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0521822025 - The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures: Empire, Travel, Modernity

Ralph Bauer

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Prospero's progeny

But this rough magic
 I here abjure; and when I have required
 Some heavenly music (which even now I do)
 To work mine end upon their senses that
 This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
 Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
 And deeper than did ever plummet sound
 I'll drown my book.

(Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*)

In the last scene of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero, the exiled duke of Milan about to return to Italy, vows to abjure the magic that has empowered him to conquer his New World island, command its creatures, and even wreck the Neapolitan ship of state. Combining the ancient knowledge of his books, the savage sensualism of his slave Caliban, and the powerful eloquence of his servant Ariel, who translates his will into forces of nature, Prospero's magic becomes firmly aligned with witchcraft and the black arts. But in a final charm he "discovers" to the shipwrecked court a new future in the relationship between his aristocratic power and the Neapolitan monarchy: his daughter Miranda and the royal heir Ferdinand, soon to be married, playing "at chess." Once back in Italy, Prospero's dukedom will no longer be secured by his Renaissance magic but rather by his progeny Miranda – who, innocently, knows nothing of the dangerous worlds of Medeas and Thessalian witches – whose name (from "mirar," to see or look) signals new ways of knowing, and whose marriage to the royal heir promises peace and stability after "this late tempest" for generations to come.¹

I invoke *The Tempest* at the outset of this book because it aptly sets the stage for the questions I want to ask about the European encounter with the Americas. Since the Renaissance battles between the Ancients and the Moderns, the "fact" of America has invariably been among the first to be invoked in arguments for scientific progress.² Even today, there

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persists a hardy tradition in the historiography of modernity that would see the so-called “Scientific Revolution” of the seventeenth century as the more-or-less direct result of an inherent inadequacy of Renaissance natural philosophy to absorb the new empirical data accumulating with the early modern voyages of discovery.³ The defenders of Humanism, by contrast, have continued to challenge this Whiggish narrative of scientific progress. Renaissance natural philosophy never formed a “single grid” that rigidly imposed a uniform order on all new information, they objected, but presented the curious with an eclectic amalgam of Aristotelian, Plinian, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, and Arabic textual traditions that was, in many ways, “perfectly suited” to handle the early modern explosion of empirical knowledge without cataclysmic cognitive dissonance.⁴ No longer taking for granted the inherent inadequacy of Renaissance learning in the face of new experience, recent cultural historians of science have explained the transformations in early modern knowledge mainly in terms of changing social, political, and economic infrastructures during the early modern period.⁵ But while the Whiggish narratives of scientific progress had oversimplified the transformative impact of the early modern discoveries upon Europe’s consciousness, the recent cultural and social histories of early modern science have often been too limited in their geographic scope, accounting for changes in scientific epistemologies and infrastructures predominantly in a domestic or national context. As a result, the question of what the historian John H. Elliott once called the “uncertain impact” of the New World upon the Old has largely been left in abeyance.⁶

Prospero’s incantations and renunciations of his Renaissance magic as he moves to and fro his New World island reinforce the urgency of this question; but they also remind us that the early modern changes in Western knowledge cannot be understood in terms of a one-directional “impact” of the New World upon the history of the Old, let alone upon particular national histories; rather, they suggest that modernity is the product of the complex and inextricable *connectedness* of various places and histories, of the way in which these places *acted upon each other*. On the one hand, in its trans-oceanic movements between Old World settings and New World subtexts,⁷ *The Tempest* reaffirms recent trends in both early American and early modern European studies to abandon proto-nationalist historical narratives and to see the cultural developments on either side of the ocean within the context of transatlantic imperial systems.⁸ On the other hand, the Mediterranean setting of this Anglo American play in the Habsburg cultural sphere of influence urges us to adopt not only an imperial and trans-atlantic but also a hemispheric and trans-national perspective on the

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early modern world.⁹ It reminds us that, from the point of view of the early seventeenth century, the question of the “impact” of the New World upon the Old was primarily a “Spanish” question, some minor English forays notwithstanding. It is for this reason that *The Tempest* has long been regarded not only as Shakespeare’s “American play” by Anglo American critics but also as Shakespeare’s “Latin American play” by Latin American critics who saw there a recognition of Spanish America’s important role in the making of the very culture of modernity by which it has subsequently been marginalized.¹⁰

