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Postcolonial transitions in Europe: contexts, practices and politics

Jesse van Amelsvoort

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Paul Gilroy opens *Postcolonial Transitions in Europe* with a warning: 'The enduring effects of Europe's colonial history have never been more deeply or disastrously inscribed upon its post-Cold War, post- and neo-colonial present' (xi). Later, he writes: 'the "neo" secreted inside the postcolonial will have to be ruthlessly and repeatedly uncovered and interrogated' (xvi). This is not the first time Gilroy, or other critics, have issued such statements, but one would be hard-pressed to find scholarship in which the tasks of postcolonial Europe are taken up more thoroughly than they are here.

This volume's undertaking is critical: it starts from the assumption that Europe's postcolonial state – its postcoloniality, one might say – is generally ill-understood, either neglected or ignored. The 'postcolonial', here, denotes a continuation of colonialist logic and imperialist attitudes into the present. As the editors, Sandra Ponzanesi and Gianmaria Colpani, state in their introduction: it is 'imperative ... to unmask the unmitigated residues of imperial structures' (5). Here, they show themselves part of the intellectual strand emphasizing the continued influence of Europe's colonial remains, which in the introduction is represented primarily by Robert Young. More importantly, Ponzanesi and Colpani place their volume in a post-Marxist light, drawing inspiration from Stuart Hall and his reworking of Gramsci's thought to articulate new directions for the political Left. Not every contributor, however, draws

on these thinkers; in fact, most do not. Instead, they follow their own methodologies and intellectual lineages to show how Europe is refracted and cast in a different light through the postcolonial. This is not, however, a volume that sprawls into countless directions; the editors have kept a tight grip and ensure coherence, as authors frequently refer to other essays in the volume.

This volume consists of five parts. The first deals with postcolonial Europe's 'discontents'; specifically, those tensions captured with the term 'race'. In her essay, Anca Parvalescu argues race is not a concern Europe should out-source to the United States; rather, it is 'one modality in which Europeanization has unfolded and continues to unfold' (29). Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson continue their investigation of the relations between the European Union and Africa as they place the 2007 'Strategic Partnership' between the two in a historical light. Other chapters deal with postcolonial Ireland and cinematic representations of charity in Europe. Following the volume's understanding of postcolonial Europe as determined not by a break, but a connection with its colonial past, these chapters convincingly show that this connection echoes in both everyday encounters and as the highest political processes, and perhaps everything in between.

The volume then moves on to issues of memory in postcolonial transitions. In a thought-provoking coda to her essay on Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005), Christine Quinan argues for thinking of the January 2015 attacks on the Charlie Hebdo offices in light of the violence directed at French Algerians on 17 October 1961. Also in this section, Rasa Navickaitė considers the relationships between sexuality and postsocialist Eastern Europe: this is one of the many times that *Postcolonial Transitions in Europe* rightly turns its attention to those states that emerged from

the Communist bloc and Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and are since being incorporated into ‘Europe’ (whether as a political idea or as a political union).

In the next section, ‘Postcolonial Spaces: Un/Doing Borders’, the space of postcolonial Europe comes under scrutiny. Borders and boundaries are always constructed, and making them feel obvious and self-explanatory is part of any political project. The focus here, on the one hand, is on Italy and its new geopolitical position *vis-à-vis* continuing migratory streams from across the Mediterranean and, on the other hand, on Eastern Europe as a space that has a difficult relationship with the idea of Europe. Milica Trakilović and others in this volume join a growing field of criticism that addresses Soviet and Yugoslav rule over Eastern Europe as another form of imperialism (see Pucherová and Gáfrik 2015).

The fourth section constitutes as much an exploration of how postcolonial Europe is mediated online as it is an example of what Koen Leurs in his contribution calls ‘postcolonial digital humanities’. The authors here rightly assume that the Internet is a space where postcolonial identities can be reconfigured and reshaped in ways that cannot happen offline. Bolette B. Blaagaard surveys contemporary journalism, while Eva Midden focuses on the intersections of gender, multiculturalism and religion online and Nicholas Boston looks at Polish gay migrants’ digital sexuality. These essays demonstrate that adopting a postcolonial approach in (new) media studies can lead to fruitful analyses of migrants and postcolonial subjects’ online identity expressions.

This volume’s final section is a sort of synthesis of the whole book. The authors try to balance cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism in postcolonial Europe, without suggesting that cosmopolitanism is the only, or, indeed, the required, way out of Europe’s post- and neo-

colonial present. Feyzi Baban summarizes the volume’s intellectual efforts as follows:

At its best, cosmopolitanism entails a normative commitment to human relationality and togetherness; it constantly reminds us that living together is about going beyond one’s own interests and connecting with others in order to find ways of developing solidarities across differences and not in spite of them. (386)

With those words *Postcolonial Transitions in Europe* ends. This tightly edited volume again and again interrogates contemporary Europe’s relation to its colonial past, and all the manifestations that past takes. It derives its strength from the breadth of its approach – probing into issues as diverse as EU integration, charity, sexuality, religion and media usage – rather than from its depth. Rather than in profundity, one might say there is unity in diversity.

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As David Damrosch has famously argued in his discussion of “world literature” (2006), contemporary literature is “post-canonical” as well as “hyper-canonical”. The widespread