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Paulo Polanah, Sitinga Kachipande

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Mapping Reverse Colonialism: Notes on the Many Lives of a Post-Colonial Trope

P. S. Polanah et Sitinga Kachipande

Qu'est-ce que le "colonialisme inversé" ? Quelles formes cela prend-il ? Quelles en sont les origines historiques et les trajectoires sémantiques ? Quels sont les contextes qui ont invité au couplage de ces deux termes dans le contexte post-colonial ? Qui assume le rôle inversé de colonisateur/colonisé dans les schémas du "colonialisme inversé" ? Depuis l'effondrement du colonialisme moderne, la terminologie "inversée" s'est progressivement imposée dans les discours mondiaux, devenant un élément clé du paysage tropologique post-colonial. Au cœur des tropes "inversés" se trouvent des déploiements discursifs impliquant des notions de "colonialisme inversé" que l'on retrouve dans d'innombrables commentaires sur les dynamiques postcoloniales. La portée mondiale des tropes liés au "colonialisme inversé" justifie à elle seule que l'on s'y attarde dans le cadre d'une étude, étant donné le manque notable de publications scientifiques et le peu d'attention jusqu'ici reçu par ces tropes. À l'aide de sources primaires, nous étudions les contextes historiques et thématiques du "colonialisme inversé" (colonisation à l'envers, impérialisme inversé) dans le circuit anglophone, en nous intéressant aux origines ainsi qu'à la portée de certains de ces tropes dans un contexte mondial. Seront ainsi inclus les écrits universitaires, mais aussi les médias grand public, le discours politique, l'art, le cinéma, la culture culinaire, les blogs et la publicité, parmi d'autres éléments. Notre objectif est double. Il s'agit de proposer une synthèse discursive des diverses articulations de concepts liés au "colonialisme inversé", et de fournir des repères utiles pour un engagement théorique plus solide vis-à-vis de ce trope post-colonial. Alors qu'à elle seule, l'expression devrait laisser apparaître une inversion historique des rôles entre ancien colonisé et ancien colonisateur, notre étude indique plutôt, et sans réserve, qu'il s'agit là d'une locution beaucoup plus complexe, multi-sémantique et polyvalente, employée dans un large éventail de commentaires culturels, politiques et idéologiques. Les manifestations collectives du "colonialisme inversé" depuis la fin du colonialisme européen jusqu'à ce jour tendent en effet à résister au catalogage taxonomique et ne peuvent être réduites à une seule définition, une seule théorie ou encore à une seule vision commune.

What is "reverse colonialism?" What forms does it take? What historical origins and semantic trajectories does it possess? What contexts have invited the coupling of these two terms in the post-colonial? Who takes on the reversed role of colonizer/colonized in the schemata of "reverse colonialism"? Since the collapse of modern colonialism, "reversed" terminology has steadily gained currency in global discourses, becoming key staples in post-colonial tropological landscape. Central to "reversed" tropes reside discursive deployments involving notions of colonialism in reverse, found in innumerable commentaries on post-

colonial dynamics. The global reach of tropes of reverse colonialism alone warrants pause and inquiry, especially in view of the dearth of scholarly publications and attention it has thus far received. Drawing from primary sources, we survey historical and thematic contexts of “reverse colonialism” (colonization in reverse, reverse imperialism) in anglophone circulation, glancing at their global genealogies and perambulations, which span scholarly writing, but also mainstream media, political discourse, art, cinema, culinary, blog and advertisement culture, among many others. Our aim is twofold: to offer a discursive overview of the articulations of concepts linked to “reverse colonialism;” and to provide helpful coordinates for a more robust theoretical engagement with this post-colonial trope. While the expression itself should denote a historical reversal of roles between former colonized and former colonizer, our study unreservedly points instead to a far more complex, multi-semantic, and versatile term employed in an extensive array of cultural, political, and ideological commentary. Indeed, the collective articulations of reverse colonialism from the final stages of European colonialism to this date tend to resist taxonomic cataloging and cannot be reduced to a single definition, theory, or shared understanding.

Mots-clés

colonialisme inversé, impérialisme inversé, études postcoloniales, tropes postcoloniaux, mondialisation, inversion historique des rôles, tropologie

Keywords

reverse colonialism, reverse imperialism, post-colonial studies, post-colonial tropes, globalization historical role reversal, tropology

For its conceptual parameters, the introduction of *The Oxford Handbook of Postwar European History* embraces what has become a sanctioned feature in the idea of 21st century Europe, one that identifies colonialism within Europe’s internal profile. “Europe,” the *Handbook* stipulates, “is understood to mean all of Europe, including notable emphasis on Eastern Europe as well as on the creation of ‘neo-Europes’ overseas and ‘reverse colonialism’ in Europe itself” (Stone 7-8). Since the early 2000s, the intriguing expression “reverse colonialism” has circulated with irresistible appeal in popular and scholarly vernaculars, at once identifying, denouncing, or celebrating situations of what is perceived as “reversed” colonial relationships in the post-colonial world. Undeniably, the expression “reverse colonialism” has eluded both standardized definitions and tolerable theoretical and historical grounding, which has accounted for its ineligibility for membership in the more formal taxonomies of colonialism. Nevertheless, references to “reverse colonialism” have soared in the aftermath of decolonization, acquiring considerable visibility in texts and discourses on post-colonialism and globalization.

