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Disrupting Preconceptions: Postcolonialism and Education

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While most Africanists, and certainly those focusing on South African education and history, will quickly identify a series of small errors, such as the labeling of Vista as a technikon (postsecondary technical school) rather than a university, *Elusive Equity* remains a compelling analysis that is, in the main, both appropriate and accurate. The book is a solid introductory piece of research on the complex aspects of education reform in postapartheid South Africa but one that needs to be enriched through the inclusion of reflective voices from the classroom.

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Disrupting Preconceptions: Postcolonialism and Education edited by Anne Hickling-Hudson, Julie Matthews, and Annette Woods. Brisbane: Post Pressed, 2004. 264 pp. $45.33. ISBN 1-876682-56-6.

"Postcolonialism" is indeed a nebulous term. It can be defined temporally as the aftermath of colonization in the periphery, in which political control by European or other empires has ended, but newly independent states remain within a global system of economic and cultural domination in which the former colonizers retain their hegemony. An even more capacious definition views postcolonialism as part of a worldwide dialectic of oppression and resistance in all of its myriad forms—postcolonial subjects have identities that are also gendered, sexual, religious, and linguistic. Postcolonialism can also be defined as an oppositional position that combats legacies of colonial domination by discerning strategies of resistance to neocolonial powers. In *Disrupting Preconceptions*, a collection of thirteen essays that address postcolonialism in education, the editors have selected conference papers that embrace, to varying degrees, each of these definitions.

Editors Anne Hickling-Hudson, Julie Matthews, and Annette Woods provide an informative introduction to postcolonial theories and their uses for the study of education, and they view postcolonialism as an approach that both "highlight[s] the ambiguous nature of [educational] change" and "seeks to disrupt the cultural beliefs, logics, and theories in which education systems are embedded" (7). Although the editors envision an education audience for their book, those engaged in postcolonial studies who belong to other disciplines could also benefit from it. The book is divided into three sections: articles that investigate oppression and resistance from the standpoint of postcolonial subjects, those that explore the lingering effects of colonial empires, and those that consider the intersections of the postcolonial with other identities. It includes an afterword by Allan Luke.

Held at the University of Queensland in 2001, the conference illustrates a well-known paradox of postcolonial scholarship. The presenters examine the postcolonial in educational structures and practices in Asia, Africa, North America, and Australia, but the colonial legacy remains—the language of the conference is English, the publisher is Australian, and the book is printed in Great Britain. Perhaps this collection serves as an example of what Robert J. C. Young, in his

Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, 63), terms "the power of western academic institutions [being] deployed against the west." After all, the editors invite us to imagine a postnational education system that is open and equal to all classes, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, disabilities, and regions. The messages contained in the chapters, however, are not utopian. Rather, the authors stress that postcolonial education, where colonialism and other forces overlap, is best characterized by complexity and ambiguity in efforts to extend literacies and schooling more widely. Nowhere are such complications more evident than in those chapters that address the interrelated topics of indigenous knowledge, democratization, and language acquisition.

In "Indigenous Knowledge and the Cultural Interface," Martin Nakata examines the locations of indigenous knowledge within Western systems, including that of information technology. The education systems in developing countries, through postcolonial policies that add indigenous knowledge to the curriculum, also fragment indigenous ways of knowing by drawing them piecemeal into academic disciplines. Postcolonial subjects navigate through educational systems that help to develop understandings of their own indigenous cultural contexts more fully, while also preparing them for "success in the global marketplace" (26). Although opportunities to incorporate indigenous knowledge abound when considering the uses of information technologies at the intersection of indigenous knowledge and formal education—universities can design online courses in ways whereby indigenous communities help to shape pedagogy and curriculum, for example—contributions from indigenous communities do not necessarily lead to using information technology "for our own [indigenous] interests" (33).

Pam Christie's chapter on educational restructuring in postapartheid South Africa is a portrait of an education system that has bumped up against the limits of democratization within a country that seeks a semiperipheral role within the global economic system. Christie characterizes the South African educational project as modernist—the challenge has been to extend educational opportunities to the majority, and in part this has meant organizing public education into geographic regions instead of the nineteen departments based on racial identity. Yet, postcolonial theorizing often privileges indigenous cultural identity and blurs the boundaries of the nation-state. The challenge for Christie is not to reject postcolonial frameworks as ways of understanding South Africa's democratizing project but rather to use them to highlight the ways that ethnic and cultural identities have influenced state formation and economic restructuring in the postapartheid era.

Another article that illustrates this call for the postcolonial emphasis of identity within the nation-state's policies of educational democratization is Christine Fox's study of Laos. Here, Fox presents stories of three Laotians and the role that formal education has played in their lives. Two women and one man, all three had rural childhoods, with each hailing from a different ethnic minority. Two of the stories illustrate briefly the role that a growing system of formal education can have on individual mobility from country to city and from traditional to modern, whereas in the third story, of a fifteen-year-old Hmong girl, the girl's schooling is the result of a sharper form of national development—authorities relocated her village for closer access to road and market. As in other places and times, state schools with

trained teachers become viable through abrupt disruptions to housing and work. Fox illustrates, at the human level, a triangle of postcolonial relationships—the legacy of colonial education, policies of state formation, and the reality of globalization. And so metropolitan conceptions of school architecture, national goals of universal education, and recourse to international donor agencies often result in relatively large schools that are constructed of materials not available locally and placed in locations that remain inaccessible to children from the remotest villages.

Add to this the challenges of language policy and it is evident that education reform brings with it aspects of both regional development and neocolonialism. The topic of language is addressed head-on in Roslyn Appleby's chapter on English-language teaching in East Timor, a divided country of at least 15 spoken languages that has emerged from Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation only recently. Tetum is the dominant indigenous language, with Indonesian serving as the language of occupation until 1999 and Portuguese as a language of resistance. Interestingly, university students educated entirely in Indonesian had been active in the resistance, but for them, a return to Portuguese represented a loss of economic and political potential, so they advocated Tetum as the official language and pushed hard for UN-sponsored English-language training. Appleby concentrates on the ambiguities that university-based English-language learners express regarding English as an engine of upward social mobility and as a means of reinforcing East Timor's move toward independence. Overall, this collection helps us to consider postcolonial education in many of its complexities, beyond simple dichotomies of formal education as nation builder and modernizer, on the one hand, or education as reproducer of colonial domination, on the other.

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The Challenges of Education in Central Asia edited by Stephen P. Heyneman and Alan J. DeYoung. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2004. 392 pp. (paper) $31.95. ISBN 1-931576-48-3.

Of the former socialist bloc countries, Central Asian republics are often neglected in the debates over education reform, democratic transformation, and civil society development. *The Challenges of Education in Central Asia* fills this gap by examining education change in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This volume attempts to capture the complexity of education transformation in the Central Asian republics, which are struggling to maintain Soviet traditions, revive pre-Soviet traditions, and reposition themselves closer to the West all at the same time. As Stephen Heyneman, one of the volume editors, points out, the education transformation process has been erratic in Central Asia—"one step back, two steps forward" (3). Although the volume could have done much more in mapping the trajectories of education transformation processes in Central Asian republics, its