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Review / Reseña

Graff Zivin, Erin. *Anarchaeologies: Reading as Misreading.* New York: Fordham UP, 2020.

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Erin Graff Zivin's *Anarchaeologies: Reading as Misreading* arrives at a pivotal moment for Hispanic studies and the theoretical humanities, when long-standing assumptions about literature, intellectual inquiry and their roles in modern democratic societies are no longer capable of explaining why it is that reading is a vital component of our inhabiting a world. Some scholars have characterized the present moment as a dire situation in which the historical configuration of the humanities as a space for cultivating autonomous, responsible citizens has now been fully subsumed within the monetizing rationality of what Bill Readings termed the "university of excellence," with free reflection now largely supplanted by superficial enactments of interdisciplinarity and identitarian self-affirmation. Acutely aware of the challenges facing the humanities today, Graff Zivin takes a somewhat less pessimistic view of our current disciplinary conjuncture. Her aim, in a monograph that brings Hispanic literary studies and humanistic theoretical inquiry into conversation with one another, is neither to accept the demise of theory nor to resuscitate what is dead or dying in the humanities, but to open up underexplored avenues for inquiry. *Anarchaeologies* explores what deconstruction (Derrida and, to a lesser extent, de Man) and Latin American literary

and cultural studies have to say to one another concerning politics, ethics, and reading. In our relating to one another and to others or strangers, can we pay heed both to the shared, universal language of politics and to the ethical encounter with the other in its unquantifiable, incomparable singularity? How can the practice of reading open up new ways of approaching the seeming impasse between the commonality of politics and the singularity of the ethical relation? The monographic title, *Anarchaeologies*, provides a first clue about how Graff Zivin proposes to address the vexed question of politics and ethics and their relation to one another. The goal will not be to resolve the conflicted matter of their relation to one another but to develop these questions, allowing them to linger and incite further thinking. If we take the title literally, to the letter, the goal would be not to build or restore a foundation there where uncertainty reigns. The book does not aspire to reestablish the seemingly solid ground on which these disciplines once rested, but rather seeks to expose our disciplinary thinking to a site where the foundation has begun to founder. *An-archaeologies*: an accounting of the *arkhaois*, of what is ancient or even primeval, from *arkhé* (beginning) and *arkhein* (to be first, to begin). The privative *an*-, meanwhile, refers to what is without *arhké* or that for which no first principle is to be found. An an-archaeology would entail something other than an account dedicated to the discovery of origins, of pure and undivided first beginnings. It would call for a thinking of the trace, of post-hegemony, of infrapolitics, and of *marrano* existence.

While recent debates in Hispanic studies and elsewhere in the humanities have tended to situate politics and ethics as wholly distinct realms and even as antithetically opposed to one another, Graff Zivin rejects the premise that theoretical practice must choose between them. The assumption that politics and ethics are opposed to each other not only too hastily dismisses any consideration of what they might share, but the demand to choose implies that these domains exist as stable, self-determined spheres of activity; it presupposes that each is in possession of its own distinct *arkhé*. The call for positioning and choosing thus suppresses the possibility that these two spheres might in fact depend on something external to themselves for their coherence or that they contain within themselves something irreducible to their own proper logic, something that political reason or ethical philosophy cannot account for.

The book is organized into five central parts plus an introduction and an afterword, with each main part comprising two short chapters. Eschewing methodical conceptual development, the author introduces key conceptual vocabulary in the process of critical engagements with scholars and thinkers whose interests similarly turn

