ahmad, Kritee Ahmed, Rouzbeh Akhbari, Roxana Akhbari, Rasoul Aliakbari, Khalid Alhathlool, Afshan Amjad, Mark Ayyash, Jasna Balorda, Krista Banasiak, Katherine Bischooping, Derek Bryce, Valentina Cappuri, Elizabeth Carnegie, Ahmad El-Sayed, Andrew Gayed, Marriam Georgis, Riva Gewarges, Duygu Gül-Kaya, Roshan Jahangir, Felix Kalmenson,

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Last but not least, we thank all of our authors for having patiently worked with us throughout the various stages of the coming together of this book. Their original and thought-provoking scholarship has been and will continue to be an endless source of inspiration for us.

Siavash Saffari, Roxana Akhbari, Kara Abdolmaleki, and Evelyn Hamdon  
March 2017



## INTRODUCTION

# UNSETTLING COLONIAL MODERNITY: ISLAMICATE CONTEXTS IN FOCUS

SIAVASH SAFFARI, KARA ABDOLMALEKI  
AND ROXANA AKHBARI

For nearly a century, debates about a condition code-named *modernity* have held a critical space in Muslim-majority societies at both theoretical and practical levels. Throughout this period, a perceived tension between modernity and Islamic traditions has been one of the defining features of many social, political, and cultural studies. Within South Asia, Middle East, and Northern Africa, a wide range of critical questions regarding democratization, the rights and status of women, socioeconomic development, globalization, and the trajectories of change in social and cultural values continue to be examined with reference to the analytical framework of Islam and modernity. Similarly, in the Western academy the question of compatibility or incompatibility of Islam and modernity has long preoccupied Orientalists and scholars in various fields of social sciences and humanities.

As a collective effort, this book offers an alternative approach for analyzing the lived social, political, and cultural experiences of people from Islamicate contexts in relation to historically constructed (and presently sustained) asymmetrical global power structures, and beyond the false binaries of Islam/modernity, and Islam/West. To this end, the contributions in this volume examine, from a wide range of perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds, the historical encounters with, past and present responses to, and ongoing efforts to unsettle and transcend what we identify as *colonial modernity*, within Islamicate contexts.<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> The term *Islamicate* was originally coined by the prominent American historian of Islam, Marshall G. S. Hodgson, who used it in his 1974 book, *The Venture of Islam, Volume 1: The Classical Age of Islam*, to describe “the social and cultural

analytical starting point of this approach is an understanding of colonial modernity as a condition whose introduction into Islamicate contexts was facilitated historically by the gradual expansion of European colonialism into South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Northern African societies. Also informing our approach is the recognition of the many modes through which, in Europe itself, and in North America by extension, people from Islamicate contexts have been, and continue to be, otherized in the constitution and the advancement of the project of modernity.

The wider intellectual and academic context in which our collective project has taken shape is a growing skepticism about the unilinear and Eurocentric conceptions of modernity and of the history of the modern world. This skepticism is today manifested in a range of critical discourses, such as indigenous modernities, multiple modernities, and alternative modernities, as well as a rich body of literature provincializing Europe, unveiling the darker side of its modernity, and calling for the decolonization of knowledges, norms, and practices that were made hegemonic in the course of Europe's colonization of the world. It is in dialogue with these global counterdiscourses that the present book sets out to bring to light many social, political, cultural, epistemological, and aesthetic modes of resistance, within both Muslim-majority and diasporic contexts, aimed at subverting and unsettling the globalized condition of colonial modernity.

