

**Notes from the Editor:
Postcoloniality and Politics**
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Postcolonial studies have always been consciously political. The early years of advocating for Commonwealth literature and language studies made the intersecting claims that the new world literatures written in English could stand equally beside the established canons of English and American literatures and that the cultural productions of newly independent nations and former settler colonies have a crucial political intervention within a world increasingly aware of anti-imperialist wars (Algeria, Kenya, Vietnam). In the development of the discipline from Commonwealth literatures into postcolonial studies during the 1980s and 1990s a crucial understanding was the recognition that the cultures of former colonies ‘wrote back’ (to borrow the phrasing of the now-classic book *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin), that they contested and challenged the markings of colonization on subjectivities, bodies, and institutions. Building on earlier writings such as Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, inspired phenomenology and psychoanalysis, and later concepts such as Homi Bhabha’s poststructuralist discussion of mimicry in *The Location of Culture*, postcolonial studies developed complex analyses of often intersecting modes of domination, subordination, resistance and transformation.

In the same decades, an increasing body of scholarship emerged around globalization and the shaping of the world in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. On the one hand, the emergence of the Internet and new technologies that facilitate communication and the dissemination of information across the globe, often at little or no expense, offer new opportunities for previously marginal voices. Similarly, the increase of migration and the creation of large diasporic communities around the globe open up new possibilities of peoples living to-

gether in diverse societies. On the other hand, globalization and market-driven economies mobilize much more sinister and frightening occurrences: ongoing conflicts which produce huge populations of displaced people and refugees; the trafficking of young women, across the globe, by an increasingly sophisticated sex trade; the intensification of environmental degradation for profit (the destruction of coastlines in Asian shellfish farming, for example, or in Chilean farming of Atlantic salmon for American supermarkets); the global trade, sometimes underground, in body parts; the continued internal migration of poor rural populations to the burgeoning slums of large urban centers; the super-exploitation of workers in developing regions, and an increasing exploitation in the developed world of illegal migrant workers, some of whom exist under conditions resembling slavery. The list could go on. At the same time the older lines of demarcation between colonizer and colonized are shifting, and different alignments of neo-colonial domination are emerging. Most significant might be the increasing division between wealth and poverty within the new economies of South Asian, East Asia and elsewhere whose new rich situate themselves in terms of culture, media and consumer goods within a global economy, not a national one. In a recent interview the sociologist Saskia Sassen, author of *The Global City* (2001) and *Territory. Authority. Rights.* (2006), speaks about the “uncertain trajectories” of new global formations. In the “new history” of the contemporary, “there are realities that cut across borders.” She comments:

Thus the elites in Sao Paolo and the elites in Manila both share an emergent geography of centrality that connects them—rather comfortably—with elites in New York, or in Paris. There are parallel geographies of poverty and disadvantage that also cut across old divides: we are becoming a planet of urban glamour zones and urban slums.

Within such divisions the older categories of class and class formations regain prominence, although they are inflected with the particular desires and positionings of the twenty-first century.

On a recent visit to Shanghai I was struck by how the luxury shopping district along Huai Hai Road, an urban glamour zone where the streets are lined with storefronts selling familiar international brands, is engaged in remaking Chinese space into a sector of global consumerism. The slim blond models of Paris, London and New York share billboards with images of privileged oriental youth, and participate in the circulation of an economy of desire that makes its marks on human subjectivities, even if the goods in the shops remain too expensive for purchase. On a nearby street there is a series of buildings with no Chinese names, only English, the language of international trade. To notice the spaces of a new China driven by entrepreneurship, capital and the accumulation of wealth is not to suggest that Chinese modernization is not a process of complex appropriations and refashionings; it is not to imply that a simple imposition of western values is taking place. Nor is it to forget the thousands of migrant and local workers for whom Shanghai is a very different city than the one evoked by the luxurious shops of Huai Hai Road. And yet, it seems worth observing that this colonizing project of global images, transnational brands and consumer cravings might ironically prove to be more substantial than the stolid architecture of the older international concessions from an earlier age of colonialism.

Postcolonial studies have developed, and continue to develop, sophisticated analyses of colonization. In exploring ethics and language, nation and diversity, race and gender, globalization and war—to name only some issues—*ARIEL* hopes to engage both persistent and emergent questions in ‘postcoloniality and politics.’

Notes

- 1 The Ideas Interview: Saskia Sassen. *Guardian Unlimited Online*. 4 July 2006. *The Guardian*. 14 August 2006. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists>