

SUBTERRANEAN MODERNITIES AND PHANTASMAL NATIONS

Some Questions and Observations

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CARTOGRAPHIC MEXICO: A HISTORY OF STATE FIXATIONS AND FUGITIVE LANDSCAPES. By Raymond B. Craib. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. Pp. 328. \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)

MODERNITY DISAVOWED: HAITI AND THE CULTURES OF SLAVERY IN THE AGE OF REVOLUTION. By Sibylle Fischer. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. Pp. 384. \$89.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.)

CONSCRIPTS OF MODERNITY: THE TRAGEDY OF COLONIAL ENLIGHTENMENT. By David Scott. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. Pp. 296. \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)

MODERN INQUISITIONS: PERU AND THE COLONIAL ORIGINS OF THE CIVILIZED WORLD. By Irene Silverblatt. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. Pp. 320. \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)

BILINGUAL AESTHETICS: A NEW SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION. By Doris Sommer. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. Pp. 280. \$74.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)

AFTER SPANISH RULE: POSTCOLONIAL PREDICAMENTS OF THE AMERICAS. Edited by Mark Thurner and Andrés Guerrero. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. Pp. 376. \$84.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper.)

OVERVIEW

Duke University Press certainly has been busy. All six titles discussed here spin out of a commitment to enlarge and complicate the cultural, political, economic, and social scope of Latin American scholarly studies. In the texts that I explore here we see many analytical twists and turns in and out of a variety of cultural phenomena (maps, pictographs, literature, *testimonios*, and heretical diaries, among others) that aim to enliven discussion (modernity, coloniality/postcoloniality, nation) and expand conceptions of the past and present Americas (North and South).

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The works, some more directly than others, seek to position the Spanish conquest and colonization of the Americas within the historical script to revise concepts of coloniality, modernity, and nation-state formation (a stronghold of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglo-European postcolonial studies). In *Modern Inquisitions* Irene Silverblatt explores how the late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century inquisitions (traditionally considered premodern) in Lima, Peru, act as a violent undercurrent in the nascent formation of a unified Spanish nation-state. Inquisitional authorities like the Archbishopric of Lima played a significant role in scripting race narratives of the indigenous as Other. Silverblatt untangles the inquisition's role as an arbiter of "race thinking" (7) in the shaping of the modern world. Archived sermons, catechisms, diaries, *autos-da-fé*, and Catholic church correspondence between Madrid and Lima are the trace markers that make up a "theater of power" (7) that performs cultural and political unity of church and proto-state (at home and abroad) in opposition to Others: practitioners of witchcraft, Jews, Muslims, New Christians (colonialists like the Portuguese and Dutch), and all manner of indigenous heretics. It is upon the illusion of unity and "godlike" (80) autonomy, naturalized by the inquisitor's appeal to reason, moral inhibition, and regulation (in the name of a *res publica*) that the modern nation-state is built. For example, Silverblatt analyzes the "texts" of Doña Mencia de Luna, Manuel Henríquez, and Manuel Bautista Pérez, all of whom become the enemy (threatening Judaizers) necessary for a nascent Spanish nationalist discourse to form. Thus, to reveal the fragmentary nature of what amounts to "state terror" is to not only place Latin American coloniality centrally on the historical grid, but is also to reveal how the inquisition helped give violent birth to a Spanish nation-state and thus set the direction for, as Silverblatt writes, "modern race thinking" (219).

Silverblatt is not the only scholar interested in teasing out formative cultural, political, and economic subtexts within a Latin American coloniality that informs the birth of the modern nation-state. The eleven scholars brought together in Mark Thurner and Andrés Guerrero's edited *After Spanish Rule* focus less on the Iberian Peninsula and more on the discursive formation of the modern nation-state in Latin America. Collectively, they paint a thick and multilayered historiography of significant colonial and postcolonial moments in a wide sweep of Latin America (from the Andes to the Caribbean). For instance, Mauricio Tenorio turns his sights on Mexican creole/mestizo elites' construction of nationhood, inclusive of indigenous peoples only as symbolic objects; so, in the building of a postindependence Mexican nation-state, such national imaginaries for Tenorio solidify into real forms of racialized exclusion. At the core of a Peruvian national identity, Mark Thurner reveals a primitivist glorification of its Incan past that excludes