on the connections between thought, politics, ethics, and Latin America. For instance, in the first part, "Anarchaeologies," the notion of literary misunderstanding, borrowed from the French political philosopher Jacques Rancière, emerges through a sympathetic but critical assessment of Timothy Clark's account of contemporary politics. For Clark, an art critic whose political sympathies are with the Left, the options available to those who reject the dogmatic association of free markets with human emancipation amount to a choice between bad and worse: between utopian, revolutionary anticapitalist politics on the one hand, and a pessimistic politics that has concluded that the foreseeable future is defined by global capitalist system in which financial speculation is now the dominant motor for accumulation on the other. For Clark, utopian politics has conclusively shown itself to be incapable of bringing about the radical transformations to which it aspired; or, if you prefer, the Left has shown itself unable to live up to the utopian aspirations it embraced over the course of the previous two centuries. Thus, the only real option today for the Left is a politics of tragic pessimism, *resigned to* but not *in the service of* global capital. Graff Zivin does not contest Clark's diagnosis of the exhaustion of utopian politics but she does take issue with the foundation on which that assessment is based, and thus we might say that she challenges the position from its very *arkhé*. The problem with tragic pessimism is its starting point, which it shares with utopian politics: both dispositions are based on a conceptualization of time as a sequence of presents; the future is thus understood as a present to come, an object that can be represented by a subject. For utopian politics, we know what we want and it is just a matter of getting from here to there through collective struggle; for tragic pessimism, meanwhile, we know what we want *and* we also have learned that it is not attainable or that its realization would lead to even more oppressive forms of power. Utopianism thinks the future as product of the will of a collective subject while tragic pessimism posits the future's horizons as already having been determined and thus, for this tragic resignation, futurity would be nothing more than a continuation of an eternal present. Not unlike the false choice between politics and ethics, utopianism and tragic pessimism work together in their mutual antagonism to suppress any thought of futurity as irreducible to calculation and will: the future as chance; as possibility of an event that punctures prevailing frameworks of intelligibility; or as naming an altogether different thinking of time, irreducible to the sequence of past present, actuality, and future present. Between utopianism and tragic pessimism there is no room for thinking the present as "haunted" by what it is not. By contrast, a thought of the future as possibility of the impossible or as irreducible heterogeneity would mark a limit for political reason

and ethical philosophy. As a limit, this thought of futurity acts like a border, shared by both and proper to neither and conditioning each domain. For one, democratic politics would be inconceivable without the accompanying thought of a political subject, the People, whose self-determination is still to come. By the same token, ethical philosophy departs from the thought of a responsibility to something—in the other or in us, in me—that exceeds all equivalence, rejecting all representations of it as like the familiar. However, such a limit also destabilizes the domain to which it gives shape, at least as far as its aspiration to constitute itself as a self-sufficient whole is concerned. The limit ruins political reason as the subject's ambition to represent to itself its self-realization; and it ruins ethical philosophy as endeavor to hear the other without doing violence to the singular voice or call that is the other's appeal—it ruins, that is, the pretension of a pure ethics of non-violent respect. Futurity conceived as something other than time as sequence of self-contained units dominated by the present: for political reason and ethical philosophy, this would be another instance of *an-arkhé*, a foundation that not only lends support but also destabilizes.

The second and third parts, entitled "The Ethical Turn" and "Violent Ethics" respectively, take as point of departure the aforementioned academic debate over whether critical practice should ally itself with the politics of social transformation or acknowledge that its proper responsibility is to the other in its alterity. This debate has assumed a prominent place in Latin American literary and cultural studies in recent decades, beginning with the reception of *testimonio* in the 1980s and 90s. Whereas John Beverley described testimonial narrative as a political vehicle used by participants in Latin American popular struggles to transmit their experiences of oppression and resistance to sympathetic audiences in other parts of the world, fostering critical awareness and solidarity, critics such as Doris Sommer have emphasized how *testimonio* presents an epistemological limit for academic knowledge production. Rather than seeking to advance Western knowledge of other cultures as a traditional ethnographer might, Sommer argues that the responsible reader's duty is to respect the right of the other to withhold their truths from Western eyes. Of course, the ethical stance advocated by Sommer can be understood as containing its own politics: it would push back against a long history of complicity between European and North American knowledge production centers and the mechanisms of imperial domination, dispossession, and extractivism. More recently, the politics-or-ethics debate has been taken up by Hispanic Studies scholars such as Bruno Bosteels, who argues that deconstruction's emphasis on finitude as ethical and ontological condition is a

consequence of the historical defeat of militant politics. For Bosteels, critical focus on finitude is not unlike Clark's tragic pessimism, unwittingly reinforcing a dogmatic rejection of any and all anti-capitalist initiatives today.

