

Introduction

Enemies of Empire

Nowhere within the British Empire were black people passive victims. On the contrary, they were everywhere active resisters.

Peter Fryer, *Black People in the Empire: An Introduction*

On 4 August 1857, some three months after the commencement of the insurgency in India, though it is unlikely he was aware of it at the time, the former slave and American abolitionist Frederick Douglass gave a speech in Rochester, in New York State, felicitating a different revolutionary moment. Nearly twenty-five years before, in ‘one complete transaction of vast and sublime significance’, slaves in the British West Indies had finally been deemed human beings, restored to their rightful stature as free men and women.¹ Three decades after the 1807 abolition of the British slave *trade*, often confused with the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, Britain’s human chattel on the vast sugar and cotton plantations of the West Indies had officially ceased to be slaves, though they would remain compulsorily apprenticed to their owners for another five years. In the United States, however, slavery still flourished – as indeed it did in other parts of the world such as Brazil, where it carried on to the end of that century. Douglass was speaking to fellow abolitionists, gathered in Rochester to commemorate the West India Emancipation, and he took pains to contrast Britain’s significant achievement with the ‘devilish brutality’ he saw around him in a formally democratic and republican land. The act of abolition, deriving though it did from ‘the moral sky of Britain’, had universal ramifications since, Douglass insisted, it ‘belongs not exclusively to England and English people, but to lovers of Liberty and mankind everywhere’.²

Douglass’s speech paid due homage to the august ranks of British abolitionists. For those who had claimed that only Englishmen could ‘properly celebrate’ the West Indian Emancipation, he had a message: in that case *all* those who love freedom can ‘claim to be Englishmen, Englishmen in the love of Justice and Liberty, Englishmen in magnanimous efforts to protect the weak against the strong and the slave against the slaveholder’.³ Thereafter, however, his speech took a curious turn. Douglass had also to counter the charge, made by some of his fellow American blacks, that to commemorate the West Indian Emancipation was to celebrate the achievements of others, specifically the deeds of white people, ‘a race by which we are despised’. In a two-pronged response, Douglass noted that, while in the North American struggle against slavery, ‘we, the coloured people’ had not yet played a significant role, this was not the case with Emancipation in the British West Indies.

To the extent that they had been able to, the ‘rebellious chattel’ in Britain’s Caribbean colonies had strenuously resisted their oppression, and so ‘a share of the credit of the result falls justly to the slaves themselves’. It is this insight that then leads Douglass to make his famous pronouncement: ‘The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle ... Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and never will.’ With an irony he was probably unaware of at the time – news of the Indian ‘Mutiny’ was only slowly making its way to and around Europe and America – Douglass quietly observed that some white abolitionists actively discouraged black initiative, expecting black abolitionists to ‘fight like the Sepoys of India, under white officers’. This, Douglass says, must not deter him and others who would struggle for their own freedom; it is ‘no part of gratitude to allow our white friends to do all the work, while we merely hold their coats’. As he was speaking, of course, the ‘sepoys’ had, in fact, risen against their white officers in a bloody insurgency that would alter the shape of the British Empire for good, ending the rule of the marauding East India Company in the subcontinent as the Crown took over full governance of British India.

Well over the century and a half since Douglass gave that speech, the notion that freedom from both slavery and imperial rule emerged thanks to the benevolence of the rulers continues to exercise a tenacious hold within certain influential strands of British imperial history and in the popular imagination. Both abolition and decolonization – twin outcomes of Britain’s expansionary colonial project over three centuries – are all too frequently regarded as deriving chiefly from the campaigning consciences of white British reformers or as the logical outcome of the liberal and liberalizing project that empire ostensibly always was, conquering in order to free. Despite an abundance of histories of resistance, and not only from a nationalist perspective, which make clear the constitutive role of resistance to the imperial project, ‘imperial initiative’ – colonies ‘given’ their freedom when they were deemed ready for it – as the motive force of decolonization remains stubbornly entrenched in much political and public discourse in Britain. Where, for Douglass, the story of Emancipation specifically, and freedom more generally, was one of universal aspiration and shared struggles, in its most influential and popular versions it continues to be figured as a capacious British, or now Anglo-American, franchise generously extended to peoples across the globe. Edward Said observed correctly that ‘a standard imperialist misrepresentation has it that exclusively Western ideas of freedom led the fight against colonial rule, which mischievously overlooks the reserves in Indian and Arab culture that *always* resisted imperialism, and claims the fight against imperialism as one of imperialism’s major triumphs’.⁴ Writing in the 1930s, G. M. Trevelyan, Regius professor of history at Cambridge, understood such extensions to be ‘pre-eminently a result of our free institutions, our freedom of speech and association, and all that habit of voluntarism and private initiative’.⁵ Today, where imperial initiative is not actively given the credit for decolonization, we are offered the claim, here articulated by David Cannadine, that the Empire was ‘given away in a fit of collective indifference’.⁶ John Darwin, meanwhile, paraphrases that school of thought in terms of the notion that ‘the British colonial empire was liberated more by the indifference of its masters than the struggles of its subjects’.⁷ In either event, the ‘granting’ or ‘giving’ of

independence to British colonies once they were deemed 'ready' for it, remains a cause for national self-congratulation; it fits neatly into an equally familiar establishment mythology about 'English capacities to reform without violence or rejecting valuable past practice'.⁸ Like all mythologies, this too relies on the selective elision of key strands in the story.

Such accounts – which, of course, draw on a longer tradition of Whig historiography – typically figure the geopolitical West as rolling on inexorably towards greater freedom, the darker nations taught to follow in its wake. Influential popular right-wing historians such as Niall Ferguson have coined clunky neologisms like 'Anglobalization' which enshrine the pre-eminence of the British Empire as a positive force leading the world towards this hypothetical state of total freedom, an epic in which the Empire rises and falls, only to open out onto greater vistas of liberty.⁹ As the historian Victor Kiernan has observed, the word 'freedom' carries a racialized inflection, 'easier made into a parrot-cry than defined, and Westerners boast now of being free very much as not long ago they boasted of being white'.¹⁰ In actuality, freedom from British rule was the end result of hard-fought struggles and different kinds of negotiation, historical processes which unfolded over a long period of time. As the Empire expanded from the slave colonies of the Caribbean to encompass the settler colonies of North America, Australia and New Zealand, the Indian subcontinent and large swathes of Africa, it was met with different kinds of resistance, both peaceful and violent, sometimes taking the form of mutinies, revolts and wars, and at others of civil disobedience and passive resistance.¹¹ This much is not in question outside the most retrograde circles, even if there is disagreement about the extent to which such events actually had an impact on or effected eventual decolonization. While the work of such counter-historians of slavery and empire as Herbert Aptheker, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, C. L. R. James, Robin Blackburn, Terence Ranger, Hilary Beckles, Gelien Matthews, Richard Gott, John Newsinger, Stephen Howe and Antoinette Burton, to name just a few, has shown comprehensively that the history of the British Empire is also the history of resistance to it, and – importantly, from both beyond and within Britain – such resistance is still not central to the writing of British imperial history. 'The trouble with British imperial histories', Burton has noted recently, 'is that they are not written with dissent and disruption in the lead', even though 'the very character of imperial power was shaped by its challengers and by the trouble they made for its stewards.'¹² The familiar 'rise-and-fall' model is indeed misleading, suggesting a long period of stability followed by a sudden end, whereas the maintenance of imperial rule in fact required constant vigilance and frequently forceful responses to resistance.¹³

On the other side of the coin, much attention, within both imperial historiography and postcolonial literary studies, has been paid to the ways in which colonial subjects took up British ideas and turned them against empire, 'writing back' or 'striking back' when making claims to freedom and self-determination – the now well-worn 'Caliban' model, as it were, of a language learned from and deployed against the colonizer. Originally theorized by the Latin American critic Roberto Fernández Retamar, the idea has now been generalized beyond recognition and its original historical usage.¹⁴ As an abstract paradigm it is vulnerable to being read as a version of an idea familiar to imperial historians whereby anticolonial

nationalism was the result of ‘the tendency of the colonial rulers themselves to construct political institutions which could then be captured by local politicians and used against their masters’.¹⁵ Also invoking the figure of Caliban – Shakespeare’s slave who learned language from his master, Prospero, and then used it to curse his enslavement – Jan Nederveen Pieterse notes: ‘The most commonly observed form of dialectics of imperialism is the *dialectics of assimilation*, particularly as regards education ... [This] reared a colonial intelligentsia who absorbed the Western ideals of liberty and patriotism and put them in the service of national awakening.’¹⁶ However, while Pieterse himself is attuned to it, in general the possibility of reverse impact – including reverse appropriation and reworking – either has been curiously sidelined or is, at best, invoked notionally. In fact, read carefully, a substantial archive points clearly to the existence of such reverse influence, particularly in relation to the emergence of British criticism of empire – too often read, in Whig mode, as a simple outcropping of a home-grown liberalism.