This book explores how various places and histories are connected and act upon each other in new cultural formations. Specifically, it places the transformations in Western knowledge occurring during the early modern period in the geo-political context of European settler colonialism in Spanish and British America from 1500 to 1800. As early as the legal battles between the Spanish crown on the one hand and Columbus and his heirs on the other over the “Rights of Discovery,” European settler colonialism in the New World had raised unprecedented questions about the political constitution of modern overseas empires that were never entirely resolved until their final breakup during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Whereas the first conquests and colonizations of the New World had largely depended on private initiative, with the European monarchies ready to grant individuals quasi-feudal contractual relationships as incentives, the monarchies, in a “second conquest,” subsequently attempted to centralize the political administration over the newly conquered territories in order to channel the economic profits to be reaped from the exploitation of the New World in ways most profitable to the imperial metropole.¹¹ But the attempts at political and economic centralization frequently met with the resistance of the colonial Creole elites, who jealously guarded their neo-feudal dominions that had arisen in the New World simultaneously and co-dependently with the centralizing states of Europe as the products of transatlantic mercantilist economies.¹²

Of paramount importance in this geo-political conflict over imperial centralization was the question of how knowledge could be centrally produced and controlled in the centrifugal cultural dynamics of outwardly expanding geo-political systems. It is one of the arguments of this book that the transformations in the organization of early modern knowledge must in part be understood as a response to the distinct geo-political questions raised by European settler colonialism in the Americas. The European encounters with the New World had unleashed an unprecedented inflation in the value of empirical forms of knowledge, as explorers such as Américo

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Vespucci returned with “news” that held the claim that with “this voyage of mine” the ancient authorities stand “confuted,” thus proving that “practice is of greater worth than theory.”¹³ This inflation of empirical knowledge, accelerated by mechanical reproduction through print, exerted formidable stress upon what Stephen Shapin has called the traditional “trusting systems” of the Old World. New ways of trusting had to be found that would uphold the existing social orders. One particularly “modern” attribute of these newly emerging trusting systems was, Shapin observes, their inscription in social space: “Those who cannot directly witness a phenomenon must either reject its existence or take it on trust from those who have, or from testimony still more indirect.”¹⁴ This book investigates how these early modern “trusting systems” were ordered not only in social space in Europe but also in geographic space in early modern settler empires. In particular, it understands the trans-atlantic networks of relations engaged in the making of the early modern scientific paradigm of “natural history” (“*historia natural*”) in terms of territorialized economies of knowledge production, “empires of truth” that were structured by a geo-political order that might be characterized as forms of “epistemic mercantilism.” The poetics of this mercantilist production of knowledge demanded a division of intellectual labor between imperial peripheries and centers, the effacement of colonial subjects, and the transparency of colonial texts as the providers of raw “facts.” In the early modern scientific paradigm of natural history, the basic theorem postulating the environmental determination of all living forms generally, and of human faculties in scientific debates over “creolization” particularly, hereby rationalized its own modes of production in terms of geographic hierarchies. In theory, these imperial economies of knowledge production thus resembled the mercantilist economies of material production, based as they were on a regulated and protected balance of exchange in the eastward flow of raw materials – wood, sugar, gold, silver, furs, cotton, and tobacco – and the westward flow of refined consumer products and manufactured goods. In practice, however, these imperial epistemic economies, like their material counterparts, existed but as logocentric utopias that engendered their own modes of geo-political resistance and were frequently undermined by colonial subjects.

We are reminded of the geo-political dimension in the history of Western knowledge by the more recent epistemological crisis in the Human Sciences and Humanities precipitated largely by the de-colonization of the so-called “Third World” during the second half of the twentieth century, when ex- and post-colonial “friends” turned theorists in order to expose the imperialist politics of modern Western scientific and literary discourses,

