

What's off-centre of empire? Introduction to the special issue

Giulia Carabelli & Miloš Jovanović

To cite this article: Giulia Carabelli & Miloš Jovanović (2020) What's off-centre of empire? Introduction to the special issue, *Cultural Studies*, 34:5, 675-687, DOI: [10.1080/09502386.2020.1780282](https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2020.1780282)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2020.1780282>



Published online: 22 Jun 2020.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



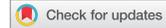
Article views: 88



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



What's off-centre of empire? Introduction to the special issue

Giulia Carabelli ^a and Miloš Jovanović ^b

^aSchool of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK;

^bDepartment of History, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

In this Introduction, we discuss the aims of this publication along with guidelines to locate and connect the essays part of the edited volume. We start by highlighting the original contribution of our intervention in terms of what *off-centring empire* offers in relation to scholarship that de-centres empire. To us, this means to look at the processes, dynamics, and movements that connect empire (as a centre of power) to its peripheries (as a site of difference, struggles, and resistance). To be sure, attempts to off-centre and de-centre empire are related, relational, and they both commit to the project of challenging the centrality of empire, to confronting its lasting legacies and normative powers. Yet to off-centre, as we argue, is to focus on the electrifying force-field generated by the poles of imperial power, rather than oppose centre and peripheries to subvert their relationship. Our aim is to reveal the complex ways centre and periphery connect and distance with the aim to highlight emerging modes of counter-imperial practice. Further, this introduction serves as the opportunity to discuss the structure of the SI and its three main sections – Public Memory, Orientations, and More-than-human. Here we reflect upon how each essay brings to the fore a unique way to off-centre empire, and thus provide examples that may inspire future research. Finally, we highlight how conversations emerging from individual essays can be assembled and read into threads, pointing to multiple ways in which we seek to off-centre empire through empirical research.

KEYWORDS Empire; empire off-centre; Public Memory; orientation; more-than-human

The proposed special issue (SI) contributes to existing discussions on how to challenge the lasting cultural 'duress' of empire (Stoler 2016). This means to locate how the present retains the complexities and ambiguities of imperial entanglements, and thereby confront the 'imperial privilege [that] render[s] some stories, History' (Terry 2006, p. 156). Expanding Patrick Wolfe's (2006) assessment on settler colonialism, we account for empire and its legacy as an enduring and malleable structure that is astute and adaptable (Stoler 2013). As such, we propose an approach to research how imperial formations transform and survive through political changes and cultural turns. The

CONTACT Giulia Carabelli  g.carabelli@qub.ac.uk

© 2020 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

original contribution of this SI must be appreciated in our commitment to off-centre rather than de-centre empire; a gesture guiding much post-colonial and decolonial scholarship.

Thinking empire off-centre emerged in conversations at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, between Miloš Jovanović, one of the co-editors, and Zach Sell, a scholar of US settler slavery (Sell 2020a, 2020b). In 2018, the concept returned as a blanket term for the common research trajectories of the two co-editors of this SI, Giulia Carabelli, Miloš Jovanović and Annika Kirbis, one of the contributors, as developed in preparation of an international conference at the Max Planck Institute of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen. At this stage, the concept reflected more our positions as researchers of 'off-centre' empires, the Habsburgs and Ottomans, rather than a concrete conceptual intervention that went beyond such geographical confines.

It was during a research trip to Vienna that the idea cemented. On a Sunday morning, we travelled to the outskirts of the city, looking for the estate of Habsburg General Ernst Gideon von Laudon. Remembered for his conquest of Belgrade in 1789, Laudon had retired to Hadersdorf, the suburb we set out to visit. Walking in the woods of his former estate, we searched for decaying markers of the trophies Laudon brought back from his conquest (the marble of a city gate, a vizier's tombstone and a little girl; see Jovanović 2020). We crossed path with hikers, families, children and dogs enjoying their day off. Standing in front of the trophies, arranged by Laudon in a Turkish garden, we assessed the potentials of thinking this place in terms of off-centring empire and quickly realized how this concept could powerfully bring together our ongoing individual projects.

