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## Book Review: *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*

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**Book Review: The Decolonization of Imagination:  
Culture, Knowledge and Power**

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Pieterse, Jan Nederveen and Parekh, Bhikhu (eds.). *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*. London: Zed Books, 1995. 265pp. \$59.95 (cloth), \$22.50 (paper).

[1] *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power* includes fourteen essays, some of which are revised papers presented at a cultural studies conference in Amsterdam in 1991, that contribute to the rapidly growing library of literature on postcolonial theory by exploring the dimensions of decolonization.

[2] In the lead chapter, "Shifting Imaginaries: Decolonization, Internal Decolonization, Postcoloniality," the editors portray colonization as a highly complicated process that has created an amalgam of the old and the new, the endogenous and the foreign, that is best described as a form of consciousness that does not lend itself to analysis. Likewise, decolonization is a process that is no less complicated, that cannot discard that which is deemed alien, and that requires "an imaginative creation of a new form of consciousness and way of life." This creation is the decolonization of imagination that involves all parties concerned---the colonizers as well as the colonized--and that reflects "the relationship between power and culture, domination and the imaginary." Nederveen and Parekh are keen to suggest the importance of images, for images are vectors of difference as well as communion, and function to construct boundaries between self and other.

[3] The editors explore three modes of engaging colonial imaginaries that represent the pattern of cultural decolonization: decolonization as an anticolonial progression involving nationalism and nativism; internal decolonization involving critiques of nationalism and nativism as continuing the logic of colonialism as well as a move to syncretism or a dialectic between endogenous and foreign cultures; and postcoloniality involving a departure from dichotomic or binary thinking to thinking that is characterized by boundary and border crossings. It is this last mode of engagement that precipitates an acknowledgement of globalization and cultural pluralism. It amounts to nothing less than the "hybridization" of human culture and the horizon of human evolution. What the rest of this work does, as the editors suggest, is to address a number of important avenues of inquiry that reflect these modes of engagement, but which are underrepresented by mainstream postcolonial studies.

[4] "Part One: Imaginaries of Domination" consists of six reflections on the depth and range of colonial imaginaries of domination. These chapters make up the strongest and the most disquieting part of the book. In "'Dying Races': Rationalizing Genocide in the Nineteenth Century," Patrick Brantlinger explores nineteenth-century evolutionism and its corollary thesis that weak races will inevitably become extinct through "auto-genocide." In concretizing the rationalizations for extinction, Brantlinger focuses on the demise of the Tasmanian aborigines during the 1800s but concludes with the unsettling proposition that

the twentieth-century record of genocides, including the recent ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, is evidence that the rationalizations for the extinction of races are at work and will continue to operate in the colonized and colonizing imaginations.

[5] Regarding an issue of interest to those of us dealing with the exploitation of indigenous people, Raymond Corbey comments on the growth of ethnographic exhibitions and how narrative structures were (and still are) used to establish the identity of Self and Other in the chapter entitled "Ethnographic Showcases, 1870--1930." World fairs, colonial exhibitions, and special ethnographic shows (*Volkerschauen*) were to a great extent inseparable from imperialism, nationalism, commerce, science, and missionary activities. The "colonial natives" were a part of empire and nation building, a source of profit, and a means by which the scientific community of the time could explore civilized man's evolutionary link to "primitive" man. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches portrayed the non-Western, non-Christian peoples as heathens to be targeted for a civilizing and religious offensive. There was established a fundamental opposition between the civilized and the uncivilized through which the narrative of the ascent to civilization was soon presented. Although the narratives were portrayed as coming from a privileged vantage point, Corbey notes that the perspective of the Other, of the Nubian, Pygmy, and Kalmuk, for example, was generally left unexplored. Indeed, the Other that was put on display for white people was more or less just another object for the onlooker. Recognizing that the narrator perceives what his cognitive fund allows him to perceive--that ideology is within seeing itself--Corbey contends that the perceived order was a constructed reality through which cultural others were appropriated within the context of ethnological exhibitions. Members of tribal cultures were "commodified, labeled, scripted, objectified, essentialized, decontextualized, aestheticized, fetishized. They were cast in the role of backward, allochronic contemporary ancestors, receivers of true civilization and true religion in the stories told by museums, world fairs, and imperialist ideologies, thus becoming narrative characters in the citizen's articulation of identity---of Self and Other." The author's concluding message is that the binaries, exemplified in ethnocentric exhibitions, are being extended across species boundaries in the guise of anthropocentrism and speciesism.

[6] Another fascinating piece, "Liberalism and Colonialism: A Critique of Locke and Mill," by Parekh, exposes liberalism's contradictory impulses of egalitarianism and inegalitarianism, tolerance and intolerance, peace and violence. He focuses on the writings of the liberal English philosophers John Locke and John Stuart Mill as theorists whose liberalism gave justification to colonialism. The phase of colonialism that Locke gave legitimacy to was one in which the surplus population of European countries settled in North America, Australia, and New Zealand. In his very enlightening analysis of Locke's theory of man and society as the basis for Locke's mistaken stand on colonialism, Parekh rediscovers and critically appraises the flawed assumptions made by Locke. Although his perspective was egalitarian insofar as North American Indians were thought of as human beings and, thus, as *objects* of concern, it was also in-egalitarian insofar as Indians were not thought of as "self-defining *subjects* entitled to full and equal self-determination." Although Mill lived during the second phase of colonialism, a phase that saw the controlling influence of imperialism encompass the continents of Asia and Africa, he too constructed a philosophical defense of imperial domination. A promoter of a theory of human nature that, at its core, took man to be a self-creating being, he nevertheless considered non-European societies and their peoples as backward and in need of foreign guidance. The century and a half that separates Mill from Locke does not stop Parekh from drawing numerous similarities between the two defenders of colonialism, and he concludes by making it clear that these same theories of man and society help to explain the inegalitarian and imperial strands of twentieth-century liberal thought.

