“Every idea or system of ideas exists somewhere, it is mixed in with historical circumstances, it is part of what one may very simply call ‘reality.’” Edward Said wrote these words to critique the political idea of Zionism as a historical project whose concrete realization somewhere—present-day Palestine—reveals both its intellectual/political provenance in nineteenth-century European imperialism and its practical effectivity as a system of accumulation and displacement, crucially dependent on the political, economic, and cultural apparatuses of twentieth-century U.S. global hegemony. Said’s emphasis on the place of the idea of Zionism, historically and geographically (against the placeless world of abstraction within which ideas are said to exist), was also a passionate affirmation of the embodied locus of social experience of Zionism’s violent effects—Palestinians, as its victims—from which standpoint an oppositional knowledge of and struggle against this effective reality could be produced. The theoretical/political accent on somewhere opposed not only the abstract idealism that upholds international liberal hegemonic support of Zionism, but also the practical and symbolic erasure of Palestinian being and human value—somebody/ some people—that the imperialist presumption of the emptiness of the land sought to achieve.

In light of the horrific Israeli assault on Palestinians in Gaza at the close of 2008, which underscores both the unmitigated genocidal principles of Israel’s constitution as a nation-state and the undaunted refusal of the Palestinian people to disappear, Said’s 1979 essay “Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims” (ST 1, 1979) could not be timelier. And yet, without diminishing the specific relevance of this piece, and of Said’s critical interventions as a whole, to the Palestinian plight, the anti-Orientalist, anti-imperialist position he stakes out here as elsewhere is timely for
reasons beyond this specific context. For though in the main Said’s aim was to uncover the unexamined links between the Zionist project and European imperialism of the nineteenth century, he practiced a keen sense of the contemporary legacies of that turn-of-the-twentieth-century world-making project and in particular of the privileged role of the United States in maintaining the Western cultural and ideological hegemony that imperialism secured and that it inherited upon its own assumption of world power from its European predecessors. That sense as well as our own awareness of the special role accorded Israel within the framework of U.S. imperial ambitions in the Middle East and in the world at large put before us the problem of the present moment of global power— the problem called “empire”— in terms of the specific intellectual/political task Said set for himself with respect to Zionism; that is, to bring out its concealed history, as it was exacted from somewhere and some people. We are urged to ask: How do we critically understand the idea of empire and the reality it is a part of? What does it mean to examine empire from the standpoint of its victims?

Today’s empire would seem vastly different from the model of nineteenth-century imperialism that Said saw protracted in the colonial occupation of Palestine. For Said, as well as for many others, imperialism was a matter of territorial acquisition and expansion, and while Said warned against considering territory too literally, advocating an understanding of *imperium* as a matter of constitutive and appropriative power over a domain, consisting of ideas, people, and land—in short, power over a designable reality—imperialism was undoubtedly a spatially conceived moral and epistemological vision as well as a geographically organized political and economic order. In contrast, formulated either in the image of, or in definitive relation to, globalization (a concept, together with empire, hardly hatched in the public sphere at the time of Said’s writing), the historical epoch and global project called empire appears to be a much more deterritorialized affair. Unbridled transnational processes of capitalist accumulation in the constitution of global imperial power (including transnational practices of militarist adventurism in fitful relations of mimicry, alliance, and rivalry with finance capital) appear to scramble or at least continuously fudge the fixed boundaries, categories, and coordinates of social stratification of the older political geography, particularly the spatial configurations of land, people, and ideas that were for Said the primary units and objects of imperialism’s representational project of domination. It would seem that the very representational categories of territorialized identities through which the objects or victims of imperialism historically emerged as oppositional political subjects, and perhaps representational politics as a whole, have now been rendered obsolete.