Part of Jovanović's work on the material legacies of empire focuses on the power of imperial-historical spaces to shape contemporary subjectivities. As he notes about Laudon's Garden, 'the space of empire is the space of power constituted outside the subject which the subject is forced to reckon with. [Empire] renders us off-centre' (Jovanović 2020). And so we felt too! Far from the centre of Vienna that celebrates (and profits from) the glamour of the Habsburg legacy, we were now able to inhabit *in closeness* the violence of empire that displaces, re-assembles, and memorializes its own conquest. In this case, to study empire off-centre meant to us the effort to push for research that exposes and explores the connective space linking an edulcorated past celebrated as *history* and *legacy* with its persistent, and yet concealed, exploitative and violent nature. In other words, we realized that *off-centre empire* could become a tool to upset accepted narratives that rest on highly asymmetrical power dynamics between centre and margins.

In this sense, we propose here to *off-centre* as a means to address empire from unexpected places, to offer unorthodox views on empire and its legacy. Carabelli's work on affect suggests ways to capture the emotive resonance of

empire catalysed by its material legacy (Carabelli 2019, 2020). Orienting ourselves in relation to the internal movement that came over us after visiting unmarked ruins in suburban woods, we felt invigorated by the chance to arrange and present our work differently. Is this to be considered an ulterior legacy of empire? And, if so, how can we research the more intangible workings of empire in the present? Kirbis' work (also in this SI) explores how new biotopes emerge from the ruins of imperial brickwork industry in Vienna. Similarly to what we experienced as nature taking over Laudon's estate to create a suburban leisurely environment, we wanted to reflect on how empire transforms and survives even without being at the centre of its own story. If so, we ask, is *being off-centre* a survival strategy, a new mode of engagement with new and developing forms of power and political dynamics? To continue and expand this conversation, we invited a number of scholars of empire whose work, we thought, was already off-centred and off-centring.¹

Following the 2018 conference, Jovanović and Carabelli co-edited two special issues that archive and expand the talks held at the Max Planck in Göttingen. The first, published as a Special Section of *History of the Present* (Jovanović and Carabelli 2020), presents essays written from sites marginal to the postcolonial gaze – Transylvanian rurality, global Habsburg history, plantation empire in Indonesia, queer desire in imperial and contemporary Ethiopia and the unique entanglement of US settler colonialism and slavery. As we argued, empire produces space in the present by exploring power, hierarchies and difference in a world that 'remains besieged by imperial zones of belonging' (Jovanović and Carabelli 2020, p. 5). The publication highlights political and economic processes that integrate imperial centres and margins shaping new hierarchies of exclusion and power.

This second SI moves beyond questions of political economy and imperial geography to reflect on the cultural resonance of empire in the present. We think about public memory, orientations, and more-than-human agency as means to further our practice of off-centring empire. Whilst this special issue privileges the intangible legacy of empire, we don't wish to dismiss the materiality of empire or the roles played by political economy, production and reproduction processes. Rather, we direct you to the essays collected in *History of the Present* to explore further this aspect of our collective research and, in particular, the work of Sell (2020b) and Tilley (2020). The main aim of this publication is, however, to reflect on the complex relationships of centre and margins by thinking at the space they create in between, which we visualize as an electrified force-field. Borrowing from Fredric Jameson, we argue that cultural impulses 'must make their way' (1984, p. 57) within a force-field of empire. To see the cultural logic of empire in the same way that Jameson sees postmodernism, i.e. as *hegemonic*, means consequently to recognize that empire was never a totalizing, closed system. Placing the imperial off-centre thus has the potential to 'endow the individual subject

with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system' (Jameson 1984, p. 92). Accordingly, the papers in this volume present ways to navigate the force-field and its space in-between; we think about directions, obstructions, orientations, and embodiment, as means to illustrate both the potentials and difficulties of studying empire through the grey areas of its contradictions.