What would happen if, in something akin to the ‘spirit of dialectics’ which informs Susan Buck-Morss’s exploration of the Haitian Revolution’s influence on Hegel, we explored the possibility that Britain’s enslaved and colonial subjects were not merely victims of this nation’s imperial history and subsequent beneficiaries of its crises of conscience, but rather agents whose resistance not only contributed to their own liberation but also put pressure on and reshaped some British ideas about freedom and who could be free?¹⁷ We might even ask whether the idea of Britain’s uniquely liberal Empire, which was humanitarian in conception and had the liberation of its conquered subjects as its ultimate goal, might itself have been, at least in part, a response to the claims to humanity, freedom and self-determination made by those very subjects. One axis, though not the only one, along which this question can be explored is that of dissent around the question of empire in Britain, with dissidents variously referred to as ‘critics of empire’, ‘imperial sceptics’ or British ‘anticolonialists’. We know, of course, that not only was there significant diversity in attitudes to the Empire within the metropole, but also, at various moments, interrogation of and even opposition to the imperial project itself. In recent decades, a small number of distinguished historians have produced an important body of work fleshing out the activities and impact of imperial dissidents.¹⁸ They include, most importantly, Stephen Howe, to whose foundational *Anticolonialism in British Politics* this work, particularly the later chapters, is indebted. Significant additional contributions to scholarship detailing the nature of domestic criticism of aspects of empire have also been made by Gregory Claeys, Nicholas Owen and Mira Matikkala. While between them these works offer an impressive and substantial account of the existence and importance of British dissent on the question of empire over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they do not examine in any depth the vital *relationship* between anticolonial resistance in the periphery and the emergence of such dissent in the metropole. In his unsparing account of colonial repression and violence, John Newsinger has discussed the ways in which ‘radicals and socialists in Britain organised, demonstrated and protested in solidarity with ... resistance movements’ in the colonies, noting rightly that the likes of Ernest Jones, the Chartist leader, are part of a proud British anti-imperialist tradition.¹⁹ But it is important to account also for the ways in which that tradition was influenced and shaped

by anticolonial insurgency and anticolonial agents (including campaigners and intellectuals). As we shall see in [Chapter 1](#), the Indian uprising of 1857 fired Jones's imagination, distinctly shaping his criticism of the imperial project, and leading him to go as far as to urge British working people, whose own struggles were flagging, to learn from the Indian rebels. The emergence of metropolitan dissent on colonial questions alongside liberation struggles in the colonies, *Insurgent Empire* argues, was a dialogical and, at times, dialectical process in which the lines of influence can be seen to go in both directions.

To examine the extent to which awareness of rebellion and resistance in the colonies, and in due course contact with anticolonial figures, shaped British domestic criticism of empire, which eventually grew from occasional dissent into a more full-throated anticolonialism, is to overturn the still prevalent emphasis on political and intellectual influence as radiating outwards from the imperial centre towards the periphery. It is to interrogate the tenacious assumption that the most significant conceptions of 'freedom' are fundamentally 'Western' in provenance, albeit open to subversive appropriation by the colonized. A closer look at the archives indicates that, in the contexts of both antislavery and anticolonialism, 'freedom' was a contested concept, its content emerging dialogically, determined through experience and struggle. The rebels of Morant Bay in 1865, for instance, challenged the notion that they were being 'emancipated' from slavery into wage labour, insisting instead on different labour practices. Nearly a century later, for many Kenyan resisters and insurgents in the period following the Second World War, self-determination involved not individualism but collective land-ownership as manifested in a struggle for 'Land and Freedom'. Such contestations, I suggest, were not without impact on metropolitan ideologies and practices. Without merely replicating the inversions of nationalist histories, *Insurgent Empire* shows how specific states of subjection and struggles against them were fundamental to how freedom – and cognate concepts like 'liberation', 'self-determination' and 'emancipation' – were understood and asserted both by insurgents on the ground and by their interpreters in the diaspora, influencing, in turn, how it was understood and reframed in the imperial centre. As Timothy Brennan notes of anticolonial thought in the peripheries, the very fact of colonialism entailed that the ideas at hand would 'include (inevitably, though not exclusively) those from Europe'.²⁰ Without pretending that the field could ever have been level or the lines of influence simply reciprocal given the constitutive power differential, this book suggests that there was *also* an anticolonial impact from outside Europe on metropolitan thought – specifically, though not only, on British dissent around and criticism of the colonial project. Resistance to the colonial project in several parts of the British Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries helped shape criticism of and opposition to the imperial project within Britain itself. That influence was not necessarily always ideational, best assessed using the tools of intellectual history; it was often exercised through struggle and by crises occasioned by insurgency.

Insurgent Empire argues that there were heterogeneous but not unconnected arcs of criticism of empire that can be said to constitute a dissident and frequently outright anticolonial inheritance in Britain forged over more than a century. It examines, first, some nineteenth-century critical engagements with empire in the wake of rebellions and unrest; and, second, the emergence of more explicitly left-wing and internationalist anticolonialism

in the twentieth century. Two major nineteenth-century crises of rule – the 1857 uprising in India and the 1865 rebellion of former slaves in Morant Bay – had important consequences for many of a liberal or radical bent in Britain. Through the fog of racialized imperial righteousness that enveloped the public sphere, these crises and the controversies they generated allowed for a rebel consciousness to be discerned, acknowledged and interpreted, even if only through newsprint and parliamentary papers. Having troubled liberal hierarchies of ‘freedom’ in which elite white Englishmen were its most ardent and deserving devotees, these crises then cleared the ground for common cause to be made with some radicals, like Jones, drawing parallels between colonial insurgencies and working-class resistance. In the case of the Positivist Richard Congreve, it formed the basis for a working-class (and interestingly also female) rejection of the imperial project. At the *fin de siècle*, several politically inclined travellers to antique lands under British rule arrived into milieus of ‘unrest’, finding themselves not the dispensers but the subjects of political tutelage, learning from what they witnessed, shifting their views, and even being radicalized in the process. From the years following the First World War, this process of what I call ‘reverse tutelage’ was furthered by the presence of strong anticolonial black and Asian voices within the metropole, who took on the function of interpreters between British dissidents and the millions who were resisting being governed by Britain.

The ‘interdependence of cultural terrains in which colonizer and colonized coexisted and battled each other’, to use Edward Said’s formulation, is examined in this study through the lens of resistance and response – specifically the response of those inclined to interrogate the imperial consensus.²¹ British national self-conceptions, particularly those to do with a love of liberty, certainly drew on existing domestic traditions; but as the Empire expanded through the long nineteenth century into the first half of the twentieth century, these conceptions were also subject to the pressures created by resistance to that Empire. When these moments of discernment are set alongside the growing contact between domestic critics of empire and anticolonialists from Britain’s vast sphere of colonial possessions and influence, it becomes clear that the development of ideas of freedom in the context of empire did indeed involve lines of influence in both directions, if unevenly so, since ‘it was not the struggle of same with same’.²² Said rightly notes that, without ‘metropolitan doubts and opposition, the characters, idiom, and very structure of native resistance to imperialism would have been different’.²³ Those doubts and opposition were moulded in turn by native resistance – a point Said makes but does not elaborate in any detail: ‘Opposition to empire in London and Paris was affected by resistance offered in Delhi and Algiers.’²⁴ In assessing this relationship, both British imperial historiography and postcolonial literary studies have left work to be done.

Colonial Insurgency and Historical Silences

It was we ourselves who had supplied to our subject-races the materials which were now being used to weave the imperial winding-sheet. We had done this deliberately, not swerving from the stance adopted by Macaulay in the 1830s when he had pressed for the adoption of an English education system in India, under whose discipline Indians should be trained to become fit to take responsibility for their own affairs.

A. P. Thornton, *The Imperial Idea and Its Enemies*

Our Empire has grown into a Commonwealth of free nations, because of Britain's deliberate policy towards her Imperial responsibilities. What has happened today, therefore, is not a retreat but a direct fulfilment of the noble work done by our fathers and grandfathers in taking our traditions of liberal law and material progress to every quarter of the globe.