Most critics of empire distinguish the new global moment and sys-
tem from the old imperialism on a number of fronts, which support this scrambled effect: the divergence of economic and political-territorial interests under empire in contrast to their convergence under imperialism; the fragmentary, haphazard (irrational or arbitrary) character of the new imperialism as opposed to the totalizing, spatially continuist vision of the old imperialism; the transnationalization of production as well as capitalist accumulation (the creation of a transnational capitalist aristocracy) under the new global dispensation as opposed to their centralization in metropolitan nations under the previous imperialist regime; and the deterritorialization of core and periphery today as opposed to their fixed, territorial locations on the world map of the past.

The radical or epochal change that such systemic differences aim to define effectively displaces the very political crux of anticolonial, anti-imperialist critique: that is, the charge that the universal aspirations and ideals upheld and propagated by the civilizing mission of imperialism (humanist freedom and enlightenment, justice and equality, prosperity and progress) were cut to the particular measure of white Western man and founded on the ontological negation and impeded and destroyed life possibilities of the West’s colonial others.

If a fully globalized (universalized) capitalism is the manifest “real” referent of empire—“pure” geoeconomy stripped of the older civilizational, modern developmentalist, racist humanist categories of place-based, bodily identities that were the operative codes of an older imperialism—the atrocities of U.S. imperial wars against the external and internal enemies of American democracy both since the war on terror and in the murky covert history that preceded it have only raised questions about the specific character of empire as a U.S.-led enterprise (the United States as global capitalism’s emperor? monarch? symptom?). Rather than challenging the claimed eclipse or supercession of imperialism’s imaginary, the recent domestic and international enactments of U.S. power have urged only a greater refinement in the conceptualization of empire’s specific configuration of forces and logics of political sovereignty and dispossession and the forces and logics of economic value-production and accumulation. However, as valuable as these conceptual refinements have been, the apparent continued salience of older geosocial categories of difference in the bodily materialization of the enemies and victims of empire—whether exterminable terrorist brutes or warehoused criminalized populations or global urban excess or border-crossing illegals or disposable feminized labor or a disappearing, wasting indigeneity—has hardly provoked a radical anti-imperialist interrogation of the very idea or system of ideas of empire. Instead, attending the U.S. global war against terrorism, a general embrace of empire as status quo, whatever its valence as a positive or a negative reality, marks this dire political, historical hour. As Aimé Césaire
wrote of the metropolitan citizenry, each time a brutal act of contemporary colonialism is committed, they accept the fact.

While the search for the inner rationality of empire continues (providing the integrity, if not systematicity, of the concept and the facticity of its referent), a rationality pursued in such questions as whether and how neoliberalism is continuous with neoconservatism, liberalism, or any other designable global ideology and its normative ideals; whether capital, in its foremost aspect as finance capital, has reached an apogee or made a qualitative leap in the ordering of global life and its apparatuses, from the state form to forms of subjectivity; what the status and reach is of a sovereign politics of exception or necropolitical rule, and the character of its rapprochement with the economics of the global market; and whether the rise of political Islam in rival and alternative transnationalisms tells us something fundamental or essential about the Christian secular liberalism of empire today—while such inquiry continues, entire swathes of human life as sources and examples of divergent and insurgent rationalities and political ontologies are wiped out from theoretical consideration as having any bearing on the idea of empire except as the vast areas of surplus populations, disposable life, and social, cultural wastage created and cast off by empire’s political and economic machinations.

To highlight empire’s existence as a reigning idea or political ontology, one might very well invite the same objections that Anders Stephanson made to William Pietz’s critique of the colonialist elements informing the idea of totalitarianism during the cold war (both articles are in ST 19/20, 1988). Casting suspicion on “the vast Saidian totalization known as ‘orientalism,’” indeed dubious that a “colonialist vision” ever dominated Western Europe in the last two centuries, Stephanson argued that rather than any such totalizing ideological narrative, “war and sacrifice” constituted the real, lesson-imparting historical event and experience that sanctioned the totalitarian narrative. Stephanson’s distinction between narrative or cultural discourse as the stuff of ideological visions, on the one hand, and historical events as the stuff of political and economic policies, on the other hand, which he mapped onto a division of scholarly enterprise between the “lit-crit industry” (the domain of suggestive interpretative readings) and more proper historical work (the domain of solid historical claims), continues to mark current divisions of intellectual work in the emergent, belated field of U.S. empire studies, though the division is undoubtedly unsettled by many exceptions. Writing in the late 1980s at the very end of the cold war, when the ideological ramparts of the free world appeared to be superannuated by the viral workings of the globalizing free market, it is not surprising that Stephanson should consider the narrative and metaphorical devices of an older geographical imperialist imagination to have lost their relevance. For many across the disciplinary divide, the
disaggregating real practices of global capitalism seemed to have rendered representational logics (and imperialism itself as an analytical category) irrevocably outmoded.

