

Introduction

Special Issue: "A Colonial Atlantic?: Rethinking Colonial Studies"

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This issue of *Arachne* includes the presentations of a group of colleagues who were invited to Rutgers on February 23, 2001 to participate in a one-day roundtable on Colonial studies. The main purpose of this conference was to rethink the place of Colonial studies at Rutgers, as well as within the college curriculum. We invited three colleagues from other institutions--Rolena Adorno (Yale), Margo Glantz (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), and Kathleen Ross (New York University)--and two of our own colleagues--Herman Bennett (History) and César Braga-Pinto (Spanish and Portuguese). We focused our discussion on the status of the field and on ways to foster interdisciplinary collaboration to promote Colonial studies at Rutgers.

Colonial studies is currently a complex field that incorporates historical, sociological, anthropological, and literary approaches. The degree of collaboration that exists between these disciplines is variable and unstable. The way in which geographical demarcations of this field are defined tends to follow a national paradigm, instead of exploring other points of contact that respond better to the internal structure of the colonial system as it was established in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. On the other hand, the colonial condition can also be defined from a temporal, geographical, or contextual perspective. There are many contradictions that arise from the fact that some scholars define the colonial as a homogeneous period encompassing three hundred years, without recognizing internal differences in the social and political contexts of the colonies in the Americas. Therefore, colonial subjects and discourses are conceived as ahistorical categories. Furthermore, regional differences could account for the unequal process in the constitution of Creole or colonial voices in the Caribbean and the Americas.

The purpose of this roundtable was to rethink the place of Colonial studies within academic institutions. Our point of departure was the recent proposal to establish programs of transatlantic relations to question the way in which the field can be reconfigured in order to

enlighten our understanding of this period and its cultural productions. The speakers were invited to explore some of the following questions: How can we combine historical, anthropological, and literary analysis to consider the constitution of a colonial subjectivity in Europe and the Americas? Can colonialism be defined as a common social structure in which a certain kind of discourse is produced? How can we propose comparative studies on transatlantic cultural relations that do not replicate Eurocentric models of understanding the colonial subjects? How can we incorporate European, American, Brazilian, and Hispanic cultural productions into our understanding of Colonial studies as a field? How can we transcend national paradigms in order to foster comparative studies that reestablish the internal contacts between metropolitan centers and colonial territories?

In this issue we include the interventions of Adorno, Ross, Glantz, and Braga-Pinto. In "Estevanico's Legacy: Rethinking Colonial Latin American Studies from Postcolonial Africa," Adorno redefines colonial Latin American studies "along broadly cross-Atlantic lines," by juxtaposing "the insights from postcolonial theory, particularly Africa, to the monuments of colonial Latin American letters." As an example, Adorno discusses the way in which Albert Memmi's The Colonizer and the Colonized illuminates the reading of colonial texts and postcolonial theory in her undergraduate courses.

On the other hand, Kathleen Ross's essay, entitled "Rethinking Colonial Poetry in an Atlantic Studies Context," explores the limited attention devoted to the study of poetry. Ross begins her reflection by asking general questions about the status of the field: "Why have we not written as much on colonial poetry as we have on colonial narrative forms? What could move more of us to engage colonial poetry with passion and critical rigor?" After assessing the difficulties of reading and interpreting poetry, compared to the ease with which we approach narrative, Ross reviews and comments some of the most recent studies on epic poetry and popular poetry of the eighteenth century that contribute to the redefinition of the field and its objects of study.

The next essay, "El jeroglífico del sentimiento: la poesía amorosa de Sor Juana" by Margo Glantz, analyzes the rhetorical paradox present in Sor Juana's poetry as she opposes the expression of passion and the artistic tradition of courtly love. Glantz explores in her essay the following questions: "How can one escape from that vicious circle set in stone by tradition, rhetoric, courtly decorum and the difficulty of inventing a new language of love? How can one transcend the limits of language in order to express the inexpressible?" She provides some answers to these questions by examining two metaphorical

chains in Sor Juana's poetry: the heart as tears and the broken heart as expressed in its blood.

Finally, César Braga-Pinto's essay, "Brasil 500 anos: An Incredible Miscegenation in the Park," closes our issue with a critical commentary of the ways in which Brazilians conceived the 1992 commemoration of the Quincentennial as an opportunity to rediscover Brazil. After reviewing some of the few publications on Colonial studies released in Brazil between 1992 and 1998, Braga-Pinto describes and comments the "Mostra do Re-descobrimento," an exhibit that intended to show "a trajectory of 30,000 years of history-of Brazilian history!" Braga-Pinto compares the exhibit's intention of representing a harmonious "mestizo" society with some of the "cracks" of that homogenizing discourse as reflected on various incidents in which Indigenous and other subaltern groups reminded the state and its intellectuals about their constant marginalization and exclusion from Brazilian social, cultural, and political life.

