

Book Reviews

DOI 10.1515/zaa-2015-0008

Graham Huggan, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Hb. xv, 734pp. £ 95,00. ISBN 978-0-199-58825-1.

After 30 chapters and almost 700 pages, an “Afterword” by Stephen Slemon voices the impression which most readers will have derived by this point: that “this particular Handbook does not stay within the formal definitional boundaries of its genre,” thus reflecting “the essentially insubordinate nature of postcolonial studies at the level of critical temperament” (697). Rather than offering ready reference, this state-of-the-art handbook invites its readers to share the lively and controversial debates of contemporary postcolonial studies. This field has come a long way since the 1980s Empire Writes Back model and its strong focus on literatures that developed in former British colonies. Graham Huggan’s *Oxford Handbook* impressively demonstrates how postcolonial studies has sprawled in many directions, acknowledging the plurality and dynamics of colonialisms and postcolonialisms, involving a wide range of disciplines, and extending its critical interest far beyond literature. The postcolonial field in the 21st century displays a wide array of ideological inflections, even to the extent of being “torn,” as Huggan writes in his General Introduction, “between competing revolutionary and revisionist impulses” (4). Postcolonial studies has come under critique (for instance in Neil Lazarus’s *The Postcolonial Unconscious*), and many have seen it replaced by global and/or transnational studies. Huggan engages with such positions (including Lazarus among his contributors with a chapter on the “Political Imaginary of Postcolonial Studies”), and he is aware of the controversial nature of the term “postcolonial” itself (22). At the same time, he maintains that postcolonial studies – under precisely this denomination – has retained its explanatory and political significance as well as its combative potential and commitment to transforming the world with which it quarrels. Huggan holds a “critical revisionism” to be the “default mode of postcolonial theory and criticism” (20), and he claims that all postcolonialisms (which at any rate are “not necessarily compatible”) desire to “intervene in the unfinished history of the modern world” (20). Huggan could not have found a more appropriate way to organise his Handbook than with chapters that, according to Slemon, “do not sit easily alongside each other at the level of critical argument” (697). The authors of these chapters – all experts in the field, and many of them internationally renowned – come from

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different regions of the world (though predominantly its English-speaking parts) and have diverse disciplinary backgrounds, from literary and cultural studies to history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and others. (Only linguists seem not to have been considered.) They refer to multiple founding figures of postcolonial studies and have various political orientations, so that the Handbook's coherence (like that of the field it aims to cover) is achieved primarily through "dialectical interaction" (4). Huggan links his impressive selection of contributors and themes through meticulous cross-referencing and a comprehensive, 30-page index. Orientation within the volume's rich 'discursive' arrangement is further facilitated by the fact that each of its five sections includes an introduction by the editor that sketches the major debates and controversies within the given subfield (and so also makes it possible to read the Handbook selectively, without losing sight of the wider contexts), while a final response by another scholar points to the sections' major ideas from another perspective.

The first two sections are dedicated to "The Imperial Past" and "The Colonial Present," reflecting the editor's contention that postcolonial studies must not limit itself in presentism, because "the imperial past is not past" (31) but has left multiple legacies for a world that is increasingly globalised while also being incompletely decolonised. Not surprisingly, this is evinced most emphatically in chapters that engage with the Islamic world, such as Walter D. Mignolo's challenging "Decolonial Narrative" that links the Ottoman Sultanate and Spanish Empire to the US and the EU and so aims, by shifting "the geography of reasoning" (110), to show that the hegemonic, Eurocentric narrative of imperial history is being destabilised by alternative dewesternised narratives. The *Handbook's* central section focuses on the relationship between "Theory and Practice," and its last two parts range "Across the Disciplines" and "Across the World," thus addressing two aspects which most obviously distinguish today's postcolonial studies from the field's beginnings more than three decades ago: Not only has postcolonial studies become decidedly multi-disciplinary, but it has also transcended its earlier focus on the nations that emerged from the former British Empire. This is already reflected in the first section, whose chapters on the imperial past open a space for comparison as they address the various imperialisms not only of Britain, but also of Spain and Portugal, France, the Netherlands, and of Islam. Patricia Seed, for instance, discusses the special significance of the concept of indigeneity for the Spanish and Portuguese 'New World,' where "the scale and diversity of the newfound 'natives' far exceeded anything that Africans, Asians, or Europeans had previously encountered" (92). Reactions to this staggering difference would lead to significant consequences for the indigenous peoples of the Americas who would continue to be governed by neocolonial rule, while

