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The Industry of Postcoloniality

Like a telescope reversed, the traveller’s eye swiftly screws down the individual sorrow to an oval nest of antic numerals, and the iris, interlocking with this globe, condenses it to zero, then a cloud.¹

Postcoloniality’s touristic conscience

According to Graham Huggan’s innovative materialist assessment, postcoloniality entails a form of industrial commodification that serves the interests of certain privileged audiences; the ‘postcolonial field of production’ turns out ‘translated products for metropolitan consumers in places like London and New York.’² Huggan’s description of this field involves frequent reference to a global market reader, a figure with indistinct identity and agency. Indeed this cosmopolitan consumer figure is one basis upon which Huggan’s analysis depends, so it seems odd that she is subject to little of the materialist examination so crucial to his study’s overall project. I begin this project by determining some of what is behind this neglect.

Two of Huggan’s major claims can serve as initial illustrations of my concerns. First, a set of celebrated cosmopolitan writers is said to achieve success in the market due to commodity fetishism, which operates through all of the following: ‘mystification (or levelling-out) of historical experience; imagined access to the cultural other through the process of consumption; [and] reification of people and places into exchangeable aesthetic objects’ (19). Here, fetishism is a consumer behaviour characterized by a reading community’s desire to achieve ‘access to the cultural other,’ as well as by its complicity in the
mystification and reification of that same other’s seemingly authentic experiences. Second, Huggan’s definition of the exotic in its newly global guise – in essence, the foreign fitfully translated into the unthreatening and familiar – rests on the notion that, now, ‘difference is appreciated, but only in the terms of the beholder; diversity is translated and given a reassuringly familiar aesthetic cast’ (27). The exotic is not a quality inherent to a given text but is instead the product of a specific mode of mass-market consumption. He writes, ‘exoticism describes [...] a particular mode of aesthetic perception – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery’ (13). In short, exoticism is a willful activity in which the ‘beholder’ is the major participant; exotic products are manufactured by a form of consumption characterized most notably by aestheticization and dehistoricization.

In establishing this definition one of the key distinctions that Huggan makes is between the pursuit of real knowledge and the desire for identification or escape. Huggan’s central elaboration of a separation between postcolonialism and postcoloniality partakes of this divide. For him postcolonialism is largely an academic discipline, ‘an anti-colonial intellectualism that reads and valorises the signs of social struggle in the faultlines of literary and cultural texts.’ Meanwhile postcoloniality is a ‘value-regulating mechanism within the global late-capitalist system of commodity exchange’ (6). So, similarly, between ‘the progressiveness of postcolonial thinking,’ and ‘the rearguard myths and stereotypes that are used to promote and sell “non-Western” cultural products in and to the West,’ there exists ‘a remarkable discrepancy’ (25). It is ‘myths and stereotypes’ that drive forms of consumption premised on the ‘urge to identify’ – an urge essential to exoticism – which ‘often comes at the expense of knowledge of cultures/cultural groups other than one’s own’ (17). It is in deference to such urges that some readers – as I say, largely unspecified, but of a predictable class and metropolitan location – choose genres like ethnic autobiographies or travel writing about ‘other’ places ‘to expand their own cultural horizons’ (12). Such reading is said to privilege the aesthetics of identification over more laudable forms of theoretical and historical understanding.

Moreover, and importantly, the postcolonial writer knows about this consumer as well, and incorporates a critique of her tendencies into the text, deploying a strategic exoticism designed to interrogate the reader’s own constructions. ‘Postcolonial writers/thinkers,’ Huggan writes, ‘are both aware of and resistant to their interpellation as mar-