What we mean by *off-centring empire*

The essays collected in this volume focus on the cultural and affective dimensions of empire that congeal into *contemporary cultural formations* whose legacies can be appreciated in the persistence of social practices, ethics and values inherited from or associated with empire. *Cultural Studies* has given ample space to debates on the roles of postcolonial and decolonial practices to challenge the cultural resonance of colonialism in the present (especially the 2007 SI *Globalization and the De-Colonial Option* and, in that volume, Grosfoguel 2007). This SI draws on such debates whilst pushing them forward by proposing ways to *off-centre empire*.

To *off-centre empire* carries methodological, epistemological and ethical implications. *Firstly*, to *off-centre* empire means to *off-centre* research about empire that focuses largely on imperial material infrastructures and governance mechanisms that provided empire with a semblance of a centripetal, and *centred*, order. More specifically, the practice of *off-centring* empire evokes the methodological imperative to examine empire in its interstitial complexity; not as a coherent whole corresponding to its own hegemonic discourse, but as a complex ensemble of contradictions, contestations, and transformations both past and present.

Secondly, we *off-centre* empire by reassessing empire's historical specificities, after-effects and durabilities to 'find new ways to demonstrate that imperial effects are intimately bound to [...] what counts as knowledge and its fields of force' (Stoler 2006, p. 146). In other words, we wish to zoom-in and blow-up the nodes anchoring imperial legacies to the present. Doing so amplifies the ways in which empire shapes current cultural processes across a range of different sites, from the intimate to the global. We are inspired by Mignolo's call to develop a critical mode of inquiry that dwells outside empire's centredness. Thinking through Gloria Anzaldúa's 'mestiza consciousness', Mignolo explains the strength of decolonial projects in their sensibility '[to] dwell in the borders, [to be] anchored in double consciousness' (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 77, Mignolo 2007a, p. 165). In this way, the after-lives of empire can only be grasped through a multi-layered epistemology that reflects upon incoherent and complex cultural formations of imperial pasts and their living present.

Thirdly, *off-centring* empire signifies a commitment to a method 'for the political and ethical project of revealing the imperial complicity between

the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality' (Mignolo 2007b, p. 499). Accordingly, the essays in this volume dissect contemporary cultural practices whose *normalcy* renders them *harmless* exactly to the degree that imperial legacies reside within the subterranean spaces of everyday life. Our contributions therefore delve into 'the clogged spaces in between – the conceptual processes, academic conventions, and affective practices that both elicit and elude recognition of how colonial histories matter and how colonial pasts become muffled or manifest' (Stoler 2011, p. 122). Thus, in line with our methodological commitment to counteract imperial legacies by dislodging their supposed stability, we aim to make visible, and redress, their continued inequities. Through off-centring, we embrace what Walter Mignolo suggested exactly in this journal: the necessity to *de-link*, 'to remove the anchor in which the "normalcy effect" has been produced as to hide the fact that the anchor can be removed and the edifice crumbled' (Mignolo 2007b, p. 499).

Our proposed volume is thus prompted and inspired by conversations that invite to embrace decolonial approaches to the production of knowledge. We respond to this call by proposing ways to reanimate what empire wishes to exhaust: the possibility to exist and evolve *instead of* empire. The space of such reanimation lives beyond the logic of imperial centrality, beyond the dichotomy of a centre and its margins, yet at the same time acknowledges the durability of empire's power. In other words, the space of *instead* grows off-centre to empire.

Why off-centre empire?

The original contribution of this SI must be appreciated in our commitment to off-centre empire especially in relation to scholarship on de-centring empire. In this section, we wish to discuss further the conceptual implications of this move.

We approach the act of *de-centring* empire as that of displacing empire from its central position. Postcolonial and decolonial scholarship de-centres empire by looking at its peripheries. The most well-known example, Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'Provincializing Europe' rethinks histories of modernity and capitalism by centring the imperial margins. In so doing, postcolonial scholars challenge modes of research that privilege the centrality of empire at the expense of processes and dynamics that happen at dislocated centres of power. Accordingly, they highlight the need to re-fashion discussions on empire by undermining its centrality as unique source of power and norms. Instead, we work with a more capacious concept of power, one that is more appreciative of how multiple forms of power coexist and shape into asymmetrical and hybrid configurations. If this is akin to Homi Bhabha's 'hybridity' it is only so in its emphasis on the multilateral nature of even the most asymmetric structures of power.