In seeking to destabilize the seemingly self-evident distinction between politics and ethics, *Anarchaeologies* posits that these two domains have always been *both* inextricably connected *and* at odds with one another: not opposed to one another but resistant to forming a single totality. The political acts as both the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of ethics and vice versa. Graff Zivin's point of departure is that this conflictive contiguity, which can neither be resolved into a harmonious relation nor broken once and for all, offers a site for thinking today: for a thinking that would aspire to something more than just reproducing what is already known or making itself complicit with the practices of power that dominate our contemporary social order. Let me illustrate as concretely as possible what this idea of a conflictive contiguity would look like by drawing on a point made by Jacques Derrida in his reading of Emmanuel Lévinas' meditation on the ethical scene of the face-to-face encounter with the Other. This illustration is central for *Anarchaeologies*, and it highlights the blindness of any belief in the equivalence of deconstruction as critical practice and ethical philosophy. For Derrida, it is only with the appearance of a third, an other of the Other, that the ethical encounter in its singularity can be registered as such. Let us note that this appearance of the third is also the advent of politics: the politics of counting, calculation, and distribution. Just as there can be no ethics prior to the appearance of this other to the Levinasian Other, the appearance of the third marks an excess for ethical praxis, the proper concern of which is not equivalence but alterity, incomparable singularity.

If deconstruction has something to add to Doris Sommer's ethical indictment against prioritizing knowledge production over respect for the unknown—or the other's alterity as such—it would be that the ethical proscription against representation needs to be understood not just as a willful decision to foreclose some determinate phenomenal content. It is not enough to envision a responsible reader who relinquishes the urge to know and allows the *testimonialista* to guard the cultural practices whose divulgence might unwittingly collaborate in the exposure of indigenous groups to imperial power. While deconstruction does not deny the real connection between knowledge and power, it would allow the thematization of "secret" to resonate as a limit that imposes itself prior to any phenomenality, prior to any distinction between what is "ours" and what "theirs"—and thus preceding and disrupting any and all

attempts to determine and constitute an understanding of *the proper* over against the representation of its other, *the improper* or *the other*.

The fourth part, "Political Thinking after Literature," looks at two works by the Argentine writer César Aira, *El congreso de literatura* (1997) and *El error* (2010), together with a manifesto published by an Argentine artistic collective known as "La internacional errorista", whose public emergence as performance artists in 2005 coincided with the intensification of the U.S.-led War on Terror. While both Aira and the "Erroristas" could be classified as belonging to the Argentine or Latin American neo-avant garde, they distance themselves from the rupturalist sensibility typically associated with avant garde movements. Rather than proclaiming a break with tradition and an end to art's participation in bourgeois hegemony, Aira and the "Erroristas" return, each in their own way, to this very archive in order to bring to light what tradition as such necessarily suppresses: an "errancy" or a "spectrality" that haunts its archives. This section begins with a discussion of politics and allegory framed by Fredric Jameson's assertion, in his 1986 article "Third-World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism," that all novels produced in the so-called underdeveloped world can be read as national allegories in which personal stories stand in for collective struggles. Jameson's thesis has generated contentious discussion in Latin American literary studies, much of it focused on contesting the overly schematic nature of the claim. With a few notable exceptions—such as Kate Jenckes' and Alberto Moreiras' readings of Borges and Brett Levinson's reading of Rigoberta Menchú—critical discussion has largely avoided any confrontation with the question of allegory as such, taking for granted that we know what we mean when we speak of it. Graff Zivin reminds us how allegory, as "extended metaphor" that tells a story through recourse to another story, in fact harbors a form of saying that poses insurmountable problems for interpretation. As Paul de Man has shown, allegory marks a limit where reference (language indicating something external to itself, such as the phenomenal world or the author's state of mind) becomes difficult or impossible to distinguish from what de Man calls *text*, or language understood as referring to language. The point is not that allegories are simply unreadable: it is that allegory names a fold wherein readability and unreadability overlap, the one passing into the other. The allegorical fold thereby at once calls for and resists reading. Allegory is the name for an elementary relation that makes a literary work both decipherable in the first place as something more than a transparent, self-identical message (literature *requires* reading as interpretation) and frustrates or ruins any attempt to have the final word concerning the work (that

