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Postcolonialism and the Cultural Industry: Complicity and Resistance

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Sandra Ponzanesi

The Postcolonial Cultural Industry: Icons, Markets, Mythologies.

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A central aim of Sandra Ponzanesi's *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry: Icons, Markets, Mythologies* is to explore how 'specific traditions, products, and subjectivities enact in an interdependent fashion both complicity with neo-colonial cultural industries and resistance to them' (p. 48). This volume arrives at a particularly important time for the field of postcolonial studies, considering the multiple engagements and re-appropriations of the term 'postcolonial' in the age of neo-liberal capitalism and globalisation. This well-researched intervention incorporates what feminist cultural theorist Angela McRobbie has termed the 'double entanglement' of the discourse between feminism and post-feminism.¹ She describes it as the 'co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality, and family life, with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual, and kinship relations'.² She then goes on to pose profound questions in regard to the postcolonial cultural field, specifically for the political potential of postcolonial chick lit, as laid out in the volume's concluding chapter, 'Postcolonial Chick Lit: Postfeminism or Consumerism?' This volume moves postcolonial discourse forward by decisively grounding its analysis in both a wieldy literature review as well as precise and discerning case studies that examine the various relationships between the marketplace, postcolonial cultural production, and postcolonial studies.

What role have cultural productions, modern commodities, and entangled 'practices' played in postcolonial processes? In six chapters, Ponzanesi constructs an argument that draws explicit attention to how the postcolonial can be capitalised upon, and how the labour of its practices and products in the cultural sphere have been exploited under the purportedly progressive forces of globalisation. This includes literary prizes in the publishing industry, the process of canonisation of minor and world literatures (or even their ability to be published in the West, let alone to succeed in such a market), the adaptations of postcolonial texts to film, and the distribution and circulation of those films in the global marketplace. Each of these chapters function adequately on their own to analyse a particular

aspect of the postcolonial cultural industry with a contemporary lens including marketing, advertising, and cultural iconography. However, the entire volume works towards a sustained intervention on the political economy of postcolonial resistance in the era of global industry, and thus is invaluable as a monograph.

In sketching out her project's intellectual genealogy, Ponzanesi returns to Adorno's theorisation of the 'culture industry', a technology that enables the production of cultural commodities for the masses in service to hegemonic political interests. She updates this theoretical foundation with the inclusion of recent work on 'participatory culture', which renders audiences as producers as well as consumers in the postcolonial cultural industry. 'The Postcolonial Cultural Industry: Notes on Theory and Practice' further defines the postcolonial cultural industry as that which interacts dynamically with cultural productions and lays out precisely how cultural difference – one of the primary objects of engagement in postcolonial studies – can become a commodity form. She does this by fleshing out the various cultural industries that she will return to throughout the monograph: the Black and South Asian cultural industries, specifically manifested in Black music, 'Indo-chic', and 'the Brown Atlantic'. In the second and third chapters, 'Literary Prizes and the Award Industry' and 'Boutique Postcolonialism: Cultural Value and the Canon', Ponzanesi directs her analysis towards the confluence of power and the exploitative nature of the publishing industry, specifically regarding the production, distribution, and consumption of particular texts as well as the rise of 'ethnic-chic' literatures. She critiques popular and prestigious literary prizes by tracing their distribution, the nationality of the recipients, and the politics of eligibility, authenticity, and representation as, in part, 'a kind of vicious cycle as the prizes tend to circulate among a restricted number of authors, who become the epitome of literary prestige' (p. 66). The notions of value and culture take on an additional valence in the fourth chapter, 'Advertising the Margins: Translation and Minority Cultures', which describes a few case studies in postcolonial resistance that try to end that cycle. Discussed in this chapter are prizes and other modes of standardisation that privilege the role of minor or endangered languages, and literary forms such as the short story, which has a storied history in African countries but is not often afforded a prestigious space on the literary prize circuit. Also discussed is the Indian Sahitya Akademi Award which is another attempt to circumvent the Anglocentric literary market and facilitate the success of texts in minor languages on the national and international marketplace. The film industry is the primary object of study in chapter five, 'The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Postcolonial Film Adaptations'. It is a particularly insightful chapter for (postcolonial) film studies as it offers a considered critique of how films are selected for adaptation and the process by which that adaptation mines the source material in a way that is palatable and accessible for its likely transnational audiences. Ponzanesi does a good job here using an array of films which challenge expectations of intertextuality, including minor films, to reframe the dynamic negotiation between *Darstellung* and *Vertretung* in terms of the entanglements of the cinematic apparatus, cultural industry, and aesthetic labour practices.

This volume is quite concerned with tracing orientations, a methodology that makes up much of Ponzanesi's scholarship. For example, she names the aporia and discrediting of the histories around Italian colonialism a 'colonial unconscious',³

'The Postcolonial Turn in Italian Studies: European Perspectives' published in 2012 was concerned with assessing the contours of Italian postcolonial studies, but it was also a case study that sought to analyse 'what exactly does the term "postcolonial" designate?' (p. 59).⁴ *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry*, then, can be said to continue this project, but with an even wider breadth of study. The logic of Ponzanesi's project rests on its analysis of postcolonial resistance as well as its critique of theoretical categories that have comfortably remained dominant in recent discourse. There is great care in this volume to differentiate the postcolonial as an aesthetic, an historical apparatus, a field of enquiry, and a mode of critique or theoretical tool. However, what elevates this to a rigorous project is the attempt to perform an insightful reorientation of the field to the question of cultural capital. That is to say, this project sustains multiple levels of critique regarding the various ideations of 'the postcolonial' as a means to direct us to think through whether 'the new mechanism behind globalization merely rehearses the colonial dynamics, or whether it tends to offer new differentiated forms of resistance and "subversive misappropriation"' (p. 7).

The Postcolonial Cultural Industry is thus a rather more accessible and comprehensive work than many in its field. The incisive analyses condensed into this monograph render it an excellent resource for both students and scholars of postcolonial theory, cultural studies, and world literature and film. It offers a breadth of knowledge from those fields, historicises the implicit aims of a 'stated postcolonial agenda' within the market economy, and interprets the ways in which certain texts and practices continue to renegotiate their boundaries and double entanglements in the contemporary marketplace. It thereby introduces a refreshing perspective to these fields and also enables further research from a position of critical resistance. Ultimately, this volume renews a call for hypervigilance that scholars such as Spivak⁵ urged us to consider and Gilroy, Cashmore, and other theorists have been calling for when discussing anxiety around Western epistemology, capitalism, and the state of the various postcolonial cultural industries: that we allow the postcolonial the room to negotiate but do not facilitate its tendencies to rehearse colonial practices by another name.

Notes

¹ Angela McRobbie, 'Post-feminism and Popular Culture', *Feminist Media Studies* 4(3), 2004, pp 255–264, p 256; McRobbie Angela, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, London: Sage, 2009.

² McRobbie, 'Post-feminism and Popular Culture', p 256.

³ Sandra Ponzanesi, 'Fragments of a Nation: Italian Cultural Studies from Colonial Legacy to Global Perspective', *Legendaria* 23(September), 2000, pp 24–26.

⁴ Sandra Ponzanesi, 'The Postcolonial Turn in Italian Studies: European Perspectives', in C. Lombardi-Diop and C. Romeo (eds), *Postcolonial Italy. Challenging National Homogeneity*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012, pp 51–69.

⁵ Gayatri C. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.