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*Aguirre, Robert D.
Informal Empire:
Mexico and Central America in Victorian Culture.
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In *Informal Empire: Mexico and Central America in Victorian Culture* (2005), Robert D. Aguirre examines the political and economic methods and goals of British “informal empire” in the region that currently constitutes the states of southern Mexico and the countries of Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras. The author presents the region as a contested object of imperial domination, an area in dispute for imperial control between two international superpowers, Great Britain and the United States, where the United States is rapidly gaining ground and solidifying its control, a fact evidenced by the Spanish American War in 1898. This study focuses upon the ways in which Britain, increasingly unable to sustain physical imperial domination in the face of international competition, attempts through the construction of social ideology to incorporate Central America as part of its international empire. Aguirre examines how the British government seeks to extend its imperial domination through the control of cultural capital and the institution of ideology that establishes British cultural and racial superiority over the Latin American Other.

Aguirre's study examines five interrelated moments in British history spanning from 1821 to 1898 that evidence first the endeavors at the configuration of, and later the recognition of the impossibility of informal British political and economic control in southern Mexico and Central America. One of the primary strengths of Aguirre's study is that he is able to expose the precarious nature of the formulation of informal empire while examining several different cultural manifestations. The author considers museum collections, visual arts, official governmental dispatches, freak shows, and literature of the Victorian Age to display the ways in which Latin American otherness came to be codified and commoditized so as to later be presented to mass audiences. In each one of these varied representations, Aguirre's study strives to demonstrate how the Latin American Other is leveled or flattened out, reduced to his/her most basic characteristics so as to demonstrate that he/she is essentially inferior both culturally and racially to his/her British counterpart. This portrayal of the Latin American subject attempts to substantiate the correctness of a British presence in the region to civilize and make productive that physical space that constitutes Central America.

As may be gleaned from the terminology used thus far, Edward Said's Orientalism is fundamental in Aguirre's theoretical approach in this study. However, the author seeks to move beyond Said's work noting that "Orientalism, whose rigid binaries (us/them; West/East) and strict Foucauldian model of discourse allow for very little resistance on the part of the Orient, flattening out the always conflictual, contingent, heterogeneous, and partial quality of imperial practices" (XXV). Instead, Aguirre follows the studies of Nicholas Thomas and Mary Louise Pratt, analyzing in each chapter of his study the ways in which imperial power was contested by the Other, thus suggesting a Laclauian model of hegemonic processes. However, while interested in presenting the case of resistance, the author is careful not to present a romanticized vision of the indigenous subject noting that:

The archives that shape my inquiry, whether British or Spanish, are not transparent or all-inclusive; they are ideological constructs in themselves. Here, at least, the subaltern does not speak, except through the voices of British and Spanish elites. Hence, I limit myself to suggesting the ways in which the indigenous presence that haunts these discourses constitutes a kind of colonial unconscious, an anxious, ambivalent reminder of violent or symbolic dispossession. (XIX)

This aspect of Aguirre's study is at once a strength and a limitation of his work. The author presents an extremely interesting topic of investigation, but at times the question of the subaltern appears lost in the study, a closing remark rather than an integral part of the investigation. However, as Aguirre clearly states, his aim is not to attempt to reconstruct the subaltern perspective, but rather to mark his/her ambiguous presence in the British imperial project.

The first chapter of Aguirre's study entitled "'Open for Inspection': Mexico at the Egyptian Hall in 1824" deals primarily with a 1824 exhibition of pre-Columbian artifacts collected by British entrepreneur William Bullock on a visit to Mexico in 1823. What is of interest to Aguirre in this chapter is to show that Bullock's collection not only presents foreign objects to be observed, but also proposes "ways of looking and perceiving that reinforce imperial subject positions" (22). Aguirre shows that Bullock's exhibit is an effective fusion of science and spectacle under the guise of disinterested humanitarian motivation. The author presents the ways in which Bullock purports himself as a mere collector of "curiosities," interested only in the preservation of the antiquities of Aztec culture threatened first by Spanish disregard during the Conquest of Mexico, and later by Creole incapacity to preserve such cultural treasures. However, Aguirre's analysis also shows how Bullock's exhibit displays a pejorative attitude with respect to Mexican culture as primitive and in need of modern British guidance, thus extending an invitation to British economic and industrial investment in the region.

Aguirre demonstrates how Bullock's collection evidences a Victorian aim to "dominate from a distance." Employing Arjun Appadurai's theories of "decontextualization" and "recontextualization" the author shows how through the configuration of the museum collection, a process is enacted where the objects removed from their original surroundings come to be reevaluated and assigned new cultural significances. Artifacts are not assessed aesthetically, but rather ethnographically and archeologically. As Aguirre demonstrates, such scientific criteria of evaluation consistently lead to a negative appraisal of both the past and present state of Mexican culture. Additionally, Aguirre documents how the Mexican Creole elite attempted to contest exhibitions such as that of Bullock's, enacting legislation in order to retain historical artifacts within their own national boundary. The author contends that such acts on behalf of the elite display a rejection of British imperial techniques that attempted to acquire Mexican antiquities for incorporation into the imperial catalogue.