Recasting Colonialism After Colonialism . . . with Reversed Robes

What does “reverse colonialism” mean? What semantics have been served by the imagery connoted in the coupling of these two terms? From whence does this construct hail? Which

contexts call for the deployment of these terms? Arguably, these and other possible questions should be prefaced by the recognition that the actual existence of any form of colonialism in reverse might well be out of the question. The imagery evoked by modifying “colonialism” with “reverse” lacks commensurability with available historical models: European colonial empires alone supply the dominant historical script for the discourses on colonialism and accompanying taxonomies; they provide the conceptual pedigree underpinning the biographies of “colonization in reverse.” As such, one can duly ask what practices and structures of domination can be identified in post-colonial histories that reproduce, for instance, the Portuguese or Belgian colonial record?

These incongruences encased in “reverse colonialism” piqued our interest in inspecting and gaining some understanding of the nature of this peculiar post-colonial construct. Ideas associated with “reverse colonialism” have certainly resulted in a powerful and fertile trope, at once filled with ideological content and semantic possibilities (see Kelen). As a significant entry in post-colonial global glossaries, “reverse colonialism” deserves pause and theoretical consideration, especially within the realm of academic research concerned with the intricate, varied, and often conflicting meanings expressed in post-colonial themes.

However, focused scholarly inquiry into “reverse colonialism” *qua* post-colonial trope has not yet found its place in scholarly research agendas. In other words, there is a marked absence of published tropological studies on “reverse colonialism,” a state of affairs that has not discouraged scholarly literature from liberally incorporating, disseminating, and perpetuating this trope, often with rewarding outcomes as we detail below. Scholarly enlistments of “reverse colonialism,” accordingly, have largely proceeded without the benefit of an overall theoretical picture of the histories, contexts, ideologies, provenances, and protagonists that have shaped and driven the discourses surrounding “reverse colonialism.” In view of an absence of studies on this trope, we opted to pursue primarily a survey of the historical and global bearings of the ideas of “reverse colonialism.” This survey’s aim is to offer an introductory and archival roadmap of “reverse colonialism,” focusing specifically on its flourishing and its discursive expressions within the anglophone speaking world. It specifically seeks to identify useful coordinates to scholars interested in the rich profiles of “reverse colonialism” and, to a lesser extent, draw attention to the biographies of tropes in post-colonial, cultural, and political discourses.

Our study indicated to us that ideas associated with “reverse colonialism” do not linearly align themselves with “colonialism redux.” They fall short of providing scrupulous historical equivalences with European-derived colonial models. In other words, the themes addressed by this expression do not present proportionate examples of restatements of colonial violences, hierarchies, and practices in the post-colonial landscape. Yet, the unabated conscription of this idiom, often from distinct and contrasting notional prisms, confirms its status as a recognizable expression, a significant and useful convention, and a successful trope of the post-colonial vernaculars. Its success, in our view, lies in its semantic latitude: it is variously applied with irony, metaphor, hyperbole, or as a self-evident historical reality, all of which not only reduce complex historical dialectics to a simple narration, but also provide repeatable, meaningful, and compelling imagery to commentaries on the post-colonial.

Our endeavor to locate meaningful coordinates of “reverse colonialism” recognizes, therefore, that ideas associated with this expression cannot be corralled into a single conceptual pen. To be sure, a perfunctory overview of the many uses of “reverse” with “colonialism” reveals how the coupling of these words has produced a protean formula for post-colonial

discourses that does not lead to uncomplicated theorization. “Reverse colonialism,” for instance, can be found in discourse ranging from mosques in Belgium to Indian cuisine in the UK, North African immigrants in France, the Israel-Palestine question, South Korean overseas proselytizing practices, African American political activism, Australian real estate ownership in London, the philanthropy of US foreign aid policy, English Soccer “hooliganism,” Global South “Brain Drain,” feminist critiques of drag culture, Brazil’s economic investments in Angola, or on the iconic characters *Dracula* and *King Kong* to cite a few examples. As we indicate below, these multiple and various uses of “reverse colonialism” account for its appearance in areas as diverse as academic writing, newspapers headlines, editorials, economic analysis, political and militant texts, congressional papers, satirical poetry, science-fiction, art, theater, cinema, sports, gastronomy, advertisement, and blog commentary.

Along with this overarching presence in modern discourse, “reverse colonialism” has lent itself to multiple variants, among them “reverse colonization,” “colonization in reverse,” “colonialism in reverse,” and “inverted colonialism.” Sharing the same conceptual orbit with these variants are also two related (and older) expressions: “imperialism in reverse” and “reverse imperialism.” Despite conceptual distinctions between colonialism and imperialism and the risk of oversimplification, we have opted for using “reverse colonialism” to represent all possible *reversed* iterations, unless context demands otherwise.

In what follows, we identify several noteworthy landmarks in the vast landscape of “reverse colonialism” within two conceptually separate sections: In the first, “Unearthing Historical Itineraries,” we peek into the biography of the trope, tracing its historical origins from the relatively obscure and tentative beginnings in the 1930s and 1940s to the threshold of the 21st century. While the selection of this specific date may be somewhat arbitrary, it aligns with a significant proliferation of references to this post-colonial trope—on a global scale. As such, accounting for the tens of thousands of references to this concept presented challenges beyond the scope of this survey’s modest purview. The post-2000 articulations of “reverse colonialism” ideas we examined were instead incorporated into the subsequent section, titled “Brief Profiles,” where we take note of recurrent elements in the trope’s discursive record, identifying several authors, themes, ideas, contexts, as well as languages and qualifiers involved in animating the idea of reverse colonialism.

