

*Commodifying (Post)Colonialism: Othering, Reification, Commodification and the New Literatures and Cultures in English*

Rainer Emig and Oliver Lindner (eds.)

262 pages, 2010, \$81.00 USD (hardback)

Amsterdam–New York, Rodopi

Reviewed by Christopher Ward, Biotechnology University College, Dubai

*Commodifying (Post)Colonialism: Othering, Reification, Commodification and the New Literatures and Cultures in English*, a volume of fifteen essays edited by Rainer Emig and Oliver Lindner, and published by Rodopi, looks at the problems of postcolonial identity as it is consumed and, indeed, subsumed by the marketplace of Western cultural production. The text proffers a polysemic collection of critiques covering theory, fiction, drama, film, and pop music whose commonality lies in the bond between Western discourse and its seemingly pre-emptive and presumptive analysis of the Other as variously exotic, quaint, fashionable, or horrid, so long as it is marketable. The marketability of the postcolonial may be seen as a function of both economic and cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu), yet it is hard to ascribe a dominant argument to the essays. It is also difficult to escape the dominion of capital's ambit as a commodifying consensus culture, or disavow a universal history, no matter how Eurocentric (Hegel; Vasquez-Arroyo). Fredric Jameson's description of late capitalism as first objectifying and then incorporating its opposition, commodifying everything in its path with a "new expansion of multinational capital [that] ends up penetrating and colonizing those very pre-capitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which offered extraterritorial and Archimedean footholds for critical effectivity" (8) points toward the nature of ascription and cultural inclusion of the Other within capitalism as myopic outgrowths of greed, and a matter of historical precedence. Capital's consensus-generated self-perception is blindly centrist and inevitably fetishistic. The mythology of its centrality and beneficence contradicts its own capacity to generate objectivity (Buck-Morss 119). However, an agenda based upon a cartography with no fixed firmament seems just as precarious and reductive as does the seemingly omniscient paternalism and inclusiveness of late capitalism's preemptive social hegemony. If the one is scientific in its broad swathe of applicability, so too is the other in its assured impoverishment of vision or direction. Negotiating the divide remains a challenge.

The need to overcome this gulf of alterity is underscored by Jens Martin Gurr in "Bourdieu, Capital, and the Postcolonial Marketplace," which follows after an absorbing introduction lodging the Other as "the binary opposite that the self needs in order to assert itself" (Emig and Lindner ix) but which also leads on to affirm that "commodification has

been at the core of representations of colonial and postcolonial experience” (Emig and Lindner xxiii). Gurr wants to make a case for the postcolonial based upon a shift from the complicating problems of autonomy and heteronomy inherent in Bourdieu’s perception of phenomena in the postcolonial marketplace by turning to “narrativity, performativity, and modality of actors’ self-positioning in this field” (4). This approach skirts the issue of the subsuming self in Western cultural commodification by valorizing fresh and distinctive means for assessment. Gurr’s renegotiated self and Other also entails the examination of “local, national, and transnational fields of cultural production” into a seamless field (or fields) of cultural production, sans capital—or at least, sans the prioritizing of capital. Whether this is achievable remains moot. But the clear need to tackle the divide between self and Other from new perspectives remains and underscores the earlier concerns of Horkheimer and Adorno. They sensed an original Hegelian sin in the means by which thought must eliminate all that is not thought, to devour the opposition in its effort to create identity, yet whose alternative of a “logic of disintegration” seems to leave not only just the faded memory of a ‘ludic’ moment, but also the bitter aftertaste of despair (*Negative Dialectics*). Nothing is achieved, aside from the pleasure the game provides its privileged players, or as Georg Lukacs would have it, a “considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia, including Adorno, have taken up residence in the ‘Grand Hotel Abyss’ which I described in connection with my critique of Schopenhauer as “a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity” (Preface to *The Theory of the Novel* xiii). What seems to be required, beyond a new intellectual turf, is appropriately alluded to by Gurr’s mention of de Certeau’s “hegemonic ‘strategies’ and subversive ‘tactics’” in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (17). If we are all subsumed by late capitalism, then the procedures of consumption become the tactics of consumption and a new mapping of reality emerges, perhaps without the imprimatur of Universal History, but with the spirit of its concept or aspiration, thereby conveying a refinement of Adorno’s negative dialectic. What is left is the negotiated pursuit of the positing of culture predicated in an aesthetic of strategic mapping akin to Jameson’s “global cognitive mapping” but with an “incredulity towards meta-narratives” (Lyotard xxiv).