The second chapter of Aguirre's study entitled "Buena Vista: Panoramas and the Visualization of Conquest" examines the use of landscape aesthetics and the representation of panoramas in the construction of informal empire. In this chapter the author seeks to demonstrate how the control over visual representation intends to further imperial control over distant territories. Aguirre defines the panorama as "vast 360-degree paintings displayed in specially designed, circular theaters" (36) and to analyze the massive paintings the author draws a suggestive parallel between the panorama and Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, the architectural figure analyzed by Michel Foucault. Aguirre demonstrates that in the presentation of panorama the viewer is at once incorporated into the spectacle that he/she observes while at the same time maintaining a privileged gaze upon the work itself, a view that suggests the domination of the landscape being observed.

In the examination of a panorama created by Robert Burford and exhibited by William Bullock, Aguirre notes that imperial painting seeks to represent Mexico as an orderly space so as to assure financial interest couched in the language of "mutually beneficial exchange" (44). As was the case in his museum exhibit, Bullock presents British interest in Mexico as that of fostering growth not only for Britain, but for Mexico as well – an aim clearly not held by the Spaniards who intent was only to dominate Mexico. Aguirre's focus then shifts to the United States and the historical context of the Mexican War, analyzing a novel by William Prescott, History of the Conquest of Mexico (1843), and a mobile panorama by Corydon Donnavan. The author argues that these representations seek to justify a second conquest of Mexico by basing themselves in the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. Again, Aguirre demonstrates that these cultural manifestations did not go uncontested by Mexican cultural elites and that in the criticism of such works an anti-imperialist sentiment is exhibited.

The third chapter of the book entitled "Agencies of the Letter: The British Museum, the Foreign Office, and the Ruins of Central America" investigates a highly complex web of official governmental dispatches composed between 1841 and 1855 regarding the unsuccessful attempt to acquire artifacts from present-day Guatemala and Honduras for display in the British Museum. What is of principal importance for Aguirre in this chapter is to demonstrate how writing serves to both empower and cripple imperial domination. The author examines how British interest in the acquisition of artifacts from Copán, Quiriguá, and Tikal was spurred on by knowledge attained from travel narratives, primarily from Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan (1841)

written and illustrated by John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood. Again, native disregard and ignorance serves as an important justification for the pillage of these Mayan ruins and again, the context of imperial competition serves as an important backdrop for the author's investigation.

Aguirre presents the homosocial world of Victorian British bureaucracy as enabled by the power of the official dispatch, but at the same time limited by the capacity of the dispatch to affect reality. The author also demonstrates how internal rivalry in the British political hierarchy and personal rivalries among competing explorers paralyzed attempts to consolidate imperial control in the region. It is in this chapter where Aguirre makes his most convincing comments regarding the subaltern subject. His depiction of non-communication between indigenous peoples and foreign explorers may lead the reader to consider this part of Aguirre's study in the light of the theories proposed by James C. Scott in Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (1985).

The fourth chapter of Aguirre's study entitled "Freak Show: The Aztec Children and the Ruins of Race" presents the case of Máximo and Bartola, two microcephalic children brought from El Salvador to London in 1851 to star in a freak show as the "Aztec Lilliputians." In this chapter it is the author's goal to demonstrate how the spectacle of freakery is used in order to construct and legitimize social concepts of the racial inferiority of the Other. Aguirre clearly documents how through the use of scientific discourse based in ethnographic and racial theories, the two children pass from being simply enfreaked bodies – examples of lost, ancient indigenous cultures – to being representative of the decline of the mestizo and mulatto, thus justifying a sense of Anglo racial superiority. The children prove to the Victorian scientific community that which had previously only been cited in travel narratives and as such, the condemnation of the Latin American is confirmed and imperial authority is upheld. Aguirre also examines a contemporary case of the performance art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco that seeks to recreate conditions similar to those of the Victorian freak show in order to invert the gaze of the spectator, making him/her the object of spectacle.

Aguirre's final chapter, "H. Rider Haggard and Imperial Nostalgia," deals with Haggard's novel Montezuma's Daughter (1894). Although this is the first chapter of the study entirely dedicated to the analysis of a fictional narrative, throughout the book the author clearly makes a case for the ways in which the writings that accompanied museum exhibits, panoramic paintings, and freak shows

attempted to substantiate claims of British imperial authority. Here, Aguirre illustrates how Haggard's tale of adventure and lost treasures may be read as a commentary on "Britain's lost opportunities in Latin America" (139). The author notes that Haggard's novel reflects a consciousness of loss of imperial power, making the historical past where the story told in Montezuma's Daughter is situated a place of nostalgic refuge where the British Empire could look to the future with hopes of imperial prominence.

Aguirre's successfully shows how the various cultural media examined in his study worked together to construct a particular way of looking at and appraising the otherness. Tracing the trajectory of British contact with Latin America throughout the Victorian Age, Aguirre's study convincingly illustrates the successes and failures of the British informal empire and is an interesting and very much quotable investigation.