Unearthing Historical Itineraries: Snapshots of “Reverse Colonialism” 1930s-2000

To date, popular culture has produced multiple instances where themes of “reverse colonialism” are inferred or explicitly played out without directly referencing the expression itself. Such instances, often in allegorical form, can be found in the French novel *Soumission* by Michel Houellebecq (2015), in the British novel and television series *Noughts & Crosses* (2001; 2020), or in Hollywood’s dystopian films such as the *Planet of the Apes* saga (1968-2017), *Blade Runner* (1982), or *The Matrix* (1999), among many other titles (See Higgins). This survey’s primary focus, however, is on the actual written references of the expression “reverse colonialism/imperialism.” These references can trace their roots back to colonial writing, well predating the extensive post-colonial catalog of *reversion* concepts. These include: reverse assimilation, reverse slavery, slavery in reverse, reverse nationalism, reverse ethnocentrism, reverse fascism, reverse hegemony, as well as the more frequently used, reverse sexism, reverse racism, and reverse discrimination.

Specific presentations in print of the term “reverse imperialism/colonialism” began entering global circulation speaking during the 1930s and 1940s. These initial installments, of anglophone stock and temperamentally political, lacked a shared meaning or definition. Moreover, they lacked a common geopolitical nexus, and, of significance, addressed historical contexts unrelated to the still vibrant European colonialism of the time. One of the earliest references concerned interwar tensions in Sino-American evangelical relations. It surfaced in the American periodical *China Weekly Review* in a 1934 editorial titled “Imperialism in Reverse” inveighed against a Chinese-authored article: “Where [US] Imperialism Penetrates through the Church” (Powell 395). Another early reference is found in a conference paper by Chinese scholar, Ch’en Shou-yi, presented in the 1940 American Historical Association annual meeting: “Imperialism in Reverse: Asiatic Cultural Influences on the West.” In 1945, the renowned German historian Hans Rothfels warned against Soviet ideological expansionism, drawing attention to precedents found in the “reverse imperialism of the Third International” pursued by the USSR during the interwar period (306). And, in another instance (1947), the US historian Albert C. Manucy reasoned that the Spanish failures to colonize Florida in the early 1700s “suggested colonization in reverse,” much of it occasioned by Florida’s “wild forests filled with savagely hostile Indians” (332).

These early references were few. Exhibiting what would become the norm henceforth, they were untethered to any standardized understanding or context of “reverse colonialism,” and in the years after 1945, began referencing new global relationships of the post-war period. In 1948, for example, US politician James Farley invoked the expression “imperialism in reverse” in a congressional session—as did in a parliamentary session the year before, the New Zealander Member of Parliament Thomas Bloodworth—to describe the nation’s eleemosynary and moral obligations toward less capable nations and peoples (Farley A4295; Bloodworth 377). Likewise, in both a 1951 editorial (“Productivity: Key to Prosperity and Peace”) and congressional hearings (1953), the US Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson summoned the expression “colonialism in reverse” to announce and promote a new type of national foreign policy. Under the aim of securing “world peace,” he explained, “we are exploiting our people and using our own resources to benefit other peoples” to raise the standard of living of substandard areas of the world (10; see also Wilson 1955). Dozens of domestic newspapers, featuring headlines such as “Wilson Calls *US Policy ‘Colonialism in Reverse,’*” carried Wilson’s charges against what he perceived to be a national self-inflicted colonialism (*Toledo Blade* 1953). Also addressing post-war developments, in this case involving emerging Latin American nationalist sensibilities, UC Berkeley geographer J. J. Parsons used “cultural imperialism in reverse.” In this case, Parsons referenced the trope to describe the “inferiority complex” fueling the resentment “so characteristic in countries south of the border” toward the US, “the Colossus of the North” (54).

From the mid-1950s through the 1960s, usages of reverse imperialism/colonialism were only sporadically expressed, primarily in contexts relating to global shifts triggered by the dismantling of European empires. One such new context concerned migration, henceforth a thematic staple in many reversed locutions of imperialism/colonialism. While no single individual coined and popularized reversed expressions of imperialism and colonialism, the famed Jamaican author Louise Bennett (aka Miss Lou) gave considerable impetus to the expression in her 1966 poem titled “Colonization in Reverse.” Bennett’s poem depicted a subversive celebration based on the concept of role reversal occasioned by the 1950s mass migration of West Indians to Britain: “I feel like my heart will burst, Jamaicans are colonizing England in reverse, by the hundreds and the thousands . . .” (*Selected Poems* 106-107). Two years later, another Caribbean author turned the idea of reverse colonialism into the subject of a francophone satirical novel to explore the fantasy of Africa becoming the colonizer and Europe the colonized. In *La Revanche de Bozambo* (1968), French Guian-

nese Bertène crafts a scenario where “the whites are the natives and the blacks are the imperialists” carrying out a drama “of reverse colonialism” (Smith 25). When the English edition was released a few years later, Juminer’s book was re-titled to highlight its unequivocal theme: *Bozambo’s Revenge: A Novel of Reverse Colonialism* (1976).