[7] The three remaining chapters in Part One provide more depth in how the colonizing imagination is still at work in the "New World" (Marion O'Callaghan's "Continuities in Imagination"), as well as uncovering colonial imaginaries well beyond the West (Hiroshi Yoshioka's "Sumurai and Self-Colonization in Japan," and Toine van Teeffelen's "Metaphors and the Middle East: Crisis Discourse on Gaza").

[8] "Part Two: Imaginaries of Cultural Pluralism" is composed of four essays dealing with cultural inclusion and exclusion in colonial and postcolonial societies. In the chapter entitled "Culture Wars in the United States: Closing Reflections on the Century of the Colour Line," Ronald Takaki presents an interesting discussion of American society that pits Francis Fukuyama's thesis that the triumph of liberal democratic capitalism has resulted in the "end of history" against John Lukacs's claim that the twentieth century has ended with the triumph of tribalism. Although the latter thesis provides a description of our society, it lacks explanatory depth. The 1992 LA riots, which Fukuyama and Lukacs fail to illuminate, is just one spectacular example of how "the colour lines were criss-crossing, colliding: racial minorities were fighting against one another, especially African-Americans and Korean-Americans." According to Takaki, what the riots are reflective of is a growing black underclass brought about by structural economic changes, an apartheid pattern of housing segregation, and the decline of America's manufacturing base caused by the Cold War. This context has also played itself out in an intellectual backlash against peoples of colour for attempting to define themselves in terms of group identity, particularly through revising school curriculums that are less Eurocentric and more culturally pluralistic. Even here, however, the advocates of cultural plurality have been responsible for failing to provide the groundwork for understanding the origin and meaning of a multicultural United States because of their neglect of the material basis of racial inequality, the abstract nature of their writings, and their unwitting fragmentation of U.S. society by failing to study it holistically.

[9] The remaining chapters by Ann Stoler ("Mixed-Bloods' and the Cultural Politics of European Identity in Colonial Southeast Asia") and Jan Berting ("Patterns of Exclusion: Imaginaries of Class, Nation, Ethnicity and Gender in Europe") focus on the inclusionary and exclusionary attitudes and practices against the Other, whether it be in Southeast Asia or Europe, whereas Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ("Teaching for the Times") discusses the obstacles that educators face in transnational teaching of literature.

[10] "Part Three: Global Imaginaries," consists of two essays that explore today's globality. In "The Self Wandering between Cultural Localization and Globalization," Susantha Goonatilake presents a new perspective on cultural dynamics by examining two contradictory historical processes that are operating in today's world: the process of globalization, whereby cultures and other spheres of modern life are being embedded in more pervasive global networks, and the process of localization, whereby local identities are being defended to the point of armed conflicts between insurgent groups and larger, more dominant communities. Goonatilake is particularly illuminating on the interplay between globalization and localization tendencies in the variety of culture communities--the face-to-face, transborder, and virtual communities--and how the individual self has become an inhabitant of these cultural worlds, simply put, it is in the individual human minds that the drama between globalization and localization will be played out. Being a member of these various communities leads her to conjecture that "no firm separatism within the internal cultural world of an individual, is objectively possible, or viable in a real sense in today's world. A cultural 'Lebanonization' [farewell to 'Balkanization'] of the mind occurs, with multiple frames of reference for action, corresponding to each subculture." Goonatilake ends her essay by wondering about the possibility of future cultural and political liberation movements given the impact of globalization, as well as acknowledging that the localization and globalization of culture appear to be of a greater whole when human interactions with the electronic information system, conceived as a "significant other," are pieced together.

[11] The remaining chapter by Sol Yurick ("The Emerging Metastate Versus the Politics of Ethno-Nationalist Identity") provides a discussion of the tension between cultural fragmentation and the capitalist Metastate, concluding that the Metastate manifests itself as a world project devoted to the devouring of cultures and the establishment of its own monoculture.

[12] This volume makes it clear that the themes bound up in the decolonization of imagination are numerous as well as difficult to penetrate. *The Decolonization of Imagination* is tailored to specialists who are well-versed in the literature of postcolonial theory. Still, although the technical jargon is unrelenting at times, the chapters are reasonably accessible to those from other disciplines seeking a scholarly yet approachable overview of this fast growing field. For this reviewer, who is a philosopher but not a cultural theorist, the book offered a number of interesting insights about colonizer and colonized alike. The editors have done a fine job in bringing together a set of papers that provide a penetrating analysis of postmodern thought. All in all this is a worthwhile collection that makes for compelling reading for those interested in cultural studies, literary studies, development studies, and political and social theory.

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