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Hybridity, Identity and Global Music

Review by
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***Cultural Globalization: A User's Guide*, by J. Macgregor Wise.
Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008. ISBN-13: 9780631235392. 175 pp.**

J. Macgregor Wise's book, "Cultural Globalization: A User's Guide," considers the impact of globalization on culture and identity formation through a focus on global youth and global music. Wise, an associate professor of Communication Studies at Arizona State University, writes in a conversational tone and draws on several experiences from his own life. Having grown up in India, Korea, the Philippines and Milwaukee, Wise was exposed to border crossings early in his life. He describes the book as an essay and acknowledges that it neither seeks new theories nor offers extensive ethnographic fieldwork.

In Chapter 1, Wise lays the groundwork for the book by introducing several key concepts, including those of culture, habitus, territory, power, identity, home, assemblage, ideology, hegemony and Orientalism. He concludes that "what we might consider local or traditional culture has been a hybrid culture all along, and that the global culture that it is faced with is far from uniform or universal" (p. 25). Edward Said and other scholars of culture would agree.

In the next chapter, Wise continues his essay with theoretical considerations of globalization, cultural imperialism, the local and the global, and global media flows. He differentiates between what he calls "the happy hybridity bandwagon" (p. 38) of National Geographic (similar to Thomas Friedman's flat world) and the more negative view of globalization's unequal relationships, as exposed in the 1970s by Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's Marxist analysis of Donald Duck. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's five dimensions of globalization, Wise concludes correctly that globalization does not exist in a one-way flow of culture from the West to the Rest but instead in multiple, multidirectional flows. In his discussion of the local and the global, Wise differentiates

between local form/global content and global form/local content, yet the distinctions between these two types of cultural products remain unclear. What Wise is referring to are the processes of localization and glocalization, but he never uses these terms. Similarly, he writes about the imbalance of flows but never calls this phenomenon asymmetrical interdependence.

“Global Youth” is the topic addressed in Chapter 3. This chapter mostly deals with issues of identity and surveillance as they relate to young people. Wise also introduces the concepts of the core and periphery, and he is particularly interested in examining the experience of young people on the periphery. In an example from Russia, Wise argues that young people there feel that “global culture ignores, caricatures, or misunderstands Russia” (p. 73). These complaints, of course, are echoes of the Third World’s protests during the New World Information and Communication Order debates of the 1970s. Here, Wise could have made a stronger connection between global youth and global music.

The highlight of this book is undoubtedly the chapter on global music. Textbooks on international communication sometimes include a short account of the music business, so Wise’s extended discussion is welcome. Wise is interested in the cultural politics of music that is distributed globally. He defines World Music as “a category of music in the West that tends to encompass non-Western musical artists, especially so-called traditional musics” (p. 79). This music is often sold in response to middle class desires for “authentic, tribal, or primitive music,” what Wise calls “aural tourism” (p. 79). Wise then considers the presence of cultural imperialism and the exploitation of Third World musicians in World Music. He mentions an opposite reading that sees world beat as subversive and resistant but never expands on this possibility. As Wise points out, the problems with World Music are plenty: it strips music from its local contents, it ignores history, it misrepresents situations, it is a result of unequal power relations, and it depends on the “generosity” of Western musicians to “save” local music from extinction. He discusses the examples of punk and hip hop in more depth.

As my own work focuses on cultural globalization and transnational feminisms, I see some interesting connections between world music and global feminism. World Music is a Western definition of non-Western music. Similarly, so-called “global feminism” is often described as a Western, imperialist interpretation of women’s issues. World Music tries to “save” local musicians, just as Western feminists often try to “save” women in developing countries. As other scholars have pointed out, the local is always seen as the weaker part of the two in the global:local dichotomy.

In the final chapter, Wise writes about the performance of identities in the new territories of globalization. As examples, he includes the Chinese singer Faye Wong and the Singaporean musician Dick Lee. Panlatinidad (the state of being Latino/a), Wise argues, is a landscape in which people negotiate their identities, and music plays an important role in issues of borders and immigration. Other audiotopias (cultural contact zones) are the Afro-Caribbean sound system culture and South Asian bhangra in the United Kingdom. Toward the end of this chapter, it again seems unclear how concepts discussed here relate to each other and the rest of the book.

This apparent lack of cohesion is also present in the conclusion. In the preface to the book, Wise writes that he considers his book to be “a rant about connecting theory to everyday life” (p. viii). Unfortunately, the conclusion does seem a bit like a moralistic rant about what we should do as global citizens: become reflective, consider our place in the world, get used to each other, and get used to living in a bigger world. Wise says he advocates a kind of cosmopolitanism that displays a willingness to engage with the Other. Does Wise position himself as opposite to the Other? Who is his Other? If the Other are those living on the periphery, then is this book only written for and applicable to Westerners? Does Wise also have a message for the Other, or does the Other not have the luxury of these choices of engagement? Even so, Wise concludes “there are no Others, only others, finding their way through their ordinary everyday lives” (p. 154). It is not clear exactly what he means with the switch from uppercase to lowercase.

This book has several bright moments, but as a whole, I am not sure who would benefit from reading it. For students and casual readers, the dry definitions and theories of the first two chapters would be a deterrent. International Communication scholars will not learn anything new, except perhaps for some applications to global music.