

Review / Reseña

Jáuregui, Carlos. *Espectros y conjuras. Asedios a la cuestión colonial*. Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2020. 381 pp.

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There are books that are born, as José Carlos Mariátegui pointed out in paraphrasing Nietzsche, not from the deliberate and intentional work of an author who purposefully sits down to write a book, but instead from their daily work and thoughts which, spontaneously and inadvertently, come together in a book. In a sense, Carlos Jáuregui's *Espectros y conjuras. Asedios a la cuestión colonial* (Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2020) follows Mariátegui's Nietzschean dictum by bringing together revised and improved versions of some of Jáuregui's previous projects and ideas, together with new ones previously unknown to the public, and presenting them as a coherent and cohesive unit that showcases the intellectual maturity and thoroughness that his work has achieved. Nonetheless, the fact that *Espectros y conjuras* was not preconceived as an organic book does not mean that it was a book that was born suddenly out of thin air. *Espectros y conjuras*, as will become evident to anyone who reads it, was gestating in the many years that Jáuregui spent in different archives in numerous cities in various countries throughout the world, during the thousands of hours that he labored over syntax and grammar, searching and finding just the right words to transmit the ideas that had been haunting him for years or perhaps decades.

Espectros y conjuras is not a typical academic book because it does not answer a typical academic or research question. At a time when most research agendas in the field of Latin American colonial studies are rightly concerned with understanding the diverse processes that gave rise to a wide variety of identity categories (such as gender and race) that continue to operate to this day, or are engaged in the noble task of unearthing the silenced voices of disenfranchised, displaced, or disproportionately represented populations during the colonial period, *Espectros y conjuras* appears on the scene to remind scholars of the Latin American colonial period that the *way* we read and teach colonial texts is, like it or not, an inherently political task. And so, with our readings, our writings, and our teachings, we continue to participate in the regime of terror that began then and continues to operate to this day; we can read to be critical of this “colonial legacy” or we can read to continue to justify and perpetrate it.

Indeed, in *Espectros y conjuras*, Jáuregui interpellates his fellow critics and scholars and urges them to rethink and reconsider the way in which most colonial texts have been approached. In doing so, his contribution is invaluable. By posing not one question but many, by inquiring not into the work of one author but of many, by inquiring not into one country but into an entire region, Jáuregui seeks to intervene in the very field of Latin American colonial studies itself, as a whole, seeking to shake it up, trigger urgent debates and conversations and thus, inevitably, improve it.

In *Espectros y conjuras*, Jáuregui analyzes a series of paradigmatic colonial texts of Latin American colonial cultural history that includes relations of the conquest, plays, ethnographic accounts, government plans, novels, and historiographies by authors such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Bartolomé de las Casas, Michael de Carvajal, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, José de Anchieta, Antônio Vieira, Eligio Ancona, and Oswaldo Costa, among others, through the conceptual and theoretical lenses of three main figures: Walter Benjamin, Paul Ricoeur, and Jacques Derrida.

Espectros y conjuras is divided into seven chapters, each of them a “conjuring” of a “spectral insurgency.” In the introduction, Jáuregui provides a brief explanation of the book’s subject matter and outlines his methodological approach, defining the operating theoretical concepts of his book such as “the colonial question,” “colonial specters,” and “spectral insurgencies.” For, Jáuregui colonial writing was a process of deploying epistemic and symbolic violence through which American alterity was “over-codified” and appropriated to ultimately be subjected to imperial/colonial powers. And yet, while colonial texts constitute instances of concealment of alterity, paradoxically, they also reveal the very alterity they sought to conceal in the form of specters. The

reading of colonial texts, therefore, functions as a kind of conjuring that invokes these specters and, according to Jáuregui, it is the critic's task to summon these spectral insurgencies and, in doing so, to *interrogate* the *colonial question*.

Chapter I of the book, "El espectro de Gonzalo Guerrero," examines the mythical figure of Gonzalo Guerrero, the paradigmatic Spanish conquistador who "went native" and became a so-called Maya warrior. Through a thorough analysis of the colonial archive and representative texts such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* and Eligio Ancona's *Historia de Yucatán*, Jáuregui traces the (re)invention of the Guerrero character, argues that he represents a codification and overcoding of multiple countercolonial struggles in Yucatán from the sixteenth century to the present, and discusses the hypothesis of his narrative invention. As such, Jáuregui argues that the figure of Guerrero reflects the political complexities of indigenous resistance in a postcolonial world and has been used to represent both a hero and a traitor. However, and despite the many attempts to erase him from history, the specter of Guerrero continues to haunt the Yucatan peninsula, as he is remembered in a variety of ways in Mexico.