irreducible residue of fiction making, or making that continues to trouble interpretation as it seeks to complete the transfer from one register to another). While my description may sound somewhat antiquated, evoking old solipsistic debates over whether or not deconstruction in fact admits the existence of something "outside of the text," that is not what Graff Zivin or the aforementioned scholars are up to. For Graff Zivin, the controversy surrounding the national allegory thesis in Latin American literary studies is eminently political in that it has to do with canon formation and with the question of who is authorized to decide over what criteria will be used to determine inclusion. The groundbreaking treatises of the 1980s and 90s that first established a critical basis for reading Latin American literature alongside post-war European intellectual traditions associated with Foucault and Derrida among others—Roberto González Echeverría's *The Voice of the Masters* (1985) and Carlos Alonso's *The Spanish American Regional Novel* (1990) are the ones mentioned by Graff Zivin, though one could also include Doris Sommer's *Foundational Fictions* (1991), a work with whose critical perspective the author appears to have more sympathy—are themselves allegories. As allegories, they perform two things at once: they generate accounts of the great works of the Latin American tradition, works worthy of being read and discussed alongside what Matthew Arnold described as "the best that has been thought and said" on the one hand, and they promote the figure of the critic—a late iteration of the *letrado*—as great arbiter of the Good. What is a stake here is not just the question of *who* can decide but more fundamentally, how the very act of *deciding* should be understood: as the domain of a sovereign subject who is supposed to know? Or as what Jacques Derrida, in *The Politics of Friendship*, enigmatically terms the "passive decision," a decision that responds not to the self-conscious "I" or the will, but to the other within me? Graff Zivin's modified use of the concept of political allegory—as something other than the representation of a subject whose emancipation will come about through its becoming conscious of its situation—seems to me to mark a limit for politics itself. Or, at the very least, it would mark a limit for politics understood since Plato and Aristotle as a domain grounded in the capacity to draw clear and stable distinctions between the proper and the improper: between logos and mere noise; between what is ours and what is not; between friend and foe.

The discussion turns from metacritical assessment of allegory to the literary and cultural works by Aira and "the Errorista manifesto." Both Aira and the "Erroristas" invite us to think the ostensibly negative, passive, or redundant motifs of debt, inheritance, transmission, and copying as vital but unstable components of

creative activity. If the critical work of canon formation has always been about securing a distinction between the proper and the improper through the figure of the self-conscious, knowing subject, Aira and the "Erroristas" offer thoughts of writing, reading, and performance as governed by a logic over which no subject could possibly have control: a logic of chance and errancy, reproduction and mutation in which the basic categories of humanistic thought (the human and the non-human, consciousness and the unconscious, the animate and the inanimate) have begun to unravel. This unravelling, together with the profound uncertainty it generates, are disconcerting but vital source of creative impulse in their work. And, of course, these elements (chance, errancy, etc.) cannot properly be said to have or participate in a logic, understood as systematic account of the interrelatedness of various parts of a whole. If *Anarchaeologies* is a name for the exploration of the impossibility of the *arkhé*, the monograph appears also to call for a new name for a kind of relationality that resists systematization. An il-logic, perhaps?