Shuttleton *et al.* write (2000) that de-centring is an exploration and a political project of liminal spaces (where hegemony might be less stable) as well as the attempt to create such spaces. To *off-centre* empire means to inhabit spaces of contradictions that shape as power dynamics between centre and peripheries shift and, in so doing, counter the normative and all-encompassing narrative of empire as always-in-the-centre. Hardt and Negri have argued that the nature of empire is always de-centred so 'every act of resistance strikes at the heart of empire' (Corbridge 2003, p. 185). Our move to *off-centre* empire is attuned to a different sensibility. As Bhabha has already noted, to articulate discussions around the dichotomy of centre and periphery might overlook the in-betweenness (Bhabha 2004, pp. 18–28). In other words, although our ultimate commitment resonates with the goals of a de-centring project – challenging the centrality of empire – our approach doesn't focus on the relationship of centre versus peripheries. Rather, we explore what processes of meaning and cultural production exist in between the two poles of empire.

Among those who have engaged with projects of off-centring, our thinking is aligned with Barreiro López and Díaz Sánchez, who argue that to off-centre 'highlight[s] the existence of spaces of dialogue and symbolic negotiation alien or tangential to the hegemonic power centres' (2013, p. 2). We also concur with Masao Miyoshi (1998) for whom the process of off-centring addresses the necessity to explore historical 'blindness'. To be sure, his work discusses the extent to which historical relationships between Japan and the United States have been driven by misunderstandings i.e. each nation have interpreted the other through their own cultural tropes thus never fully 'seeing' them. In other words, for Miyoshi, to off-centre means to re-engage with the process of writing history so that it could be re-focused and subverted (and empire with it). By thinking in terms of off-centre, we ask, what can we uncover by capturing imperial entanglements in their process of becoming? And how does such attunement to the study of empire initiate new political projects that challenge the lasting legacies of empire?

Crucially, to off-centre empire expresses the desire to transform. Firstly, we aim to transform the binary opposition between the centre(s) and its margins (rigid and static) into a relational opposition (tensional and vectoral). In so doing, we explore the force field enacted by the conflicting relationships of the core (empire) and its peripheries. In other words, whilst the dichotomy emphasizes difference by clearing the space in between core and margins, the analogy empowers the force-field in between these two poles by exploring what they have in common. Cultural formations are important markers of the forces which electrify this field.

Secondly, we explore the force-field by tracing and discussing how humans and non-human animals and plants move across time and space transforming

the relationships between core and periphery. In this movement, we explore how directions are followed but also how they can be ultimately subverted. As such, we argue that to off-centre empire means to re-engage with imperial history in ways that reflect processes of translation through which empire is continuously (re)-appropriated, experienced and narrated, countered, and discovered. Such processes move between the past, present, and future; from the centre to the margins and back; from humans to nature and more-than-human animals and plants and so forth.

Crucially, the essays in this collection wish to understand how movements between the poles allow for their reciprocal transformation. In such a way, to off-centre becomes a mode to study empire by attending to its power as relational, relationally produced, and thus prone to transformation. Elsewhere, we used the visual metaphor of the *haze* to represent this force-field, proposing to sharpen this haze as a means 'to frame empire from different vantage points, seeking focus within its plural modes of power' (Carabelli *et al.* 2020, p. 15). Importantly, to de-centre empire initiates processes of dismantling empire's centrality by bringing into focus what happens away from the centre (and to re-frame hierarchies of power). For Ngugi wa Thiongo (1993), this is the meaning of 'moving the centre'. Yet, as we propose, to off-centre empire means to engage with empire as already displaced through its relationality. In other words, empire is central to our research, but its centrality is questioned.