Heretofore, in political oratory, editorial content, and a few academic entries, a marked gravitas accompanied most uses of “reverse colonialism.” By contrast, Bennett and Juminer reprogrammed the expression to satirize race role reversal between former colonizers and colonized. Bennett, in particular, offered the expression “colonization in reverse” as an alternative to “imperialism in reverse.” More significantly, she established the connection between colonialism and post-colonial migration histories absent in previous uses of “reverse colonialism,” which framed the *reversed* terms in the context of ideas, attitudes, and cultural influences concerning nations, governments, and foreign policy (Dawson).

During the 1970s, at the same time that references (gestated during the 1960s) to reverse sexism, reverse racism, and reverse discrimination came into prominence from the cultural embattlements in the West, “reverse colonialism” gained more traction, principally in political discourse and scholarly texts. Far-reaching social and cultural transformations tied to the changing relationship between the Global North and the Global South, and substantially to migratory movements from former colonies to former colonial metropolises, opened a greater space for the enunciation of “reverse colonialism.” Mirroring a trend in political discourse, several scholars residing in North America and the UK began to enlist this construct to describe unsettling developments that unfolded in the post-colonial world. A few of these scholars envisioned benefits arising from an inversion of a colonial relationship and, accordingly, employed “reverse colonialism” as a politically useful ideal. Take for instance A. Heggoy, a US historian examining the social dynamics of the Algerian colonial period in 1973. Heggoy adopted the expression “colonization in reverse” to describe and commend the efforts by “local Algerians” to purchase properties vacated by French colonials in the 1950s. He defended this practice as an ideal anti-colonial program, a more effective way for Algerians to regain control over their colonized homeland than migration to France (25). Chronicler of Jewish history, Max I. Dimont, also favored the idea of reverse colonization, in this case, to represent the efforts of early “Jewish colonizers” to erect “the future Jewish state.” Unlike American and European colonialisms, which relied on the exploitation of native labor and its own lower metropolitan classes, Dimont wrote in 1971 that Zionist colonizers in Palestine consisted of “an intellectual elite that deliberately transformed itself into a blue-collar class of farmers and workers” to create a modern state. Dimont regarded this process as the only genuine “reverse colonization movement in the history of man,” effectively “an achievement of Zionism” that constituted a legitimate alternative to colonialism (395).

Heggoy and Dimont’s positive use of the term, however, was not the norm. Far more common was the apprehension expressed by Alvin Toffler in that, “the risk of reverse colonialism may exist.” Referencing global changes in economic relationships, this futurist thinker conceived of “reverse colonialism” not as a metaphor, but as a measurable and unwelcome occurrence, as stated in his editorial title: “Colonialism in reverse: how it threatens us” (76). Similarly, the German-American Marxist theorist Henry Pachter published an op-ed for *Harper’s* magazine (1974) under the title “Imperialism in Reverse,” (cited a day later in the US Congress) to denounce the 1973-74 oil embargo by the “small and ragged sheikdoms of the Middle East” (62-68). These sentiments were echoed by British Historian Judith Shaw, whose 1978 journal article on the 1970s’ Britain-Kuwait relations traces the rise of the commercial bids by Kuwaiti financial groups in the British Isles. In “Reverse Colonialism: British Relations with Kuwait,” Shaw contended that Kuwait’s impressive invest-

ments in the British industry in the 1970s reversed what had consisted of, until 1961, a colonial relationship, leading her to lament that the former protectorate could soon “own a larger part of Britain than Britain ever owned in Kuwait” (270).

References to “reverse colonialism” continued to emerge during the 1980s, appearing in a few scholarly texts, and occasionally in popular media, political, or satirical commentary (Glinga 1986; “A Case of Reverse Imperialism”; “Canadians Set Out”). In terms of content, the uses of the trope differed little from the preceding decade, drawing from the epic historical shifts and role reversals states and populations experienced since World War II. Emerging global migratory traffic to the West, in particular, seemed to invite the use of “reverse colonialism” (an association that had only sporadically surfaced since the 1960s). A telling example of this association is found in a short editorial, “Easternization of the West: An Essay in Reverse Colonization,” where Indian Canadian author Sushil Jain highlighted the profound effects of post-World War II changes. These include developments such as “the break-up of the West European Empires, the freeing of the colonies from Imperial yoke, the emergence of African and Asian political power in international affairs, . . . the power of religious orthodoxy or fundamentalism, especially of Islam, the collapse of the Soviet Socialist Republic” (1), among others. Yet, for Jain, of all these massive developments none was “more significant and of far-reaching consequence” than “the movement of people from Asia, Africa, and Latin America to Western countries” (1). This post-War and post-colonial global transference of formerly colonized people to the West constituted, according to Jain, the embodiment of the idea of “reverse colonialism” (see also Bulpitt 22; August 237).