The style of argumentation in *Anarchaeologies* yields an engaging, readable discussions that are free of density and never get bogged down in overly technical vocabulary. While this intervention is timely and framed in terms of a specific conjuncture—that of the contemporary university in the context of the global capitalist system together with the conflicts and anxieties it fosters—the discussions are grounded in critical and philosophical questions whose relevance is not limited to any specific historical moment. Thus, *Anarchaeologies* promises a durable shelf life not always found in academic books that seek to define and intervene in the state of their field. On rare occasions, meanwhile, the conversational pace at which Graff Zivin moves leaves the reader wishing that more time could have been devoted to delving into complexities in the theoretical and philosophical texts with which the author is working. For instance, the presentation of the *marrano* in the introduction includes a rehearsal of Paige duBois's writing on torture in her 1991 book *Torture and Truth*. DuBois traces modern practices of torture back to a Greek philosophical understanding of truth (*aletheia*) as a "buried truth brought to light" (the words are Graff Zivin's: p.33). Torture, duBois asserts, was legitimated in Athenian society as the extraction of a hidden truth from the body of the slave, a body deemed by Aristotle to be incapable of producing its own account (*logos*) of how things stand with the world. Torture could thus be understood, at least in the Athenian context, as a violent corrective for the strange ontological status of the slave, who, as one who can understand orders (*logoi*) but is not capable of giving them, is neither simply animal nor fully human. This account of

torture as establishing a proper relation between body, violence, and truth has important ramifications for the *marrano*, a term used in early modern Spain to refer to new Christians suspected of harboring secret affiliations with their Jewish ancestral roots. If the figure of the *marrano* has always been synonymous with the supposition of a real or imagined secret, Graff Zivin is interested not in the secret's phenomenal content as envisioned by inquisitorial interrogation (i.e., is this self-proclaimed Christian in fact a secretly practicing Jew?) but with what we could call the secret's spectral residue. The spectral residue refers to the sense in which any so-called subject will have been marked by a subtraction or a secreting that cannot be named or professed; secreting is thus logically "prior to" identity and phenomenality. *Marrano* thinking, in this light, would oppose itself to all practices of power that are based on an understanding of truth as hidden entity that could be divulged or extracted through coercion. However, du Bois' account of *aletheia*, based on her reading of Martin Heidegger's writings on early Greek thought and central to her argument, proves problematic in that it ignores important distinctions traced by Heidegger, both between Greek and Roman thought (*aletheia* versus *veritas* in the 1942-43 seminar on Parmenides) and within Greek thought itself (the pre-Socratics versus Plato in the 1936-38 *Bëitrage* among other places). Unlike Roman/Latinate and modern understandings of truth, a*letheia* does not exist in an oppositional relationship to an antithesis (*veritas*/*falsum*, true/false). Already containing one of the Greek terms for "forgetting" (*lethe*), *aletheia* posed for the pre-Socratics an entirely distinct approach to truth: not as bringing to light a buried content but as primordial opening *and* withdrawal through which beings disclose themselves to the world. DuBois, then, would seem to want *aletheia* and *truth* to be joined by a single, continuous lineage of reason. In this respect, *Torture and Truth* is of the same cloth as the histories it describes. DuBois' account yields not an anarchaeology but an archaeology that would excavate the hidden bedrock shared by philosophy and material practices of power.

It would be unfair to ask of Graff Zivin that she incorporate into her book a full accounting of the many works and thinkers to which her sources make reference. Moreover, the concern I am raising here does not alter any of the fundamental issues at stake in *Anarchaeologies*, such as the matter of whether truth is to be understood as fixed and thus available for extraction or whether truth names something that cannot be fully accounted for by the phenomenal game of hiding and disclosing. Nor does it diminish what is in my view one of the most laudable contributions made by *Anarchaeologies*: that of defining the state of contemporary Hispanic and Latin American

literary and cultural studies in terms that compel us to think and talk about the relation between theory and literature, politics and ethics, while remaining cognizant of the possibility that these domains and the conceptual vocabularies they generate only acquire meaning when they come into contact with others, in proximity to a distance that at once destabilizes the familiar while also allowing truth to speak, as it always does when it speaks, strangely.