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REVIEW ESSAY

The "Hemispheric Turn" in Colonial
American Studies

*The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures:
Empire, Travel, Modernity.*

RALPH BAUER.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

"In Comparable Americas: Colonial Studies after the Hemispheric Turn."

University of Chicago/Newberry Library.

April 2004.

"Beyond Colonial Studies: An Inter-American Encounter."

Brown University/John Carter Brown Library.

November 2004.

"Technologies of Memory: The Atlantic Axis in Early Modernity."

University of Michigan/Atlantic Studies Initiative.

March 2004.

"Invisible Subjects? Slave Portraiture in the Circum-Atlantic World
(1660-1890)."

Dartmouth University/Center for Transcultural Visual Studies.

Fall 2004.

In Herman Melville's novella of 1855, *Benito Cereno*, an allegory of some of the recent changes in our field seems to call for our attention. These changes are exemplified by Ralph Bauer's excellent new book, *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures: Empire, Travel, Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) and by a number of recent large and small comparative conferences at the University of Chicago, Brown University, Dartmouth University, and the University of Michigan. You will recall that at the beginning of Melville's narrative, Captain Amasa Delano has in the year

1799 left the oft-plied sureties of his New England waters to find himself at anchor in the Bay of Santa Maria off the southern Chilean coast, facing a bedraggled Spanish slaving ship. Delano, a typical Protestant Anglophone reader of his day, knows the Gothic genre well and has read John Ledyard's travel journals describing sub-Saharan Africa. In other words, he has been conditioned by his reading and his parochial upbringing to see Catholics as machinating direful inquisitors and to see Africans as docile children of Nature. What ensues, after days of Delano's excruciating misrecognition of the recent occurrence of a slave insurrection aboard the ship, is his abrupt experience of the violence of the Atlantic world. Though Delano only recognizes the violence of the insurrection without considering the precipitating violence of the slave trade, and so merely replaces his image of the docile slave with that of the diabolic African, Melville urged his *Putnam's* readers—through the indirection of irony—to perceive the Atlantic world as a pervasively violent place and to perceive the cause of this violence to be the self-interest common to all people rather than the malevolence of one nation or race. Inasmuch as this story is ultimately about a movement in the *reader* from parochial isolation to a multi-perspectival awareness of a number of Atlantic subject-positions through the acquisition of the subtle skills of comparative and critical reading, it offers an allegory for the growth of interpretation in colonial American studies over the last generation.

Moving from scholarship that studied pockets of colonial culture in isolation or as anticipations of the inevitable “character” of the United States, literary scholars over the last 20 years have come to see colonial Anglophone culture as part of the transatlantic British world; scholars have come to study the spaces of conflict and creolization wherein English, indigenous, and African peoples encountered one another; and scholars have geographically reached beyond New England and Virginia to study British culture in the middle Atlantic and the Caribbean. In Ibero-American scholarship, the same move occurred, albeit earlier, “from nationalist particularism to transatlantic cosmopolitanism” (to quote Ralph Bauer, *EAL* 38:2, 285). Most recently, individual scholars have begun to compare the various European colonial cultures in the New World, or scholars have joined together at conferences to perform the work of comparison collectively. In our fields of colonial literary studies, Ralph Bauer's work—as author, conference organizer, and online database creator of the

Early American Digital Archive (EADA)—has been the central driving force behind this shift.