### **(Re)Historicizing an 'Encounter'**

We begin our inquiry into the condition of colonial modernity, and its unfolding and unsettling in Islamicate contexts, by probing the two categories of modernity and coloniality. For Jürgen Habermas, the former refers to an historical and epistemological shift in Europe, articulated by “the philosophers of the Enlightenment.”<sup>2</sup> At the sociopolitical and socioeconomic level, Habermas contends, what characterizes modernity is a move toward “the rational organization” of society and the development

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complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims” (59). Building on Hodgson's and other, more recent conceptions, in this volume we use the term in its most inclusive sense, to refer to the dynamic mosaic of social and cultural life forms that exist not only in Muslim-majority societies, but also in diasporic Muslim communities.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity: An Unfinished Project,” in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, ed. Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), 45.

of “the universalistic foundations of morality and law.”<sup>3</sup> Anthony Giddens, too, traces the rise of modernity to the European Enlightenment, describing modernity as “modes of social life or organisation which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence.”<sup>4</sup> Expanding on these modern modes of life, other commentators have pointed to a number of developments, particularly the formation and consolidation of the nation-state, and the emergence of industrial capitalism and the globalizing patterns of industrialization and urbanization.<sup>5</sup>

Absent from such conceptualizations of modernity by Habermas, Giddens, and a host of other commentators, is any meaningful attentiveness to the link between this historical shift and the momentous event that preceded the age of Enlightenment in Europe, namely the rise of European colonialism in the late fifteenth century. Though the scholarship dealing with the question of modernity in Islamicate contexts is also largely inattentive to this critical link, the historical development that has been dubbed the “encounter with modernity”<sup>6</sup> is nevertheless understood by many as a consequence of the nineteenth-century acceleration of European colonialism in Asia and Africa. This description, though it is analytically both limited and limiting, is not entirely unfounded. The nineteenth century was marked by a sequence of European military advances into areas ruled by Mughal, Ottoman, and Qajar empires. The French military campaign in Egypt and Syria, which lasted from 1798 to 1801, was an attempt by Napoléon Bonaparte to counter Britain’s eastward expansion. The Russo-Persian wars of the early nineteenth century, which resulted in the loss of Qajar territories in the Caucasus, were yet another harbinger of European domination in the region.

It was following these military defeats that Ottoman and Qajar rulers launched a series of modernization programs in an effort to compensate

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991), 1.

<sup>5</sup> See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944); Derek Sayer, *Capitalism and Modernity: An Excursus on Marx and Weber* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Luciano Pellicani, *The Genesis of Capitalism and the Origins of Modernity*, trans. James G. Colbert (New York: Telos Press, 1994); Prasenjit Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 17.

for the perceived backwardness of their societies vis-à-vis, and to catch up to, major European powers. In Ottoman territories, a comprehensive Tanzimat program, including military, educational, legal, and institutional reforms, was introduced in 1839 by Sultan Abdülmejid I. Concurrently in Egypt, similar measures were implemented during the reign of Muhammad Ali Pasha. Of the Qajar kings, it was Naser al-Din Shah, who in the 1850s embarked on a quest to introduce European-style reforms by creating Iran's first modern educational institution, a postal system, and a modern military force. The quest for modernization in Islamicate societies continued throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as newly emerged nation-states, with support from Western-educated and Western-oriented technocrats, sought to design and build their societies anew in the image of modern European societies. Turkey under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Iran under Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi are prototypical examples of these Eurocentric modernization projects.<sup>7</sup>

This twofold condition, namely the initiation of modernization programs under the ominous shadow of Europe's military dominance and the decided Eurocentricity of these programs, positively reveals the conspicuous interwovenness of coloniality and modernity in the contemporary history of the region. Importantly, however, and contrary to what the conventional historiography of modernity in Islamicate contexts suggests, such interwovenness was neither exclusive to a particular regional context, nor did it begin in the nineteenth century. In this regard, and in identifying the category of *colonial modernity* as the subject of our inquiry and critique, we propose that a critical analysis of the encounter with and the responses to modernity in Islamicate contexts would benefit from the analytical insight offered by the *modernity/coloniality* framework. The framework owes much of its theoretical credential to the "Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality" (MCD) project, a collective effort launched in the late 1990s by a group of leading Latin American scholars including, among others, Enrique Dussel, Walter Dignolo, Edgardo Lander, Anibal Quijano, Arturo Escobar, and Fernando Coronil.

For MCD theorists, far from being distinct and divisible, modernity and coloniality have historically represented two coconstitutive forces, the latter embodying the "darker side" and the "hidden agenda" of the former.<sup>8</sup> Where Habermas and Giddens trace the birth of modernity to the advent of Cartesian logic or Kantian critique, MCD theorists regard the colonization

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<sup>7</sup> See Touraj Atabaki, *The State and the Subaltern: Modernization, Society and the State in Turkey and Iran* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Walter Dignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 2.

of the Americas as the inaugural point of modernity.<sup>9</sup> Extending on and bringing together the contributions of mid-twentieth-century dependency and postcolonial theorists, MCD scholarship underlines the connected histories of the colonizer and the colonized, the center and the periphery, within the global context of a capitalist colonial modernity. Concomitantly locating various regions of the world in the fifteenth-century matrix of an expanding European colonial modernity, Dussel, for instance, notes that while European Atlantic voyages were prompted by a desire to circumvent the Ottoman blockade and open alternative trade routes with Asia, the conquest of the Americas gave Europe its first and most decisive comparative advantage over its mighty eastern Muslim rivals.<sup>10</sup>

Although it acknowledges the historical realities of the rise and fall of empires and fierce imperial rivalries between European and non-European powers, Dussel's account nevertheless proposes that it was only Europe that sought, and through the force of colonialism managed, to establish global hegemony and a "world system."<sup>11</sup> Placing coloniality front and center in investigating the global experiences of modernity, as Dussel does, is predicated on an understanding of coloniality both as the condition of the global hegemony of European capitalist modernity, and as the broader context in which countries of the periphery embarked on their paths to modernization. From this perspective, the historiography of modernity in Islamicate contexts cannot begin with the nineteenth-century acceleration of European military expansion into Asia and Africa, but with the very dawn of European colonialism in the late fifteenth century. This is precisely why Dussel stresses linkages between European colonial projects in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, and Mignolo regards the nineteenth-

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<sup>9</sup> Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 132.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 134. That European preoccupations and competition with the Ottoman Empire was a key factor triggering Europe's conquest of the Americas is corroborated by commentators such as Eric Mielants, who argues that "it was precisely the inter-city-state competition for access to Eastern markets and the threat of the expanding Ottoman Empire that led to the discovery of the Americas." See: Eric Mielants, *The Origins of Capitalism and the 'Rise of the West'* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2007), 85

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 132. Similarly, British military historian Geoffrey Parker argues that in the period between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the military superiority of European nations vis-à-vis their imperial rivals enabled them to establish the first global hegemony in history. See Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West 1500-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1988]), 154.

century assault on Mughal, Qajar, and Ottoman territories as part of a global design that had begun to take shape several centuries earlier with the invasion and settlement of the Americas.<sup>12</sup>

It is now well-understood and well-documented that by the time the military encounters with European colonial modernity occurred, the territories under Mughal, Ottoman, and Qajar rule had already been incorporated into a world system of capitalist modernity in which major European powers constituted the center and the colonized world the periphery. Thus, Karen Armstrong points out that in the Mughal context, by the mid-eighteenth century, Bengal had been transformed by the British into a site for the production of “raw materials for the industrialized Western markets.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Janet Afary notes that the peripherization of Iran and the incorporation of its economy into the global capitalist system had commenced with the establishment of expansive trade links with Europe, the immediate result of which was the transformation of the Iranian economy from subsistence-based to cash-crop production.<sup>14</sup> Other historians, including Juan Cole, trace the formation of this asymmetrical trade system to the early sixteenth-century expansion of the Portuguese empire into the Persian Gulf, which was aimed at challenging Ottoman influence and controlling “the Hurmuz spice trade and the Bahrain pearl fisheries.”<sup>15</sup>

The postcolonial disenchantment with colonial modernity and the postmodern doubt about the emancipatory promises of the European Enlightenment have, in recent years and decades, opened spaces for the articulation of alternative historiographies narrating the condition and content of modernity in South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Highlighting the precolonial emergence of a range of sociopolitical and socioeconomic patterns of change in these geographic areas, some historians challenge the conception of modernity as a European phenomenon and a product of occidental rationalism. For Indian historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam, for example, modernity is a post-sixteenth-century shift in the Eurasian civilizational zone with diverse histories and a

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<sup>12</sup> Mignolo, *The Darker Side*, 184.