Gurr has pointed the way. Oliver Lindner continues with a critique of Nathaniel Crouch’s *The English Acquisitions in New Guinea and East India* (1708) and in Edward Cooke’s *A Voyage to the South Sea* (1712). Lindner presents a compelling indictment of the European cannibalization of a peripheral and ‘barbarous’ world by engaging in a voyeuristic and prolonged evisceration of all that was held sacred or dear to the indigene, a metaphoric cannibalization of the New World of vastly greater horror than any European text could ever describe, even in the passion for catering to a popular press with an appetite for ‘exoticized’ violence. Carl Plasa’s contribution, “Saccharographies” adds an acerbic note to the truth about sugar and the social life of white masters and black slaves in the

West Indies. Wolfgang Funk in “‘The dark races stand still, the fair progress’ Matthew Kneale’s *English Passengers* and the Intellectual Commodification of Colonial Encounter in Tasmania” alludes to the fragmentation of history and its correlative in the scattered bones of Truganini, the last Aborigine of Tasmania. Funk makes it clear that there is nothing new about historiographic distortions. He states, “One might be tempted to ask if literature (which invented and in the sense of being cast in narratable shape) has not always been the more truthful means of conveying past and irrecoverable experience, since it is not impeded by the burden of veracity” (73). Along the lines of Nassim Taleb’s “notion of narrative fallacy” he suggests that Fukuyama’s “end of history” should be supplanted by a new form of historiography (74).

This entails a literature scrubbed of pretension: “Literature with its tradition of depicting equivocal semblances instead of univocal truths, might be in a position to fill this void if it itself relinquishes its traditional authoritative *gestus*, which I would closely correlate with an aesthetic of *mimesis* for a new ‘aesthetic of humility,’ which takes the fundamental of origin and starts out from there not only to adopt new narrative attitudes but also eventually to create a pristine locus for literature, from which it can more faithfully comment on a society that has in many ways become a post-realist one” (75).

Literature, and particularly a hybridized novel of historical autonomy that seeks out untold stories, effectively reframes historiography. The idea of writing through the fissures of history creates a disruptive alchemy which can both rectify and enhance the filtered light of history’s misadventures.

Invariably, in reviewing an anthology, some texts are valorized at the expense of others. This is, of course, true in reviewing *Commodifying (Post)Colonialism*, which includes invaluable critical analyses by Sissy Helff on new variants of the *Alice in Wonderland* motif as it is transplanted to Australia; by Lars Eckstein, on global marketing and magical realism in the Maori novel, *The Whale Rider*; by Ksenia Robbe, on commodification of black South African women’s narratives; by Cecile Sandten, on mythologies of urban representation; by Samy Azouz on historical representations of slavery; by Katharina Rennhak on theatrico-politico implications of contemporary Irish drama in the plays of Martin McDonagh; and by Stephan Laque on the colonizing, and re-colonizing of the Wild West, and the re-colonizing and de-colonizing of Africa by American cinematographers in the 60s. Other valuable contributions include Birte Heidemann on cinematic culture in black Britain, Sabine Nunius on interpolated exoticism in the film *Bride and Prejudice* and in the music of Apache Indian, and Ana Cristina Mendes on Salman Rushdie as postcolonial superstar. Finally, Graham Huggan in “Celebrity Conservationism, Postcolonialism, and the Commodity Form” cleverly and eloquently points the way to what might actually become of the postcolonial given a carefully orchestrated flight of fancy between damaged reality and desired result. Perhaps, as Susan Buck-Morss states,

“It is in the discontinuities of history that people whose culture has been strained to the breaking point give expression to a humanity that goes beyond cultural limits” (133). What becomes clearer is the path to the future. Could there be a more fitting conclusion than Huggan’s appeal for a democratization of knowledge and the cultural redress it invites; indeed, could this be a harbinger for a better mediated history?

*Commodifying (Post)Colonialism: Othering, Reification, Commodification and the New Literatures and Cultures in English* is one of those rare texts that fills a gap in the evolution of both historical postcolonialism and the theory that shrouds it by suggesting that there are fresh ways of negotiating the Other. By keeping the dialogue alive, this text is central not just to cultural researchers but to everyone as we continue to map the human spirit, and “an incredulity towards meta-narratives” is amended with a collocation of micro-narratives which implement a different vision of history.<sup>1</sup>

#### Note

1. The criticism of history is a criticism of a universal history which is patently Eurocentric and reflects a solipsistic reductivity of the Other based on either domination or exclusion. Cf. Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Susan Buck-Morss’ *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, and Enrique Dussel’s “Beyond Eurocentrism” in *The Cultures of Globalization*.

#### Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics* (1966). Trans. E. B. Ashton, New York: Seabury P, 1973. (GS 6). Print.
- Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Transcribed by Andy Blunden 1998. Print.
- Bourdieu, P. “The Forms of Capital.” in J. Richardson (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood, 1986, 241-58. Print.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2009. Print.
- De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall, U of California P: Berkeley, 1984. Print.
- Dussel, Enrique. “Beyond Eurocentrism.” *The Cultures of Globalization*. Eds. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi. Durham: Duke UP. 1998. 3-21. Print.
- Hegel, Georg. *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: The Science of Logic*. Ed. and trans. George di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. Print.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Brooklyn: Verso, 1991. Print.

- Lukacs, Georg. "Preface." *The Theory of the Novel*. Kriftel, Germany: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag GmbH, 1963. Trans. Anna Bostock, London: The Merlin P, 1971. Print.
- Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P. 1984. Print.
- Vazquez-Arroyo, Antonio Y. "Universal History Disavowed: On Critical Theory and Postcolonialism" in *Postcolonial Studies* 11.4 (2008): 451-68. EBSCO host. Web. 2 April 2011.