Bauer's book traces in a comparative fashion the trajectories of Spanish and British colonial prose narratives from the first generations of contact through the Revolutionary periods. Although his analysis considers a wide array of authors, it focuses in depth on the writings of eight: Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Samuel Purchas, Francisco Núñez de Pineda y Bascuñán, Mary Rowlandson, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, William Byrd II, Alonso Carrió de la Vandra, and J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur. He looks at the main prose narrative motifs that developed as Spain and England stretched their nations west: shipwreck, captivity, and travel. Bauer contends that central to both the development of prose and the rise and fall of western empires from 1542 to 1800 were contests about knowledge. Bauer's main historical premise is that in both Spain under the Habsburgs and Great Britain under James I and Charles II, there was, coupled with national consolidation at home, a tighter centralization of their New World empires. The older feudal model of the colonies, in which aristocrats were given lands to manage and profit from, gave way to mercantilist empires of "peace." Along with the political and economic tendency to centralize came philosophies of knowledge that posited the hierarchy between the colonial observation of facts or "effects" (on the bottom) and the metropolitan deduction of "causes" (on the top). With such centralization of political and epistemic power came colonial resistance in both Spanish and British America. When creoles told their stories, then, they were simultaneously, and often surreptitiously, making claims for their control over knowledge, or about the superiority of the kind of knowledge one could have on the frontier of empire. Their stories are thus self-consciously about the deployment of language as a claim for colonial authority. Specifically, Bauer argues, imperially controlled "tales of shipwreck narrativize the demise of the aristocratic ideal of "conquest" . . . thereby announcing a "new" science in which the colonial subject is effaced"(27). Writers and editors who were either never away from the metropole or who, having returned from America, were trying to curry favor in metropolitan circles, wrote about the wreckage of colonization. They wrote into "fact" the demise of the colonizer as epic hero and the arrival of the colonial as mere recorder of contingent "effects." Colonially issued captivity narratives react to this mercantile epistemic economy "as they comply with, exploit, parody, and

transgress against” such a model “in order to advance an emerging Creole patriotism.” These authors stress the power of eyewitnessing “to authorize political arguments against imperial centralization” (28). Further, Spanish creole writers of pirate captivity narratives “allegorize the theft of colonial knowledge” (28). Anglo travel writers ironized the authority of Newtonian rationalizations of distant space by positing the worth of settlers’ empirical forms of knowledge.

The large aims of Bauer’s book are manifold. He wants to show that modernity is the product of the way in which various places—on the East-West axis of imperial center and colony but also the North-South axis of the Americas—“acted upon each other”(2). He wants to make cultural geography critical to literary history. He aims to define a “distinct poetics of colonial texts” that goes beyond Eurocentric or post-Romantic “assumptions about literary value” (8). The nature and the complex multidirectional tugs of this poetics will be more evident, Bauer contends, if his study includes *both* colonial cultures. Beyond this contention that a North-South scope is more probative of a pan-American colonial poetics, Bauer defends his comparative approach first by showing in his early chapters how influential sixteenth-century Spanish colonization was on the Renaissance British counter-rhetoric of empire. Second, by including Spanish America in this account of Atlantic modernization, he wants to show “Spanish America’s important role in the making of the very culture of modernity by which it has subsequently been marginalized”(3)—in this objective, Bauer shares much with Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and his *How to Write a History of the New World* (Stanford, 2001). Third, he argues that “only from such a wider comparative perspective will we be able to decide what is particularly ‘Spanish-American’ or ‘British-American’ about the colonial cultures that formed in the New World” (*EAL* 38:2, 296).

Does Bauer achieve what he sets out to achieve? I take Bauer’s comparative method to be one of the major contributions of his book: he simultaneously demonstrates *that* contests over epistemic authority structured the prose in both colonial spheres and imperial centers and shows *how* this structuring differed among the various Spanish and British writers. His claims are more substantial for covering more geographic ground. His method allows him to tell the most integrated story, however, in the earlier chapters when he can show conscious English reception of and reaction to Spanish imperial accounts. In chapters 4 through 7, Bauer brings into

comparison writers who would not have been influenced by each other. Although he does demonstrate similar forms of colonial epistemic resistance in both Spanish and British creole writers, he has to make these writers meaningful to each other through his own interpretive work. As a result, his claims about how various places across imperial borders in the Americas "*acted upon each other*" become somewhat tenuous here.