the native presence in the shaping of the Peruvian state. Thomas Abercrombie juxtaposes a present and past Bolivian nationalism to relate yet another inclusion (creole)/exclusion (subaltern) nationalist paradigm that continues to operate today. And others like Andrés Guerrero discover this same containment of indigenous peoples, despite creole nationalists' opposite claims, in postindependence, postcolonial Ecuador and Colombia. Such scholars, to varying degrees, also reveal forms of subaltern resistance; Joanne Rappaport explores, for instance, how the structure of the nation-state can be used to accommodate enduring or reemerging forms of indigeness.

After Spanish Rule also questions the use of a postcolonial studies theoretical rubric that originated largely in the studies of subcontinental India and the Middle East; several of the essays foreground the potential problem of overlaying an approach that explores a completely different set of historical, cultural, and social variables (see in particular Shahid Amin's insightful position in the foreword). For example, Thurner reminds us that Spain's overseas empire had already crashed by the time England began its massive colonial assault on India. Because colonies were established at varying times, a grand postcolonial theory risks erasing the specific historical and social conditions and events at play in the Americas. With warnings set forth, most scholars decide that postcolonial theory is useful in its abstract of identification of the *subalterno* outside historical, social, and geographical contexts. Guerrero considers it useful in that it allows for different modes of reading and writing "histories embedded in local processes" (7), and Thurner considers it useful in that it directs us toward a one-world understanding of colonialism and empire-building where parts affect the whole.

Sibylle Fischer's *Modernity Disavowed* extends and deepens these analytical approaches that tease out subterranean discourse/power/knowledge matrices at work in the shift from a slavocratic coloniality to a modern postcoloniality in the Americas. While Fischer's analytical compass finds its proverbial north in the region of Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba, her recovery of archived material—from colonial muralscapes to revolutionary documents and literature—reveals a series of discursive revolutionary ripples that emanate far beyond these shores. Indeed, the excavation and analysis of such cultural "texts" from La Habana, Santo Domingo, and Port-au-Prince allow her to render visible a "political and cultural landscape beyond the confines of disciplinary fragmentation and categories of national language, national history, and national literature" (11). If colonial and Enlightenment discourse normalized slavery in the Caribbean and beyond, then uncovering and "stripping away [. . .] historical disguises" (101) in the analysis of texts such as, for instance, the Cuban mulatto author Plácido's poem "La Sombra de Padilla" can reveal subcurrents of resistance to power.

Moreover, while the *cordon sanitaire* quashed Toussaint Louverture and comrades' rebellions in Haiti, Fischer's stripping away allows her to trace the continued movement of a revolutionary counter-discourse (emancipation and right to rule their lives and land and create their own nation) throughout the Caribbean and beyond. This is the modernity that is disavowed; it is this counter-discursive movement that had to pass underground as a result of the imposed militaristic and economic regulations; it is this otherwise silenced racialized history with its demands of freedom and autonomy that comes to centrally inform that major push into modernity in the nineteenth century.