The second chapter of the book, entitled "El conjuro etnográfico. Cabeza de Vaca, Mala Cosa y las vicisitudes espectrales de la extrañeza," delves into the ethnographic accounts of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and his conjuring of the strange and exotic. The author analyzes the episode of Mala Cosa, an account in the *Relación* by Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca of a strange, alleged sorcerer who had haunted some of the indigenous communities with whom the castaway had lived during his infamous tour of North America. While some critics have praised the *Relación* as a positive representation of indigenous culture, Jáuregui argues that the Mala Cosa affair is a key passage to rereading the *Relación*, revealing it as a humanist recreation of colonialism rather than a portrayal of the indigenous world. Through his shared physical and performative traits, Mala Cosa's strange nature unveils him not as a trickster *Other*, but rather as a spectral figuration of the conquistador himself. Thus, the chapter argues that Mala Cosa points to an instance of recognition of the *ego conquiro*, which questions the peaceful imperialism that is ideologically ordered in the *Relación*, turning it into a conjuring that unveils an uncomfortable truth about the identity of the conqueror.

Chapter III of the book, entitled "Remedios de imperio y justicia espectral," analyzes a scene from the play *Cortes de la Muerte* (1557) by Miguel de Carvajal, one of the first Spanish imperial plays published about the conquest of the New World. The chapter emphasizes the distorted resonances of Las Casas' discourse within the play—

in particular, the famous Debate of Valladolid (1552) between the Dominican friar and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. Using the analysis of the Cortes de la Muerte, this chapter sheds light on the discursive “immunization” of Spanish imperial sovereignty and highlights the way in which humanist criticism of the conquest were co-opted to legitimize and perpetuate colonial violence.

Chapter IV, entitled “Las cifras de la anomalía. Canibalismo, eucaristía y sujetos criollos,” explores various colonial texts that speak of cannibalism and the Eucharist, and how the anomalous ascription of American anthropophagy was produced during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In addition, the chapter analyzes how the cannibal is symbolically recodified and conjured as a conceptual character in two dramatic loas by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (those that precede the *autos sacramentales* of “El cetro de José” and “El divino Narciso”), which reflect syncretistic positions of the ancient conception of religious otherness and a certain Las Casas-like pacifism regarding conversion through persuasion. Jáuregui also draws attention to the fact that, in the sixteenth century, evangelical ethnographies and doctrinal debates between Protestantism and the Counter-Reformation on the theological definition of Eucharistic sacrifice offer a closer and more pertinent “(dis)context” for the analysis of this baroque *criollo* consciousness, and that Sor Juana’s praises a peaceful conversion consistent with the imperial paradigm of humanitarian immunization. In doing so, Jáuregui argues that Sor Juana’s loas reflect the baroque *criollo* tendency to exalt Mexican antiquities as part of the symbolic genealogy of the viceroyalty, and to conceive of the otherness of the past in a relationship of continuity with the present.

Chapter V, “La re-vuelta espectral. El caso del ‘Negro Comegente’” delves into the case of the “Negro Comegente,” a mythological figure in Dominican history, to explore the colonial history of the Dominican Republic and the archive as a site of colonial power. As Jáuregui notes, the legendary character known as the “Negro Comegente” was accused of murder, cannibalism, witchcraft and sexual mutilation, and became the center of the colonial stereotype of the black man. The chapter explores the campaign to capture the “Comegente” by Pedro Catani, a lawyer commissioned by the Royal Audiencia, and how it reflects modern ideas about government, surveillance, and social control. Finally, this chapter highlights the rise of Dominican nationalism and its impact on the history of “Comegente,” which became a historical tradition upon which an anti-Haitian and racist discourse of Dominican identity was built, recycling colonial stereotypes such as irrationality, savagery, cannibalism, diabolical magic, and dirtiness. Overall, this chapter offers a thought-provoking analysis of the intersection

between colonial power, national identity, and cultural representation through the complex history of the “Comegente” myth.

