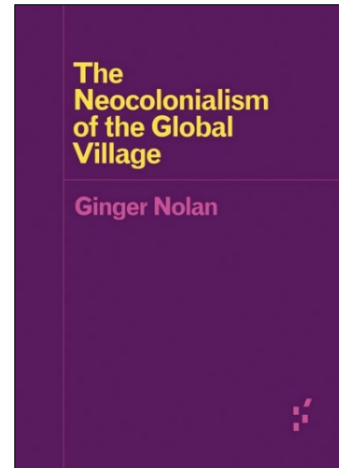


Ginger Nolan, **The Neocolonialism of the Global Village**, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018, 78 pp., \$7.95 (paperback).

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Something about the bucolic undertones of the word “village” in a Eurocentric context seems to summon up a simpler, more idyllic time. Perhaps this is why Marshall McLuhan’s reference to the “global village,” suggesting the marriage of an imagined past with a technologically interconnected future, often inspires a kind of utopian thinking in media studies. But in Ginger Nolan’s brisk volume, **The Neocolonialism of the Global Village**, she deeply explores this concept through its less often considered aspects—architecture, land use, political economy—whose disentanglement reflects a tripartite critique. First, the roots of McLuhan’s (1963) arguments in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, where the term first appeared, are steeped in colonialist theories and techniques of oppression. Second, McLuhan himself was cautious in his formulation of the idea, as he was to some degree aware (if not always critical) of the tensions surrounding the use of media during the Cold War period of decolonization in which he was writing. And perhaps most important, in the fifty-odd years since “global village” entered academic parlance, it is clear that what Nolan calls “a state of political dispossession resulting from a differential of semiotic power” (p. 1) remains in force worldwide. To argue that the world has, through ever more prevalent forms of new media, achieved the supposed closeness of a village with a free flow of information—and equitable power over it—is dangerously naïve at best.



Third, McLuhan himself was cautious in his formulation of the idea, as he was to some degree aware (if not always critical) of the tensions surrounding the use of media during the Cold War period of decolonization in which he was writing. And perhaps most important, in the fifty-odd years since “global village” entered academic parlance, it is clear that what Nolan calls “a state of political dispossession resulting from a differential of semiotic power” (p. 1) remains in force worldwide. To argue that the world has, through ever more prevalent forms of new media, achieved the supposed closeness of a village with a free flow of information—and equitable power over it—is dangerously naïve at best.

The book itself is part of *Forerunners*, a series of short volumes that open inquiries into theory for future development. Divided into thirteen bite-sized sections that each explore a different facet of the global village idea, the most noticeable issue with the text is that the author does not have room to adequately delve into the many concepts she weaves into her argument. The result is a necessary economy of language that leads to the deployment of semantically dense terms such as “noo-technologies” and “arch-paradigms.” Nolan is an able writer, and using these terms does not hamper the flow of the text too much, but any one of them could be more thoroughly explicated if there were space. Nevertheless, her argument is cogent overall as it leads from one point to the next throughout the book, connecting disparate pieces to form a nuanced portrait of media’s role in mid-20th-century Kenya.

Nolan unearths the roots of McLuhan’s work that trace back to authors such as John Colin Carothers, who argued that “literacy and urban life would radically upset [Africans’] fragile psychological constitution” (p. 11), and to neoliberal movements in urban planning that left newly decolonized states with “an intentionally incomplete and impoverished version of ‘modernity’” (p. 15). The underlying prejudice of these policies severely stunted any benefits the project of decolonization might have created, regardless of any good intentions their formulators might have had. Even the casual exoticism when (to use one of the book’s examples) McLuhan compares radio to tribal drums alludes to the belief in a fundamentally different

mind-set between colonizer and colonized. The point here is not simply to call McLuhan or his contemporaries racist—at least, this book stops just short of doing so—but to demonstrate how the racist ideologies of the time heavily influenced the formulation of theory. The difficulty of separating a theorist from their ideas is sometimes paralleled by that of separating those ideas from premises that are now known to be incorrect and/or objectionable.

