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**Review: Caroline Koegler's *Critical Branding: Postcolonial Studies and the Market* Routledge, New York, 2018, 239 pp.**

Ann Ang, Wadham College, University of Oxford, UK [ann.ang@wadham.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ann.ang@wadham.ox.ac.uk)

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In the field of postcolonial studies, 'capital' often takes on negative connotations of profiteering from power differentials, especially in a transnational context, where the 'global' functions as shorthand for the hegemony of multinational corporations and first world nations. As Caroline Koezler rightly points out in *Critical Branding: Postcolonial Studies and the Market*, postcolonial critiques often conflate Marxist critiques with the business terminology of the market, resulting in a conceptual vagueness when economic functions are mentioned. This timely study seeks to address two lacunae: the lack of self-reflection from postcolonial critics on their implication in market functions, which is matched by their instinctive revulsion, and the ghostly quality of market transactions that is invoked without further scrutiny. In response, Koezler seeks to theorise a new materialism through the mutual permeability of postcolonial studies and the market as a practice, giving rise to an idiom in which the valuation regimes of the market can be reoriented as an epistemological framework for cultural study. At its largest ambit, this would include the interaction between markets and nonhuman environments from the perspective of planetariness. The result is critical branding as a framework for the meta-discursive study of postcolonial studies.

Mindful that this book may come up against deeply-felt instincts about market concerns as being distinct from the realm of cultural studies, Koezler's study begins by surveying the intellectual history of postcolonial scholarship in relation to market forces before launching into further discussions of the field as a market practice. The second half of *Critical Branding* features case studies and discussions that elaborate on what processes of branding, self-branding, and brand acts reveal about postcolonialism as a brand and the scholarly identity of its researchers. Delving into well-known brand handles for which postcolonial studies is recognised, such as anti-capitalism and marginality, Koezler provides a rigorous discussion of the market processes which continue to shape the subject.

In Part I, Koezler traces the well-known debate between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad, and early responses to the inequalities of global capital from Kwame Anthony Appiah and Arif Dirlik. Scholarship from the 1980s and 1990s seems to evince a pronounced distinction between Marxism and postcolonialism, with Appiah taking aim at a western-trained 'comprador intelligentsia' (27) which has come to dominate the field. Koezler notes that Ahmad's rebuttal of Jameson was ironically received as a defence of third world perspectives, despite his self-profession as a Marxist. By 2011, this drifting away of postcolonial studies from its ethical origins in the politics of decolonisation led Neil Lazarus to lament the immateriality of the postcolonial as a poststructuralist project. Global capitalism makes for a 'postcolonial unconscious'

when writers and critics alike pass over the materialities of imperialistic subjugation in favour of a cultural and epistemological framework. Koegler herself lays claim to this intellectual trajectory by using Lazarus' term to describe the volume's project as further work on the 'postcolonial unconscious' – the field's denial of the 'materialising space of the market' (78).

Hence Part I of *Critical Branding* functions less to critique the content of these debates, than to make a very broad survey of the scholarly contours and 'discourse boundaries' (25) by which postcolonial studies identifies itself. The volume is also situated in relation to more recent engagements between postcolonial studies and the book market, comprising well-known scholarship by Graham Huggan and Sarah Brouillette on the commodity-value of marginality in a global marketplace, and the tactical self-exoticisation of authors themselves. However, what is missing from the intellectual conversation thus far is a metadiscourse about the place of postcolonial critic, and how academia functions like a marketplace. As a space-clearing gesture, *Critical Branding* makes a crucial distinction between capital as indicative of Marxist terminology and a redefinition of the market as a practice following Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of practice. While Koegler employs the term 'symbolic capital' according to its Bourdesian definition, she goes beyond his definition of economic capital as limited to material and monetary exchanges, choosing to understand the market as 'a dimension of practice based on the definition and diversification of concepts such as commodification, valorisation and devalorisation, markets, market practices, products and profits, innovation, subversion, market forces, and market revolutions (i.e. a temporal perspective)' (14). Such an approach allows us to read the market, and by extension, the academic market as a valuation regime, based on the circulation of concepts in the force-field of positionality. The valorisation and devalorisation of particular discursive practices according to convention, otherwise known as periodic upheavals or disavowals, are in turn the basis for epistemological claims about the field.