Bauer assumes not only that the North-South axis mattered but that, more broadly, "*history mattered* in this Atlantic world [so] that the differences in literary and generic evolutions in various places must be understood in terms of their distinct socio-historical developments." Although this is not a methodological innovation — particularly in a field so long historicist in its orientation, Bauer lives up to this claim splendidly. In each chapter, before he arrives at a close reading of the central text under question, he provides ample information about the author's specific and evolving political situation and about his or her relationship to print culture and editorial apparatuses, to economic resources, to court circles, to scientific and religious communities, and to local struggles against imperial authority or against native peoples. Because Bauer's scholarship is equally influenced by historians and by literary historians, critics, and theorists, he sets up each of his readings by arraying questions of literary development with questions of both local and transatlantic historical shifts. Not only does this make for convincing "cases," but it would make Bauer's book excellent reading material for graduate seminars where one is trying to make students simultaneously familiar with primary texts and complex scholarly discussions. Finally, what is most intellectually insightful in *Cultural Geography* is what Bauer has to say about genre. Working off of Frederick Jameson's theory in *Political Unconscious* that generic formations narrate into "reality" emergent ideologies, Bauer not only gives us a way to recognize the narrative components of a variety of colonial genres but shows us how they worked in their own period as "socially symbolic act[s]."

My criticisms are few. First, Bauer defines the epistemic contest over who has the authority to determine the "truth" about the New World in a strictly polarized fashion: once centralization of power begins to occur in both Spain and England, those at the center claim the power to ultimately determine truth while those colonials at the periphery commence to resist and ironize such discrediting of their own experiential authority. Bauer's template for such a model of polarization is Francis Bacon's early seventeenth-

century division of scientific labor into “miners” (digging for effects) and “smiths” (refining rough knowledge into a comprehension of causation). I believe this is too reductive a reading of Baconian theory and of the cultures of natural history more generally. Both Bacon and Thomas Sprat (the major apologist of The Royal Society of London) wrote of the necessity for all theories of causation to cyclically and perpetually expose themselves to new waves of observation, making causative theory always a mere draft. More important, the metropolitan men who conducted the epistolary networks of natural history argued constantly for the critical value of colonial observation, collection, and prose description to the furtherance of the New Science. Because collectors at the center needed skilled collectors in the colonial spheres where a previously “hidden” Nature was most likely to expand the frontiers of knowledge, they courted colonials by making the networks of knowledge lateral in power rather than hierarchical. Moreover, there were Indian and enslaved African collectors who were significant players in Atlantic science; how colonials gained power by brokering the knowledge of these groups is another key feature of the cultural geography of knowledge production. To be fair, Bauer intended to write a literary history of the colonial Americas, not a broad cultural history of science, but it is compelling to think how a more complex understanding of how these networks functioned would have altered Bauer’s description of the colonial poetics of resistance. A final and minor criticism is that the book would have really benefited from a conclusion. Because Bauer surveyed 300 years of literature in multiple American colonial settings, because he aimed to define a comprehensive poetics, and because his own prose is dense with information and critical interventions—because it is such an ambitious book—with a conclusion Bauer could have better disseminated his definition of this poetics. Perhaps this non-ending resembles the filmic convention of not tying up the central conflict of the story and thus anticipating a sequel; if so, we should all eagerly await more major contributions from Ralph Bauer.

Not only does Bauer’s scholarship perform the work of comparison but his indefatigable efforts as a conference organizer—in collaboration with other colonial Americanists—have asked all of us to think more comparatively in our own reading, writing, and teaching. After the first Ibero- and Anglo-American Summit in Tuscon, Arizona in May 2002 (organized by Bauer, Rolena Adorno, Raquel Chang-Rodriguez, Michael Clark, and

David Shields, reviewed in *EAL* 38.1 [2003], and historicized by Bauer in *EAL* 38.2 [2003]), a number of other comparative conferences have followed. Eric Slauter and Lisa Voigt hosted a two-day conference in April 2004 at the University of Chicago/ Newberry Library titled "In Comparable Americas: Colonial Studies after the Hemispheric Turn." A mixture of literary scholars and historians, specializing in French-, British-, Spanish, Dutch-, and Native American cultures, not only performed the "hemispheric turn" but reflected upon its challenges. Chapter-length papers were circulated in advance; commentators crossed field boundaries to respond to panelists' work. Scholars addressed many topics: formulations and histories of "the West" that have excluded and continue to exclude Latin America, the dynamics of the pedagogical work of comparison in anthologies and classroom settings, the ways in which colonial archives can be approached differently when one is looking for border and culture crossings rather than proto-national narratives, and the need to not obscure the significance of native cultures in the rush to talk about Euro-American cultures comprehensively. This conference was particularly successful because its organizers limited its size (everyone heard everyone else's paper), posted papers in advance, and urged participants to reflect on the costs and benefits of the "hemispheric turn." The collected essays from this conference are now under submission at a major press.