<sup>13</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library Chronicles, 2002), 147.

<sup>14</sup> Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 17-19.

<sup>15</sup> Juan Cole, *Sacred Space And Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 37

multiplicity of normative and structural constellations.<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, Iranian historian Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi regards modernity as an ethos whose foundations in the Persianate context already existed before the encounter with European modernity.<sup>17</sup>

While the historiographies of Subrahmanyam and Tavakoli-Targhi lend themselves to the articulation of alternative notions of modernity, or alternative modernities, a number of other scholars stress the need to abandon the very discourse of, and to theorize alternatives to, modernity. One advocate of this total departure, Hamid Dabashi, contends that modernity is an entirely European project introduced into Islamicate contexts “through the gun barrel of colonialism.”<sup>18</sup> For Dabashi, at a time when the very philosophical tenets of modernity are in question, any attempt to theorize multiple or alternative modernities is in effect an exercise in multiplying the sites of this crisis.<sup>19</sup> Dabashi’s *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (2012) provides an example of seeking out alternative categories for interpreting current realities and imagining future possibilities through a close and critical (re)reading of literary and cultural traditions as articulated in distinct societies, regions, and empires.

### **Multiple Modernities: Between the Procrustean Bed and the Nativist Trap**

In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Sigmund Freud proposes that the process of building a civilization is identical to that of the psychic development of an individual. In his analysis, apart from the psychic superego, a civilizational superego is at work in preparing the subject for modern life. He thus posits that the two processes are indeed “interlocked.”<sup>20</sup> The formation and evolution of civilization, Freud adds, is a “process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single

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<sup>16</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 737.

<sup>17</sup> Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, “The Homeless Texts of Persianate Modernity,” *Cultural Dynamics* 13, no. 3 (November 2001): 265.

<sup>18</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 43.

<sup>19</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 187, 220. For Dabashi, the literary answer to the philosophical crisis of modernity “must be sought in manners of dissolving that all-knowing [European] subject or retrieving its irresolution in varied literary traditions” (187).

<sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1962), 79.

human individuals ... into one great unity, the unity of mankind.”<sup>21</sup> Freud then suggests that “under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations, or some epochs of civilization ... have become ‘neurotic.’”<sup>22</sup> The backdrop of Freud’s thinking and the particular “civilization” or “epoch” that he has in mind is European modernity, and the “discontent” that he diagnoses holds true especially when we take heed of the notion of human mastery over nature, which sits at the heart of Enlightenment thought. In Freudian terms, maintaining the modern world order necessitates making a hierarchical differentiation between nature and civilization, curbing the former in the interest of advancing the latter. It is precisely this distinction that informs Francis Bacon’s belief in a divine right to exercise “dominion over nature,”<sup>23</sup> and René Descartes’s view of modern humans as “masters and possessors of nature.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, the will to dominate nature is only one form of violence inherent in Europe’s Enlightenment modernity. The rise of fascism, anti-Semitism, and, more recently, of Islamophobia, in the very birthplace of European modernity, reveals a tendency to violently suppress, even eliminate, any entity deemed to be the other of the modern subject. Despite its European origins, this tendency has found some of its most devastating manifestations in the European colonial peripheries: the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Oceania.

What exacerbates this violence in the colonial periphery<sup>25</sup> is that the encounter with European modernity in these formerly colonized zones,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Gaukroger, *Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Early-Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 78.

<sup>24</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Richard Kennington (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2007), 49.