Lord De La Warr, upon the Royal Empire Society substituting the word 'Commonwealth' for 'Empire' in its masthead

In his important assessment of the historiographical place of the Haitian Revolution of 1891, the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued that it is not so much active suppression as powerful silences that determine the process of writing histories. Trouillot is not simply suggesting here that there are areas of silence in individual historical accounts, as there might be in any narrative, but that 'cycles of silences' pre-exist specific histories 'to fit a world of possibilities' already deemed to be the only ones.²⁵ In the case of European historiography, what he calls a 'bundle of silences' has emerged specifically around the resistance of the colonized and the enslaved to the colonial project.²⁶ For Trouillot, the turning into a 'non-event' of the Haitian revolution is emblematic of the way in which racism, slavery and colonialism have themselves been marginalized, for in spite of 'their importance in the formation of what we now call the West ... none of these themes has ever become a central concern of the historiographical tradition in a Western country'.²⁷ In these traditions, the period from 1776 to 1843 is generally taught as an 'age of revolution' while essentially maintaining a silence on 'the most radical political revolution of the age' – that which took place in Haiti.²⁸ Trouillot's point about the elision of black agency can be generalized, I believe, to struggles against colonialism and slavery more generally, where we see 'archival power at its strongest, the power to define what is and what is not a serious object of research and, therefore, of mention'.²⁹ Thus, the narratives that continue to circulate and make sense to a majority of Western observers and readers, Trouillot suggests, is one where the West – and elite white men in particular – are the prime movers of history, taking the initiative and the action necessary to propel humankind inexorably towards freedom. The rest of the world inevitably figure as passive beneficiaries of this impulse. Resistance to European imperialism fails to 'make sense', and, like conceptions of freedom not determined by capitalist definitions, becomes quite literally 'unthinkable'.³⁰ It is an understanding of history that continues to have decisive – and deleterious – consequences in the spheres of British, American and NATO foreign policy.³¹

Trouillot's point about the extent to which the archives are both constructed *and* interpreted so as to foreground the agency of white, Western, male actors is manifest in much of the British historiography of decolonization.³² Within the 'imperial initiative' paradigm, decolonization emerges ab nihilo, the magical consequence of imperial policies developed in a vacuum immune to anticolonial pressures. It is manifest in the ongoing use of 'Commonwealth' as a euphemism for regions once colonized by Britain, enshrining as it does the cherished mythology of an Empire that ruled in order to free. The Whig politician and historian Thomas Babington Macaulay would famously say of Britannia's Empire: 'it is to her peculiar glory, not that she has ruled so widely – not that she has conquered so splendidly – but that she has ruled only to bless, and conquered only to spare'.³³ Harold Macmillan,

presiding over post-war decolonization over a hundred years later, ‘claimed self-government had been the intention behind colonial rule from its very beginnings’.³⁴ When it comes to critiques of imperial activity, there has been a tendency to privilege empire as a ‘self-correcting device’ rather than one that was forced to respond not just to ‘enlightened opinion’ in Britain but to the enslaved and colonized who asserted themselves.³⁵ These notions remain part of British common sense, along with a tenacious belief that the imperial project was, on the whole, for the good, a few blips and mishaps notwithstanding. The securing and consolidation of ‘liberty’ across the globe eventually became the official rationale for a Britannic empire that, over time, spread across swathes of North America, Asia, Africa, the Pacific Rim and the Caribbean. This would be a ‘moral’ and liberal empire with a humanitarian core, which enjoined ‘improving’ subject peoples until they were fit to receive their liberty. Making the globe and colonized peoples suitable for the spread of (capitalist) freedom would mark official British colonial and foreign policy throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As the 2003 invasion of Iraq on the basis of similar claims showed, this posture would continue to inflect foreign policy in the twenty-first century as well.

The treatment of resistance as episodic, even exceptional, has consequences for the wider public sphere. Historical studies that do emphasize dissent and disruption have not ‘made their way into commonsense perceptions of the British empire’.³⁶ What Burton describes as the absence of ‘grand synthetic counter-narratives of protest, resistance and revolution’ allows for the continued salience of imperial apologetics in the public sphere, as well as a sense – even more prominent in the wake of ‘Brexit’, or the 2016 referendum vote in favour of Britain’s leaving the European Union – that this country’s imperial role and post-imperial influence continue to be valued in the postcolonial world, or the so-called Commonwealth.³⁷ This glow of post-imperial achievement sits alongside claims that the wider British population was largely indifferent to the fate of the Empire – the ‘minimal impact thesis’.³⁸ Despite scant evidence, Stuart Ward has written, a ‘broad consensus that British culture and society were in the post-war era insulated against the periodic shocks that occasioned the demise of British power and prestige abroad’ has taken on the contours of ‘historiographical orthodoxy’.³⁹ Ward argues that, on the contrary, ‘the stresses and strains of imperial decline were not safely contained within the realm of high politics’.⁴⁰

Insurgent Empire examines how such stresses and strains – generated over several decades throughout the period of colonial rule rather than during formal decolonization alone – made their impact felt in periodic crises of empire, which in turn cleared the ground for more critical assessments of the imperial project. If, as Ward argues, it is ‘precisely the imperial context that underpinned contemporary perceptions of national degeneration’ and cast doubts on Britain’s place in the world, the various challenges to that supremacy throughout the centuries of imperial rule caused repeated crises of rule and of national identity.⁴¹ Anxieties about national degeneration were often occasioned by the repression deployed against those colonial others who laid claims to their own humanity and freedom. Many of the ideas of ‘British character’ that Ward enumerates as progressively weakened by the imminent end of empire – they included notions of ‘duty’, ‘loyalty’, ‘service’, ‘self-restraint’ and ‘gentlemanly conduct’ – were in fact thrown into crisis each time insurgency

was followed by repression.⁴² The edifice of colonial rule was subject throughout its duration to implosions – and explosions – when confronted with resistance, and these registered in public and political discourse in Britain. If decolonization was a ‘complex and intermittent process that ebbed and flowed over time’, so too was the consolidation and continuance of colonial rule, punctuated as it was by resistance and repression.⁴³

If, as John Mackenzie has argued, the ‘notion of the utterly indifferent British’ when it came to the fate of empire ‘is something of a self-justificatory and consolatory travesty’,⁴⁴ it is worth asking how this obsessive insistence on indifference also contributes to the entrenchment of the ‘cycle of silences’ with regard to the agency of colonial subjects more generally. The mythology of a managed decolonization which owed little to anticolonial resistance also resonates more generally with what Joanna de Groot describes as a familiar ‘liberal wish to find acceptable and safe stories of reform (the theme of progressive change without conflict, going back to Macaulay)’.⁴⁵ Much the same impulse would seem to animate an insistence on the marginality of British critics of empire: it is not necessary to suggest that British dissidents on imperial questions ever had the dominant hand, still less hegemony, to argue for the importance of examining connections between dissidence in a society that did not, in fact, speak with one voice on the matter of the Empire, and insurgencies which took place in distant outposts of Empire. To examine the dissident, even in the margins, is to move away from what Andrew Thompson describes as an emphasis in much imperial history-writing on ‘the official mind’, or the policy-making elite, rather than considering ‘an array of external forces working upon government’.⁴⁶ This is not to say, of course, that opposition invariably had a determinate effect upon government; lines of influence are, in any case, never easy to disentangle. If, as Thompson asserts, imperial politics ‘was pre-eminently an extra-parliamentary activity’, then opposition to empire with the agitation and activism that accompanied it should also not be assessed purely in terms of effects or numbers.⁴⁷ At the same time, we shall see that anticolonialism in Britain sometimes did decisively shape parliamentary and media debates.

Postcolonial Studies and Anticolonial Insurgency

While the field that has come to be known as postcolonial studies is assumed, in theory, to take a more than passing interest in the question of resistance to empire and imperialism, in its most influential incarnations it has emphasized the post-over the anti-colonial. In spite of its emphasis on analysing colonial discourse, the field as a whole has failed to challenge the tenacious assumption that ideas of ‘freedom’ – not just individualist or liberal renditions of liberty, but freedom in the broadest sense – are fundamentally Western (meaning European and American) in provenance, albeit available for appropriation. (I will come to more recent elaborations of the ‘decolonial’ later in this introduction.) In part, ironically enough, the focus on ‘Eurocentrism’ has resulted in a fixation on rejecting European thought generally – and the Enlightenment in particular – without a consideration of multiple lines of cultural and political engagement in the making of the entity called ‘Europe’. Rather than properly considering the Enlightenment as at once historically and culturally situated, drawing on

resources that are not in fact just ‘European’ but are potentially universal in some of their aspirations, intersecting with ideals theorized outside Europe, the field’s most influential scholars, as Neil Lazarus suggests, ‘have written at length to condemn as naive or, worse, tacitly authoritarian, any commitment to universalism, metanarrative, social emancipation, revolution’.⁴⁸ The notion of the universal – in the sense of ideas and values that might have a certain supple applicability across cultures – is itself assumed a priori to have only ever been thought of in Europe, which is guilty not only of having abused the idea – which its ruling elites certainly did – but of having come up with it in the first place. Such a sweeping repudiation of principles that might be held in common across contexts, indeed might have been forged through contact, flies in the face of the multiple historical and cultural sites where notions such as universal rights and social justice have been theorized. It also ignores a global history of human resistance to tyranny and exploitation of various kinds. Where theories of resistance are offered, the dominant wisdom of postcolonial studies has stressed what Homi K. Bhabha describes as ‘affective ambivalence and discursive disturbance’.⁴⁹ Bhabha’s transmutation of the putative ambivalence of colonial elites into a general theory of imperial undoing – which posited, as Lazarus puts it, ‘a certain slippage at the heart of the colonial episteme’ – has been persuasively subjected to critique, and need not detain us unduly here.⁵⁰ We may, however, wish to register the ways in which theories of psychic ambivalence shade without too much difficulty into a sanctioned, at times mandatory, ambivalence towards the brute reality of imperialism itself; this ambivalence in turn underlies and enables the popular apologetics for and defences of the British Empire, not least in the popular, and usually fatuous, ‘balance sheet’ assessments of empire’s pluses and minuses. This privileging of ‘ambivalence’ – not a million miles from ‘equivocation’ – may account for why, nearly thirty years into its disciplinary consolidation, postcolonial studies has not succeeded in definitively dislodging imperialist apologetics. In turn, this failure entrenches a narrow – indeed, triumphantly capitalist – understanding of ‘freedom’ when, in fact, the history of empire is also a history of contesting interpretations of the term.

