

Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2010. Pp. xi + 231; ISBN: 978-0-8014-7607-5

In an increasingly globalized world, academe's disciplinary divisions are jetlagged. Critics have been forced into a lexicographical sphere populated with a coterie of increasingly problematic *posts*—colonialism, modernism, race, and nation, among many others—that carry the weight of our weary travels through now 'hybrid' spaces, exploded binaries, and whatever other non-particular, cultural and historical vagaries that have been left behind from the theoretical turn. Paul Jay, in *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*, positions literary studies within the process of a transnational turn, a process that suggests new paradigms for the study of literature that breaks from the once more common nation-state model. Discarding these nation-based apparatuses, or at least putting them aside, will result in a *gestalt* shift, a new perspective on the dynamic process of identities, as opposed to static, reified and violent constructions. Jay calls for a transnational hermeneutic not only to address the above concerns, but to understand further what he calls "post-postcolonial" literature, of which he constructs a small canon of recent works including Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and works by Zakes Mda, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra, and Mohsin Hamid.

Global Matters links globalization studies with postcolonial studies by suggesting that globalization and colonization go hand-in-hand. Thinking of globalization as a particularly postcolonial problem (which Jay implicitly defines as a formerly colonized space that has been left by its colonizer and has since formed an independent government) ignores its long history of being intertwined with colonialism, not to mention a history of interconnectedness outside of colonialism's bounds. His most affecting example is drawn from Amartya Sen: "'The printing of the world's first book was a marvelously globalized event,' since the technology was Chinese, the book an Indian Sanskrit treatise, and the translation the work of a half-Turk" (39). The book, a cultural, material, and economic object itself, supplies another important example of what the separation of globalization and postcolonial studies perpetuates: a separation of the economic and material/cultural effects of interlinked phenomena. Jay suggests that if we think of globalization as a new phenomenon, one that has come out of some sort of rupture, we are in danger of drawing a skewed picture of globalization and colonialism.

To make this argument, *Global Matters* is divided into two parts. Part 1 develops and analyzes an intellectual history of the transnational turn by paying close attention to both the work being done inside the academy and the political situation without, to which he argues those intellectual shifts are responding. Part 2 could best be deemed as 'applied transnational turn', which takes the framework developed in part 1 to do readings of transnational, or post-postcolonial writers. Part 1's utility as a handbook for students and scholars interested in the theory behind the transnational move in literary studies is unbounded. He synthesizes with precision debates on three issues in particular: globalization studies, border studies, and the cosmopolitan. *Global Matters* is, in fact, at its best when describing the process of identity, national or otherwise, not only on the borders, but also within the nation itself.

"Border Studies: Remapping the Locations of Literary Study," the book's fourth chapter, is perhaps strongest in this regard, especially when it takes on what is perhaps the most ubiquitous term in transnational studies, "hybridity." By creating a theoretical frame using critics as canonical as Glissant, Anzaldúa, and Pratt, but also the neglected Mexican philosopher Edumundo O'Gorman, Jay is able to make the book's strongest, and perhaps most understated

and unemphasized claim: “If all cultures and identities are at their core hybrid, then two things happen: hybridity loses its value as an explanatory term specific to border cultures, and the term itself becomes essentialized and foundational, since it comes to stand for a general truth about the ontological nature of all forms of subjectivity and identity” (82). He points to the doubly problematic nature of an unquestioned acceptance of hybridity; it reifies just as a national identity would and it is also too large, and too universal to have critical value, unless, of course, it is supported by cultural and historical specificity.

Part 2 attempts readings of transnational novels that keep the dangers of hybridity in mind, leading to an emphasis on the flow of identities from economic and cultural contact. His reading of Smith’s *White Teeth* emphasizes the dual importance of “roots and routes” to identity, a reading made particularly strong by *White Teeth*’s tendency to think of deep historical work as “root canals” (158). Smith’s novel emphasizes, “how to imaginatively construct English identities that are both rooted in—and rooted through—the complex history of their families and the nations that produced them” (160). In other words, *White Teeth* and the other fiction that Jay explores, particularly Díaz’s *Brief Wondrous Life*, link a gendered private life to the potentially oppressive global and political system that those lives take place in. These novels humanize the traumas—or emancipations—of a subject in globalized world. More importantly, he suggests that these political relationships, these transfers and flows of power are mirrored and mimicked in romantic relationships. Identity then becomes a flow between genders, re-emphasizing the potentially hybrid and constructed nature of gender and sexuality. When we are constantly calling for a disruption of binaries, a reading of dynamic cultural, economical and historical flows, and a reshaping of our vocabulary to incorporate voices that have been violently silenced and dismembered for too long, *Global Matters* is able to do what often seems impossible in this veritable state of emergency: make concrete claims about texts in its newly declared paradigm. It would be absolutely irresponsible and unacceptable as a reviewer to not give Jay boisterous applause for this effort.

The problem, however, is that this near impossible task can very easily fall subject to both its own critique and the precarious cultural assumptions that can come along with that critique. For instance, he draws extensively on Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, an attempt in the early 90s to create a new transnational frame to rethink both African diasporic identity and British identity; Gilroy’s book was pathbreaking, to some degree, but is deeply problematic at the very essence of its argument, and it would be fascinating to see Jay’s take on a review of it by Colin Dayan¹ that suggests that “the idea of slavery, so central to his argument (and so necessary to our understanding of what he calls the enlightened “complicity of reason and terror”) becomes nothing more than a metaphor” (7). If we were to couple this with Jay’s distillation of Gilroy that “the black Atlantic will usefully complicate our understanding of the construction of both “Englishness” and “modernity,”” (84) we will recognize that this construction uses slavery and the Middle Passage as a metaphor to define English identity—black bodies in the slave trade are again being exploited, but now as a means to recover some type of lost ‘Englishness’ or to find the origins of ‘modernity’. Slavery is certainly a historical, cultural, and economic phenomenon, but to use it as either a reference point to enable a new construction of English identity—or transnational identity—in a metaphoric form perpetuates the

¹ Dayan, Colin. “Paul Gilroy’s Slaves, Ships, and Routes: The Middle Passage as Metaphor.” *Research in African Literatures*. 27:4 (Winter 1996). 7-14.

violence and exploitation of the historical situation. This is a potential danger of the theoretical turn and Dayan's critiques seem to seep through to Jay's work.

The Black Atlantic aside, *Global Matters*, in some ways, remains inside of the binaries and of the distinctions between the economic and the material/cultural, a division made manifest in the book's two parts, which separate and create an opposition between the theoretical apparatus constructed through the academy as a response to a particular political environment and the cultural texts that are responding to that environment. Besides eliminating those moments where Jay tells us to refer back to theoretical work done in part 1 throughout part 2, the book would exemplify the intertwined nature of economics, culture, and history that it theoretically purports. This tricky and dialectic structure reifies the Hegelian and Enlightenment paradigm, of thesis, antithesis, synthesis that Jay seemingly is fighting against. *Global Matters* is not an intervention, nor does it claim to be, but instead exemplifies where we are as we make our transnational turn.

Strangely enough it is in this gap that *Global Matters* is *most* successful, because it calls attention to the problems, the dilemmas, and the difficulties of trying to write and critique global flows, to break down binaries, to write across nations without essentializing hybridity, and without losing all of the meaning in all of our critical terminology. In a sense, *Global Matters* performs its own critique of a hazardous universalizing, theoretical, transnational turn one that is surely historiographical, but is in no way *actually* historical, economic, or cultural. *Global Matters* is successful in pointing us to our own state of emergency and that we have yet been able to make concrete the many things we call to change.

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