These presentations, along with the dialogue that followed the roundtable during the afternoon session, included some interesting suggestions to find new ways to incorporate Colonial studies into our undergraduate and graduate curricula. I would like to mention a few of them, to encourage the continuation of an interesting debate that could very well redefine some of the main areas of inquiry within Colonial studies. Ross pointed out the need to place colonial discourse historically and geographically to acknowledge unequal temporal developments in the colonial world of the Americas. On the other hand, Adorno expressed her concerns about the ways in which postcolonial theory can enlighten our understanding of the colonial condition in Latin America. There seemed to be a consensus among the participants in the understanding of Postcolonial theory following Ashcroft, *et. al.*'s observation: "'Post-colonial' as we define it does not mean 'post-independence,' or 'after colonialism,' for this would be to falsely ascribe an end to the colonial process. Post-colonialism, rather, begins from the very first moment of colonial contact. It is the discourse of oppositionality which colonialism brings into being" (117). Glantz pointed out the importance of addressing the differences between the debates on Colonial studies as they are conceived in the United States and in many Latin American universities. The lack of real dialogue between institutions, scholars and/or theoretical productions recreates a colonial condition that limits the development of the field not only as an interdisciplinary, but also as an international--and also transnational--intellectual endeavor.

Herman Bennett's interventions were quite stimulating, as he presented some concerns that were significant for the redefinition of

our common field of study. His essay, "Seventeenth-Century New Spain: A Slave Society," emphasized the need to broaden our critical inquiry of race and ethnicity in the colonial world [1]. During his presentation Bennett pointed out that there are many volumes on slavery and race relations still waiting to be studied at the Archivo General de la Nación in México. He also questioned the use of the term "Colonial" to define our field of studies as well as the subjectivities involved in almost three hundred years in the history of the Americas. He proposed the use of "Early Modern," to allow for the inclusion of other experiences and subjectivities--those that transcended the traditional opposition between a metropolis and a colony due to their voluntary or involuntary displacements between Africa, Europe, and the Americas. This idea prompted an interesting dialogue on the meanings associated with the word "colonial," and the ways in which it incorporates the unequal relationship of power that characterized the definition of the Colonial world. Bennett's historical approach, on the other hand, brought forward the relationship of this imperial order with modernity. By examining the different ways in which we conceive and "name" our own discipline of study, we also considered the importance of interdisciplinary approaches as a defining trait of our research and academic projects.

Braga-Pinto posed another interesting debate when he invited us to rethink Colonial studies not as a temporal category, but as an interdisciplinary field of research similar to Ethnic, Gender, Queer or Diaspora studies. He pointed out that "this field would be concerned with issues of colonialism and decolonization across temporal and geographical divides." At the same time, Braga-Pinto argued that what could link Colonial studies with Gender and Ethnic studies would be the similar, contestatory nature of the fields, and not their object of study.

I would like to conclude this introduction by returning to an idea suggested in the title of this issue of *Arachne*. By proposing a "Colonial Atlantic," this issue wishes to focus on the development of an Atlantic empire, as a "transcultural, international formation" (4) which follows Paul Gilroy's provocative study, *The Black Atlantic*. This broad geographical, social, and political view would allow us to reconnect the Americas with Europe and Africa, and to study the colonial, or early modern period, as a transnational field of inquiry that should not be conceived as pre-national or postnational, but as an international network of ethnic, racial, political, cultural, and economic interactions. This kind of approach constitutes a field of study that breaks with national paradigms in order to explore those experiences that took place long before and during the configuration of modern nations as we know them today. A "Colonial Atlantic" could also

promote an interesting dialogue to consider the relationship between Latin American Colonial studies and programs of Transatlantic studies currently being organized in English and Comparative Literature departments. Finally, this broad definition of the field also makes evident the fact that we need to foster more internal dialogues among university programs and departments to encourage the development of interdisciplinary initiatives and to revitalize Colonial studies here at Rutgers as well as in other academic and research institutions. We hope this special issue of *Arachne* can be a contribution toward the reconceptualization of such a vibrant field of study.

Notes

1 Bennett's essay will be included in his forthcoming book entitled Slaves & Subjects: Iberian Expansion, Christian Colonialism and New Spain's African Diaspora, 1450-1650.

Works cited

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