

Book Review**“We Can.” : A Review of *Can Non-Europeans Think?***

Book by: Hamid Dabashi

Review by: Peter Amponsah

In *Can Non-Europeans Think?* author Hamid Dabashi (2015) illuminates and deconstructs Eurocentric processes of knowledge production, or in many cases, knowledge rejection in the Global North. Applying a post-colonial, post-orientalist analysis to the activities and relations in places like the Middle East and to transformational moments like the Arab Spring, Dabashi argues that it is through audacity that the West assumes that it alone occupies spaces of knowledge creation, in which self-gratifying “fast knowledge” is produced (p. 18). This knowledge, often constructed in favour of new iterations of military conquest and subjugation of the Global South, serves to sustain and reinforce the West’s dominance over colonized lands and people. To interrupt this process, Dabashi calls for a decolonial epistemic disjuncture from Eurocentric knowledge toward the recognition of the intellectual contributions and ongoing struggles of people in the Global South; Dabashi encourages thinkers from the Global South to embrace and lead this epistemic turn.

The foreword of the book, titled “Yes, We Can,” is written by Dabashi’s friend and prominent decolonial thinker, Walter Dignolo. In the foreword Dignolo continues a conversation between himself, Dabashi, and Slavoj Žižek in which he responds to Žižek’s appraisal of Eurocentric political structures and knowledges. In a paper titled “A Leftist Plea for Eurocentrism,” Žižek stated, “Are we then condemned to the debilitating alternative of choosing between a knave or a fool, or is there a *tertium datur*? Perhaps the contours of this *tertium datur* can be discerned by reference to the fundamental European legacy” (Žižek, 1998, p. 1006). In this statement, Žižek exacted the confines of social progress to limited possibilities and enacted Eurocentrism as the option forward; a position of which Dignolo is skeptical. In *Can Non-Europeans Think?*, Dignolo’s piece identifies some features of Eurocentric colonial knowledge production, citing examples like the construction and use of the “the West” as a linguistic representation of the omnipotent point of epistemic annunciation (p. xxv).

Dignolo promotes a radical break from the common Western colonial canon; his piece is a rousing call to intellectuals wanting a breath of fresh air. In his words, “To find one’s own way one cannot depend on the words of the master; one has to delink and disobey. Delinking and disobeying here means avoiding the traps of colonial differences” (p. xxiv); differences which favor the oppressor over the oppressed. In this statement, Dignolo is contesting the epistemic posturing of

thinkers like Žižek and Zabala, for whom an over-reliance on positions based in a Eurocentric legacy and legitimacy are compounded. Delinking and disobeying in the context Mignolo presents becomes part of the decolonial agenda and moves beyond traditional acts of dissent. He further explains, “In the non-European world it is a matter of delinking from dialectics and turning to analectics (Dussel), and, as well, delinking from progress and seeking equilibrium” (p. xxiv). The project toward equilibrium holds firm as an underlying theme throughout *Can Non-Europeans Think?*

Dabashi’s introduction follows Mignolo’s. In this portion of the book, he outlines in more detail the conversation between himself, Mignolo and Žižek. Naming the introduction “Can Europeans Read?” Dabashi takes subtle jabs at the stoic posturing of European philosophy as epistemic supremacy—a posturing that Žižek has defended. Dabashi goes on to critique Žižek and what can be understood as a type of colonial fragility or an inability to coexist intellectually with non-European, othered peoples and with ideas that run contrary to the globalized hegemony. Dabashi notes that “Žižek and his fellow philosophers are oblivious to those geographies because they cannot read any other script, any other map, than the colonial script and the colonial map with which Europeans have read and navigated the world” (p. 10). This kind of intellectual bias is created and sustained through a power–knowledge link that reverberates into the world through the West’s imperial might, so that even some knowledge produced by non-Europeans presents blind spots marked with the colonial stain; knowledge produced with the intention of liberation, but failing. The question “Can Europeans read?” should not be taken literally, as Dabashi is not looking to identify competency. Rather, he is posing a question to expose the lack of capacity for Eurocentric thinkers even to consider the possibility for thought to emanate from non-European minds. For those committed to social justice, the need to shift toward decentring Eurocentric positions and providing alternative frameworks need not be treated lightly.

In a short first chapter, Dabashi returns to the question “Can non-Europeans think?” making commentary on the problematic, centric nature of European thinking and on the role of geography, place, and space in determining what knowledge is valued, and what can be disregarded. Throughout Chapter 2, Dabashi dedicates his writings to Edward Said, author of *Orientalism* (1978). Dabashi draws attention to the scope of influence that Said’s intellectual contributions have had on himself and others engaged in post-colonial struggle; as he states, “a band of rebels and mutineers...who speak truth to power with the voice of Edward Said, the echo of our chorus” (p. 45). Dabashi clarifies some of the misapplications of Said’s thinking, and challenges readers to imagine and consider what post-orientalism might look like in today’s globalized world. He says, “After Said there are no native, no national, no international, no First, Second, or Third world intellectuals. Battlefields of ideas are site specific and global. One cannot wage any battle at any local level without simultaneously registering it globally” (p. 59). In this sense, Dabashi is highlighting the scope and unavoidable nature of the universalized epistemic struggle that colonialism has waged on the world, and that we must take up: a struggle that resonates in similar ways for those in Africa and

the Caribbeans as it does for those in Latin America, throughout Asia and the broader non-Western diaspora.