Raymond B. Craib also scratches the surface of alternative discourses of nation-building and modernity in *Cartographic Mexico*. As the title suggests, Craib looks at a variety of mid-nineteenth- through early-twentieth-century mapping projects and Mexico's formation as a nation-state. Indeed, for Craib, an analysis of various mapping systems—those of explorers, surveyors, cartographers, and localized villagers and bureaucrats—reveals a "relationship between modes of representation and the material practices of power" (7) that contain and control the Mexican subject. Craib considers such a cartographic construction of nation as a "readable stage" (8) and so in his decoding, for instance, of Antonio García Cubas's 1858 *Carta general de la República Mexicana* (a map used in classrooms and hung in administrative buildings) he denaturalizes a scientific discourse of geography that allowed postimperial elites to systematize hierarchies of difference and power in the establishment of Mexico as a stable nation-state. While the *Carta general* positions Mexico within a "modern spatial sensibility" (33) in its reference to the Greenwich meridian and includes a timeline of Mexico that dates back to the Toltec empire, history and science simply impose a "temporal order" (49) on a history of Mexico that is deeply conflicted, multiply layered, and radically contingent (49). As a pre-Columbian past is cartographically represented, it is within the delimited space of an archaeological past—and not a present or a future. Within this spatial containment, however, Craib also identifies "fugitive landscapes" such as those Veracruzanos whose "agrarian practices, conceptions of history and geography, and local politics all radically complicated and reshaped the projects surveyors had been assigned" (11). Dismantling these staged spaces by analyzing the "historical and social processes that conditioned its creation" might ultimately allow one, as Craib concludes, "to recuperate and imagine other possibilities, other ways of being in the world, and other opportunities that were figuratively and literally foreclosed" (259).

In *Conscripts of Modernity* David Scott seeks to expand notions of coloniality (and anticoloniality), modernity, and the nation in his analysis of the "complex structure of social, economic, juridical, and political

relations of knowledge and power" (112). Like other scholars, he also considers Toussaint Louverture's rebellion as a little-explored paradigm shift. However, he does so attuned to the twentieth century. Specifically, he analyzes the way C. L. R. James's pre- and post-Bandung editions of *Black Jacobins* renders the rebellion in either a Romance or a Tragic mode. Different editions provide distinct versions of "the modern colonial intellectual" (20) like Toussaint Louverture. For example, whereas the 1938 edition is filled with a "redemptive mythology" (138), given that C. L. R. James lived through a time when postindependence anti-colonial administrations failed *after* the Bandung conference in 1956 (it launched the nonaligned movement between African, Asian, and Latin American countries),¹ he shifts the "mode of emplotting the story" (210) in his 1963 edition of *Black Jacobins*; this edition is deeply pessimistic and deterministic and casts a dark shadow over postcolonial futures. Scott favors the latter edition's shift to the Tragic mode not only because it offers the "most searching reflection on human action, intentions, and chance" (12), but also because it is less utopic and more realistic; it is more "contingent" and "paradoxical" and thus more realistically depicts relationships "between identity and difference, reason and unreason, blindness and insight, action and responsibility, guilt and innocence" (13). He sees us as having reached a dead end in "modernities constructed by the postcolonial state" (115). The only way out is to embrace the Tragic mode. We must be, he writes, "less enthusiastic about the heroic story embodied in the alternative modernities thesis and more concerned to inquire into the modern concepts and institutions upon which these resisting projects themselves depended" (115).

Like Scott, Doris Sommer focuses on the twentieth century. While she moves readily between European and Latin American critical thinkers in *Bilingual Aesthetics*, she tethers her analysis and discussion of multilingualism and nation formation largely to a contemporary United States. She considers the racial melancholia and disease caused by a nation-state that enforces monolingualism and that seeks to homogenize difference. According to Sommer, we are what we think and we think in language; thus, destabilizing language in bilingual jokes, code-switching games, and multilingual puns can disrupt uniform ideas of

1. It was at the Bandung conference in 1956 where the heads of the nonaligned states (Mumbia, Nehru, the President of Mexico, Lopéz Mateos) and intellectuals (Malcolm X and Richard Wright, for example) met to declare their "third path" that would neither follow the way of Communism nor that of Capitalism, but something in between. Declared as such or not, most followed Walter Rostow's developmentalism. That is, they declared that the people of these nonaligned states should simply accept their misery and patiently await the arrival of social change; this, of course, was another way of getting the people to submit completely to imperialism.

identity (xxiv). In an English-only, assimilationist nation-state like the United States, then, linguistic border crossing can radically realign the nation's "constitutional protections" (83). For Sommer, multilingual, mischievous play "upsets the coherence of romantic nationalism and ethnic essentialism" and defamiliarizes "liberal laws" (xi); it sends "shock waves to the closed concept of national sovereignty" (86). Because politics and language go hand in hand, a language that estranges and that can "jog reflection about the artifice of society and perhaps about the normal proliferation of artful constructions" (93) will not only sharpen our "critical thinking" but also "make us better citizens" (xiii). Finally, Sommer reveals how, in learning to double deal, defamiliarize, and estrange as multilingual subjects do, we might develop alternative perspectives, alternative modernities, alternative nations, and more generally, a "love for the contingent and changing world" (191).