Global migration and population encounters also attracted the attention of the 1980s burgeoning literary, postmodern, and post-colonial theories in the West, leading to a sprinkle of explorations into the conceptual possibilities promised in the idea of “reverse colonialism” (States 333). However, only during the ensuing decade, the 1990s, did “reverse colonialism” gain stronger prominence and recognition within academic texts, precisely in areas related to globalization and postcolonial studies. Along with literary criticism, theorization in these two critical discourses encouraged greater currency of “reverse colonialism” within the humanities and social sciences and generated ancillary reverberations in popular cultural discourse. Here, two contributions of distinct theoretical temperament are worthy of reference. The first concerns Stephen Arata’s “The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization,” a journal publication responsible for disseminating a model of “reverse colonialism” among a wide readership grounded in literary and postcolonial criticism. Applying psychoanalytic literary criticism, Arata located hidden anxieties of reversed relationships between the colonizer and the colonized in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, identifying in this late-Victorian fiction colonizers’ fears that “the ‘civilized’ world is on the point of being colonized by ‘primitive’ forces.” These metropolitan anxieties of “reverse colonialism” permeated the vast invasion literary genre of late-Victorian fiction (including H. G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds*) and were “linked to a perceived decline—racial, moral, and spiritual” of European civilization (623). Arata’s contribution was such that today the idea that a considerable number of “reverse colonialism” narratives permeated late Victorian literature is well established in literary studies.

The second contribution came from the area of sociology of globalization. While Arata sought to unveil psychological states that concealed fears of “reverse colonialism” in imperial literature, Anthony Giddens proposed altogether distinct theoretical coordinates to the concept. Giddens employed “reverse colonialism” to denote new processes of power and “influence” within globalization. In *Runaway World* (1999), he pointed out that as globalization became decentralized, it fostered a host of exchanges and transformations that engendered instances of “reverse colonialism,” a concept he defined as scenarios wherein

“non-Western countries influence developments in the West.” The changes brought about by these extra-Western influences affected multiple aspects of culture, the global financial system, communications, media, and “the very nature of government itself.” For Giddens, “reverse colonialism” is found in these new influences permeating the West, as seen in instances “such as the ‘Latinizing’ of Los Angeles, the emergence of a globally-oriented high-tech sector in India, or the selling of Brazilian TV programmes to Portugal” (34).

Giddens presents “reverse colonialism” as a desirable and restorative epiphenomenon of globalization, a position tied to a larger theoretical claim: if “reverse colonialism” constitutes evidence that the old colonial order has ceased to exist, then we are truly in a *post*, not a neo-colonial world order. In this sense, globalization is not a restatement of the old Western imperialist pursuits. In fact, Giddens’ “reverse colonialism” stands as one of the most salient challenges against the theory that globalization equals westernization. Oddly, *Runaway World* reserved only one brief paragraph to articulate the idea of “reverse colonialism” (34). Yet, despite this succinctness, Giddens outlined a cogent framework that has been reproduced in multiple texts across scholarly disciplines.

Arata and Giddens’ contributions certainly have primed specific understandings of “reverse colonialism” for greater scholarly exposure and use. Notwithstanding, since the early 21st century “reverse colonialism” has developed a life of its own, proliferating in numerous disciplines ranging from business studies to cultural studies, ethnic studies, africana studies, women studies, queer studies, law studies, film studies, food studies, art studies, environmental studies, and, in particular, literary criticism. Outside scholarly ambits, uses of “reverse colonialism” during the first two decades of the 21st century have multiplied in popular culture, political speech, media commentaries, editorial pieces, literature, poetry, TV commercial ads, film, and theater. This extensive and heterogeneous ground covered by “reverse colonialism” contains recurrent features that permit us to contribute some observations about the themes, meanings, actors, languages, conceptual derivatives, and qualifiers that have animated the trope.

Brief Profiles of “Reverse Colonialism”

At least since the 1960s, it should be noted, disciplines in the natural sciences such as biogeography, environmental science, microbiology, ecology, zoology, or animal biology, have adopted the expression “reverse colonization” to describe processes of occupation, domination, or expansion among plant, animal, and microbial communities (see Esposito et al.; Nishiumi and Chang-Hoe). That aside, themes of occupation, domination, or expansion embedded in “reverse colonialism” have garnered significantly more attention in the social sciences, humanities, and various popular, political, and cultural writings. From all this output of references, one can identify recurrent features to begin to make sense of the general discursive topography of “reverse colonialism.” Below, we offer an overview of select elements that exemplify the deployment of this trope. We cast a net over somewhat thematically unrelated samples, while stressing that numerous additional facets can be identified.

“Reverse colonialism” is a global invention and elaboration in English. That is, the trope originated and gained traction in anglophone circuits, notwithstanding the “speakers” of ideas of “reverse colonialism” hailing from Europe, Asia, Australasia, Africa, and the Americas. Far more than any other global language, non-native and native English-speaking references to “reverse colonialism” during the 1930-2020 period is such that to this day it remains predominantly an anglophone articulation. As far as we could determine, versions of

“reverse colonialism” sprang also in Hispanic, Italian, German, and more pronouncedly in Lusophone and Francophone lexicons (and, undoubtedly, also in other languages taking part in post-colonial discourses). Still, references in these national lexicons present contrasts from their anglophone counterparts: in these non-English languages, “reverse colonialism” remained relatively muted during the 20th century, acquiring a certain visibility during the second decade the 21st century. In addition, “reverse colonialism” has received minimal scholarly attention in non-English languages, remaining a concept adopted to an extent from their English counterparts. Likewise, the trope has received only sporadic attention in popular culture and print media in non-anglophone countries, and its use has been generally confined to Europe’s cultural and political relationship with immigration, Islamic cultures, refugees, or expressions of non-European economic musculature, such as Saudi-Arabia or China’s “silent conquest” of Europe (“The Silent Chinese Conquest;” see also Turner).