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particularly that of modern anthropology.¹⁵ At a time when trans-national migration and de-colonization, multinational capitalism and neocolonialism are eroding the ethnic, demographic, political, economic, and epistemic bases of the modern nation states,¹⁶ it is an appropriate moment also for a comparative reflection upon the geopolitics of scientific and literary discourses in the early modern period, which brought about the forms of knowledge now in crisis. While this book is in part inspired by the recent post-colonial critique of modern anthropology, it also insists on the important historical *differences* between early modern European settler empires in the Americas and nineteenth- and twentieth-century empires in Africa and Asia. As Anthony Pagden has reminded us, in many respects the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European empires, from which the recent “post-colonial” critique has emerged, were antithetical to the earlier European empires in the Americas:

[The] real intellectual significance for Europeans of their several experiences in America was that these had demonstrated what successful empires should *not* attempt to be. By 1800 most of enlightened Europe had been persuaded that large-scale overseas settlement of the kind pursued, in their different ways, by Spain, Britain and France in the Americas could ultimately be only destructive to the metropolis itself. They had shown that every immigrant community, no matter what its cultural origins or the degree of self-rule it is able to exercise, will one day come to demand economic self-sufficiency and political autonomy.¹⁷

In the geo-political constellations of the European settler empires in America before the nineteenth century, the Creole descendants of the European conquerors often occupied an “ambiguous” social and legal space, neither colonized nor colonizers but rather *colonials*, who often (though not always) stood apart from the geo-political interests of the imperial metropolis and from what post-colonial criticism has come to conceptualize as the colonized “subaltern” – the Native Americans and Africans whose land or labor was being exploited in the imperial economies.¹⁸

The twentieth-century Caribbean writer and critic Aimé Césaire has recognized this triangular geo-political constellation of early modern settler colonialism in the Americas in his own reading of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, entitled *Une tempête; d'après “La tempête” de Shakespeare. Adaptation pour un théâtre nègre* (1967). There, Césaire reads Prospero as a new type of social being as well as a new type of knower who had emerged in the Americas during the sixteenth century but remained utterly alien to European social theory. In the age of centralizing monarchies, the American conqueror re-incarnated the power of the old European aristocracy in his

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colonial neo-feudal dominion in the New World; but his power was based on the exploitation of un-free labor and natural resources at the periphery of globalizing mercantilist systems rather than on inalienable land and local estate economies. Moreover, he was a new type of knower who had access to the persuasive power of empirical forms of knowledge in a new world of experience without being guaranteed to share the metropolitan geo-political interests of the European monarchies. In Césaire's *Une tempête*, Prospero's magic therefore stands somewhere between Caliban's "black magic," incarnate in the Yoruba trickster-god of truth and deception Eshu-Elegbara, and the scientific rationalism of the early modern imperial state, represented by the Inquisition.¹⁹ His power is vested in the control he exerts over the New World's material and epistemological resources, upon which the mercantilist arrangement between nobility and bourgeoisie had come to depend. "I WANT them to eat," he exclaims after Ariel has made the tantalizing banquet vanish before the eyes of the royal court:

ARIEL: That's despotism. A while ago you made me snatch it away just when they were about to gobble it up, and now that they don't want it you are ready to force-feed them.

PROSPERO: Enough hairsplitting! My mood has changed! They wrong me by not eating. They must be made to eat out of my hand like chicks. That is a sign of submission I insist they give me.

ARIEL: It's evil to play with their hunger as you do with their anxieties and their hopes.

PROSPERO: That is how power is measured. I am Power.

The profits to be reaped from the economic exploitation of the New World's natural resources depend on Prospero's collaboration in the mercantilist arrangement; in turn, it is his proximity to these resources that empowers his struggle against the imperial state in its efforts to assert its territorial claim over the New World island first discovered and conquered by Prospero's magic. Yet, for precisely that reason, his power is suspect and must be policed by the imperial metropolis.

[W]hen they learned that through my studies and experiments I had managed to discover the exact location of these lands many had sought for centuries, and that I was making preparations to set forth to take possession of them, they hatched a scheme to steal my as-yet-unborn empire from me. They suborned my people, they stole my charts and documents and, to get rid of me, they denounced me to the Inquisition as a magician and sorcerer.²⁰

As Césaire is aware, the control and ownership of knowledge was of utmost importance in the geo-political conflict between the Creole elites and the

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imperial administrators in early modern transoceanic settler empires. This book explores the ways in which the imperial states attempted to secure Prospero's "charts and documents" as well as the ways in which he resisted the theft of his knowledge.