By way of situating some of this book’s own concerns, I want to pause briefly on some significant – and representative – recent work that has drawn on postcolonial approaches. (Readers who wish to proceed with the historical episodes should feel free to skip straight to [Chapter 1](#) now.) Lisa Lowe’s *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015) locates itself within the wider critique of European liberal thought developed by scholars such as Uday Mehta, Walter Dignolo and Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others, to argue that ‘liberal philosophy, culture, economics, and government have been commensurate with, and deeply implicated in, colonialism, slavery, capitalism, and empire’.⁵¹ Lowe herself seeks to make visible in this context global connections that bring together aspects of the imperial project (including indenture and enslavement) as they unfolded in Europe, the Americas, East Asia and Africa. Her aim is to provide an ‘unsettling genealogy’ that ‘examines liberalism as a project that includes at once both the universal promises of rights, emancipation, wage labor, and free trade, as well as the global divisions and asymmetries on which the liberal tradition depends, and according to which such liberties are reserved for some and wholly denied to others’.⁵² Exclusion, in other words, is built into the structure of liberalism. Concepts such as ‘reason’,

‘freedom’ and ‘civilization’ work to effect colonial divisions to which the subordination of colonized and dispossessed peoples, and the appropriation of their land and labour, are fundamental. This insight is unexceptional – indeed, familiar.

But what of those who resisted dispossession and expropriation? They do not loom large in Lowe’s study. Lowe notes that, in the case of settler conquests in the Americas, ‘native resistance to European intrusion was regularly cast as a threat to the security of settler sovereignty’ (which, of course, it was!), and that black abolitionists such as Ottobah Cugoana, Mary Prince and Olaudah Equiano were ‘often persuaded’ to use the same terms of appeal as white abolitionists – against ‘cruelty’ and ‘immorality’, and to the ideal of a ‘just, humanitarian English society’. Elided from the discussion, somewhat paradoxically, are the challenges offered by the colonized to the regimes that confronted them, including liberalism.⁵³ Without romanticizing such agency or proposing that insurgent consciousness is easily accessed, it is nonetheless possible to assess the ways in which liberalism was in turn thrown into crisis by, and often responded to, the resistance of the colonized, in sometimes unexpected ways, including appropriating and domesticating it. The example Lowe herself gives is a case in point: drawing on the distinguished work of Thomas C. Holt, she rightly notes that ‘“emancipation” clearly did not establish freedom for Black peoples in the British West Indies, many of whom were still confined to the plantation, and others were left bound in economic servitude and poverty’.⁵⁴ At the same time, we may wish to pay attention – drawing both on the extant archives of counterinsurgency and the work of Holt and others – to the ways in which the ‘emancipated’ did not take the condition of continuing subjugation lying down; indeed, in the case of the West Indies, they were often the first to articulate, through their words and actions, a refusal of the condition of wage-slavery, insisting on the right to own and farm small plots of land over working for planters. As we shall see in [Chapter 2](#), the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865 both enacted resistance to a post-Emancipation regime deemed to be exploitative and, through the unfolding of the ‘Governor Eyre’ controversy back in Britain, enabled this resistance to generate debate and effect deep divisions among the metropolitan *bien-pensant*, who had to find a way to deal with the reality of black insurgency.

In the necessary process of challenging its premises, it is vital not to repeat the elisions and silences of European liberalism, particularly those that emerged historically around the agency of the enslaved and the colonized. Otherwise, at the very moment of interrogating liberalism’s elisions and exclusions, we rehearse the ways in which it renders nugatory the agency and actions of those who put pressure on it, questioned it, or rejected it outright. Despite its formally adversarial stance, the focus of colonial discourse analysis, much like that of imperial history, has largely been on the imperial centre – ironically, to the detriment of a consideration of those who were subject to these regimes, but not necessarily (indeed, hardly ever) silently so. Colonized or enslaved people did not just create ‘the conditions for liberalism’ – they often also forced open its premises and challenged its exclusions, drawing not just on Caliban’s learning of Prospero’s language but also on their own existence, experiences and cultural resources to do so. Similarly, while their exclusion may have been constitutive of European humanism, the insistence of the colonized on their own humanity demanded, and often obtained, a reconstitution. An emphasis on the official mind, often

made inevitable by the slant of the archives themselves, should not lead us to enact our own forms of forgetting, making black agency invisible or rendering resistance ‘unthinkable’ in Trouillot’s sense of the term.

Certainly, the kinds of resistance explored in *Insurgent Empire* – from the legendary Indian uprising of 1857 to the Egyptian revolution of 1882, which was fomented in part within a milieu of radical Islamic intellectualism; from the Swadeshi movement in India, with its Hindu iconography; to the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, which drew on Kikuyu cultural beliefs and practices – at once asserted cultural specificities and made insistent claims upon shared humanity. In this regard, we might recall Susan Buck-Morss’s suggestion that, if ‘the historical facts about freedom can be ripped out of the narratives told by the victors and salvaged for our own time, then the project of universal freedom does not need to be discarded but, rather, redeemed and reconstituted on a different basis’.⁵⁵ Similarly, the archives yield the sense that, even as colonial narratives of universal freedom were challenged and queried, the project of something like universal freedom was reconstituted and reframed, rather than discarded. Witnessing or interpreting resistance, British critics of empire read against the grain of colonial discourse’s insistence on immutably sharp cultural differences or radical alterity, recognizing possibilities for forging common cause in cultures of resistance, as well as what Satya P. Mohanty describes as ‘the kind of agency that is so crucial to defining practices and, collectively, cultures’.⁵⁶ In Said’s words, rebellious ‘natives’ were able to ‘impress upon the metropolitan culture the independence and integrity of their own culture, free from colonial encroachment’.⁵⁷ This does not necessarily imply either the elision of cultural differences and historical particularities, or the de facto imposition of a grand scheme of European Reason; indeed, the very nature of encounters in the face of anticolonial resistance made such elision difficult even where it might have been wished for. Uday Mehta is right to point to the impulse within British liberalism, when confronted with the unfamiliar, ‘to hitch it to a more meaningful teleology’, to annex difference, and render it a subset of more evolved European modes of thinking.⁵⁸ Yet, as we shall see, liberalism was affected not only by empire but also by anti-empire as idea and praxis. For British dissidents of a liberal-reformist bent, encounters with resistant colonial subjects often entailed learning that not all that was deemed ‘European’ was in fact solely European – that, when it came to ideas of freedom and justice, as Gurminder Bhambra puts it, ‘the concepts and traditions are not European; what is at stake is the claiming of these concepts and traditions as *European*’.⁵⁹ Unlearning paternalism, for many British dissidents, involved interrogating and working through the seeming ‘Otherness’ of the colonized, and the ‘sentimental charity’ that a sense of difference called for, as well as working with the possibilities – radical in context – offered by the often difficult practice of equality. Far from neutralizing the other within a safe mode of ‘difference’, resistance brought home the fact of a commonality that could not be contained by the familiar disposition of benevolence. What was required was solidarity.

Human Affinities, Political Communities

A revolution which does not aim at changing me by changing the relations between people does not interest me;

what's more, I doubt whether a revolution which does not affect me enough to transform me is really a revolution at all.

Jean Genet, 'The Palestinians'

For some time now, historians and literary critics who have made use of postcolonial approaches have been excited by the 'utopian' conceptual possibilities embedded in what they regard as profound otherness. In her important and influential 2006 work *Affective Communities*, Leela Gandhi reflects on the concept specifically in relation to the emergence of British anticolonialism, arguing that British radicals in the nineteenth century undertook border-crossings, 'visible in small, defiant flights from the fetters of belonging toward the unknown destinations of radical alterity'.⁶⁰ Inasmuch as theirs were 'flights from imperial similitude', the imperial dissidents of Gandhi's study were radical, she argues, in their refusal of 'the exclusionary structures of instrumental binary reason'.⁶¹ This refusal, for Gandhi, is contiguous with what she sees as fundamental to postcolonial critique: 'the impulse against imperial binarism'. Gandhi does, however, dissent from the tendency in postcolonial studies to figure the dissolution of such binaries as inevitable; Homi Bhabha famously theorizes 'ambivalence' always already inscribed 'at the very origins of colonial authority'.⁶² As I have already argued, such 'ambivalence' would seem to be little more than a theoretically fashionable version of Whig imperial history's own rendering of imperialism as a self-correcting system that arrives at emancipation or decolonization without regard to the resistance of its subjects. In other words, the theory of ambivalence produced through mimicry also suggests that there is always 'a kind of built-in resistance in the construction of any dominant discourse – and opposition is an almost inevitable effect in its construction of cultural difference'.⁶³ Gandhi rightly calls for attention to be paid to more active dissidents, those 'from within the imperial culture' who are 'unwilling to wait for its eventual hybridization, actively renouncing, refusing, and rejecting categorically its aggressive manicheanism'.⁶⁴ For all that its use of 'anti-imperialism' is expansive to a fault – 'troped as shorthand for all that was wrong and iniquitous in the world' – Gandhi's study offers us a refreshing return in our jaded times to a subculture of utopian aspiration embedded in a longing for 'ideal community'.⁶⁵ Certainly, it is the case that the late Victorian moment she examines – and to which *Insurgent Empire* also turns, if somewhat differently – was redolent with the promise of radical transformation on a global scale.