In the English-speaking world, early installments of the trope indicate a preference for the terminology “imperialism/colonization in reverse.” “Reverse colonization,” “reverse colonialism,” and “reverse imperialism” came into view during the 1960s and 1970s. These renditions enjoyed sufficient momentum and appeal in the early 21st century not only to join post-colonial discourses but also to invite negligible variations prefixed by reversal adjectives such as “inverted, inverse, and reverse.” Still, other variants continue to emerge, seeking additional conceptual nuances, such as “reverse coloniality,” “reverse counter-colonialism,” “reverse imperialism,” or “Reverse Colonial Project,” the latter consisting of a website dedicated to highlighting the Indian influence on the English language (Chakravarthi 2018). Other “reversed” departures from the root-concept “colonialism” proffer even more baroque possibilities in the form of “reverse/reversed postcolonialism,” “reverse anti-colonialism,” or even “reverse neo-colonialism,” an idea present, for instance, in the extravagant book title: *The Epic and Audacious Adventures of the NAUTILUS! and Her Gallant Crew in the 19th Century, Part IV: A Tragicomedy on Reverse Neo-Colonialism of Celestial Proportions* (Bender and Harris).

As a rule, “reverse colonialism” concerns two distinct entities, be they languages, nations, nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, or histories. Curiously, the malleability of the construct allows it to occasionally be directed to collectives with no shared past colonial relationships. Such instances can be observed in political remarks on the Turkish migrant presence in Germany, the subalternation of US political classes and foreign policy to Israel, the charges leveled at Brazil over its business investments in Lusophone Africa, the *Canadian Geographic* article “Reverse Colonialism: How the Inuit conquered the Vikings” (Shoalts), or in the instance of then-prime minister of Trinidad & Tobago, Eric Williams, who likely perplexed many when he accused Venezuela of practices of “reverse colonialism” against his nation (*Caribbean Monthly Bulletin* 3). These instances aside, “reverse colonialism” especially after the 1960s tend to concern contexts involving nations and populations with former colonial ties. Examples are many and varied, encompassing relations between nations worldwide, with a large number focusing on the relationship between African, Middle-Eastern, Asian nations and Europe/West, and their former colonial hegemon. Many such references target historical or current dynamics involving, on one hand, Britain, and on the other, the US, Scotland, Ireland, the Caribbean, Canada, Australia, Argentina, or India. Other recurrent examples reference Brazil-Portugal, Angola-Portugal, Francophone Africa-France, Latin America-Spain, Mexico-US, Japan-US, Greenland-Finland, Poland-Germany, the Philippines-Japan, Britain-(white) South Africa, or Philippines-US (Parker; Padilla).

Regardless of the specific nations referenced in different iterations of “reverse colonialism,” a consistent element shared by the signifiers of this trope in global discourse,

whether expressed satirically, analogically, or literally, is the notion of “historical role reversal.” Concerns over population movements and encounters, specifically inroads by formerly colonized peoples into the ex-imperial centers and cultures, illustrate this “role reversal” element. As such, these concerns are manifest in pronouncements about the Islamification or the Easternization of the West, but also find extensive representation in the familiar postcolonial hot-button issues of nationalist anxieties, immigration, multiculturalism, race, ethnicity, miscegenation, language, social hybridization, cultural assimilation, or identity politics. Other uses of the trope addressed seismic developments linked to role reversals in global economic and political relationships or the new South-North verticalities. As such, considerable political and business commentary resorted to “reverse colonialism” to describe the global rise of Japan, China, or India, as well as the creation of BRICS.¹ In particular, the economic successes of formerly colonized states continue to attract copious use of the trope. Such is the case of the blog article “India’s Reverse Colonization” (2007) or the UK *Business Mirror* op-ed observation that “in the corporate world, “reverse colonialism” is rising,” alluding to the Indian and Filipino acquisitions of Western businesses as the latest instances of “the reverse colonial acquisition wave” (Gamboa).

The element of historical role reversal, expressing a reversal in power relations, contributes to the predominant politico-ideological tone of “reverse colonialism.” Whether of scholarly or non-scholarly origin, the articulations of this trope have consistently resisted a purely neutral and descriptive usage, invariably carrying negative or positive semantic ascriptions. In a negative sense, “reverse colonialism” is often framed implicitly or explicitly as, what UK political commentator Douglas Murray called, a “blowback for colonialism” (Siegel). This post-colonial “blowback” can take the form of the economic prowess displayed by ex-colonies vis-à-vis Europe, as in the case of alarmed Portuguese journalists reporting as “reverse colonialism” the massive investments in Portugal by Angolan economic elites (Sandén 51). Far more common are references to negative “reverse colonialism” positing that “immigration [to the West] is none other than reverse colonization” (Caccia 164). These usages of the trope revolve around the conviction that “fundamental differences” exist between “Western societies grounded on post-Enlightenment values” and non-Western migratory cultures embedded in pre-Enlightenment value-systems (Barnhizer 7).