<sup>25</sup> The terms “core” and “periphery” originated from Dependency Theory literature, which explains the unequal division of wealth between developed and underdeveloped countries, or what is now called the global North and the global South. Focusing on colonial and neocolonial relations of domination, Dependency Theory, in its varied accounts, posits that the accumulation of wealth in developed countries (the core) comes at the price of the exploitation of natural resources and cheap labour, and the creation of obsolete technology markets in underdeveloped countries (the periphery). See: Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1967); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1974); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1976).

either by sheer military might or by what Abdullah Laroui identifies as “cultural imperialism,”<sup>26</sup> has imposed a sudden epistemic shift on these regions, not originating from their traditions nor having any attachment to their cultures. As noted earlier, colonial and imperial relations have turned European modernity into a procrustean bed, upon which other societies and their traditions are laid. As the local agents of this relation, comprador intellectuals have sought either to saw off the legs of local traditions or to stretch them out of shape so as to align them with Eurocentric frames of reference. This colonial and imperial violence has undermined non-European regimes of knowledge production and has erased from the historiography of modernity the role of the nexus within the Eurasian civilizational zone, between East Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Persia, the Ottoman Empire, and European city-states; it has fabricated the illusion that only the European can think.

Postcolonial theory is, in part, an attempt to theorize strategies for countering this epistemic violence. The formerly-colonized world is now in the midst of fundamentally altering its relation to Europe by proposing alternative and multiple modernities, thus unsettling the very categories of core and periphery. At the same time, the shadow of doubt that is cast, from within Europe, on the basic tenets and legacies of Enlightenment modernity reveals that the (previously) modern world is now enthralled in an age of postmodern doubt, wherein history, politics, ethics, and culture are interrogated about their secret ideological convictions. The combination of these factors creates a window of opportunity for a complete reshaping of the political-cultural *ancien régime* of the world. A present challenge in Islamicate and other non-European societies is that negotiating alternative and indigenous modernities requires, firstly, a thorough interrogation of European modernity and, secondly, a deep insight into the cultural flux, interconnectedness, and dialogical exchange. Within such a new context, wherein once-hegemonic paradigms have lost their significance, the precise nature of these alternative and multiple modernities, and exactly what any culture may take home from interactions, exchanges, and dialogues with other cultures, remain open-ended questions.

These attempts to unsettle Western hegemony and to renegotiate modernity, despite their progressive and emancipatory possibilities, run the risk of regression into “nativism”<sup>27</sup> or “cultural particularism.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Abdullah Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectuals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 100.

<sup>27</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), xxiv.

Nativist and culturally particularist tendencies, according to Mehrzad Boroujerdi, ground their logic on a doctrine which has emerged out of the post-colonial condition and which “calls for the resurgence, reinstatement, or continuance of native or indigenous cultural customs, beliefs, and values.”<sup>29</sup> Within post-colonial studies today, the term nativism has come to represent “a cultural reflex on the part of many Third World intellectuals from Southeast Asia to the Caribbean, eager to assert their newly found identity. The proponents of nativism were adamant about ending their condition of mental servitude and their perceived inferiority complex vis-à-vis the West.”<sup>30</sup>

The fundamental attempt of nativist thought is to return to a utopian past, an absolute form of local and collective agency.<sup>31</sup> Such a nostalgic return to an Edenic past is, of course, impossible under the present, relentless globalization of capital. Furthermore, nativist projects and discourses take for granted (and even reinforce) various aspects of the colonial condition and the logic of coloniality. Indeed, as Edward Said adroitly observes, Eurocentrism and nativism are binary forces that “feed off each other.”<sup>32</sup> While the latter emerges in response to the former and its colonial consequences, it nevertheless accepts and assumes “the consequences of imperialism, the racial, religious, and political divisions imposed by imperialism itself.”<sup>33</sup> Cultural particularism is essentially “self-defeating”<sup>34</sup> for two reasons: First, a harmony among various nativist ideologies will not be possible without recourse to universal principles, and, second, adherence to particularism (aka nativism) would require an ignoring of relations of power between various nativist groups, minorities,

<sup>28</sup> Akbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London and New York, Routledge, 2004 [1992]), 130. Also see Roxanne L. Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism: A Work of Comparative Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>31</sup> Ali Mirsepassi, *Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment: Philosophies of Hope and Despair* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 45.