Chapters 3 to 5 are narrated through Dabashi's publications in various news agencies. In focusing on the Middle East, Dabashi addresses the most current domestic and foreign affairs. Drawing on case studies like the Arab Spring and the Green movement, he asks readers to consider new potentials for the post-colonial, decolonial struggle, treating these examples as blueprints for the new revolutions around the world. In describing this futurity, Dabashi makes note of the insidious reach of imperialism: a reach so devastating that it afflicts the minds of local intellectuals and leaders to the extent that they internalize these Eurocentric imperialist views at the expense of rights- and equity-seeking values and movements. These intellectuals are those whom Fanon (1969) described as the "colonial intellect."

In Dabashi's conclusion, he urges us to be hypervigilant to the traits of the continued regime of knowledge production. His efforts are articulated in his purpose for the book:

This volume and my two earlier books for Zed Books are among the preliminary steps I have taken to alter the texture, disposition, and timbre of our thinking against the grain of that neo-liberal ideology that systematically sustains American imperialism and its regional allies and global beneficiaries. (p. 288)

Throughout the book, Dabashi describes the dialectical interplay of threat versus reality. Specifically, he points to how the West uses the threat of violence and harm to control; this threat, in itself, becomes more damaging than the reality of violence. Dabashi references this concept multiple times in the book's concluding section and offers many examples. This ideological tool of threat versus reality plays upon fear and can be traced throughout the lineage of the West's colonial rule. From the threat of slave uprisings during enslavement and after emancipation, to the threat of a socialist invasion, and the threats leading to the cold war, racism, and islamophobia, all of these serve the function of sustaining the moral divide necessary for assumed intellectual supremacy to breed.

In attempting to keep the debates around post-colonial realities and existence alive, Dabashi's *Can Non-Europeans Think?* does well. For those steeped in post-colonial scholarship and decolonial possibilities, this book is for you. Dabashi provides a toolbox for thinking about transformation for current times: learning from historical lessons but tapping into contemporary expressions of disdain, disappointment, and disagreement. His choice to draw examples from the Middle East was an accurate pedagogical decision, as it brings us into confrontation with these current, present, tangible paradigm shifts. No longer do we have to imagine the revolutions of our ancestors; we are walking on the paths they paved. Key players in these revolutions must be the young of that generation; "youth are always among the first to experience the problems and possibilities of social change" (Fine & Sirin, 2007, p. 16). Therefore, it is not a coincidence that Dabashi sheds light on the youth- and student-led grassroots essence of the Arab Spring and the Green Movement;

their strategies, politics of denial, and efforts to redistribute power goes overlooked, locked within the Islam–West binary of reason and logic.

Dabashi's book presents a kind of permission—an access point for non-traditional thinkers looking to find validation for their experiences of being silenced and dismissed. He shows that the rules of engagement for Western social and economic development, when applied to non-European lands and peoples, does not fit. The decolonial effort then must be intentional; scholars and activists, particularly those engaged in the disciplines of social work, social science, cultural studies, literary studies, etc., need to consider the contexts from which they draw their practice and research knowledge. The Akan of Ghana, the Indigenous of the Americas, Patanjali, Tic Nhat Hanh: All of these non-European knowledge sources are not only legitimate, relevant, and useful for non-Europeans but also applicable to European knowledge production.

My critique of Dabashi's book is not in regard to the book's objectives, as I feel it comes very close to accomplishing these. Rather, my critique is of the tools that Dabashi uses in reaching this objective. It is fair to say that any post-colonial project committed to the creation of the new being (Fanon, 1969) will enter from a place of essentialized identities. However, given the deep wedge between the Middle East and the West, Islam and Judeo-Christianity, Dabashi runs the risk of re-exotifying the region and its people. Particularly, when condemning the leadership of local politicians and intellectuals, the polemic that Dabashi writes in leaves no room for grappling with other post-colonial realities. Therefore, this limits his analysis and application to the confines of a specific place (Middle East) and space (Islam); extrapolating the learnings and applying them to Western contexts becomes a challenge for even the most radical of thinkers.

Read with an understanding of the lineage and legacy of decolonial thinking, *Can Non-Europeans Think?* continues the push for a society that looks and feels different than the social and political advances of our past. These new advances will lie beyond the boundaries of racial, religious, and linguistic differences, and will force humanity to construct new social rules of engagement. As more restless souls develop the awareness, courage and vocabulary to articulate the need for this world and take the necessary steps to create it, Dabashi's words will remind them that, yes ... we can.

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Reviewer Note

Correspondence concerning this book review should be addressed to Peter Amponsah. Email: pamponsa@yorku.ca