Ultimately, however, Gandhi too fails to break with the dominant elisions of postcolonial studies – a field that, despite her claims, is not for the most part predicated on the binaries between colonial power and anticolonial resistance, favouring as it has precisely the grounds of 'hybridity' and 'ambivalence'. Her welcome, if excessively cautious, critique of the conceptual inadequacies of Bhabha's rendering of colonial ambivalence notwithstanding, and despite a salutary emphasis on the 'aspirational energy' of metropolitan anti-imperialism, Gandhi's rather limited understanding and hostile repudiation of 'historical dialecticism' impoverishes her account. While it is gently critical of Bhabha's elision of agency, Gandhi's own rendering of metropolitan anti-imperialism in the mirror of postmodernism – diffuse, unorganized, even ludic – is appealing to contemporary literary sensibilities but performs several occlusions of its own. Foremost among these is the figuring of metropolitan

dissidents as in some sense intrinsic exiles who responded to local pressures, rather than as evolving subjects who were often in dialectical engagement with insurgents and movements in the colonies that can be caricatured neither as simply nationalist nor as being in thrall to invented traditions. Even assuming that it might be possible or desirable to glean ‘one paradigmatic narrative of metropolitan anti-imperialism’ – a diversely unwieldy phenomenon – it is unlikely that such a narrative could be merely character-driven, simply a story of fascinatingly eccentric outliers whose actions constituted ‘the disaggregated forms of a dissent engaged for its own sake, bearing no practical investment in the *telos* of the anticolonial nation-state and certainly gaining no apparent material advantage from the economic and political diminution of imperial power’.⁶⁶

As we shall see, for many of the figures discussed here, ‘intolerable domestic pressures’ were less the cause of a conversion to anticolonialism for them than a useful point of comparison, a way of drawing connections between domestic forms of oppression and those being exercised abroad. Certainly, they allowed for common cause to be made. Characters such as Ernest Jones, Wilfrid Blunt, Nancy Cunard and Fenner Brockway may have been unique personalities with distinctive life-stories, but the point is not that they were somehow ontologically less ‘immune to the ubiquitous temptations of empire’. What is more significant is that their critical positions developed out of a concatenation of factors in which their contact with or consciousness of insurgent movements and actors was significant. Anticolonial insurgency often inspired these personalities to call for parallel domestic resistance to tyranny. The elision of agency that emerges in theories of ambivalence resurfaces in Gandhi’s attribution of these processes to ‘cultural osmoses occasioned by colonial encounter’ and ‘the irremediable leakiness of imperial boundaries’.⁶⁷ In the face of the theoretical condescension that afflicts our present view of such movements, it is worth noting that not all anticolonialists – indeed, not even all nationalists – naively embraced ‘purity’ or ‘edenic premodern antiquity’. On the contrary, they were all too aware of the strategic nature of the binaries they deployed against empire; these, moreover, often took the form not only of subject nation against imperial nation but of the powerless against the powerful, the just against the unjust, and right against might. Crucially, those ranged against power, injustice and oppression were not defined in exclusively racial or communal terms but could comprise alliances across the boundary between metropole and periphery. Imperial binaries could not simply be ‘dissolved’; they had to be fought strategically with differently constituted ones not unlike those implied by the ‘new and better forms of community and relationality’ which Gandhi writes about with verve. The ‘unsatisfactory theoretical choice between the oppositional but repetitive forms of cultural nationalism on the one hand and the subversive but quietist discourse of hybridity or contrapuntality on the other’ may, in fact, exist only in the writings of contemporary critics.⁶⁸

While profoundly attuned to its psychological dimensions and representational mechanisms, the metropolitan critics of empire and their anticolonial interlocutors discussed in *Insurgent Empire* rarely saw imperialism as, in the first instance, ‘a peculiar habit of mind’, or ‘a complex analogical system’ that could be disrupted simply through aestheticized versions of disorder, chaos or unruliness. Nor was anticolonialism simply a volitional matter

of ‘opting out from the idiom of their own colonizing culture’ for an ‘other-directed ethics’.⁶⁹ If the periphery did give rise to ‘a new politics of unlikely conjunction and conjuncture’, it was one that took hard work, reciprocal un-learning and learning, and collective organizational efforts. It was a politics, in short, not so much of friendship (though that was not absent) as of difficult solidarities forged through dialogism, in which both parties found themselves being transformed in just the way suggested by Genet above. The story of British metropolitan anticolonialism is not one of the growth of ‘affective communities’ alone, but also of shifting of affective dispositions, from that of the paternalist humanitarian to one of solidarity defined as a ‘transformative political relation’, or ‘the active creation of new ways of relating’ – one in which both sides might shift and evolve their dispositions in response to the encounter.⁷⁰ This transformation is traced here through thickly historicized textual readings in which the individual voice, distinctive as it is, was necessarily inflected by the collective, in a relationship that at its best is at once interrogative and representational. The effort – particularly in the twentieth century – was to create *political* communities that were not devoid of affect, or even of conviviality, but cognizant of challenges, disagreements and power differentials; a solidarity characterized neither by homogeneity nor by shared national belonging, and where contiguity of interests had to be argued for and forged rather than taken for granted. Indeed, to recall the famous closing scene from Forster’s *A Passage to India*, Aziz and Fielding, the Indian and the Englishman, would have to be allies in the project of driving the English out of India before they could be friends. The resistance of the colonized was key to this process, in which the political and the affective were mutually constitutive.

Culture, Universalism and the Anticolonial

The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention.

Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*

The relationship between the political and the affective as manifested in the relationship between anticolonial insurgency and British dissent on questions of the Empire was a dialogical one in the broadest sense, where each term influenced the other, if not evenly or equally. The kinds of British oppositional discourse examined here can be seen as manifest responses to the voices, insights and consciousness of insurgents, incorporating them in a transformative process. Bakhtin’s insight that the word ‘lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context’ is helpful here.⁷¹ The actions, utterances and, in complicated ways, ‘voice’ of insurgency inhabited the discourses of British criticism of empire, so that they embody what Bakhtin describes as a hybrid of ‘varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of “our-own-ness” ’.⁷² The ‘process of interaction and struggle with others’ thought’ inflects the genres and utterances of these texts, from speeches and manifestos to memoirs, petitions and editorials. The emergence, at first, of ‘sympathy’, and subsequently of variants of ‘solidarity’, as a metropolitan response to resistance and crises of insurgency, can be broadly located in the intersubjective space of communication. It is a space that can be simultaneously conflictual and reciprocal, in which meaning is made, and

in which the fact of cognized difference does not preclude, and may indeed facilitate, the emergence of shared ground. Inasmuch as ‘a relation is never static, but always in the process of being made or unmade’, the dialogism of the anticolonial encounter, as much as that of the colonial one, enabled the reconstitution of both selves and relations in more radical directions.⁷³ If we might regard anti-colonialism as a very specific form of address through self-assertion, it can be seen to generate a sense of ‘answerability’ in imperial dissidents. To the extent that dialogism ‘argues that sharing is not only an ethical or economic mandate, but a condition built into the structure of human perception, and thus a condition inherent in the very fact of being human’, I make the case for both something like a reconfigured critical humanism and an expansive universalism as central to the anticolonialism of the texts examined here.⁷⁴

The space of ‘sharing’ that emerges through the dialogism of the encounters discussed here – also one in which universals make their claims felt – does not necessarily entail the elision of difference or the assimilation of it into the cunning of European ‘Reason’. On the contrary, as we shall see from the intellectual journeys of Wilfrid Blunt, Henry Nevinson, Nancy Cunard and Fenner Brockway, among others, the space of anticolonial encounter is also a field of moral inquiry, in which different cultures functioned as ‘laboratories of moral practice and experimentation’ for all concerned.⁷⁵ Satya P. Mohanty’s argument that cultural differences (and, arguably, historical specificities) are not necessarily at odds with moral universals is useful here. He points out that it is perfectly possible for ‘a nonrelativist understanding (and defense) of diversity and pluralism’ to be developed if interaction between cultures (as ‘fields of moral inquiry’) can be seen as a form of ‘epistemic cooperation’.⁷⁶ This would mean, as it did for many of the metropolitan figures I discuss, that the practices of ‘other cultures’, particularly in the crucible of resistance, showed themselves to ‘embody and interrogate rich patterns of value, which in turn represent deep bodies of knowledge of humankind and human flourishing’.⁷⁷

