

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum is located in the top left corner of a dark blue header. It features a stylized, concentric spiral design in shades of blue and white. To the right of the spiral, the text "Anthropology Book Forum" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font. Below this, the text "Open Access Book Reviews" is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

The Representation of Others in Anthropology

Review by Sue Ann Teo

Published, August 16, 2021

Bruce Kapferer and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, 2016, *Against Exoticism: Toward the Transcendence of Relativism and Universalism in Anthropology*. Berghahn Books, 147 pp., ISBN 978-1-78533-371-2

Keywords: Exotic, exoticism, representation, ethnographic nostalgia, exoticization

Against Exoticism confronts the complications of theorizing and researching the ‘exotic’ in anthropology. Bruce Kapferer and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos conceptualize the ‘exotic’ in the book as that which is “outside and does not fit into presumptions, opinions and theories that guide the analyses in humanities, social science and sciences that concern with differences and universalities of human sociocultural practices” (137). ‘Exoticism,’ on the other hand, is conceptualized as the construction of false and unsubstantiated differences through the inappropriate application of descriptive/analytical categories, and this limits the interpretations of the localized and relative modes of comprehension. These conceptualizations reflect the authors’ intention to disengage from the prevailing dichotomy of West and Others. Hence, the book constitutes ethnographic studies carried out in South America, Africa and Asia. These studies focus on the exotic and exoticism as a particular methodological import for anthropology in which the scholars discuss their research experiences and their representation of subjects.

In the introduction, Kapferer and Theodossopoulos discuss the dichotomy of relativism and universalism in anthropological studies pertaining to the ‘exotic’ as subject. They argue that the danger for anthropologists often lies in the slippage between relativism and universalism. As such, they contend that if anthropologists do not recognize their relativism within the universal, they will fall into the trap of exoticism as they misconceive the real difference as merely a variation of the universal. Consequently, implications of modifications and changes to the exotic

through time and by different stakeholders will be understudied. As a result, the universalism of the notion of exotics often becomes insufficient in explaining subjects with agencies who react and modify the externally imposed imaginaries and stereotypes to fit their purposes.

In Chapter 1, Theodossopoulos argues that anthropologists have ethnographic nostalgia in relating current social realities with past ethnographic records, which are essentialist and taxonomic, often deriving a universalistic theorization and homogenizing the differences of presumptions, opinions and theories of subjects as Others. He argues that it is crucial for ethnographers to be aware of the nostalgia, to destabilize pre-existing standards of authentication which engender a de-exoticizing that renders real differences as mere variations.

An aspect of the complexity is demonstrated by Pnina Werbner in Chapter 2. He uncovers the pragmatic improvisation in rituals (the *mothei*) among the Tswapong women of Botswana. He stresses that the cultural inventiveness in the indigenous rituals is not necessarily due to the influence of the West or to Christianity. Instead, the changing of socio-economic backgrounds, educational levels and standards of living as the context may have a more direct impact on the improvisation of the rituals.

In Chapter 3, Stephen Nugent writes about the importance of the system/context for the analysis of the exotic. He argues that the social and cultural system constitutes the albatross for ethnographers when studying the exotic. By understanding the context, in Chapter 4, Maurice Said uncovers the exoticization and counter-exoticization as reciprocal processes between expatriates and travelers with the locals of Southern Sri Lanka. Said argues that the seeming counter-reactions are driven by the agenda and intentions of the locals. The process can be both to empower and disempower and often entails (re)negotiation of the Self and Other.

Theodora Lefkadiou makes a similar argument in Chapter 5, though in a different context, as she analyses the prevailing imageries of poverty, joy, and the cultural and racial identity of Bahians in Brazil which are continuously appropriated by the current tourism industry of the country. With a specific focus on *capoeira* practitioners, Lefkadiou unravels the tensions, conflicts, compromises and conformances between the *capoeira* practitioners and the locals during the articulations, as they react to the demand of tourist markets for their livelihood.

The studies presented in *Against Exoticism* demonstrate the slippage of the notion of the 'exotic' and 'exoticism,' due to multi-layered complexity of the concepts which are never linear or merely two-way processes. For example, Said and Lefkadiou in their respective chapters, have shown that it is futile to label who or what constitutes the exotic, as exoticization is not necessarily an external imposition. The subjects of research can also be the beneficiaries, hence, of practicing exoticization. Therefore, the processes are reciprocal, simultaneous and often time mutual.

Lefkaditou found the *capoeira* practitioners self-reflected and positioned themselves towards the outsiders. Hence, Theodossopoulos, Werbner and Nugent have urged for a paradigm shift in understanding the notions of the exotic and exoticism as processes of evolving power relations among subjects of study, which are often driven by perceptions, stereotypes, political interests, economy and social contexts. *Against Exoticism* stresses the need for more critical awareness of these changes in anthropology.

This book demonstrates the urgent need for a scholarly discourse on methodological concerns with intellectual representations of minorities and subaltern groups. It echoes postcolonial critiques of representation, challenges the “transparency by denegations” of intellectuals and undoes the “epistemic violence” as described by Gayatri Spivak (2010) in “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” Chapters in *Against Exoticism* demonstrate how to account for the political, social and economic realities of subjects through explanation and narratives (Spivak 1988, 76). By unraveling these realities, the book contributes a meaningful analysis of deep-seated social values and heterogeneous norms for advancing the discipline of anthropology.

References

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1998. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, edited by Rosalind Morris, 21–78. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sue Ann Teo graduated with a PhD in Religious Studies from the Victoria University of Wellington. Teo’s research interests are in minority, gender and micro-politics studies. Currently, she is working on a research project about inter-marriage between different Indian communities in Malaysia and in exploring the institution of casteism among the diasporic Hindu communities. Teo’s studies are multidisciplinary in nature ranging from anthropology and sociology to gender and religious studies.



© 2021 Sue Ann Teo