TOWARD A CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF COLONIAL
AMERICAN LITERATURES

In exploring the consequences of European settler colonialism in the Americas for the making of early modern Western knowledge, this book seeks to make an intervention in the historiography not primarily of science but rather of "Literature," particularly of "early American Literature." A field that has long inhabited a marginal place in the modern Humanistic disciplines (where it was invented as a handmaiden to American national literary histories),²¹ early American literature in English has only recently been re-theorized broadly from an "Atlantic" perspective, hereby following suit with currents in the social, political, and economic historiography of the early Americas.²² William Spengeman has hereby been most vocal in re-defining "early American literature" broadly as a "New World of Words," as all writing that attempts to "make room in the language for the New World [and has] helped to create the stylistic circumstances in which that writing is now received." As defined by Spengeman, early American literature would henceforth include also the "literarily important" English writings of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment such as Thomas More's *Utopia*, William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* – in short, all those texts that "discover to modern readers the origins of their modernity."²³ This book adopts the basic premise underlying much of the recent revisionary literary historiography undertaken by Spengeman and others – that early American literature cannot be understood in isolation from early modern European literature and from the larger "Atlantic" context from which both emerged; but it also departs particularly from Spengeman's approach in some of its major premises. First, it proposes not only a transatlantic but also a comparative, hemispheric and trans-national perspective by juxtaposing texts from various places of the colonial Americas, such as New Spain, Virginia, Chile, New England, Peru, and New York.²⁴ For all of Spengeman's (well-founded) critique of the anachronism of proto-nationalist paradigms in early American literary studies, his own New Critical theorization of the field in terms of (mono)linguistic "competence" (i.e. English) is equally problematic for an understanding of the early modern world, which was

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still pervasively polyglot.²⁵ The discovery and conquest of America, in particular, was a thoroughly trans- (or, more accurately, “pre-”) national and trans-linguistic process, often involving Italian explorers who seemed remarkably unconcerned about their tenuous command of Spanish and, even more remarkably, about the inadequacy of Latin as a linguistic base for communicating with Native Americans;²⁶ “second-son” conquerors from the petty nobility of Castile whose culture and language had been infused with Arabic influences by centuries of co-existence in southern Spain;²⁷ multiple African and Native American cultures and languages that participated in these historical processes and the making of their literary record;²⁸ German financiers and printers, many of them – like the Crombergs – living in Spain;²⁹ courtly aristocrats and dynasts, such as the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who allegedly once claimed that “I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse”;³⁰ English pirates, such as Sir Francis Drake, who was described by a contemporary Spaniard as being “very Spanish in his ways and well acquainted with Castile and its affairs”;³¹ and poets such as Sir Philip Sidney, who was a cousin not only of the Spanish poets Diego Hurtado de Mendoza and Garcilaso de la Vega but also of the Peruvian mestizo historian Garcilaso de la Vega, el Inca. The early modern literary world was, as Roland Greene has put it, a “transatlantic family.”³²

If this book therefore proposes to take not only an east–west but also a north–south perspective on “early American literature,” its second premise is that *history mattered* in this Atlantic world and that the *differences* in literary and generic evolutions in various places must be understood in terms of their distinct socio-historical developments. If I here place primary emphasis on the *colonial* literatures in the Spanish and British empires, it is due to my sense that our appreciation of the distinct poetics of colonial texts has hitherto benefited little from the recent expansion of the field of early American literature to include also the “literarily important” European writings of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment – an expansion which has left Euro-centric epistemological assumptions about literary value unchallenged. Rather than reiterating the conventional New Critical lamentations about the aesthetic “lacks” and “lags” of colonial American writing vis-à-vis European literary history,³³ this book aims to historicize the “uneven” evolution of literary forms in order to take seriously the challenge that colonial forms of prose – “accounts,” “relations,” “reports,” “true histories,” “notes,” “guides,” and “letters” – present to modern Western categories of knowledge, such as “Literature.” As Raymond Williams has reminded us, in early modern times, “literature” still corresponded mainly

