

Korean writer of Japanese embodies the ambiguities and continuities of the context of empire in the (post)colonial period.

*Colonizing Language* is an undoubtedly valuable contribution to the fields of Korean and Japanese studies. I believe it is also an essential text for researchers outside of East Asian studies interested in the formation of national literary canons, language, colonial culture, and empire.

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*Histories of Dirt: Media and Urban Life in Colonial and Postcolonial Lagos*

By STEPHANIE NEWELL

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Stephanie Newell's *Histories of Dirt: Media and Urban Life in Colonial and Postcolonial Lagos* offers a compelling account of cultural politics of dirt in Africa. In this seminal work, Newell argues for the primacy of native public voice from colonial to postcolonial Lagos on "moral, sanitary, economic and aesthetic evaluation" in the context of dirt. Through significant empirical evidence, dirt as an interpretative framework in her book becomes a complex slippery cultural category. Newell's prose is lucid and not belabored with theoretical jargons. She introduces narrative aesthetics through her insertion of interjections and dialogue, especially in her attempt to foreground the voice of the African urban residents since the colonial period. Structurally, the book is divided into three parts of eight chapters in total.


The first section explores British colonial archives and Eurocentric research that produce identity, space, and objects labeled as dirt. Working on materials such as health reports, travelogues, and other colonial documents, the first two chapters then explore how racial policy of segregation was deployed to regulate urban bodies and spaces during epidemics of tuberculosis and malaria in colonial Lagos. The third chapter demonstrates attempts by West African-based newspapers to dispel the racial logic of the British colonialists. Newell sails her argument successfully, and her assessment unveils the failure of the colonial government to recognize the diversity of precolonial Lagos and trade expansion in the colonial era as a mitigating factor for this colonial health failure.

The second section builds methodological challenges by examining colonial educational films and reports. In chapters 4 and 5, which form the component, Newell retrieves the agency of African urban residents in the colonial archives such as Anglophone vowels and an untranslatable soundscape in Morton-William's reports. The two chapters also highlight resistance against colonial mediation from the 1930s to 1940s. Newell notes the shortcoming of existing scholarly approaches on British colonial media such as Larkin's and Hartley's persuasive models. She then builds convincingly a future African research model that subverts the propagandism in British colonial archives.

In the last part, Newell turns to what she terms “urban living archive” to buttress postcolonial history of dirt and the local value system. In chapter 6, Newell notes diverse cultural and religious backgrounds as variables that inform the public opinions on dirt. Chapter 7 clarifies how dirt is implicated in systemic otherness in postcolonial Lagos and an attempt by government to rebrand the face of the urban figure of dirt. The chapter also harps on the economy of dirt. Within Newell’s heuristic task, one comes to the understanding of dirt as a replacement for political symbolism. The last chapter of the unit deconstructs how non-heterosexual figures are associated with dirt and the development of public phobia and political legislation that follow. The chapter then interrogates how in this reversibility of othering, homosexuality is labeled a dirty Western sexual practice. To conclude her arguments, Newell reflects on the late postcolonial practice of racist and social stigma in the occasion of an Ebola outbreak in West Africa. The conclusion shows how her work on dirt dialogues with two earlier eminent postcolonial theorists, Edward Said and Frantz Fanon. Even with her robust engagement, Newell underpins the limitations of her study for future research, asking questions such as how oral histories and proverbs can be instrumental in accessing the voice of the African subject in the colonial era.

Save for a few insignificant highlights in chapter 6 and 7, Newell’s work could have been more enriched in engaging the role radio played in propagating British sanitary policy in colonial Lagos. When Newell addresses the problem of identity and migration in chapter 7, she does not expound on the gender dynamics of the migrant figure of dirt, especially in the rank of those she claims are “uplanders” from Kwara. Another defect is Newell’s submission that Boko Haram insurgency is in the campaign of the “purist understanding of African authenticity.” One may then need to interrogate further if Islamic Wahabist ideology, a cardinal goal of Boko Haram, is equivalent to African purism.

Newell’s work charts the complex networks on urbanity, dirt, and history in Africa. She creates new path methodologically by opening up “micro-spaces” where scholars gain access to urban public mind in colonial archive. The book is also a huge contribution to postcolonial studies and public health. The most recent example through which we can come to terms with Newell on this cutting-edge scholarship is in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which different world leaders and citizens invoke dirt rhetoric against Asian bodies.

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