Chapter VI of the book, “La crítica canibal de la modernidad colonial. Oswaldo Costa y la otra Antropofagia,” examines the work of Oswaldo Costa, a lesser known member of the Brazilian anthropophagic movement that emerged in the late 1920s. The chapter further explores Costa’s important role in the anthropophagic movement and his clear contribution to resistance against colonial power. Here, Jáuregui argues that Costa’s intellectual approach differed from that of other members of the group in that he developed a critical perspective that he termed a “‘cannibalistic critique’ of colonial modernity and Westernism.” Unlike many of his contemporaries, Jáuregui contends, Costa adopted a poetic and critical approach to the movement, drawing on it to question the Eurocentric notions of civilization and progress that underpinned Brazilian nationalism. Costa’s criticisms, such as his famous condemnation of cattle exports, expressed his discontent with Brazilian peripheral capitalism, steeped in colonial and neocolonial history.

Carlos Jáuregui’s *Espectros y conjuras* is, truly, a study of great erudition and knowledge that represents a return to materialist criticism in the best traditions of the discipline. One of the book’s most impressive achievements is his use of philological analysis to read colonial texts, an approach that is combined with meticulous archival research. Indeed, the book benefits greatly from his incorporation of archival documents and his detailed analysis and comparison of them. Jáuregui also weaves an intricate network of references, with an abundance of footnotes and references to the work of both widely known and lesser-known scholars. Nevertheless, the philological approach and meticulous archival work would be rendered obsolete were it not for the sophisticated analysis and careful close readings that Jáuregui conducts throughout his study. Moreover, the book is written with strong theoretical and conceptual rigor, drawing on some of the most valuable concepts of such renowned thinkers as Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Paul Ricoeur. Jáuregui uses the theoretical tools provided by these and other critics to elaborate on some of his own concepts, including the notion of spectral insurgencies, the practice of writing during the colonial period as a kind of conjuring, as well as the notion of colonial specters that are invoked through our readings in the present (which are also a form of conjuring). In short, *Espectros y conjuras* is a work of remarkable scholarship which does not intervene in just one or two areas of Latin American colonial literary and cultural studies, but also aims to influence the discipline itself.

Furthermore, *Espectros y conjuras* is also an indispensable pedagogical resource for those involved in the teaching of colonial Latin American literature and culture. By encouraging scholars to read colonial texts differently, Jáuregui also encourages them to teach colonial texts differently. And by “differently,” I mean politically. Interestingly, Jáuregui does not advocate “easy” political readings of the sort that are commonplace today in many fields and departments across the country. What Jáuregui calls for is a political reading anchored in serious archival work, together with theoretical and conceptual rigor and exhaustive analysis. *Espectros y conjuras*, in short, reminds critics and academics, present and future, that scholarship and teaching are inextricably linked.

At the risk of being repetitive or redundant, I must state once again that *Espectros y conjuras* is an invaluable contribution to the field of colonial Latin American literary and cultural studies. Carlos Jáuregui invites colleagues, scholars, and critics to stop “solacing themselves in the archive, [. . .] weeding weeds, [. . .] encrypting ghosts, [. . .] dissolving conspiracies, [. . .] placing books in a showcase already organized by the victors,” and instead “ransacking the archive, invoking ghosts and disorganizing the library of colonial modernity” (43). In this way, he encourages scholars, thinkers, academics, writers, etc., to distance themselves from the colonial legacy into which we inevitably fall when “one rescues ‘the voice of the masters’ and great books of the canon, or speaks of ‘colonial literature’ as the origin of Latin American literature, or magical realism, or when one makes a baroque, Hispanic and imperial writer a champion of feminism or human rights,” since, as he himself warns, “all these gestures are forms of empathy with the tradition that justifies the present” (26). And the present, as Jáuregui well knows, continues to be plagued by forms of oppression and injustice that have not only continued into the present but that involve us all. *Espectros y conjuras* admittedly invites “tendentious and political readings” (320) of colonial writing as it summons—or conjures—the specters of Latin America’s colonial past to defy the narrative of the vanquishers, of the victors over the defeated and vanquished. Invoking the specters of a colonial past, Jáuregui continues to move his scholarship and, of course, his teaching, towards the fulfillment of a well-known dictum or prophecy, which more or less states that philosophers (and, I would dare to extrapolate, also critics) have only interpreted the world; however, what is necessary—urgent, I would affirm—is to transform it.