

Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boye, ed. *Beyond Dichotomies: Histories, Identities, Culture and the Challenge of Globalization*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002. xxv + 317 pp. ISBN 978-0-7914-5383-4; ISBN 978-0-7914-5384-1.



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Freedoms beyond Dogma, Essentialism, and Domination

Based on a conference held at Stanford University in 1998, this book draws together recent studies by prominent postcolonial scholars including Abdul JanMohamed, Mary Louise Pratt, Robert Young, Edouard Glissant, and a number of others. Although individual contributions often raise a number of issues simultaneously, they are usefully organized into sections that highlight three prominent areas within postcolonial studies. These are: the relationship between postcolonial theoretical formulations and the intricate processes they seek to uncover ("Beyond Dichotomies"); the conceptualizing and theorizing of identity ("Contested Places, Contested Self Ascriptions"); and the analysis of how cultural texts and discourses are produced, circulated and received ("Translating Places, Translating Ambivalence"). The contributions make it clear that postcolonial explorations of identity and patterns of cultural domination and contestation have always engaged with the processes and subject positions that are increasingly being linked to the term, "globalization." The explicit reflection on a term originating in economics, then, is an index of its currency in contemporary discourses, rather than an indication of the turn among postcolonial theorists to substantively differ-

ent subject-matter. This attention also sheds considerable historical, cultural and political light on a concept which, although often used, is also frequently simplified or mystified. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot observes, "globalization" is a "fuzzy word" (p. 3), with commentators often limiting its complexity through the use of blunt generalizations or convenient key words, or through silencing the many cultural exchanges among different societies and cultures that have developed over several centuries.

A pivotal strength of the book is the attention paid to debates within postcolonial studies. Of particular importance here are contributions that not only interrogate the neat binaries (for example, between subject and object or self and other) that were popularized with early postcolonial thinking in the seventies and eighties, but that raise the pitfalls of work since the nineties. With the popularizing of studies of creolization, hybridity and *metisage*, it has become almost *passé* to contest the tendency within early theories of colonial discourse to duplicate the binaristic logic they sought to contest. Ideas about the fluidity, porousness and instability of all cultures and identities have therefore become *de rigueur*. Yet

the “new” language celebrating fusion and inbetweenness often erases power and struggle (highlighted with great force in the writings of a theorist like Edward Said, for example), and silences what Trouillot describes as “the past on a world scale ... the continuous and deeply felt encounters that have marked the last 500 years of human history” (p. 6).

Certain contributions also reflect a timely self-consciousness about the fate of postcolonial scholarship beyond the academy. Scholars have generally used terms like “othering,” “hybridity” and creolization in metaphorically rich and intellectually suggestive ways. Yet the concepts can be reified or packaged in a manner that leads to the loss of their symbolic resonance. Generally, then, the book offers valuable epistemological reflections almost three decades after the publication of the first wave of postcolonial scholarship.

While many of the contributions offer case studies and provide detailed empirical reflection, the chapters in part 1 are more directly theoretical in orientation. Of particular importance in this section is the questioning of the idea that globalization, as a recent phenomenon signalling a new moment in world history and international exchanges, commences from the second half of the twentieth century. Trouillot’s “The Perspective of the World: Globalization Then and Now” argues that “studies of globalization need to develop a global perspective,” and proposes a model of temporal stages (p. 7). For Trouillot, a first moment commences with New World slavery and the industrial revolution, so that a second, which starts from the middle of the twentieth century, is distinctive because of the tremendous volume, influence, and speed of global flows. Mary Louise Pratt’s “Modernity and Periphery: Toward a Global and Relational Analysis” is similarly attuned to the pitfalls of identifying globalization as “new.” Focusing on the critical study of modernity by Third-World scholars, she develops a global and relational account of it. This allows her to show that its definition and theorization has been Western-centric, with many Third-World thinkers totally redefining “modernity” and also questioning the conventional distinctions that have been made between modernity and postmodernity.

