

Book Reviews

***Displacing Theory through the Global South*, eds. Iracema Dulley and Özgün Eylül İşcen. Berlin: ICI Press, 2024. pp. 229**

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In his article “Changing Theory: Thinking Concepts from the Global South,” Dilip Menon writes that “Doing theory from the Global South stems from the exigent demand for decolonizing knowledge and developing a conceptual vocabulary from traditions of located intellection” (p. 158).¹ He argues that “colonialism inculcated an amnesia toward local forms of intellection with their own long histories. More important, it fixed the location of the genealogy of thought (philosophy as originating in Greece, or in the European Enlightenment) occluding the circulation of ideas that then generated the habit of making distinctions between ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ ideas.” (p. 143). His emphasis on knowledge production as a space for decolonialisation is key to current postcolonial studies across different disciplines.

Displacing Theory Through the Global South, edited by Iracema Dulley and Özgün Eylül İşcen, builds on this emphasis in postcolonial studies through chapters that cover the Global South and discuss various fields of knowledge production in a broad geography from Angola to Iran. The collection is a part of ICI Berlin Press’s “Cultural Inquiry” series. As the series aims at “a decidedly cross-disciplinary approach” that explores “how diverse cultures can be brought into fruitful rather than pernicious confrontation” (n.p), the book seeks to create a critical space for a decolonized cultural theory by emphasizing the possibilities of and obstacles before knowledge production on the Global South from the Global South. The collection of essays concentrate on the location of knowledge production and the ways in which Eurocentric hierarchies are perpetuated in public and intellectual pursuits.

The chapters of the edited collection are the outcomes of a set of activities organised by a research collective in Berlin. The members of the group, who also comprise some of the authors of the volume, are mainly postdoctoral fellows from the Global South who have been conducting their research at Berlin’s Institute for Cultural Inquiry around the broad topic of “Theorizing Through the Global South.” The discussions on this theme took shape during their reading group meetings and the workshop they held in 2022. As someone who has contributed to these activities (but not the volume itself), I have been privy to the rigorous way they handled some of the key questions concerning current postcolonial studies.

¹ Dilip Menon, “Changing Theory: Thinking Concepts from the Global South,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 59.1 (2022): 142-162.

In addition to a broad geographical spectrum, a variety of disciplinary approaches that include anthropology, ethnography, sociology and the arts are represented in the collection. They provide critiques of political structures and institutions, ideologies and discourses, and academic and scholarly spheres. The latter in particular is not only central to the work being done at the Institute and to the authors of the book but also is key to understanding the unequal dynamics of knowledge production even when a critical and decolonising attitude is assumed. As is stated in the Introduction of the volume, the contributors are aware that their very positionality itself is a part of the discussed dynamics. Dulley and İşcen maintain their awareness as such in the kind of questions they ask:

As Berlin-based researchers and practitioners invested in both theorization and a specific historical and geopolitical context, we recurrently face the frustration of having our work either reduced to the particularity of its context or subsumed into Eurocentric generalizations. In this vein, we propose to reflect on the following questions: How are our theoretical affinities transformed through contexts in the so-called Global South? How can we make our work relevant to a larger audience beyond a particular region or a field defined in terms of area studies? What are possible strategies to present the theoretical impact of our work despite its constant peripheralization as a case study? What affordances can certain disciplines and institutions offer to tackle such theoretical and methodological challenges? (pp. 1-2)

Consequently, they engage with intellectual traditions from the Global South whereby local knowledge production had been mainly ignored, dismissed or rendered ineffectual under colonial epistemologies towards a universalisation that engenders various forms of “monolingualism” and “monohumanism” (as stated by Al-Zayed, p. 41). They aim to defy theory as one such form of universalisation, “a form of generalization” by means of which the Global South either provides the “raw material for abstraction produced in the Global North” or is the “consumers of its final products” (p. 3).

The range of chapters in this edited collection speaks for the diversity of the possibilities of knowledge production on and from the Global South. While Michela Coletta explores the “entangled” economies and ecologies of Extractivism in the Global South, Şirin Fulya Erensoy engages with the Queer and Feminist activism of the artists from the Global South based in Berlin. Iracema Dulley and Frederico Santos dos Santos present the importance of being given names by the locals in ethnographic research in the cases of Senegal and Angola and examine the impact of adapting methodologies to local circumstances on research output. In a similar vein, Bernardo Bianchi looks at the case of the reception of engagements with Karl Marx’s *Das Capital* in Brazil as they compare a reading group at the University of São Paulo with the one once established by Louis Althusser in Paris.

Mahmoud Al-Zayed challenges the general perceptions of the decolonisation of knowledge by emphasising how “the act of decolonization is not *ipso facto* a liberating one; the claim of decolonization can be appropriated to reproduce and perpetuate colonial relations” (p. 32). From a similarly critical perspective Firoozeh Farvardin and Nader Talebi investigate the issue of locality and positionality in and on the Global South through the case of Iran. Their chapter provides further food for thought on topics such as the opportunity and the ability to produce knowledge in the Global North, i.e. issues of censorship in the Global South and the availability of resources for knowledge production in the Global North.

The chapters by Iracema Dulley & Juliana M. Streva and Marlon Miguel explore the relationship between psychoanalysis and discourse. While Dulley and Streva take

Lacanianism and language as their cue to create a free writing style in the form of a dialogue and thus bring practice and theory together in a sense, Miguel excavates the Jungian work of Nise da Silveira, a Brazilian psychiatrist, who brings together art and psychiatry in a radical fashion akin to the paralleling work of Frantz Fanon. In fact, Fanon is a key name that appears in various chapters of the book whether it is a discussion on racism, colonialism, or the psychic constitution of the Global South.

Similar to Dulley and Strevia and inspired by writers such as Ursula K. LeGuin and Virginia Woolf, Kata Katz chooses a colloquial style to discuss the “need to undertake the task of reconfiguring how we value alternative modes of knowledge and creativity within academia” (p. 159) through an emphasis on the importance of women in literature and scholarship. Continuing the colloquial style, Ana Carolina Schweitzer guides the reader through the streets of Berlin itself as a part of unearthing the colonial history of Germany. Decolonisation is not truly possible unless the coloniser acknowledges its legacy and unless reparations follow. Schweitzer connects this past legacy with the current immigration stories of Berlin that includes the Turkish and Arabic speaking populations presented through art. Finally, in dialogue with women writers and inspired by Emily Dickinson, Bruna Martins Coelho writes “a letter” that is not only a critique of the current unequal dynamics of academia but is a powerful criticism of the neoliberal precariousness that is faced by many scholars all around the world today. It seems humanities research is the Global South of academia whether it is within the Global North or the Global South.

Although the actual contributions are mainly from the research network itself, and could be seen as a limitation, the contributors’ own positionalities speak for themselves. Yet, I believe this aspect of the volume could be better utilised. For instance, I would have liked to see more (perhaps translated) references to scholars of the Global South who do not publish in the languages of the Global North. Such choices could provide the kind of data that is often inaccessible to international scholarship.

Displacing Theory Through the Global South first and foremost scrutinizes the very positionality of the scholarly work on the Global South being done in the Global North and reveals the fault lines of knowledge production from its very site of production. The authors ask the kind of questions that are vital to truly “decolonize” knowledge and its production, revealing its possibilities and limitations, as well as its exigence.