As I will show, these encounters frequently generated a pedagogical process I call ‘reverse tutelage’, in which metropolitan dissidents came to learn something from their anticolonial interlocutors and the movements they represented. In the crucible of these pedagogical encounters which ‘widen[ed] the fields of historical inquiry’ and enabled ‘a fuller range of human possibilities’, notions of human good or a just global order were unsettled, challenged, expanded and reconstituted.⁷⁸ The likes of Keir Hardie, travelling to an India in ‘unrest’; Raymond Michelet, writing about various African cultures; and even C. L. R. James and George Padmore, teaching themselves about Africa in order to be able to better interpret and represent black resistance, would come to a recognition of the narrowness of their own frames of historical and epistemological reference. They would seek to expand and deepen these through studying both resistance itself and the various cultural resources which African and Asian resistance to empire drew upon. There was certainly an operative sense in most cases that there were ‘features of human nature ... shared by all humans across cultures’ and some ‘minimal requirements for human welfare’, but these were insights that were acquired through reading the texts of resistance rather than an a priori claim, often *conceded* rather than imposed.⁷⁹ Human commonality – and equality – were reclaimed by the

colonized, not bestowed by the colonizer, much in the spirit of the black man who stands upright in the frontispiece to abolitionist and feminist Elizabeth Heyrick's magnificent 1824 polemic, *Immediate not Gradual Abolition*, who does not ask whether he should not be treated with common humanity, but asserts defiantly: 'I AM A MAN, YOUR BROTHER'.⁸⁰ Rejected here was the mendicancy and petitioning that many anticolonialists from the colonies would also take pains to repudiate.

If, in addition to the 'language' of force, anticolonial rebels also deployed the 'language of conscience', their purpose was 'breaking down the strategy of *dehumanization*', or the 'thingification' that Jan Pieterse so bitterly ascribes to colonialism.⁸¹ In forcing a moral confrontation, insurgents were not merely claiming a shared humanity, but also pushing open the boundaries of what it meant to be human in a global frame: 'In thus creating political facts, setting limits, and placing beacons, emancipation movements recreate our collective environment and collective awareness, in a process of social creation from below.'⁸² They were, in other words, participants not just in what Lloyd and JanMohamed call 'a viable humanism ... centered around a critique of domination' but also 'a utopian exploration of human potentiality'.⁸³ Here it is worth noting that while the subjects of resistance often drew on cultural resources and social practices of their own that were not derived from the regime of the colonizer or his language, these rarely translated in any simple sense into radical difference, or what the influential theorist of 'decoloniality' Walter D. Mignolo calls 'other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics' – or 'pluriversality'.⁸⁴ Claims to radical alterity are, in fact, rarely to be heard in the language of resistance, even as there is often a fierce insistence on cultural specificities. Even as the vocabulary of some forms of resistance drew on spiritual and religious frameworks that were clearly situated outside the European Enlightenment, there was no self-evident repudiation of 'reason' (in the lower case). The capacity for reason could be conceded to the colonizer no more than 'freedom' or 'humanity', whatever the claims he made for their provenance. Challenging the 'pretended universality' and the pseudo-humanism of the colonizer involved enriching and reconstituting universality through multiple strands of experience and engagement, rather than conceding the logic of absolute difference. Indeed, it might even be regarded, in the face of the dehumanizing gestures of colonialism, as a *rehumanizing* of the metropole. For anticolonial insurgents, there was no simple opposition between the logic of 'emancipation' (which for Mignolo belongs to 'Europe') and the claims of 'liberation' (the 'decolonial' option); Europe had to be forced to make good its moralizing claims even as the struggle for self-liberation pressed inexorably on. 'De-centering the universal emancipating claims in the projects grounded in the liberal and socialist traditions of the European enlightenment' did not, contra Mignolo, always entail a rejection either of emancipation per se or of the possibility of universally applicable values.⁸⁵ Mignolo is right to suggest that 'emancipation', as it was figured in European liberal discourse, is different from 'liberation' as it is conceived of in 'decolonial' discourse, deriving as it does from the provenance of revolutions in France, Britain and the United States. Events such as the Haitian revolution and the decolonization of Africa and Asia – two examples Mignolo uses – brought different dimensions to both liberalism and

Marxism/socialism. At the same time, a disproportionate emphasis on radically different ‘categories of thought’ obscures the extent to which many ‘liberation’ struggles were committed to universalism – and not only because they were part of the dominant language or the colonizer’s categories of thought. Indeed, rather than offer sutured, self-contained alternatives to the idea of universal freedom, resistance often deliberately showed up the colonizer’s version of universalism to be anything but universal. Universals had to be embodied through experience and resistance, not refused as ‘European’. This often entailed working with the ‘logic of modernity’, decolonizing rather than repudiating it, teasing out its revolutionary promises.

If, as Edward Said has argued in his posthumously published set of lectures, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, we would do well to be attentive to the ways in which all language ‘exists to be revitalized by change’, then the dialogical role of struggles for liberation in enacting that revitalization needs to be taken seriously.⁸⁶ They did so, not least, by forcing a process of ‘self-definition, self-examination, and self-analysis’ in the metropole. It is in that sense that Britain today is itself as much the product of anticolonialism as it is of the imperial project. Many of ‘the achievements of emancipation enter into the mainstream by being assimilated by elites’, Pieterse has argued; this turning of yesterday’s struggles into ‘today’s institutional frameworks’ holds true not only for postcolonial contexts, but also for Britain.⁸⁷ The making of an empire that was forced over time to make concessions, offer reforms, attend to human rights (if only notionally), embrace ‘humane’ considerations, and even regard itself as an emancipator in the first instance, must be read as a response to resistance. We know that history records ‘the achievements of empires and imperial civilizations more than it does the humanizing and civilizing contributions of emancipation movements’.⁸⁸ It is now something of a commonplace that a certain kind of narrow, self-regarding and narcissistic humanism was exported to the colonies by the colonial project. Yet it is also the case that the resistance of the colonized expanded the scope of humanism in the metropole. As Paul Gilroy notes in his eloquent case for reconsidering the scope of ‘humanity’ and ‘human rights’, historical struggles in the ‘Black Atlantic’ against racial hierarchy have come up with radical understandings of the category of the ‘human’ and developed ‘twentieth-century demands for a variety of humanism that would be disinclined to overlook Europe’s colonial crimes’.⁸⁹ He notes too that the formation of transnational ‘moral communities’ – which registered in European cultures – often relied on ‘the dissemination and refinement of an idea of the human which was incompatible with racial hierarchy’.⁹⁰

Resistance and the Archive

Insurgent Empire is written with Said’s insight in mind that what makes cultures and civilizations interesting is ‘not their essence or purity, but their combinations and diversity, the way they have of conducting a compelling dialogue with other civilizations’.⁹¹ This means returning to ‘what has long been a characteristic of all cultures, namely, that there is a strong streak of radical antiauthoritarian dissent in all of them’.⁹² Dissent, when it has an

effect, often becomes invisible once absorbed into institutional frameworks.⁹³ Part of my effort here is to make it – and its dialogic nature – visible again. The materials examined here are not unknown to historians; I make no claims to unearthing an entirely new archive – though some materials are perhaps less well known than they might be. Rather, to a rich set of historical materials that have yet to be fully interpreted, this study brings some of the tools of literary criticism – in particular, attention to voice, allusion, quotation, influence, intertextuality and translation. The word in British anticolonialism, I suggest in a Bakhtinian spirit, was half that of those who rose up against the Empire and of those who sought actively, as anticolonial writers and intellectuals, to ‘manipulate the self-understanding of the oppressor’.⁹⁴ The effect of non-European strands of thought – Hindu ‘theosophy’ and *l’art nègre* on art, music and spirituality on *fin de siècle* and modernist avant-garde cultural formations – has largely been documented. I want to suggest that attention also be paid to the effect of anticolonial resistance from outside Europe and America on British dissident discourse.

To study the texts of British imperial dissidents and critics of empire in relation to the texts of anticolonial resistance is, in one sense, to study a *minoritized* literature – that is, to reflect on them as texts that ‘have been and continue to be subjected to institutional forgetting’, to borrow Abdul JanMohammed and David Lloyd’s words once again.⁹⁵ Through close textual analysis of an assemblage of texts – accounts of trials, speeches, manifestos, journalism, essays, memoirs – *Insurgent Empire* tracks the different ways in which resistance in colonial contexts was variously received, refracted or reframed, and allowed to revise and radicalize existing dissenting tendencies in the metropole. Works by individual metropolitan figures such as Wilfrid Blunt, Frederic Harrison, Nancy Cunard, Fenner Brockway and Arthur Ballard are examined in relation both to the anticolonial insurgencies (and rebel voices) they read and assimilated into their work, and, where relevant, to their personal engagement with such oppositional figures who emerged from milieus of ‘unrest’ as Jamal-ud-din al-Afghani, Colonel Ahmad Orabi, Aurobindo Ghose, Claude McKay, George Padmore, C. L. R James and others. Even as the emphasis here is on close textual reading, in such a way as to cast light on influence and engagement, the account which follows insists on the *worldliness* of oppositional discourse, whereby individual voices and texts of insurgency and dissent are not only profoundly imbricated with each other but also shaped by the practice of struggle and the *collectivities* forged through it. If the tale here is told through texts and individual authors, it is with a deep awareness of the wider collective context that produced these utterances. In the language of dissenters and opposers, we frequently see something like the creative ‘process of *assimilation* – more or less creative – of others’ words’ that Bakhtin describes.⁹⁶ The metropolitan language of liberty and justice often manifested, I suggest, an assimilation, reworking, and re-emphasis of the languages – in the broadest sense – of anticolonial insurgency.

Examining how their actions, their voices and their words were in fact assimilated and refracted in metropolitan oppositional discourse, we can re-vision colonial subjects as agents whose actual resistance put critical transformative pressure on British claims to cherishing freedom, and on those Britons who spoke and campaigned in its cause. In doing so, these

subjects may themselves have drawn, as Haiti's rebels had done, on the languages of revolution and emancipation that came to them from Europe (although there was arguably a difference between appealing to French republican values and to the benevolence of the British monarch). However, they also drew on other cultural resources, as well as on their own historical and material circumstances. 'Freedom' and 'equality' were not abstractions derived from the Enlightenment (itself hardly a homogeneous intellectual formation) – they were real and present aspirations shaped by the condition and experience of subjection and exploitation. If we take seriously, as we surely must, the testimonial insights of a campaigner like Douglass, who combines a clear admiration for British abolitionism with an unequivocal sense of the contribution of the enslaved to their own liberation, then it seems necessary to think somewhat differently about the emergence and circulation of emancipatory ideals in the context of slavery and colonialism. It would necessitate focusing more centrally than the British historiographical tradition has done on the shaping influence of struggles against British rule, and on the role played by rebellious slaves and colonial subjects in fomenting dissensus at the heart of empire. 'Opposition to a dominant structure', as Said observes, derives from an awareness 'on the part of individuals and groups outside and inside it that, for example, certain of its policies are wrong'.⁹⁷ *Insurgent Empire* seeks to elucidate the relationship between 'outside' and 'inside' in opposing empire.

One of the first scholars to work on British 'critics of empire' was the historian Bernard Porter, who noted rightly that 'in Britain the imperial theme had always had its counterpoint of protest'.⁹⁸ Porter's important early work examines what he calls a 'body of disaffection', and covers a range of contributing factors including pacifism, internationalism, humanitarianism, free trade, the 'rule of morality' and arguments about economic unprofitability. Symptomatically, however, the role played by anticolonial insurgency in inspiring some of this disaffection is missing. Take, for example, Porter's discussions of the Positivist Richard Congreve, and the Labour politician Ramsay MacDonald, both of whom explicitly engaged with anticolonial resistance at different points in their careers. While noting that Congreve called for a sympathetic and respectful approach to India, Porter speculates that this might be due to the philosopher's 'cultural relativism' and a related 'dissatisfaction with European civilisation'.⁹⁹ As we shall see in [Chapter 1](#), Congreve's position on India also had much to do with his reading of the events of the summer of 1857, which, by his own admission, caused him to shift from an earlier, more supportive, position and criticize British rule on grounds that were far from relativist. Similarly, Porter reflects on MacDonald's travels to India as simply confirming the politician's existing 'ethical' viewpoint, whereby it was wrong to force native races into British thought and perspectives. While he does acknowledge that MacDonald's *Awakening of India* spoke of England having 'as much to learn from Asia and Africa as they from her', Porter again attributes this to the Labour leader's personal disposition of 'humility' rather than to the pedagogical process to which the latter explicitly alludes. By his own account, the evolution of MacDonald's critical views on the imperial project in India owed something to his encounters with Indian anticolonialism in the political travels he undertook just before the First World War, as I show in [Chapter 4](#).¹⁰⁰ The vital significance of such pedagogical engagements throughout the latter

half of the British imperial era, where the direction of teaching was from insurgent colony to imperial metropole, is one of the central concerns of this book.

From the eighteenth century onwards, runs Said's argument, there was a lively European debate on the merits and defects of colonialism drawing on earlier positions to do with the rights of the native peoples and the abuses of those rights by Europeans. During the nineteenth century, with some rare exceptions, there emerged a much more limited discussion on profitability, management and mismanagement, and on free trade versus protectionism. There are two things to say here. The first is that his correct assessment of J. A. Hobson's very limited critique of empire notwithstanding, those whom Said terms 'liberal anti-colonialists' were also a rather more diverse group than it may seem at first glance.¹⁰¹ Secondly, what is interesting about many of these liberal critics of empire – say, Henry Nevinson or Frederic Harrison – is that where they might have begun with a simple 'humane position that colonies and slaves ought not too severely to be ruled or held', their positions did not remain static. They could be radicalized by anticolonial rebellions such that some, like Wilfrid Blunt (Chapter 3), did in fact come to seriously challenge European domination of non-Europeans, and precisely 'dispute the fundamental superiority of Western man' or white supremacy.¹⁰² Even Ramsay MacDonald, whom Said correctly describes as 'a critic of British imperialist practices but not opposed to imperialism as such', would come, albeit only for a brief period, to have more serious doubts about its viability.¹⁰³ These individuals, and earlier moments that entailed crisis and connection, certainly do not have the weight we might more justifiably accord to anticolonial struggles and international coalitions in the era of decolonization. Yet they constitute, I believe, a vital strand of the larger story not just of anticolonialism in a global frame, but also of the 'overlapping and intertwined' histories of some forms of British dissidence and global resistance. In that sense, they form an important part of the backstory to the twentieth-century 'common anti-imperialist experience' which enabled 'new associations between Europeans, Americans, and non-Europeans', transforming disciplines and giving voice to new ideas in the process, as Said suggests.¹⁰⁴

While I hope that, in the course of this study, the importance of certain forms of dissent in their own right becomes clear, it is also worth noting that the question of 'significance' or 'influence' is a necessarily circular one when it comes to dissident traditions. Dissent from regnant ideologies and discourses is, of course, never in and of itself marginal; it emerges as (often, constitutively) marginalized discourse that must articulate itself against the grain of the dominant. We must also be alert to the ways in which sidelining dissent involves the circular argument that such dissent was only to be heard from the sidelines, and must therefore be consigned to insignificance. There are also other compelling reasons to study dissent independent of what 'impact' it may or may not have had on the mainstream. For one, we do learn that not everyone 'back in the day' thought that the imperial project was unproblematic, as is widely believed – hence the charge of 'historical anachronism' when imperial depredations are judged by what are wrongly claimed to be only present-day moral yardsticks. John Darwin is correct to suggest that we might think about empire as 'a cockpit or battleground where different versions of Britishness competed for space', but he seems curiously resistant to the idea that those versions were themselves shaped by the imperial

encounter – an engagement which necessarily included resistance to the imperial project.¹⁰⁵ What we are left with is a curiously abstracted and ahistorical British heterogeneity which is hermetically sealed from reverse influence: ‘It was in the end the protean nature of empire as a political idea, the extraordinary range of interests and purposes to which it could be rhetorically harnessed (including preparing colonial peoples for self-rule) that allowed its demise amid a mood of public indifference.’¹⁰⁶ What if it was, in fact, the resistance of the colonial peoples which prepared Britain ‘to relinquish or modify the idea of overseas domination’?¹⁰⁷ Here, the narratives produced by British dissidents and critics of empire have something to teach us.

Chapter Overview

In the archives that *Insurgent Empire* examines, capturing exemplary moments rather than recounting a narrative history, insurgency variously registers with, reanimates and radicalizes dissenting individuals, tendencies and groups in Britain. In the first section, ‘Crises and Connections’, I discuss two exemplary nineteenth-century crises of rule, in which insurgencies of ‘sepoys’ and freed blacks impacted in different ways upon British oppositional tendencies. While each crisis – the 1857 ‘Mutiny’ in India, and the 1865 ‘Governor Eyre affair’ – had specific resonances back in Britain, awareness of these early insurgencies, and interpretations of them, broadly prepared the ground for the dialogical expansion of the moral imagination of British dissent to incorporate the consciousness of the rebel as ‘an entity whose will and reason constituted the practice called rebellion’.¹⁰⁸ In these early crises, the ‘voice’ of anticolonial resistance could only be accessed, of course, by reading what were essentially hegemonic representations of rebellion, either in the form of dispatches or what Ranajit Guha famously termed ‘the prose of counter-insurgency’.¹⁰⁹ From the outset, as we shall see, insurgencies within the Empire threw gradualist narratives of freedom into crisis. They helped to create the understanding among liberal campaigners in Britain that that people share a *human* tendency to resist injustice, whatever their context; *self-emancipation* itself then entered the frame of discussion as a precondition for real liberation, though at this stage more as distant counterpoint than distinct keynote.