Part 2 approaches globalization mainly from the perspective of identity construction. The more powerful articles here highlight key theoretical debates. Arif Dirlik’s study of Chinese-American identity considers the extent to which concepts that may start off as being oppositional have been reified. He shows how easily the fluidity sug-

gested by concepts like “diaspora” and “hybrid” can be betrayed when they are instrumental in policing and essentializing those who are not American nationals. In the course of this discussion, he critically reviews the work of theorists like Paul Gilroy and Homi Bhabha. Robert Young, by examining identity politics in Britain, surveys the work of prominent scholars such as Stuart Hall and Kwame Appiah, and raises provocative insights about race and ethnicity. These empirically-grounded theoretical reflections mark a shift away from the highly abstract and dense postcolonial scholarship—associated especially with Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha—of the eighties. They indicate the extent to which scholars are focusing increasingly on how theory can explain specific cultural and historical patterns, rather than on the dextrous elaboration of theory. It is noteworthy here that the relatively plain register of most of the contributions differs strikingly from the dense and esoteric register of early postcolonial work.

In the third section of the book dealing with the circulation of texts and discourses, Emily Apter demonstrates how translation can lead to caricature, the reinforcing of stereotypes, and a situation where publishers, booksellers and readers end up feeding off the translated and stereotypical otherness of marginal writers’ texts. Her question cautions against any automatic celebration of the current popularity of Third-world writing in the West: “what happens to ethnic and national literary voice in the global literary market once that voice has become a regionally dislocated, overtranslated caricature if cultural affect” (p. 198)?

Reading against the grain of Apter’s sceptical take on translation, Walter Mignolo and Freya Schiwy propose translation as a metaphor for the movement beyond stultifying binaries, and argue that “if English is the hegemonic language in a transnational world, it shall also be the transnational language in which positions of subalternity can be rearticulated” (p. 279). The conversation between Apter on one hand, and Mignolo and Schiwy on the other, is a direct example of the richness of the debate that the book as a whole offers. Another highlight in section 3 is Ali Behdad’s study of American anti-immigration sentiment. He persuasively argues that anti-immigrant consensus has always been deeply embedded in the American national consciousness, and that “discourses of immigration have made the ambivalent concept of the nation-state imaginable in America” (p. 204). In view of the powerful expressions of xenophobia in the United States after September 11, the argument is enormously suggestive.

Overall, the book marks a crucial moment in the history of postcolonial studies. Because it maps out important theoretical and conceptual territory to date, it is likely to be of considerable interest both to researchers who are familiar with postcolonial scholarship, and to students who are fairly new to the field.

While the book offers a critical retrospective appraisal, it is also a reminder of the valuable perspectives and analytical tools that postcolonial studies have offered. Edouard Glissant's keynote address for the 1998 conference, "The Unforseeable Diversity of the World," which concludes the anthology, powerfully conveys the wealth of this legacy by evoking the intellectual and political quest that postcolonial theorists have consistently pursued through interrogating the complexities of cultural and discursive domination. Glissant offers the concept of "worldness" as an alternative to globalization, defined as the "reduction to bare basics, the rush to the bottom, standardization, the imposition of multinational cor-

porations with their ethos of bestial ... profit" (p. 288). In this way, he affirms cultural and intellectual growth in relation to others not on the basis of the domination of any one person or group by another, but on the basis of "change through exchange with others" while being "viscerally attached to the origins of the histories of our particular communities, our cultures, peoples, or nations" (p. 287).

Glissant's article, maybe especially because its poetic style differs from the more academic style of the other contributions, compellingly conveys the idealism that has always been central to postcolonial scholarship. While the commodification of knowledge and ideas, and powerful legacies of essentialized thinking may lead to the distortion of many postcolonial formulations, scholars have consistently searched for ways to articulate freedoms that lie beyond dogma, essentialism and domination. This book is a topical, comprehensive and encouraging testimony of these searches.

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