<sup>32</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxiv.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>34</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 26.

or ideologies, which will lead to “sanctioning the *status quo* in the relations of power between the groups.”<sup>35</sup>

In contemporary Islamicate contexts, instances of nativist traps are abundant, from the anti-Western rhetoric of Iran’s rulers who have proclaimed themselves as the spokespersons of authentic Islam, while brutally crushing any form of dissent within the country, to the criminal violence of such groups as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the name of resistance against imperialism. These political movements are almost always fueled by nativist intellectual discourse. In Egypt, Sayyid Qutb; in India, Abul Ala Maududi; and in Pakistan, Israr Ahmad are some cases in point, who have offered fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic scripture. The trap of nativism also lies in the path of anticolonial and postcolonial scholars today. It is, thus, imperative to make a clear distinction between emancipatory articulations of anti-imperialism, and the “anti-imperialism of fools.”<sup>36</sup> The latter is ever present today in culturally relativist discourses that justify the calamities of religious fundamentalism and equate all attempts at Islamic reform with Islamophobia and Western-centrism. As several commentators have cautioned, there exists a fine line between fostering a much-needed indigenous modernity and the self-delusion of particularism or “self-apartheid.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, it is absolutely imperative to distinguish a radical critique of coloniality and Islamophobia in Europe and North America from the denial of human rights, subjugation of women and LGBTQ people, political oppression, and restriction of free speech by appealing to the ideas of resisting the empire, decolonization, and/or the revival of local religious and cultural traditions.

It is true that, even in their imported and top-down modes of implementation, modernization programs in Islamicate and other non-European contexts have alleviated a number of socioeconomic ailments, including the areas of poverty, health, sanitation, or literacy. Still, in these contexts, just as in Europe itself, modernization has also introduced tensions that are inherent to a “commodity economy” which

contains in itself the internal and external tensions of the modern era; it generates these tensions over and over again in an increasingly heightened form; and after a period of progress, development of human powers, and emancipation for the individual, after an enormous extension of human

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>36</sup> Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (London, New York: Verso, 2002), 126.

<sup>37</sup> Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 27.

control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, European modernity has broken the Enlightenment's promise of human autonomy and freedom. Critical Theory's critique of late modernity and capitalism starts precisely from this premise. Perhaps, then, it would be useful to utilize Critical Theory alongside postcolonial theory in order to re-examine some of the foundational tenets of Enlightenment thought while avoiding particularism. Combined with the radical critiques of modernity from its European bedrock, the theoretical insight that emerges from the (former) colonial periphery can offer a much desired third way to transcend the colonialism/nativism binary. In this regard, thinkers and scholars who adhere to the idea of a third way should be regarded as important as their European counterparts. A common thread in the thinking of these postcolonial thinkers of the periphery is that their critiques of Europe's Enlightenment modernity do not degenerate into nativism and cultural essentialism.<sup>39</sup> They walk a very fine line between two traps: 1) Embracing the norms and values of an increasingly neoliberal global north, and 2) Succumbing to tyrannical and regressive cultural and religious traditions in their home countries. Their contributions, in distinct ways, serve the project of negotiating a third way between the clashing binaries that have dictatorially defined our contemporary and connected histories.

As a number of the contributions in this volume demonstrate, bringing together these varied critiques of modernity also allows us to re-read, through a fresh lens, a wide range of aesthetic productions in Islamicate and other non-Western contexts that tackle the questions of modernity and coloniality. Eurocentric and modernist discourses have generally been dismissive of these works, a dismissal that has cast doubt on the very intellectual capabilities of non-Europeans to develop alternative modes of knowing and understanding.<sup>40</sup> Yet the potentials contained in these works of literature and art for arriving at alternative visions of a shared world, an interconnected humanity, and a common ecology are endless. Artists and

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<sup>38</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1975), 227.

<sup>39</sup> We may recall for instance that in *Culture and Imperialism*, Said distinguishes between nativist anti-imperialist discourses and what he considers to be the far more "imaginative" liberation discourses of figures such as Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon who call for a new soul and a new humanity (Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 307).