The views on immigration by Oxford legal scholar John Finnis, among countless other examples, illustrates this acerbic take on “reverse colonialism”: speaking of Europe’s condition in the early twenty-first century, Finnis complained that the continent had entered a “trajectory of demographic and cultural decay,” prompted by factors which include “population transfer and replacement by a kind of reverse colonization” (180). This sense of doom framed as “reverse colonialism” appears with frequency in online discourse or commentary in media, often in discourses that impute to foreign presences the social conflict and negative cultural changes befalling European civilization and identity. One representative, but strident example is found in the contentious argument that Europe faces the prospects of “genocide by substitution,” an idea elaborated by the French far-right activist and “identitarian” nationalist writer Renaud Camus. In his controversial book *Le Grand Remplacement* (*The Great Replacement*), Camus took on an alarmist tone to warn “white Europeans” that they “are facing reverse-colonization by immigrants arriving on the continent from Africa and the Middle East” (Kostov & Meichtry).

Behind these gloom-ridden usages of “reverse colonialisms” inveighing against foreign migration into European spaces lurks another element: the specter of historical decline and disintegration. Significantly, these themes of historical decline derive nourishment from the persistent but much contested historiographic model that attributes the collapse of the Roman Empire to the arrival and widespread presence of outsiders, also known as the

“Barbarian invasions” (Theodore). The historical “Fall of Rome” model, stocked with barbarization, devolution, and “end-of-an-age” narratives, has itself been described in terms of “reverse colonialism.” Classics scholar Stephen Dyson for example, noted that “what might be called reverse colonization” predicated “the end of the Roman empire,” a development fueled by “groups outside of the Roman Empire crossing the imperial borders, raiding but also settling within” (4). This same paradigm bracketing “reverse colonialism” with the demise of the Roman empire and the foreign invasion factor is similarly present in the historian Niall Ferguson’s 2015 op-ed: “Like the Roman Empire in the early fifth century, Europe has allowed its defenses to crumble.” Similarly, the doom-laden 2006 speech by a British senior military officer, Christopher Parry, provides another telling example: Parry warned that a “threat on par with the barbarian invasions that destroyed the western Roman Empire in the 5th century” hung over “Western civilization.” This condition afflicting Europe, he contended, was brought about by “immigrant groups from the Third World with little allegiance to their host countries,” who were likely to “undermine Europe in a ‘reverse’ colonization” (“The West Faces another Invasion”).

Unlike renditions of *reverse* racism, sexism, or discrimination, “reverse colonialism” is also conceived as an ideal worth of pursuit, signifying at times the formula for historical liberation and empowerment of the ex-colonized, as pointed out in the 2015 blog commentary “Reverse-Colonialism: The key to Economic Independence,” or in the reading of “reverse colonization” as a subaltern strategy for autonomy and accommodation (Coutin et al.; see also Hage; Faria and Hemais). Other times, approbative usages of the trope welcome and promote “role reversal” in post-colonial developments induced by what Giddens calls “the influence of others on the West” (34). Thus, this ex-colonial influence on the West can find expression in celebrations of occasions such as “when an oriental filmmaker [...] colonizes a western work, adapting it through the scope and views of an Indian reader,” as proposed in the movie blog review, “*Vanity Fair* and Reverse Colonization.” This celebratory tone can also be directed to larger themes involving the growing hybridization of ethnicities in Europe and the US, the robust Global South cultural footprint on the Global North metropolises, the presence of African and Asian diasporas in European political circles (Antonio Costa–Portugal; Rishi Sunak–UK, among others), or even the instances when non-Western “political leaders” exhibit an “ability to select leaders” in Europe (Nyokabi; Agrahari). One memorable occasion of commemorating the “influence” exercised by the former colonized comes from then-UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, who proclaimed at a speech commemorating 70 years of India’s independence, that “we in the UK are the beneficiaries of reverse colonialism” (Johnson).

In addition to this positive/negative tonality scripted into this post-colonial trope, the versatility of “reverse colonialism” to be activated across various contexts remains one of its most salient features. A mere glimpse into scholarly engagement with concepts related to “reverse colonialism” reveals the diverse array of possibilities to which the trope has been subjected. To illustrate the eclectic range of topics supplied by academic imagination, consider that, in film studies, it is possible to read the British drama *To Sir with Love* (1967) as an instance of colonialism in reverse; in anthropology, to interpret multiculturalism as a beneficial expression of “reverse colonialism”; in economics, to construe as “reverse colonialism” the global success experienced by wine industries from nations such as Australia, South Africa, US, Argentina, or Chile; in sociology, to conceptualize the brain-drain effect as colonialism in reverse; in history, to characterize the Portuguese self-exiled monarch ruling from Brazil (1808–21) as “reverse colonialism”; in religious studies, to view “reverse colonialism” at work in Western-sponsored formulations of Neo-Hinduism; in migration studies, to equate “reverse colonialism” to large-scale movement of peoples from former colonies to the metropolis.

Outside academic circles, cultural politics, involving religion, literature, food, art, music, fashion, architecture, and sport have also provided opportunities for creatively playing out the idea of “reverse colonialism.” At times, the trope of “reverse colonialism” has acquired expression in non-print form, as in the case of satirical political cartoons. It has taken the form, in addition, of the video game *Civilization 6: Reverse Colonization* (2016), the TV ad by the South African fast-food chain Chicken Licken (Chutel 2018), the US hip hop song “Operation Reverse Colonization” (2011) by Dr. Oop & Budamunk, the European stage performance *Reverse Colonialism* (Ratnamohan 2016-2020) by the four African Antwerp-ers *Star Boy Collective*, and in the comedy by the Australian duo Rahman and Hussain *Fear of a Brown Planet* (see also the album *Fear of a Black Planet* by Public Enemy, 1990). In popular print, the trope lent itself to a wide reach of applications, making its way into op-eds, blogs, e-zines, online discussion forums, covering topics as varied as soccer rivalries, the rise of non-Western art to global preeminence, the continued spread of *Hinglish* vis-à-vis English, the criticism of the black American Back-to-Africa movement, the Western adoption of yoga, the pervasiveness of Asian cuisine in the West, the Italian fashion campaigns into the UK fashion industry, the US anxieties that fueled the “Japan Bashing” of the 1980s, the tribulations of the political culture of the “new” Russia, Jim Crow cartoons’ depictions of African American males, or the theological debates between Nigerian and US and UK evangelical churches that were part of the Anglican realignment around homosexuality (Valentine et al.).