This point is driven home by the etymological relation, yet material disconnection, between the idyllic imaginary of the [global] village and the reality of villagization, a scheme by which residents were resettled (often forcibly) in planned spaces, often to minimize dissent (see e.g., Whittaker, 2012). Nolan details the layout and operations of these camps-turned-communities, such as the vans playing British radio propaganda in the central “market” area, a space she notes is “devoid of actual commerce but suffused with broadcast media” (p. 25). She explains how McLuhan himself described media as a form of soft power, shaping minds just as much as they convey information; in particular, the precondition of participating in media is to “give oneself over to prevailing *programs*” (p. 28, emphasis by author). But behind this deterministic perspective is the uncomfortable question, Who decides whose mind will be shaped, and by what? To what ends? Given the ideologies mentioned above, it should come as no surprise that the governors of Kenya, for all their rhetoric about allowing the nation to decide its own affairs, did not give equal control of the media to their newly independent subjects. The participation of postcolonial subjects has less in common with the ideals of mass communication than with Foucault’s (2007) pastoral power, wherein the “flock” willingly submits itself to the direction of a pastor figure. The colonizer-knows-best approach that informed the distribution of media—which they may have perceived as more “civilized” than outright brutality—still laid the groundwork for continuing inequality on the global stage.

Nolan uses the term “semiotic poverty” to describe this postcolonial condition, where the new nation and its citizens lack “equal capabilities to leverage semiotic power toward political transformation” (p. 35). An example of this, in chapter 6, is the continuing use of colonial languages for communication and administration, limiting the ability of nonnative speakers to fully engage with the structures of the state. Moreover, the author points out McLuhan’s belief that media could eventually overcome the imperfection of language, and his support for anti-oral/prowriting forms of language planning, as evidence that the language policies were not to the advantage of the Kenyan residents. (Strangely, she never cites or mentions the seminal work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986), such as the essays in *Decolonising the Mind* that deal with these issues, growing out of the same geographic and historical context.) Rather than try to understand the smoothly functioning multilingualism of Kenya or another former colony, according to this idealistic logic, the proponent of a global village would instead insist that the use of a “world” (read: European) language is the prerequisite for participation in the media landscape—which in turn would lead to peace and understanding. But when the levels of access are limited, as with the vans delivering propaganda in the village square, and the distributors of access operate under a belief that the minds of population operate fundamentally differently, and therefore require management, it is not hard to see the presence of neocolonialism alluded to by the book’s title.

The latter chapters are devoted to what Nolan calls “terra-power,” a form of “harnessing the earth’s bioreproductive capacities,” and “a technology for *redistributing* risk over time and across different strata of society...linked to class struggle” (p. 59, emphasis by author). In the case of newly independent Kenya,

terra-power was inextricable from the interests of white landowners and racialized ideas of how to use the land best. The upshot of this discussion is to demonstrate that semiotic poverty cut across nearly all levels of everyday life: media, language, and even planting and building. It is a testament to the resilience of the decolonized that they were able to develop their state given the initial impediments worked into its fabric, and to the corrosive nature of colonial policy that its negative impacts continue to stymie growth, materially and politically. Returning to the overarching thesis of the book, it is clear that when a colonial individual refers to the "global village," they mean something different—intentionally or not—from the way that villages were physically constructed and semiotically positioned in places like Kenya. And while Nolan's exploration covers an exemplary case that McLuhan was demonstrably aware of as he formed his theories, it is far from the only one, past or present. Near the end of the book, the author states, "the global village names a paradigm for instating semiotic poverty . . . [which] must therefore be conceived also as a 'battle for intelligence'" (p. 67). A more precise framing might be to call this a battle for equal participation in the global noosphere, from which comes the right to define and self-determine the material circumstances of a people's lives.

While the connection between McLuhan and the history of decolonization in Kenya may seem tenuous at first glance, by the end of this volume, Nolan has thoroughly considered every angle of it. Working against the limitations of space, she successfully argues for the reconsideration of the so-called global village, and challenges its usefulness as a term. The implicit question is, how shall academics from the "Global North," with their outsized influence on the field, honestly and respectfully reassess their usage of this idea? What is the decolonized perspective on the global circuits of media, and how can it be given equal attention? For any reader interested in the intersection between media evolution, critical race theory, and colonial/postcolonial studies, and curious about their own positionality as a scholar, this thought-provoking monograph should generate some careful reflection.

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