<sup>40</sup> See Hamid Dabashi, *Can Non-Europeans Think?* (London: Zed Books, 2015).

belletrists capture the zeitgeist of an age with much more detail and animation than any historian. Whereas historiographies of modernity often depict a once-hegemonic and now-shifting condition in broad strokes and detached terms, aesthetic productions capture the emotions and psyches of people who have been under the grindstone of domination. Indeed, under the glance of an adroit critic, these acts of resistance can be grouped and theorized to light the path to decolonization and indigenous modernity.

### **Contemporary Settler Colonial Violence from a Relational Angle**

Against the backdrop of the above-discussed historical and conceptual links between European colonialism and Eurocentric modernization projects within and without Europe, in the present section we seek to revisit contemporary challenges of liberal multicultural settler colonialism. We do this by reflecting on the particular place and time of a two-day conference that led to the publication of this book. The conference, which bore the same name as the title of the present volume, was held in April 2015 at the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, Canada, on an Indigenous territory within a settler colonial state and amid the Canadian state's gestures of apology for its historical injustices toward racialized populations. Acknowledging our particular positionality as non-white, immigrant-citizens or immigrant-residents of a white settler colonial society, we, organizers of the conference and authors of this introduction, take the opportunity here to reflect on the relational angle of common experiences of diasporic communities from Muslim-majority societies with other marginalized ethnic groups in Canada. The initial idea for the conference was conceived much earlier than 2015, while we were graduate students, each in a different discipline, yet all sharing similar concerns and intellectual proclivities. Though it was not always explicitly acknowledged, our collective thinking took shape in multiple ways in relation to our positionality. On the one hand, in the early 2010s, when we began our conversations about organizing this conference, the racialized othering of Muslims and Muslim-looking people was in full swing in Canada, echoing the "War on Terror" years, the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the rise of Islamophobia in North America and Europe. The defenders of the Canadian state's heavy involvement in the Afghanistan war and those who sought to expand the already expansive security apparatus frequently depicted Islam and Muslims as the others of the West and its modern civilization. On the other hand, since the 1988 apology to the Japanese Canadian community, the Canadian state has

been offering various gestures of apology to different racialized groups in the country in response to their long histories of grassroots redress movements. In the heat of Canadian state apologies to racialized communities, we would like to underline the ways in which the commonalities of experiences of settler colonial violence in racialized diasporic communities and Indigenous populations have been obscured in state discourses of apology. In doing so, we intend to draw the attention of anti-colonial scholars and activists to the growing need, especially in the age of apology, for strengthening cross-ethnics solidarities and networks of resistance in Canada's grassroots redress culture.

Examining self-representations of North American nation states in the context of political apologies is especially important as these representations tend to have significant implications for reinforcing the disproportionate accumulation of the capital in these regions – partly through shaping the processes of global (im)migration and racialization that exclusively benefit North America. An example of a political apology that nicely captures the global impact of self-representations of nation states is Canada's 2008 apology to Aboriginal peoples. In 2008, one year after the United Nations declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (followed by decades of Indigenous activism and negotiations between Indigenous peoples and the U.N. member states), the Canadian state offered its second formal apology to Aboriginal peoples.<sup>41</sup> This apology, entitled *The Statement of Apology to Former Students of Residential Schools*, was delivered by Stephen Harper, the prime minister of Canada at the time, and particularly addressed the Canadian government's explicit role in genocidal practices of Indian Residential Schools (IRS). The significance of Canada's 2008 apology is that it was followed by the government's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, promising to redress its past injustices against Aboriginal peoples; Canada's TRC allowed the Canadian government to represent itself as the first "established democracy" with a national Truth and Reconciliation Commission (especially in 2009, the UN International Year of Reconciliation).<sup>42</sup> It is

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<sup>41</sup> Giving a full account of Canada's contemporary redress movements is outside the scope of this short introductory chapter. For a complete account of these movements, please see Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham, "Introduction," in *Reconciling Canada: Critical Perspectives on the Culture of Redress*, ed. Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2013); and Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2013)

<sup>42</sup> For a more complete account of Canada's contemporary redress movements, please see Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham, "Introduction," in