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to “the modern meanings of literacy”; it meant both “an ability to read and a condition of being well-read.” If “Literature” (with a capital “L”) has in modern times come to privilege the discursive and generic evolutions of Europe – what Williams calls the “modern complex of *literature, art, aesthetic, creative, and imaginative*” – it is due to issues not of linguistic competence but rather of “social and cultural history.”³⁴ In adopting such a broader understanding of “literature,” this book focuses on three central motifs recurring in early modern prose narratives about the Americas – shipwreck, captivity, and travel. Following Fredric Jameson, it approaches these narratives as “socially symbolic acts” within the specific historical context of imperial politics and suggests that these recurring tropes are the “ideologemes” of early modern imperialism that not only “narrate” real or imagined events but also “narrativize” transforming ideologies by proposing “imagined resolutions to . . . social contradiction[s].” Jameson’s multi-layered approach to textual analysis is particularly useful for my purposes here, for his call to “Always historicize!” moves significantly beyond the conventional Marxist practice of reading texts as representations of non-discursive infrastructures; instead, Jameson presses for an understanding of the *forms* of representation in terms of political history, social context, and the modes of its own production; in short, for an “ideology of form” by which “symbolic messages [are] transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign-systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production.”³⁵ The early American accounts of shipwreck, captivity, and travel, I argue, narrativize the new forms of knowledge production in an age when the aristocratic model of “conquest” was being displaced not only as a political foundation – for regulating the relationship between the monarch and his subjects – but also as a way of knowing and representing the world in the globalizing economies of transoceanic empires.

Finally, while recent New Historicist scholarship has alerted us to the socio-political underpinnings of early modern European literary genres,³⁶ this book inquires into the geo-political dimensions of the evolution of early modern prose forms from the point of view of the colonial Americas. For example, while some New Historicist critics have called our attention to the crucial role that Renaissance Humanism, translation, and metaphor played as “colonial discourse” in the European discovery and conquest of America,³⁷ this book asks why colonial American writers, like Prospero in the last scene of Shakespeare’s last play, frequently renounced Humanist rhetoric and wrote – as the eminent Cuban writer José Lezama Lima observed in his seminal essay *La expresión americana* (1959) – “in the prose of a primitive who receives the dictate of the landscape.”³⁸ While other

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critics have made arguments for the “American” or “colonial” origins of the European novel,³⁹ this book asks why the novel remained conspicuously absent as a genre from colonial American literary production at a time when Europeans wrote a *Utopia*, a *New Atlantis*, a *Don Quixote*, or a *Robinson Crusoe*.

In exploring the cultural geography of early modern literary developments, this book must complicate some of the epistemological assumptions of modern historicism. As Hayden White has explained, Western historical discourse since the nineteenth century has invariably been ordered by what he calls an “archetypal plot of discursive formations,” which renders familiar new domains of experience. Building on Kenneth Burke’s taxonomy of the four “master tropes” of human cognition and rhetoric – metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony – White argues that this archetypal plot in modern historical discourse has ordered these four master tropes in a chronological dialectic:

[The] narrative “I” of the discourse moves from an original metaphorical characterization of a domain of experience, through metonymic deconstructions of its elements, to synecdochic representations of the relations between its superficial attributes and its presumed essence, to, finally, a representation of whatever contrasts or oppositions can legitimately be discerned in the totalities identified in the third phase of discursive representation.⁴⁰

Metaphor, as Burke had defined it, brings out the similarities between dissimilar things, the “thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this.” The operative code of metonymy, by contrast, is “to convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible.” Synecdoche operates in the opposite direction, apprehending the concrete part as “representative” of the abstract invisible principle. Finally, “irony” emerges when “all the sub-certainties [are] considered as neither true nor false, but contributory.”⁴¹

From this point of view, the history of early modern prose genres may be seen in terms of White’s tropological plot as the apprehension of the New World in the languages of the Old. For example, in his “dialectical theory” of the (English) novel in Europe, Michael McKeon has argued that the origin of the novel during the eighteenth century was only the final product of a long process of ideological, epistemic, and generic destabilizations and transformations beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His thesis can be schematically summarized as a three-pronged dialectical argument: the “novel” emerged (in England) at the beginning of the eighteenth century in the context of an epistemological “extreme skepticism” antithetical to the earlier “naïve empiricism” that had produced the genre of the