The essays part of this special issue address different historical empires – the archetypal empires of the Habsburgs and the British; the often-disregarded Russian, Prussian and Italian, the narrated-as-exceptional US and Ethiopian. They also exemplify how different academic disciplines – among which cultural studies, literary critique, anthropology, international relations, and history – engage with the study of empire, varying greatly in style, adopted research methods, and goals. In the spirit of off-centring, we fostered such inter-disciplinary dialogue purposefully, as an attempt to work across and in-between boundaries whose existence depends on inherited imperial taxonomies. Further, the interventions we make do not contribute to one single debate. Rather, the argument for off-centring empire is itself off-centred to present academic constellations. It is in this capaciousness that we envisage the possibility for productive exchanges to flourish.

What these articles likewise share is a critical engagement with the present. This is not always the contemporary present, but rather the everyday – the German *Alltag* and the site of the Italian *microstoria*. Our approach is often reflexive or at least personal. This needs to be appreciated in the attempt to capture through the body and the experience of the author those movements of empire that are often hard to pin down. Crucially, we understand the present as the unit containing both the past and the future. Such an approach resonates with Walter Benjamin's (Benjamin 2009) proposition

that the present is not a space of transition, but the space where time stands still, full of potential (*Jetztzeit*). This time is filled with the energizing and promising presence of the *now*. It is full; it contains the blast of the past and the revolutionary promise of the future whose potential awaits fulfilment. As such, we position our essays in the present as a favourable departing point to explore the force field. We do so spatially, by looking at how geographies drawn by empire have been transformed and changed since imperial occupation. Yet we also do it temporally, by inhabiting the present as the space that contains the past and the future in all its relational contradictions.

Here, we wish to spend a few more words on the temporal relationships uncovered through processes of continuous translation. We return to Benjamin and his well-known image of the angel of history that is propelled towards the future while looking at the past. We combine this vision with Melandri (Melandri 2004) who imagines instead the future as an angel regressing in the past while looking at the future. Melandri recollects the Foucauldian idea of archaeology understood as the process able to regress and rescue what has been lost in the genealogy of history to set the basis for a critical history. Taking place in Benjamin's *Jetztzeit*, the essays in this collection appreciate both interpretations as valid. We see no single direction in the space of the present, but movements spacing time towards the past and the future, shaping and reshaping historical narrations.

By locating our work in the *Jetztzeit*, we commit to the political project of challenging the duress of empire by way of exposing imperial continuities in the present and ways in which these are enacted and/or subverted. This acquires salient importance in the face of a present resurgence of forms of colonialisms and imperialisms. Such forms call on us, as Hassan Hage (Ba'a 2018) has argued, 'to think through the post-colonial relation as a fluctuating relation that can oscillate between the colonial and the post-colonial since the two co-exist with each other'. To us, exploring the relationality of empire through a force-field laden with its legacies and margins, placed between the past and the future, highlights how the present is full of Benjaminian revolutionary potential. Off-centre, such potential can trace new paths towards dismantling empire across time.

The structure of off-centre

The essays collected in this SI cluster around three main sections; (1) Public Memory; (2) Orientations and (3) More-than-Human.

The first section, 'Public Memory', engages with the urban landscape to explore the links and intersections between the material residues of imperial projects of city-building and the interpretations that such projects elicit in the present. The cities of Asmara, Zagreb, and Alba Iulia all share – albeit different – imperial pasts. Jeremy F. Walton proposes a reflection on the ambivalent

legacies of empire by dissecting the ways in which a statue in the central square of Zagreb came to embody, historically, both loyalty to empire and nationalist desires of imperial emancipation. The article both re-writes and off-centres the history of this object to explore how it revives and obliterates empire in the present. Walton's analysis well exemplifies our metaphor of the electric force field through a rendition of the electric tension between the statue's mana and other, equally electrifying, forces and events that materialize in the square across time. Expanding Walton's broader scholarship on empire, this essay also reflects on how

the afterlives of empires as objects of memory exceed historical knowledge precisely because these afterlives shape and recast the present and the future. Such present- and future-oriented imperatives accentuate imperial pasts in selective ways, yielding new constellations of post-imperial amnesia as well as memory. (Walton 2019)