One last feature of “reverse colonialism” deserves a mention in this brief survey, as it seems to be a pervasive *sine qua non* behind the usage of the trope. To articulate “reverse colonialism,” many authors routinely preface (as we did) the trope with generic qualifiers that give metaphorical range to the expression as well as intimations of legitimacy. Thus, lexical accessories such as “a tale of,” “talk of,” “the so-called,” “what might be called,” prefigure many locutions of “reverse colonialism.” Even more pervasive are “an instance of,” “a type of,” “a form of,” “a gesture of,” “a kind of,” “a sort of,” “a mode of,” or “a process of.” Although allusive of historical precedents, these widespread modifying phrases preceding the term “reverse colonialism” clearly lack historicity. Moreover, they inaccurately presume the existence of established typologies, (of “types or kinds of” “reverse colonialism”). Yet, this “unaccountability” to historicity and typological formalism seems only to facilitate the passing of the trope as an apt descriptor of perceived reversed colonial interactions in the post-colonial world. Like other tropes, reverse colonialism’s autonomy from rigorous theory, rather than proving debilitating or outright objectionable, enhances its functions as a signifier and broadens the possibilities for its semantic and rhetorical impact.

Conclusion: A Fraught but Fecund Trope of Colonialism

For scholars working on colonialisms, ancient and modern, the problem of containing a multitude of diverse expressions of colonial rule, power, and expansion within one all-encompassing representative category (colonialism) has long invited conceptual dissonances and challenges. Typologies of colonialism have emerged to account for temporal, geographical, political, social, and economic expressions of colonial power (Shoemaker). Yet, without extensive qualifiers (settler, metropole, classical, internal colonialism, among others), the idea of colonialism is at once a “fundamental phenomenon of world history,” and a “phenomenon of colossal vagueness” (Osterhammel 4). To a far greater degree, reverse colonization suffers also from a “colossal” vagueness which allows for applications ranging

from the inconsistent, unrelated, to the contradictory. Lacking the descriptive and explanatory stability required of historiographic or sociological categories, the model offered by the idea of reverse colonialism has not been accorded serious membership in the formal nomenclatures of colonialism, which, as a rule, derives life from modern colonialism.

The encounters we had with the idea of “reverse colonialism” left us intrigued about the basis for the existence of such an idiomatic compound in post-colonial history, both inside and outside the academic realm (see Hage; Turner). As we researched references to “reverse colonialism,” it became clear that the absence of yet established scholarly discussions on this topic beckoned a look into the profile of this expression. Although relying on a modest number of snapshots of “reverse colonialism”—of its provenances, itineraries, uses, contexts, and overall attitudinal characteristics—this survey should suggest that this prodigious reprising of colonialism in the post-colonial period contains material that could benefit from scholarly attention. From a desultory set of expressions lodged toward the end of the European colonial age, “reverse colonialism” has grown into a full-blown global trope in the 21st century.

“Reverse colonialism” has evolved into this global stature by inhabiting different and often inconsonant possibilities, by eliding both precision and uniformity in favor of a polysemic identity, by remaining ideologically “promiscuous,” and by relying merely on nominal relationships with formal definitions of colonialism. It can be argued that the historical processes addressed by the thematic of “reverse colonialism” might benefit from other nomenclatures: in strict historiographic terms, the expression “reverse colonialism” has very little to do with actual historical conditions evocative of European colonialism frameworks of colonialism. Yet, tropologically, “reverse colonialism” functions along the same lines as the term “colonialism,” itself subjected historically to multifaceted applications and evolving typologies. As such, to the extent that the expression has functioned as a useful ideological trope, it contains a vast library of meanings, applications, and contexts that serve successfully as provocative proxies for historical dialectics of the post-colonial. If it offers oversized metaphors, it also delivers meaningful ideological, political, and rhetorical content that gives focused meanings to the complex historical dynamics of post-colonialism and globalization.

In this sense, the trope belongs to a lengthy list of reversing, inverting, or reverting categories concerning colonialism found in post-colonial lexicons. This list contains terms such as *Homecoming*, *Latinization*, the *Empire Strikes Back*, *Third Worldization*, *White-shift*, *Eurabia*, *Tropicalization*, *Replacement Theory*, *Brain Drain/Loan* as well as ideas of multiculturalism, diversity, reparations, reverse anthropology, and recolonization, among others. This cauldron of post-colonial terminology reaffirms something about colonialism: the recasting of colonialism—with reversed or inverted robes—for panoramas emerging decades after its cancelation underscores the unabating discursive capital of *colonialism* in modern discourses.

¹ Geopolitical bloc consisting of five member-states: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

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NOTES

¹ Geopolitical bloc consisting of five member-states: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa