

Esther Lezra

The Colonial Art of Demonizing Others: A Global Perspective. New York: Routledge, 2014. xv + 151 pp. (Cloth US\$140.00)

This important book proposes a way of interpreting visual and textual images of colonial violence between Europeans and the black people they enslaved. It contrasts with those countless archives throughout the world documenting colonial torture that were authored by people who wielded power and exacted violence. Esther Lezra argues that a sublimated message beats at the heart of many European-authored texts dealing with colonialism, and that there are ways to read those messages if you have the right lens. Her mission in this short but dense book is to provide that lens.

A number of materials from the colonial period of European expansion have at their centers what Lezra calls a “transfigure.” A transfigure is a representation that functions in several different ways. On the surface it looks simply like violence against a black person by a colonial oppressor. But reading it with the lens Lezra provides, it also functions to show the colonial oppressor his or her monstrosity.

Every dehumanizing representation of black people, every document of successful colonial violence against black freedom fighters revealed this “virulent moral disorder” and withheld any and all depictions of black people’s expression of their humanity. Every transfigure then, contains a self-loathing indictment of the beastliness of the repressive and violent practices of colonization and enslavement that sustained Europe and colonial societies in the Americas. (p. 16)

Every transfigure is “monstrous” because it retains “the psychic effects of colonial violence on both” Europeans and the people they violated (p. 17). The transfigure is monstrous, but it also forces Europeans to acknowledge their own monstrosity, an act that creates extreme anxiety in European audiences because it exposes the fact that Europe would not exist without colonial oppression and violence. At the same time, the transfigure signals agency for black people. Lezra calls this a process where “patterns of colonial disavowal ... release records of Black agency” (p. 29).

The term “transfigure” is important because “trans,” meaning “across,” “beyond,” or “through” is the cornerstone of Lezra’s larger methodology. In order to fully understand the transfigure, she argues, one must look at texts across time, space, and language. The term “translate” is key here. “The work of translation occurs across language barriers but also, very importantly, across time” (p. 19). Therefore, the transhistorical and transnational colonial texts Lezra uses form her chapters.

After a helpful introduction, Lezra devotes a chapter to William Blake's engraving of "Neptune" for John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, showing how Neptune is a transfigure whom Blake later works into his illuminated books, *America: A Prophecy* (as Orc), *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (as Othoon), and *Europe: A Prophecy* (as two nameless black men) (p. 41). In the next chapter, Lezra discusses Jean Francois, former slave and leader of the black freedom fighters in Haiti at the end of the eighteenth century. She reads three kinds of documents: administrative letters relating to Jean François's activity, constitutional debates, and an anonymous letter written in Seville in 1812 in order to "show the transatlantic, transnational and multilingual self-imaginings of Europe" (p. 52). A fourth chapter considers Solitude, the daughter of slaves who joined the maroons in Guadeloupe and fought against slavery after Napoleon reinstated it in 1802. Finally, Lezra's eye-opening conclusion shows how reading the transfigure can be applied to current racial atrocities—specifically photographs, paintings, and documentaries of Abu Ghraib.

Lezra's book reflects a range of knowledge; she is unusually conversant across many languages and different kinds of texts, which allows her to create a whole new category for analysis, what she terms "multilingual social text[s]" (p. 52). In addition, she seems to have at her fingertips the theoreticians and cultural critics that best help her make her case: Aimé Césaire, Fredric Jameson, Marcus Wood, and Slavoj Žižek among them. This combination of intellectual breadth and theoretical rigor is the book's great strength.

Lezra's message is vitally important and would have been even more relevant if she had adopted a less jargoned style. While she provides biographical and historical segments in clear, concise prose for the transfigures she writes about, these segments are outnumbered by long, dense theoretical passages that weigh down the text with more terms and ideas than the reading mind can process. One sentence from the introduction will serve as an example: "These objects of study coalesce across national, linguistic, and epistemological boundaries into a broad social text where shared social narratives do not just exist side by side, but are interlocking nodes in a transnational, multilingual, multilocational, and mobile network of meaning, documentation, self-activity and knowledge" (p. 14). Still, this book makes an important contribution to the field of postcolonial studies and provides a welcome resource for those who teach in international and transnational programs.

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