The tense force-field between amnesia/erasure and nostalgia is also central to Gruia Badescu's analysis of competing claims over heritage preservation in the Habsburg-built Transylvanian city of Alba Iulia. Nostalgia, as Robertson explains,

is a barometer of present moods. It figures as a distinctive way of relating the past to the present and future, and does this by juxtaposing the uncertainties and anxieties of the present with presumed verities and comfort of the ... past. (Robertson 1997, p. 105)

Badescu's article reveals the symbolic violence that characterizes both attempts to move away from empire (national self-determination) as well as to move closer to it (imperial nostalgia for a cosmopolitan past). Drawing on the work of Jameson (1997), this article well illustrates how interpretations of space depend on the allegorical frames possessed by the public. As such, Badescu captures how projects that preserve empire as heritage also manifest competing aspirations and imaginaries that translate movements towards and against empire. Netsanet Gebremichael Wel-desenbet's contribution furthers such analysis by studying how the imperial legacies of Asmara are both preserved and re-claimed in oral history. The portrayal of Asmara she composes draws on poetry, fiction work, and personal memories to testify to the multifarious and influential ways in which imperial architectural projects are perceived today. Drawing on Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Gebremichael Weldesenbet looks to the contradictions internal to colonial modernity, which inform processes of identity formation through simultaneous movement towards and away from empire. Crucially, her essay speaks to the gendered forms through which the enactment of these urban representations link the female body to processes of colonization, as well as pointing to how gender concepts are crucial to decolonization (see also Schiwiy 2007).

Overall, this section makes visible contrasting approaches to the built environment and its contested imperial legacies. The essays reflect on how urban cultures manifest frictions between processes of decolonization as well as recolonization. Further, they suggest conceptual moves to off-centre empire by disentangling beauty from progress, political ambivalence from nationalism and imperial nostalgia from cosmopolitan aspirations.

Moving away from empire's material footprints, Section Two, 'Orientations', addresses empire as a driver and orienting structure of political subjectivation. The essays explore more closely the tensions created within post-imperial force-fields and in relation to the emotional resonance of empire. Inspired by Sara Ahmed's work on the significance of being *orientated* in relation to identity and reach (Ahmed 2006), the essays aim to highlight and disrupt individuals and collectives' modes of orientation in relation to established imperial relations.

At the heart of Mark D. Steinberg's essay is an exploration of modes to navigate indeterminacy (what Andrei Bely would call *smutnost'*) by means of analysing the roles played by fog in literary accounts of imperial St. Petersburg. Steinberg offers a poetic and dreamy account of how fog embodied modern anxieties and a sense of looming disaster. This essay itself seeks to disorient familiar understandings of St. Petersburg through its fogs not only to 'off-centre experiences of history at the heart of imperial power, but also images of vaguely imagined and unpredictable possibility'. And it is on the eve of the First World War and the October Revolution that empire came to be felt most acutely in the disorienting Petersburg fog, 'an affective perception of troubled historical time, ... intangible and disembodied'. It is this revolutionary horizon *against* empire that appears as the 'cultural text' of disorientation, an affective experience that for Laura Mills' exploration of US cultural diplomacy marks the 'entanglement of emotion, empire and exchange'. Against simplistic accounts of US cultural diplomacy as 'merely the embodiment and persistence of colonial imaginaries', Mills sees the substantive fragility of empire in 'affective exchange encounters that are always already (dis)orienting'. Empire is thus laden with potential in its affective mode, its (dis)orienting properties operating alongside or against imperial logics. Ultimately, as these essays argue, adjacent and *off-centre* to political power, empire is the propeller of atmospheres, potentialities, and different times.