SOME OBSERVATIONS

From language play to cartographic nation making, from inquisitional testimonies to revolutionary murals and poetry, the six works discussed cover a lot of ground. While they present suggestive and creative ways of expanding and complicating our vision of a colonial and postcolonial, modern and postmodern Americas, they also beg a number of questions and critical observations.

Of Sommer's *Bilingual Aesthetics* I ask, can code-switching between language communities (each with its own system of signs that point to an agreed upon set of referents) really unfix monocultures and monolingual nations? Can "funny grammatical tics," "strange accents" (164), and/or a bilingual overloading estrange, distort, and ultimately transform a hegemonic nation-state? Is a "multilingual nation" necessarily a healthier nation? Do the Mixtecs in southern Mexico experience more discrimination and exploitation because they aren't allowed to be bilingual? Were the "coloured" of South Africa victims of apartheid because they spoke a different language from those in power? Is an officially multilingual nation-state like Switzerland less racist because it mandates that all products sold have advertising in German, French, and Italian? Hasn't knowing English in the United States been an essential tool for working peoples to communicate and organize against the repressive mechanisms of state? I'm all for us as a people deciding whether or not to be bilingual, trilingual, or whatever-lingual, but only when it is our choice, and not that imposed by the state. That is, when talking of a multilingual nation, who would be in charge of deciding good and bad bilingualism and which languages would be taught and spoken? Might this give the state even more authority and thus divest the people of their power to decide? Might this also make for a linguistic

apartheid where, say, Chicanos would speak Spanish, African Americans Igbo, Native Americans Uto-Aztecan Comanche, which would isolate and estrange precisely those that are already massively oppressed and exploited? Lastly, of Sommer I ask, does she really mean to say that her insights are based on “post-Chomskyeen” (35) linguistics, or rather on either a Bloomfield, Sapir/Whorf socio-behaviorist approach or a Derridean misinterpretation of the nearly century-old work of Ferdinand de Saussure? Chomsky’s use of mathematical logic to formulate a universal grammar that determines different cognitive mappings for thought and language (among many other things) is a night-and-day difference from Sommer’s conception of language as “arbitrary and slippery” and a place where bilinguals can move from “one signifier to another, in ways that affect the signified” (68).

Of Raymond Craib’s *Cartographic Mexico* I ask, can the encoding and subsequent decoding of mapped spaces make and unmake nation-states? Is mapping anything more than a technical operation operating in different historical and social conditions that to varying degrees allow for the realization of actualities (in the Aristotelian sense)? Can the remapping of “fugitive landscapes” and “vernacular images” (13) really offer a resistance to the nation-state’s legislative, executive, and juridical structures? Shouldn’t we consider how working peoples in Mexico have organized to pressure the law-making institutions to extend democracy, the rights of people, and to eliminate (as much as possible under capitalism) the distortions caused by the fact that the decision-making power is not restricted to the people who will carry the burden of the decisions made?

