



John McLeod, (ed.)  
*How Newness Enters Postcolonial Studies*

(*The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*,  
Routledge, London & New York, 2007, 252 pp.  
ISBN 978-0-415-32497)

by Simona Bertacco

This is a belated review of a very timely book. Published in 2007, *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies* is an excellent resource for all scholars with an interest in postcolonial studies. It is especially welcome for those of us who take seriously the need to adopt a multilingual approach to postcolonial studies. 'The postcolonial', as Graham Huggan called it, is generally defined as an interdisciplinary field in which cultural practices are studied side by side with the more practical – i.e. historical, political, legal, etc. – aspects of colonization. Yet, as a scholarly field, the postcolonial is almost always studied within the boundaries of *one* language, *one* colonial empire, *one* cultural framework, and *one* academic discipline.

A single-language approach to postcolonialism is blatantly unfaithful to one of the basic constituencies of the postcolonial world – i.e. its multilingualism – no matter how careful and dedicated the research. In *The Postcolonial Exotic*, Graham Huggan points out that "English is, almost exclusively, the language of this critical industry, reinforcing the view that postcolonialism is a discourse of translation, rerouting cultural products from marginal areas towards audiences that see themselves as coming from the centre".<sup>1</sup> The challenge facing postcolonialism today is, then, to become even more literally and crucially a discourse *of* and *on* translation. In fact, a translation-oriented approach would ground postcolonial studies in more complex contexts and, through a comparative perspective, would promote new engagements with theory. This is what Gayatri Spivak argues in *Death of a Discipline* (2003) when she laments "the lack of communication within and among the immense heterogeneity of the subaltern cultures of the world",<sup>2</sup> and imagines a new era for comparative literature, an era in which "the history of

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<sup>1</sup> G. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, Routledge, London and New York 2001, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> G.C. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, Columbia UP, New York 2003, p. 16.



Francophony, Teutophony, Lusophony, Anglophony, Hispanophony [are put] *also – not only* [...] – in a comparative focus”.<sup>3</sup>

A new space for postcolonial studies can be projected from here, and the volume edited by John McLeod takes an important step in the new direction. In the Introduction, McLeod acknowledges the critiques of “the anglophone bias” (11) present in the field, and the “tendency to presume that the critical and conceptual models pursued in anglophone postcolonial studies can be neatly applied to non-anglophone historical contexts” (ibidem). It is the editor’s and the contributors’ intention “to contest some of the prevailing orthodoxies in the field which, towards the end of the twenty-first century, are becoming a little dated” (10), pointing instead at the important work that has recently emerged in francophone, hispanic and lusophone scholarship.

The volume therefore ranges through the histories of four European empires and their cultural legacies. It does not consider all of the major colonial empires. The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Italy and Denmark, for instance, are not included in the survey. Partly, this limited scope has to do with the nature and size of the volume. Partly, McLeod is trying to establish a dialogue between the intellectual traditions that have been more prolific and influential in recent years in postcolonial studies. And this is already a very innovative move.

The first section of the book – ‘Colonial Empires’ – provides a comparative survey of the colonial enterprises of Britain, France, Spain and Portugal. The second part – entitled “Postcolonial Locations” – reconstructs, for each area, the geographical and historical specifics of the colonial settlement, the struggles for independence and the main events of the post-colonial phase of several nations within each area. The comparative approach reveals itself to be particularly adequate to follow the history and the cultural legacy of areas such as Africa and the Caribbean where multiple colonizations have left their distinctive mark. The attention paid to the specifics of each context is commendable: it goes against the sweeping generalizations that have often characterized the postcolonial field, and it makes the book a highly recommended read for college students who need to learn the basics about a specific postcolonial country and often feel overwhelmed by the tremendous amount of material that they need to cover. This book is an excellent starting point. It provides students with clear, manageable introductions to the field and offers them very helpful lists of recommended further readings.

The remaining two sections of the volume – “Postcolonial Formulations” and “A-Z: Forty Contemporary Postcolonial Writers and Thinkers” – are, again, very nicely structured. In “Postcolonial Formulations”, the book offers a conceptual map of the major critical debates hosted in the field of postcolonial studies. There are four main areas covered here (poststructuralist, culturalist, materialist, and psychological formulations) across language and cultural boundaries (even though the predominance of ‘English’ titles should be pointed out) that give a clear idea of the dominant concerns and theories at play in field. *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies* identifies

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.



the most influential approaches and preoccupations of the vast body of research on colonization and its aftermath, and this is a welcome departure from the common habit of merely celebrating one or another postcolonial author or critic.

Finally, the A-Z section is a user-friendly tool to help cope with the difficulties of the comparative approach. If the name of a scholar or the work by a writer we are not familiar with is mentioned in one of the sections of the book, we can turn to this index to find out some basic information about the critic or the text.

The idea behind this book is simple but powerful: if the postcolonial is to survive as a viable critical discourse, it will have to embrace the traditions that are forming in areas that are outside the purview of Anglophone scholarship. In a world where bi- and multilingualism have become normal, postcolonial studies should speak more than one language, thus pushing its field of inquiry towards the 'busy borders' between languages. This move would help our theory to respond to the suggestions that come from different linguistic, cultural and theoretical traditions. And this book provides an excellent model of how to do it.

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