their indigenous counterparts in Africa and Asia regained power as their colonial oppressors relinquished control. The Netherland Indies provide the case study for Ann Laura Stoler's "Reflections on Enlightenment and Empire" in which she applies the Foucauldian notion of *dérason*. Her conclusions can be generalised for other European empires, and not only for the eighteenth century: "Unreason in these colonial archives is a distinguishing mark, ascribed to those off-guard, overworked, or overwrought states that produce uncommon, unauthorized critical reflections that emerge when one does not look away" (62). While section two on the colonial present cannot ignore the 'war on terror' (Huggan's introduction identifies Derek Gregory's 2004 study on this war and its antecedents, *The Colonial Present*, as "one of the most influential books of the last decade for postcolonial studies," 170), its chapters are also concerned with some of today's pressing biopolitical issues. David Farrier and Patricia Tuitt, for example, challenge Agambian abstractions in their discussion of possible futures available to refugees ("Beyond Biopolitics: Agamben, Asylum, and Postcolonial Critique"), and the explicitly dialogic nature of their discussion, with the perspectives of a literary critic and a legal scholar respectively, seems to epitomise the entire *Handbook's* discursive and cross-disciplinary agenda.

The *Handbook's* third section addresses postcolonial studies' dilemma of how to tackle the "disparity between theory and practice" (298) that seems fundamental to the field. It tests this alleged disparity in chapters related to various issues of activism, including Elleke Boehmer's investigation of Nelson Mandela's political career as anticolonial activist and intellectual, Michael Rothberg's discussion of the activist potential of memory studies ("Remembering Back"), and Simon Featherstone's plea for a greater inclusion of popular culture and the culture of everyday life within postcolonial studies. Section four begins with Huggan's provocative question whether postcolonial studies is a truly interdisciplinary (and not merely interdiscursive) field, since to date most notable advances seem to have been made by scholars "with training in a similar discipline" rather than by researchers working in genuinely multi-disciplinary teams (418). However, collaboration between different knowledge-producers is required to tackle many problems of today's world, not least its environmental ones, as is argued by Diana Brydon ("Modes and Models of Postcolonial Cross-Disciplinarity") and in a chapter co-written by Dana Mount and Susie O'Brien ("Postcolonialism and the Environment"). Other authors discuss the contribution of specific disciplines to the postcolonial field, such as literature, history, the social sciences and religious studies. The fifth section finally leads the *Handbook* into the minefield of postcolonial studies' relationship with globalisation and global studies, which Huggan envisages as a complex, dialectical interplay between fields whose

approaches complement each other while nevertheless remaining “equally inadequate” (548). It is uncontested, however, that global and postcolonial studies do have overlapping interests, for instance with respect to forms of inequality, uneven development, subalternity and, once more, environmental issues. Also, as several chapters demonstrate, both fields are challenged by the emergence of new regionalisms resulting from the continuing (re)configuration of global economic relationships: Daniel Vukovich, for instance, discusses “Postcolonialism, Globalization, and the ‘Asia Question,’” and Michelle Keown and Stuart Murray explore issues of globalisation, regionalism and (trans)nationalism in the Pacific region, with its “particular imbrications in both local and global (neo)imperial configurations” (623). Frank Schulze-Engler’s “Irritating Europe” is the final chapter and brings the Handbook back to where the world’s most consequential colonial projects began. However, Schulze-Engler pleads for a new look at Europe through a postcolonial lens, and investigates the significance of such a perspective “for the self-understanding of an emerging ‘New Europe’” (670).

Taken together, the contributions to this *Handbook* – its chapters, introductions, and responses – attest to the ongoing importance of postcolonial studies for the world today and its geo- and biopolitical dynamics. When the book was produced, the editor and several of his contributors were preoccupied with the Arab Spring; it would now, in autumn 2014, more probably be the Islamic State. Postcolonial studies provides the intellectual equipment to discuss and interpret both phenomena, as well as many others, and this *Oxford Handbook* offers expert guidance. Graham Huggan proves his command of the wide and divided field of contemporary postcolonial studies in the selection and arrangement of chapters, and especially in his general and section introductions. OUP could hardly have found a better and more careful editor for this ambitious and rewarding project. The *Handbook* will be a standard work for years to come and should be on the shelves of every respectable university and departmental library. However, since it charts a complex and internally divided field, it cannot – and should not – be expected to offer ‘easy’ reading. It will be most useful and profitable to readers who are already familiar with the tenets of postcolonial studies and who wish to engage with its current debates.