The last and Third Section, 'More-than-human', focuses on the off-centre effects of imperial duress from a more-than-human perspective. Recognizing the environment as a natural and cultural formation, the three essays of this section respond to Slack and Whitt's argument that cultural studies 'must respond to the political and ethical challenges which that recognition poses' (1992, p. 571). Accordingly, the authors explore imperial legacies as settled imprints onto our very notion of 'nature' and our relations with non-human living beings (Kohn 2013).

For Marianna Szczygielska, empire extends through the trafficking and display of exotic animals to 'a geopolitical context without direct overseas colonies' – the East European periphery of the colonial world. With a particular focus on elephant performances in the zoological garden in Poznań, Szczygielska 'uncover[s] imperial presence in the periphery and map[s] out colonial encounters mediated through nonhuman materiality and spectacle'. Situating empire in more-than-human encounters, her work challenges empire's self-referential narratives, recollecting imperial pasts from beyond the grasp of their narrative hegemony (Lee 1999, MacLeod 2000, Stoler 2013). Such multi-species entanglements are charged with imperial energy in the work of Annika Kirbis, both as the lasting duress of colonial pasts and sites of intimacy that have the potential to *off-centre* empire. Thinking through Walsh and Mignolo's call to engage with 'interdependence/*vincularidad*' (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, pp. 1–4) as a method to unsettle empire's authoritative duress, Kirbis' essay traces more-than-human encounters in a Northern German bike path, a Guatemalan home, and a Viennese claypit. In the urgent context of the Anthropocene, Kirbis looks to the multi-species entanglements of humans, slugs, and algae to find a common cultural home set against imperial legacies of ruination. In the closing essay to this section, June Rubis offers an indigenous perspective to conservation that is likewise attuned to interdependence, articulated against imperial legacies of naming and knowledge production. At the centre of her intervention is a discussion on the colonial naming of the *maias* as 'orang utan', and the continued ways such imperial legacies shape human-nonhuman relationships through conservation practices in Sarawak, Borneo. Turning to her Iban interlocutors' ways of knowing, Rubis looks to 'social practices and connections ... [that] work towards re-establishing relationships between nature and humans ... disrupted through the making of empire and its legacies'. Together, the essays in this section highlight the urgency to re-engage imperial legacies in relation to nature and human/nonhuman relations. Certainly, such work requires a critical focus on how human and nonhuman actors' relations still depend on imperial projects of order. Yet, for the authors of this section, the imperial tension that binds nature and culture is likewise laden with potential, pointing to sites *off-centre* to the logic of empire. In their complexity and interdependence, more-than-human entanglements exist beyond empire, creating that space which re-contextualizes and challenges empire's duress.

This structured reading of the volume's contributions is not stable nor exhaustive but rather an invitation. We hope our readers will find additional threads, meanings, and inspiration to join us in the project of off-centring empire.

Note

1. For the programme of the conference. see <https://www.mmg.mpg.de/events/15870/136880>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Giulia Carabelli is an Urban and Cultural Sociologist. She is a Lecturer in Sociology at Queen's University Belfast. Her current research explores the cultural and more intangible legacies of the Habsburg empire with a focus on affect and the everyday life.

Miloš Jovanović is a Historian and Urban Studies Scholar. He is Assistant Professor of History at the University of California, Los Angeles. His research interests include the Balkans, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, the history of urban change, Marxist theory, and visual methods.

ORCID

Giulia Carabelli  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7427-3923>