For those of us who would want to critically examine the idea of empire as part of the reality it designates, Pietz’s response (ST 22, 1989), which insisted on the crucial role of language in the making of the “very real economic and political facts,” is instructive. Beyond Pietz’s own argument about how colonialist discourse shaped the pragmatic realist subject-position of cold-war theorists and actors, however, language—or more broadly, figuration or codification—also matters to the extent that it is constitutive of the concrete material processes that sustain the idea of empire as well as the standpoint from which those processes, as the very facts that others accept, can be critically contested.

If we understand this critical standpoint as the site of the concealed history of empire “as it has been exacted” from its victims, as Said put it with respect to Zionism’s toll on Palestinians, it is important to consider such exacted historical experiences in terms of hidden forms of lifetimes—bodily and political existences; social capacities and potentials; pasts, presents, and futures—whose suppression, diminishment, and fatal consumption empire depends on for its continued hegemonic existence. More, it is crucial to recognize the role of dominant codes of understanding and figurations of practice, including those of theoretical critique, in the very process of that imperial subsumption. While Marxist and feminist perspectives point to the unacknowledged values, collective capacities, cooperative relations, and social power that disenfranchised and devalued social strata produce for and as capital and dominant rule, subalternist, queer, and indigenous perspectives point to the importance of the figuration and codification of such energies, agencies, relations, and potentials in the processes of their expulsion from or foreclosure by the norms of imperial social reproduction. To view empire from these combined perspectives is to recognize that the importance of language and figuration does not lie only in their role in empire’s operation as a system of representation but also in their role as crucial means of organization, production, exploitation, and dispossession of social life.

Empire is, one might argue, a utopian image insofar as it captures the dialectical contradiction between total global wealth and power and complete planetary subjection to both—for conservatives picturing an ideal state, while for progressives picturing the very condition for its radical reversal in the form of global revolution. It is critical to note, however, that the idea is an overestimation of the achievement of globality. This utopian image, moreover, bears few, if any, dreams of empire’s actually existing subalterns, who figure too often merely as the constitutive negation, internal limit, or sacrifice of imperial power. If we are to challenge rather than
accept the facts of empire, it may be vital to suspend the language of its ontology, with which the epistemology of its critique tends to coincide, and instead to further the force and flourishing of those exchanges, associations and acts, social capacities, aspirations, and practices of living that exceed imperial protocols for viable and valuable existence—to cultivate and build on the tangential, fugitive, and insurgent imaginations of those whose very thriving in spite of and beyond the exactions of empire does not only testify to the operation of new and long-standing forms of political potential. Such thriving also bears within it our last remaining resources of radical hope.
Empire

Neferti X. M. Tadiar

Edward Said’s 1979 essay in the inaugural issue of Social Text, “Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims,” places before us the problem of the present moment of global power—the problem called “empire”—in terms of the specific intellectual/political task Said set for himself with respect to Zionism; that is, to bring out its concealed history as it was exacted, from somewhere and some people. We are urged to ask: How do we critically understand the idea of empire and the reality it is a part of? What does it mean to examine empire from the standpoint of its victims? This essay takes up the differences between an older imperialism and present-day empire, in order to envision what yet remains for us to consider in opposing its contemporary global rule.