The mid nineteenth century, bookended by two Reform Bills extending the franchise, is also typically read as a period of intense domestic opposition, with social movements for greater internal democracy necessitating a turn inwards. In fact, insurgency in the colonies was not infrequently referenced in domestic discussions, even if it was often by way of redefining internal protest, as Ernest Jones did, in terms that made explicit comparisons to the 1857 uprising in India. Even for less radical figures like the Positivist Richard Congreve, the rebellion would force open an understanding of the scope of ‘humanism’, as we shall see in [Chapter 1](#). [Chapter 2](#) shifts to post-Emancipation Jamaica and the events in Morant Bay in 1865, when an uprising of freed slaves and their descendants resulted in a controversial crackdown and the hanging of an opposition politician by the name of George W. Gordon. The summary execution of Gordon and the brutality with which the uprising was suppressed generated a huge controversy back in England which came to be known as the ‘Governor

Eyre affair’, famously dividing well-known politicians and intellectuals along ideological lines. While this episode is often read as a very English crisis to do with the rule of law, what is overlooked is the ways in which the positions taken were based on contrasting readings of rebel voices. Central to the controversy was the reality of black people demanding a more meaningful, self-defined freedom than the notional ‘Emancipation’ that had been bestowed on them. [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) examine the effects of contact between opponents of empire in milieus of anticolonial ferment and British political travellers of a humanitarian or liberal bent, such as Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and Henry Nevinson. What is noteworthy here is how those travels had the effect of unsettling, and in some cases transforming, an unexamined paternalism or benevolent humanitarianism into something rather more radical. Frequently, travels to areas of ‘unrest’ turned into unexpected pedagogical journeys (the case of Wilfrid Blunt and the ‘Urabi Rebellion’ in Egypt, discussed in [Chapter 3](#), is only one instance) in which the traveller learned something about the nature of resistance and the cultural resources it drew upon. As Frederic Harrison, influenced by Blunt, would observe, the strength of Egyptian anticolonialism was ‘not military, but civil. It lies in the great university or school of Cairo, the intellectual centre of the Mussulman world.’¹¹⁰ Even Donald Mackenzie Wallace, the otherwise establishmentarian *Times* foreign correspondent who was broadly supportive of the occupation, would find it necessary to pose the question: ‘Is our position in Egypt a legitimate one? – How long have we the right to remain there?’¹¹¹

In the twentieth century, the volume of travel in the other direction – into the heart of the Empire – increased, and this had determinate effects on metropolitan anticolonialism. The third and largest section of this book, ‘Agitations and Alliances’, considers the energizing presence of black and Asian anticolonial campaigners and intellectuals in the imperial metropolis as part of a tripartite dynamic. As Brennan notes,

From 1880 to 1939, artists and social theorists in the European metropole, many of them foreigners, brought a new attention to the non-Western world. These regions were no longer simply artistic raw material or an ethical site for expressing sympathy with the victims of various invasive business enterprises, but an array of emergent polities populated by colonial subjects rising in arms and pressing their demands.¹¹²

This was part of a wider process taking place in Europe, in which ‘European intellectuals learned from those outside its orbit in the colonial encounter’.¹¹³ Insurgent movements in India, Africa and the West Indies galvanized African and Asian campaigners, who in turn functioned as what I call ‘interpreters of insurgency’, putting pressure upon British criticism of aspects of empire to develop in more comprehensively radical directions. These figures played a key role in facilitating links and networks between resistance movements in the colony and dissidents in the metropole. An important consequence of this contact was the attempt to form global anticolonial networks and, within Britain itself, to foster anticolonial movements and dissident institutions which could offer a platform for radical criticism. [Chapter 5](#) examines the influence and role of Shapurji Saklatvala, the Labour and then Communist MP, as an interpreter between Indian radicals and the British political establishment. [Chapter 6](#) takes up the labour insurgencies in India to which Saklatvala repeatedly drew attention in the House of Commons, and the impact of the notorious Meerut Conspiracy Case in fomenting and developing an anticolonial British internationalism

inspired by struggles in the colonies. An important development here is the formation in 1927 of the League Against Imperialism, which put anticolonialists from the colonies in active partnership with British and other European critics of imperialism. The emphasis on self-emancipation and the need for Western liberals and leftists to register and respond to voices from the colonial periphery is also the subject of [Chapter 7](#), which also looks at figures such as Sylvia Pankhurst, editor of the *Daily Worker*, and Nancy Cunard, editor of the pioneering anthology *Negro*, in the interwar period, and at the partnerships they formed with black intellectuals. Both Cunard and Pankhurst made strenuous efforts to educate a Western readership about what was taking place in the colonies.

Labour uprisings in the Caribbean form the background to the emergence of figures such as George Padmore, C. L. R. James and Amy Ashwood Garvey, among others, who would become enormously influential in the emergence of pan-Africanism. Engagement with them and with pan-Africanism more broadly – particularly in the wake of Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1938, which galvanized black anticolonialism in Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean – would shape the views of many British liberals and radicals with whom the former had close but often contentious relationships. The formation of the International African Service Bureau in the wake of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 is at the heart of [Chapter 8](#), which examines the powerful anticolonialism articulated in the pages of its journal, *International African Opinion*. Another British journal, the *New Leader*, which would become distinctly more radical on colonial matters under the influence of George Padmore, is the subject of [Chapter 9](#), which also examines Padmore’s work and its impact in the years immediately leading up to and following the pioneering Pan-African Congress held in Manchester in 1945. [Chapter 10](#) explores the impact of one of the last major anticolonial rebellions, the so-called Mau Mau uprising and the Kenyan Emergency, in fomenting public controversy and crisis in Britain; nearly a hundred years after the 1857 uprising, the British political and intellectual milieu was once again torn between denouncing the barbarism of the insurgents and supporting brutal repression, on the one hand, and, on the other, blaming the colonial government and settlers for causing the unrest. This chapter also considers the Movement for Colonial Freedom, established in London in 1954 with Brockway at its helm, which connected anticolonialism to movements across the world for the rights of ordinary people.

Insurgent Empire does not aspire to achieve anything like comprehensive coverage of anticolonial insurgencies, bearing in mind that the Empire was subject to almost constant challenge. It also does not attempt to survey the whole terrain of British dissent on imperial matters. The maps of anticolonial insurgency and dissidence are vast and varied. Instead, my focus is on what I identify as exemplary *crises* of rule and engagement that helped create a tradition of dissent on the question of empire, looked outward to the colonial world, and sought to effect transformation as much in Britain as beyond. This book seeks to be capacious without pretending to be comprehensive. Even so, certain lacunae require explanation – in particular, the Second Anglo-Boer war (1899–1902), which fomented a great deal of anti-war sentiment (and a certain kind of criticism of imperialism), and was most famously denounced by figures such as J. A. Hobson and Gilbert Murray. I have also not engaged with the many important crises generated by Irish resistance through the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries. Apart from the fact that the impacts both of the Boer War and of Anglo-Irish engagement have been worked on extensively, my interest here, for reasons already discussed, is in the specific impact of resistance that emerged from non-European contexts – of black and Asian subjects – on metropolitan dissent. There are also, of course, gaps even where these are concerned: events and engagements I simply did not have the time or space to incorporate. These include Queen Victoria’s ‘little wars’ (the Afghan, Opium, Ashanti, Zulu and Maori wars); the revolt in Palestine in 1937; the crises of decolonization in Suez, Malaya and Cyprus; and resistance in West Africa in the first half of the twentieth century.¹¹⁴ The relative absence of black and Asian women is also a matter of justifiable concern – and, for me, great regret. They are very much there, of course, in the form of both organizers and foot-soldiers, active participants in resistance. When it comes to *voice*, the connecting strand of this study, however, unsurprisingly the most prominent and influential are gendered male. The recovery of marginalized non-male voices in this context is work that lies ahead of us. Nor are Gandhi and Indian nationalism, including the Quit India movement, discussed in any depth; they too constitute an overrepresented topic in discussions of anticolonialism, often at the expense of other conceptions and strategies of resistance (see [Chapter 6](#)).¹¹⁵ While my aim has not been to offer a comprehensive overview of all relevant figures and ideas, my principles of selection may of course be subject to debate. I make no claims to writing a history; indeed, the methodological principles that have guided my research and writing are enthusiastically generalist. The book is structured as an ensemble of accounts, disparate in many ways yet vitally connected in others, gaining in its amateur ‘sense of excitement and discovery’, I hope, what it might not offer in specialist terms.¹¹⁶ Its guiding literary model, similarly, is more akin to the short story than to the novel; but these are stories that emerge, of course, from an epic canvas. My hope is that this book will contribute to and advance lines of enquiry and discussion, including in other imperial contexts, to which other scholars will also contribute in future.