I could just as easily ask the same questions of Silverblatt’s and Fischer’s work as well as of many of the essays included in *After Spanish Rule*, which all in various ways encode and decode cultural “texts” that stabilize and/or destabilize discursively constructed nations. I think of examples such as Thurner’s decoding of Peru’s “iconographic and narrative motifs in the postcolonial historical imagination” (141), Abercrombie’s articulation of the cultural construction of the Bolivian national subject as creole and modern, and Tenorio’s unfixing of the modern nation to make for a more “inclusive, multicultural, and rhetorically plural” reality (80). In all such cases, one might ask, what happened to those specific moments in time and space when the working class struggle has organized and secured rights for the working people inhabiting, say, the territory called Mexico, or Peru, or Cuba? Might this not be a form of philosophical idealism that negates our historical and social material reality? Might such an approach to the self, modernity, and nation as determined by discourse/power/knowledge systems allow scholars to make cuts into history without having to account for what we did to transform the world and how this world transformed us both before the respective cut and after? Doesn’t a

juxtaposition of vastly different historical moments without a reciprocal sense of a before and after lead us away from an understanding of how we communicated as a people across particular times and spaces, how we transformed the world in time and space, and how such and such activities moved us from one space/time to another? Might a conception of the world formed automatically, immediately, and without any mediation by discourse/power/knowledge systems lead us to a Kantian transcendentalism where categories don't have to be justified, explained, or in any way empirically verified? Might this not suspend all epistemological questions concerning the validity of knowledge, power, or language?

Concerning Silverblatt's *Modern Inquisitions*, I have other questions and observations. Might her formulation of a proto-nation formed in the face of an enemy—Jews, Muslims, New Christians, indigenous Others—and whose nationalist myths that celebrate its "exceptional character" and thus divert attention from a "shameful subterranean stream" (226) rely on a rather deterministic and pessimistic model of the world? I am thinking here not only of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, but also of Carl Schmitt's formulation of war and/or the state of exception where the function of politics is to direct the "enmity" between the nation and its enemy. (Along with Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* and *Glossarium* I am thinking also of the work of Giorgio Agamben.) Don't Silverblatt's Judaizers also function as that enemy that tells the nation who it is? Isn't hers also a nation imagined at war with an enemy? Perhaps this might help us understand why Silverblatt leans so heavily on Arendt's notion of "totalitarianism" and "banality of evil." Recall, however, that Arendt's formulations make no distinction between totalitarianism, fascism, and Stalinism (identified as Communism) and that along with this abstraction of totalitarianism she affirms a tribalism that completely eliminates the public sphere of politics. Isn't the domain of the political always the domain of the state? Doesn't it relate to the state because the political is the domain of the antagonism between the social classes—and this since the development of society? Recall, too, that with her conception of the "banality of evil"—we are all capable of evil, even an old man like Eichmann—she erases any sense of personal responsibility. So, we might ask, if it is our nature to be bad and if the nation-state forms to control this badness and continues to exist as an identity separate from an enemy Other, aren't we thus fated to eternal oppression and exploitation? Doesn't history show us something more optimistic? For instance, the working-class struggles in Latin America and worldwide long imposed on the bourgeoisie a whole series of guarantees and protections under law within the framework of the nation-state. Are the various formulations of our "natural" badness another way of denying our ability to collectively organize to willfully shape our future?

Shadowed, subterranean, and rhizomic resistant systems that stand in contrast with hegemonic master narratives of modernity lead me to a last set of observations. Fischer identifies the “phantasma and nightmare” (5) of the so-identified silent revolution by reading “beyond literal meaning [to] grasp that which is meant but not, strictly speaking, said” (xi). To do so, she turns to the already highly speculative theories of Freud, Lacan, and Žižek. Moreover, and Fischer is not alone here, there is a sense that the world is divided into centers (Europe) and peripheries (the Americas). To varying degrees, we see this dividing up of the world in most of the six works discussed above. I ask, however, if under capitalism we can really slice up the world into parts? I ask, too, if this might not lend itself to a First World versus Third World developmentalist and/or a Factors Theory model of change that privileges isolated and specifically directed teleological acts as the sole agents of social and historical change? Hasn't capitalism since its inception always been global? Thus, doesn't the transformation of our one-world (yesterday, today, and tomorrow) happen not in parts, but globally?

Perhaps what we should take away from the six works discussed above is their resistant spirit, that is, to resist current assumptions and assertions, to resist forms of idealism and instead make distinctions that make a difference in the study of the politics, economics, history, society, and culture, among others, that make up our Americas.