Such criticality, as alluded to in the book's title, *Critical Branding*, leads Koegler to gesture towards several points of unease in the positioning of postcolonial critics amidst the branding of the field as a whole. This is facilitated by a helpful introduction to the terminology of markets, marketisation and branding for literary and cultural researchers whose exposure to these may be limited. For instance, several attempts have been made to declare that the era of postcolonial studies is at an end, but the discourse of market and business studies allows such efforts to be seen as a brand narrative rather than truly reflective of the scholarly work that continues. Koegler

analyses Robert Young's well-known essay 'Postcolonial Remains' (2012) as a response to an earlier *PMLA* roundtable in 2007 on the impending demise of postcolonial studies. The 'inaccuracies' (163) of his response aside, Young's rhetoric coalesces a number of positions that are epistemically recognisable as postcolonial. He draws attention to the roundtable as comprising only representatives from the global north and highlights their escapism from sociopolitical issues. Such generalisations, Koegler observes, were initially made by members of the roundtable themselves. Critical branding as an approach invites us to consider why the field of postcolonial studies relies on such generalisations, and whether mechanisms such as essentialism and othering are truly minimised in postcolonial studies.

A major strength of the volume is its comparative approach. By juxtaposing critical perspectives from the market and the field of literary studies, this book queries if we have been inattentive to the presence of the market as a theoretical construct in our study of cultural formations to date. In order to outline the nature of markets as imaginary, Koegler compares Benedict Anderson's conceptualisation of the nation as an imagined community with the market. Both begin with face-to-face interactions, in the classical Greek *agora* for instance, but as the scale of these expand over time, each is abstracted as 'a principle, not a place' (59). Unlike nations, markets are not imagined as defined by boundaries, and interactions in a local market spill over into transnational transactions. Markets can therefore be described as a series of epistemological lenses, referring in turn to global markets, consumer markets, business markets and so on, bringing to light 'different conglomerates of people, organisations, practices, and networks' (60) and the imaginative discourses that shape these. Later in the volume, Koegler brings this comparative perspective to a case study of Romantic writing. Romantic writers systematically distanced themselves from commerce, preferring the idealism of originality and the individual imagination. However, this occurred at a time when authorial rights and the commercial infrastructure to support its maintenance were established rapidly to uphold the distinctiveness of each Romantic voice. Koegler goes on to query if a similar process of self-commodification is ongoing in contemporary migrant writing in the UK, where ambivalent stances towards commerce are constructed and abandoned as part of textual poetics. Hence, *Critical Branding* demonstrates how demonising marketisation and economic forces deprives us of a perspective to understand culture as marketized, and structured by market processes.

The book also tackles the knotty issue of the authority of the postcolonial critic as related to, and in fact enhanced by, the performance of third world or ethnic claims

to authenticity. In the introduction, Koegler observes that self-exoticism and self-orientalism are not limited to critics who reside outside the 'West', but that all critics, even from other academic fields, engage in some degree of strategic self-fashioning. However, given the investment of postcolonial studies in its decolonial origins, which brings cultural study and participatory politics together – a work like Barbara Harlow's *Resistance Literature* is emblematic – such tactical positioning runs up against a field in which subalternity is a key ethical concern. To illustrate this point further, Koegler presents a brief discussion of 'Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value', during which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak addresses an academic audience by alternately occupying and abdicating the speaker's position. This results in 'a complex process of dialogical identitarian ascriptions and projections' (120) which disrupt the listeners' perceptions of Spivak as a brand act which inflects her identity as female and Asian. From the perspective of branding, Spivak is introducing 'friction into symbolic circuits' (122), though as Koegler points out, not all members of the audience can be assumed to agree with Spivak's position as a critic of the third world. Where Koegler's argument could have gone further was perhaps in commenting on how such self-critical performances of marginality arise from the ubiquitous experiences in academia, where many unspoken power differentials do impact on who is allowed to assume a position of authoritative study. The sometimes overly observational stance of critical branding detracts from further connections the volume might have made between the market practice of valuation regimes and the praxis of how postcolonial studies embraces marginality, minor locations and minorisation.

The book ends by gesturing towards new fields of study which have adopted postcolonial studies as a critical handle, with connections being drawn between exploitative capitalism and nationalist communism practiced by Chinese firms, as well as the extractive politics of biopiracy. In doing so, it returns to the most radical proposition in the volume's argument for a new materialism, which is that bodies and their somatic states can be activated and integrated into branding. In this embodied version of epistemology, behavioural responses function as the productive element in the reception of brands acts.

There is perhaps scope to consider further a non-agentic discourse of branding in order to understand further how branding is received by a posthuman consumer, as Koegler herself suggests by referencing Timothy Morton's work on hyperobjects at several points. Such a perspective would indeed be stretching the limits of business and management theory where the consumer remains at least human, if not an individual.

*Critical Branding* is at its best when bringing the market and its attendant concepts to elucidate debates that have come to define the field of postcolonial studies. With an insider's view of the priorities and mores that inform such scholarship, Kogler shows how critics at large are implicated in branding as a signifying system. Especially in postcolonial studies, where questions of social justice, transnational power differentials, and the hegemonic accumulation of capital in the global north continue to impact the material conditions and lived realities of many, *Critical Branding* challenges scholarly readers to scrupulously examine the political impact of their research without inflating the value of the postcolonial as a brand.

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#### **Competing Interests**

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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