In November 2004 at Brown University and the John Carter Brown Library, Ralph Bauer and David Boruchoff, along with local directors Nancy Armstrong and Norman Fiering, organized a second large-scale conference entitled "Beyond Colonial Studies: An Inter-American Encounter." The conference was a mixture of traditional sessions with 20-minute papers, informal "workshops" around shared primary texts and scholarly works-in-progress, a day of plenary sessions, and two keynote addresses by David Shields and Rolena Adorno. The work presented at this conference seems indicative of the various directions the "hemispheric turn" is taking. Scholars compared an Ibero-American author with an Anglo-American one (Sor Juana with Roger Williams, and Benjamin Franklin with Philip Mazzei); looked at international border zones (Florida and the Caribbean) to analyze cultural exchanges and manipulations; analyzed oral and material cultures that reflected inter-cultural fluidity; analyzed intertextuality across imperial borders; treated one topic comparatively across empires (missionary work); looked at Euro-American minorities in places domi-

nated by other European powers (French in Brazil, Scottish in Central America); looked at the de-Hispanicization of “America” in nineteenth-century scholarly and popular texts; and finally, examined how individual authors (Washington Irving) mixed the local and the cosmopolitan in their construction of America. The mixture of formats was a great success, allowing for meaningful smaller groups to work on common interests but also for the entire assembly collectively to witness and query senior scholars performing new kinds of hemispheric thinking.

I have attended two other, smaller, “theme” conferences that have brought together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to think about experience and representation in the early Americas. The Atlantic Studies Initiative at the University of Michigan, led by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, put on a small conference in March 2003 called “Technologies of Memory: the Atlantic Axis in Early Modernity,” which drew together scholars of the early modern Atlantic world — European, Euro-American, and African — to consider how representational modes and technologies “made” the Atlantic of our memories. In the fall of 2004, Dartmouth University’s Center for Transcultural Visual Studies and organizers Angela Rosenthal and Agnes Lugo-Ortiz hosted a small two-day conference, “Invisible Subjects? Slave Portraiture in the Circum-Atlantic World (1660–1890),” bringing together historians of French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and British art involving New World slavery. This conference was extremely successful because the theme was very specific, making the comparative model both necessary and not overwhelming or diluting.

If the United States in the nineteenth century witnessed a de-Hispanicization of the origin stories of the Americas — making Protestant liberalism prophetically speak out of the Spanish chronicles of central America — and a territorial de-Hispanicization of the Southwest with the War of 1848, the United States in 2005 is witnessing a re-Hispanicization of the southern border zones and a significant Hispanicization of the electorate. Connected to this political process, and to the wider virtualization of national spaces brought about in post-modernity, we in colonial American studies are attempting to dismantle field boundaries based upon older geopolitical divides. Inasmuch as this “hemispheric turn” opens up new texts, new scholarly paradigms, and new regions for all of us scholars to consider, it makes us grow and stretch in healthy ways. I continue, however, to find the work that shows how hemisphericity was experienced by the early mod-

erns themselves the most compelling. More than a comparative method that may sharpen our sense of the similarities and differences between Euro-American colonial cultures, I hope we put more concerted energies into exploring the many geographic border zones where intercolonial exchanges occurred. Finally, I hope we continually reintegrate this hemispheric awareness back into a circum-Atlantic scope. In this way we will not only perceive North-South and colony-metropole axes of influence but also understand the critical importance of Africa and diasporic Africans in the making of modernity.

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