Miloš Jovanović  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8528-1013>

References

- Ahmed, S., 2006. *Queer phenomenology: orientations, objects, others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Anzaldúa, G., 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 1st ed. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
- Ba'a, H. 2018. Hage Ba'a: another de-colonial politics is possible. Hage Ba'a.
- Barreiro López, P., and Díaz Sánchez, J., eds., 2013. *Crítica(s) de arte: discrepancias e hibridaciones de la Guerra Fría a la globalización*. Murcia: CENDEAC, Centro de Documentación y Estudios Avanzados de Arte Contemporáneo.
- Benjamin, W., 2009. *On the concept of history*. New York: Classic Books America.
- Bhabha, H.K., 2004. *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Carabelli, G., 2019. Habsburg coffeehouses in the shadow of empire: nostalgia in Trieste revisited. *History and anthropology*, 30 (4), 382–392.
- Carabelli, G., 2020. Re-territorialising empire: imperial memories and contested history in Forte Ardietti. In: G. Carabelli, et al., eds. *Sharpening the haze. Visual essays on imperial history and memory*. London: Ubiquity Press, 77–97.
- Carabelli, G., et al., 2020. *Sharpening the haze. Visual essays on imperial history and memory*. London: Ubiquity Press.
- Corbridge, S., 2003. Countering empire. *Antipode*, 35 (1), 184–190.
- Grosfoguel, R., 2007. THE epistemic decolonial turn: beyond political-economy paradigms. *Cultural studies*, 21 (2–3), 211–223.
- Jameson, F., 1984. Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism. *New left review*, I (146), 53–92.

- Jameson, F., 1997. Is space political?. In: N. Leach, ed. *Rethinking architecture: a reader in cultural theory*. New York: Routledge, 255–269.
- Jovanović, M., 2020. Laudon's garden: Habsburg legacy and the warped space of empire. *History of the present*, 10 (1), 28–45.
- Jovanović, M. and Carabelli, G., 2020. Introduction. *History of the present*, 10 (1), 5–8.
- Kohn, E., 2013. *How forests think: toward an anthropology beyond the human*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lee, G.D., 1999. *Walking where we lived: memoirs of a Mono-Indian family*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- MacLeod, R.M., ed., 2000. *Nature and empire: science and the colonial enterprise*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Melandri, E., 2004. *La linea e il circolo: studio logico-filosofico sull'analogia*. Macerata: Quodlibet.
- Mignolo, W., and Walsh, C.E., 2018. *On decoloniality: concepts, analytics, praxis*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mignolo, W.D., 2007a. Introduction. *Cultural studies*, 21 (2–3), 155–167.
- Mignolo, W.D., 2007b. Delinking. *Cultural studies*, 21 (2–3), 449–514.
- Miyoshi, M., 1998. *Off center: power and culture relations between Japan and the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Robertson, J., 1997. Empire of nostalgia: rethinking 'internationalization' in Japan today. *Theory, culture & society*, 14 (4), 97–122.
- Shiwy, F., 2007. Decolonization and the question of subjectivity. *Cultural studies*, 21 (2–3), 271–294.
- Sell, Z., 2020a. *Trouble of the world. Slavery and empire in the age of capital*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Sell, Z., 2020b. Real estate questions: Capital, slavery, and empire in the early United States. *History of the present*, 10 (1), 46–66.
- Shuttleton, D., Watt, D., and Phillips, R., eds., 2000. *De-centring sexualities: politics and representations beyond the metropolis*. London: Routledge.
- Slack, J.D. and Whitt L.A., 1992. Ethics and cultural studies. In: L. Grossberg, et al., eds. *Cultural studies*. London and New York: Routledge, 571–593.
- Stoler, A.L., 2006. On degrees of imperial sovereignty. *Public culture*, 18 (1), 125–146.
- Stoler, A.L., 2011. Colonial aphasia: race and disabled histories in France. *Public culture*, 23 (1), 121–156.
- Stoler, A.L., 2013. *Imperial debris. On ruins and ruination*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Stoler, A.L., 2016. *Duress: imperial durabilities in our times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Terray, E., 2006. *Face aux abus de mémoire*. Arles: Actes sud.
- Tilley, L., 2020. "A strange industrial order": Indonesia's racialized plantation ecologies and anticolonial estate worker rebellions. *History of the present*, 10 (1), 67–83.
- wa Thiongo, N., 1993. *Moving the centre: the struggle for cultural freedoms*. London: James Currey.
- Walton, J.F., 2019. Introduction: textured historicity and the ambivalence of imperial legacies. *History and anthropology*, 30 (4), 387–409.
- Wolfe, P., 2006. Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native. *Journal of genocide research*, 8 (4), 387–409.